

**FINDING BOOK JOY:
HOW ACCESS AND CHOICE
CAN TRANSFORM READER IDENTITY DEVELOPMENT
FOR CHILDREN
IN ECONOMICALLY DISADVANTAGED COMMUNITIES**

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In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for
the Degree of Doctor of Education

By

Carolyn Polchinski

Center for Education

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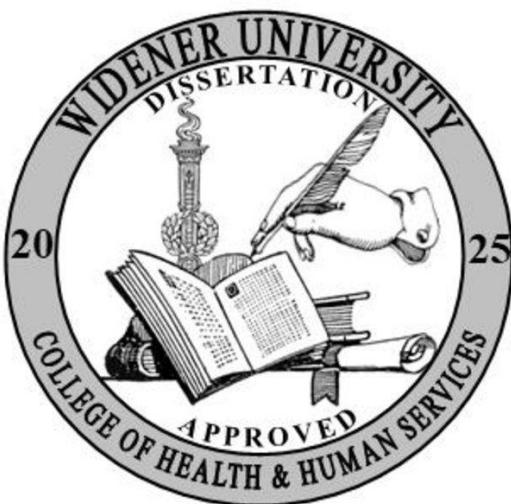
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Author: Carolyn Polchinski

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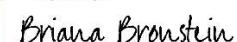
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Zora M. Wolfe, Ed.D.
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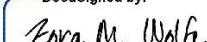
2CF6F6A7B16447B...
Briana M. Bronstein, Ph.D.
Committee Member

Signed by:



05AE89171D364AD
Kristi Hoffmann, Ph.D.
Committee Member

DocuSigned by:



19171CCCF51C4FE...

Zora M. Wolfe, Ed.D.
Associate Dean, College of Health & Human Services

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
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Dedication

In deepest gratitude, I dedicate this dissertation to my devoted parents, William Joseph Polchinski and Maureen Carroll Polchinski Heaney, who believed in me since the day I was born. Thank you both for instilling in me the understanding that I could achieve any goal that I possibly imagined. My role as your firstborn has been the catalyst for this doctorate, as I knew early on in life that no dream was out of reach.

Since I wrote and illustrated my first books prior to entering kindergarten and recorded my stories on audio tapes at our dining room table, you always encouraged me to share my voice. I knew back then that my thoughts held value.

While I accomplished this goal in the context of unimaginable circumstances, I knew in my heart that both of you were with me every step of the way.

My immigrant grandparents, your parents, came to the United States with the hopes of providing their children and grandchildren with increased educational opportunities. In many meaningful ways, I am the personification of their American dream.

Thank you, Mom and Dad. I love you. I would not be here today without your love and support. I am grateful every day that God chose you as my parents.

Guided by the strength of those who persevered before me,
this achievement is a testament to determination.

“and here you are living, despite it all.....” ~ Rupi Kaur

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Abstract

Protecting and nurturing a child's right to read is a revolutionary act that can radically transform a child's life and is vital to reading achievement, yet alarming inequities persist in access to book ownership and reading opportunities for children in economically disadvantaged communities in the United States. These income-based disparities create striking contrasts in children's agency, confidence, and independence as readers and have enduring implications that required a closer look at how increased access and choice can transform a child's identity as a reader. Framed by the Transactional Theory of Reading (Rosenblatt, 1978), this narrative research endeavor was guided by the following research question: In what ways can access to book ownership and choice in book selection transform reader identity development for children in economically disadvantaged communities? This inquiry was conducted in two phases. Phase one analyzed data from semi-structured interviews with 20 literacy advocates and resulted in the formation of *Find Book Joy*, a local book access initiative founded by the researcher that provides inclusive books of choice at no cost to children in Title I schools. Phase two explored reader identity development through interviews with eight *Find Book Joy* book recipients in grades one through five. Data analysis indicated that increased access and choice resulted in expanded reading volume, motivation to read, reading purpose, reading engagement, the value one places on reading, and one's self-perception as a reader. Insights from data analysis indicated that reading inclusive books helped children build meaningful connections and inspired hope, resilience, and optimism. Knowledge generated will inform parents, educators, community partners, and elected officials about how equitable access to book ownership and choice in book selection can support children in building and sustaining their confident reader identities.

Keywords: access, agency, book joy, choice, identity, inclusive books, reading engagement

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Chapter I: Introduction

“I am a book collector!” a young reader exuberantly exclaimed, as she firmly held her treasured books securely in her arms (Neuman, 2022, p. 672). This confident young reader was genuinely excited to express her book joy and to exercise agency as she intentionally and independently chose her own books from the local book vending machine located in a community with limited economic resources. The promising opportunity to choose her own books to read fostered pride in book ownership and expanded her book joy, as she self-assuredly made autonomous decisions about the books that she wanted to read (Neuman, 2022).

This enthusiastic young reader had access to book ownership and was able to become a book collector due to JetBlue’s commitment to their *Soar with Reading* innovative book distribution program that is designed to get books into the hands of children that need them most (JetBlue Airways, n.d.). This book access endeavor generously provides free book vending machines filled with brand-new titles from leading children’s book publishers to children living in economically disadvantaged communities (Neuman, 2022). The primary goal of this important initiative is to increase equitable access to books and provide endless hours of reading engagement for young readers who may not otherwise have the chance to own their own books due to the insurmountable cost barrier to book ownership (Neuman, 2022).

The heartfelt pride in book ownership expressed by this child clearly conveyed her pure *book joy*, or pure elation and enthusiasm for books and reading experiences, as she proudly recognized herself as a reader (Compton-Lilly, 2006) and self-identified as a book collector (Neuman, 2022). Yet, how did she arrive at these bold conclusions? How did she know that recognizing herself as a reader exudes confidence? When or where did she learn that being a book collector is indeed a source of pride, and why this identity is a reason to celebrate? As a

child living in an economically disadvantaged community, with significantly limited access to books, where did this child's understanding of pure book joy first originate? Most importantly, how can this same book joy and enthusiasm for reading be instilled in *every* child, regardless of their zip code, school district, or available family resources?

Protecting and nurturing a child's right to read is a revolutionary act that can radically transform a child's life (Mackey, 2022; Massey et al., 2021; Muhammad & Mosley, 2021; Neuman, 2017, 2022; Neuman & Moland, 2019) and is imperative to reading achievement, yet alarming inequities exist in access to book ownership and reading opportunities for children with vastly different socioeconomic backgrounds in the United States (Mackey, 2022; Neuman, 2017, 2022; Neuman & Celano, 2001; Neuman & Moland, 2019; Neuman et al., 2021). Sharp inequalities in family income create wide chasms in access to books that substantially restrict the right of entry to reading achievement for children in economically disadvantaged communities when contrasted with the abundant access to surplus books and literacy opportunities available to their financially secure counterparts (Neuman & Knapczyk, 2020, 2022; Neuman & Moland, 2019). Children who are avid readers with plentiful access to books and literacy materials in well-resourced homes and schools are securely positioned for reading achievement, yet children in communities experiencing economic hardship who are deprived of book ownership and the vital shared reading experiences that are imperative to reading success face substantial barriers to achieving reading proficiency (Neuman & Knapczyk, 2020; Neuman & Moland, 2019).

Children who live in *book deserts*, a structural inequity that describes economically disadvantaged neighborhoods with significantly limited access to books and literacy resources, (Neuman & Moland, 2019) endure strenuous circumstances that exclude them from the many joys of book ownership and shared reading interactions and consequently restrict their

opportunities to develop self-assured reader identities. For the purposes of this study, *reader identity* can be understood as an ever-evolving entity (Bucholtz & Hall, 2005) that develops across the lifespan (Scoggin & Schnewind, 2021) and encompasses individual reading behaviors and practices as a reader, including choice, agency, frequency, volume, and enjoyment; knowledge of reading preferences and purposes for reading (Allington & McGill-Franzen, 2021; Harvey & Ward, 2017; Konrad, 2023; Mackey, 2022; Neuman, 2022); motivation to read (Gambrell, 2011); the value one places on reading (Hall, 2012, 2016; Harvey & Ward, 2017; Konrad, 2023); and self-perception and confidence as a reader (Hall, 2012, 2016; Harvey & Ward, 2017; Konrad, 2023; Mackey, 2022; Neuman, 2022; Ortlieb & Schatz, 2020).

Identity as a reader is informed by four primary factors, namely: (1) access to books; (2) individual reading behaviors and practices, including the roles of choice and agency in book selection; (3) self-perception and confidence as a reader; and (4) social interactions around books at home and at school (Enright et al., 2021; Harvey & Ward, 2017; Heineke et al., 2022; Hikida, 2018; Konrad, 2023; Mackey, 2022; Neuman, 2022; Neuman & Moland, 2019). Reader identity formation starts early in life and is shaped and influenced by children's home and school environments, their self-perceptions as readers in relation to the norms of these social settings (Holland et al., 1998), and how these self-perceptions inform the choices and decisions they make about books and reading (Luttrell & Parker, 2001; Vaughn et al., 2020), all core factors in reader identity development.

In addition, Compton-Lilly (2006) suggests that reader identities are formed within relationships with others and are continuously subjected to the influences of social interactions. Moreover, Hall (2012) asserts that the language used to position young readers in the classroom setting can factor prominently into a child's reader identity development, a concept discussed

later in this chapter. Moreover, reader identity continues to evolve as life unfolds, is “fluid and dynamic” (Scoggin & Schneewind, 2021, p. 76), and includes reader self-efficacy, book choices, reading habits, reading preferences, and reading purpose. Further, reader identity relies on a sense of self that is ever-changing, according to positions that are taken up or resisted (Davies, 1993, 1994; Weedon, 1997). Finally, reader identity can be disrupted, reinforced, reframed, and/or reshaped based on children’s lived experiences and social interactions, and how they situate themselves within these contextual environments (Alsup, 2005).

Reading engagement is a key factor that influences and connects all elements of reader identity, as “reader identity and reading engagement have a reciprocal relationship” (Scoggin & Schneewind, 2021, p. 78). According to Guthrie et al. (2012), reading engagement involves the effort, persistence, and time that an individual dedicates to a reading task with the aim of achieving desired reading goals. Engaged readers actively interact with texts and demonstrate curiosity, persistence, joy, and enthusiasm. Motivation is also a key factor in reading engagement. According to Gambrell (2011), “engaged readers are intrinsically motivated to read for a variety of personal reading goals, strategic in their reading behaviors, knowledgeable in their construction of new understandings from text, and socially interactive about the reading of text” (p. 172). Further, Serravallo (2015) asserts that choice and personal connections to the books they read advance children’s reading engagement. Children who demonstrate high reading engagement most often develop a lifelong love of reading and live a *readerly life* that encompasses reader confidence and independence, reading as a priority, daily exploration of books, and a positive and receptive disposition towards reading (Calkins, 2001), practices that exemplify the value of reading in children’s lives (Peterson, 1992). This understanding of the value of reading is an essential feature in reader identity development.

Choice in book selection is imperative to the development of identity as a reader, most notably for children living in economically disadvantaged communities, as providing children in economic need with a wide selection of books to read accompanied by the trust to choose their own books allows for a sense of agency and autonomy that they may not have in any other facet of their lives (Neuman, 2022). In addition, choice in book selection often results in increased reading volume, as young readers require not only exposure to an abundance of texts but also access to literature that connects to their personal preferences to fully captivate their engagement, improve their motivation to read, and support their reader identity development (Allington, 2012; Konrad, 2023; Mackey, 2022). Moreover, the strong connection between an optimistic self-perception as a reader and reader agency that can be cultivated through exercising choice is paramount to solidifying a secure reader identity (Ortlieb & Schatz, 2020). Finally, the emotional experience of pure enjoyment and excitement about books that children love to read and choose to read, also known as *book joy*, is a primary factor in reader identity development and is closely correlated to reader self-concept and the value that children place on reading in their lives (Frazee et al., 2014; Hall, 2012; Konrad, 2023; Vlach et al., 2023).

To meet the needs of young readers in economically disadvantaged communities, an equitable approach to supporting children in reader identity development that embraces access, diversity, inclusion, and opportunity for all is required (Muhammad & Mosley, 2021). In this context, young readers must be provided with choices in inclusive books to validate their lived experiences and engage in more socially just learning endeavors (Enright et al., 2021; Gomez-Najarro, 2020; Hikida, 2018). For the purpose of this study, *inclusive* encompasses individuals with diverse identities, including those with differences in race, culture, first language, gender, socioeconomic resources, lifestyle, and/or physical and cognitive abilities, who live

multidimensional lives (Ascenzi-Moreno & Quiñones, 2022; Ford et al., 2019; Hayden & Prince, 2023; Heineke et al., 2022; Kleekamp & Zapata, 2019; Neuman, 2022; Page, 2017; Pennell et al., 2017; Sharma & Christ, 2017; Tondreau & Rabinowitz, 2021) and reflects the intersectionality of these representations; and *inclusive texts* are books that capture a wide range of multifaceted, humanizing portrayals that span a broad continuum of backgrounds, identities, cultures, languages, abilities, experiences, and perspectives (Ascenzi-Moreno & Quiñones, 2022; Ford et al., 2019; Hayden & Prince, 2023; Heineke et al., 2022; Kleekamp & Zapata, 2019; Page, 2017; Pennell et al., 2017; Sharma & Christ, 2017; Tondreau & Rabinowitz, 2021).

While inclusive books that encompass culturally and linguistically diverse book selections exist within a wide span of representation, the term *inclusive book* resists defining a child by just one broad characteristic (e.g., Asian) or institutional label (e.g., English language learner), and instead embraces all of children's multilayered identities (Ascenzi-Moreno & Quiñones, 2022; Hayden & Prince, 2023; Heineke et al., 2022; Kleekamp & Zapata, 2019; Pennell et al., 2017; Sharma & Christ, 2017; Tondreau & Rabinowitz, 2021), including books that feature characters with diverse physical and cognitive experiences. Finally, inclusive books provide infinite opportunities for young readers to explore their reader identity formation, as children look both outward and inward while exploring the language, characters, plot, and illustrations in the books they read to consider how they fit into the world (Niland, 2021).

The Background and Context of the Problem

The exorbitant expense of children's books has created an insurmountable cost barrier to book ownership that restricts equitable opportunities to build home book collections that foster reader identity development for most families living in communities of economic hardship (Canfield et al., 2020b; Neuman, 2022; Neuman & Knapczyk, 2020), thereby elevating book

ownership to another form of privilege in the United States. While children living in homes with access to books will earn, on average, three more years of education than children in homes bereft of books (Evans et al., 2010; Fagan, 2022), broad systemic inequities, such as housing and food insecurity, income disparities, funding limitations, intergenerational poverty, and parental reading vulnerabilities, contribute as risk factors to the development of secure reader identities for children in communities with limited financial resources (Canfield et al., 2020b; Williams & Lerner, 2019). The enduring and life-altering consequences of these substantial injustices in access, resources, and opportunities have monumental implications for children's reader identity development and their potential for reading achievement.

When children are born into well-resourced, literacy-centered home environments with generous access to books and reading materials, the circumstances of their birth (McIntosh, 2003) provide a safe and secure environment from which to grow and develop as young readers. The myth of meritocracy (McIntosh, 2003), however, reveals that a wide *opportunity gap* exists in the United States (Darling-Hammond, 2009), particularly in access, resources, and opportunities for children learning to read in economically disadvantaged communities. In this unjust framework, privilege limits fair and equitable access to books and literacy gains for children whose family income limitations cannot support book ownership. Income segregation has resulted in an inequitable distribution of resources that restricts the abilities of families in economic need to provide the books and literacy resources required to prepare their children to enter school with the knowledge of print concepts and language skills that are essential to learning to read (Bettencourt et al., 2020; Canfield et al., 2020b; Neuman & Moland, 2019).

In a meta-analysis of 99 studies, Mol and Bus (2011) identified "an upward spiral of causality" (p. 267) of print exposure and language proficiency. While children growing up in

stimulating reading environments often demonstrate stronger oral language skills, vocabulary, and reading comprehension, those in communities experiencing economic hardship lack the same access to surplus books, solid literacy infrastructure, and generous reading time with parents and caregivers, due to the far-reaching implications of the *opportunity gap* (Darling-Hammond, 2009). Consequently, it is imperative to recognize that children in communities with limited financial resources are in peril of underachieving as readers since they are deprived of experiencing the many life-changing gains that could be acquired from equitable access to books and reading encounters (Neuman & Moland, 2019; Raban, 2022; Williams & Lerner, 2019).

In a seminal study, Adams (1990) discovered a striking contrast in access to book ownership and shared reading experiences that results from stark differences in family income: children from economically privileged families often arrive in kindergarten having accrued 1,000 hours of read-aloud time with parents or caregivers, while children entering school in economically disadvantaged communities may not have experienced a single shared reading experience in their young lives – or, if they have, these rare literacy interactions frequently added up to just 25 hours of shared reading time with adults prior to kindergarten.

Vast disparities in access to books for young readers in the United States restrict children in economically disadvantaged communities from developing the background knowledge and vocabulary required to build reading comprehension skills and achieve reading proficiency. In Connecticut, where this study took place, according to the U.S. Department of Education's National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), the 2024 NAEP results showed that only 18% of fourth-grade students who were identified as economically disadvantaged (formerly identified as eligible for free or reduced-price lunch) achieved reading proficiency at or above the NAEP reading proficiency level. In 2024, 36% of all fourth-grade students in Connecticut

achieved the NAEP reading proficiency level. Moreover, in Connecticut, the NAEP data reflects that reading proficiency scores declined seven points from 2019 in 2024 for economically disadvantaged students. Further, according to the U.S. Department of Education's National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), overall national reading scores declined in 2024, compared to data from 2022 and 2019 (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2024). The average fourth-grade reading score in 2024 was two points lower than in 2022 and five points lower than in 2019. The most recent NAEP data indicate that nationally, 18% of fourth-grade students from economically disadvantaged families are proficient in reading, meaning 82% are below proficiency. In contrast, 41% of their economically secure peers are proficient, with 59% of fourth-graders reading below proficiency. Overall, in 2024, NAEP results indicated that 69% of all fourth graders nationwide were not proficient readers, reflecting all student groups. These alarming data reports indicate that childhood literacy development is in crisis in the United States and requires immediate attention to safeguard and support the futures of young readers.

In the 21st century, the astounding inequalities in income between well-resourced households and those in communities of economic hardship continue to expand at alarming rates. These resource inequities have enduring implications for book ownership. In 1970, families in the 90th percentile of income earned five times more than those in the 10th percentile, yet by 2013, rising economic disparities had widened the gap, with high-income families earning 11 times more than their lower-income counterparts (Reardon, 2013). Moreover, surplus financial resources in high income families are often assigned to the purchase of books and other literacy materials to support their children's reading development (Reardon, 2013), whereas families in economic need must prioritize their available financial resources for food, shelter, and other urgent survival needs. Prior studies have illuminated how stark economic inequities restrict a

child's access to books and, consequently, to reading volume, but also limit their choices in book selection, their abilities to develop knowledge of preferences, and their opportunities to ask questions, learn about language, experience book joy, and build reading engagement (Harvey & Ward, 2017; Konrad, 2023; Mackey, 2022; Neuman, 2022; Neuman & Moland, 2019), all reading practices and behaviors that nurture a child's reader identity development.

Finally, in addition to limitations on access to books of choice and opportunities to read, young readers in economically disadvantaged communities are often met with socially constructed models of identity within the classroom setting that use inaccurate labels to institutionally position them as "*struggling readers*" or "*at-risk*" (Hikida, 2018). Language that educators use to position students has enormous power to shape children's reader identities and self-perceptions as readers in either affirming or restrictive ways, as language and labels can be used to empower young literacy learners or to reinforce inequalities (Harvey & Ward, 2017; Johnston, 2024). Misguided assumptions, often shaped by those in power (Lin, 2008) and rooted in privilege, can reinforce stereotypes and influence how children are positioned in learning environments (Compton-Lilly, 2006). Moreover, implicit or explicit biases based on children's race, culture, first language, gender, and/or socioeconomic resources often influence instructional decisions and curriculum choices and have persistent consequences for children of color, immigrant children, Indigenous children, multilingual learners, and/or children with diverse abilities. Inaccurate perceptions about children's abilities can reduce achievement expectations by teachers for young readers (Hempel-Jorgensen et al., 2018) and cause feelings of inadequacy or exclusion in students, thereby substantially reducing children's self-perceptions as readers and significantly limiting their motivation to read (Harvey & Ward, 2017).

Statement of the Problem

Access to book ownership can nurture a child's identity as a reader early in life, yet joyful and inquisitive reading experiences become nearly impossible when home and school bookshelves are barren (Neuman & Moland, 2019), as children are deprived of the rich vocabulary, rhythms and cadences of language, and knowledge of print concepts that are central to learning to read. Children from economically disadvantaged neighborhoods have strikingly less access to books and other reading materials than their more financially stable peers do, at home, in school, and in their local libraries and communities (Allington & McGill-Franzen, 2021; Krashen, 2004; Neuman, 2022; Neuman & Celano, 2001; Neuman & Moland, 2019). Sharp inequalities in family income create wide disparities in access to book ownership that markedly limit reading achievement for children in communities of economic need when contrasted with the generous access to surplus books and literacy opportunities available to their more economically advantaged peers (Neuman & Knapczyk, 2022; Neuman & Moland, 2019).

Reading volume and motivation to read, key factors in reader identity development and leading indicators in reading achievement, could be expanded exponentially for children in economically disadvantaged communities by providing increased access to inclusive books of choice at no cost (Allington & McGill-Franzen, 2021). Yet, since books are extraordinarily expensive, children in communities with limited financial resources are deprived of fertile opportunities to engage in the invaluable early literacy experiences with parents and caregivers that provide the foundation for their reader identity development and instill the value of reading in young readers, including opportunities to learn new vocabulary, expand exposure to print, build background knowledge, explore preferences, and increase motivation to read (Canfield et al., 2020b; Fälth, 2021; Neuman & Moland, 2019; Wagner, 2020). Firm restrictions in access to book ownership and choice in book selection due to structural inequities and family resource

limitations result in alarming contrasts in children's agency, confidence, and self-perceptions as readers and have enduring implications for their reader identity development.

While access to book ownership is markedly limited for children in communities experiencing economic hardship, inclusive books in particular are scarcely found in American homes and classrooms due to the paucity of children's books that feature authentic representations of diversity in characters, setting, and plot development (Ascenzi-Moreno & Quiñones, 2022; Ford et al., 2019; Hayden & Prince, 2023; Heineke et al., 2022; Kleekamp & Zapata, 2019; Pennell et al., 2017; Sharma & Christ, 2017). Access to inclusive children's literature plays an instrumental role in a child's pursuit of developing an identity as a reader, as picture books, poems, narratives, biographies, and other literary resources help children to see the brilliantly wide vistas of diversity that exist beyond the mainstream ableist narrative (Agarwal-Rangnath, 2021). Therefore, this inquiry sought to examine the many ways to use inclusive books to transform reader identity development specifically to meet the unique needs of children in economically disadvantaged communities (Ascenzi-Moreno & Quiñones, 2022; Ford et al., 2019; Hayden & Prince, 2023; Heineke et al., 2022; Kleekamp & Zapata, 2019; Pennell et al., 2017; Sharma & Christ, 2017; Tondreau & Rabinowitz, 2021).

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this narrative inquiry was to investigate the ways in which increased access to book ownership and choice in book selection can transform reader identity development for children in economically disadvantaged communities. The primary goal of phase one of this qualitative inquiry was to examine the perspectives of 20 literacy advocates in a range of professions from across the United States about the roles of access to books, choice in book selection, and representation in inclusive books in reader identity development to determine

how to increase sustainable book joy opportunities for children in economically disadvantaged communities. The data collected from semi-structured interviews with literacy advocates in phase one of this inquiry served as an informative framework for the formation of a new local book access endeavor for children in Title I schools that was the center of phase two. The *Find Book Joy* program, founded by the researcher as a result of the insightful data collected and analyzed in phase one of this study, is a local grassroots initiative that redistributes existing book wealth and expands book joy by providing unlimited access to developmentally-appropriate inclusive books to children to build their own personally curated home libraries in communities of economic need. The *Find Book Joy* initiative has expanded equitable access to book ownership and increased choices in book selection for hundreds of children whose reader identity development would otherwise be markedly limited due to a prohibitive cost barrier. The second phase of this study included interviews with eight young reading enthusiasts in 1st through 5th grade enrolled in Title I schools who were book recipients from *Find Book Joy* to investigate how increased access to inclusive books at no cost and choice in book selection can nurture reader identity development for children in economically disadvantaged communities.

Research Question

To investigate the impact of access to books and choice in book selection on reader identity development for children in economically disadvantaged communities, the following research question framed this study:

In what ways can increased access to book ownership and choice in book selection transform reader identity development for children in economically disadvantaged communities?

Theoretical Framework

This qualitative study investigated how Rosenblatt's (1978) Transactional Theory of Reading guides the process of reader identity development by centering the individual reader in the reading transaction and focusing on their ability to make meaning from the text based on their individual lived experiences (Davis, 1992). This concept allows for an abundance of individual meanings, rather than one definitive meaning, to be accepted as literary interpretation and reader response. The Transactional Theory of Reading (Rosenblatt, 1978) explores how readers read, interpret, and evaluate literature (Cai, 2008) and is reader-centered, since its focus is on how individuals construct meaning from the text based on their personal lived experiences. This individuality in interpretation and meaning making is at the core of reader identity (Hall, 2012; Wagner, 2020) and was therefore an appropriate choice to frame this study.

Significance of the Study

While scholarly research exists on access to inclusive books to support reader identity development (Ascenzi-Moreno & Quiñones, 2022; Ford et al., 2019; Hayden & Prince, 2023; Heineke et al., 2022; Kleekamp & Zapata, 2019; Ness, 2019; Neuman, 2022; Tondreau & Rabinowitz, 2021), this study aimed to add to the existing literature by specifically investigating the roles of increased access to books and choice in book selection in reader identity development through the eyes of children living in economically disadvantaged communities.

This research used literacy as a lens to study an assets-based approach that increased access to inclusive texts and provided opportunities for young readers to choose their own books. Access to book ownership is imperative for providing children with opportunities to continuously read and improve as readers, increase their abilities to achieve reading proficiency, and experience the abundant gains that result from reading achievement (Bettencourt et al., 2020; Canfield et al., 2020b; Fagan, 2022; Mackey, 2022; Massey et al., 2021; Neuman, 2022; Neuman

& Knapczyk, 2022; Neuman & Moland, 2019). Access to books must transcend socioeconomic barriers, however, as equitable access to books is access to literacy, to communication, to wide-open futures, and to limitless opportunities, as literacy is an infinite source of liberation for all those who have been historically silenced and marginalized (Ford et al., 2019).

In this equitable approach to access to book ownership, an intentional focus illuminated the many strengths within the community and supported wider access to literacy learning opportunities and reader identity development in ways that traversed traditional boundaries (Neuman & Knapczyk, 2022). These community-led partnerships prioritized literacy within the communities where families live, work, and play, to create a more equity-focused and inclusive approach to literacy learning (Neuman & Knapczyk, 2022). This comprehensive approach ensured that children living and learning in economically disadvantaged communities in this study had equitable opportunities to develop secure and confident reader identities.

This investigation identified findings that transformed current and existing literacy practice to inform parents, educators, literacy advocates, community partners, and elected officials of the compelling need for increased access to inclusive texts for children living in communities experiencing economic hardship, most notably how this equitable access resulted in expanded choice in book selection, enhanced motivation to read, increased reading volume, and the development of well-cultivated reader identities. Practical implications of this study included expanding stakeholders' knowledge to provide hands-on, practical, and sustainable ways to increase access to no-cost book ownership and reading experiences for children living in economically disadvantaged communities who endure strict limitations on access to books.

The goals of this study included the formation of enduring efforts to increase equitable literacy practices, such as no cost book fairs, community book swaps, redistribution of existing

book wealth in book donation and school partnerships, and book access programs that provided continuous supplies of free books to children in homes and schools with demonstrated economic need. Finally, this inquiry aimed to address the unique literacy needs of children in economically under-resourced communities by providing young readers with increased access to inclusive book ownership and choice in book selection while elevating their varied literacies and providing opportunities for them to experience the joy, dignity, and pride that accompany book ownership with books they could take home and keep (Bettencourt et al., 2020; Canfield et al., 2020b; Neuman, 2022; Neuman & Knapczyk, 2020; Neuman & Moland, 2019).

Glossary of Key Terms

Book Deserts: a structural inequity that describes economically disadvantaged neighborhoods with significantly limited access to books and literacy resources (Neuman & Moland, 2019).

Book Hero: a community advocate for reading and books who models the importance of reading in everyday life (Ascenzi-Moreno & Quiñones, 2022).

Book Joy: the feelings of pure elation and excitement that accompany pride in book ownership and meaningful reading experiences about books that children love to read and choose to read (a term first defined by the researcher as a result of phase one data collection).

Counter-storytelling: a term commonly defined as a means of amplifying marginalized voices and sharing narratives and perspectives that are frequently overlooked (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). It is important to note that counter-storytelling extends beyond filling narrative gaps; it actively challenges and disrupts the dominant narratives that surround identity (Ness, 2019). In this study, the term *counter-storytelling* is used interchangeably with the term *counternarratives*.

Culturally Responsive Pedagogy: the use of cultural knowledge, prior experiences, frames of reference, and performance styles of ethnically diverse students “to do instructional justice” to

the complexity, vitality, and potentiality of cultural diversity and encourages educators to make learning encounters more relevant to their students and their reader identities (Gay, 2002, p. 110).

Deficit Narrative: holds students from historically oppressed populations responsible for the barriers and inequalities that they face and fails to place accountability on structural inequities and systems of oppression (Bruton & Robles-Piña, 2009; McKay & Devlin, 2014; Solórzano & Yosso, 2002; Valencia, 1997, 2010).

Deficit Ideology: the dominant position about poverty that is informed in the United States and elsewhere by the myth of meritocracy (McIntosh, 2003; McNamee & Miller, 2009), further explored by Gorski (2016), and rooted in the belief that poverty is the natural result of ethical, intellectual, spiritual, and other shortcomings in people who are experiencing it (Gorski, 2016).

Equity: "Equity is not about equal inputs for all children, but about providing resources and support based on children's specific needs, ensuring that those who start with fewer advantages receive more intensive and targeted interventions to achieve similar outcomes" (Neuman, 2019, p. 362). "Equity does not mean simply equal funding for all schools; rather, it means providing more and better resources to students who have greater needs so that they can have genuinely comparable opportunities to learn" (Darling-Hammond, 2010, p. 29).

Identity: the social positioning of the self and others (Bucholtz & Hall, 2005, p. 586). Identity "encompasses notions of who we are, who others say we are (in both positive and negative ways), and whom we desire to be" (Muhammad, 2020, p. 67). Identity is fluid, multilayered, and shaped by social and cultural influences as well as by literacy practices (Sutherland, 2005).

Identity Capital: the specific behaviors, skills, or achievements that a community sees as valuable and is used to connect individuals to their models of identity within their social environment (Côté & Schwartz, 2002).

Inclusive: the practices, policies, and behaviors that actively seek to involve and embrace people from diverse backgrounds, perspectives, lifestyles, and abilities in ways that ensure all individuals feel valued and respected, and diversity is accepted and celebrated. (Cambridge University Press, n.d.).

Inclusive Texts: books that reflect a wide range of multifaceted, diverse portrayals that span a broad continuum of backgrounds, cultures, identities, abilities, experiences, lifestyles, and perspectives (Page, 2017; Pennell et al., 2017; Tschida & Buchanan, 2017). The term “inclusive texts” also refers to books that feature main characters with agency and diverse physical and cognitive abilities who live multidimensional lives (Gabel, 2002; Gabel & Peters, 2004; Kleekamp & Zapata, 2019; Pennell et al., 2017).

Literacy Advocate: an individual who works to improve literacy outcomes for all by driving systemic change and supporting policies and practices that increase access to literacy in an equitable framework that honors and elevates diverse voices (ILA, 2018).

Literacy Ambassador: a person who demonstrates the importance of living a literacy-centered life and shares their lifelong love of reading while providing books to children and illuminating the path for children to discover book joy in their own lives (developed by the researcher).

Opportunity Gap: "the accumulated differences in access to key educational resources - expert teachers, personalized attention, high-quality curriculum opportunities, good educational materials, and plentiful information resources - that support learning at home and at school." (Darling-Hammond, 2009, p. 28).

Reading Champion: an individual who actively promotes the joy of reading and literacy within their community. This person serves as an advocate for reading, often organizing literacy activities, events, and programs to encourage others to read more and develop a love for books.

Reading Champions can be teachers, librarians, parents, literacy advocates, or community volunteers who work to create a positive reading culture and support the development of literacy skills in children and adults alike (Flint, 2024).

Reader Identity: an ever-evolving entity (Bucholtz & Hall, 2005) that develops across the lifespan (Scoggin & Schneewind, 2021), and encompasses individual reading behaviors and practices as a reader, including choice, agency, frequency, volume, and enjoyment; knowledge of reading preferences and purposes for reading (Allington & McGill-Franzen, 2021; Harvey & Ward, 2017; Konrad, 2023; Mackey, 2022; Neuman, 2022); motivation to read (Gambrell, 2011); the value one places on reading (Hall, 2012, 2016; Harvey & Ward, 2017; Konrad, 2023); and self-perception and confidence as a reader (Hall, 2012, 2016; Harvey & Ward, 2017; Konrad, 2023; Mackey, 2022; Neuman, 2022; Ortlieb & Schatz, 2020).

Reader Self-Efficacy: the ability to persevere with confidence when faced with new challenges in the text (Ortlieb & Schatz, 2020) and the belief that one has in their ability to comprehend texts that contributes to reading engagement (Guthrie & Davis, 2003; Usher et al., 2019).

Readerly Life: a lifelong love of reading that includes reader independence, a priority on reading, daily exploration of books, and a positive and receptive disposition towards reading (Calkins, 2001). Living a readerly life is the pinnacle of reading engagement (Peterson, 1992).

Readerly Stamina: a reader's ability to focus, engage with text, and read independently for periods of time without being distracted or interrupted (Bridges, 2014).

Striving Reader: an inexperienced reader who has not yet explored enough books to pique their curiosity or meet their individual reading needs (Harvey & Ward, 2017).

Transactional Theory of Reading: a reader-centered theoretical lens developed by Rosenblatt (1978) that explores how readers read, interpret, and evaluate literature (Cai, 2008). The

Transactional Theory of Reading (Rosenblatt, 1978) guides the process of reader identity development by centering the individual reader in the reading transaction and focusing on their ability to make meaning from the text based on their individual lived experiences (Davis, 1992).

Conclusion

Chapter I has identified the urgent need for increased access to book ownership and choice in book selection to transform reader identity development for children living in economically disadvantaged communities. Chapter I has also outlined the perils of socially constructed deficit narratives and their impact on reader identity development for children of color, immigrant children, Indigenous children, children who are multilingual, and/or children with cognitive or physical diversity living in communities of economic need.

Chapter II will include a comprehensive overview of the theoretical framework for this study, the importance of book joy and book ownership, and the roles of access and choice in reader identity development. In addition, Chapter II will explore the significance of home literacy support and community partnerships and the importance of inclusive texts in providing opportunities for children to define their confident reader identities. Chapter II will conclude with an examination of the compelling need for educators to enact an assets-based, equity-centered approach that honors students' voices to dismantle the false perceptions and assumptions that limit reading achievement for children in communities of economic need.

Chapter III will include the research design, research setting, sample, participants, instruments, methodology, and organization of both phases of the inquiry. Chapter IV will include the child participant's individual narratives from the phase two data collection and subsequent analysis. Chapter V will include a thorough analysis of the study findings from both phases of this investigation. Finally, Chapter VI will include an interpretation and discussion of

the findings; the alignment of findings to the theoretical framework; an overview of the correlations between findings in both phases of the study; study limitations; theoretical, educational, and practical implications; and recommendations for future research and practice.

Chapter II: Review of Relevant Literature

Providing equitable access to literacy opportunities and protecting children's right to read are persistent social justice concerns for the world's children in the 21st century (International Literacy Association [ILA], 2018). Teaching a child to read opens a world of possibilities that extends far beyond their day to day lives, as reading builds a child's capacity for critical thinking, increases knowledge, opens minds, expands futures, and develops empathy for the continuum of human experience (ILA, 2018). Further, reading provides opportunities to learn about other cultures, lifestyles, identities, and perspectives, expanding children's minds and enhancing their knowledge of diverse lived experiences. "Literacy serves as a form of protection in this world and is rightly guided by both imagination and reason—two constructs that are often dichotomous, especially in current public education" (Muhammad, 2020, p. 82).

Yet if children are denied access to books and reading experiences due to prohibitive cost, their protection is lost, and their futures are at risk. In the United States, an alarming 70% of incarcerated individuals are not able to read past a fourth grade level, a fact that highlights the enduring consequences of restrictions on access to books and literacy experiences (Greenberg et al., 2007). In the absence of books to read, children are not only denied rich opportunities for language development, learning new vocabulary, building background knowledge, and gaining an understanding of print-based language, all essential early literacy competencies that are central to learning to read (Canfield et al., 2020b; Johnston, 2019; Neuman & Moland, 2019; Raban, 2022), but they are also be deprived of the magic and wonder of imagination and the promise of hope and resilience that can be discovered by reading books. In contrast, access to books is access to life, access to knowledge, access to transformative literary experiences that

can open doors that extend far beyond the confinement and limitations of one's daily existence and reveal the possibilities of what *can be* in a future that is infinitely promising.

In a close examination of the corpus of literature, this chapter will explore how an equitable approach to reader identity development that provides children with access to inclusive books at no cost, encourages choice in book selection, creates space for curiosity and book exploration, supports agency in young readers, increases home and community support, and allows time for adults to listen to children read and to share their thoughts on the books they read can help children in economically disadvantaged communities to build secure reader identities. This study was framed by the theoretical framework of the Transactional Theory of Reading (Rosenblatt, 1978) that is discussed in this chapter and throughout the study findings.

Theoretical Framework: The Transactional Theory of Reading

This inquiry investigated how Rosenblatt's (1978) Transactional Theory of Reading shapes the process of reader identity development by centering the individual reader in the reading transaction and highlighting their ability to make meaning from the text (Davis, 1992). The Transactional Theory explores how readers read, interpret, and evaluate literature (Cai, 2008). In phase one of this study, interview questions about the literacy advocates' interactions with children in their communities about access to books, choice in book selection, identity as a reader, representation and inclusion in children's books, and pride in book ownership were aligned with this theoretical framework. In phase two of this inquiry, child participants who were book recipients of *Find Book Joy* books were interviewed and their interpretations considered to learn more about the leading factors that contribute to reader identity development. The interview questions for the children were also aligned with the Transactional Theory (Rosenblatt, 1978), as this lens centers personal meaning-making and individuality as a reader at its core.

The Connection of the Transactional Theory to Reader Identity Development

The Transactional Theory of Reading (Rosenblatt, 1978) was chosen for this study as this theoretical lens has the child at its heart. When children are centered in the reading process as Rosenblatt (1978) suggests, their voices are heard, their knowledge as readers is respected, they are trusted to articulate their responses, and the individual interpretations they create from reflection and the reading process are refined until the process makes sense (Davis, 1992). Rosenblatt's (1978, 1993, 1995) Transactional Theory defines meaning making as a highly individualized encounter, as the individual reader brings to the text a wealth of personal memories, prior knowledge, and ideas that then become part of the reader's individual experience, to be reflected on in any way that resonates with their experience.

In addition, Rosenblatt (1982) discusses the concepts of *evocation* and *response* as key components in her Transactional Theory of Reading (1978). The term *evocation* refers to how the text first evokes certain thoughts, memories, or associations for the reader (Rosenblatt, 1982). The term *response* describes how the reader then responds to the stimulus that the text creates, and how those responses cause the reader to react, on personal, emotional, and intellectual levels (Rosenblatt, 1982). Further, Rosenblatt (1993) explored evocation and response in the context of children's literature and examined how children's responses to literature are influenced by their prior knowledge, backgrounds, and lived experiences. Finally, children's individual interpretations and personal engagement with texts contribute to the formation of their reader identity development (Rosenblatt, 1978).

In 1969, Rosenblatt first used Dewey's and Bentley's term *transaction* rather than *interaction* to describe the encounter between a reader and a text (Davis, 1992), as a literary transaction necessitates that the reader's individual creation of a poem (*transaction*) out of text

must be an active and self-directed process (Rosenblatt, 1969). The clear emphasis on the individual in this theoretical lens highlights the intimate relationship between the reader and the text and results in freedom and autonomy that opens doors to infinite possibilities. In this vivid description, rather than centering the role of the text in the reading process, Rosenblatt (1978) frames reading as an act of individual interpretation, much like a musician's performance that is guided by a musical score (Davis, 1992). Moreover, Smith (2012) cites Iser (1974) who asserts that there are infinite numbers of readings for texts, and an infinite numbers of interpretations. According to Rosenblatt (1978, 1993, 1995), the *transaction* is what happens when the reader interprets the words based on their own prior knowledge and connects the text to their own individual lived experiences (Davis, 1992). Keeping in mind that reader identity is built upon the individual reader's behaviors and practices and how these actions shape the value that reading has in each person's life, this theoretical model provided a critical lens for the current study on reader identity development. Framed by the Transactional Theory (Rosenblatt, 1978), factors such as access, choice, agency, self-perception, book joy, engagement, independence, and confidence were explored in this study for their roles in nurturing reader identity development. This theoretical model aligns with the current study that foregrounds individuality at the core of reader identity (Hall, 2012; Wagner, 2020).

The Connection of the Transactional Theory to Inclusive Texts

To apply Rosenblatt's reader-centered theory and her focus on individual meaning-making to this study on reader identity development, it was imperative to provide inclusive books in the choices provided to children so that they could connect to characters, setting, and plot development, as these selections encouraged children to read in ways that brought their individual backgrounds to their reading experiences (Davis, 1992). The Transactional Theory of

Reading (Rosenblatt, 1978, 1982) suggests that when reading, a child brings their own expectations, previous reading experiences, unique understandings, and sociocultural background to the reading process, creating a personal interpretation of what is read. In this inquiry, inclusive books provided rich material for this exploration and allowed young readers to understand characters' lives that reflect diversity in human experience (Sipe, 2008). The Transactional Theory of Reading (Rosenblatt, 1978) aligned with the roles of increased access and choice in reader identity development and provided a lens to examine and explore how children engage with literary experiences by reading inclusive books of choice that span a diverse range of individual transactions with texts (Cai, 2008).

In this study that explores the intersection of reader identity and inclusive texts, the narrative approach to interviewing adults in phase one and children in phase two of this study focused on Rosenblatt's (1995) assertion that meaning is constructed in the transaction that takes place between the reader, their prior knowledge, their previous experiences, and the context within which their reading takes place (Christ & Sharma, 2018). While recognizing the social and cultural aspects of the reading process, Rosenblatt's Transactional Theory (1995) supports the process of providing children with increased access to inclusive texts that value their cultural capital (Yosso, 2005) and observing how their personal experiences guide their perspectives and decisions that define their individual reading choices. In the Transactional Theory (Rosenblatt, 1995), the reader's personal identity plays a central role in interpreting and finding meaning in a text. Opportunities to read and respond to inclusive books in this study will allow young readers from diverse backgrounds to see themselves reflected in their reading transactions (Rosenblatt, 1995). This connection can increase engagement in the reading process.

In this reciprocal relationship between the reader and the text, while each reader may engage with the same text, their individual knowledge and lived experiences will inform the meaning that is created (Davis, 1992). Interviews with literacy advocates and children who have received books of choice from *Find Book Joy* will include questions that elicit individual narratives from each participant. Increased access to inclusive books that provide a broad range of human experiences and diversity allow children to choose what to read and allow them to make meaning from what is read, thereby fostering agency and personal engagement with the text (Harvey & Ward, 2017), two core principles of the Transactional Theory of Reading (Rosenblatt, 1978) and leading factors in reader identity development.

The Efferent and Aesthetic Stances of the Transactional Theory

In her reader-centered Transactional Theory, Rosenblatt (1978) outlines two distinct stances that a reader takes when engaging with text: efferent and aesthetic. Efferent reading is when the reader's main goal is to extract information *from* the text. This model gives more power to the written text than to *experience* of reading (Davis, 1992) and decenters the role of the individual reader in the reading process. The term *efférent* comes from the French verb *efférer*, which means "to carry away" or "to direct outward." An efferent stance focuses on extracting information or shared meanings from the text, resulting in a more impersonal, analytical, and abstract approach (Rosenblatt, 1995). This type of reading is used when following instructions, solving problems, determining actions, or acquiring knowledge to remember beyond the reading experience (Rosenblatt, 1978). In childhood literacy development, children take an efferent stance when reading informational texts, such as books about music or animals or astronomy. In contrast, aesthetic reading is a more private and deeply personal experience, as it empowers the reader and centers their interpretations as the focus of the transaction (Rosenblatt, 1995).

Aesthetic reading is immersive and participatory, where readers immerse themselves in the narrative or imagery, experiencing the text as a journey rather than simply as a source of external information (Rosenblatt, 1978, 1995). The aesthetic stance describes the *lived through experience of reading* (Rosenblatt, 1978), focuses on the reader's enjoyment and engagement, and requires the reader to bring meaning *to* the text. This stance is more reflective and subjective, encouraging readers to engage with the nuances and emotional layers of the text.

Since aesthetic reading experiences reflect a wide range of emotions and invite readers to become deeply immersed in the characters' lives (Robinson, 2020), these interactions most commonly occur when children engage with fiction that expands their imagination. However, while fiction books encourage perspective-taking and foster empathy for characters, reflecting the aesthetic stance, informational texts can also offer children opportunities for similar engagement with text, such as when an animal becomes a source of prey or is injured (Robinson, 2020). In addition, children may express emotions and expand their imaginations when reading informational books about music or art, for example, and respond in ways that reveal their personal responses to the text in the aesthetic stance (Robinson, 2020). Further, as they engage with text, young children demonstrate various approaches to making meaning, moving along the efférant-aesthetic continuum in response to the images and information they encounter (Robinson, 2020; Rosenblatt, 1995).

In summary, Rosenblatt's (1978) theory highlights the interplay between the reader's purpose and the stance they adopt when engaging with text. While young readers usually lean toward a primary stance, they can and should adjust their approach during the reading process (Rosenblatt, 1978). Rather than maintain a rigid stance when engaging with text, readers' responses shift as they selectively focus on new ideas and events (Rosenblatt, 1995) and adopt a

stance based on their purpose for reading. Rosenblatt (1978) asserts that texts are neither inherently efferent nor aesthetic; rather, it is the purpose for reading that shapes the stance readers assume (Smith, 2012). Notably, an individual's purpose for reading often determines the stance one takes when reading, rather than the text itself. As young readers move through the text, they shift their focus in response to their prior knowledge and previous experiences, engaging with new ideas along the way. Rosenblatt (1998), as cited in Robinson (2020), noted that skilled readers stay open to a text's possibilities, drawing on their knowledge, experiences, emotions, and beliefs to engage in individual interpretation.

In this study of reader identity development that centers children's voices and their reading experiences, the role of the individual reader is paramount. According to the aesthetic stance of the Transactional Theory, reader's immersive and often emotional responses to the text are essential to their understandings (Rosenblatt, 1978). This approach encourages readers to engage their imaginations and learn about identities and perspectives that differ from their own (Robinson, 2020), as children do when they explore inclusive texts. The aesthetic stance is the primary lens that is utilized in this study to explore reader identity development, as the reader's attention is directed inward, connecting the text to personal emotions, memories, and experiences, thereby fostering meaningful connections and increasing reading engagement (Rosenblatt, 1978). In reader identity development, individual reading behaviors and practices inform each of the variables that contribute to one's reader identity development, thereby focusing the meaning on the value that each individual person brings to the experience. This narrative research study on reader identity development will primarily focus on the aesthetic stance of the Transactional Theory (Rosenblatt, 1978) and center children's voices as the authors of their own stories.

Identity as a Reader

Identity as a reader begins early in life. When children are invited to take part in reading books with caregivers, they are provided with the implicit message that books matter and reading has value (Neuman & Moland, 2019). Children conceptualize what it means to be a “good reader” at an early age (Hall, 2010, 2012). Literacy-centered interactions with their parents, siblings, teachers, and peers provide children with opportunities to acquire knowledge of what it means to be identified as a capable and engaged reader or, conversely, to be viewed a reader who is unmotivated and disengaged, and the positive and negative implications that are associated with each of these roles (McDermott et al., 2006). Once they begin to understand the value of books and reading, children’s identities and their reading and writing practices are intricately linked. In this context, reading practices are seen as “*identity capital*,” as children respond to cues from adults and peers as to how they should or should not behave when interacting with texts, even in the early childhood stage of development (Hall, 2010, p. 1795).

Identity capital refers to the specific behaviors or achievements that a community sees as valuable, and is a term used to connect individuals to their models of identity within their social environment (Côté & Schwartz, 2002). Early in their literacy development, young children learn to understand that there are certain qualities and reading behaviors that are valued by adults as identity capital, in this case, *reader identity capital*, such as listening attentively to stories read aloud and questioning and responding to questions about the books that are read (Hall, 2010). As children grow and develop, their literacy behaviors and practices are connected to the formation of their reader identity development, as when children read, write, and talk about texts with parents, siblings, teachers, and peers, those early literacy practices shape (and are shaped by) how they think about themselves as readers and their place in the world (Sutherland, 2005).

Further, children's early reading experiences influence the development of their self-perceptions as readers (Jensen et al., 2019). As noted by Jenkins (2021), Jensen et al. (2019) suggest that there is a reciprocal relationship and positive association between reader self-concept and reading achievement that starts in early childhood. The more confident a child is in their identity as a reader, the more gains they will achieve as an independent reader (Jenkins, 2021). Self-concept, as defined by Shavelson et al. (1976), is the self-perception that is formed by individuals' interpretations of their environment. In the literature, the terms self-concept and self-perception are often used interchangeably (Jensen et al., 2018).

In a classroom learning environment, children's understandings of who they are as readers contribute to the decisions they make about reading (Luttrell & Parker, 2001). In small-group or whole-group settings of book discussions, children who have a self-perception as a "poor reader" may withdraw or limit their interactions to attempt to conceal their self-perceived inadequacies (Hall, 2012). In contrast, students who identify as "good readers" or as readers who meet or exceed expectations may be more likely to join in conversations about books and share their perspectives and observations in class, as their confidence results from a strong belief in their reading abilities. These differing self-perceptions as readers are an example of how perceived *identity capital* about reading attributes and behaviors can influence students' roles and social interactions within the classroom learning environment (Hall, 2010). According to this model, children's engagement with texts and instruction is not necessarily determined by their cognitive reading competencies or reading proficiency levels, but rather by their self-perceptions of what it means to be a certain type of reader, how that reader identity is framed, and how young readers understand themselves in relation to these social norms (Hall, 2012).

According to McCarthey and Moje (2002), the concept of reader identity also involves how the social relationships that individuals form shape their reading and writing practices. Social literacy interactions with peers become robust opportunities for children to exercise agency and share their reading preferences. The sense of belonging in a group where children demonstrate their individual reading practices can serve as a source of motivation for some students, suggesting that relationships can shape identities and reading practices (McCarthy & Moje, 2002). Further, Compton-Lilly (2006) cites Smith (1997) who shares that children aspire to “*join the literacy club*” and hope that if they join this group, they will become more like the more advanced members, those children who already read well. Moreover, Compton-Lilly (2006) suggests that the many consequential implications of disparities in privilege, such as limited access and opportunity that are consequences of socially identified differences in race, culture, first language, gender, and/or socioeconomic resources, have influenced and continue to influence the literacy experiences and interactions that contribute to children’s reader identity development. Finally, the pure elation that children experience as a result of access to book ownership and choice in book selection early in life, known as *book joy*, provides a foundational connection between their reading experiences and their self-perceptions as readers.

The Role of Book Joy in Reader Identity Development

Access to book ownership and choice in book selection offer endless possibilities for young readers to experience the many wonders of book joy. Book joy encompasses the feelings of pure elation, enthusiasm, and excitement that accompany pride in book ownership and meaningful reading experiences and is a source of transformation that can reach all children, independent of the confines of their socioeconomic limitations (Frazee et al., 2014; Konrad, 2023; Love, 2019). Book joy opens doors to reader identity development by providing children

with choice and opportunities to define their preferences in book selection (Mackey, 2022). Once a child connects to book joy, there is no limit to their future nor to the scope of their identity as a reader. When book joy is activated by providing access to book ownership and choice in book selection, young readers' hearts and minds experience the joy of enlightenment (Vlach et al., 2023). Further, when a child reads purely to discover book joy in the absence of any external expectations, mandates, or demands, these instrumental literary experiences can transform a resistant reader into an avid reader for life (ILA, 2018).

Book joy provides the promising opportunity for children to engage in adventure and exploration, discover hope and optimism, develop pride in book ownership, learn about hope and resilience, expand their knowledge of genres and preferences, experience a sense of accomplishment, and indulge in the limitless potential of the imagination. When children are provided with the freedom and trust to choose their own books, this autonomy creates a literacy learning environment within which book joy can thrive (Mackey, 2022). As Konrad (2023) notes, both access to books they love and the freedom to read the books they *want* to read are primary considerations that contribute to a child's ability to experience book joy and also to develop book love, which is a highly individualized experience.

According to Nell (1988), three key elements are necessary for developing a love of books: reading proficiency, a positive attitude toward books and reading, and the extent to which books align with the reader's interests. These factors are connected to a reader's self-perception, the value they place on reading, and the enjoyment they derive from their chosen books (Konrad, 2023). The book joy that results from reading books of choice leads to increased frequency and volume in reading for all children (Allington, 2014; Konrad, 2023), as the more joyful reading can be, the more a child will want to read. Thus, the correlation between reading volume and

book joy is reliant on increased access to books and choice in book selection for children in economically disadvantaged communities (Neuman, 2022; Neuman & Moland, 2019).

The Connection between Justice and Book Joy

The right book at the right time can define a turning point in a child's life. All children have the right to read books that intrigue and excite them, reflect their own experiences, and transport them to places that transcend their daily lives (ILA, 2018), as access to books is not a privilege, but an equalizer—an equity game changer. Since joy cannot exist in the absence of justice (Vlach et al., 2023), efforts to support young readers in building a reader identity that is deeply rooted in book joy must be aligned with the social justice core values of increased equitable access, diversity, and inclusion for children living in economically disadvantaged communities. Book joy must be available to every child, regardless of family income or economic circumstances, as literacy is a civil right that should not be restricted by socioeconomic resources (Shahid & Brooks-Yip, 2022). As Love (2019) asserts: "Joy is crucial for social change; joy is crucial for teaching. Finding joy amidst pain and trauma is the fight to be fully human. Joy makes the quest for justice sustainable" (pp. 119-20).

In this pursuit of justice and joy, educators can use inclusive children's literature as a source of joy to center diverse voices that invite young learners to share their counter-narratives and enter a place of self-empowerment (Vlach et al., 2023). In the classroom setting and at home, teachers and parents can guide children in the discovery of book joy by asking themselves the question: "How can children's joys be recognized and sustained?" (Chong & Orr, 2023). As Johnston et al. (2019) suggest, teachers and parents must use literacy to guide students into humanity, not just to help them learn to decode and answer questions about texts. To elevate humanity and embrace the honest stories and authentic representations of diverse individuals,

educators and parents are compelled to provide access to inclusive books and a safe space for children to explore these books to shape their reader identities (Vlach et al., 2023).

Educators can increase book joy in the classroom setting by choosing inclusive books for culturally responsive read-aloud time with their students, as they situate justice and joy as the center of their students' literacy experiences (Muhammad, 2020; Vlach et al., 2023). Exploring stories from a range of varied perspectives and lived experiences can honor students' expert power and value their individual perspectives (Delpit, 1988; Yosso, 2005). Moreover, having access to engaging inclusive literature (Kozak & Martin-Chang, 2019) and a safe space to discuss complex social justice subjects that are explored in the books they read through a critical lens (Cushing & Carter, 2021) contribute to children's positive reading experiences and result in increased reading enjoyment (Zare et al., 2023). Further, in an equitable approach to embracing book joy, biographies, novels, poems, or short stories that fit children's emotional needs and suit their unique cultural backgrounds and individual characteristics (Lucas et al., 2019) can be used as critical lenses to explore social justice issues and expand children's knowledge in the classroom setting and at home (Agarwal-Rangnath, 2021; Ness, 2019).

Justice and Transformative Literacy Experiences

When Frederick Douglass (1817-1895), a self-emancipated formerly enslaved person, wrote: "Once you learn to read, you are forever free," (Douglass, 2005, p. 1), he conveyed the keen understanding that reading extends far beyond the ability to decode printed words to open doors to humanity for all citizens, regardless of race, color, religion, or creed (Shahid & Brooks-Yip, 2022). Historically, literacy has served as both a limitless source of liberation and a powerful tool for resistance, offering psychological healing, most notably for people of color (Ford et al., 2019). Anti-literacy laws in the United States during slavery were designed to

control enslaved individuals and prevent rebellion by prohibiting their education, with any attempt to learn to read resulting in threats of punishment, being sold, or even death (Williams, 2005). However, despite it being illegal, learning to read was a path forward and an escape for enslaved individuals. Access to written words offered them the opportunity to experience mental freedom and to envision themselves living freely in a world beyond their current circumstances.

Today, transformative literacy experiences that uplift the voices of those who have been historically marginalized create space for increased engagement and allow young readers to learn about justice and joy while renewing their interests in reading and learning (Vlach et al., 2023). Joy is deeply connected to social awareness and justice, as true joy is deeply connected to self-determination and self-empowerment (Vlach et al., 2023). Historically, joy has been centered in the work that cultivates social action by connecting hearts and minds in the pursuit of justice (Vlach et al., 2023), and is situated in a culturally responsive approach where children learn about who they are by understanding how others from varied backgrounds overcame hardship and adversity in their own lives. Finally, according to Vlach and colleagues (2023), to center joy in the context of justice, educators must expand their view of literacy beyond reading, writing, and language skills, recognizing it as a crucial resource for exploring social justice issues.

While justice is deeply connected to book joy, Muhammad (2020) advocates for literacy to be more than a source of self-fulfillment or pure enjoyment for young readers, and supports efforts for literacy to be interconnected with endeavors to shape and transform the sociopolitical landscape for those who have been historically oppressed. These justice-centered reading encounters guide can students to a deeper understanding of humanity (Johnson et al., 2019). As Huck (1987) suggests, “Literature has the power to take us out of ourselves and return us to ourselves a changed self, to enlarge our thinking while educating our hearts” (p. 70). Immersive

literacy experiences exemplify how reading can capture the transformative power of books in shaping young readers' identities and how they perceive their individual journeys in life.

The Importance of Access to Book Ownership in Reader Identity Development

Equitable access to book ownership is a prerequisite to reader identity development for *all* children, most notably for children in communities experiencing economic hardship. Children who live in well-resourced homes and own their own books are categorically more likely to read more books and read more often, and consequently have more opportunities to define their individual reader identities (Miller & Sharp, 2018) than children who are deprived of book ownership due to sharply limited financial resources. Young readers who grow up surrounded by books in their homes receive more books as gifts (access), read more often (frequency) and for longer periods of time (readerly stamina), read more books overall (volume), demonstrate higher reader engagement, acquire a broad knowledge of individual reading preferences, and achieve higher levels of education (Clark & Poulton, 2011) than their counterparts in underserved communities without access to book ownership. Each of these reading practices that result from robust access to books plays an instrumental role in a child's reader identity development.

When children can access books at home in close proximity and read by choice on their own terms without external expectations, they possess ownership and exercise agency in their reader identity development. The opportunity to access, choose, and enjoy books from well-stocked libraries at home and at school instills in young readers the belief that reading has value and conveys the understanding that literacy is an integral part of everyday life (Neuman, 2022; Neuman & Knapczyk, 2020). Scholars in pediatric health care, developmental psychology, social science, and literacy education agree that when children have access to book ownership and shared reading experiences at home with parents or caregivers, these early literacy experiences

have enduring implications for their vocabulary development, background knowledge, expressive language skills, and reading comprehension abilities (Bettencourt et al., 2020; Canfield et al., 2020b; Fälth, 2021; Neuman & Moland, 2019; Neyer et al., 2021).

Book ownership in early childhood is required for children to build exposure to print, expand their vocabulary, and develop the background knowledge necessary to shape their individual reader identities and empower them to access reading achievement (Neuman, 2017; Neuman & Moland, 2019). In addition, a firm parental commitment to a culture of learning within the home environment, reflected in their intention to maintain a substantial home library, notably boosts their children's educational attainment (Evans et al., 2010). To further support the importance of access to books in a home library environment, Lindsay (2018) discovered that children in economically disadvantaged communities who participated in book distribution programs that increased book ownership demonstrated notable improvements in reading achievement. Further, Allington and McGill-Franzen (2021) cite Becker (2010) who learned from an international study that the number of books in a home is a leading factor in reading achievement, "even when family income, parental education, home language, and other factors were controlled" (p. 4). Moreover, Allington and McGill-Franzen (2021) note that the *quantity* of books in a household had nearly as much of an impact on children's reading achievement as the family's socioeconomic status. Likewise, Heppt and colleagues (2022) identified the quantity of books in the home environment as a more reliable predictor of proficiency in academic language comprehension than both parental occupation and education.

Following a comprehensive analysis of scholarly research in the benefits of book access, Allington and McGill-Franzen (2021) concluded that if children in communities of economic need were equally fortunate to have the same ease of access to books that is common for students

from more economically advantaged families, the reading proficiency of students from economically disadvantaged communities may meet the same achievement levels as their more well-resourced counterparts. According to Allington and McGill-Franzen (2021), a 2010 study by Evans, Kelley, Sikora, and Treiman reported on their analyses of an international database of 27 nations and 70,000 cases and found that:

Controlling for each family's socioeconomic status, father's occupation, and parental education, the effect of home access to books was about the same size as the influence of parental education level, twice as large an influence as father's occupation, and a stronger influence on reading achievement than was the case for family socioeconomic status.

(Further) students who grew up in homes with many books completed three more years of schooling than did students from largely bookless homes, independent of social class, parent education, and parent occupation. This correlation was present in rich versus poor nations and under communism and capitalism. The advantage of living in a home where many books were available was twice as large as the difference between having a professional father and having a father who was a laborer. (p. S234)

This study's conclusions underscore the invaluable reciprocal relationship that exists between book ownership in the home and long-term reading achievement.

The Relationship Between Access to Book Ownership and Reading Volume

Access to books is unequivocally linked to increased opportunities for voluntary and independent reading outside of school (McQuillan & Au, 2001), thus it is imperative to increase access to book ownership to expand reading volume for children in economically disadvantaged communities (Allington, 2014). To boost reading volume, it is imperative for adults to offer children freedom in choosing their reading materials (Konrad, 2023; Massey, 2022). Allington

and McGill-Franzen (2021) found that reading volume can be increased in substantial ways if a child has unlimited access to books at no cost. Volume of reading is also an instrumental element in the development of reading proficiency (Johnston, 2019), as the sheer amount of reading, e.g., how much reading people do (Krashen, 2004), is the single greatest factor in reading achievement, one that supersedes even socioeconomic status. Lastly, students not only need to read an abundance of books, but they also need access to books that they love, books that they choose, and books that captivate their interests to actively participate and engage in the reading process (Allington, 2012; Konrad, 2023). Moreover, when students have the opportunity to self-select their own books and the freedom to choose books that they *want* to read, they develop advanced strategies for making choices and are more likely to become intrinsically motivated readers who read more books (Konrad, 2023). This autonomy in decision making promotes a sense of ownership in their reading journey, which is linked to expanded reading engagement, increased reading volume, and a lifelong love of reading (Guthrie & Humenick, 2004).

The Vital Importance of Choice in Reader Identity Development

To accompany robust access to books they love and generous time to read independently, young readers must also develop the keen ability to discern their individual preferences in book selections to define their identities as readers. Choice in book selection is empowering, as it increases children's self-esteem as readers and as decision makers (Miller & Sharp, 2018), strengthens motivation to read (Konrad, 2023), and is key to motivation and academic independence (Schunk et al., 2013). Krashen (2004) suggests that there is substantial evidence indicating that allowing individuals to choose their own reading materials notably contributes to their reader identity development. In addition, choice in book selection and autonomy in reading decisions also expand reading volume (Konrad, 2023). Fisher and Frey (2018) concur, and

suggest that to increase reading volume for young readers, adults have to expand the amount of choice children have in deciding what they read. When a child *chooses* a book to read, “they learn to enact preferences, demonstrate agency, and define their identity as a reader” (ILA, 2018, p. 8), all practices that enhance their reader identity development.

In the process of learning *how* to choose books they love to read, guidance from adults can provide children with the ability to know and understand who they are as readers and what matters most to them (Konrad, 2023; Mackey, 2022), as young readers learn from adults *how* to discover new genres, define personal preferences, and identify their own choices. However, while adults can provide guidance in this process, it is crucial to protect children's autonomy in their reading decisions, as this agency builds their self-confidence and supports their reader identities. Mackey (2022) emphasizes the importance of allowing children to make their *own* decisions when selecting books, as she asserts that exploring a wide range of genres and literary styles can deepen young reading enthusiasts' understandings of how personal experiences have shaped their reading preferences. Finally, when young readers demonstrate agency in choosing their own books, they develop the ability to define and act on their own individual reading goals (Vaughn, 2018), a key feature of one's reader identity development.

The decisive action of enacting choice in book selection factors prominently into reader identity formation most notably for striving readers, as choice allows them to learn about books, define their individual agency, and build knowledge of preferences (Harvey & Ward, 2017; Mackey, 2022; Miller & Sharp, 2018). Identity formation is a primary consequence of one's agency, and this agency can be seen as a bridge to connect identities across different practices and resources (Ivey & Johnston, 2013; Vaughn et al., 2020). Moreover, when children read books of choice and increase their agency by demonstrating knowledge of preferences and

sharing their connections to characters, setting, and plot development while recommending books to peers, these behaviors and practices support the development of a confident reader identity (Mackey, 2022; Ortlieb & Schatz, 2020).

The Impact of Choice on Motivation to Read

Choice in book selection is deeply connected to motivation and reading engagement, since children who choose their own books and exercise agency and autonomy are driven by internal motivation rather than external mandates determined by the adults in their lives (Miller & Sharp, 2018). Extensive research on reading motivation over the years has shown that choice in books and reading materials is a key factor in motivation to read (Guthrie & Wigfield, 2017; Ivey & Johnston, 2015). Moreover, Meier (2015) found that providing choice to literacy learners resulted in their increased responsibility, empowerment, and sense of purpose.

Motivation to read can be defined as the likelihood of engaging in reading or choosing to read (Gambrell, 2011), as “engaged readers are intrinsically motivated to read for a variety of personal goals, strategic in their reading behaviors, knowledgeable in their construction of new understandings from text, and socially interactive about the reading of text” (p. 172). According to Guthrie and Wigfield (2000), motivation to read is influenced by several facets, including goal-setting, internal and external rewards, self-efficacy, and social engagement.

According to Konrad (2023), when young readers have access to books that they love to read and are encouraged to follow their own interests and preferences, they are self-motivated to read independently. Also, Konrad (2023) discovered that when children are provided with freedom in book choice and are trusted by adults to read books that they *love* (not just like), their reading enjoyment corresponds to the amount of time they spend reading independently, thereby increasing their reading volume. Similarly, Gambrell (2011) asserts that children are more

motivated to read when they have opportunities to make choices about what they read, reach independent decisions, and determine how and why they engage in literacy tasks.

In contrast, children who are discouraged from reading their self-selected texts and instead told to read books chosen or required by their teachers and/or parents report feeling disillusioned and disinterested in the reading process (Konrad, 2023). Meier (2015) concurs, and asserts that when children only read books that are required to be read for curriculum mandates or to meet external expectations, they form a less than positive view of reading that can have enduring implications for their individual reader identities. Further, reading only for external demands reduces children's motivation to read and decreases the potential for young readers to experience book joy (Konrad, 2023). Finally, Mackey (2022) agrees and suggests that children learn about the many joys of reading *most* when they are not burdened by external demands or expectations and are instead trusted to explore their choices and preferences.

To open doors to choice and encourage increased motivation to read, teachers can foster an inquiry-based approach that engages children in book preview conferences by asking questions about books' features and students' interests. These types of interactions can help curious book explorers to develop their individual preferences and provide keen insights to educators when helping children in discovering captivating reading experiences (Konrad, 2023). When aiming to learn more about how to support children's reading preferences, Konrad (2023) advises educators to ask young readers thoughtful questions about the books they love. Children's personal interests will emerge as a result of these interactive exchanges that can help inform their reading choices and book selections. These social conversations about books are a primary factor in reader identity development, as children who continuously feel that their voices and choices are valued feel empowered and invincible (Ortlieb & Schatz, 2020).

Choice as a Social Justice Value

Choice in book selection also connects to promoting social justice values in children's lives. When books are provided as choices for children, they must reflect the diversity of their community by including authentic representation of varied races, cultures, language, genders, identities, lifestyles, socioeconomic resources, mobility and/or ability levels, ages, and family units. This intentional practice connects choice in book selection to a culturally responsive approach, as for choice in book selection to truly matter, books must accurately represent the diversity, interests, and lived experiences of the individuals in the community (Neuman, 2022).

However, in addition to sharp disparities in access to books of choice, children of diverse cultures and backgrounds often do not have equitable access to inclusive books or to curriculum that aligns with their histories, literacies, or identities (Love, 2019). In response to this quandary, providing children with choices in inclusive books that feature equitable representations and varied perspectives can help them learn about equity-centered dilemmas and emerging concepts of social justice as they develop empathy for others' lived experiences (Kim et al., 2019).

Increasing children's access to book ownership extends far beyond the volume or number of books provided, as young readers need access to texts that are culturally relevant, authentic, and meaningful (García & Kleifgen, 2019). Moreover, Massey et al. (2021) suggest that children's literature can be an instrumental resource for fostering hope in emerging book lovers and posit that providing choices to children in inclusive books that feature characters who overcome adversity can provide an opportunity for children to learn about hope, resilience, and optimism, as they begin to envision a promising future beyond their current day-to-day lives.

To provide equitable access to books and reading experiences, giving children ample time to explore curiosity and wonder in reading books of choice and allowing them to access and

choose their own books from an abundance of available options can signal a turning point in a child's reader identity development (Harvey & Ward, 2017). Moreover, inclusive books that provide opportunities to connect with characters who overcome adversity and intolerance can propel young readers to develop a sense of optimism. Access to books, choice in book selection, and opportunity to read books of choice without limits on time are key social justice practices that support children in reader identity development (Mackey, 2022; Massey et al., 2021).

In addition to experiencing book joy, the humanizing practice of giving children the trust and autonomy to choose their own books that they can keep provides for children in economic need a sense of agency that they may not have in other areas of their lives (Neuman, 2022). Access to reading material, independent choice in book selection, and time to read are key factors to motivate and engage all readers (Fisher & Frey, 2018; Mackey, 2022; Ward, 2017) and are indispensable factors for young readers who are navigating their individual paths to reader identity development in communities with limited financial resources. According to Mackey (2022), access to books, choice in book selection, and time to read increase endurance and enthusiasm for reading, two qualities that enhance children's confidence and self-perceptions as readers. Scoggin and Schneewind (2021) agree and emphasize the urgent need to give aspiring reading enthusiasts dedicated time to read, autonomy to select their own reading materials, opportunities to engage in discussions with peers about their reading experiences, and consistent modeling and leadership to support their reader identity development. Time to explore books increases young readers' knowledge of genres and provides them with opportunities to develop their reading preferences. Further, when students have the autonomy to select books of choice and the time to explore, their self-perceptions as capable readers are strengthened, thereby motivating them to engage with more books and increase their reading volume.

The Essential Role of the Home Literacy Environment in Reader Identity Development

Children who grow up in a well-resourced home literacy environment—those with both access to print materials and someone willing and able to read with them—have more advanced academic outcomes than children who grow up in less supportive home settings (Canfield et al., 2020b; Neuman & Moland, 2019; Tichnor-Wagner et al., 2016). According to de Bondt et al. (2020), increased access to book ownership and the ability to choose their own books allows children to create a home library filled with books that have been self-selected, a key factor in reading achievement and a primary influence in one's self-perception as a reader (Neuman & Moland, 2019). In this context, de Bondt et al. (2020) outline the primary features of a home literacy environment as follows: (1) high frequency of shared book reading with parents and caregivers; (2) parental or caregiver interest in participating in shared book reading; (3) the number of children's books that are available in a child's home; and (4) the opportunity to take part in frequent library visits. The significance of a well-curated home library and shared reading experiences with parents and caregivers is highlighted in the Scholastic Kids and Family Reading Report (2013) which suggests that children who have reading role model parents who exemplify the importance of reading and access to generous home book collections read more books and read more frequently, even in households with restrictions on financial resources.

Providing children with the opportunity to build a personally curated home book collection that is comprised of books of choice can increase their pride in book ownership, enhance their self-perceptions as readers, expand their knowledge of preferences, and build their confident reader identities (Neuman, 2022). Moreover, the proximity of books in the home environment increases the likelihood that children will read more books voluntarily and explore their home libraries with parents as well as independently to gain valuable literacy experiences

(Neuman, 2022; Neuman & Knapczyk, 2020). In addition to a robust home book collection, parent-child interactions with books are primary components of a supportive home literacy environment, as reading aloud to children provides opportunities for social bonding between parents and children while increasing the knowledge of vocabulary and background knowledge that are required for children to acquire the literacy skills required to read on grade level (Bettencourt et al., 2020; Canfield et al., 2020a; Canfield et al., 2020b; Fälth, 2021; Johnston, 2019; Neuman & Moland, 2019).

The Influence of Parent-Child Reading Experiences on Reader Identity Development

While increased access to book ownership is imperative for reader identity development, Neuman and Moland (2019) argue that access alone is clearly inadequate as a singular solution to improve early childhood literacy skills and build a child's reader identity development. Reading aloud to children and engaging them in conversations about books in the home environment invites them to become inquisitive learners (Bettencourt et al., 2020; Canfield et al., 2020b; Johnston, 2019), since shared reading experiences between parents and children are embedded in a social context that encourages inquiry and collaboration. In addition, these joyful literacy-centered encounters allow children to function as coparticipants in co-constructing purposeful encounters through book exploration (Neuman & Knapczyk, 2022).

Early childhood reading experiences that prepare children for literacy learning opportunities in the classroom begin at home from birth, well prior to kindergarten (Anderson et al., 2019; Bettencourt et al., 2020; Canfield et al., 2020b), as children who are read to frequently early in life demonstrate a fervent interest in books and reading, build background knowledge, develop storytelling skills, view reading as enjoyable, acquire new vocabulary, and gain knowledge of print concepts (Anderson et al., 2019; Bettencourt et al., 2020; Canfield et al.,

2020b; Fagan, 2022; Neuman & Knapczyk, 2020; Neuman & Moland, 2019). Moreover, when parents and caregivers enjoy reading to their children and see this experience as pleasurable and a source of joy, their children initiate interest in reading on their own from an early age (Raban, 2022). In fact, children are more likely to initiate reading interactions independently by enthusiastically re-enacting a shared reading experience and modeling the intonation and book language used by their caregivers when they observe their parents experiencing book joy and modeling a love of reading together. Finally, when family reading encounters with parents and caregivers include emotional intimacy and physical closeness, these conditions prompt children to explore the same books on their own, even if they are not yet reading independently, to emulate the caregivers' reading behaviors and demonstrate their literacy skills (Raban, 2022).

Johnston (2019) examined the value of social interaction in parent-child shared reading experiences and how these interconnected relationships advance and extend a broad range of essential skills in emergent literacy development. In an adult-child read-aloud experience, the ordinary act of reading a book with a child becomes an extraordinary opportunity for supporting the early language learning and literacy skills that plant the first seeds to developing an identity as a reader. Read et al. (2022) noted that when parents who read to their children provided support for new words in the text while reading aloud, this practice resulted in a higher word count for children than any other conversation that took place throughout the day, thereby increasing a child's exposure to language and opportunities to learn new vocabulary in context. These early literacy experiences build the crucial background knowledge that is required for children to one day independently engage with text and to comprehend what is read (Canfield et al., 2020b; Read et al., 2022). Moreover, sharing books with caregivers provides a pathway for children to develop expectations for their future reading encounters, when they will embark on

the road to reading proficiency as confident and independent readers (Canfield et al., 2020b; Neuman & Moland, 2019; Raban, 2022).

However, while parent-child reading interactions are vital to the development of a child's secure reader identity, it is imperative to keep in mind that societal inequities create restrictive cost barriers to book ownership that greatly reduce the resources and opportunities that parents in economic need have available to read to their children. These sharp inequalities present monumental obstacles to families in preparing their young children to enter school with the knowledge of print features, background knowledge, vocabulary development, and expressive language skills that are vital to learning to read (Neuman & Knapczyk, 2020).

Barriers to Book Ownership and Creating a Home Literacy Environment

While every child should have access to a rich home literacy environment that includes access to books and parent support, persistent hurdles such as the exorbitant cost of children's books, limited financial resources, urgent survival needs for food and shelter, and parental vulnerabilities collude to markedly limit book ownership and shared reading experiences for children living and learning in communities experiencing economic hardship (Canfield et al., 2020b). When access to book ownership is far out of reach due to a prohibitive cost barrier, the choices that children have in selecting their own reading materials are also strikingly limited (Canfield et al., 2020b; Neuman, 2022; Neuman & Knapczyk, 2020; Neuman & Moland, 2019). Accessibility to books persists as a substantial impediment for parents to be able to read aloud to their children and for children to read independently at home (Canfield et al., 2020b; Neuman, 2022; Neuman & Knapczyk, 2020; Neuman & Moland, 2019), thereby markedly constraining reader identity development for young readers in economically disadvantaged communities.

Neuman and Moland (2019) found that for children who live in *book deserts*, communities in which there is drastically limited to almost no access to children's books, hundreds of children may share one book. In fact, in one economically disadvantaged neighborhood where 67% of the child population lived in poverty, 833 children had to share *one book* to be able to read (Neuman & Knapczyk, 2020). In addition, Neuman and Celano (2012) found remarkable disparities in availability of books between different socioeconomic communities: in one economically impoverished neighborhood that had a child population of 7,000 children, there were 358 books for sale in total at the four stores that carried children's books, while at the same time, a nearby middle-class community offered 16,453 children's books and resources available for purchase to meet the needs of a child population of 1200 children (Neuman & Celano, 2012). Additional obstacles such as limited physical access to nearby libraries and other barriers for library use often hinder children's access to access to books and no-cost opportunities for reading engagement (Neuman & Knapczyk, 2020).

Canfield and colleagues (2020b) studied the hardships faced by parents struggling to cope with the many burdens of living in economic need while trying to balance shared reading experiences with their children and noted how basic needs such as food and shelter often compete for funds that could be used to secure book ownership. According to Canfield et al. (2020a), limited access to books and reduced shared reading experiences compromise the social-emotional bonding time and early relational interactions that are instrumental to healthy child development. In addition, parental reading vulnerabilities, limited time to read to children due to competing work responsibilities, language differences, and intergenerational influences about home reading behaviors are all additional factors that substantially restrict opportunities for parents and children to read together at home. These co-existing stressors and demands require

determined efforts to remove the cost barrier to book ownership and provide parents with literacy coaching, education, and resources, so that they will feel capable of confidently joining their children as supportive reading partners (Canfield et al., 2020b).

In addition to economic barriers, parents and caregivers may navigate language issues that hinder their ability or confidence to read aloud to their children (Canfield et al., 2020b). To add to these obstacles, intergenerational influences may alter parents' perceptions of reading to their children at home, as some parents were not read to or supported as children in their own reader identity development, and therefore may struggle to read aloud due to their own reading vulnerabilities. This constellation of complex issues results in notably reduced adult-child shared reading experiences for early literacy learners living in economically disadvantaged communities and drastically reduce opportunities for children to develop secure reader identities (Neuman et al., 2021; Waldron, 2018). To properly address the needs of parents who may feel vulnerable reading to their children due to their own reading insecurities, (Canfield et al., 2020b; Neuman, 2022; Neuman & Moland, 2019; Waldron, 2018), comprehensive effort must be devoted to empowering parent voices and providing parent literacy support so that parents and caregivers can read to their children with confidence and model the value of reading in everyday life.

Literacy Support for Parents to Support Children's Reader Identity Development

While it is imperative for parents and caregivers to read aloud to their children to support their reader identity development, it is equally imperative for the community to address parents' vulnerabilities as readers by providing parents with coaching and support to increase their literacy skills and to learn how to help their children in developing their reader identities (Bettencourt et al., 2020; Canfield et al., 2020b; Williams & Lerner, 2019). The role of parent support in creating a literacy-centered home environment is imperative for children to build a

self-assured reader identity (Canfield et al., 2020b; de Bondt et al., 2020; Neyer et al., 2021), yet realistically, some parents may require their own assistance to be able to do so with confidence.

To meet the need to provide encouragement to parents to actively engage and increase the literacy infrastructure that exists in the home environment, a recent study on the gains that resulted from the *Imagination Library* (Neyer et al., 2021) noted that when book distribution efforts included increased both access to books and ongoing parent support, parents of children enrolled in the program acquired a new understanding of their invaluable role in their child's reader identity development. Providing parents with coaching and modeling for reading aloud to children as well as materials and resources to support reading at home can address parental vulnerabilities and empower parent voices so that they can be active participants in their children's reader identity development (Bettencourt et al., 2020; Canfield et al., 2020b).

National Book Access Programs to Support Parents and Children. In response to the competing concerns of limited access to book ownership and parental vulnerabilities as readers, trailblazing no-cost national book distribution programs such as the *Imagination Library* (Neyer et al., 2021) and *Reach Out and Read* (Canfield et al., 2020b) that include the vital parent coaching component have resulted in substantial progress in early childhood literacy development. Reach Out and Read (ROR) is a national book distribution program that aims to "make literacy promotion a standard part of pediatric primary care" (Willis, Kabler-Babitt, & Zuckerman, 2007, p. 632). ROR has three key components: 1) families receive a free children's book at each well-child pediatric visit from six months to five years of age, 2) pediatricians and other medical staff provide guidance and support to parents to promote reading and other early literacy activities during these visits, and 3) volunteers read aloud to children in the waiting room, modeling book-sharing behavior for parents and providing literacy experiences for

children (Canfield et al., 2020b). Notably, in *Reach Out and Read*, parents who received sound advice on literacy support from a trusted and credible healthcare source, i.e., a pediatrician or nurse, were particularly more inclined to read to their children at home (Canfield et al., 2020b). This finding suggests that considerations about setting, context, and the source of support may contribute to parents' receptivity to receiving counsel to read to their children (de Bondt et al., 2020). Moreover, when healthcare providers modeled book-sharing practices with parents and caregivers, such as how to scaffold new vocabulary and identify features in illustrations, interest in reading for both parents and children improved (Canfield et al., 2020b).

In 1995, Dolly Parton launched Dolly Parton's *Imagination Library* (DPL) to benefit the children of her home county in East Tennessee (Dolly Parton's Imagination Library, 2019). In memory of her father and in an effort to eradicate illiteracy in her community, Ms. Parton's vision was to nurture an early love of reading among her county's youngest children by providing them with the gift of a new book at no cost sent to their home each month, from birth to age five. In this framework, a child can amass a home library of 60 books prior to entering kindergarten. There is no proof of income requirement for enrollment in this program, which researchers found increased participation, as cultural and social barriers may preclude learners from accessing assistance programs when financial disclosure is required (Green et al., 2020).

Neyer and colleagues (2021) studied program goals for the *Imagination Library* to determine if parent programming is cost effective for this international book distribution program. In their analysis, Neyer and colleagues (2021) discovered that the consistent, frequent supply of new books at no cost from the *Imagination Library* directly impacted the frequency of parent-child home reading experiences, as they served as a good reminder to read more at home. In summary, an examination of the results of the *Imagination Library* program goals identified

four primary gains: (1) benefits extended far beyond the enrolled child; (2) both children and their parents developed strong pride in book ownership; (3) families learned to connect books with learning and achievement; and (4) free books from the program helped parents and children to build consistency and reading routines as a family unit (Neyer et al., 2021). Further, an examination of the Arkansas *Imagination Library* (Green et al., 2020) found that collaborations and partnerships with local banks, chambers of commerce, state government, health care providers, schools, and local churches resulted in increased enrollment and advocacy for the program. Green et al. (2020) also found that due to increased access to books based on enrollment in the *Imagination Library*, there was a shift in the ratio of books to children living in economic need from 3.3 books per 1000 residents (Neuman & Celano, 2001) to a ratio of 10 books to 1000 residents. This expansion in book ownership was attributed to the collaborative efforts of the Arkansas *Imagination Library* with strong local community partnerships (Green et al., 2020).

Studies found that when national book distribution programs embedded parent coaching and support to caregivers, these individuals experienced their *own* transformative change as readers while learning how to improve literacy gains for their children (Bettencourt et al., 2020; Canfield et al., 2020b; Neuman & Moland, 2019; Neyer et al., 2021; Prahl, 2023). Further, Johnston (2019) discovered that interactive reading exchanges between parents and caregivers and their children with books from the *Imagination Library* increased a child's motivation to read and developed their enchantment with the reading process. In an analysis of the gains from participation in the *Imagination Library*, Johnston (2019) shared four ways to encourage parents and caregivers to engage their children in the literacy process: (1) provide children with choices in book selection; (2) give children the role of authors in making their own books that shape their

identities as authors; (3) value what children notice; and (4) build dialogue around what is noticed by children. The *Imagination Library* is one example of how community-based book distribution efforts can provide access to books at no cost and guide parents in transforming their children's early literacy development.

The Instrumental Role of Community in Reader Identity Development

The instrumental role of relationships and partnerships in the larger community beyond the child's home environment is imperative to reader identity development. When considering the aspirational goal of creating a joyful community reading culture to encourage children's reader identity development, three primary factors emerged from the research: access to books, choice in book selection, and time for children to read independently and frequently outside of school (Fisher & Frey, 2018; Mackey, 2022; Massey et al., 2021; Neuman, 2022). These key social justice practices support children in reader identity development and are framed within an equitable approach to literacy learning (Mackey, 2022; Massey et al., 2021). Further, community relationships can often provide support that may supplement the home literacy environment.

In a thoughtful approach to shaping a community reading culture, informal literacy spaces can provide innovative literacy learning opportunities for young children (Neuman et al., 2020). While access to books of choice is imperative to build an enduring reading culture, this goal must also include social interactions around books that ignite the community spirit to share reading experiences and exchange book recommendations (Neuman, 2022; Neuman & Knapczyk, 2022). When parents and their children meet and connect with other families while accessing a book vending machine or reading together at the laundromat or bus stop, the engaging literary conversations that unfold may include book recommendations that expand young readers' preferences and knowledge of genres (Neuman, 2022).

These community-based learning environments transcend the more traditional classroom setting and provide access, time, context, and space for the social interactions around books outside of school that are key to reader identity development, also proving that learning can occur in a multitude of sociocultural contexts (Neuman, 2022; Takeuchi et al., 2019). Further, these community-centered literacy experiences convey that learning is contextualized within settings and reliant on adult interactions, as children make the connections that deepen their engagement in literacy learning experiences, while adults serve as the *architects* or *engineers* who design and construct the infrastructure that enables and support this learning (Takeuchi et al., 2019, p. 8). This broader conceptualization builds on an asset-based cultural perspective that recognizes the abundance of talents and funds of knowledge that non-dominant communities may bring to their social settings (Neuman et al., 2020) and recognizes the urgency for a more equity-focused and inclusive approach to literacy learning (Neuman & Knapczyk, 2022).

Further, community *book heroes* and *literacy ambassadors* can be essential sources of support for young readers as they model the value of reading in real life. Ascenzi-Moreno and Quiñones (2022) define the term *book hero* as an individual within the community reading culture who exemplifies the pure joy found in reading and literacy experiences and who models the inestimable value of reading in everyday life. Similarly, *literacy ambassadors* demonstrate the importance of prioritizing reading in one's life and share their lifelong love of reading while providing books to children and illuminating the path for children to discover book joy in their own lives. When these community literacy leaders build instrumental relationships with young reading enthusiasts, they reinforce the inestimable value of reading in their lives.

Neighborhood Learning Spaces to Advance Literacy Development

Community partnerships are essential to building a vibrant reading culture and supporting reader identity development, as creating neighborhood learning spaces stocked with books in neighborhood locations such as laundromats or placing book vending machines in high-traffic areas such as stores or churches can provide infinite opportunities for children to experience informal literacy learning in everyday life (Neuman, 2022; Neuman & Knapczyk, 2022). In one example of community support, Neuman (2022) asserts that strategically placed book vending machines can provide not only increased access to books, but also increase *choice* in book selection. Neuman (2022) advocates for choice as an invaluable opportunity families living in circumstances of economic hardship to exercise agency and autonomy in book selection. According to Neuman (2022), choice is instrumental in improving not only active participation in this type of book distribution program, but also in elevating and empowering the voices of the community participants, as it is imperative to prioritize the needs of the community in which each initiative is situated. Neuman (2022) cites the work of Guthrie (2004) who posits that since vending machines offer people choices, the experience of choice in book selection in and of itself is a strong source of motivation. Finally, according to Neuman (2022), choice in book selection may provide children with feelings of agency, ownership, and control of one's own decisions, as the power of choice in the context of economic hardship and vulnerability may not reside in reaping its rewards, yet in having the power to actually make that choice in the first place.

In addition to book vending machines sponsored by Jet Blue and their *Soar with Reading* program (Neuman, 2022), the Clinton Foundation's *Too Small to Fail* early childhood initiative and the Laundry Cares Foundation jointly spearheaded a community literacy program by reimagining laundromats as vibrant early literacy learning spaces (Neuman et al., 2020). In this endeavor, the partnership transformed laundromats in under-resourced communities into literacy

learning spaces by creating small, attractive “*book nooks*” that included bookshelves filled with children’s books, a small seating area for parent–child reading engagement, child-sized tables and chairs, magnetic letters, a child-sized washer and dryer, puppets, and a puppet theater. Attractive signage was provided that conveyed fun ideas for family involvement and encouraged families to further continue literacy learning encounters in the home environment (Neuman et al., 2020). Moreover, these laundromat literacy spaces provided social opportunities for families to gather and share experiences about books and early literacy engagement (Neuman et al., 2020). These types of community-based literacy encounters shape children’s self-perception as readers and reinforce the principle that reading is an integral part of daily life, both key influences in reader identity development. In summary, these community-based literacy centers increased access to books and literacy materials, supported parents and caregivers, and fostered children’s expressive language development and imaginative play participation to build their emergent literacy skills (Hirsh-Pasek et al., 2018; Neuman & Knapczyk, 2022; Roskos & Christie, 2007).

Further, keeping in mind that children interact most with learning activities that provide proximity of placement (Neuman, 2022), the positioning of book vending machines and literacy learning spaces in accessible locations in the community, such a laundromat or convenience store, creates a lively literacy presence in a neighborhood that may have previously been bereft of print (Neuman, 2022). Neuman and Knapczyk (2020, 2022) found that placing free books in high-traffic areas sparked children’s interest in reading and improved book title recognition, especially when paired with consistent adult support in reader identity development.

The Socioeconomic Limitations of Public and School Libraries

The goal of building and sustaining a community reading culture calls into question the subject of school libraries and public libraries and their abilities to adequately meet the needs of

the individuals in the communities they serve. As explored in this study, when children and families with limited financial resources attempt to obtain reading materials, they often encounter an inability to afford children's books due to the exorbitant cost barrier. While a seemingly practical solution to this problem is borrowing books at no cost from local libraries, they are often faced with systemic barriers that prevent access to library books for their children.

Public libraries, once viewed as the last safety net in communities experiencing economic hardship, often contend with markedly limited funding, drastically decreased operating hours, and decidedly curtailed library services (Neuman & Moland, 2019), thus further restricting (rather than increasing) children's access to print resources and a vibrant reading culture. Moreover, public libraries are often located in neighborhoods that require either a car or public transportation to access, and not all working families have the access or time available to be able to visit libraries at the hours that they are open. While browsing in children's libraries is one of the earliest experiences that helps shape a child's reader identity by expanding their knowledge of genres and developing their personal reading preferences, striking limitations on library resources greatly curtail opportunities for children in communities of economic need to build secure reader identities and consequently limit their right of entry to reading achievement.

Further, scores of school libraries located in underserved communities have astoundingly shuttered their doors to children due to lack of staff and funding for books, a harsh reality that restricts children's access to books within their own schools and exacerbates inequalities in the availability of literacy resources. In school libraries that remain open in communities with limited financial resources, book collections are often woefully outdated and in poor condition. Schools in communities experiencing economic hardship are often inadequately equipped to provide optimal library services to their students due to limited funding, as they have strikingly

less resources compared to those that exist in learning institutions in more well-resourced communities (Neuman & Celano, 2001). The dire consequences of these funding restrictions often result in obsolete book collections that are not sources of motivation or book joy for children who already endure resource limitations and therefore do not advance the goals that access to books could potentially provide. School libraries can serve as a valuable resource to enhance children's access to books at no cost if funding allocation is prioritized.

In one example, Pribesh et al. (2011) explored variations in school library attributes, such as disparities in staffing, collection updates, and closure frequencies, across schools with vastly different socioeconomic levels. Their findings aligned with those of Neuman and Celano (2001), revealing that schools serving the largest populations of students from economically disadvantaged communities had the least access to essential library resources, thereby further widening the equity gap in access to books for children living and learning communities of economic need. In communities that have the highest need for books due to an insurmountable cost barrier and limited financial resources, school library hours and collections are often restricted. These sharp disparities result in communities that are bereft of books and reading materials and cause enduring implications for children's reader identity development.

Little Free Libraries as an Alternative Source of Access to Books

Since many public libraries and school libraries in communities experiencing economic hardship are not able to meet the needs of their communities for a range of complex reasons, most rooted in systemic inequities, literacy advocates are aiming to better address the needs of young readers in historically marginalized communities with innovative initiatives to increase access to books at no cost. One way to proactively address the access to books crisis is to establish a Little Free Library (LFL) within the community, which is a grassroots book

exchange, a neighborhood book access opportunity, and an informal meeting place where “*take one, leave one*” is the order of the day. Literacy advocates believe that these small neighborhood book access exchanges are powerful tools for confronting some of the resource limitations in public and school libraries (Little Free Library, n.d.). As journalist David L. Ulin (2015) expressed in *The Los Angeles Times*, “A Little Free Library is, to me, an almost perfect expression of literary democracy: Take a book, return a book; reading not as commodity exchange but as an exchange of identity, of ideas.”

Little Free Library (LFL) is a non-profit organization dedicated to promoting reading and literacy through community involvement by providing free book exchanges in communities all over the world (Little Free Library, n.d.). The Little Free Library movement started in 2009 when Todd Bol from Hudson, Wisconsin, inspired by the book lending community spaces and book lending practices of historic traveling libraries, created the first LFL in his front yard when he built a small replica of a one-room schoolhouse as a tribute to his mother, a former teacher. The Little Free Library concept soon gained momentum, and as of March 2025, it was estimated that there were more than 200,000 registered Little Free Libraries worldwide, with thousands more in development (Little Free Library, n.d.). These neighborhood book exchanges are open 24 hours a day, seven days a week, and remove the cost barrier to book ownership. To date, Little Free Libraries around the world have distributed over 400 million books.

Since Little Free Libraries are available 24 hours a day, seven days a week availability and do not require a library card, these features may be appealing to individuals who feel unwelcome or uncomfortable in public or school libraries due to cultural or social barriers (Snow, 2015). In addition, LFLs have no due dates or fines, providing more opportunities to read for pleasure without the pressure of deadlines or fees. While the mission of Little Free Libraries

support diverse books and materials to promote empathy, understanding and inclusion (Little Free Library, n.d.), some concerns about a lack of inclusivity have been raised. These concerns relate to the prevalence of Little Free Libraries in affluent communities, where book collections often feature characters who are predominantly White, financially secure, and able-bodied (Snow, 2015). To increase inclusion in the Little Free Library book collections, advocates aim to study the various locations of Little Free Libraries more closely to determine their proximity to more culturally and socioeconomically diverse communities and to be sure that inclusive books that feature diverse lived experiences are being provided to children, teens, and adults who frequent these community book exchanges. Expanding equitable access to inclusive books in Little Free Libraries requires further examination of critical social justice issues and their impact on the role of inclusive books in reader identity development (Snow, 2015).

The Role of Inclusive Books in Reader Identity Development

To accompany literacy-centered interactions with book heroes and literacy ambassadors in their communities, aspiring book explorers must also have access to inclusive texts to fully define their identities as readers. As noted, the term *inclusive texts* captures a wide range of multifaceted, humanizing, nuanced, and diverse portrayals that span a broad continuum of backgrounds, identities, cultures, languages, abilities, experiences, and perspectives (Kleekamp & Zapata, 2019; Page, 2017; Pennell et al., 2017). Further, inclusive literature provides children with the opportunity to understand how their individual experiences fit into the context of the overall human experience (Ford et al., 2019; Hayden & Prince, 2023; Heineke et al., 2022; Kleekamp & Zapata, 2019; Pennell et al., 2017; Sharma & Christ, 2018; Sims Bishop, 1990). Discovering meaningful connections with characters, setting, and/or plot development and/or identifying with a character's lived experience or ways to navigate adversity are some of the

primary reasons that support the moral imperative to include inclusive books in the range of literary choices for young children (Ascenzi-Moreno & Quiñones, 2022).

In her 2009 TED Talk, *"The Danger of a Single Story,"* Nigerian novelist Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie conveyed that when narratives do not encompass broadly diverse experiences, the risk arises of perpetuating, rather than dismantling, what Adichie (2009) called *"the single story."* Moreover, "the single story creates stereotypes, and the problem with stereotypes is not that they are untrue, but that they are incomplete (Adichie, 2009). They make one story become the *only* story" (00:04:45). In contrast to a broader and more inclusive view of individuals living with diversity, single stories become the definitive way that a person or a group of people are viewed, thereby reducing them to one-dimensional beings (Tschida et al., 2014). This is especially notable in children's books that feature characters with diverse mobility or cognitive needs. As Adichie (2009) further explains, "Power is the ability not just to tell the story of another person, but to make it the definitive story of that person" (00:09:25). Adichie (2009) conveys that the power is held by those who have the authority to choose which narratives are shared, who shares them, when they are shared, and the manner in which they are told. Historically, children's books have often prioritized White, middle-class, and ableist standards, which silence the values and assets that exist among individuals living and learning in marginalized communities (Agarwal-Rangnath, 2021; Ness, 2019).

In contrast to a "single story" approach, inclusive children's literature represents a brilliant variety of lived experiences and individuals from diverse backgrounds, encompassing race, culture, language, gender, identity, lifestyle, abilities, age, and socioeconomic circumstances, while amplifying the voices of children with marginalized identities, including those navigating cognitive and/or mobility differences (Agarwal-Rangnath, 2021; Ascenzi-

Moreno & Quiñones, 2022; Ford et al., 2019; Hayden & Prince, 2023; Heineke et al., 2022; Kleekamp & Zapata, 2019; Pennell et al., 2017; Sharma & Christ, 2017; Tondreau & Rabinowitz, 2021). Notably, inclusive books offer opportunities for counter-storytelling that elevates the voices of those often excluded in children's literature and in society at large. Counter-storytelling is commonly understood as a means of amplifying marginalized voices and sharing narratives and perspectives from individuals that are frequently overlooked (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). In this context, it is important to note that counter-storytelling in inclusive literature extends beyond filling narrative gaps; it actively challenges and disrupts the dominant narratives that surround identity (Ness, 2019) by providing alternatives to the mainstream ideologies.

The opportunity to define a literate self and shape one's reader identity can be framed by a series of gateway experiences (Enright et al., 2021) with inclusive books that validate and affirm students' social identities (Ascenzi-Moreno & Quiñones, 2022; Gomez-Najarro, 2020). Moreover, the cultural capital (Yosso, 2005) that is featured in inclusive books can encompass a brilliant spectrum of diverse lived experiences, including varied backgrounds in race and culture, language, gender, identity, lifestyle, socioeconomic status, age, mobility, ability, and any reality that is not defined by ableism or the mainstream narrative. Finally, inclusive texts provide young readers with the promising opportunity to "self-author their identities through literary engagement that extends beyond the White literary canon" (Enright et al., 2021, p. 445).

According to Ascenzi-Moreno and Quiñones (2022), there is an urgent responsibility for educators to include books that feature authentic representation of diversity in their classrooms, as these vital resources are integral to students developing their individual reader identities and to them feeling seen and heard in their learning environments. However, while inclusive books can

provide opportunities for children to connect to their home cultures and languages while opening avenues for discussion of the importance of diversity and critical social justice issues (Heineke et al., 2022; Ness, 2019; Neuman et al., 2021), there is a dire scarcity of children's literature that positively features characters of color, immigrant children, Indigenous children, multilingual learners, and/or those who identify as two or more races or cultures or anyone whose lived experiences are not defined by ableism or the mainstream narrative in authentic ways that honor their humanity (Hayden & Price, 2023; Tondreau & Rabinowitz, 2021). According to Yosso (2005), traditional notions of cultural capital have historically centered White, middle-class, ableist norms, and argues that this approach overlooks the strengths and resources that exist in marginalized communities - a chasm that inclusive literature seeks to address by affirming diverse experiences, lifestyles, and perspectives.

Inclusive Books as Mirrors, Windows, and Sliding Glass Doors

In her seminal essay, Sims Bishop (1990) stated that books can serve as a mirror to reflect the reader, as a window to see the lives of others, and as sliding glass doors that enable readers to transverse between groups and worlds, and to sometimes be forever changed by the book. According to Sims Bishop (1990):

When lighting conditions are just right, however, a window can also be a mirror.

Literature transforms human experience and reflects it back to us, and in that reflection, we can see our own lives and experiences as part of the larger human experience.

Reading, then, becomes a means of self-affirmation. (p. ix)

Mirror books are those that align with literacy learners' identities and interests as well as their appearance and lived experiences, while window books provide ways for children to learn about others' identities and experiences that may be unfamiliar to them (Ascenzi-Moreno & Quiñones,

2022). Books that function as sliding glass doors offer a similar experience to books that serve as windows, but with a key distinction: these books actively transform the reader, allowing them to emerge changed by their reading experience (Johnson et al., 2017; Sims Bishop, 1990).

Further, while books that serve as windows allow readers to look and to visit, books that serve as sliding glass doors invite readers to step through and into an experience that may change their lives, similar in ways to how the characters in a story are also transformed (Johnson et al., 2017). Inclusive texts that can serve as sliding glass doors are those books with characters that experience injustice, take risks, wrestle with ethical decisions, and raise questions about their world (Johnson et al., 2017). If reading inclusive texts can help children see themselves reflected in inclusive books as mirrors, look through windows to learn about others who may look different than they do or navigate their worlds in different ways, their literacy experiences will become opportunities to step through sliding glass doors into the comprehensive human experience (Christ & Sharma, 2018; Johnson et al., 2017; Sims Bishop, 1990).

Inclusive Books that Feature Cultural and Linguistic Diversity

Children connect with inclusive books in a broad range of noteworthy ways that further their identities as readers, frame how they conceptualize reading, expand their humanity, and shape how they connect reading to their cultural and linguistic understandings (Heineke et al., 2022; Wagner, 2020). Books that serve as mirrors can increase visibility and provide a sense of belonging and connection to children who may feel excluded from their peers due to cultural or linguistic differences, while books that are windows can provide a lens to learn about children with cultural and linguistic features other than one's own (Sims Bishop, 1990). Finally, when children see their cultures represented, respected, and recognized in books in authentic and

meaningful ways, they are more engaged in the reading process and may even be more motivated to read independently (Fleming et al., 2016; Ford et al., 2019; Sims Bishop, 1990).

Inclusive texts that feature cultural and linguistic diversity provide opportunities for children to connect to their home cultures and languages while opening avenues for discussion of critical social issues that examine injustice (Heineke et al., 2022; Johnson et al., 2018; Neuman et al., 2021; Sharma & Christ, 2017). Authentic representation that amplifies voices from underrepresented communities is crucial, as these perspectives are in contrast with the more dominant narrative of the mainstream culture. Educators must be intentional when selecting inclusive texts, as Ness (2019) recommends responsible critical assessments of books' quality, authenticity, authorship, and inclusivity prior to sharing them with children. Sharma and Christ (2017) and Kleekamp and Zapata (2019) offer helpful rubrics to assist educators in learning selection criteria for authentic representation and inclusivity for equity-centered practice.

In her instrumental work on culturally relevant pedagogy, Ladson-Billings (1995) encourages educators to center students' cultural competence as front-and-center in their teaching practices to help young learners grow in their knowledge and understanding of their own cultures and the mainstream culture. This intentional approach to elevating children's voices holds high expectations for academic success for all students, supports cultural competence to shape the formation of young learners' cultural identities, and provides opportunities to develop critical consciousness to address social inequities (Ladson-Billings, 1995). Culturally responsive pedagogies that provide inclusive books to children empower diverse learners to deepen content knowledge, develop critical awareness, enhance engagement, and strengthen self-efficacy, thereby fostering their belief in their role as agents of change (Ortlieb & Schatz, 2020). Moreover, Slade (2023) cites the work of Martens et al. (2015), who assert that engaging young

learners with inclusive books offers a meaningful way to validate and reflect young children's cultural identities. To increase awareness and expand understanding, Sharma and Christ (2017) encourage educators to incorporate texts that reflect the unique and varied perspectives and lived experiences of the children in their classrooms and communities. Appendix K features a resource for educators by Sharma and Christ (2017) that assists with inclusive book selection. This rubric sets forth the criteria for selecting culturally relevant children's books for children.

In educational settings, a culturally responsive framework that embraces inclusive literature addresses the importance of recognizing and valuing students' cultural backgrounds (Gay, 2002). While providing books to children that feature cultural integrity and linguistic diversity is key to cross-cultural understanding, it is imperative for educators to also acknowledge a wider range of diverse lived experiences, framed in counternarratives that are all-encompassing. In this approach, educators can also use literature as a lens to explore the lives of individuals who navigate mobility and/or cognitive differences. An authentic understanding of culturally diverse literature must go beyond race, culture, and language to encompass differences in mobility, cognitive abilities, socioeconomic status, age, gender, and religion, as well as varied lifestyles, perspectives, and identities (Hayden & Prince, 2023; Heineke et al., 2022; Kleekamp & Zapata, 2019). Recognizing this broader spectrum of diversity allows for a more inclusive and meaningful literary experience that fosters deeper connections for young readers.

Inclusive Books that Feature Characters with Mobility and Cognitive Diversity

The National Center for Education Statistics (2023) reports that in the 2022–23 school year, approximately 7.5 million students aged 3–21 received special education services under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), accounting for 15% of all public school students. This percentage marks a 2-point increase from the 2012–13 school year, when 13% of

public school students received these services. However, while 15% of students attending schools in the United States receive special education services to address their individual learning profiles, children with disabilities may be one of the most markedly underrepresented and inadequately included groups in children's literature (Blaska, 2004; Dyches et al., 2006). In fact, Hayden and Prince (2023) suggest that disability in children's literature is often presented as one of two models that both reinforce an ableist approach: characters with disabilities are either seen as passive recipients of charitable efforts or medical treatment, both of which are detrimental to their agency, independence, and peer acceptance. Moreover, limiting notions that feature individuals with differences as one-dimensional beings within a single story (Adichie, 2009) present a stereotypical and linear view of disability that limits a more inclusive and comprehensive understanding of how diversity is represented (Hayden & Prince, 2023; Kleekamp & Zapata, 2019). These exclusionary practices can result in further isolation for children navigating various forms of mobility and cognitive diversity in their daily lives.

In contrast, inclusive texts that uphold cultural integrity and humanize characters with mobility or cognitive differences present them as complex, multidimensional individuals, rather than reducing them to stereotypes or inaccurately labeling them as marginalized or excluded (Kleekamp & Zapata, 2019; Pennell et al., 2017). Children must have access to inclusive books that feature characters with diverse abilities to learn from varied lived experiences (Blaska, 2004). Books that depict disabilities in a strengths-based model can influence the perspectives of not only the children who engage with them but also the parents, teachers, and caregivers who share these stories with young readers (Pennell et al., 2017).

To promote the use of inclusive texts and deepen understanding, Kleekamp and Zapata (2019) support educators in selecting picture books with equity-centered representations of

characters with disabilities, as reflected in the guiding questions included in Appendix L. Additionally, the Images & Encounters Profile (Blaska, 2003) in Appendix M is a valuable resource for evaluating children's books, guiding reviewers to examine the storyline, language, and illustrations for authentic and respectful representation that upholds the humanity and dignity of characters with disabilities. Children's books that feature realistic representation of characters in a strengths-based model focus on what people *can* do and *can* be (Shogren et al., 2017), rather than on their perceived limitations. Moreover, since instrumental literary experiences with inclusive books provide counternarratives, they are especially notable for children who read books about characters who may have cognitive or mobility differences, as they learn new perspectives and develop understanding for children who may think or move differently in their daily lives (Hayden & Prince, 2023; Johnson et al., 2017; Tondreau & Rabinowitz, 2021).

The opportunity to encounter characters in books whose joys, hopes, fears, aspirations, and struggles reflect their own can help young readers who learn, move, or communicate differently to feel less "othered" and more included in the multidimensional and vibrantly diverse human experience (Sims Bishop, 1990). In one example of how inclusive texts can expand perspectives, a book that includes a child who uses a wheelchair for mobility can provide a mirror for a young reader who may also use a wheelchair while also increasing a window of understanding for all children that having a mobility limitation is not the sole determinant of a meaningful life (Pennell et al., 2017). In one example, the children's book *Outside Amelia's Window* written by Caroline Nastro and illustrated by Anea Sandu Budisan, features a child who has endured an injury that requires her to use a wheelchair for mobility. Initially, Amelia is hesitant to go outside and play with her new neighbors, as she feels insecure about her situation. However, as the story unfolds, Amelia observes how birds build a nest outside her window, and

their apprehensive fledglings eventually learn how to fly. Their courage and independence inspire Amelia, as she thinks to herself “*If they can do it.... Perhaps so can I.*” (Nastro, 2009).

This story reaches a joyous conclusion when Amelia’s new friends kindly create a treehouse that includes a ramp to accommodate Amelia’s wheelchair. The last illustration features an exciting celebration, with one child marching, one on a scooter, and Amelia using her wheels. On the last page, Amelia can be seen smiling and holding her arm up high in a triumphant moment of pure joy and self-acceptance. This book fosters empathy and understanding for children who experience mobility diversity and provides a window for all young readers to learn about alternative methods of getting around. As this inclusive book illustrates, selections that feature authentic representation of characters with physical or cognitive differences can provide a thoughtful counternarrative (Ness, 2019) that challenges ableist views.

When curating an inclusive book collection to support reader identity development, the nuanced intersectionality of varied identities that each individual possesses is essential to keep in mind, as human beings are complex and layered individuals (Kleekamp & Zapata, 2019; Pennell et al., 2017). A person who may utilize an assistive listening device, for example, or use a wheelchair for mobility, may also be a skilled researcher, a talented musician, a champion athlete, or an award-winning author. In one compelling example, the book *Piano Starts Here: The Young Art Tatum* by Robert Andrew Parker (2008) offers a glimpse into the life of a musician who was blind and had an extraordinarily successful career as a jazz pianist (Pennell et al., 2017). As Kleekamp and Zapata (2019) note, high-quality inclusive children’s literature features strength-based representation of characters with agency who live multidimensional lives who also happen to carry the label of a disability accompanied by a history of exclusion. These humanizing texts provide opportunities for children who are navigating these varied identities to see their lived

experiences represented in books, as a mirror, while simultaneously allowing children who may not have an awareness of diversity to gain insight into the lives of characters who may experience the world in different ways, thereby providing a window into a wider range of diverse lived experiences (Sims Bishop, 1990; Kleekamp & Zapata, 2019).

The Intersection of Equitable Practice and Reader Identity Development

While the use of inclusive books to dismantle ableist views, expand perspectives, and transform deficit thinking about individuals who navigate diversity in a range of multifaceted ways is one way to support an equitable learning environment, there are other vital determinants that can either strengthen or restrict reader identity development in the classroom setting.

Exclusionary Labeling Practices

The assignment of identities that position children of color, immigrant children, Indigenous children, multilingual learners, and/or learners who are differently abled who live in economically disadvantaged communities solely as struggling or as coping with academic deficits is a socially-constructed institutional practice deeply embedded in biases and assumptions often held by educators in the dominant culture and one that fails to acknowledge the intersectionality of these identities (Hikida, 2018). False labeling discourses are exclusionary practices that maintain the privilege of certain groups while distancing literacy learners whose reading practices do not suit the mainstream narrative from the same promising opportunities to have access to books of choice, explore genres, exercise agency in book selection, expand their knowledge of preferences, and build peer connections around books and reading experiences (Ascenzi-Moreno & Quiñones, 2022; Hikida, 2018).

Primary barriers, including the use of false labeling practices and limiting language that underestimate young readers and writers, restrict reader identity development for children in

communities of economic need. External influences such as adults' verbal assessments of a child as either a "*struggling reader*" or "*at-risk*" that are based on stereotypes rooted in bias and misguided assumptions can have enduring implications for a child's self-perception as a reader (Hikida, 2018). Moreover, educators' efforts to control and enforce identity models can restrict students' reader identity development and compromise their abilities to realize their potential (Moje & Lewis, 2007). These discursive identities that are rooted in deficit thinking and narratives of inadequacy can result in young readers feeling inaccurately labeled and marginalized from their peers (Hall, 2010). Keeping in mind that "identity is composed of notions of who we are, who others say we are, and whom we desire to be" (Muhammad, 2020, p. 67), the socially constructed narratives of academic struggle and perceived limitations that surround children living and learning in underserved communities must be reframed in an equitable approach that redefines children's reader identities, centering on their assets and strengths (Enright et al., 2021; Hikida, 2018).

Educators' decisions can prioritize or inhibit certain facets of young learners' reader identities and play an instrumental role in shaping classroom reading practices. Choices in instructional strategies, the availability or limitations of book access, student grouping decisions, and curriculum selections can have enduring implications for children's self-perceptions (Ascenzi-Moreno & Quiñones, 2022). Positioning young readers and writers based on biases or assumptions about their race, culture, first language, gender, and/or socioeconomic resources can marginalize or stereotype some young readers while privileging others within the same classroom (Venegas, 2022). This model socially elevates children who are identified as reading more advanced leveled books, with more mainstream reader identity capital, to privileged roles, by providing more availability in books, additional choices in book selection, increased teacher

validation, while significantly limiting access, choice, and support for developing young readers, thereby creating an inequitable literacy framework (Abodeeb-Gentile & Zawilinski, 2013).

Exclusionary Instructional and Curricular Decisions

Additional limitations to reader identity development result from a biased model of skills-based reading instruction and assessment that is focused solely on finding correct answers in a text, where limited recognition is given to the many social and cultural factors that shape young readers' literacy practices and contribute to their reader identities (Hall, 2012). Children in economically disadvantaged communities often receive a literacy curriculum that is framed in a deficit narrative and centered on basic skills, while their perspectives and aspirations for deeper learning are overlooked (Ng et al., 2016). Further, when educators require that children only read rigidly-leveled books that limit their access to books of choice and book joy experiences, this exclusionary positioning ascribes false identities to young literacy learners based on external subjective labels (Abodeeb-Gentile & Zawilinski, 2013) often assigned by misguided adults in their lives. This discriminatory practice has enduring consequences for children's reader identity development, since it restricts the books that children have access to read and, moreover, what they are *allowed* to read, within the classroom setting. This inequitable framework consequently limits young readers' abilities to develop knowledge of preferences, opportunities to ask questions, experience book joy, and expand their reading engagement (Harvey & Ward, 2017; Konrad, 2023; Neuman, 2022; Neuman & Moland, 2019), all reading practices and behaviors that nurture a child's reader identity development. These far-reaching decisions often substantially limit children's access to book joy experiences and can result in markedly reduced motivation to read (Abodeeb-Gentile & Zawilinski, 2013; Hikida, 2018).

Inclusive Books as Opportunities to Expand Equitable Practice

To counter the deficit narrative and limiting notions of diversity, children's reader identities can be strengthened by providing increased access to inclusive books and broadly representative literature so that aspiring storytellers can see their lived experiences reflected in the books they read and the books that are read to them (Ford et al., 2019; Heineke et al., 2022; Ness, 2019; Sims Bishop, 1990). Providing access and opportunities for children to cultivate their reader identities through inclusive books that feature strengths-based representations of diversity allows young readers to connect not only to the physical appearances and cultural identities of characters in the stories they find interesting, but also, and perhaps equally importantly, to the characters' lived experiences (Heineke et al., 2022). Rather than only having access to books that are written from a monolithic, Eurocentric, and ableist perspective, the promising opportunity to see others overcome similar challenges in life due to their race, culture, first language, gender, age, socioeconomic level, and/or cognitive or mobility differences through inclusive texts can reduce feelings of isolation and increase a sense of belonging for children navigating diversity in their own lives (Kleekamp & Zapata, 2019).

Further, reading inclusive books can disrupt the identities of reading and writing deficit that are rooted in biases and assumptions about children who live in circumstances of economic hardship and can help them to construct authentic reader identities that exemplify confidence and independence (Abodeeb-Gentile & Zawilinski, 2013; Hikida, 2018; Mackey, 2022; Neuman, 2022). Finally, when young literacy learners connect to characters, setting, and plot in inclusive texts that reflect their identities and lived experiences with cultural fidelity, these encounters can play a central role in the social and emotional well-being of *all* readers, especially for those living and learning in historically marginalized communities (Heineke et al., 2022).

Prioritizing culturally responsive choices in book selections for children is an equity-centered practice that invites educators to engage in instructional decisions that go beyond teaching skills “to center the core values of social justice and encourage young literacy learners to know, validate, and celebrate who they are” (Muhammad, 2020, p. 69). In the classroom setting, inclusive books offer educators valuable opportunities to reflect on how single stories and one-dimensional views have influenced their perceptions of children of color, immigrant children, Indigenous children, children who are multilingual, and/or children who are differently abled (Adichie, 2009; Ford et al., 2019; Hayden & Prince, 2023; Kleekamp & Zapata, 2019; Pennell et al., 2017; Tondreau & Rabinowitz, 2017).

Authentic portrayals of individuals with a multitude of complex identities and lived experiences are imperative factors for educators to consider when curating texts that feature characters who personify the intersectionality of human experience (Heineke et al., 2022). To this end, providing educators with resources to evaluate books and materials that challenge stereotypes mitigates the negative impact of stereotypical or objectified portrayals in books on young readers—such as decreased self-esteem, increased isolation, and reduced motivation to read (Kleekamp & Zapata, 2019; Tschida et al., 2014). The responsibility of educators to provide inclusive texts to their students requires that they question who is valued and who is important in their classrooms and in society at large while meeting the needs of the children they serve (Pennell et al., 2017). Finally, in this exploration of inclusive texts as a way to advance equity, it is essential to recognize that attaining literacy is not solely about the clinical aspects of reading development, such as fluency, decoding, or comprehension, but that the overarching goal of reading achievement is to empower children with the knowledge of how literacy and becoming literate can transform their lives (Wolk, 2003).

Inclusive Instructional Decisions and Social Practices

When teachers invite striving readers to join in literary discussions and share their authentic cultural capital (Yosso, 2005), they disrupt misguided perceptions of reading and writing deficit (Hikida, 2018), validate their contributions as useful, and provide a pathway for children to develop identities as capable and knowledgeable readers. Empowering all readers to actively participate in shaping their reading engagement involves attentively listening to their perspectives and understanding the social and cultural influences that shape their backgrounds, values, and lived experiences (Ng, 2018). When literacy learners are encouraged to access their cultural resources to position themselves in social interactions about books and reading in the classroom setting (Compton-Lilly, 2006), the valued cultural capital that they bring with them to their reading experiences is recognized and respected (Yosso, 2005). Young reading enthusiasts who are welcomed to confidently take part in engaging book discussions with their peers can be invited to demonstrate their agency and literary competence in ways that convey reader independence (Hikida, 2018). These affirming experiences increase young readers' confidence and self-perceptions as readers and contribute to their reader identity development.

Book recommendations and invitations for children to participate in *book talk*, i.e., engaging conversations about books that promote understanding and foster the enjoyment of reading (Chambers, 2011), create social interactions around books that can ameliorate a child's interest in reading for pleasure and enjoyment and contribute to their reader identity development (Johnston, 2019; Konrad, 2023; Neuman, 2022). According to Oxley and McGeown (2023), building a foundation of enthusiasm, knowledge, and experience about books is key to the development of successful *book talk* practices. Moreover, Hikida (2018) suggests that when aspiring readers are welcomed to participate in collaborative literary experiences with their

peers, they develop confidence and *an authoritative readerly stance* (Hikida, 2018) that improves their self-perceptions as readers. Finally, Fisher and Frey (2018) suggest recommending books with vivid descriptions as ways to boost children's reading engagement. These social practices provide rich context for children to build relationships that support their self-perceptions as readers and allow them to see themselves within a sociocultural framework.

Conclusion

In summary, the review of the literature addressed how increased access to book ownership, choice in book selection, book joy experiences, home support and community partnerships, inclusive books that feature authentic representation, and equitable literacy practices in the classroom setting contribute to a child's reader identity development. The Transactional Theory of Reading (1978, 1993) that framed this study centers the reciprocal relationship between the individual reader and the text and provides open avenues for young readers to explore their individual interpretations. Inclusive texts that feature authentic representation of diversity can open doors for young readers to learn about a range of lived experiences that reflect a wide span of multifaceted portrayals of varied backgrounds, identities, abilities, experiences, and perspectives (Page, 2017; Pennell et al., 2017; Tschida & Buchanan, 2017). These reading encounters contribute to children's reader identity development. In this comprehensive analysis of peer reviewed scholarship, access and choice were identified as key principles for advocating for an equity-centered approach to reader identity development.

Next, Chapter III will include the research design, role of the researcher, setting, context of the *Find Book Joy* program, sample, participants, instruments, methodology, data collection and analysis, and the overall organization of both phases of the investigation. Finally, Chapter III will include an overview of the alignment with the theoretical framework; ethical considerations;

trustworthiness and rigor; and validity and reliability to conclude the chapter. A thorough conclusion will summarize the methodology for both phases of this investigation.

Chapter III: Methodology

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this study was to investigate the ways in which increased access to book ownership and choice in inclusive books can transform reader identity development for children in economically disadvantaged communities. This research study included two phases of data collection and analysis. The primary goal of phase one of this inquiry was to examine the perspectives of 20 literacy advocates in a range of professions from across the United States on the roles of access to books, choice in book selection, home support, community partnerships, and representation in inclusive books in reader identity development for children in communities with limited financial resources. In the second phase of this study, eight young readers enrolled in 1st through 5th grade, all participants in the *Find Book Joy* program, were interviewed to explore the ways in which increased access to inclusive books and opportunities to choose their own books transformed reader identity development for children in communities with limited economic resources. To examine the impact of access to book ownership and choice in book selection on reader identity development for young children in communities deprived of book ownership opportunities, the following research question framed this study:

In what ways can increased access to book ownership and choice in book selection transform reader identity development for young children in economically disadvantaged communities?

With this overarching purpose in mind, the following section outlines the research design that was utilized to investigate this question and explore how access and choice can transform reader identity development for children in communities experiencing economic hardship.

Research Design

Narrative research, a qualitative methodology that focuses on interpreting human experience through the personal stories individuals share within a social context (Parks, 2023), was used in both phase one and phase two to answer the research question. Moreover, narrative research offers the researcher's interpretations of the study participants' lived experiences (Fraenkel et al., 2011). Two phases of qualitative data collection were conducted in this study: semi-structured interviews of 20 literacy advocates and eight children in grades 1st through 5th who were book recipients in the *Find Book Joy* program. Since the focus of this study was on reader identity formation, the narrative approach was chosen as most appropriate, as this methodology is primarily used in the process of identity construction (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Further, narrative research is a well-recognized methodology for exploring identity development in educational research (Parks, 2023, p. 58) and is closely aligned with the understanding of identity (Sfard & Prusak, 2005; Swain et al., 2015), thus making it an ideal choice for an inquiry that investigates reader identity development.

Since the key criterion of narrative research is storytelling (Fraser, 2004), narrative research was chosen for this study as it focused on stories about the lived experiences of 20 literacy advocates supporting young readers in their communities and the stories shared by eight literacy learners about the shifts in their reader identity development that emerged from the increased access to book ownership and choice in book selection that they experienced as a result of their reading encounters with books that they chose from the *Find Book Joy* collection.

Narrative research aligned with this inquiry because it focuses on examining personal life experiences and important events (Barkhuizen, 2017; Bell, 2002) and is intimately connected to how human beings conceptualize and understand identity (Sfard & Prusak, 2005; Swain et al.,

2015). Additionally, as part of the interview process, this inquiry incorporated counter-storytelling, a narrative approach used to challenge dominant perspectives by sharing the personal stories of marginalized individuals, often revealing narratives that are silenced or left untold (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). In phase one, literacy advocates were asked questions that were written to elicit storytelling about their lived experiences in increasing access to books for children living and learning in economically disadvantaged communities.

In the second phase of this narrative inquiry that centered children's voices, eight young readers in the *Find Book Joy* program shared their personal stories about their reading experiences and shifts in perspectives with books of choice that featured inclusion and representation. The decision to center young readers' voices in this study resulted in several instances of counter-storytelling that challenged the mainstream narrative by providing firsthand perspectives of individuals whose cultures and identities have been historically marginalized (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). As illustrated by the children's narratives, Kelly (2017) asserts that counternarratives highlight the transformative power of sharing authentic experiences, even when those stories challenge or question the dominant viewpoint. In this study, children's personal stories and counter-stories that disrupted the mainstream narrative were woven throughout their personal narratives and in their responses to the interview questions.

In phase one, the researcher provided open-ended interview questions that invited literacy advocates to share their personal stories about providing children with increased access to books and choice in book selection. In phase two, the researcher provided open-ended interview questions and follow-up prompts to child participants to elicit their narrative storytelling experiences about access, choice, reading volume, motivation to read, book joy, book ownership,

and inclusive books. In both phases of this study, field notes and a reflexive journal were used by the researcher to document the data collection experience.

As Adler et al. (2017) assert, research using narrative methods is primarily concerned with *meaning-making*, particularly meaning that concerns the self and matters of identity. The empirical study of narrative is as a subjective science that examines issues and topics of personal meaning (Adler et al., 2017). Parks (2023) defines one's sharing individual interactions with stories as "meaning-making-in-progress," (p. 67), as participants connect to previous stories they have read and utilize them as springboards to recall personal experiences. Further, since narrative research provides open-ended opportunities for sharing meaning-making by individual readers, this choice of methodology is aligned with the Transactional Theory of Reading (Rosenblatt, 1978) that frames this study. In phase one, the researcher analyzed the personal stories shared by literacy advocates about experiences that increased their knowledge and understanding of access to inclusive books and choice in book selection for children in economically disadvantaged communities. In phase two, the researcher analyzed the personal narratives shared by child participants about their individual experiences as book recipients from *Find Book Joy* to identify common themes and patterns and to understand how increased access to inclusive books and choice in book selection transformed children's reader identities.

In their analysis of narrative research, Adler et al. (2017) discuss commonly assessed narrative variables, including *agency*, or the degree to which the protagonist (in this case, the reader) can initiate changes on their own, achieve some degree of control over the course of their experiences, and be an agent of change in their own lives. Narrative research positions the storyteller, or in this case, the interview participant, as the owner of their individual experience. Identity formation is a primary consequence of one's agency, as agency can be seen as a bridge

to connect identities and as a way to cultivate identities across different practices and resources (Vaughn et al., 2020). Agency is also connected to discovering one's voice through storytelling. As Ranson (2000) asserts, "to find a voice is to find an identity and the possibility of agency in the world" (p. 268). As mentioned above, another frequently explored narrative variable is *meaning making*, or the extent to which the protagonist learns something from an event, such as keen insights or concrete life lessons (Adler et al., 2017). Further, meaning making as a reciprocal relationship between the reader and the text was the focus of the analysis of stories told by the literacy advocates as well as the narratives shared by the child participants and was guided by the principles of the Transactional Theory of Reading (Rosenblatt, 1978, 1995).

Finally, this inquiry explored the roles of personal and cultural narratives in reader identity formation, aligned with the principle that individual identity is shaped by the broader social and cultural contexts that influence its development (Ascenzi-Moreno & Quiñones, 2022; Ford et al., 2019). Since narrative research honors participants' authentic stories as authors of their own lived experiences (Adler et al., 2017), this research methodology was an appropriate choice for an inquiry that foregrounds students' cultural capital (Yosso, 2005) and examines their personal experiences with inclusive books. This individuality in interpretation and meaning making is at the core of reader identity (Hall, 2010, 2012; Wagner, 2020).

The Role of the Researcher

The role of the researcher was critical in this inquiry, as the data were collected and analyzed solely through their lens. This inherent subjectivity resulted in the researcher's core values, childhood background, advanced degrees, and professional experiences as a reading specialist inevitably shaping their interpretation of the data. To mitigate the risks of bias, the researcher remained vigilant in acknowledging how these factors may have influenced the data

analysis process and actively engaged in reflexive practices throughout the experience. The researcher kept a reflexive journal and engaged in member checking and peer debriefing to discuss their findings and interpretations. In the reflexive journal, the researcher documented their thoughts and decisions and reflected on potential biases while adhering to formal interview and observation protocols that ensured the validity and reliability of their findings. Further, the researcher reflected on how their values, background, and core values shaped the research design, participant interactions, and data interpretation. Additionally, the researcher remained engaged with the literature throughout the study to contextualize findings and refine their understanding of how the Transactional Theory of Reading (Rosenblatt, 1978) influenced their thinking and framed the data analysis and interpretation.

Researcher Positionality: Childhood Literacy Experiences

The researcher was born in New York City and grew up in a print-rich environment, in comfortable economic circumstances in the suburbs, with two working parents, surrounded by books and literacy resources. Encouraged to read and write from an early age, the researcher was read to by adults from birth and was given every opportunity to build an identity as a confident reader. Early on in life, the researcher developed a fervent interest in the magic of storytelling, wonder, and imagination that could be discovered in children's books from their robust home book collection and authored and illustrated their own books before they entered kindergarten.

In addition to reading and writing as modes of self-expression, the researcher often created audio recordings throughout their childhood as a storytelling modality to convey their lively personal narratives. The researcher was raised with the keen understanding instilled by their parents that reading as many books as possible held the key to unlimited opportunities in life. This privileged childhood framework—characterized by access to books, abundant home

literacy resources, parents who were invested in their children's literacy development, and opportunities for creative self-expression—has profoundly influenced the researcher's perspective on the vital importance of books and reading in children's lives. These formative experiences contributed to the researcher's positionality in this study by highlighting the impact of access to books and literacy resources on reader identity development.

Researcher Positionality: Educational Background and Teaching Experience

Prior to pursuing a Doctorate in Education, the researcher earned a Master's degree in Education, with a concentration in Reading and Literacy Studies, and gained two decades of career experience in classroom teaching roles and private practice in K-12 reading intervention, assessment, and support. The researcher, an accomplished reading specialist and tenacious literacy advocate, has also taught courses in Reading and Literacy Education to in-service teachers on the graduate level. Thus, their educational background and foundational beliefs about the value of childhood reading experiences may have influenced the interpretation of study data.

Early on in their public school teaching career in underserved communities, the researcher encountered hundreds of children who were deprived of the magic and wonder of books due to markedly limited access to book ownership and an insurmountable cost barrier. The researcher soon developed a keen understanding that young readers in communities of economic need were deprived of the joys of book ownership due to the prohibitive expense of children's books while their private tutoring students from well-resourced print-rich homes in affluent communities were afforded generous access to books and literacy assets. These contrasting professional experiences revealed sharp disparities in children's access to books and literacy resources due to striking disparities in family income and economic status. As a result of these observations, the researcher learned that book ownership had been elevated to another form

of privilege, only afforded to children whose families have the financial means to purchase books. This clear distinction consequently limits book joy experiences and restricts reader identity development for children in economically disadvantaged communities.

In addition, the researcher's clinical experience in delivering reading intervention to children deprived of book ownership provided valuable insight into how restricted access to books and reading opportunities can profoundly impact a child's potential for reading achievement. Firsthand observations of the stark inequities that exist in neighboring communities resulted in a sense of urgency to effect meaningful change and shaped the researcher's moral imperative to increase equitable access to book ownership for all children, regardless of zip code or income level. This compelling motivation determined the focus of this research study.

In sum, the researcher's childhood literacy experiences, generous access to books, educational background, teaching experience, demographic characteristics, and core values have influenced their strong beliefs in the inestimable importance of unlimited access to books and the life-changing importance of reading aloud to children. As a result, the researcher acknowledges the many complex ways in which their lived experiences influenced the framing and analysis of this study. In order to reduce the influence of their positionality, the researcher made a conscious effort to approach each child as an individual reader, without preconceived notions or assumptions about their reader identity or literacy development, and to be guided by the children's interpretations of their reading encounters. This intentional approach aimed to maintain the validity and reliability of the study's findings and ensure that each child's individual reading experiences were prioritized and evaluated through the theoretical lens of the Transactional Theory of Reading (Rosenblatt, 1978), which positions the child at its center.

Researcher Positionality: Intersectionality of Privilege and Identity

Finally, the researcher's race, culture, social class, and educational background intersect to inform their positionality. As a White, American, well-educated, middle-class citizen of the United States whose first language is English, the researcher recognizes their privilege and understands how societal and historical forces have elevated certain groups while marginalizing others (Speight & Vera, 2004). Honest reflections on their own privilege within the context of reader identity development and observations of inequitable access and resource distribution in literacy education led the researcher to approach this study with an awareness of how these factors may have influenced their research lens and the interpretation of data. This critical understanding is essential in recognizing the complex ways in which personal identity and broader cultural paradigms influence the experiences of individuals in educational contexts.

Research Setting

Phase one of this study took place in Spring 2023 on a videoconferencing platform, and included semi-structured 45- to 60-minute interviews with 20 literacy advocates in leadership roles across a range of professions, including pediatric health, literacy advocacy and education, community partnerships, children's book publishing, and the non-profit sector, from across the United States. These participants were recruited on the social media platforms LinkedIn and Instagram for their intentional efforts and professional accomplishments in providing equitable access to book ownership for children in economic need. The literacy advocates represented a diverse range of career experiences and professional backgrounds, offering valuable insights into systemic issues related to access to books and literacy materials and suggesting innovative solutions to address the sharp resource disparities that exist in underserved communities for individuals who have been historically marginalized. Their professional experience in leadership

roles in large-scale advocacy efforts provided them with strong background knowledge that allowed them to speak in well-informed ways about sustainable grassroots book access initiatives. The interviewees were selected based on their proven track records of effecting meaningful change in literacy outcomes through strategic initiatives, advocacy for educational equity, and their ongoing commitments to addressing the diverse literacy needs of children living and learning in communities of economic need with increased access to inclusive books.

Phase two of this research study took place in Fall 2024 and included 30-minute semi-structured interviews on a videoconferencing platform with eight children enrolled in 1st through 5th grade in Title I schools who were book recipients from the *Find Book Joy* program in an economically disadvantaged community in a mid-size city in southeastern Connecticut. In this city of 148,028 residents, the 2022 per capita income was \$29,506.00, according to the U.S. Census Bureau (2022) and just 21.2% of adults held a Bachelor's degree or higher. Moreover, in 2022, 17% of residents in this city lived below the poverty line. Further, 54.6% of city residents in this city speak a language other than English at home, compared to 23.9% of households across the state of Connecticut. Further, this city's public school system serves a diverse student body of over 20,000 students, with a significant portion of the student population enrolled in Title I schools, which are designated as schools that serve high percentages of children from families with limited incomes. A Title I school is a school that receives federal funding to support students from families in economically disadvantaged communities to improve educational opportunities (U.S. Department of Education, 2021). Approximately 87.5% of the students in this school district qualify for free or reduced-price lunch, highlighting the economic hardships endured by many families in the community (Connecticut Department of Education, 2025). In this context, children who were recruited for this study all received free or reduced lunch, as

determined by family income, and were past recipients of books of choice from the *Find Book Joy* program. Finally, most of the eight child participants who joined this investigation had never owned a book prior to their enrollment in the *Find Book Joy* program, which offers children increased access to book ownership and choice in book selection.

Context of Phase Two of the Study: The *Find Book Joy* Program

The focus of phase two of this study centered on children's reading experiences as inclusive book recipients in the *Find Book Joy* program (Find Book Joy, n.d.), a local book access initiative in southeastern Connecticut founded by the researcher that expands equitable access to book ownership for children living and learning in economically disadvantaged communities. The formation of the *Find Book Joy* endeavor was informed by data analysis in phase one that identified an urgent need for expanded access to book ownership and choice in book selection for children in communities of economic need. The *Find Book Joy* program provides access to developmentally appropriate inclusive books of choice to children at no cost, thereby removing financial barriers to provide equitable access to the promise of book ownership. In phase two of this study, semi-structured interviews with eight *Find Book Joy* recipients in grades one through five offered rich firsthand accounts of how access to book ownership and choice in book selection have transformed their reader identity development.

Phase one data analysis identified the compelling need for such a community partnership to support children's reader identity development in communities with limited financial resources, resulting in the creation of the *Find Book Joy* local book access program. Founded by the researcher, this innovative initiative redistributes existing book wealth to children eager to own their own books, some of whom have never owned a book in their young lives. The *Find Book Joy* initiative distributes books to children in Title I schools, sourced from well-resourced

families within the same county, building on regional strengths and shared community resources.

The books that are provided to children from the *Find Book Joy* endeavor are first sorted according to genre, grade level, and developmental stage (board books, picture books, early readers, chapter books, etc.) and evaluated for quality and content by the researcher and trained volunteers. The books are then distributed to children at home or community learning centers where access to book ownership and choice in book selection are provided at no cost. The *Find Book Joy* books that are distributed to children meet rigorous quality standards determined by the researcher. Books that meet the *Find Book Joy* criteria are clean, with intact covers and pages, contain current and relevant content, and feature developmentally appropriate subject matter. The *Find Book Joy* books are distributed to children in learning centers and at no-cost book fairs.

The Find Book Joy Program's Enrollment and Events

To enroll in the program, parents and caregivers sign up online on the *Find Book Joy* website to register their children and gain access to free books of choice. Teachers from local after-school programs also connect with the researcher via social media to request books from *Find Book Joy* for their students. The *Find Book Joy* program provides an abundance of developmentally appropriate inclusive children's book choices to children in local schools, expanding equitable access to book ownership at no cost. Joyful book distribution events take place at local after-school centers and summer reading programs. In addition, free book fairs at Title I elementary schools are sponsored by *Find Book Joy* throughout the school year and during summers to further children's access to book ownership and choice in book selection. These lively and engaging book distribution events are enchanting literacy celebrations, where children are provided with plentiful access to books on a broad array of topics, genres, and developmental

levels, offered the freedom and opportunity to explore books, supported in expanding their knowledge of preferences, and encouraged to demonstrate agency in book selection.

The Find Book Joy Program's Intentional Focus on Inclusive Books

To meet the needs of children in the community that *Find Book Joy* serves, there is an intentional focus on books that are inclusive and genuinely represent diverse identities and lived experiences, since inclusive book collections should be tailored to the young readers who will read them (Pennell et al., 2017). To meet this goal, an Amazon wish list of children's books, requested by book donors, was recently introduced to intentionally expand the *Find Book Joy* program's inventory of inclusive selections. This book list, developed by the researcher based on criteria defined in the literature (Ascenzi-Moreno & Quiñones, 2022; Ford et al., 2019; Hayden & Prince, 2023; Heineke et al., 2022; Kleekamp & Zapata, 2019; Neuman, 2022; Page, 2017; Pennell et al., 2017; Sharma & Christ, 2017; Tondreau & Rabinowitz, 2021) features current inclusive books with authentic representation of diversity, expanding children's access to books that are relevant to their lives and providing opportunities for meaningful connections.

The *Find Book Joy* collection provides a wide range of inclusive books as choices to meet the needs of children in the community that the program serves, so that they can select their own books and build their own personal home book collections with books that resonate with them. The program's intentional focus on inclusive books provides children with the opportunity to cultivate their reader identity development while sharing the experiences of characters that represent diversity in race, culture, language, gender, age, ability, mobility, and socioeconomic status as well as children who are navigating other marginalized identities, such as children who are living with cognitive and/or mobility differences. Books that are provided to children by the *Find Book Joy* program are carefully evaluated in advance to ensure cultural integrity and equity-

centered representation. When presented with opportunities to choose their own books without meeting any external expectation, children enrolled in the *Find Book Joy* program often select mirror books that affirm their diverse identities and lived experiences and window books that provide opportunities to learn about other cultures, backgrounds, lifestyles, and perspectives (Sims Bishop, 1990). Overall, the *Find Book Joy* program expands access to books and choice in inclusive book selection to provide intentional and sustainable ways to support children experiencing economic hardship in building their confident reader identities.

Inclusive Books Selection Criteria: Cultural Relevance. In their rubric to support the evaluation of cultural relevance in children's books, Sharma and Christ (2017) outline several features that educators and advocates should consider when selecting or reviewing books for children (Appendix K). These important dimensions evaluate how the books portray culture, assess the accuracy of these portrayals, and determine whether or not the books perpetuate stereotypes (Sims Bishop, 1990). In addition, the rubric also advises educators and advocates to examine inclusive books' portrayals of culture, with a keen focus on whether the author and illustrator share the same cultural background of the characters represented in the book (Ebe, 2010; Walters, 1998). When evaluating inclusive books, Sharma and Christ (2017) cite Ebe (2010), who encourages educators to assess if the characters' cultural characteristics, such as race, ethnicity, or religion, are aligned with those of their students, and whether the characters' age(s) and gender identities resonate with the intended audience. Finally, Ebe (2010) suggests that key considerations for selecting inclusive books for children include analyzing how characters speak, interact, and communicate, assessing the book's setting and location, and evaluating the authentic representation of the characters' lived experiences.

In addition, according to Sharma and Christ (2017), the Children's Literacy and Reading Special Interest Group (International Literacy Association, n.d.) offers resources for educators and has developed a list titled *Notable Books for a Global Society* that highlights exceptional children's books that promote global awareness, inclusion, diversity, and cultural understanding. The *Notable Books for a Global Society* list that is used to select books for *Find Book Joy* recognizes children's books that demonstrate lasting appeal and quality in several areas, including (a) physical characteristics, (b) intellectual abilities and problem-solving capabilities, (c) leadership and cooperative dimensions, and (d) social and economic status (Sharma & Christ, 2017, p. 302). Moreover, this helpful resource also identifies books that offer rich cultural representations, celebrate diversity, and address cultural issues in a responsible manner. The list also honors books with characters from diverse backgrounds who interact authentically, ensuring that all groups are represented with meaningful purpose, to reflect their shared humanity.

Inclusive Books Selection Criteria: Mobility or Cognitive Diversity. Keeping in mind that framing individuals with differences in one-dimensional ways reinforces a narrow, linear understanding of disability, which restricts a fuller, more inclusive view of diversity (Hayden & Prince, 2023; Kleekamp & Zapata, 2019), the *Find Book Joy* collection aspires to provide selections that explore the nuanced intersectionality of characters' varied identities. Notably, the curation of inclusive books for the *Find Book Joy* collection has an intentional focus on genuine representation and cultural accuracy, encouraging young readers to move beyond the mainstream narrative of the "single story" (Adichie, 2009) to promote a deeper understanding of the diverse range of lived experiences that are reflected in individuals' lives.

In the *Find Book Joy* book collection, books that feature characters with a wide range of mobility options, cognitive abilities, and communication modalities are provided as choices to

children, as the core values of this endeavor include the belief that human beings are complex and layered individuals (Kleekamp & Zapata, 2019).

The guiding questions provided by Kleekamp and Zapata (2019) in Appendix L are a promising way for educators and literacy advocates to advance their knowledge and understanding of books that explore various forms of physical diversity and the intersectionality of characters' social identities. In one example, the book *More Than Words: So Many Ways to Say What We Mean*, written and illustrated by Roz MacLean, helps children learn about the many ways that individuals express themselves to communicate with friends and classmates. The author explores alternative and augmentative methods of communication that transcend spoken or written word, such as alphabet boards, printed braille, a brailler, object cues, picture-symbol cues, text-to-speech and symbol-to-speech technology, as well as American Sign Language. This selection allows children to have a window (Sims Bishop, 1990) into various alternatives for communication while also integrating characters who represent cultural diversity throughout the vibrant illustrations. This humanizing text is just one of a wide range of inclusive books that support awareness and advance understanding of differences (Kleekamp & Zapata, 2019). Finally, the many varied options for communication expand readers' perspectives within a strengths-based model that focuses on abilities rather than limitations (Shogren et al., 2017).

Choice as a Core Value of the Find Book Joy program

Choice is the core value and overarching guiding principle of the *Find Book Joy* program. When young readers exercise agency in choosing their own books, they develop the ability to define and act on their own individual reading goals (Vaughn, 2018), a key feature of reader identity development. Further, according to Allington & McGill-Franzen (2021) and Neuman & Moland (2019), choice in book selection leads to notable improvements in reading volume which

results in increased reading achievement. Choice provides children with opportunities to determine their reading purpose and to develop their individuality as readers, key features in reader identity development. Choice is at the center of the *Find Book Joy* program, a locally sourced book donation and distribution endeavor that increases children's access to book ownership, removes the cost barrier, provides access and choice to children in inclusive book selection, expands children's knowledge of reading preferences, surrounds young readers with new book joy experiences, and supports children in their reader identity exploration.

Children enrolled in the *Find Book Joy* program choose their own inclusive books and take part in this childhood rite of passage in reader identity development without the burden of external expectations, rigid reading level requirements, or a cost barrier. In this inviting framework, book joy is abundant, as children find books they love and books they *want* to read. The focus at the *Find Book Joy* free book distribution events is on encouraging choice in book selection based on personal interests to increase intrinsic motivation and book joy. Children are not limited in any way on the books they choose, most notably they are not restricted to only read books on their reading level. There are no external expectations of any kind at the *Find Book Joy* book distribution events. Children can browse an assortment of books from the collection that they find fascinating and books that resonate with their personal interests.

In the context of limited access to books in communities experiencing economic hardship, rich opportunities to explore genres and series books are significantly curtailed. In response, the *Find Book Joy* model provides hundreds of books to children to choose from, to foster wide open exploration and delightful discoveries of their individual reading preferences. Insights from the data analysis in phase one demonstrated that choice plays an essential role in children's reader identity development, as it nurtures a sense of agency, ownership, dignity, and

independence. These findings correspond with the research from Fisher and Frey (2018), Konrad (2023), Mackey (2022), Massey et al. (2021), Miller and Sharp (2018), Neuman (2022), and Neuman and Moland (2019) which suggests that choice is a key factor in identity as a reader.

The *Find Book Joy* initiative supports the goals of reader confidence and independence by enhancing children's self-perception as readers through increased access and choice.

The Right of Entry to Reading Achievement

The right of entry to reading achievement starts with access to book ownership. Reading volume, a key indicator of reading success, can be decisively augmented by providing children with increased access to book ownership and choice in book selection (Allington & McGill-Franzen, 2021). To this end, *Find Book Joy* was founded on the core belief that literacy is a civil right for all children, one that should not be restricted by financial limitations. Reading volume, frequency, motivation, enjoyment, and engagement can all increase in substantial ways if children are given open access to developmentally appropriate books to take home and enjoy and build a personal book collection without the restriction of prohibitive cost (Allington & McGill-Franzen, 2021; Neuman & Knapczyk, 2020; Neuman & Moland, 2019).

Phase one data analysis indicated that in order to build well-developed reader identities, children require equitable access to books that entice them and captivate them to actively participate in the reading process (Allington, 2012; Konrad, 2023). As a result, the *Find Book Joy* program was founded on the essential principle that individual reading experiences are more personal and more joyful when children are given robust access to a wide range of compelling texts that allow for choice in book selection (Konrad, 2023). The increased exposure to books and reading opportunities that results from community partnerships in book access and distribution can potentially engage children in hundreds of more minutes of literacy experiences

per month (Neuman & Knapczyk, 2022), thereby drastically increasing their reading volume and motivation to read and significantly strengthening their self-perceptions as readers.

Study Participants

This study includes two phases of data collection and analysis and two sets of study participants. Phase one included 20 adult participants who are literacy advocates in pediatric health, literacy education, self-publishing, community partnerships, and the non-profit sector from across the United States. Phase two included eight book enthusiasts in 1st through 5th grade who are enrolled in Title I schools and were recipients of free books from *Find Book Joy*, a no-cost book access initiative located in southeastern Connecticut that secures book ownership and expands book joy to children in economic need.

Phase One Study Participants

The researcher conducted phase one of this study in Spring 2023 and interviewed 20 accomplished literacy advocates across a range of professions to identify innovative and sustainable ways to increase access to book ownership by removing the cost barrier and providing choice in book selection to children in economic need. In the initial recruitment correspondence with each prospective participant, the researcher expressed interest in elevating diverse voices in a doctoral research study that intended to investigate the values of increased access, equity, diversity, and inclusion in children's books. Phase one participants were chosen if they met the following primary inclusion criteria: they currently worked in a leadership role in literacy education and/or advocacy, they possessed knowledge of how to increase access to book ownership for children in communities with limited financial resources, and they had developed an understanding of the importance of inclusion and representation in children's literature. Interview participants in phase one were recruited online due to their accomplishments as change

agents in their respective professions who had developed knowledge and expertise about expanding equitable access to books for all children as a result of their career experience.

Study participants in phase one, as shown in Table 1, were mid-career professionals in leadership roles. Fourteen of the 20 literacy advocates identified as persons of color and/or as having one or more racial backgrounds. The interview participants were experienced thought leaders in social justice who possessed strong knowledge of the *opportunity gap* (Darling-Hammond, 2009) and the many societal inequities that contribute to wide disparities in children's access to book ownership, particularly in communities of economic hardship. As a result of this initial phase of this study, the researcher gained a keen understanding of the urgent need for equitable access to book ownership for children in under-resourced communities and Title I schools. The data from phase one served as a springboard for the formation of *Find Book Joy*, a local book access endeavor that redistributes existing book wealth from well-resourced families to share book joy with children in economic need. Phase two participants were selected from *Find Book Joy* recipients of inclusive books of choice enrolled in 1st through 5th grade.

Literacy advocates in phase one were recruited using the social media platforms LinkedIn and Instagram. The researcher reached out to prospective participants with an initial introduction and recruitment email that was scripted by the researcher and approved by the IRB at the previous institution. Once the participant agreed to be interviewed, a more formal recruitment letter was sent that was also approved by the IRB at the previous institution. While participant demographics were not formally collected for phase one of this study, the researcher was intentional in recruitment. Most interview participants self-identified as people of varied cultural backgrounds, with most as persons of color or Indigenous persons, as elevating diverse voices was a guiding principle in this study.

Table 1*Phase One Participant Demographics*

| Name | Professional Role | Self-Identified Cultural Identity |
|-------------|--|---|
| Kendra | K-6 Reading Specialist, Title I School | African American |
| Amara | Pediatrician/ Literacy Advocate | African American |
| Amber | K-6 Literacy Specialist, Title I School | Caucasian |
| Zamira | Family Program Coordinator Inclusive Book Author | Caribbean American |
| Daniel | Early Childhood Coordinator, Literacy Non-Profit Foundation | Asian American |
| Jade | K-6 Reading Specialist | Caucasian |
| Rachel | Director, Community Literacy Organization | Caucasian |
| Sierra | Founder and Director, Literacy Non-Profit | Caucasian |
| Evelyn | Volunteer Literacy Advocate, Book Access Organization | African |
| Chantal | K-2 Literacy Specialist Children's Book Author | African American |
| Nadine | Literacy Specialist, Author, Poet | Two or More Races |
| Lorraine | Director, Literacy Non-Profit | Caucasian |
| Vandana | Pediatrician/Literacy Advocate | Indian American |
| Raven | Educator Inclusive Children's Book Author | Indigenous person of the Plains Cree and Taíno Nations |
| Justin | Educator in a Middle School | Two or More Races |
| Nova | Program Director/ Educator, | Caucasian |

| Name | Professional Role | Self-Identified Cultural Identity |
|-----------|--|-----------------------------------|
| | National Literacy Non-Profit | |
| Kassandra | Professor and Literacy Specialist | African American |
| Simone | Educator Inclusive Children's Book Author | Two or More Races |
| Taylor | Founder and Director, Literacy Non-Profit | Caucasian |
| Alisha | Founder and Director, Literacy Non-Profit | Indian American |

Phase Two Study Participants

Inclusion criteria for participants in phase two of this study was intentionally developed from the data collected and knowledge gained from data collection in phase one. Phase Two of this study aimed to interview eight young readers in 1st through 5th grade who were past recipients of inclusive books of choice from the *Find Book Joy* program. Study participants in phase two were able to read independently without adult support and enrolled in Title I schools in an economically disadvantaged community in southeastern Connecticut. Study participants and their parents could speak, read, and write in English. The semi-structured interviews took place on an online videoconferencing platform, outside of school, and were framed in the context of a narrative research model (Adler et al., 2017; Fraenkel et al., 2011). Each interview lasted about 30 minutes and was recorded and transcribed via Zoom. The child assent (Appendix D) was read to each child and their consent was obtained prior to the start of the interview.

Additional demographic characteristics of children in this study included reduced and free lunch recipients, children who were enrolled in an elementary school with a high student-teacher ratio, those with racially and culturally diverse backgrounds, and children with limited

access to book ownership due to scarce economic resources. Finally, their developmental stage as young readers enrolled in in grades one through five, as shown in Table 2, was a primary consideration in the recruitment process.

In the city in southeastern Connecticut where phase two of this endeavor took place with child participants, according to the National Center for Education Statistics (2022), in 2022-2023 only 19.6% of children in public elementary schools achieved proficiency in reading on the Connecticut Smarter Balanced Assessments (SBAC), a summative assessment that is aligned with the Common Core Standards and administered to grades 3-8 in English Language Arts and Literacy, as compared to 49% of students who achieved reading proficiency statewide (www.portal.ct.gov). This district has 36 schools and serves 19,337 students. Twenty-seven of the district's 36 schools are elementary schools (US News & World Report, 2024).

According to data provided by U.S. News and World Report (US News & World Report, 2024), the student-teacher ratio in this community is 25:1, more than double the Connecticut state average of 12:1. In this school district, 87.5% of students are considered economically disadvantaged (Connecticut Department of Education, 2025), a criterion that is met if a student qualifies for the National School Lunch Program (NSLP). Eligibility for this program is based on household income: to qualify for free lunch, a student's household income must be at or below 130% of the federal poverty level (FPL), and to meet the standard for reduced-price lunch, a student's household income must be between 130% and 185% of the FPL (United States Department of Agriculture, Food and Nutrition Service, 2024).

Further, additional data from the U.S. News and World Report in 2024 indicated that the student body in this district was reflective of cultural diversity and comprised of students who identified as 8.9% white, 29.1% Black, 2% Asian or Asian/Pacific Islander, 57.4%

Hispanic/Latino, 0.5% American Indian or Alaska Native, and 0.1% Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander. In addition, 1.9% of students identified as two or more races, and 0% had not specified their race or ethnicity (US News & World Report, 2024).

Table 2

Phase Two Participant Demographics

| Name | Grade Level | Cultural Identity as Shared by Parent |
|-------------|--------------------|--|
| Orion | First | African/Caribbean American |
| Jasmine | Fourth | African American |
| Imani | First | African American |
| Josie | Third | African American and Hispanic |
| Claudine | Fifth | African/Caribbean American |
| Cameron | First | African American |
| Gabrielle | First | African American |
| Charlotte | Second | Caucasian |

The sampling method used to select participants for both phases of this study was *purposive sampling*, as the researcher used their judgment, based on prior information about demographic data and the results of phase one of this study, to intentionally select a sample that provided the data required (Fraenkel et al., 2011). In this method, a purposive sample consists of individuals who have specific qualifications or are deemed representative due to prior evidence (Fraenkel et al., 2011). Prior evidence includes data from phase one that examined the role of access to book ownership in reader identity development and the gains that result from increased access to inclusive book ownership for children in economically disadvantaged communities. Purposive sampling is an appropriate choice for this study since the researcher obtained a sample

that is uniquely suited to the intent of the inquiry and connects to the research question (Fraenkel et al., 2011) for the child participant interviews. Further, since narrative research centers participants' authentic voices and honors their roles as authors of their own lived experiences (Adler et al., 2017), purposive sampling is well suited to this inquiry.

Child participants were recruited for this study through email correspondence with their parents who were known to the researcher from previous book distribution interactions with *Find Book Joy*. Parents were invited to remain with their children for the interviews on Zoom and some chose to do so at their own discretion. Given that access to book ownership is often far out of reach for children in economic need due to systemic inequities and prohibitive cost (Neuman & Moland, 2019), limited book ownership prior to their enrollment in *Find Book Joy* was an inclusion criterion used to determine participants for this study. Exclusion criteria for child participants included children who are enrolled in kindergarten or in grade six and up, children who are not enrolled in Title I schools, children who are not able to read independently, children who own their own books that are not from *Find Book Joy*, children who do not speak, read, and write in English, and children who are provided with choice in book selection, according to background information shared by their parents.

Overview: Phase One and Phase Two Instrumentation

This qualitative narrative research study used data collected from an interview protocol (Appendix F) that was administered to 20 adult participants in the first phase of this research study in Spring 2023 and a second interview protocol (Appendix G) that was administered to eight child participants in 1st through 5th grade in Fall 2024. The interview protocols for both phases of this study were developed by the researcher based on knowledge gained from the literature (Ascenzi-Moreno & Quiñones, 2022; Ford et al., 2019; Hayden & Prince, 2023;

Heineke et al., 2022; Kleekamp & Zapata, 2019; Meier, 2015; Ness, 2019; Neuman, 2017, 2022; Neuman & Knapczyk, 2020; Neuman & Moland, 2019; Sharma & Christ, 2017; Tondreau & Rabinowitz, 2021). Interview questions and follow-up questions in both phases of this study allowed the researcher and participants to develop a rapport, clarify questions and responses in real time, and spend extended time on the research topics (Fraenkel et al., 2011).

The first interview protocol (Appendix F) was administered via an online videoconferencing platform to 20 literacy advocates of culturally and racially diverse backgrounds in professions that spanned the domains of pediatric health, literacy education, self-publishing, parenthood, community partnerships, and the non-profit sector. The adult interviews were 45 minutes in duration. The second phase of data collection was also conducted via an online videoconferencing platform and included interviews with eight book recipients from *Find Book Joy* that were enrolled in a Title I school in 1st through 5th grade. The interview protocol with children (Appendix G) lasted 30 minutes and included questions centered on the primary factors that contribute to reader identity development. These questions were intended to elicit storytelling from children in a narrative research model (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Phase One Instrumentation: Interviews with Literacy Advocates

The first set of interview questions for the literacy advocates included 10 primary questions and 2 follow-up questions (Appendix F) that were developed to answer the research question. The interview questions in phase one included knowledge questions, experience (or behavior) questions, and opinion questions (Fraenkel et al., 2011) developed to elicit responses that were informed by the participants' lived experiences. In one example, participants were asked if they could share a story about a time that they saw the impact that book ownership had for a child. This interview question correlates to Neuman's (2022) study that found that

providing children with the opportunity to own their own books and build a personal home library that is comprised of books of choice can increase their pride in book ownership, enhance their self-perceptions as readers, develop knowledge of preferences, and build their individual reader identities. The interview questions were written in advance and asked in the same sequential order for all 20 study participants (Fraenkel et al., 2011).

Interviews were chosen as a data collection method to gain perspectives of the subjects chosen as participants, as their professional achievements in gaining increased access to books for children in communities of economic need further informed the research goals. Pseudonyms were used for all participants. The 12 interview questions were approved by the IRB at the researcher's previous institution and met the alignment requirements with the research question as well as all ethical considerations. The first interview protocol (Appendix F) addressed topics such as access to books, home support, barriers to book ownership, choice in book selection, representation, inclusion, reader identity development, community reading culture, and the importance of culturally and linguistically diverse books. Interviews were recorded during each video conference and Zoom provided transcripts for each interview.

Phase Two Instrumentation: Interviews with Child Participants

The second phase of data collection involved individual interviews with children in 1st through 5th grade who were recipients from the Find Book Joy program. Interview questions elicited storytelling about the child participants' individual reading experiences with their inclusive books from *Find Book Joy*. The interview protocol for the child participants (Appendix G) was aligned with the research question, as these questions stemmed from the operationalized definitions of reader identity and inclusive texts, which were developed from the literature by the researcher. The following is an example of an interview question accompanied by a follow-up

question: “*How did it feel when you were able to choose your own books from the many choices of books provided by Find Book Joy? What types of books do you like to choose to read, and why?*” These interview questions focused on how providing choice in book selection for children factored prominently into reader identity formation, as choice can allow young reading enthusiasts to learn about books, define their individual agency, and build their knowledge of preferences (Harvey & Ward, 2017; Mackey, 2022). Additional concepts addressed by the interview questions included the principal factors that contribute to reader identity, such as access, agency, choice, frequency, volume, motivation, reading engagement, book joy, and the child participants’ perceptions of their reading experiences with inclusive texts.

Interviews were chosen as a narrative research methodology for both phases of this inquiry as an interview allows for the individual’s interpretation of their own lived experiences. In this model, the storyteller has ownership over how their story is shaped, as they own the narrative that they choose to share (Parks, 2023). Interviews as a data collection method were uniquely aligned with this narrative study on reader identity that foregrounds the lived experiences of each individual reader and positions individual interpretation at its core (Rosenblatt, 1978). In phase one, the researcher interviews 20 accomplished literacy advocates to gain insight into the roles of access and choice in reader identity development. In phase two, the researcher interviewed eight children and recorded the interviews while documenting field notes throughout the experience. Interview questions were aligned with the literature and were developmentally appropriate for children in grades one through five. Questions and follow-up questions centered on each child’s individual reading transactions with reading books from *Find Book Joy*, as an investigation of reader identity development in children positions the individual reader and their interpretations of their reading encounters at its center (Rosenblatt, 1978).

Data Collection: Procedures and Timelines

There were two phases of data collection and analysis in this study. Phase one took place in Spring 2023 with semi-structured interviews with 20 adult participants who are accomplished literacy advocates in the domains of pediatric health, literacy advocacy and education, self-publishing, and community partnerships across the United States. Phase two took place in Fall 2024 with interviews about reader identity development with independent readers in 1st through 5th grade who were recipients of inclusive books from the *Find Book Joy* book access endeavor.

Phase One Data Collection: Interviews with Literacy Advocates

In phase one, semi-structured interviews took place on Zoom between the researcher and 20 literacy advocates across a wide spectrum of professional domains over the course of four weeks in Spring 2023. The interviews lasted for 45 minutes to one hour, and spanned four weeks from April 17, 2023 to May 16, 2023. Recommendations from Miles et al. (2019) resulted in the development of an interview protocol that elicited informative responses. Interview questions for phase one participants were written by the researcher in accordance with the corpus of literature reviewed for this study. Interviews were chosen as a data collection instrument for this inquiry since an interview format provides the opportunity for one-to-one exchanges and encourages individualized responses to well-developed questions that connect to the research question.

In an example from the interview protocol in phase one (Appendix F), participants were asked about the importance of representation in culturally and linguistically diverse children's books. This question is supported by the concept of children connecting not only to the physical appearances of characters in stories they enjoy, but also to the characters' lived experiences, languages, and cultures, as their connections support the persistent need for access to inclusive books in the range of literary choices that are provided to young readers (Ascenzi-Moreno &

Quiñones, 2022; Ford et al., 2019; Hayden & Prince, 2023; Heineke et al., 2022; Kleekamp & Zapata, 2019).

The researcher explained the context of the study and shared the research question in the recruitment email and at the beginning of each interview. Throughout the introduction, the researcher asked the participants if they had any questions about the study or the interview format and provided opportunities for participants to ask questions for clarification. Informed consent (Appendix E) was obtained by the researcher sharing the parameters of the inquiry with the participants and asking if any questions pertained to the study guidelines. According to the requirements of the IRB, the informed consent provided information on the purpose and procedure of the study, along with any potential risks. Participants were reassured that their participation was entirely voluntary, and they could withdraw from the study at any time. The researcher read the informed consent (Appendix E) to the participants at the start of every interview, provided a copy to each participant, and adhered to the protocol required by the IRB at the previous institution. Translation services were not required for the interviews or the informed consent in phase one, as all study participants were able to speak, read, and write in English.

In phase one, data collection was recorded on an online videoconferencing platform that provided a video recording as well as a written transcript for each interview. The transcripts were stored as Word documents on the researcher's computer and a flash drive was utilized for backup storage. Cloud storage at the university was used to store both videos and transcripts for a total of 90 days. The researcher saved all 20 transcripts to a password protected laptop computer and a flash drive for future data analysis. To protect confidentiality, all personally identifiable information was removed from the interview transcripts and participants were identified only by pseudonyms. The researcher began each interview with a brief introduction of the study that

included the research question. The literacy advocate interviews included questions and follow-up questions (Appendix F). The researcher took notes on the participant responses throughout each interview and wrote a reflexive memo once each interview had concluded.

Phase Two Data Collection: Interviews with Find Book Joy Recipients

Phase two included interviews with eight children in grades one through five enrolled in the *Find Book Joy* program as they shared their narratives in response to questions on reader identity development and their individual experiences with inclusive reading books from the *Find Book Joy* collection. Rosenblatt's (1978) Transactional Theory of Reading supports the process of providing children with increased access to inclusive texts and observing how their personal experiences guide their decisions and shape their individual reading choices.

Phase Two of this investigation included interviews that elicited storytelling opportunities from *Find Book Joy* recipients about their reading experiences with books from the program. Interviews took place for 30 minutes on a videoconferencing platform and were recorded, transcribed, and documented in field notes by the researcher. Inclusive books from *Find Book Joy* that the children had already read were brought to the online interviews by each child and served as scaffolds to the children's responses to the interview questions. The interview questions for child participants were aligned with the literature and the research question and were developmentally appropriate for children in 1st through 5th grade.

Child assent was obtained from children on video, using the appropriate forms provided by the IRB at the current institution (Appendix D). The researcher explained the study to the child participants as outlined in the script from the university, including a description of the study purpose, what the child would experience, how often they would meet with the researcher, how long the interview session was expected to take, and the risks and benefits of participating in the

study. Each child was asked if they had any questions prior to the researcher starting the interview. Child participants were advised that the researcher would be learning from them and there were no incorrect answers to their questions. Each child was asked to agree or decline to participate in the study and was advised that their participation or non-participation in the interview would not change their ability to continue to receive free books from *Find Book Joy*. Field memos were written by the researcher after each interview. Data collection included field notes and interview transcripts, as child participants were asked questions to elicit their individual stories about reading inclusive books from *Find Book Joy* and their individual reading experiences related to the leading factors in reader identity formation.

Once the interviews with the child participants were recorded, the transcribing software was used to code the interview transcripts. Translation services were not required for the interviews, child assent form (Appendix D), or the informed consent form (Appendix E) in phase two, as the child participants and their parents were all able to speak, read, and write in English. Finally, the researcher saved the data on a flash drive as a backup as well as on Google Drive on a password-protected computer, where it will remain for a period of two years.

Phase Two Data Collection Timeline

The data collection in phase two followed a clearly defined outline as follows: Prior to the interviews taking place, children had already received books of choice in advance from the *Find Book Joy* program from the researcher. The recruitment email advised parents that during the interview, the children would be asked questions about their books from *Find Book Joy* and asked that the children have their books with them for the interview. The children then had one to two weeks to read their books from *Find Book Joy* prior to the interviews. The decision to conduct interviews with child participants as a data collection method aligned with the

Transactional Theory of Reading (Rosenblatt, 1978), as encouraging children to share their personal reading experiences revealed to the researcher how each individual child constructs meaning differently from the text and how this meaning shapes their individual interpretations of what is read. Interviews were conducted for about 30 minutes on a videoconferencing platform and were transcribed and coded for data analysis.

Data Analysis

This study includes two phases of data collection and analysis. Phase one of data analysis took place in Spring 2023 with transcripts of semi-structured interviews of 20 accomplished literacy advocates from varied professions and included open coding, axial coding, and thematic analysis. Visual data displays supported the researcher in the data analysis process. Phase two of this inquiry took place in Fall 2024 and included open coding, axial coding, and thematic analysis of transcripts from interviews with eight young readers in 1st through 5th grade who were recipients of inclusive books from the *Find Book Joy* book access endeavor.

In both phases, thematic analysis of the interview transcripts took place to identify patterns, ideas, and concepts to answer the research question. Interview transcripts were thoroughly coded in open coding and axial coding by the researcher, utilizing a methodical approach to open coding to identify key phrases, concepts, and patterns within the data. Thematic analysis was then conducted to examine these codes and group them into overarching themes that emerged across the interviews. This process involved interpreting the relationships between the themes and understanding how they related to the research question, ultimately revealing deeper insights into the participants' experiences and perspectives. According to Liamputpong and Ezzy (2005), the aim of thematic analysis is to identify patterns in the interview transcripts, which can help explain how certain behaviors elucidate the complexities of a social issue.

Finally, rather than merely summarizing the data, thematic analysis interprets and provides deeper insight into the meaning behind the data (Rosario, 2023).

Phase One Data Analysis

Qualitative data analysis in phase one included open coding and axial coding of the 20 interview transcripts to determine patterns and themes. These patterns and themes were then transferred to visual data displays to provide additional opportunities to determine findings from the data (Miles et al., 2019). The overall data analysis approach was a thematic approach aligned with the core principles of qualitative research. The researcher's approach to data analysis included a blended approach that encompassed both inductive and deductive coding. In phase one, an inductive approach to coding the interview transcripts was implemented for the literacy advocate participants that included an interrogation of the interview transcripts to identify categories and themes that helped to sort and organize the data (Creswell, 2007). This practice helped to elucidate patterns that informed the data analysis.

The researcher embarked on inductive coding for the interview transcripts, a process that is also known as data-driven coding, which involved developing codes directly from the data without any predefined or pre-determined categories. In this first coding cycle, the researcher conducted axial coding in an inductive approach, which is the process of starting with large quantities of data to learning how these codes come together and develop into coding categories (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). Open coding is typically inductive, and is the preferred method according to the constructivist approach (Gioia et al., 2013; Strauss & Corbin, 1990;), as it enables the user to code a textual unit, such as paragraphs, sentences, or words, that is close to the raw data without being influenced by any pre-existing theory or construct. In phase one, the researcher utilized manual coding without software. The researcher coded the 20 interview

transcripts to determine codes, patterns, and themes. The researcher interrogated the transcripts four times. Open coding took place first, followed by axial coding that reassembled the data to refine categories. Moreover, axial coding enabled the researcher to identify recurring themes based on "the kinds of things the participants mentioned many times" (Allen, 2017, p. 403).

In the first coding cycle of data analysis, the researcher positioned the research question at the center of data analysis and identified descriptive and *in vivo* codes that captured the participants' exact words were consistent throughout 20 interview transcripts. In this endeavor, the researcher practiced the approach recommended by Miles et al., (2019) that suggests shifting back and forth between existing data to create follow-up questions to collect new informative data. During this initial coding process, the researcher transitioned between an inductive and an abductive process in an iterative approach, which is a flexible qualitative analysis method that shifts between the emergent findings and the literature and the theoretical framework to find new concepts that exist within the data (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2007). The coding process proved to be as informative as the interview process, as both endeavors yielded robust data for the goals of this study. Finally, the researcher wrote a codebook based on codes that were identified across all 20 transcripts and created operationalized definitions for each code.

In the second coding cycle in phase one of this study, the researcher grouped the existing codes into categories or themes in a process of pattern coding. According to Miles et al. (2019), pattern codes gather material from the first coding cycle into more meaningful and concise units of analysis. The rich and robust data that was collected from 20 knowledgeable participants provided the researcher with a solid collection of codes from which to create interconnections and discover themes that informed the study findings. Throughout this process, the researcher returned to each transcript multiple times to code and reflect. While coding software was not

used to initially code these interview transcripts in the first two coding cycles, it was used as a resource in the third and fourth transcript interrogations that took place in Fall 2024.

Code books, reflexive memos, and visual data displays were kept by the researcher during the data analysis process. While interviews from phase one were already completed and raw data initially analyzed to inform this study, these transcripts were further investigated once phase two data analysis was completed. In phase one, detailed field memos were written by the researcher after each interview. As Cox (2012) suggests, the process of writing reflexive memos gives qualitative researchers a practical means to wrestle with their individual subjectivities.

In phase one, the researcher's creation of visual data displays helped to visualize and conceptualize the patterns that had been identified from the pattern coding endeavor. This experience resulted in the *cognitive map* that Miles et al. (2019) advocate for as a more integrated schema to increase one's understanding of the data assembled. In addition, the researcher created several visual data displays that aided in understanding the data analysis process. According to Miles et al. (2019), qualitative data must first be reduced through coding, then displayed through matrices, graphs, or charts, and finally verified to reach conclusions. Data displays are helpful as they require the researcher to think about their research question and which portions of the data are required to answer them while focusing time and attention on themes and patterns that emerge from the data (Miles et al., 2019). Further, conclusions about data displays are often reflected in analytic memos that require the researcher to draw conclusions and add insightful interpretations (Miles et al., 2019). In phase one, member checking took place with two participants who offered insightful recommendations on increased access to book ownership and provided suggestions for the next phase of this study.

Summary of Phase One Data Analysis

The data in phase one were analyzed based on semi-structured interviews with 20 literacy advocates from across the United States. The researcher coded the transcripts and *in-vivo* codes were derived from the participants' responses to the interview questions. Initially, each response was analyzed line by line using *in-vivo* coding, capturing the respondents' exact language and incorporating direct quotations within the Findings chapter. Open coding was conducted manually, where portions of the text were highlighted by the researcher and assigned labels to summarize the findings (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). Next, axial coding took place, to determine patterns, themes, and categories across the interview transcripts. Axial coding served as a bridge between initial open coding and the development of more refined insights by synthesizing categories and identifying overarching ideas or concepts (Ravitch & Carol, 2016). Further, once phase two data collection was completed in Fall 2024, the researcher interrogated the phase one transcripts a third and fourth time, using the Taguette platform (Taguette, n.d.), for data synthesis and further analysis. In Appendix H, a word cloud visually presents the codes that emerged from phase one. In summary, the data gathered from phase one was presented in multiple visual charts, offering clear visual illustrations of codes, patterns, and themes that supported the researcher's analysis. This comprehensive approach assisted in the interpretation of participants' narratives.

Phase Two Data Analysis

In the second phase of the study, the researcher used the data from the transcripts of the semi-structured interviews with children to conduct a thematic analysis (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). In alignment with the coding process in phase one, narrative data analysis in phase two also included open coding and axial coding of the child participant interview transcripts to determine patterns and themes. In an immersive process, open coding took place first, followed by axial coding (Ravitch & Carl, 2016) that supported the data analysis by refining categories, connecting

themes to one another, and focusing on how themes within the interview data were interrelated (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). Axial coding provided a thorough understanding of data analysis, resulting in an integrated and comprehensive approach to determining study outcomes. The patterns and themes that were identified in data analysis were subsequently organized into visual data displays, offering further opportunities to derive findings from the data (Miles et al., 2019).

In this inquiry, the five-step process for conducting narrative analysis recommended by Liamputpong (2009) was used to examine the data gathered in both phases of this study. The first step involved thoroughly reading and re-reading the transcripts to gain a deeper understanding of the content by summarizing key elements. Then, the narratives were deconstructed into key components, such as temporal elements (past, present, and future) or contextual dimensions (time, place, and setting) to increase the researcher's understanding. The next sequential step involved identifying themes to construct the narrative's meaning while examining transitions between themes, including eliminating any inconsistencies or contradictions. Following this step, Liamputpong (2009) advises researchers to recognize mini-stories within the transcripts that provide deeper insights into individual experiences. The last phase of narrative data analysis involved integrating these thematic insights, situating them within the theoretical framework, and evaluating data to enhance the significance of each narrative (Liamputpong, 2009).

When coding the interview transcripts from the child participants, the researcher applied both inductive and deductive coding approaches (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). Inductive coding allowed for themes and patterns to emerge naturally from the data, rather than allowing pre-determined concepts to shape the data analysis process. As in phase one, the researcher implemented a flexible approach to qualitative analysis that shifted between the emergent findings and the literature and the theoretical framework to uncover new concepts emerging from

the data (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2007). In both phases, the researcher also took a deductive approach to narrative analysis through the lens of the Transactional Theory of Reading (Rosenblatt, 2013), as this theory guided the process of analyzing the transcripts to determine the primary factors in reader identity development. The interview questions for child participants centered on the individual factors that comprise the operationalized definition of reader identity. A word cloud that presents a visual representation of the codes that emerged during phase two can be found in Appendix I. To conclude, the data collected from phase two was displayed in several charts that offered clear visual illustrations of codes, patterns, and themes to support the researcher in the data analysis process.

Summary of Phase Two Data Analysis

The data in phase two were analyzed based on semi-structured interviews with eight child participants in grades one through five who were recipients of inclusive books of choice from the *Find Book Joy* endeavor. The researcher coded the transcripts and codes were derived from the participants' responses to the interview questions. Initially, each response was analyzed line by line using *in-vivo* coding, capturing the respondents' exact language and incorporation direct quotations within the individual child narratives and the Findings chapter. Open coding was conducted using the electronic Taguette data analysis platform (Taguette, n.d.), where portions of the text were highlighted by the researcher and assigned labels to summarize the concepts (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). Next, axial coding took place, to determine patterns, themes, and categories across the interview transcripts. Axial coding provided a bridge between initial open coding and the development of more refined insights (Ravitch & Carol, 2016). In phase two of this study, the child participants enthusiastically welcomed the opportunity to reflect on their

reader identities, demonstrate pride in book ownership, and share their book joy experiences and the unique personal attributes that comprise their individuality as readers.

Alignment with the Theoretical Framework

The Transactional Theory of Reading (Rosenblatt, 1978) aligned with the research question, the literacy advocates' interview protocol, and the child participants' interview protocol, as noted in Table 3. In addition, the theoretical lens aligned with the data collection sources, as shown in Table 4. The Transactional Theory of Reading (Rosenblatt, 1978) is a theoretical model that situates the child at the center of the reading transaction, which is an individual meaning making process that results from their personal reading experiences (Davis, 1992). In phase one, the interview questions about the participants' interactions with children regarding their choices in book selection, individuality as a reader, representation and inclusion, purposes for reading, and pride in book ownership were aligned with this theoretical framework. Since the Transactional Theory (Rosenblatt, 1978) explores how readers read, interpret, and evaluate literature (Cai, 2008), the interview questions for participants in both phases of this study evaluated children's reading experiences with inclusive texts.

In this inquiry on reader identity development, the Transactional Theory (Rosenblatt, 1978) allowed for a multitude of individual meanings - rather than one definitive meaning - to be accepted and valued as children's literary interpretations and reader responses to their inclusive books. Children's reading encounters provided expanded opportunities for young readers to explore their individual interpretations and expand their understandings (Cai, 2008). This individuality in interpretation and meaning making is at the core of reader identity (Hall, 2012; Wagner, 2020) and was therefore an appropriate choice to frame this study. Individuality as a reader was a key finding in this study that aligned with the theoretical framework. Finally, the

intentional use of inclusive books provided rich opportunities for children to read in ways that brought their individual backgrounds and prior knowledge to their immersive and participatory reading experiences (Davis, 1992).

Table 3

Alignment Table: Research Questions and Research Design

| Research Question: | Theoretical Framework: | Data Collection Instrument: | Research Methodology: | Data Analysis Procedure: |
|--|---|------------------------------------|--------------------------------|--|
| In what ways can increased access to book ownership and choice in book selection transform reader identity development for children in economically disadvantaged communities? | Transactional Theory of Reading (Rosenblatt, 1978). | Adult Interviews | Qualitative Narrative Research | Open Coding, Axial Coding, and Thematic Analysis |
| In what ways can access to book ownership and choice in book selection transform reader identity development for children in economically disadvantaged communities? | Transactional Theory of Reading (Rosenblatt, 1978) | Child Interviews | Qualitative Narrative Research | Open Coding, Axial Coding, and Thematic Analysis |

The Transactional Theory of Reading (Rosenblatt, 1978; 1995) aligned with the data collection sources in this study since the core principles framed the adults' responses to interview questions by focusing on the meaningful personal experiences that children brought to the text. In addition, the children's narratives illuminated how immersive and participatory reading encounters can shape a child's identity as a reader, as viewed through this theoretical lens.

Table 4

Alignment Table: Theoretical Framework to Data Collection Sources

| Transactional Theory Element: | Adult Interview Question: | Child Interview Question: |
|--|--|---|
| The Transactional Theory focuses on individual interpretation in making meaning from the text, which is at the core of reader identity (Hall, 2012; Wagner, 2020). | What factors do you believe contribute to building an identity as a reader? | Is there a story that you can share about a time when you felt joyful when reading a book? What was it about that book that made you feel joyful? |
| The Transactional Theory centers children's voices, as the focus is on what the reader brings <i>to</i> the text and how their personal lived experiences guide their decisions and define their individual reading choices (Rosenblatt, 1978). | Why is book choice important for children? | How did it feel when you were able to choose and keep your own books from <i>Find Book Joy</i> ? |
| The Transactional Theory centers each reader's individual identity. This concept applies to inclusive books, as "the meaning made from the interaction between the reader and the text is a reflection of the reader's own background and identity" (Rosenblatt, 1978, p. 27). | How important is representation in children's books in building this identity as a reader? | What types of books do you like to choose to read, and why? Was there a time that you wanted to read more books? Why? |

Further, the Transactional Theory of Reading (Rosenblatt, 1978) was aligned with the data collection sources since the core tenets of this theoretical lens were integrated into the interview questions for the literacy advocates and the child participants. Keeping in mind that the Transactional Theory of Reading (Rosenblatt, 1978) is aligned with the subjects of increased access and choice in reader identity development, this theoretical model provides a lens for the researcher to examine and explore how children engage with individual literary experiences by reading inclusive books of choice that provide opportunities for a wide range of individual transactions with texts (Cai, 2008). In addition, Rosenblatt (1978) asserts that readers experience different stances when engaging with texts, ranging from an efferent stance to an aesthetic stance. The aesthetic stance was clearly evident throughout the child participant interviews, as noted in the findings. Questions on reader identity development focused on the *lived-through* individual interpretations of inclusive texts to construct meaning, thereby highlighting the aesthetic stance. Overall, Rosenblatt's (1978, 1993) Transactional Theory of Reading views reading as an interactive and reciprocal relationship between the reader and the material that is read, a focused exchange that is at the core of reader identity formation.

Ethical Considerations

Since the researcher interviewed minor children, there was a keen awareness of the critical ethical issues of privacy, confidentiality, and informed consent. The researcher was well-prepared to adhere to the ethical considerations that were outlined by the university's institutional review board (IRB) and knowledge gained from their doctoral study.

Since children grouped by demographic characteristics are especially vulnerable due to inattention to their rights to privacy and freedom of expression and their inability to fully consent (Graham et al., 2013) it was imperative for the researcher to take steps to protect child

participants in this study from intrusive research practices that may compromise these rights.

Further, the researcher was aware that privacy, confidentiality, data stewardship, and ethical data protection are the primary ethical considerations for researchers interviewing and observing children, as these core values are essential to children's psychological well-being and development (Graham et al., 2013).

In this study on reader identity development, it was especially critical to provide children with the freedom and autonomy of identity exploration and experimentation without the burden of adult surveillance, as these protections were critical to fostering their agency and identity formation (Responsible Data for Children, n.d.).

There is a paucity of research that focuses on ethical practices and the rights of young children in qualitative research (Sun et al., 2023). Therefore, when evaluating ethical considerations in exploring young children's voice in qualitative research, it was essential for the researcher to continue to promote children's agency and assent-seeking as ongoing processes (Sun et al., 2023). Further, since children are vulnerable, they are dependent on the moral responsibility of adults to protect their rights when they are participants in research endeavors. Dockett et al. (2009) assert that understanding context, especially the interpretive framework that is used by academics, is indispensable when deciphering the meaning of children's responses and other contributions. Despite noteworthy progress in honoring the importance of valuing children's voice in qualitative research, it is noteworthy that the "how to" for methods and ethical considerations that involve young children is an ongoing process that continues to unfold (Fane et al., 2016). According to Fane et al. (2016), children must be situated at the center of the research as participant and as subjects to truly capture their authentic voices.

In the earliest stages of a qualitative research endeavor, building a rapport with children and including them in the data collection process by providing them with detailed information in an accessible manner helps them to comprehend the purpose of the research and what can be expected (Mishna et al., 2004). To this end, the researcher met with children prior to the data collection to establish a rapport and reconnect from previous interactions that took place at the *Find Book Joy* book distribution events. To be sure they were properly informed, children needed to understand the purpose of the study, how the study would unfold, the expectations involved, what would happen to the data that was collected, and how the researcher would utilize the results (Dockett et al., 2009). Harcourt and Conroy (2005) assert that seeking assent from young children is a critical way to respect their rights and abilities as social agents and decision makers and can increase their sense of ownership in their participation. Children need time to ask questions and reach decisions about their assent, time that provides the opportunity to establish a relationship with the interviewer that is based on trust and respect (Dockett et al., 2009).

According to Ford et al. (2007), assent is interpreted as an agreement obtained from those who are not able to enter into a legal contract. Overall, securing children's agreement and including their perspectives are ethical practices that are understood as the first steps in approaching studies in ways that respect and honor children's voice (Dockett & Perry, 1996; Spriggs, 2010).

In this study, the term *children's voice* refers to "children's expressions, perspectives, experiences, attitudes, views, and beliefs that are expressed through verbal and non-verbal communication" (Sun et al., 2023, p. 2). The researcher aspired to understand the gathering of data from child participants as an intercultural experience, where the researcher and the children involved both shaped the generation of outcomes (Baker, 2004). Honoring children's voice in this study centered the child participants in the exploration of reader identity development in

alignment with the principles of the Transactional Theory of Reading (Rosenblatt, 1978). Finally, to honor the voices of children, their perspectives were positioned at the center of the research (Sun et al., 2023), with the researcher decentering their power role by allowing the children to take center stage. Child participants were assured that all responses to the interview questions were welcomed, there were no “right” answers, and the researcher was eager and excited to learn from them. Children were trusted to share their authentic interpretations.

Understanding that children are social actors who can construct their own intellects, abilities, and identities requires adults to become immersed in (rather than to depart from) the landscape of modern childhood, with its many complications and dualisms (Ryan, 2008). To see children as social actors, according to Christensen and James (2008), is to treat them as active participants in contexts where historically they have been denied the right to participate and their voices have remained largely unheard, most notably in the qualitative research domain (MacNaughton & Smith, 2009). Children in this study were viewed within the social actor model of childhood that embodies the evidence-based idea that children’s insights and perspectives on the world can inform and improve adults’ understandings of children’s experiences (MacNaughton et al., 2007). To honor the authenticity of children’s voice, the researcher was mindful to approach the interviews without any pre-conceived notions, biases, assumptions, or expectations about how the children would respond to the questions and prompts.

When conducting research that involves children, it is imperative for researchers to comprehend the complex relationship that exists between child agency, power imbalances, and informed consent (Sun et al., 2023). Since the concepts of voice and power are interconnected in research endeavors, an honest recognition of these power dynamics can disrupt the historically powerless social positions of young children. Acknowledging and respecting child agency can

help researchers to mediate the balance of power in adult-child relationships. In the data collection phase, Sun et al. (2023) suggest that group interviews of children that include the presence of peers can help researchers to minimize the asymmetrical power imbalance that exists between adults and children. In addition, Sun et al. (2023) advocate for researchers to implement intentional data collection and analysis practices to protect children's rights as participants in their studies. Prior to embarking on this study, the researcher kept in mind how young children make meaning, participate in their communities, and share their thoughts and ideas with adults and each other (Sun et al., 2023). Further, encouraging multiple modalities of expression offered young children the freedom to communicate and express themselves in ways that they could adapt to their individual purposes. In addition to revealing a wider scope of perspectives to answer the research question, multiple data collection phases provided an opportunity for in-depth analysis to confirm and identify reliable patterns (Sun et al., 2023). Finally, the researcher's continuous reflexive considerations (Sun et al., 2023) throughout the data collection and analysis processes resulted in children's agency increasing over time, as the power dynamic shifted between the researcher and participants to result in centering children's voice at the forefront of the study. These experiences were documented in the researcher's reflexive journal.

Trustworthiness and Rigor

In phase one, the open-ended interview questions and follow-up questions provided opportunities for the study participants to engage in storytelling about their lived experiences with increased access to books and child recipients of books, thereby extending the principles of narrative research (Adler et al., 2017). In this initial phase, the researcher requested peer reviews of her interview questions from peers who are literacy specialists or doctoral students in literacy education. In phase two, the researcher requested peer reviews to ensure that the questions asked

of children were developmentally appropriate. This approach is aligned with the research findings of Ponizovsky-Bergelson et al. (2019), who found that in 1,339 child interviewee-adult interviewer exchanges, the intentional practice of providing children with encouragement and open-ended questions produced the most robust data and elicited independent thinking that helped children to share their individual perspectives and experiences (Sun et al., 2023). In addition, encouraging young readers' independent choices in book selection was another intentional decision to honor children's voices and allow for them to demonstrate agency as research participants. Finally, obtaining assent and agreement from children reminds researchers to treat children with dignity and respect, while recognizing their independent abilities to make their own decisions (Sun et al., 2023).

To secure trustworthiness and credibility in this study on reader identity development, the researcher utilized two sets of data to clearly establish identifiable patterns (Stahl & King, 2020). The process of acknowledging similar outcomes repeatedly throughout various data sources helps researchers to use multiplicity to assess the credibility of their research. This study used methodological triangulation, the use of more than one method of collecting or analyzing data (Stahl & King, 2020), and included semi-structured interviews with 20 literacy advocates and semi-structured interviews with eight child participants who were inclusive book recipients from *Find Book Joy* to determine the various ways that increased access to inclusive book ownership and choice in book selection transformed reader identity development for children in economically disadvantaged communities.

The intentional choice of using interviews as an instrument for both adult and child participants further ensured trustworthiness due to the large amount of data that was collected and the correlations and connections that were captured across individual experiences in

narrative data analysis (Parks, 2023). In this inquiry, interviews with literacy advocates and interviews with child book recipients were used to determine findings about how access to books and choice in book selection contribute to the transformation of reader identity and how inclusive texts can further impact children's reader identity formation.

Finally, peer debriefing (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) is a form of dependability, a core component of trustworthiness in qualitative research endeavors. In this study, peer debriefing took place with fellow doctoral candidates and academic peers at corresponding professional levels to the researcher and included literacy specialists in the profession of education. This approach allowed the opportunity for the researcher to secure credibility that created trust (Stahl & King, 2020). To ensure the accuracy of the findings, researcher triangulation was implemented through peer debriefing with fellow doctoral candidates, colleagues, and literacy specialists. This collaborative process helped to challenge interpretations, address potential biases, and deepen the analysis of the data. In addition, the researcher invited peers with comparable academic credentials to read and respond to field notes from the study that included the researcher's interpretations as well as the interview questions, a process that provided helpful confirmation and reassurance (Stahl & King, 2020). The parallel connections between the researcher and their peers resulted in *insider analysis* that supported trustworthiness (Stahl & King, 2020).

In addition, the researcher's reflexive analysis of the interpretation of data that existed side-by-side with recorded facts from observations, a process called "bracketing," helped the researcher monitor and examine their own biases, assumptions, and influences (Stahl & King, 2020, p. 27). Overall, the rigorous pursuit of trustworthiness in one's qualitative study is akin to achieving the goal of validity in quantitative studies and must be upheld as paramount.

Validity and Reliability

According to Fraenkel et al. (2011), validity encompasses the appropriateness, purpose, and usefulness of the inferences researchers make based on the data they collect. In qualitative research, the terms *credibility* or *trustworthiness* refer to instrument validity and reliability and to internal validity, as well (Fraenkel et al., 2011). To reduce the possibility of bias in qualitative research, particularly in data collection and analysis, triangulation was used to enhance validity and reliability by using multiple instruments to identify patterns and trends (Fraenkel et al., 2011). Since this study on reader identity development was conducted in two phases that included literacy advocates and child book recipients, data triangulation was utilized by incorporating the perspectives of these different participant groups from their interviews. A thorough analysis of the data sets revealed patterns and distinctions, enhancing the depth and clarity of the investigation. Further, this approach provided multiple viewpoints and compelling perspectives on the same concepts, resulting in a richer and more comprehensive analysis.

In addition, peer debriefing and member checking provided opportunities for individuals other than the researcher to evaluate the accuracy of the interpretations. In phase one, member checking took place, since the literacy advocates were adult participants who could participate in the accuracy evaluation process. In phase two, the researcher relied on peer debriefing, an external audit, that confirmed that the data collected was vetted to ensure validity and decrease the influence of researcher bias. The researcher analyzed the member checking documentation that already took place with adult participants in phase one along with the interview transcripts, and added peer debriefing as a method to confirm validity with colleagues who held advanced degrees in literacy education for the child participant interviews in phase two.

It was required that the researcher kept in mind that reliability and validity are context-dependent for the instruments that were chosen (Fraenkel, 2011). In this study, an additional measure that was taken to ensure validity was the researcher's decision to interrogate the transcripts from phase one and phase two several times. In addition, audio and video recordings were also essential tools for the researcher to confirm validity of the findings in both phases of this study since they provided opportunities to listen to and view the interview recordings over and over again. In addition, *rich descriptions*, or the researcher's in-depth descriptions of the context in which the interview questions were asked and/or the situations were observed (Fraenkel et al., 2011) were central to this study. These contextual descriptions were particularly essential to the validity of this inquiry (Stahl & King, 2020), as the socioeconomic circumstances and surrounding environmental characteristics were key factors in determining the findings on reader identity development for children in economically disadvantaged communities.

In addition, construct validity and content validity were of paramount importance in this study, as a precise understanding and a thorough analysis of the many variables of reader identity were imperative. *Construct validity* refers to how accurately an instrument measures the concept it is intended to assess, aligning with known indicators of observable traits (Fraenkel et al., 2011). In this inquiry, the concept of reader identity, as defined in the literature, was the construct measured, with interview questions designed to reflect this understanding. In contrast, *content validity* concerns how well the instrument captures all aspects of the framework, ensuring the interview questions gather insights that reflect key elements of reader identity development (Kemper, 2020). In this inquiry, both construct and content validity ensured the interview questions effectively measured reader identity development across both phases.

The validity and trustworthiness of this study were the responsibility of the researcher.

Establishing validity in this inquiry relied on the use of multiple data sources, including literacy advocate interviews and child participant interviews, to confirm and identify reliable patterns in the data (Stahl & King, 2020). In addition, member checking and peer debriefing were implemented to verify the accuracy of the researcher's interpretations once the data sources were collected and analyzed. Finally, reflexive and honest self-analysis was the moral responsibility of the researcher (Stahl & King, 2020) throughout the data collection and analysis processes.

Conclusion

To summarize, this qualitative study was conducted utilizing a narrative research design in two phases, with literacy advocates and *Find Book Joy* book recipients. Participants were selected and recruited based on the inclusion and exclusion criteria detailed in this chapter. The first phase of the study included semi-structured interviews with 20 literacy advocates in varied professions from across the United States. The interview questions were developed from the literature and intended to elicit storytelling from the participants about their experiences providing equitable access to book ownership and choice in book selection to children in economically disadvantaged communities. In the second phase of this inquiry, eight children in grades one through five who were book recipients from the *Find Book Joy* program were interviewed to explore the key features of reader identity development through their individual interpretations. The children's interview questions were also developed from the literature. In the child participant interviews, the researcher asked questions to encourage self-reflection and elicit storytelling about the variables in the operational definition of reader identity. To answer the research question, interviews were transcribed and then coded to determine themes. Finally, data were analyzed and synthesized to identify correlations across both phases of the study.

In phase one, thematic analysis of the data from the literacy advocates provided a keen understanding of how access and choice contribute to a child's identity as a reader for children in economically disadvantaged communities and resulted in the development of the *Find Book Joy* program, a local book access and distribution program. In phase two, the same thematic analysis took place with the interview transcripts from the eight child participants enrolled in the *Find Book Joy* program. Next, drawing from insights from data analysis in both phases of the study, the researcher synthesized the evidence to determine important correlations, ensuring a well-rounded interpretation of the results and their implications. Finally, the researcher explored an in-depth evaluation of their positionality to explore how the data may potentially be framed by their personal and professional identities. Chapter IV will provide an exploration of reader identity development through the narratives of the eight individual child participants.

Chapter IV: Individual Child Participant Narratives

The following section presents the individual narratives of the eight child participants in phase two of this study. These deeply personal stories provide rich insights into the *Find Book Joy* recipients' individual experiences with access to book ownership and choice in book selection and how these factors have transformed their identities as readers. Each revealing narrative illuminates the children's individual perspectives on reading, the role of choice in their literary experiences, their personal sources of book joy, their pride in book ownership, and the agency that they gained through access to books of choice. Their choices in book selection are shown in Table 5. The decision to share the children's personal narratives in this study conveys the researcher's intention to elevate children's voices as authors of their own stories, some that offered counternarratives to mainstream perspectives. Finally, centering the children's narratives aligned with the intentional selection of narrative research as the study's methodology, as it prioritized young readers' lived experiences, honored their voices, and provided a deeper understanding of how they interacted with texts to develop meaningful experiences.

Table 5

Find Book Joy Books Chosen by the Children for their Participation in the Study

| Name | Grade | Titles of <i>Find Book Joy</i> Books | Author | Illustrator |
|---------|-------|---|--|--|
| Orion | 1 | <i>A Snowy Day</i> <i>Quackling</i> <i>The King of Kindergarten</i> <i>Hair Love</i> | Ezra Jack Keats Aaron Shepard Derrick Barnes Matthew A Cherry | Ezra Jack Keats Wendy Edelson Vanessa Brantley-Newton Vashti Harrison |
| Jasmine | 4 | <i>Dancing in the Wings</i> <i>Parker Shines On: Another Extraordinary Moment</i> | Debbie Allen Jessica Curry and Parker Curry | Kadir Nelson Brittany Jacks |

| Name | Grade | Titles of <i>Find Book Joy</i> Books | Author | Illustrator |
|-----------|-------|---|---|---|
| Imani | 1 | <i>My Daddy Rules the World</i> <i>Misty Copeland: Ballet Star</i> <i>Firebird</i> <i>Good Night, I Say to You</i> <i>You Can Be a Doctor/You Can Be a Pet Vet (Barbie) (Step into Reading)</i> | Hope Anita Smith Sarah Howden Misty Copeland Naeemah Philippeaux Mary Man-Kong | Hope Anita Smith Nick Craine Christopher Myers Lucia Gaia Jiyoung An |
| Josie | 3 | <i>Eyes that Speak to the Stars</i> <i>A is for Awesome! 23 Iconic Women Who Changed the World</i> <i>I Am Enough</i> <i>Rainbow Weaver / Tejedora de arcoiris</i> <i>A Box Can Be Many Things</i> | Joanna Ho Eva Chen | Dung Ho Derek Deserto |
| | | | Grace Byers Linda Elovitz Marshall Dana Meachen Rau | Keturah A. Bobo Elisa Chavarri Paige Billin-Frye |
| Claudine | 5 | <i>Mae Among the Stars</i> <i>I Am Enough</i> <i>Who Was Harriet Tubman?</i> <i>A Chair for my Mother</i> <i>Outside Amelia's Window</i> | Roda Ahmed Grace Byers Yona Zeldis McDonough Vera B. Williams Caroline Nastro | Stasia Burrington Keturah A. Bobo Nancy Harrison Vera B. Williams Anca Sandu Budisan |
| Cameron | 1 | <i>Maybe: A Story About the Endless Potential in All of Us</i> <i>National Geographic Reader: Sharks! (Science Reader Level 2)</i> | Kobi Yamada Anne Schreiber | Gabrielle Barouch Photos courtesy of National Geographic |
| Gabrielle | 1 | <i>Stacey's Remarkable Books</i> <i>A Library</i> | Stacey Abrams Nikki Giovanni | Kitt Thomas Erin K. Robinson |
| Charlotte | 2 | <i>Dear Zoo</i> <i>It's Snowing! It's Snowing!</i> <i>Winter Poems (I Can Read)</i> <i>Amelia Bedelia Gets the Picture</i> | Rod Campbell Jack Prelutsky Herman Parish | Rod Campbell Yossi Abolafia Lynne Avril |

Participant Orion

Participant Orion, a first grader, came well-prepared to the interview with 10 books from *Find Book Joy* and his own book collection. Orion was elated to enthusiastically share his well-stocked home bookcase with the researcher and exclaimed, “*I have a library in my house!*” as he proceeded to share imaginative descriptions of each one of his 10 chosen books. Orion expressed that when he chooses new books to read, he looks for books that are “*new to him*,” and he is “*excited to read them*.” Orion proudly responded to the first interview question about book ownership by sharing that his favorite book, *Quackling*, a retelling of a French folktale by Aaron Shepard and illustrated by Wendy Edelson, has his name written inside the cover, and expressed that “*it felt good to know that this book belongs to me*.” Next, he opened the book to share the inscription with the researcher. Orion noted that his father often reads this book to him before bedtime and shared, “*my daddy reads this book to me with special voices, and I like when he does that*.” He smiled broadly while recalling his fond memories about these shared reading experiences with his father, a delightful source of pure book joy for this young reader.

When asked if there was a book that has caused him to feel joy, Orion exclaimed, “*all of them!*” and held up as many of his books as he could hold. As the conversation progressed, he shared that on his birthday in kindergarten, his parents visited his classroom, and they read *Quackling* to his class. Orion expressed he has always enjoyed reading this story since it is “*interactive*,” and it evokes recollections of bonding with his father during their shared reading time. In this story, the clever main character (a duck) wears a crown and sets out to reclaim his fortune from the king with the help of several unlikely heroes who join him in his quest. *Quackling* eventually outwits the king and claims his just reward (Shepard, 2004). Orion recalled that just as the protagonist in *Quacking* wears a crown, he too wore a crown in kindergarten

when he completed his work, and shared that his crown was “*super golden.*” As the interview continued, Orion shared several “*silly parts*” of the story and often shared laughter, conveying his preference in reading books to enjoy humor and engage his imagination. Orion demonstrated strong interest and motivation for books and reading and shared each of his favorites with the researcher with an exceptional level of detail, excitement, and robust comprehension.

In an impromptu text-to-text connection, Orion chose to compare the duck in *Quackling* with the main character in the inclusive book *The King of Kindergarten* by Derrick Barnes and Vanessa Brantley-Newton, as both characters wore crowns. Orion reiterated that just as the characters in the stories wore crowns, he wore a crown, as well. He spontaneously identified instances of identity alignment with all of the characters in his favorite books. Orion’s mother later shared that she provided him with positive and supportive books about kindergarten in the summer leading up to his enrollment date, as she “*wanted him to feel good about it.*” Orion independently presented each of his favorite books with a joyful summary of events in plot development and skillfully identified features of the characters without prompting or adult support. He recalled precise details from the stories that increased his comprehension. Orion’s responses demonstrated that he is a self-motivated reader who possesses secure knowledge of his personal interests and reading preferences. Further, his enthusiasm for books and reading and his pure book joy have resulted in increased reading volume, motivation, and engagement, as he personifies the principle that the more joyful reading can be, the more a child will want to read (Allington, 2014).

In his next book sharing experience, Orion presented *The Snowy Day* by Ezra Jack Keats. In this story, the main character, Peter, explores his neighborhood after a snowfall. When Peter makes snow angels and snowmen and slides down a snowy hill in the book, Orion expressed his

excitement about taking part in the same activities. Moreover, he noted his personal reason for having chosen this book, as the story takes place in winter, and his birthday is the last day of January. At the conclusion of the interview, Orion's mother shared that he often makes personal connections to the books they read together and noted that he has been enrolled since birth in the *Imagination Library* book distribution program, a nonprofit organization that provides free, age-appropriate books to children from birth to age five, fostering early literacy and a love of reading. Orion's mother shared that *The Snowy Day* (Keats, 1962) was one of the first books that was sent to him from the *Imagination Library* and expressed her gratitude that this book access foundation “*always provides us with books that have characters front and center who look like us.*” In addition, Orion's mother said that she and her husband “*always made sure that Orion had books with characters that looked like him, diverse characters, right from the beginning.*”

In another connection to *The Snowy Day*, Orion shared that he has “*school brothers,*” and that one of his school brothers is named Ezra, just like the author of this book. When asked if a book that he has read has ever caused him to want to read more, he exuberantly expressed, “*I would say, all of my favorite books make me want to read more. They are my favorites because I chose them!*” This assertion confirms that for Orion, having the agency to choose books that honor his personal interests and preferences results in increased reading volume, expanded motivation to read, and vibrant book joy. Orion's reading experiences confirm that when children have access to books that they love, books that they choose, and books that engage them fully, they will actively participate in the reading process (Allington, 2012; Konrad, 2023). Orion's lifetime of being surrounded by books further enhanced his knowledge of preferences. Finally, his intrinsic motivation to read and his determination to choose his own books illustrate how choice in book selection provides children with the ability to know and understand who they are

as readers and what matters most to them (Konrad, 2023; Mackey, 2022), leading factors in reader identity development.

Orion made several personal connections to each of his self-selected books, thereby deepening and extending his engagement with each story. He clearly could see himself in the characters, both in their appearances and their lived experiences, and this experience strengthened his individual engagement with the books he chose to read. Orion's deep connection to his many "*favorite books*" illustrates the principle that providing children with choice in what they read increases the time they spend reading, the volume of books they read, and expands their reading engagement (Konrad, 2023; Mackey, 2022).

Orion's narratives about his reading interactions conveyed that children form meaningful connections with story characters not only through their physical appearances, but also through their lived experiences. These relatable bonds underscore the critical need to provide children with inclusive books that feature authentic representation of diverse characters within the literary choices available to curious young readers (Ascenzi-Moreno & Quiñones, 2022; Ford et al., 2019; Hayden & Prince, 2023; Heineke et al., 2022). Orion's strong bonds with the characters in his favorite books made his reading experiences more relatable and increased his reading engagement. He spoke of the characters in his inclusive books as if they were treasured friends.

Overall, Orion's reading interactions are aligned with the aesthetic stance of the Transactional Theory of Reading (Rosenblatt, 1978), as he immersed himself in the emotional and imaginative aspects of his chosen books. Further, Orion's reading experiences reflect the principles of this theoretical framework (Rosenblatt, 1978), which focuses on how readers' personal backgrounds and lived experiences shape their engagement with texts and guide their interpretations (Hall, 2012). Finally, Orion saw each book as an adventure, and each character as

a close friend. He spoke about the features of each story with precision, and his descriptions had an exceptional level of detail. Orion shared that when he chooses his books, he reads them more, thereby confirming that his reading volume increases as a result of choice in book selection.

Strong parental support for Orion's literacy development has clearly been an influential factor in his pride and confidence as a reader. As the interview unfolded, it became evident that Orion's parents had the means to provide him with access to books well prior to his experiences in the *Find Book Joy* program, as they had enrolled him at birth in the *Imagination Library* book access program. Orion proudly shared that he "*has his own library, right in my house*" and proudly shared his home bookcases filled with books that he owns during his interview. Orion noted that when his parents purchase books for him or he attends a *Find Book Joy* book fair, he "*can keep his books and not have to give them back.*" Moreover, he enthusiastically expressed that his parents have read to him since he was born, and noted that he has "*books in every room.*" In a stunning achievement, Orion had read 1,000 books with his parents prior to entering kindergarten, and together they have recently embarked on reading his second thousand books. Finally, Orion's deep pride in book ownership and his boundless book joy were highlighted in his many spontaneous declarations about his robust home library collection, including his bold exclamation, "*I have so many books that belong to me that I love to read!*"

Participant Jasmine

Participant Jasmine, a fourth grader, chose four inclusive books about ballet from the *Find Book Joy* collection and brought two of these books with her to the interview: *Dancing in the Wings*, written by Debbie Allen and illustrated by Kadir Nelson, and *Parker Shines On: Another Extraordinary Moment*, written by Jessica Curry and Parker Curry and illustrated by Brittany Jackson. During the interview, Jasmine often referred to the illustrations to scaffold her

responses to the questions. When engaging with the researcher and responding to questions about her *Find Book Joy* books with a brilliant smile, Jasmine was brimming with enthusiasm as she described the books with an exceptional level of detail and exuberance.

Jasmine, a gymnast, was elated to share her impressions of the ballet books that she had chosen and offered keen insights in character analysis and plot development for the books *Dancing in the Wings*, written by Debbie Allen and illustrated by Kadir Nelson, and *Parker Shines On: Another Extraordinary Moment*, written by Parker and Jessica Curry and illustrated by Tonya Engel. Jasmine began her book discussion with *Dancing in the Wings* (Allen, 2002), and described the main character, Sassy's, ballet poses in fine detail as she referred to her ability to “*stand on her tippy toes to balance, so she does not tumble.*” Jasmine was visibly enchanted by the many ballet poses that Sassy demonstrates in the illustrations and asked the researcher if she could act out these poses during the interview. Jasmine connected to the main character named Sassy due to their mutual interests in ballet and expressed that Sassy was “*so talented.*” When responding to the question that asked if she had ever wanted to read more when reading a book, Jasmine expressed that this book, *Dancing in the Wings* (Allen, 2022), caused her to want to read more. In fact, she said that she has “*read it every night*” since she chose this book from the *Find Book Joy* collection, thereby demonstrating the connection between choice in book selection and increased reading volume. When asked why she chose this book from *Find Book Joy*, Jasmine shared that she chose this book based on her interests in gymnastics and ballet. She noted, “*when I choose my own books, they are the books that I like most.*”

Throughout the interview, Jasmine paused to identify illustrations when the protagonist experienced success or encountered adversity in the story and shared that she connected to how the main character was feeling in the story based on her own personal experiences in gymnastics.

Jasmine noted that Sassy was treated unfairly by some of her peers due to her height, as she was much taller than her classmates. In response to the main character facing exclusionary behaviors in the text, Jasmine expressed, *“People make fun of her because she is so tall, but she is still happy and proud of herself.”* When Jasmine shared the illustrations with the researcher, she said, *“Sassy is just like me.”* When asked to expand on that assertion, she expressed, *“We are both confident and we believe in ourselves.”* The strong connections that Jasmine felt with this character and her story served as a mirror for her (Sims Bishop, 1990), as a child of color who is also a tall young gymnast. Moreover, she admired this character’s perseverance and tenacity and seemed energized by her determination to follow her dreams and achieve her goals.

In addition, Jasmine spontaneously shared more than once that the protagonist in this story is a person who *“does not give up on herself,”* and expressed in her own words that she is also a tenacious person and does not give up on herself. When asked to describe Sassy in the story by sharing character traits, she reiterated, *“she looks like she never gives up.”* In her approach to this reading experience, Jasmine became deeply immersed in the narrative, engaging with her chosen book reflectively and exploring its emotional and nuanced layers (Rosenblatt, 1978). The many examples of identity alignment that Jasmine experienced with the main character in this inclusive book highlight that when a child can find themselves in inclusive books and develop empathetic connections with diverse characters that provide them with models for hope and resilience, these reading experiences can result in increased self-esteem.

In an instance that conveyed her confidence as a reader, Jasmine asked the researcher if she could read aloud from the story, and did so proficiently with fluency that reflected strong intonation and expression. When invited to share the types of books that she likes to read, Jasmine shared that this book, *Dancing in the Wings* (Allen, 2002), was her favorite book since

the main character, Sassy, “*believed in her dreams.*” Jasmine smiled broadly when she described Sassy as “*confident in her life, happy, excited, and proud,*” and excitedly expressed that since she owns this book, she can “*read it at home, over and over again.*” Jasmine’s determination to reread her favorite book illustrates how book choice and book ownership contribute to increased reading volume, aligning with Serravallo’s (2015) research, which examines how meaningful connections to texts and choice in book selection can strengthen reader identity.

Finally, Jasmine shared the connection that just as Sassy in the story performs ballet poses and “*cool stunts*” in the story, she likes to do the same in her gymnastics class. Jasmine described Sassy as “*a girl who is loving her life.*” At the conclusion of the interview, she asked the researcher if she could perform a backbend to demonstrate her skills as a gymnast, noting she was “*flexible, just like Sassy.*” This connection demonstrated another relatable bond. Overall, Jasmine’s assertions illustrated the concept that for children who can see themselves reflected in books in characters who look like them and have similar lives who can achieve their goals, there is a sense of reassurance that conveys, “*If they can do it, I can, too.*”

The many thoughtful revelations that Jasmine shared during the interview increased her book joy and expanded her reading engagement, as she discovered a love for ballet and developed a strong bond with the main character in her favorite book. Jasmine expressed with excitement that she would like to read more books about characters who are ballet dancers and gymnasts. Jasmine’s participatory reading experience with *Dancing in the Wings* (Allen, 2002) reflected Rosenblatt’s (1978) aesthetic stance, where readers engage emotionally with the text, immersing themselves in the narrative and imagery of the text. Jasmine’s joyful reading encounter with the main character in *Dancing in the Wings* (Allen, 2002) exemplified a key

principle from the phase one data analysis: when children read the right book at the right time, they gain an understanding of their own promise and potential.

Participant Imani

Participant Imani, a first grader, chose four books that featured authentic representation of diversity from the *Find Book Joy* collection. Imani had all four books with her during the conversation and often referred to the illustrations and events in plot development during her responses to the interview questions. In addition, she eagerly asked the researcher if she could read several of the books aloud during the interview, a request that was echoed by several of the child participants. Imani excitedly shared that she “*loves to collect books*” and that when she reads books, “*I learn new facts that I never knew before.*” As the interview began, she demonstrated enthusiasm for books and reading and expressed that she did not know which book to choose first, as “*they are all so good!*” Imani asked the researcher about their favorite children’s books and eagerly followed this inquiry with many more thoughtful questions.

The first book that Imani shared was the poetry anthology, *My Daddy Rules the World*, written and illustrated by Hope Anita Smith. This collection of poems honors the joyful day-to-day adventures and mutual experiences that young readers share with their beloved dads. This inclusive book highlights the medium of collage in illustrations that feature a child and her father, persons of color, and spans their many treasured moments spent together. The poems explore daily encounters such as their early morning breakfast routines, reading books together at home, and learning to ride a two-wheeler at the park. Imani joyfully expressed that she has experienced all of the same activities with her own dad.

When asked if a book ever caused her to feel joyful, participant Imani exuberantly exclaimed, “*YES! This one!*” and asked to read a poem aloud that describes a child’s experience

of learning to ride a bicycle without training wheels with the guidance and support of her father (Smith, 2012). Imani was elated to report to the researcher, “*and I did this with my Daddy!*” and shared that the child in the poem and the illustrations “*rides her bike with her Daddy holding it, until she can ride it all by herself, without her Daddy holding it anymore, just like I did with my dad.*” This relatable bond is one example of several meaningful connections that Imani shared with the characters in her many *Find Book Joy* inclusive books.

The authentic parallels that Imani identified between the child in the poems and her own life increased her enthusiastic motivation to read this book and resulted in enhanced reading engagement. Imani often noted that she read this book with her father and expressed that the father in the book “*goes to the office, just like my dad, and reads books to her, just like my dad.*” As she excitedly turned the pages during the interview, she shared that she identified with this child and pointed out many shared encounters, particularly as a child who is also close to her father. The many personal connections that Imani shared with the main character in these poems clearly increased her motivation to read. Moreover, the validation Imani experienced from reading these poems evoked strong feelings of book joy, as she expressed pure elation when identifying each connection between the events described in the poems and her own lived experiences. Finally, Imani conveyed that she reads her *Find Book Joy* books at home with her dad, each night before bedtime, just like the character in the book reads with her father (Smith, 2012). Imani’s reading encounters in this study support the belief that providing children with opportunities to read and respond to inclusive books allows young readers from diverse backgrounds to see themselves reflected in their reading transactions and to experience identity alignment, an emotional experience that can increase reading engagement (Rosenblatt, 1995).

As the interview continued, Imani excitedly shared a second inclusive book that she had chosen from the *Find Book Joy* collection, an early reader about the life of ballet dancer Misty Copeland, the first African American principal dancer in the American Ballet Theatre in the company's 75-year history (Howden, 2015). In this book, *Misty Copeland, Ballet Star* (Howden, 2015), Imani identified the illustrations that included posters on the character's bedroom walls that represented Misty Copeland's many exquisite performances, including the role of *Firebird*, the subject of a picture book autobiography written by Ms. Copeland. When asked why she chose this select book from the *Find Book Joy* collection, Imani shared, "*I always wanted to learn more about ballet dancers*" and "*I was curious when I first saw this book.*"

In response to the interview question about a time when a book made her want to read more and the reasons why, Imani expressed that the poetry book about the father and child made her want to read more "*since it reminds me of my dad and me in real life.*" She also was enchanted by the picture book biography, and noted that she enjoyed learning from this early reader about how Ms. Copeland became the Sugar Plum Fairy in *The Nutcracker*, the ballet by George Balanchine. In this reading encounter, Imani became emotionally connected to Misty Copeland, as her immersive reading experience facilitated a reciprocal interaction with the text, where her prior knowledge and personal responses shaped the interpretation of the narrative (Rosenblatt, 1978). As Imani expressed: "*If I could ever meet Misty Copeland, I would be crying, but it would be a happy cry, because all of her life is so beautiful.*"

As she turned the pages of this inclusive book and shared the events in the life of Misty Copeland with the researcher, Imani noted in her own words that Ms. Copeland was met with racial discrimination as a person of color in the ballet world and was advised by her ballet classmates that her body was "wrong" for ballet. In response to this bias incident, Imani recalled,

“*Misty did not mind the words they said,*” and persevered. Imani read this part of the story aloud to the researcher and articulated that it was “*other White girls*” who told Ms. Copeland that her body shape was not welcomed in ballet. Imani chose this encounter of racial discrimination as the focal point of her reading experience. In her reflections about this *Find Book Joy* book choice, she expressed, “*this book is special.*” When asked to elaborate, Imani shared:

I remember that this book is special, because the other girls at Misty’s ballet, the White girls, they said that she had the wrong body for ballet, but then she became the first African American girl, well, the first African American principal dancer, in the American Ballet Theatre. She did not mind the other people, the other White people. I would also not mind the words they say.

In this self-assured assertion, Imani conveyed her deep respect for Ms. Copeland’s determination to succeed and achieve her goals, even in the face of injustice. This first grader’s personal reading experience was an example of how the interconnected nature of justice and joy can be explored in inclusive children’s literature to center diverse voices and invite young learners to enter a place of self-empowerment (Vlach et al., 2023). The adversity faced by Ms. Copeland in this early reader is an example of how books can serve as a *sliding glass door*, i.e., books that invite readers to meet characters that experience injustice, take risks, wrestle with ethical decisions, and raise questions about their world (Johnson et al., 2017; Sims Bishop, 1990). Further, Imani’s interpretations highlighted the key narrative research element of meaning-making, as she described how the protagonist gained valuable insights from her experiences (Adler et al., 2017). Further, Imani’s personal responses to the bias and intolerance faced by Misty Copeland reflect how the Transactional Theory of Reading (Rosenblatt, 1978) allows for

multiple individual meanings—rather than a single definitive meaning—to emerge in children's literary interpretations.

In this example, providing Imani with access to inclusive literature and a safe space for discussing complex topics through a critical lens (Cushing & Carter, 2021) contributed to her positive reading experiences and expanded her reading enjoyment (Zare et al., 2023). Imani shared that she admired Misty's courage and determination in the face of exclusionary behavior by her peers and recognized Misty Copeland's remarkable achievements. As a daughter of African immigrants, Imani connected to this compelling story, as she recognized the intolerance in the life of Misty Copeland and the racial bias that she faced with open eyes and a resolute spirit and seemed to draw inspiration from this experience. Imani noted Ms. Copeland's singular achievement in the American Ballet Theatre, and clearly admired her strength, tenacity, and resilience. Imani's focus on Misty Copeland's determination demonstrated how her lived experiences and keen awareness of bias and intolerance contributed to her construction of meaning during the reading process, aligning to Rosenblatt's (1978) Transactional Theory of Reading. Further, Imani's transactions with the text illustrate how in the aesthetic stance, the reader's attention is directed inward, connecting the text to personal emotions and experiences, and increasing reading engagement (Rosenblatt, 1978).

Participant Josie

Participant Josie, a third grader, brought several *Find Book Joy* inclusive books with her to the interview and was excited to discuss her reading experiences. In the picture book *Eyes that Speak to the Stars* written by Joanna Ho and illustrated by Dung Ho, Josie explained in her own words that the main character learns about his Chinese cultural identity through intergenerational relationships and family bonds with his father and grandfather. Josie shared her admiration for

the protagonist's journey of self-discovery by sharing illustrations with the researcher to support her reading engagement. As the interview unfolded, Josie confidently explored a picture walk of the story and offered her own narrative to accompany the events in plot development.

In her responses to the interview question about the books that she likes to read and why, Josie chose *Eyes that Speak to the Stars* (Ho, 2022) as a book that increased her reading volume. Josie expressed empathy for the main character as she pointed out how he navigated conflicted feelings about the features of his appearance when a classmate drew an illustration of him that stereotyped his Asian identity. In this story, the protagonist's journey leads him to embrace pride in his cultural background and develop self-acceptance as he finds joy in the rituals he shares with his ancestors through engaging interactions with his father, grandfather, and younger brother (Ho, 2022). This insightful book features authentic portrayals of diversity and accurate representation, as the author, Joanna Ho, is Chinese American and often explores the theme of cultural identity in her work. The lyrical language and vibrant illustrations create a compelling visual journey that invites children into the lived experiences of the main character.

Near the end of the story, Josie shared a triumphant illustration of the main character wearing a cape and looking determined and proud. She pointed out that by the conclusion of the story, he developed pride in his identity, when he declared that he is "*the emperor of his own destiny*." Josie expressed an advanced understanding of inclusion for children who may look different from each other and shared her thoughts throughout the picture walk. At the conclusion of her narration of this story, Josie expressed her belief that the protagonist in *Eyes that Speak to the Stars* was strong and believed in himself, as she expressed, "*he is proud of who he is.*" Josie's reading experience with *Eyes that Speak to the Stars* (Ho, 2022) illustrated the principle that providing children with access and opportunities to explore a wide representation of

diversity in inclusive books results in transformative reading encounters and strengthens reader identity development (Heineke et al., 2022; Kleekamp & Zapata, 2019).

In addition, Josie's participatory and immersive reading encounter with *Eyes that Speak to the Stars* (Ho, 2022) illustrates how inclusive books encourage perspective-taking and foster empathy, in alignment with Rosenblatt's (1978, 1995) aesthetic stance of the Transactional Theory of Reading. Josie's engagement with the main character as he navigated the complexities of living with diversity deepened her emotional connection to the text and enriched her understanding and appreciation of different culturally representative perspectives.

Josie decided to share *I am Enough*, written by Grace Byers and illustrated by Keturah A. Bobo, as her second choice from her Find Book Joy collection. This inspirational picture book encourages young women to value individuality, self-love, and acceptance, as the narrator identifies characteristics that make each person unique. Illustrations of children in the story reflect diversity in race, culture, and mobility, thereby representing an inclusive approach in text and imagery. This book is written for young woman and focuses on self-acceptance, highlighting the value of individuality in the context of race, gender, and personal strengths. At the conclusion of her reading experience with *I Am Enough*, Josie was asked about her impressions of this inclusive book. She spontaneously shared her thoughts about valuing the many gifts of diversity reflected in her own group of friends and classmates. In response to the interview question about books that have caused her to feel joyful, Josie expressed:

This book made me feel joyful. Everyone is important. Everyone looks different, their names, their skin, their hair, their voice. Nobody has to be the same. If we are all the same, it is just not fun in the world.

In sum, Josie's reading experiences exemplify the principle that when cultural capital (Yosso, 2005) is authentically featured in inclusive books, children's transactions with texts can provide literacy learners with windows into the lives of characters who represent cultural backgrounds different from their own (Sims Bishop, 1990). Josie's impressions of the inclusive books *Eyes that Speak to the Stars* and *I Am Enough* provided context for her to further explore reader identity formation, as children look both outward and inward while exploring the language, characters, plot, and illustrations in the books they read and consider how they fit into the world (Niland, 2021).

When asked how it feels to be a "book collector," Josie smiled and responded that it felt "exciting," ran over to her well-stocked bookcase while on the videoconferencing platform, and exclaimed, "*Look! I have so many books on my shelf! I love to collect books!*" When asked how she first became a book collector, Josie joyfully shared that she had received most of her books from the *Find Book Joy* collection, and some from her former teacher. Josie provided a self-guided tour of the contents of her bookcase to the researcher, identified the features of each book, and shared why each qualified as one of her chosen favorites. Josie expressed that she enjoys having her bookshelf right next to her bed, "*so I can read my books every night,*" thereby conveying the value of proximity to books in increasing reading volume (Neuman, 2022).

Josie's book tour illustrated that access to book ownership and choice in book selection provided by the *Find Book Joy* program had resulted in a small home library collection that had been personally curated by Josie and her younger sister and clearly provided a deep sense of pride for these reading enthusiasts. In a confident presentation, Josie recited many facts about characters, setting, and events in plot development and other features for each of her treasured

books. Josie's self-perception as a reader was clearly connected to her pride in book ownership, as she excitedly expressed, "*It is fun to be a book collector!*"

In her third book discussion, Josie chose *A Box Can Be Many Things* written by Dana Meachen Rau and illustrated by Paige Billin-Frye as her "*all-time favorite book*" and shared that the two main characters use their imagination to create a cave, a house, a birdcage, a rocket ship, and a race car out of an old cardboard box. Josie provided an impromptu read aloud from *A Box Can Be Many Things* to the researcher and shared that the siblings in the story also used parts of the box to make a hat, a flag, a sword, and a necklace. In her vivid descriptions, she noted that she chose this book since the characters use their imaginations. In a text-to-text connection, Josie shared that she also likes to read *The Magic Treehouse* series by Mary Pope Osborne, as "*it is also an imagination book*" and noted that when the characters use their imagination, "*they can see it in their minds, like it is imaginary, it is not real, but it is real to them.*"

Questions about the importance of book choice elicited strong responses from Josie, as she emphatically stated that each child should have the right to choose their own books. Josie shared her firm belief that children should have the freedom to choose which books to read, as "*we can choose what we want to read, and nobody can make the right choice except you.*" As the interview continued, Josie expressed her strong disdain for book banning and expressed, "*nobody else can decide what we can read.*" Josie advocated for choice in book selection for *all* young readers, especially for those who may not have discovered their favorite genres or authors or series yet by recommending library visits to encourage children to expand their knowledge of preferences. In summary, Josie had many informative responses to the interview questions and shared that she was "*always happy*" to see the Book Fairy from *Find Book Joy* arrive at her learning center to share books that she could choose to read and take home to her collection.

Participant Claudine

Participant Claudine, a fifth grader, chose to share the following books that she owned from the *Find Book Joy* collection: *Mae Among the Stars* written by Roda Ahmed and illustrated by Stasia Burrington, *Who Was Harriet Tubman?* written by Yona Zeldis McDonough and illustrated by Nancy Harrison, and *I Am Enough* written by Grace Byers and illustrated by Keturah A. Bobo. When asked why she chose these books, Claudine expressed that “*good books are books that you remember something about*” and noted these books had made an impression.

The first book that Claudine shared, *Mae Among the Stars* (Ahmed, 2018), tells the story of Mae Jemison, the first African American female astronaut to travel to space, highlighting her childhood dreams and aspirations. As the book unfolds, the reader follows Mae as a young child as she develops self-esteem, tenacity, and determination in pursuit of her dreams in the face of barriers to her success. Claudine initiated the discussion about this biography, *Mae Among the Stars*, by using a picture walk of the book to note that as a child, Mae built a rocket ship from a cardboard box to expand her imagination and viewed the stars through a telescope with her dad.

In this book, the protagonist, Mae, expresses determination to become an astronaut early in life and her loyal parents consistently support her intentions to pursue a career in astronomy. Claudine shared that when Mae wondered aloud if she could *really* go to outer space, Mae’s parents reassured her, “*If you can dream it, if you believe it, and work hard for it, then anything is possible.*” Claudine shared an illustration of Mae at the library, surrounded by books, and explained that Mae’s parents often took her to the library to find books on astronauts and outer space. As Claudine noted, “*Mae could learn from these books about conditions and expectations in outer space.*” When asked if a book ever caused her to want to read more, she expressed, “*This book made me want to read more, since I was curious to see if her dream came true.*”

Claudine shared that in the classroom setting, when Mae first expressed her desire to become an astronaut in response to her teacher's questions about her future career plans, all of her classmates laughed. Moreover, Claudine shared that Mae was met with discrimination and a deficit mindset from her White teacher, who scoffed at the concept of Mae's dream to become an astronaut and suggested that she become a nurse instead. In response, Claudine noted that this was "*not fair*" on the part of the teacher, especially when the teacher phrased her suggestion as, "*a nurse would be a good job for someone like you*" (Ahmed, 2018). Claudine expressed that the teacher was "*limiting Mae*" and noted that Mae's career choice was *her* decision, as "*Anyone can be anything they want to be in life.*" In response to her disappointment about this experience, her mother encouraged Mae to continue to pursue her dreams and said, "*Nobody can stop you; follow your dream and go to space*" (Ahmed, 2018). As the story concludes, Mae promises to wave to her parents from outer space. When asked why she chose this book, Claudine shared that Mae's mother "*encouraged her and motivated her*" and that "*Mae never gave up.*" Further, Claudine expressed, "*Mae was a believer; she believed in herself,*" and clearly admired this character's tenacity and persistence, noting how Mae persevered even when met with socially-constructed barriers such as racial and gender discrimination by her teacher.

This inclusive book features authentic portrayals of diversity and a multilayered real-life character who pursued their aspirations in the face of adversity. In addition, *Mae Among the Stars* (Ahmed, 2018) concludes with a brief summary that expands on Mae Jemison's life beyond her career as an astronaut, including details about her professional accomplishments as an engineer and physician. This section provides additional context about her contributions and highlights her many achievements. As a child of color, Claudine shared that she chose this book "*since Mae looks like me and she followed her dreams.*" Claudine expressed that since she took

this book home, she had read this book three or four times, and noted that when she reads a book more than once, she “*gets better at reading*,” thereby sharing one of her reading purposes.

Claudine’s interpretations of events in plot development in this book reflect Rosenblatt’s (1978) Transactional Theory of Reading, which views meaning as co-constructed between the reader and the text. Moreover, Claudine’s excitement about the adventurous themes in this story and her ability to identify with the main character’s achievements further illustrate how readers bring their individuality to their interactions with the text. The dynamic exchange that occurred between Claudine and the narrative also highlighted the significance of representation and how the reader’s lived experiences influence their engagement (Rosenblatt, 1978).

As the conversation progressed, Claudine chose the book *Who Was Harriet Tubman?* written by Yona Zeldis McDonough and illustrated by Nancy Harrison. She explained that Ms. Tubman used a network of secret routes to help enslaved persons escape to freedom in the 19th century in the northern United States and Canada. Claudine noted that Ms. Tubman lived by the commitment “*leave nobody behind*.” This sense of brave determination made an impression on Claudine, as she described Harriet Tubman as “*hard-working and helpful*.” When asked if she preferred to read fiction or non-fiction, Claudine shared that she likes to read both, and explained that in this case, she prefers non-fiction, since a biography is about a person who actually lived in real life. Claudine also expressed her interest in reading series books and said that she is “*always eager to read the next book to learn about new adventures*.” Further, Claudine shared that when she reads series books, she sets a personal goal to read all of the books in that collection.

Finally, Claudine’s final book choice was *I Am Enough* written by Grace Byers and illustrated by Keturah A. Bobo. Claudine shared her impression that this book is about “*knowing each person is enough and that they belong*.” She described this book as “*a joyful book that says*

we don't have to change anything; we are perfect just as we are." In response to the question about book ownership, Claudine noted that since she owns this book, she can "*read it several times, and each time I find something new.*" Claudine also shared that when she chooses her own books, she reads them more often. Moreover, she expressed that when she reads a book, "*it is important to question the book and to find the answers to your questions to fully understand what the book is about.*" In response to the question about what types of books she would like to choose in the future from the *Find Book Joy* collection, Claudine shared that she would like to read more chapter books and graphic novels. She expressed excitement for visiting the next *Find Book Joy* book fair at her school. Finally, Claudine's descriptions of book joy centered on "*reading more books,*" as she connected joyful reading experiences to increased reading volume.

Participant Cameron

Participant Cameron, a first grader, chose several informational texts from *Find Book Joy* for his interview experience. When asked about the books that he chose to read and why, Cameron expressed that his interests in reading encompassed many far-ranging, fast-paced topics, such as action figures, superheroes, dinosaurs, and sharks, "*since they are all super-fast and have superpowers.*" Cameron expressed that he has always been motivated to read books that include action and adventure with characters that demonstrate super-human strength. To illustrate his affinity for action-packed books, Cameron chose a *National Geographic* book on sharks that had many vivid photographs of these ferocious ocean creatures from the *Find Book Joy* collection and shared his personal knowledge about sharks' predatory behaviors. He expressed with enthusiasm that he loves to read his shark book every night and excitedly noted facts that he had learned about these massive creatures, including, "*sharks can smell blood a mile away.*" Cameron's exuberant reactions to the colorful and realistic images of interactions

between sharks and various marine life illustrate behaviors reflective of the aesthetic stance (Rosenblatt, 1978), which states that children actively engage with reading by immersing themselves in the text, considering others' perspectives, expressing a range of emotions, and responding as if they are experiencing the events firsthand. This description accurately defined Cameron's lively interactions with his shark book. Moreover, Cameron's fascination with this informational text increased his preferences for this type of text (Robinson, 2020). When asked why he likes to read books, Cameron expressed that he reads "*to gain more knowledge.*" In one example, he shared that he reads books about how to play games so that he can learn the rules and understand how to play the games correctly. As his reading encounters shifted on the efferent-aesthetic continuum, Cameron's motivation to read informational texts highlighted his purpose to read books to gain knowledge and learn new information within the efferent stance (Rosenblatt, 1978), a consistent pattern that was evidenced across his many reading transactions.

As the interview unfolded, Cameron shared that he recently downloaded an app to learn more about drawing illustrations, as drawing is one of his many talents. In one of his chosen *Find Book Joy* books, *Maybe: A Story About the Endless Potential in All of Us*, written by Kobi Yamada and illustrated by Gabriella Barouch, in one of the illustrations, the main character draws a staircase and then ascends the staircase that she drew. Cameron pointed this illustration out to the researcher and was genuinely fascinated by the main character's accomplishment. As the story continued, the protagonist drew several visions from her imagination. Cameron experienced identity alignment with this protagonist, as they shared artistic talents. As the story progressed and the main character continued to illustrate images on the pages of this book, Cameron expressed that he thought it was "*so cool*" that the character was able to "*use her imagination in this way*" and expressed that he would like to draw a staircase, as well. He also

shared that he “*likes to draw plans, just like she does.*” In a powerful expression of self-realization, Cameron spontaneously shared in his own words, “*we learn from books what we can do.*” This insightful assertion conveyed the principle that reading books where children can see characters who share their lived experiences promotes a sense of promise and possibility, enhances self-confidence, and strengthens the perception, “*If they can succeed, then so can I.*”

The interview continued as Cameron noted that the main character fell down, but then got back up – and he read aloud from the text, “*and rises a little taller and a little stronger.*” (Yamada, 2019). Cameron’s engagement with the book *Maybe: A Story About the Endless Potential in All of Us* (Yamada, 2019) highlighted his individuality as a reader, as he connected with the character’s illustrations through his own identity as an artist and illustrator. While the book’s uplifting message about perseverance is compelling, it was the main character’s detailed illustrations and imaginative self-expression that captivated Cameron most. He found inspiration in the character’s artistic skills in a clear example of how personal interests and lived experiences shape meaning-making for young readers. Finally, Cameron shared a quote that he read aloud, “*You may fall down. You may fail. But you will also get back up, and you will rise a little stronger and a little taller. Because there really is more inside you than you know. And this world needs your gifts, your talents, your big ideas. And maybe you are just getting started.*” Cameron’s immersive reading encounter aligned with the Transactional Theory of Reading (Rosenblatt, 1978), which elevates children’s voices and focuses on how readers’ individual perspectives and experiences inform their interpretation, choices, and purpose(s) for reading (Hall, 2012).

When asked what makes him want to read more, Cameron expressed his interest in learning more about books by attending a book fair, since they recently held one at his school. Cameron shared his intention “*to see all the books in the world.*” Finally, when asked how he

felt when he chose his books from *Find Book Joy* and he knew that he could keep the books, including the book *Maybe: A Story About the Endless Potential in All of Us* (Yamada, 2019) and his informational book on sharks, Cameron indicated that he was “*very excited to read my books.*” At the conclusion of his interview, this young reader asked the researcher to explain the term *potential* from the title of the story. Following a brief explanation and interactive discussion about this term, he was asked what he would like to achieve in life, since he learned the term *potential*. In response, Cameron shared that he would like to continue to read more books, so that he can become a better reader. Finally, Cameron’s increased reading volume, motivation to read, and reading engagement, all accompanied by exuberant book joy from his *Find Book Joy* reading encounters, were primary factors in transforming his reader identity development.

Participant Gabrielle

Participant Gabrielle, a first grader, centered her narrative for the interview on her favorite book chosen from the *Find Book Joy* collection, *Stacey’s Remarkable Books*, written by Stacey Abrams and illustrated by Kitt Thomas. In this story, the main character Stacey shares her love of reading with her new classmate and friend Julie, who does not yet read in English. While their differences in languages create an initial barrier, Stacey is able to use her love of books and reading to transcend language and culture and connect with Julie. Gabrielle noted that Stacey was a good friend, since she helped her friend Julie learn English and noted that just as the children in the story have a bookcase in their classroom, she has a bookcase in her room.

In her empathic and inclusive approach, Stacey shares books as a bridge to reach Julie and to let her know she is welcomed in their classroom. The two girls visit the school library together and read books outdoors during recess. In the story, Stacey’s teacher calls the day that the class visits the school library “*adventure day*” (Abrams, 2023). Gabrielle shared that her

favorite part of this book was when Stacey and her friend Julie used their imaginations to go on an adventure in the library by reading an assortment of different books. When asked to expand on this description, Gabrielle used the book to explain that the protagonist shared, “*when we read different books, it is like going on an adventure to new places*” (Abrams, 2023). In addition, Gabrielle extended her understanding and expressed, “*an adventure is when we use our imaginations.*” She also spontaneously shared her knowledge of the visualization process and added, “*when we use our imaginations, we are seeing what we are thinking*” as she noted an illustration of an octopus in the story who played eight different instruments. Finally, Gabrielle expressed that she intended to continue to read this book every night, as she noted, “*when we read a book more than once, it helps us learn more about what is happening in the story.*”

Gabrielle’s responses to the interview questions revealed that her individuality as a reader contributed to her motivation to choose this book, as it focuses on the experiences of reading, learning, and using one’s imagination, all sources of her reading purpose. Moreover, Gabrielle smiled throughout the interview discussion and expressed book joy as she enthusiastically shared the illustrations and events in plot development about the characters’ relationships with books and reading. Her assertions about why she chose this book conveyed that Gabrielle had developed an understanding of her reading purpose. This awareness was most clearly illustrated by her response to the question about how reading many books can benefit aspiring readers, as she noted, “*The more books we read, the more we practice reading, and the more we learn.*”

In a remarkable moment that captured how inclusive books can provide meaningful connections for children of diverse backgrounds, when asked if there was any part of this story that caused her to feel joy or if she felt connected to the main character, Gabrielle shared a brilliant smile and said, “*Yes, because she looks like me.*” This response aligns with the assertion

by Cartledge et al. (2016) as cited by Heineke et al. (2022) which states that first and second graders prefer culturally relevant texts that mirror their racial and cultural backgrounds over non-culturally relevant ones due to the personal connections they make to the texts. Gabrielle was genuinely enamored by the storyline in her favorite book and how the girls in the story formed a close friendship that blossomed from their shared love of books and reading. This reading transaction strengthened her motivation to read and expanded her reading engagement. Gabrielle's reading transaction with *Stacey's Remarkable Books* demonstrated how personal connections with inclusive books help to foster emotionally resonant literacy experiences.

Further, Gabrielle's immersive reading encounter illuminated how inclusive books that reflect cultural diversity empower readers to draw from their own lived experiences, as framed by the Transactional Theory of Reading (Rosenblatt, 1978). When Gabrielle recognized herself reflected in the illustrations and narrative in this book, she felt validated and developed the motivation to continue exploring more books. This prompted a conversation about other books with the same main character that were written by the same author, such as *Stacey Speaks Up* (Abrams, 2024) and *Stacey's Extraordinary Words* (Abrams, 2023). Gabrielle's reading transactions in this study strengthened her motivation to read and expanded her reading engagement. Moreover, her immersive reading encounters with *Stacey's Remarkable Books* illustrate how authentic representation in inclusive books can provide opportunities for children to experience identity alignment with characters and their lived experiences.

When asked if there was a book that caused her to want to read more, Gabrielle expressed that *Stacey's Remarkable Books* was her "favorite book" and that she "likes to read it every day," thereby connecting personal preferences and book ownership to reading volume. She also shared that her teacher has this book in school and has read it to her class and that is why she

chose it from the *Find Book Joy* collection. Further, Gabrielle's heartfelt reading experience with *Stacey's Remarkable Books* conveyed how reading inclusive texts can increase empathy, understanding, and self-awareness for children navigating diversity who, until quite recently, have been excluded from children's literature (Hayden & Prince, 2023). Finally, Gabrielle's enthusiastic response to *Stacey's Remarkable Books* aligns with the belief that when children see their cultures represented, respected, and recognized in books in authentic and meaningful ways, they are more engaged in the reading process and may even be more motivated to read independently (Fleming et al., 2016; Ford et al., 2019; Heineke et al., 2022; Sims Bishop, 1990).

Participant Charlotte

Participant Charlotte, a second grader, brought three of her favorite *Find Book Joy* books to the interview: *Dear Zoo* written and illustrated by Rod Campbell, *It's Snowing, It's Snowing*, an early reader book of winter poems written by Jack Prelutsky and illustrated by Yossi Abolafia, and *Amelia Bedelia Gets the Picture*, written by Herman Parish and illustrated by Lynne Avril. Charlotte expressed the primary source of her motivation to read books is the opportunity to "read with mom," and shared that her mother provides support for learning new words. Charlotte noted that she owns many books at home and expressed that receiving books from *Find Book Joy* "makes me feel happy." Further, she expressed that she reads every day, and she encourages her friends to read more books by telling those who may be resistant readers to "just have fun."

In response to the interview question about what motivates her to want to read more books, Charlotte conveyed her enjoyment about reading entertaining stories and shared that books with these attributes capture her interests. To illustrate her purpose for reading for enjoyment and entertainment, Charlotte often took note of humorous events in plot development in the timeless classic *Dear Zoo* (Campbell, 1982). During her interview, Charlotte shared

several examples of misadventures from the story that made her laugh, such as when the zookeeper sends the child an elephant, a giraffe, a lion, a camel, and a monkey. In this interactive lift-the-flap book, illustrations of each zoo animal were revealed when Charlotte lifted the colorful flaps. She shared that she has had this book since her toddler years, and likes to read it with her mother. Charlotte pointed out events in the story that were silly and whimsical, and she visibly enjoyed her reading experiences. Charlotte's smiles and laughter conveyed that her primary purpose for reading the books she chose is to experience enjoyment and be entertained.

When asked about choices in book selection, Charlotte shared that she prefers to choose her own books rather than have a parent or teacher choose books for her to read, as then she can read books that she likes "*that are fun to read,*" thereby reinforcing her preferences for books that can sustain her attention by their entertainment value. Charlotte connected access to books and the opportunity to choose her own books from a wide assortment of books with her reading volume and motivation to read, as she stated that, "*when there are more books that I can choose, then I can read more books.*" This assertion conveys her keen understanding about the connection of access and choice to increased reading volume and reading engagement. In response to a follow-up question, Charlotte asserted her independence and noted that when she chooses books to read, she has autonomy in decisions, "*then I have choice, I get to decide.*"

To continue, Charlotte mentioned the *Rainbow Magic* series as an additional source of books that she likes to read to expand her imagination, and noted that it is fun to read series books since the characters often embark on adventures. In addition, Charlotte shared her propensity to read the same books that she likes "*over and over again,*" yet noted definitively that she *only* reads a book more than once if it is a book that she has chosen to read. Charlotte often recalled fond memories of reading together with her mother and shared that they engage in

this bonding experience before bed each night. Charlotte mentioned that she has read with her mother all of her life. Her responses conveyed that she has strong parental support in her literacy journey, as she and her mother have developed a close reading partnership.

The interview concluded with Charlotte spontaneously expressing her perception of “good readers” as “*good readers like to read, they know all the words, and good readers like to look at the pictures.*” Charlotte shared that she enjoys books where the characters use their imagination and reiterated her fervent interest in series books, noting that “*I like to read series books, since they have the same characters, but they always go on different adventures.*” She shared that once she reads one book in a series, she is motivated to read the next book, to learn what happens next, thereby revealing her understanding of sequencing in series books.

Charlotte’s focus on reading for pleasure aligned with the aesthetic stance of the Transactional Theory of Reading (Rosenblatt, 1978), as it focuses on the personal and experiential dimensions of reading. Further, this theoretical lens foregrounds the imagination and frames children’s immersive reading experiences. Charlotte’s reading experiences were aligned with the Transactional Theory of Reading’s focus on imaginative encounters. According to Rosenblatt (1978), “Imagination, in the transactional theory, is a dynamic element that links the reader’s personal experience with the text, creating meaning through the interaction between them” (p. 72). Charlotte’s agency and the autonomy that she exercised in her reading decisions led to individualized interpretations of events. These perspectives reinforced the core principle of the theoretical lens that conveys how individual meanings, rather than one definitive meaning, are valued as children’s literary interpretations and individual reader responses (Cai, 2008). Finally, Charlotte’s individuality as a reader informed her reading purpose, increased her reading volume, and expanded her reading engagement, key influences in reader identity development.

Chapter V: Findings

The purpose of this narrative inquiry was to investigate the ways in which increased access to book ownership and choice in book selection can transform reader identity development for children living and learning in economically disadvantaged communities. Framed by the Transactional Theory of Reading (Rosenblatt, 1978), a child-centered framework that positions the reader at the heart of the reading experience and situates meaning-making as a highly individualized process (Davis, 1992), insights from qualitative data analysis addressed the following research question:

In what ways can increased access to book ownership and choice in book selection transform reader identity development for children in economically disadvantaged communities?

This chapter will provide a thorough analysis of findings that is organized by presenting evidence from phase one and phase two for each study outcome. In phase one, this narrative study utilized semi-structured interviews with 20 literacy advocates from a range of professions to identify innovative and sustainable ways to provide increased access to books of choice at no cost for children in economic need and how this access to free books can transform a child's identity as a reader. In phase two, this narrative study utilized semi-structured interviews to explore how eight children enrolled in grades one through five in a Title I school who are book recipients from the *Find Book Joy* program experienced the primary factors that contribute to reader identity development as a result of increased access and choice. Data from phase one and phase two were coded and examined independently, leading to thematic analyses that identified key findings. These findings were then synthesized to reveal alignment.

How Phase One Findings Shaped the *Find Book Joy* Initiative and Phase Two

In phase one of this study, which included semi-structured interviews with 20 literacy advocates, the researcher investigated innovative ways to increase access to book ownership for children in communities of economic need and conducted an in-depth analysis of the systemic barriers that limit such access. Literacy advocates shared their knowledge and experiences about the roles of access, choice, book ownership, home and community support, and the importance of representation and inclusion in reader identity development. The robust data gained from phase one provided a wealth of knowledge and expertise about how to enact sustainable local book access endeavors for children in economically disadvantaged communities. Further, the analysis of phase one data illuminated the moral imperative to increase book ownership opportunities for children in economically disadvantaged communities with an intentional focus on inclusive books that reflected the identities and lived experiences of the children served. This important priority shaped the direction of phase two, where access to inclusive books and choice in book selection became essential pillars of the current study. In phase two, the researcher applied insights from the information gained from phase one to create *Find Book Joy*, a local book access endeavor that provides equitable access to the joys of book ownership and choice in book selection with a specialized focus on inclusive books for children living and learning in economically disadvantaged communities in Fairfield County, Connecticut.

In phase two of this study, semi-structured interviews with eight *Find Book Joy* recipients offered rich firsthand accounts from children of how access to book ownership and choice in book selection have transformed their reader identity development. These personal narratives shared by eight *Find Book Joy* recipients enrolled in grades one through five in Title I schools investigated the outcomes of providing increased access to inclusive books of choice to children living in communities of economic need. The purpose of including the child participant

narratives alongside the thematic analysis was to elevate children's voices in understanding how increased access to books and choice in book selection have informed their reader identity development as a result of their enrollment in the *Find Book Joy* program.

To complement outcomes from the data analysis in phase one, insights from the investigation in phase two provided a more nuanced and individualized understanding of principal themes, centering children's authentic voices in their reading experiences. Essential to this study's findings were the child participants' narratives and contributions, as their voices and interpretations illuminated their individualized book joy experiences beyond what any external perspective could convey. The intentional decision to focus the narrative research lens on the children's perspectives and experiences in phase two authentically captured each child participant's personalized literacy encounters, informed by increased access to books and choice in book selection, revealing the individualized dimensions of the study's key findings and their connection to the theoretical framework (Rosenblatt, 1978).

Findings Overview

Findings from both phases of this study suggested a strong consensus about the many instrumental ways that access to book ownership and choice in book selection transform a child's identity as a reader for children living in economically disadvantaged communities. In phase one, data analysis revealed that identity as a reader starts early in life when access to books and shared reading experiences are provided to children at home in early childhood. According to the data analysis, access to book ownership and choice in book selection increase children's reading engagement, which includes reading volume and motivation to read; shape their individuality as readers by illuminating their preferences and purposes for reading; and improve their self-perceptions as readers through book ownership. In addition, phase one data analysis elucidated

that home support—including parent engagement, shared reading experiences, and access to robust home book collections—when accompanied by community involvement, including relationships with *book heroes* and *reading champions*, visits to bookmobiles and *Little Free Libraries*, participation in school partnerships, and attendance at no-cost book fairs, is a critical factor in children’s reader identity development.

In phase two, eight *Find Book Joy* book recipients demonstrated how access to book ownership and choice in book selection transformed their identities as readers, most notably how the joys of book ownership that resulted from increased access and choice in inclusive books influenced and shaped their individuality as readers, supported them in defining their reading purpose(s), and expanded their reading engagement, which included reading volume and motivation to read. Further, data analysis from phase two illuminated how pride in book ownership empowered children to create their own personally curated home book collections, enhanced children’s self-perceptions as readers, and offered them new opportunities to experience book joy. Moreover, children in phase two selected inclusive books from the diverse collection provided by *Find Book Joy*, thereby encountering reading experiences that nurtured hope, resilience, and optimism, fostered meaningful personal connections, and expanded book joy opportunities. According to the data analysis, individuality as a reader developed when children were given opportunities to: (1) exercise agency and autonomy in book selection; (2) cultivate personal interests; (3) discover reading preferences; and (4) identify individualized reading purpose(s). Further, stemming from their individuality as readers, the investigation of phase two data supported that children developed individual purposes for reading that encompassed: (1) reading to learn to read or to improve as a reader, including reading to learn the use of strategies; (2) reading for entertainment and enjoyment, including reading to expand

one's imagination; (3) reading to acquire new knowledge or to gain information; and (4) reading to develop or expand social-emotional skills. According to insights from data analysis, the distinct reading purpose chosen by each child participant in phase two was as individualized as each child's fingerprint.

Across both phases of this study, the findings highlighted that access to books with authentic representation of diverse lived experiences and the ability to choose from inclusive book selections were essential factors in reader identity development. According to data analysis from phase one and phase two, when children saw themselves reflected in inclusive books that introduced them to varied perspectives and identities, their reading experiences built self-esteem, expanded book joy, increased reading volume, and strengthened their motivation to read. In addition, a thorough analysis of the data revealed that reading books that genuinely reflected diverse identities and lived experiences in characters who overcame hardship and adversity redefined children's sense of promise and potential, inspired hope, promise, and resilience, and expanded their hopeful visions for the future. Overall, interpretation of the findings indicated that access to book ownership and choice in book selection strengthened and defined one's identity as a reader, as access and choice provided children with equitable opportunities to learn who they are as readers, what they like to read about, and why they read the books they do.

This chapter begins with a summary of the six primary findings that emerged from the data in phase one and phase two about how access to book ownership and choice in book selection transform reader identity development for children in economically disadvantaged communities. Finding one, which focuses on home and community support, is exclusive to phase one, and finding five, regarding children's decisions about their purposes for reading, is specific to phase two. Findings are presented in a storytelling model that elevates participant voice, in

alignment with the principles of narrative research. Since narrative research is a well-recognized methodology for exploring identity development in educational research (Parks, 2023) and is closely aligned with the understanding of identity (Sfard & Prusak, 2005; Swain et al., 2015), this approach was an ideal choice for an inquiry that investigated reader identity development.

Findings

To begin, phase one data analysis resulted in comprehensive outcomes about the essential priority of home support and community involvement in transforming reader identity development for children in economically disadvantaged communities. Phase one literacy advocates' responses identified key influences in reader identity development such as home support and community involvement, factors that were not addressed by the child participants due to their developmental stage. Therefore, this first finding was exclusive to phase one.

Finding One

Access to book ownership and choice in book selection can transform reader identity development for children in economically disadvantaged communities when home support and community support are provided to children as early in life as possible.

Phase one data analysis indicated that access to book ownership and choice in book selection, when accompanied by robust home literacy environments, parents and caregivers reading to children, community book heroes and literacy advocates, and community support for parents and caregivers, are primary contributions to reader identity development. This finding examines the vital roles of home and community support, the home literacy environment and shared reading experiences with parents and caregivers, the role of community involvement in reader identity development, the importance of community book access partnerships, and community literacy support for parents and caregivers in children's reader identity development.

Home and Community Support. Insights from phase one data analysis revealed that reading to children at home and providing them with generous access to books as early in life as possible are primary factors to support their reader identity development. In addition, the importance of solid literacy-centered relationships and community reading partnerships emerged from phase one data analysis as vital to children's reader identity development. According to data analysis, parent-child reading experiences at home and supportive relationships with *book heroes* (Ascenzi-Moreno & Quiñones, 2022) or *reading champions* (Flint, 2024) within the communities where children live and attend school serve as foundational elements for reader identity development. Notably, these community connections and mentoring relationships are even more vital in circumstances where home support for reader identity development may be limited. These invaluable encounters instill the belief in children early in life that reading has value and help them develop the understanding that reading experiences can enrich their lives.

According to data analysis, home literacy environments where adults provided access to books and actively engaged with children, along with strong community support, played a crucial role in reader identity development (Raban, 2022). When adults at home and in the community modeled the importance of reading, they conveyed the pivotal message to children that reading holds value. Kendra, a K-6 literacy specialist in a Title I school expressed that when children see their parents reading to them at home and sharing their affinity for books and they view adults reading in community settings, "*These types of experiences exemplify the model of leading by example.*" Interviewees agreed that emerging reading enthusiasts emulate the behaviors and practices of the literacy leaders in their lives, as seeing adults at home and in the community who read and who are positive and joyful about reading helps children learn that reading is a valuable pursuit and supports them in building relationships with other readers at

home, at school, and within the community. Participant Evelyn, a volunteer community literacy advocate, shared that when parents can provide books at home and model the importance of reading for their children, young readers will emulate their reading practices. This informal literacy leadership model of *reading by example* demonstrates the importance of reading to children and instills in them an understanding of the value of reading in their lives, a key feature of reader identity development.

The Home Literacy Environment and Shared Reading Experiences. Reader identity development starts early in life when children have access to books at home and shared reading experiences with parents and caregivers. While access to books of choice at home is essential for children to develop secure reader identities, parents' interactions with books and their children were identified by study respondents as the single most essential element of a home literacy environment that supports secure reader identity development. Study contributors agreed that reading to a child early in life, preferably from birth, plants the seeds for children to develop confident identities as readers. As Participant Daniel, a program manager with a national literacy foundation, shared:

Reading together at home promotes positive and protective family relationships, and safe, stable, nurturing relationships that can mitigate adverse childhood experiences. Having access to books at home and reading to your child acts as a vehicle to creating protective spaces and building families that are supportive of each other. These interactions have a positive effect towards books and reading, and also encourage children's bonding experiences and involvement with their parents. Reading to a child helps their brain to expand within a safe and nurturing environment that increases reading engagement.

Family literacy program coordinator and inclusive children's book author Zamira shared her understanding that in the earliest years of the child's life, the reading culture in the home "*is dependent on the parents' behaviors and actions around books.*" Participant Sierra shared that with her non-profit literacy organization:

Any time a child goes to the doctor between the ages of 0 and 5, they are given a book from our foundation, and the doctor goes over with parents how to sit down and read a book with their child, and the importance of them reading at an early age. The books that we provide are aligned with developmental milestones. This advice comes from a trusted source. If a doctor tells you to read with your child, chances are, you are going to do it.

To support reader identity development, results from data analysis indicated that parents and caregivers should start reading to children at birth, a core belief that was met with agreement by all study participants. Literacy advocate Nadine shared that a child's identity as a reader begins to take shape in infancy and expressed that reading diverse books to children from birth is "*crucial at this age.*" As participant Simone noted, "*I read to my children, and I read with my children. When they see me reading, they go and find their own books and read alongside me. They know that reading is an important part of our lives.*" Participant Evelyn shared that her child's gift registry to celebrate her birth included numerous children's books.

When asked how adults can support the development of reader identity in their children, participant Taylor, a director of a literacy non-profit foundation, expressed that by reading daily to a child at home, a parent or caregiver can instill a lifelong love of reading in children. She shared that when children are read to in early childhood, they "*develop the understanding that books have meaning, and that books are important, and this really starts before the child even understands what a book is.*" This understanding that books have value and purpose is a leading

factor in reader identity development and fosters the development of *reader identity capital*, or the behaviors and practices that contribute to a strong reader identity (Côté & Schwartz, 2002). Further, insights from data analysis suggested that when parents and caregivers genuinely enjoyed reading to their children and saw this experience as pleasurable and a source of book joy, their children emulated this practice and initiated interest in reading on their own from an early age (Raban, 2022). Reading together at home with parents and caregivers provided a framework for children to develop an identity as a reader. As participant Amara shared:

Parents can help children develop a reader identity by reading to them at home, as they can speak life into their child. When I was a child, this experience helped me to think of myself as a reader, as a person who loves reading, as a person who appreciates reading, and to self-conceptualize who I was as a reader.

In addition to increasing children's knowledge of the value of reading in their lives, data analysis indicated that early childhood shared reading experiences that promoted bonding between children and their caregivers secured the most tender roots of a lifelong love of book joy.

Participant Evelyn noted that her daughter has shared a bedtime reading routine with her father since she was born. Overall, literacy advocates expressed that children viewed reading with their parents as a special bonding time that expands book joy and increases their closeness, as participant Daniel shared:

I know my daughter Emersyn would always ask: "*Daddy, can we read another book?*" I don't think she always *wanted* to read another book, but she knew that she would get to stay up longer, and spend time with me, and I never told her no.

These early reading experiences help children build emergent literacy skills and form the secure roots of children's reader identities (Canfield et al., 2020a).

Community Support for Reader Identity Development. Insights gained from interview responses to questions about how the community can support reader identity development in children included recommendations about school involvement, literacy leadership, impassioned advocacy, reading mentorships, and trusted partnerships that meet the unique needs of the community. When participants were asked about the aspirational goal of creating a joyful community reading culture that would encourage children's reader identity development, three leading influences emerged from the data analysis that were aligned with findings in the literature: Children must be provided with access to books, choice in book selection, and time to read independently and frequently outside of school, key social justice practices that support their reader identity development (Fisher & Frey, 2018; Mackey, 2022; Massey et al., 2021; Neuman, 2022).

Evidence analysis illuminated the paramount significance of relationships with literacy mentors, known as *book heroes* or *reading champions*, in emerging readers' lives. In one example, Rachel, a study participant in a director role in a literacy non-profit foundation that provides inclusive books to children, shared that her program relies on "*non-traditional literacy advocates*" within the community, such as sports coaches or local merchants, who embrace the principle of reading as integral to everyday life by modeling reading, exchanging book recommendations, and talking with children about the books they read. These interactions model the importance of reading by example and uphold the value of reading as a promising and life-affirming endeavor. Also, as participant Amber shared, some children may not have strong home support for their reader identity development due to barriers such as parental reading vulnerabilities, economic limitations, survival needs, and intergenerational influences that surround reading to children at home. In these circumstances in particular, community

relationships with *book heroes* and *reading champions* that provide literacy leadership to children are even more imperative for children to learn about the value of reading in their lives. As participant Zamira shared:

Seeing the adults they trust or admire reading within the community will help children see that reading is just a cultural norm, it is woven into the fabric of everyday life.

Seeing adults who read for pleasure conveys that reading can be a source of enjoyment.

Community Book Access Partnerships. When asked to share their thoughts about sustainable ways to build and sustain a community reading culture that supports reader identity development for children in economically disadvantaged communities, interviewees responded that no-cost book fairs could give children access to books and the opportunity to interact with other curious readers in social conversations around books. As participant Zamira expressed, “*Reading together is a huge part of creating a reading identity for a child, since it allows them to feel like they belong.*” As emerging book lovers build community with other children at community book fairs and local book distribution events, these literacy-centered interactions can nurture reader identity in ways that increase social connections and expand children’s knowledge about books.

In another promising recommendation, Zamira encouraged adults to model reading to children and to create “*book gardens*” in public parks so that books are available, visible, and part of the community’s recreational space. In this model, gardens of free books could be made available to enthusiastic young readers and their families in local playgrounds. To add to this concept, Rachel suggested that community literacy events that involve author visits or storytelling circles could “*bring people together across lines of difference*” and create space for social conversations around books. In this example, Zamira shared some of her innovative ideas:

I would like to hold some literacy events at parks, where kids could have an opportunity to read with other kids on a sunny day. Like an outdoor “book garden,” where it can have a café type of feel, and lots of diverse books and tables to sit down and read. Kids can be doing reading activities, and there could be a space for literacy-based play. Fun ways to get kids interested in reading more. Reading can promote a sense of *belonging* for kids, they can feel that they are a part of something more, a sense of community. Children understand the world through modeled behavior, right? Adults would also have to be included in these literacy events, and they must convey to children that reading in their community is valued, nurtured, and prioritized.

In addition, participant Justin, a middle school educator, suggested that “*community literacy programs could provide bookmobiles that visit children in local parks that look similar to ice cream trucks, yet when they pull up, they are filled with free children’s books.*” These bookmobiles could host joyful literacy ambassadors and travel from one community to the next to provide free books to children right in their own neighborhoods. Participant Lorraine suggested that community bookmobiles would offer choice in book selection to children and provide books that reflect a range of genres, series, and developmental levels. This literacy-centered initiative could increase access to books at no cost and improve proximity to books for children, thereby eliminating both the cost barrier and the transportation issue in book access and book ownership for children in economically disadvantaged communities.

In addition, “*Sunday Book Swaps*” that would take place amongst families in the neighborhood were identified as a recommendation by study participant Zamira as another no-cost way to expand book access and share book joy with children. Zamira also expressed that encouraging events that have previously loved books available to be “recycled” within the

community is another way to extend a book's life and redistribute book wealth amongst children in need of increased access to book ownership. Participant Evelyn shared that her community center hosts weekly book swaps where children can exchange books they have already read with their peers who have not yet read the same titles. Simone, an author of inclusive children's books and community literacy advocate, shared a similar experience when she expressed, "*Our community center has put in giant shelves where it's a free book trade, so people can just go in and swap books. This has done a lot for access to books!*"

According to the data analysis, community-based endeavors that support aspiring readers should encompass an "all-hands-on-deck" approach to access to books, with literacy leaders throughout the community modeling reading as an integral part of everyday life. Zamira expressed the crucial importance of modeling reading behaviors and practices for children, and suggested that this literacy leadership will improve a child's self-perception as a reader. Participant Evelyn addressed the importance of proximity in access to books and recommended that one way to achieve the goal of increased community involvement in emerging book explorers' lives is to place books in places where children frequently go with their caregivers, such as laundromats, bus stops, churches, and barbershops, "*so that we put the books right where the kids are, so they can access the books.*" The consensus from study contributors supported the premise that books should be in places "*where kids are kids.*" In this child-centered model, data analysis revealed that when books are in close proximity, children tend to read more, as access to books that are close at hand increases reading volume, motivation, and engagement.

Community Literacy Support for Parents and Caregivers. Study contributors recommended that community support for reading explorers should include opportunities for parents to be invited into the schools to learn about reading aloud to their children so that they

can provide supportive home literacy environments. Interview respondents recommended workshops or classes for caregivers to engage with books and their children and suggested that local schools and libraries build a community of readers to support each other in achieving their mutual goals. Participant Kendra noted that some parents may not have been read to when they were children, and some may feel insecure about their own reading limitations. In response to these barriers, data analysis identified the critical importance of the community to address parents' vulnerabilities as readers to increase their skills and confidence so that parents and caregivers can learn how to support their children in building their literacy skills (Bettencourt et al., 2020; Canfield et al., 2020b; Williams & Lerner, 2019). Data analysis of participants' responses to follow-up questions about supporting parents' vulnerabilities as readers suggested that encouraging parents to read to their children in their native language and/or advising them to look at illustrations together are instrumental ways to convey an invaluable principle in reader identity development, namely the understanding that reading has value.

In an observation regarding the exorbitant cost barrier to book ownership, participant Rachel shared, "*book ownership has become a luxury and a privilege for working families.*" Participant Daniel expressed that community-based literacy programs must recognize the urgent moral responsibility to get books into the hands of children whose lack of available family resources may restrict their access to book ownership when he shared, "*It is our responsibility to be sure that those folks are supported, since doing so will raise the tide for everyone.*" The data analysis indicated that each study participant recommended increasing community partnerships for curious book explorers, providing parental education, valuing the promise held by book ownership, and finding sustainable ways to "*level the playing field*" so that all children in every zip code can have access to the many wonders and magic of book joy.

Intentional support that meets the unique needs of residents who live in the communities served by book distribution endeavors emerged from data analysis as part of the essential infrastructure that provides the foundation to reader identity development. Participant Vandana, a pediatrician involved in a national book access program, shared her perspective, which aligns with the insightful work of the visionary thought leader Susan Neuman and her inclusive approach to community partnerships to eradicate *book deserts* (Neuman, 2022). Vandana shared her belief that community stakeholders should be the central voices in developing any community-based literacy endeavor. In Vandana's words:

They, you know, a lot of the people grew up here. They really are passionate. They really *care* about change in their community, and they *understand* their community, and I think that is so important for developing a reading culture that you know, honors the voices of their stakeholders in their community. They understand on a level that we never will. They also have that community pride. They have trusted community leaders who have built solid relationships who would have to be included in these endeavors.

Participant Alisha shared that since the New York City communities where her program provides books to children have been identified as *book deserts*, increasing access to free books at community book fairs is a luxury for working families who may be grappling with meeting their children's survival needs, such as providing them with food and shelter. As Alisha poignantly noted, "*hunger precludes books.*" She went on to share that parents raising children with limited resources are often faced with urgent survival needs that preclude them from purchasing books for their young readers. Participant Amber expressed that shared reading experiences may not be prioritized in homes where parents are "*doing all they can to survive.*" These study contributions highlighted how societal inequities such as food and housing

insecurity, resource and funding limitations, intergenerational poverty, vast income disparities, and parental reading vulnerabilities persist as multidimensional risk factors to the development of secure reader identities for children in economically disadvantaged communities (Canfield et al., 2020b; Williams & Lerner, 2019). To illustrate these challenges, participant Alisha concluded, *“If the choice is to put food on the table and keep a roof over their children’s heads or buy a new book, they are most likely going to choose the former, and understandably so.”* Overall, the influential roles of home support and community involvement were identified as key features in children’s reader identity development, with participants noting how hands-on and sustainable ways to enhance reading opportunities can achieve long-term and enduring change.

Finding Two

Access to book ownership and choice in book selection increase children’s reading volume and motivation to read, primary factors in reading engagement, an essential feature of reader identity development.

Phase one research findings revealed that increased access to book ownership at no cost and choice in book selection expanded children’s reading engagement by increasing their reading volume and improving their motivation to read. In phase two, the relationship between increased access and choice and expanded reading engagement was also identified from data analysis, as children experienced higher levels of reading volume and expanded motivation to read due to increased access to books and choice in book selection. This section is organized by evidence from phase one and phase two to support the finding of how access and choice increase children’s reading volume and motivation to read, thereby expanding their reading engagement.

Phase One Evidence. In addition to the increased motivation to read that results from access to book ownership and choice in book selection, access and choice were also identified in

phase one data as pivotal factors in the *volume* of books one reads, as Title I public school K-6 reading specialist Jade shared, “*When children have choice in book selection, they're going to be more invested in the process, and they will tend to read more.*” Further, participant Taylor expressed:

Children who own their own books that they have had the opportunity to choose have a better sense of their identity as a reader. They want to read more. They also have a stronger sense that they can excel more in school. They have more self-confidence.

This assertion aligns with findings by Allington and McGill-Franzen (2021) and Neuman and Moland (2019), who concluded that access to books, when paired with thoughtful choice and self-selection, leads to not only expanded reading volume in children, but also to increased reading achievement.

Further, findings in phase one aligned with Miller and Sharp’s (2018) conclusion that providing children with the opportunity to learn about their reading preferences and choose their own books leads to increased reading time and motivation to read. Participant Nova, a director with a national literacy non-profit foundation, shared that access to books and choice in book selection are especially critical for reluctant or resistant readers and described choice in book selection as a “*game changer*” for children who may not yet have discovered their reading preferences. Moreover, participant Simone advocated for time to be provided to young readers to learn about their own preferences, and shared that she views a resistant reader as someone who “*has just not found the right book yet.*” In an example of how false labeling practices can unjustly position emerging readers, Nova expressed that aspiring literacy learners are sometimes underestimated and viewed as “*struggling*” or “*at-risk*” in the classroom, when in fact they may have simply lacked opportunities to discover their personal source(s) of book joy.

In an insightful observation, participant Kendra expressed that choice in book selection may be an entirely new experience for children who lack access to book ownership. To address this quandary, she suggested asking children what kinds of books they like and talking with children in book conferences about varied genres to help curious young readers explore books and learn about their reading preferences. To support this goal, Kendra noted that she begins the school year with a brief survey for emerging book explorers about their reading preferences, which children update periodically throughout the year. To expand their knowledge of genres and series books, she encourages her students to share their reading preferences with peers, fostering discussions that help reluctant readers discover new books and develop their reader identities.

Kendra noted that limited access to books can hinder a child's ability to cultivate their individuality as a reader and develop their knowledge of preferences, and suggested, *“Maybe a child would read more books if they knew what types of books they like to read.”*

Overall, phase one participants agreed that intrinsic motivation to read exists when one is incentivized by internal reasons to choose books that are close to one's heart, rather than when one reads to fulfill external demands or expectations from parents or teachers. In alignment with the belief that identity formation is a consequence of exercising agency and defining preferences in all aspects of life, public school K-6 reading specialist Chantal shared that when children can build their reader identities by independently choosing what they ultimately read and engage with on their own, they begin to take ownership and define who they are as readers, *“as opposed to being told that this is something that you must absolutely do, by an external source.”*

Similarly, Jade expressed that if children are being asked to read 30 minutes a day, *“that reading should be from books of choice that suit each child's individual needs and personal interests.”*

This concept exemplifies the connection between choice and the experience of book joy, as when

a child reads purely to discover book joy, in the absence of any external expectations, this endeavor can transform a resistant reader into an avid reader for life (ILA, 2018).

Phase Two Evidence. In this study, self-motivated children who had access to books that they love to read and who were encouraged to follow their own interests and preferences (Konrad, 2023) demonstrated strong reading engagement. The enthusiastic book collectors who participated in phase two exemplified how choice in book selection can improve motivation and increase reading volume, two factors that expand reading engagement (Allington & McGill-Franzen, 2021; Harvey & Ward, 2017; Konrad, 2023; Mackey, 2022; Neuman, 2022). In addition, analysis from study insights illuminated that participants' love for reading and the book joy they experienced from reading books of choice resulted in increased frequency, volume, and engagement in reading, conveying the principle that the more enjoyable reading is, the more motivated children will be to read (Allington, 2014). Further, findings aligned with insights from Ortlieb and Shatz (2020) which highlight the connection between reader agency that exists when children self-select their own books and optimistic self-perceptions, both of which are imperative for reader identity development. Finally, a thorough analysis of the data revealed that children who perceive themselves as readers are more likely to engage with books on personal, aesthetic, and critical levels (Kucirkova & Cremin, 2020), thereby increasing their motivation to read.

Reading volume, a key factor in reading engagement, was consistently identified in the phase two data as a leading gain from choice in book selection, as children shared that they read more books and read more often as a result of expanded choice in book selection and the fulfillment experienced from owning their own books. Moreover, children's enthusiastic responses to the interview question about reading volume, *"Have you ever read a book that caused you to want to read more? What was it about that book that made you want to read*

more?" that were shared in the individual participant narratives were aligned with findings by Allington and McGill-Franzen (2021), Neuman and Knapczyk (2020), and Neuman and Moland (2019), who assert that reading volume, frequency, enjoyment, and engagement all increase in substantial ways when children are given access to books and choice in books to take home and build a personal book collection without a cost barrier. Access to books that provided children with book ownership resulted in increased reading volume by study participants.

In response to the interview question about books that increased her motivation to read more, Josie expressed that she enjoys having her bookshelf right next to her bed, *"so I can read my books every night,"* thereby connecting to proximity of books at home to increased reading volume. In another example, Jasmine explained that *Dancing in the Wings* (Allen, 2022) was a book that sparked her desire to read more, and revealed that after choosing this book from *Find Book Joy*, she read it every day after school, which highlighted how access to book ownership and choice in book selection can expand increased reading volume and motivation to read.

Reading volume and book joy increased for children when they were trusted to choose their own books to read. As Orion, a first grader, shared, *"when I choose the books I like to read, then I want to read more. I love my favorite books!"* Moreover, *Find Book Joy* participant Gabriele expressed that when she has an opportunity to choose the books she reads, *"I get more excited about reading!"* while third grader Josie shared that visits to book fairs hosted by the *Find Book Joy* program made her feel happy, since she *"gets to collect more books!"* In addition, Gabrielle was enamored by how the characters' shared love of books in *Stacey's Remarkable Books* (Abrams, 2023) fostered a close friendship, which in turn boosted her reading volume, motivation to read, and reading engagement. Child participants in this study all shared their intentions to *"read more"* when asked about their favorite *Find Book Joy* books, thereby

confirming that access to book ownership and choice in book selection resulted in increased reading volume and reading engagement. This aligns with the principle that curious young readers require exposure to a wide range of literature to fully engage them and support their reader identity development (Allington, 2012; Konrad, 2023). Finally, during the interviews, the new book collectors often spontaneously exclaimed that they intended to read their *Find Book Joy* books “*every night!*”

Analysis of evidence in phase two indicated that providing children with access to books that pertained to their personal interests and captivated their imaginations was proven to increase their motivation to read and expand their reading volume, key factors in reading engagement. The children’s reading experiences in this inquiry were consistent with Krashen’s (2004) work that defines the volume of reading, e.g., how much reading people do, as the most crucial factor in reading achievement and a leading factor in reader identity development.

Finding Three

Access to book ownership and choice in book selection transform reader identity development by fostering pride in book ownership, which increases book joy experiences and empowers children to create their own personally curated book collections that strengthen their self-perceptions as readers.

Pride in book ownership and the increased book joy experiences for children that resulted from owning their own book collections were identified as key factors across both phases of this study. In phase one, literacy advocates shared how children shared their enthusiastic expressions of book joy by children in their programs when they were provided with opportunities to own their own books. In phase two, the *Find Book Joy* recipients exuberantly conveyed the transformative power of book ownership in their lives. Further, data analysis in both phases

highlighted how developing their own self-selected home book collections strengthened children's self-perceptions as readers. Notably, insights from data analysis illuminated several instances where children were overjoyed from experiencing book ownership for the *very first time in their lives*, due to previous restrictions on access to books that resulted from societal inequities, funding restrictions, and family income limitations. This section includes evidence from phase one and phase two to support how expanded access to books and choice in book selection created pride in book ownership that increased book joy experiences, empowered children to build home book collections, and transformed how they saw themselves as readers, thereby redefining their self-perceptions as confident readers.

Phase One Evidence: Pride in Book Ownership Increases Book Joy Experiences. In response to the interview question about the role of book ownership for children in economically disadvantaged communities, study contributors responded enthusiastically in the following ways, “*it’s critically important,*” “*book ownership changes lives,*” and “*there is nothing more powerful than knowing that book belongs to you.*” In response to the interview prompt: “Tell me about a time when you saw the impact that *owning* a book had for a child,” Participant Jade shared her memorable observations about seeing her students receive books that they could keep for the first time:

When I announced to my students that they could actually *keep* their books, they had this look of amazement, and then they kept saying, “I get to keep it? It's *my* book? I don't have to give it back to *anyone*? I don't have to like, turn it in or give it back, it is just going to be *my* book?” This pride in book ownership was empowering for them. Then, when the books showed up, and this is something that I did not expect, as I handed them out, some of my students even *hugged* the books. It is that sense of pride. They have now

become the owner of a book. They know that they can keep the books. They started calling them “*my books.*” They are now a reader, writer, and thinker. That pride in book ownership just takes it to a different level.

In a similar observation of children who experienced pride in book ownership, participant Simone shared:

Seeing the sticker on the inside cover with “*This Book Belongs To*” and *their own name* on the first page of the book was an overwhelming source of joy for these kids. Their eyes just lit up when they knew they could keep the book. I can remember one child was just glowing when he found out that he could take his books home. I actually have chills right now, I am emotional, just thinking about it. They really developed a deep love for these books. This was a real turning point for them.

Study outcomes indicated that increased access to book ownership and choice in book selection are imperative for children to derive pure enjoyment from their reading experiences. This emotion, also known as book joy, is a key element in reader identity development. Chantal and Simone highlighted children’s pride in book ownership as a cause for joyful celebrations, recommending ideas such as “*literacy celebrations,*” “*big book parties,*” “*book giveaways,*” and “*book carnivals*” to enhance and honor book joy in the lives of enthusiastic young readers. According to the data analysis, recreational literacy events provide opportunities for enthusiastic book explorers to engage in social conversations around books and celebrate their reading engagement, thereby increasing the perception of reading as a fun and honorable pursuit. Insights from data analysis further suggested that book joy is limitless when children have the freedom to read books of their choice on their own terms, experiencing reading “*as an adventure*” rather than as a response to external expectations.

In contrast to the framework of reading a certain number of required pages for a school assignment or reading for a set number of minutes each night, study participant Rachel shared her approach to encouraging free-spirited book joy in avid readers and noted that she encourages children to see books as candy or popcorn, sources of pure joy and pleasure, when she noted, “*Books are like candy, books are like popcorn, like shove it in your mouth joy, like read it under the covers joy, like stay-up-all-night-reading kind of joy.*” In addition, book ownership and book joy can result in children’s increased confidence and improvement in their self-perceptions as readers, as Taylor conveyed:

Children who own their own books have a better sense of their identity as a reader, they have more of an understanding of *who they are* as a reader. They also have a stronger sense that they can excel more in school. They see themselves as readers.

According to the literacy advocates, book joy is inextricably linked to book ownership, as once children experience the security of owning their own books, they can feel free to explore a wide range of genres and series books without time constraints, external expectations, or cost restrictions. Participants noted that for many children, free book fairs may be the first time they have experienced the freedom and autonomy to develop their identities as readers. Finally, data analysis suggested that the expressions of book joy that result from book ownership can expand imaginations and increase possibilities for future travel adventures. Jade related a story of a third grader who had gained access and choice in free books from a community-based book access program who exclaimed, “*I never knew there were books on sharks!*” Participant Simone recounted a story about a child who saw illustrations of an island setting in one of her books about dolphins and clearly stated their intentions to “*go here to meet the dolphins someday.*”

Analysis of phase one data indicated that children who were provided with access to free books to choose and keep were filled with enthusiasm for reading and expressed the many exciting ways in which they would share their book joy with others, such as reading to a sibling, cousin, or pet, or telling their teacher in school all about their books about owls or unicorns. As Taylor expressed, *“I couldn’t believe the joy in the kids’ eyes when they understood that this was a book that they could keep, a book they could take home, a book they didn’t have to give back.”* Further, Amara, a study participant who is a pediatrician affiliated with a national book access program, shared her young patient’s pride in book ownership and his knowledge of his role as a book collector when he exclaimed, *“Now I have **five** books in my collection!”* The pure book joy that is rooted in book ownership, respondents conveyed, increased children’s enthusiastic motivation to read and inspired them to want to read more books.

Vandana shared that when providing children with access to books so that they can experience the many joys of book ownership, individual reading levels are less important in this context than encouraging book choice based individual interests and preferences:

When we provide that access, we want children to have the chance to individualize it, to help books feel accessible to everybody, to know that everybody can read. There's no right or wrong way to read. The more I have learned, the more I realize that we need more of that in this space, across the board. There's no wrong way to read it. Just it's fine, and whatever your level is, your level, that's fine. Today we are just here to read books.

The pride in book ownership that results from increased access to books as a source of pure book joy was identified by participants as a primary feature in reader identity development.

In addition, participants noted that pride in book ownership provided a sense of dignity to children living in economically disadvantaged communities. In response to interview questions

about the importance of book ownership, participants conveyed their vivid memories about times when children who had limited access to books finally received their very first book that they could keep as their own. Evidence analysis revealed that children responded to book ownership in ways that expressed pure joy and excitement. Sierra noted that every time she told a child that they could take their books home and keep them, “*their eyes just lit up.*” As participant Zamira related, “*When a book belongs to a child, and they can write their name in there for the first time, it is just immediate ownership and immediate joy. That ownership is so important.*”

Phase Two Evidence: Pride in Book Ownership Increases Book Joy Experiences.

Insights from data analysis in phase two clearly identified book ownership as a leading factor in children’s book joy experiences, as child participants enthusiastically shared their *Find Book Joy* book collections with the researcher and expressed their excitement to have books they could keep. Evidence that substantiates this finding is woven throughout the children’s narratives and conveys the children’s book joy in their own words.

Children in this study developed a strong sense of pride in owning books they had selected from the *Find Book Joy* collection. As indicated by the individual participant narratives, this pride led to increased reading volume and expanded reading engagement. When access and choice resulted in book ownership, the *Find Book Joy* book recipients eagerly anticipated reading their chosen books and noted how their reading volume increased each night. They were excited to show the researcher their home bookcases filled with *Find Book Joy* books and enthusiastically shared the contents of their personally-curated home libraries. When asked how they felt about keeping their chosen books, the children described emotions such as excitement, happiness, joy, and delight. These emotional experiences were aligned with the principle that suggests that when children have access to books and the opportunity for intentional self-

selection, they can build their own home libraries, which in turn strengthens their self-perceptions as readers (Allington & McGill-Franzen, 2021; Neuman & Moland, 2019).

Child participants expressed excitement and enthusiasm for reading their chosen books in ways that conveyed joy and contentment. Their levels of reading engagement with their *Find Book Joy* books were deeply immersive (Rosenblatt, 1995), with each child eagerly sharing their selected books and providing picture walks to support their connections. Jasmine connected with the protagonist in *Dancing in the Wings* (Allen, 2002) and Imani connected with Misty Copeland (Howden, 2015) and expressed that their reading encounters were sources of pure book joy that increased their motivation to read. Moreover, young readers viewed the characters in their stories as treasured friends, and expressed empathy and admiration for their experiences. Young readers spontaneously shared their connections to their inclusive books and the many ways in which they related to the characters. Josie expressed excitement for her home book collection and joyfully shared the contents of her bookcase with descriptions of each book. Orion and Charlotte often referenced their “*favorite books*” and shared their gratitude for having books at home that they could read every night. Cameron looked to his *Find Book Joy* books as sources of his future plans and goals as an artist, as he related to the main character who modeled resilience and optimism. Claudine’s fascination with the achievements of Mae Jemison was similar to Imani’s admiration for Misty Copeland, as they each viewed these accomplished woman as living examples of perseverance and determination. Overall, the exhilaration that the children experienced, as expressed in their book joy encounters, resulted in increased reading frequency, volume, and engagement, exemplifying the principle that the more enjoyable reading is, the more it will motivate a child to read (Allington, 2014).

Participants enthusiastically shared vivid details from each of their *Find Book Joy* inclusive books that illuminated their authentic connections and increased their reading engagement. In one example, Orion noted that the main character in *The Snowy Day* (Keats 1962), Peter, shared his enjoyment making snow angels and building snowmen. Moreover, participant Jasmine was elated to share her many similarities with the protagonist in *Dancing in the Wings* (Allen, 2002), as she felt a kinship with the character's fascination with ballet. Gabrielle's radiant smile conveyed her genuine connection to the protagonist's love of reading and book exploration in *Stacey's Remarkable Books* (Abrams, 2023). Gabrielle conveyed that she agreed with the main character when she shared that the adventures that can be found in books provide infinite opportunities to explore the wonders of the imagination. Additionally, Imani's pure excitement that resulted from identifying with the main character's interactions with her father in *My Daddy Rules the World* (Smith, 2012) illustrated how relatable connections enhanced her experience of book joy.

In addition to highlighting the close relationship between book joy and reading engagement, findings in phase two indicated that book ownership and book joy are highly correlated to reading volume, as children agreed that when they owned their own books that they could take home and keep, they *read more books*. Every child in this study expressed their firm intentions to read their *Find Book Joy* books every night. The abundant opportunities for identity alignment that their inclusive books provided to children ignited their increased motivation to read. Data analysis indicated that access to books and choice in book selection resulted in joyful, self-motivated, and independent reading experiences that built momentum for young readers. Reading books that they *want* to read and books that they *chose* to read imbued the children with a sense of agency and determination that could not be inspired by external mandates. Moreover,

the close bonds and joyful connections that the book recipients developed with the characters in their inclusive books conveyed their affinity for reading books that featured authentic representations of individuals with layered identities. These uplifting reading encounters exemplified the principle that justice and joy are intimately related (Vlach et al., 2023).

Phase One Evidence: Pride In Book Ownership Empowers Children to Create Their Own Personal Book Collections and Strengthens Their Self-Perceptions as Readers.

According to the evidence analysis, access to book ownership at no cost and choice in book selection opened doors for children to proudly identify as book collectors and to build their own home libraries to enhance their book joy experiences. Events such as free book fairs at local schools that provided increased access to book ownership offered children rich opportunities to expand their knowledge of preferences and develop individualized reading goals, two primary factors in reader identity development. Simone expressed her understanding that book ownership increases children's pride and self-perception as readers when she expressed, *"Once they own their own books, they're already identifying themselves as a reader. They're proud to show you their book collection."*

Data analysis revealed that when children built their own personal book collections as a result of increased access and choice, this accomplishment increased their reading volume, enhanced reading engagement, and provided new opportunities to experience book joy in their home environment. Participant Lorraine noted that during the pandemic while schools were closed, she would travel to schools, as she expressed, *"to line up free books in the parking lot, so that families could drive up and pick up books for children to have access to books at home."* Lorraine also shared information about her book access organization's partnerships with a local food pantry that provided meals to families in need. In this model, children's books were

provided to participants in the same parcels that held food, so that families could take part in building home libraries that fostered shared reading experiences at home. Similarly, participant Alisha noted that book ownership resulted in proximity to books at home when children received free books to keep at her foundation's no-cost book fairs. As Alisha expressed, "*Once they have those books in hand, they have immediate access to their own home library of books they have chosen to read. This book collection becomes their own personally curated home library.*"

Further, access to books that children own at home creates the proximity of books of choice, a principal factor that is required to expand reading volume. Moreover, this corresponds to research by Neuman (2022) and Neuman and Knapczyk (2020), which suggests that accessibility of books in the home environment increases the likelihood that children will read more books and explore their home libraries with parents as well as independently to gain valuable literacy experiences. To illustrate this concept, Jade expressed the connection between book ownership and children's self-perceptions as readers when she noted, "*Availability of having their own books to read at home, in close proximity, is an essential factor when children are building their reader identity development. This lets them see themselves as readers.*"

Participants Sierra and Kassandra concurred, and noted that book ownership provides young readers with multiple opportunities to read and re-read books at home, to *practice* the art of reading while affording children the luxury of time to develop their individual reader identities. Insights from data analysis reinforced that book ownership also provides children with more opportunities to read independently for pleasure and enjoyment. As Simone noted, "*reading books at home from a self-selected home library gives a child long-lasting, positive emotions.*" As Nadine shared:

Book ownership increases that access to books, the books are right there on the shelf in your own bedroom. This access allows a child to pull a favorite book off the shelf and just snuggle up with a good book and read it over and over again.

In alignment with this assertion by Nadine, Daniel suggested that reading and re-reading books that they own at home can help children's fluency and confidence improve, and can also increase their self-perceptions as readers. As participant Lorraine noted:

When children own their own books, they have the opportunity to experience the same books over and over again. This repetition not only increases their reading volume, but also increases their exposure to how stories work and how language works. It also gives young readers more time to explore books and use their reading strategies.

Further, participant Lorraine, a director at a local literacy non-profit foundation, added that confidence, a key feature of reader identity, continues to increase with each successive reading experience when children have books at home, as when a child knows they can read a book independently, "*they feel a sense of pride and excitement.*"

When entrusted with new books to take home and build their personal book collections, participant Kassandra expressed that she noticed how children in her class developed a sense of pride and responsibility to take care of their books that increased their self-esteem and improved their self-perceptions as readers. Moreover, participant Sierra suggested that book ownership can increase reading volume and inspire children to take good care of their books, "*When children own their own book, they may even read that book more, and take better care of it, since they know they own it and don't have to give it back.*" Participant Kassandra shared that when children in her class were given the opportunity to select books of choice to take home from a

free book fair at her school, “*they walked taller that day.*” In another connection to book fairs that foster book ownership, Sierra shared her experience:

The kids, they're so excited to take the book home, they'll tell me, “I'm going to take this home for my mommy to read this to me or my big sister or brother to read to me.” I mean they're just so eager to take the books home. When they hand them the book at the book fair and say “well, this is *your* book.” Their eyes just light up like, “Oh, wow, this is so cool, this is **my** book!”

Interview respondents indicated that when children knew that they could keep their own books and not have to return them, they experienced a level of excitement that transcended time and place. As participant Jade noted,

When a child knows that they have become the owner of a book, they develop a sense of pride. They know “*it's mine, I can keep it. I own this book.*” In many cases, this is the first time that a child has owned a book. This gives them a sense of “*this is real, this is my book, I am a reader.*” Book ownership that lets them build their own home libraries gives them a sense of leadership, and a sense of empowerment.

Participant Evelyn also shared her thoughts on the empowerment that accompanies book ownership for children and how this responsibility shapes their self-perceptions. As Evelyn noted, “*If you entrust a child with a book or a group of books, they learn the importance of books and reading. Knowing they are trusted with the responsibility to take care of their books is empowering for children.*” According to the data analysis, the responsibility that accompanies book ownership fosters a sense of empowerment, strengthening children's self-perceptions as capable, confident readers. Finally, participant Nova suggested that owning books at home, as early in life as possible, is vital to children's futures, and she noted, “*book ownership and a rich*

home book collection can change the trajectory of a child's life." In summary, data analysis indicated that a robust home book collection that is curated with books of choice can increase young book collectors' pride in book ownership, expand their book joy experiences, enhance their self-perceptions as readers, augment reading volume, and help them cultivate their individual reader identities (Neuman, 2022; Neuman & Moland, 2019).

Phase Two Evidence: Pride In Book Ownership Empowers Children to Create Their Own Personal Book Collections and Strengthens Their Self-Perceptions as Readers.

According to data analysis, access to book ownership and choice in book selection created pure book joy by opening doors for children to become book collectors as they built their own personally curated home book collections. In phase two, book ownership notably transformed how children saw themselves as readers, significantly enhancing their self-perceptions. The *Find Book Joy* book recipients shared many exuberant expressions of book joy about their home book collections and were exhilarated to share their bookcases and book displays with the researcher. Evidence analysis indicated that having access to home book collections allowed for more time for book exploration, which improved children's self-perceptions as readers. Child participants expressed deep pride in their personal book collections and articulated the many reasons why they chose the books they did. Young readers proudly self-identified as knowledgeable book collectors, as they viewed the interviews as rich opportunities to share every book they own from *Find Book Joy* with the researcher, providing summaries of events in plot development, describing characters, highlighting settings, and using the illustrations to support their responses to interview questions.

The high-spirited book joy that emerged from owning their own books from the *Find Book Joy* collection was clearly evident in the pride the children expressed in sharing each

book's notable qualities and articulating why each book was one of their treasured favorites. In one example of how book joy and book ownership connected to increase reading volume, Jasmine beamed as she described the protagonist in *Dancing in the Wings* (Allen, 2002), Sassy, in her own words as “*confident in her life, happy, excited, and proud,*” enthusiastically sharing that owning this favorite selection allowed her to “*read it at home, over and over again.*” In many instances, the phase two reading enthusiasts’ lively book joy experiences were the catalysts for increased reading volume and expanded motivation to read, as they eagerly expressed their intentions to read their *Find Book Joy* books every night. In addition, participant Gabrielle expressed that she intended to emulate the protagonist in *Stacey’s Remarkable Books* (Abrams, 2023), who took books to read with her to recess each day. Evidence analysis revealed that having books at home provided more time for book exploration that enhanced children’s self-perceptions as readers. Data assessment indicated that if access to books became a part of everyday life at home *and* at school, children perceived books and reading as more important.

Analysis of phase two data indicated that identifying as a *book collector* elicited a profound sense of book joy in children. Knowing that they had amassed enough books in their own home libraries to be viewed as a *book collector* resulted in noticeable boosts in their confidence and in their self-perceptions as readers. Notably, all eight participants responded to the final interview question—“*How does it feel to be a book collector?*”—with brilliant smiles and vibrant expressions of pride and excitement, appearing genuinely delighted to be asked this question. In response, the children expressed terms such as *good, great, happy, proud, and smart.* Josie, Gabrielle, Claudine, and Charlotte all noted that “*a book collector is someone who has a lot of books*” and connected the volume of books with reader identity capital. Identifying as a person who owns and collects books was viewed as an admirable identity by the *Find Book Joy*

book recipients. Finally, data analysis demonstrated that children conveyed their understandings that possessing a good number of books was a source of pride, joy, and accomplishment. Findings indicated that there was a distinct connection between book ownership and book joy that came to life in the children's relationships to their *Find Book Joy* collections.

Since self-perception as a reader is crucial for developing confidence and belief in one's ability to become a skilled reader, being recognized as a *book collector* led the child participants to fully embrace that identity, resulting in pure book joy. This outcome aligns with findings by Luttrell and Parker (2001), who assert that readers' self-perceptions are central to the choices and decisions they make about reading, core influences in their reader identity development. The expressive qualities of pride, confidence, and trust played key roles in the child participants' abilities to view themselves as *book collectors* and, consequently, as capable readers. This book joy was further evidenced in the excitement expressed by the *Find Book Joy* recipients as they confidently shared their home book collections with the researcher.

Data analysis indicated that participants Orion, Imani, Jasmine, and Claudine shared personal connections to their book collections that revealed strong relatable bonds. The pride in book ownership that was expressed by the child participants increased their confidence, as their book collections strengthened their self-perceptions as readers. According to Konrad (2023), allowing children the autonomy to select their own books and experience book joy plays a crucial role in shaping a resourceful reader identity while fostering a strong self-perception as a confident reader. Cameron and Gabrielle noted that they enjoyed reading books at home from their book collections with their mothers before they went to sleep each night, and Orion and Imani conveyed that they shared reading time at home with their fathers. Moreover, Charlotte, Imani, and Josie shared that being book collectors made them feel "happy," and noted that they

read their *Find Book Joy* books at home every night. Evidence analysis from both phases of this study supported Neuman's (2022) findings which highlight that a personally curated home book collection based on children's choices can foster pride in book ownership, enhance their self-perception as readers, encourage them to see themselves as book collectors, and contribute to the development of their reader identities.

Interpretation of data analysis suggested that children's pride in book ownership led to increased reading engagement and expanded reading volume. Their personal experiences as book collectors led the children to eagerly recount joyful stories about their chosen books, as they enthusiastically shared the contents of their home book collections. When asked how they felt about keeping their chosen books from *Find Book Joy*, participants described emotions such as excitement, surprise, happiness, and joy. When asked how it felt to be a *book collector*, Josie responded that it felt "*exciting*," and ran over to her well-stocked bookcase to share each title with the researcher. In similar experiences, both Gabrielle and Orion described their book collections as "*libraries in their homes*," as they enthusiastically conveyed pure joy in book ownership and in their identities as book collectors. Gabrielle observed that just as the children in one of her books had a bookcase filled with picture books and early readers in their classroom, she also has a bookcase in her bedroom. Imani happily shared that she has so many books at home that each day she has a new favorite book. Charlotte noted that she likes to read her favorite selections at home more than once. In addition, Jasmine expressed sheer delight that book ownership has allowed her to return to reading *Dancing in the Wings* (Allen, 2002) and *Parker Shines On: Another Extraordinary Moment* (Curry, 2020) every night, "*I can read these books as many times as I want to read them, I can, since they're mine.*" These personal book joy experiences were aligned with the principle that asserts when children have access to books and

the opportunity for thoughtful self-selection, they can build their own personally curated home libraries and read more at home, leading factors in reading achievement (Allington & McGill-Franzen, 2021; Neuman & Moland, 2019).

Finding Four

Access to book ownership and choice in book selection transform reader identity development by providing children opportunities to develop their individuality as readers through (1) exercising agency and autonomy in book selection, (2) cultivating their personal interests, and (3) identifying their reading preferences, including *what, when, where, and why* they read.

Individuality as a reader emerged as a key finding that resulted from increased access to book ownership and choice in book selection. This section examines the three primary ways that children's individuality as readers was developed by reading inclusive books of choice that were provided at no cost. This individuality was enhanced by children exercising agency to make autonomous decisions about their own books without external expectations, which fostered their confidence and self-perceptions as readers. In addition, opportunities to explore a wide range of free books of choice allowed young readers to cultivate their personal interests and discover selections that were aligned with their particular areas of fascination. Finally, across both phases of this study, children demonstrated clear inclinations for *what, when, where, and why* they read books, with a keen focus on defining their reading purpose(s).

Study outcomes across both phases indicated that when children were provided with equitable access to book ownership, it allowed them to exercise agency and discover their personal preferences. Access to book selections that spanned a wide ranges of genres and choice in book selection offered young readers rich opportunities to find books that explored their

personal interests. As a result of this informative process of discovery, children expanded their knowledge of preferences and shaped their individuality as readers.

Choice in book selection that stems from increased access to books results in expanded agency and independence for young reader, a primary finding in the exploration of how access and choice transform reader identity development for children in economically disadvantaged communities. Literacy advocates emphasized that when children were given the opportunity and the trust to choose their own books, they exhibited increased enthusiasm and motivation to read. This aligns with Mackey's (2022) assertion that when children are provided with the freedom and trust to choose their own books, this autonomy fosters a literacy-centered environment in which book joy and reading engagement can thrive. Data analysis in phase one indicated the significant impact that agency and autonomy in book selection can have on children's reading engagement. Insights from data analysis in phase two mirrored these insights, and revealed the prominent role of autonomous choice in book selection in reader identity development, most notably the importance of agency and choice in inspiring children to want to read more books. Moreover, study outcomes across both phases of this study indicated that access to books opens doors to choice in book selection for young readers living in economically disadvantaged communities who may rarely, if ever, experience opportunities for agency and choice in their day-to-day lives (Neuman, 2022).

Finally, while preferences in one's individuality as a reader pertain first to the subject matter and/or genre of *what* young readers choose to read, based on personal interests and lived experiences, analysis of study outcomes suggested that preferences as reader also connect to the *when*, *where*, and *why* children read. Choices that children make in the context of reading about their preferred settings and purposes for reading play a significant role in developing their

individuality as a reader. Further, *when* and *where* children read—whether in quiet corners of their homes in the evening, during after-school book clubs in school, or on weekends in outdoor spaces— influenced their individuality as readers in ways that further contextualized their reader identities. Finally, understanding *why* children read is crucial to defining their *reading purpose*, a concept that will be discussed further in this chapter. Access to book ownership and choice in book selection are prerequisites to how children develop their individuality as readers, including the *what*, *where*, *when*, and *why* children read.

Phase One Evidence: Individuality as a Reader: Exercising Agency and Autonomy

in Book Selection. Phase one findings aligned with Neuman's (2022) conclusion that providing children in economic need with access to a wide selection of books to read accompanied by the trust and autonomy to choose their own books allowed for a sense of agency and freedom that may not exist in other facets of their lives. As Vandana, a pediatrician affiliated with a national book access initiative shared, "*Choice is everything.*" When asked about the role of choice in book selection in reader identity development, Amber, a K-6 literacy specialist in a public school in an extremely impoverished community in the rural South, expressed, "*Choice is essential for reading engagement.*" Participant Kassandra connected choice to reading volume and shared, "*when children are given choice in selecting their own books, they are more invested in the reading process, and they will tend to read more.*" Further, Amber shared that when a child is experiencing housing instability and food insecurity, having the ability to choose and keep their own books is an invaluable opportunity to manage uncertainty, develop a sense of stability, mitigate adverse circumstances, and experience book joy.

Insights from the data analysis suggested that the agency and autonomy that children exercise when given a choice in book selection were empowering for emerging literacy

explorers. Evidence analysis indicated that granting children autonomy in book selection increased both their reading time and the frequency of their reading experiences. Participant Daniel described the confidence and sense of agency that children gained from making independent decisions about books as “*powerful*.” Participant Amara shared the connection between choice, motivation, and reading volume when she noted, “*When a child finds the right book, it can spark something for them; it can spark curiosity and a desire to read more.*” Further, as participant Jade expressed, “*Once they can choose their own books, and they have that spark, that joy, they become more engaged readers.*”

The agency that results from access and choice was viewed by the literacy advocates in phase one as imperative to nurturing children’s self-perceptions as readers. Study participants shared their impressions of how individuality as a reader is shaped by providing children with opportunities to choose books freely from a range of genres to build their own home book collections. Moreover, participant Zamira shared her childhood reading experiences and noted that her individuality as a reader was defined by choice, as it allowed her to have autonomy and independence in her reading journey:

Even early on, I somehow knew how I wanted to experience reading, right? That allowed me to say “*I like this type of book. I like this genre of books. I’m excited to hear these types of stories.*” These early experiences with choice gave me ownership of my reading experience, and the agency and choice to determine the books that I wanted to read.

As study participant Nadine shared:

When a child has trust to select books of choice, primarily there's agency, right there, there's the ability to make your own decisions, to have autonomy, even at a young age, and to express what your interests are, right, and to find sort of reflections of things that

you want to learn more about, or experiences that you want that you've had, that you want to also have a reflection of, or perhaps you want to learn more about. I think it actually increases a child's love of reading, to have a choice to read books about their preferences, as well as their ability to read, and their confidence in reading, and how they think about themselves as readers. That knowledge of preferences informs their self-perceptions as readers. I think all of that is crucial to reader identity development.

In summary, the vital role of choice in defining one's individuality as a reader was identified by the literacy advocates as an essential factor in reader identity development, as choice results in increased reading volume and motivation to read and expanded reading engagement.

Phase Two Evidence: Individuality as a Reader: Exercising Agency and Autonomy

in Book Selection. Phase two data analysis provided valuable insights on the instrumental roles of access to book ownership and choice in book selection in shaping children's agency and autonomy, key factors in reader identity development. The examination of the evidence suggested that when children had the access, trust, freedom, and autonomy to choose books on topics such as astronomy, ballet, giraffes, cultural exploration, or musical instruments, this self-selection fostered advanced decision-making strategies and increased children's intrinsic motivation to read more books (Konrad, 2023). Notably, participant Charlotte expressed that she only reads a book more than once if it is a book that she herself has chosen, thereby conveying the connection between choice and reading volume. Charlotte noted that she "*likes to make the decisions*" about the books she reads. Further, participant Orion expressed the value in autonomy in book selection when he shared that the freedom to select his own books provided him with agency over his reading decisions, and expressed, "*I love to choose my own books. When I choose my books, I read more.*" Autonomy and agency in decision making seemed to propel

children towards more independence in their reading choices, as their actions and choices provided a pathway to explore self-discovery and identity formation (Wisneski & Reifel, 2012).

Child participants revealed a renewed sense of confidence and independence as readers when they were afforded the ability to choose their own books and reach autonomous decisions about the books they read. As participant Josie expressed, in her impromptu discussion about banned books, *“It’s not them who is making the choice; it’s you. You can choose what you want to read. It’s your decision.”* Further, a thorough analysis of the data indicated that children who were empowered to have the responsibility to self-select their books gained confidence in their reading abilities and viewed themselves as more capable, more independent readers, thereby strengthening their self-perceptions. To illustrate this finding, Jasmine and Orion expressed that their agency in choosing their own books led them to focus on reading their *“favorite books,”* with the autonomy they had in the selection process acting as the catalyst for reading more books. The agency and autonomy children experienced by self-selecting their own reading materials sparked their intrinsic motivation to read, offering an alternative to the external expectations of reading mandates. This intrinsic motivation not only led to increased reading volume among the child participants, but also empowered them to explore their individual purposes as self-driven decisions. According to the evidence analysis, this freedom buoyed young readers’ self-confidence, and when coupled with their strengthened self-perceptions as readers, fostered a sense of accomplishment. In summary, exercising agency in book selection helped children recognize the significance of their reading choices, improving their self-perceptions and empowering them to develop nuanced individuality as readers.

Phase One Evidence: Exploring Individuality as a Reader by Cultivating Personal Interests and Reading Preferences. Early on in life, emergent literacy learners eagerly

demonstrate their affinity for favorite interests, as most children who are read to at home by parents and caregivers have a beloved bedtime story about their chosen topic that is requested each night. Participant Kassandra, a K-6 literacy specialist and clinical professor who specializes in the evaluation and treatment of speech and language disorders, noted that whether it is trains, rocket ships, dinosaurs, sharks, unicorns, butterflies, the moon, or musical instruments, children develop a love for certain subjects early on in life that keep them enthralled during bedtime stories. Participant Sierra noted that children often have a favorite book on their shelf about a preferred subject that they enjoy reading about, and will want to be read this book more than others. Participant Taylor connected these personal interests to reader identity development, and shared, *“The moment that child can pull that favorite book off the shelf and ask for it to be read to them, they’re going to have that reader identity.”*

When asked about the leading factors that contribute to a child building an identity as a reader, analysis of data insights from the literacy advocates identified that books that pertain to one’s personal interests feature prominently in reader identity development. Pediatricians Amara and Vandana, both affiliated with national book access and distribution programs, agreed that providing children with books that relate to their personal sources of fascination, such as sharks or butterflies, has been proven to increase children’s motivation to read and, in turn, expand their reading volume. Konrad (2023) concurs and asserts that when children can access books they love to read—books that they have *chosen themselves*—about topics that they find captivating, they are more motivated to read and, consequently, develop a more multifaceted reader identity. Access to books and choice in book selection provide increased opportunities for children to learn about their favorite subjects and to find books that explore these sources of captivation.

Participant Rachel shared her perspective on how increased exposure that results from access to many different genres at no cost can foster reader identity development in young book collectors by helping them to build knowledge of personal preferences and opening children's minds to the literary landscape: *"Build exposure to as many different types of books as possible, for children to create their own understanding of how their individual literacy journeys can be shaped."* Moreover, study participants agreed that the ability to exercise choice in book selection based on individual interests increases reading volume and expands motivation to read in pivotal ways that contribute to reader identity development.

Participant Alisha shared that her organization holds quarterly free book shopping events for children in economically disadvantaged communities to foster book ownership. She described these literacy-centered book shopping events as similar to visiting a free bookstore:

It's a similar to a Scholastic book fair, but it's completely free for the children that we're serving. These book shopping events build exposure for children to all different types of genres and allow children to discover topics and interests that they are passionate about, so they learn how to self-identify their preferences. They get to see chapter books and poetry books and graphic novels. Then they know which types of books they will gravitate towards at the next free book fair."

Finally, as community literacy program director and founder Sierra shared:

Choice can help children develop preferences, as then they really get to learn what types of books they enjoy reading. Do they like mystery? Do they like fiction? Do they like historical fiction? Having that choice builds their identity as a reader.

Phase one analysis highlighted that when choice, agency, and decision making in book selection are provided to children, these practices nurture the development of their individual preferences

as a reader and foster reader identity development. This process of self-discovery deepens each child's individuality as a reader by affirming their personal interests and giving them more opportunities to read about these sources of fascination.

Phase Two Evidence: Exploring Individuality as a Reader by Cultivating Personal Interests and Reading Preferences. Insights from phase two data analysis further elucidated how access to book ownership and choice in book selection nurture a child's individuality as a reader by allowing them to explore various genres, discover series books, develop personal interests, and shape their reading preferences. These principles correspond with Hall's (2012) findings on reader identity development that suggest that when young book collectors choose their own books to read based on their personal interests and reading preferences, they exercise agency and make important decisions that are instrumental in shaping their individual reader identities.

In phase two of this study, the *Find Book Joy* book recipients expressed their fervent interests in reading different genres and series books and books by different authors, and shared how they prefer to engage with texts in unique ways that defined their individuality and fostered reader identity development. Josie, Claudine, and Charlotte conveyed their penchant for series books as a source of motivation to read more, as they connected with the characters and looked forward to reading about their next adventures. Josie and Charlotte expressed that they prefer to read fiction to expand their imaginations and be entertained, while Claudine and Cameron shared that they found non-fiction and informational texts such as biographies and books about the natural world to be the most intriguing books to read to acquire new knowledge. In addition, child participants expressed a distinct preference for certain authors that prompted them to read several books by the same author and sharing connections between texts.

Every child participant expressed that they had “*favorite books*” that propelled them to read more and conveyed in their own words that being able to choose their own books was a leading factor in defining their individuality as a reader. Children in this study chose books from the *Find Book Joy* collection based on their unique personal interests in astronomy, ballet, dinosaurs, gymnastics, sharks, musical instruments and more, reflecting their nuanced individuality as readers. Young readers’ preferences and their reasons for these decisions varied widely, ranging from books about astronomy and sharks to those featuring royalty and aristocrats, as well as books that highlighted characters’ love of books and reading. Children visited the *Find Book Joy* collection with their personal interests in mind, and often requested books to suit their topics of fascination. Child participants experienced pure book joy when they encountered books that aligned with their requests, with many expressing the intention to read more extensively on their chosen topics. Some enthusiastic young book lovers excitedly expressed their intentions to take their books to sleep with them at night and to “*tuck them under the pillow.*” The customized home book collections that emerged from children’s distinct choices in book selection fostered their motivation to read and expanded their reading engagement.

First grader Orion expressed a strong interest in books that feature royalty and crowns, as he demonstrated a fascination with aristocracy and tales of nobility. Gabrielle, an emergent first grade reader, shared that she was captivated by books that focus on the magic and promise of reading books. Imani shared that she was enamored by books about princesses and Barbies, since she “*knows a lot about Barbies!*” and noted that she has a book from *Find Book Joy* that tells the story of Barbie as a veterinarian, a woman of color. Charlotte, a second grader, shared that she is enthralled by reading adventure stories about fairies who have special powers, such the *Rainbow Magic* (Meadows, 2003) series, as these selections engage her imagination.

In addition, Cameron's book exploration included requests for books on action-packed, fast-paced topics, such as action figures, superheroes, dinosaurs, and sharks. He expressed his fervent interest in learning more about characters who have "*super-human strength*" and abilities. Josie favored books about characters using their imaginations and shared that she looks for books with culturally representative characters. Jasmine, a fourth grade gymnast, conveyed her passion for reading books about ballet and gymnastics, as she identified with the characters in these stories based on her fondness for these disciplines. Finally, Claudine, a fifth grader, shared her preferences for reading historical fiction and biographies about real-life figures, as she enjoys learning about individuals who overcame adversity. Child participants shared that they often learned more about new favorite topics to read about from attending the *Find Book Joy* book fairs at their schools. Access to books and choice in book selection resulted in young book lovers expanding their knowledge of genres as well as developing keen interests in a wide range of subjects. Each child's motivation to read was enhanced by their access to read books of choice that featured their personal interests and increased their reading engagement.

Phase One Evidence: Individuality as a Reader—The *What, When, Where, and Why*

Children Read. The *what, when, where, and why* children read are deeply personal decisions that are instrumental to one's individuality as a reader and are key to reader identity development. As participant Rachel shared, "*when children develop preferences in where and when and why to read by having choice, they have a stronger sense of their identity as a reader.*"

In addition, participant Nova expressed:

When children have access to books of choice and can demonstrate their personal

preferences about what they read and why, these decisions change their mindset about reading and shifts their own perceptions of themselves. They begin to demonstrate the behaviors and habits of a reader.”

These responses from literacy advocates in phase one highlight the importance of reading preferences in defining one’s individuality as a reader and the importance of self-discovery in reader identity development.

According to the data analysis, reading for pleasure and reading outdoors in nature can increase young readers’ peace of mind. Participant Nadine shared an indelible childhood memory that focused on *where* children read:

When I was a child, we would rent a friend's cabin in Maine, and we had no TV. It was only radio and books, and I have the most vivid and warmest memories of sitting in that cabin or sitting by the lake, or sitting in the hammock and reading books, and just the sense of just like being in nature, smelling this fresh water, you know, hearing these birds, hearing the loons, and reading, and feeling like this is the life, right? Like, this is the way life should be lived.

Participants in phase one also shared how children can read with parents or siblings on vacation or outdoors in nature, and noted that parent-child bonding experiences can take place in various locations. In addition, data analysis revealed that literacy advocates often placed books for children to read in informal venues, such as the laundromat or the local park, in hopes that providing a more options for *where* children read would result in children reading more books.

Insights from data analysis with literacy advocates illustrated many stories about lively young readers and their parents exchanging thoughts and ideas about books they read together in informal settings in the community, such as at the bus stop or the grocery store. These social

interactions increased children's understandings of the *when, where, and why* people read and expanded their reading opportunities. In addition, analysis of interview data indicated that reading in informal settings helped expand children's understanding of the value of reading as an integral part of everyday life. This finding is aligned with research by Hudson (2016) who observed that in these informal settings, young book explorers can engage in social interactions with peers around books, encouraging interest in reading and insights into each other's reading preferences. Simone shared fun ways to offer young readers flexibility in *when* and *where* they read, and encouraged parents to keep children's books in their cars, take them on road trips, and to the local park. As Simone expressed:

Keep books with you in the car and take books on road trips. This way, your children will learn that reading in informal settings is a part of your family culture, just a part of everyday life. Books may even give your children new opportunities to engage with someone with whom they have never spoken. This is how reading and books can help children build new relationships in their community.

Further, phase one outcomes suggested that reading together in the home environment fostered children's perceptions of reading as a top priority their daily lives. Participant Alisha noted that having access to books at home provides proximity of placement that creates more opportunities for children and their parents to engage in home reading routines. This assertion aligned with findings by Neuman (2022) that concluded children interact most with learning activities that provide proximity of placement. Alisha also shared that reading books with parents, siblings, and extended family in a supportive home literacy environment provides the context for children to connect reading to close relationships and provides a safe place for them to explore their emerging reader identities. Moreover, participant Rachel recommended placing

books in every room in the home, so that children have access to reading opportunities that are close at hand. As Rachel noted, “*The availability of books that children can explore at home builds their knowledge and their curiosity. Reading at home extends the idea that books are not just for school; books are part of real life.*” Finally, insights indicated that reading at home with parents and caregivers instills in children the keen understanding that reading has value, a primary factor in reader identity development.

Finally, *why* children read, defined here as their reading purpose, encompasses the many unique and highly individualized reasons why children open books to read and is the focus of the next finding that resulted from data analysis. According to the evidence analysis in phase one, children read for a range of motives and intentions, including reading for fun, escape, or enjoyment. As participant Kendra expressed, “*Reading is a gateway that takes you to a different world.*” Findings indicated that children also read to gain new knowledge and acquire new skills, such as reading to learn a new language or reading to learn how to play a musical instrument. Evidence analysis demonstrated that children also read to gain perspective and develop empathy for characters who encounter and overcome adversity and hardship. The concept of reading as a method of opening doors to possibilities and opportunities for future achievement was noted by Nova and Nadine as primary reasons why children read, most notably for children living and learning in communities of economic need. Participant Jade conveyed how for some children, books are their only lens to what *can be* beyond their current existence:

Once they see books and characters who look like them who achieve their goals, they feel that if they can do it, I can, too. This experience opens up the horizons of their minds to the possibilities that could be, and these kinds of books make them want to read more.

Finally, participant Justin shared that “*Every time you open a book, it is an adventure.*” while Nadine concurred, and expressed that “*books are a way to travel without leaving home.*” These various reasons to explore a new book provided children with the opportunity to choose their reading purpose as a form of self-expression as they defined their individuality as readers.

In summary, evidence analysis from phase one about the *why* children read indicated that children read to improve as readers, read for enjoyment and entertainment, read to gain new knowledge or information, read to escape, read to explore new perspectives, and/or read to build social and emotional skills, such as empathy for characters. Moreover, phase one findings indicated that children also read to expand their imaginations. In these discussions, evidence analysis revealed that individuality as reader includes the *why* children read, aligned with reading purpose—decisions that are quite nuanced and individualized. In considering these many reasons *why* children read, it is important to recognize that no single reading purpose defines an individual reader, as these purposes naturally shift over time, much like a child’s ever-evolving reader identity continues to develop across the lifespan (Bucholtz & Hall, 2005).

Phase Two Evidence: Individuality as a Reader—The *What, When, Where, and Why*

Children Read. Phase two data analysis uncovered the many interpretations of how children’s discoveries about their personal preferences defined their individuality as readers. The *Find Book Joy* book recipients reported that they each preferred to read at different times, in varied locations, and for personalized reasons, as outlined in more detail in the discussion about reading purpose. In phase two, the *what, when, where, and why* children read emerged from the data analysis as definitive qualities in a child’s individuality as a reader, as the child participants’ responses to the interview questions and follow-up questions about reading purpose were nuanced, layered, and reliant on each child’s individual preferences.

According to the data analysis, young readers in this study were motivated to read more by learning about the many choices for *what* children read, as they explored a variety of genres such as biographies, poetry anthologies, historical fiction, and informational texts. In addition, participants in phase two expressed interest in STEAM (science, technology, engineering, arts, and math) books and made connections to subjects that they were learning about in school. Notably, picture books, fairy tales, and folktales rounded out the many options of books that children chose as their preferences from the *Find Book Joy* collection. Data analysis revealed that the exposure to a variety of genres that resulted from expanded access to book ownership and choice in book selection due to their enrollment in the *Find Book Joy* program enriched children's reading experiences, broadened their knowledge about books, enhanced their understandings of genres, and helped them discover their reading preferences.

Evidence analysis about children's preferences on *when* and *where* to read indicated that these decisions varied by developmental stage. First graders Orion, Imani, and Gabrielle and second grader Charlotte shared their book joy about reading with their parents before bedtime each night. Imani noted that she reads with her father before she goes to sleep each night, and that these reading experiences started from the time she was born. Orion also noted that his father reads to him before bedtime, and he uses silly voices for each character. While the younger child participants in the primary grades expressed that they prefer to read at home, with parents, and at bedtime, children in the intermediate grades shared that they like to read in book clubs or in literature circles at school. Josie, a third grader, expressed her preference to "*join book groups and reading programs*" at her after-school learning center, while fourth grader Jasmine noted that she prefers to read her *Find Book Joy* books independently in a quiet space at home after school each day. Finally, Claudine, a fifth grader, shared her preference to read at home as well

as during the *Find Book Joy* reading events that take place in her after-school program. Claudine also noted that she takes books with her to read on weekend trips and summer vacations. Overall, access to books and choice in book selection empowered young readers in this study to take ownership of their reading behaviors and practices. The agency and autonomy that resulted from the children's participation in the *Find Book Joy* program helped young readers to shape their individuality as readers while increasing their self-perceptions.

Reading purpose in phase two, also described as the *why* children read, encompassed a vibrant spectrum of reasons why children chose the books they selected from *Find Book Joy*. As outlined in the findings on reading purpose, some children expressed that they read to learn to read or to improve as readers and to demonstrate strategies in decoding or comprehension, while others shared that they engaged with books for entertainment and enjoyment, including the opportunity to expand their imaginations. In addition, other avid readers shared that they read to acquire new knowledge or gain new information, while their peers read inclusive books to expand their social-emotional skills, such as developing empathy for characters. First graders Gabrielle and Imani and second grader Charlotte noted that they read to improve as readers, as they expressed their understandings of decoding skills and word solving strategies. Imani also noted her interest in learning new information from reading books and expressed empathy for characters who faced discrimination, a purpose for reading that nurtured her social and emotional skills. Gabrielle and Imani shared the viewpoint that reading makes a person smarter. Cameron, also a first grader, shared his interests in reading books to acquire new knowledge, such as how to improve as an illustrator or how to play a strategic game more effectively. First grader Orion and second grader Charlotte expressed their enjoyment about reading books that featured clever stories and used humor to advance the narrative. Josie, a third grader, noted that she likes to read

books that provide opportunities to expand her imagination and expressed a proclivity for inclusive books that feature diverse characters and lived experiences. Fourth grader Jasmine shared her book joy for reading stories that feature characters with whom she felt relatable bonds and encountered similar life experiences. Finally, Claudine noted her strong interest in biographies, most notably about women of color, and shared her ability to connect these remarkable life stories across disciplines in the curriculum.

Finally, evidence analysis across both phases of this study revealed that while some children enjoy reading informational texts to learn more about the natural world or historical events, they may prefer to read more on the weekends rather than after school or at home before bedtime. Alternatively, some children may enjoy reading series books or mysteries with a parent or caregiver while still others may discover the pure book joy that results from reading books about their personal interests in after-school book clubs that provide opportunities to engage in social conversations around books with their peers. Each one of these distinct reading purposes, or reasons for *why* children read, demonstrates that individuality as a reader is deeply personal and provides the spark that ignites reading motivation for each child as a singular blueprint for reader identity development that is as unique as each child's fingerprint.

Finding Five

Access to book ownership and choice in book selection center children's voices in their reading decisions, fostering increased agency and independence as they define and pursue their individualized purposes for reading, such as:

- (1) reading to learn to read or reading to improve as a reader, including the use of strategies;
- (2) reading for entertainment and enjoyment, including the expansion of the imagination;

(3) reading to acquire new knowledge or to gain information; and

(4) reading to develop or expand social-emotional skills.

Insights from phase two data suggest that access to book ownership and choice in book selection expanded children's purposes for reading, and revealed that these purposes were as unique as each child in this study. Since the fifth finding focuses on centering children's voices in their reading decisions, it is a finding that was exclusive to phase two data.

Evidence analysis identified that reading purpose encompassed reading to learn to read or to improve as a reader, including to demonstrate strategies to decode and comprehend; reading for entertainment and enjoyment, including to expand one's imagination; reading to acquire new knowledge or gain information; and reading for social-emotional reasons, such as to develop empathy for characters. Notably, reading purpose is closely connected to the value one places on reading (Hall, 2012, 2016; Harvey & Ward, 2017; Konrad, 2023; Mackey, 2022; Neuman, 2017, 2022), a key factor in reader identity development, as once children develop a keen understanding of the many purposes for reading, they begin to grasp the vital importance of reading in their lives. This guiding principle was evidenced throughout the child participant interview transcripts as children expressed their individuality as readers and shared reasons for their reading decisions.

Reading Purpose: Reading to Improve as a Reader. Evidence analysis indicated that child participants had developed a firm understanding of how reading more books (reading volume) and reading more often (reading frequency) can improve one's abilities as a reader. Gabrielle expressed that reading books helped her to learn how to "*sound out words*" and "*learn new words*," and Charlotte shared that reading books has helped her "*become a better reader*," noting that her reading improved when she "*read slowly and took [her] time*." Imani shared that

she liked to read books “*to learn facts that I never knew before*,” and Cameron also expressed his interest in informational texts to learn about how to improve his artistic skills. First graders Imani and Gabrielle connected reading more to “*becoming smarter*.” Data analysis revealed that the goals of reading improvement evolved across developmental stages. Reading to improve as a reader in ways that suggested knowledge of decoding skills was reflected in the first and second graders’ narratives, whereas Jasmine, a fourth grader, mentioned reading to learn new vocabulary and Claudine, a fifth grader, shared that she reads to improve her comprehension strategies. In her response to follow-up questions, Claudine highlighted the importance of questioning the text and the value of inferring skills in advancing her comprehension. Young readers all expressed a keen understanding that to read to learn new information, readers must first know how to read with confidence and independence.

Reading Purpose: Reading for Enjoyment, Entertainment, and to Expand the Imagination. Investigation of the data in phase two revealed that the child participants used their imaginations to read books in ways that captivated their interests and provided increased motivation to read. Imagination was a key feature in reading for entertainment and enjoyment, as children often joyfully noted how their favorite parts of the books they chose were when the characters used their imaginations. Josie and Cameron identified the expansion of imagination demonstrated by characters in their chosen books as the main source of their enjoyment for reading and the reasons why they chose their books from the *Find Book Joy* collection. Josie shared her description of pretend play as moments when characters used their imaginations “*to see in ways that are not real*.” In another example of how a character’s use of imagination captivated a young reader’s interest, Claudine recalled how Mae Jemison pretended to be an astronaut in her bedroom as a child and created a rocket ship from a cardboard box in the book

Mae Among the Stars (Ahmed, 2018). In addition, Gabrielle joyfully shared her recollections about the characters in *Stacey's Remarkable Books* (Abrams, 2023) and their visualizations of marine life from books they read together in the school library. Similarly, Cameron shared his enchantment with the main character's abilities to draw a staircase that she ascended in his book *Maybe: A Story About the Endless Potential in All of Us* (Yamada, 2019). As Cameron noted, "when you draw something in your imagination, then it comes true."

Child participants spontaneously shared their affinity to read books that expanded their imaginations and mentioned these instances in the books without prompting or adult support. These extemporaneous expressions by the children about the magic of the imagination were often impromptu, and were accompanied by illustrations and examples from their *Find Book Joy* books. Since imagination was not included as part of any of the interview questions, the fact that so many young readers independently chose this feature to identify in their *Find Book Joy* books was significant. The opportunity to expand their imaginations emerged as a primary reason why children wanted to read more books, thereby increasing their reading volume, and why they had chosen to identify one special book as their favorite selection. While Josie and Claudine were captivated by characters who created rocket ships out of cardboard boxes to imagine intrepid adventures in outer space, Cameron was fascinated by a character's imaginative illustration skills. Further, the many whimsical examples of the use of imagination that the young storytellers discovered in their *Find Book Joy* books elicited pure book joy, as they expressed their connections to the characters' enchanting explorations and shared their desires to one day take part in some of the same creative endeavors.

Finally, laughter and joy about "silly characters" were expressed by participants Charlotte and Orion, who were visibly delighted by reading books that incorporated humor and

adventurous escapades for their entertainment. In one example, Orion recounted a moment in *Hair Love*, (Cherry, 2019) where the characters engaged in a playful experience. As Orion shared. “*That’s why I chose this book: it is so funny!*” Charlotte noted that in the book *Dear Zoo* (Campbell, 1982), the zookeeper sent many different wild animals to the recipient and these silly gifts resulted in her amusement. Charlotte favored book selections that were fun and engaging, as reading for entertainment was her primary source of motivation. Insights from the data conveyed that reading for enjoyment as source of reading purpose for some child participants encompassed many facets of the imagination and included joyful and amusing experiences.

Reading Purpose: Reading to Acquire New Knowledge or Gain Information.

Reading for the purposes of gaining knowledge or acquiring new information emerged from the data analysis as key sources of children’s purposes to read, decisions that were influenced by expanded access to book ownership and opportunities for self-selection. Notably, in addition to fiction books that provided young readers with opportunities to expand their imagination, some participants expressed their intense curiosity for exploring informational texts. Participant Claudine expressed that when she learned facts from books such as biographies, she connected this knowledge to other biographies or to prior knowledge that she had gained from other content areas and disciplines, such as science or social studies. In one example, Claudine shared that she first read about Harriet Tubman with her fourth grade teacher before she chose the Harriet Tubman biography from the *Who Was?* Series in the *Find Book Joy* collection (McDonough, 2006). In her responses about books that caused her to want to read more, Claudine shared that this biography motivated her to learn more facts about Ms. Tubman from other sources of historical fiction, as she noted, “*she overcame challenges in real life.*” At the conclusion of her

interview, Claudine expressed her desire to explore more books about influential women from history as well as those involved in current events.

Participant Imani also expressed an avid interest in the genre of biography when she shared her impressions about her favorite book from *Find Book Joy* that featured Misty Copeland, the first African American principal dancer in the American Ballet Theatre. Since her motivation to read more about Ms. Copeland was ignited by this first book, Imani requested and received the book *Firebird* (Copeland, 2014) an autobiography written by Misty Copeland, for her next selection from the *Find Book Joy* collection. This experience was an example of how Imani exercised agency and choice in her defining her reading preferences and expanding her book joy experiences. Finally, participant Cameron's reading purpose was to acquire new knowledge, as he learned how to create illustrations such as staircases from his book *Maybe: A Story About the Endless Potential in All of Us* (Yamada, 2019). Cameron demonstrated a fascination with the intricacies of the art of illustration, and looked to this book to further enhance his skills. He shared that this story appealed to him since he is also an artist and illustrator, and noted that he found the images in this text to ignite his imagination to “*draw more plans.*” Cameron described the main character in this story as “*really cool*” and expressed his intentions to emulate her artistic skills by practicing how to draw staircases.

In this study alone, children read to learn more about sharks, dinosaurs, ballet, astronomy, giraffes, royalty, visual art, action figures, historical events, libraries, and how to ride a bicycle without training wheels. In response to the interview question about why they read more books, children explained that selecting their own books allowed them to choose their favorites, which increased their motivation to read and resulted in more personalized reading purposes.

Reading Purpose: Reading to Expand Social-Emotional Skills. Finally, the social-emotional learning goal of developing empathy and compassion for characters who faced bias, intolerance, and/or discrimination as a purpose for reading was achieved by child participants from reading their *Find Book Joy* books. In this study, young readers frequently drew parallels between their own lived experiences and challenging situations encountered by characters in their *Find Book Joy* inclusive books. This process deepened their emotional connections to the texts, enhanced their reading engagement, and enriched the meaning of their reading experiences. Each child participant engaged in personal interactions with their chosen books and developed relatable bonds with the characters, drawing upon their lived experiences and perspectives for individual interpretations. Further, the children's many examples of identity alignment with characters in their *Find Book Joy* books were shaped by their backgrounds and prior experiences, illustrating the individualized ways in which children make meaning from books they read (Rosenblatt, 1978).

In one example, participant Imani shared her empathy and compassion for ballet dancer Misty Copeland when she faced exclusionary behaviors from her peers. Imani selected this moment in the story as the most instrumental to her understanding, as it expanded her awareness of bias and intolerance and inspired her to share how she would draw from inner strength to self-advocate and cope with a similar situation. Imani's close kinship with the protagonist, Misty Copeland, reflected how closely she identified with this character's hardships and determination. In another instance of social-emotional learning as reading purpose, participant Josie expressed empathy and understanding for the struggles faced by the protagonist in *Eyes that Speak to the Stars* (Ho, 2022), when he encountered an exclusionary experience in school that portrayed his physical appearance in a stereotypical manner. In response, Josie described how the main

character's journey of self-discovery led to pride in his cultural heritage and self-acceptance through deeper intergenerational involvement in traditions with his father, grandfather, and younger brother. This meaningful interaction with the text resulted in Josie sharing an impromptu reflection of the importance of inclusion and the value of diversity in everyday life.

Throughout the data analysis, child participants expressed empathy for characters who experienced adversity in life due to their race, culture, language, gender, mobility or cognitive differences and/or socioeconomic limitations, thereby reflecting relatable bonds with characters, consistent with findings by Ford et al. (2019), Heineke et al. (2022), and Kleekamp and Zapata (2019). The *Find Book Joy* books chosen by the child participants in this study provided opportunities for children to reflect on the characters' decisions and to make sense of humanity by exploring their lived experiences. These book joy encounters extended far beyond the textual elements of each story and provided opportunities for children to learn about the many moral nuances that are integral to human nature, thereby increasing their social-emotional learning opportunities. Finally, as the conversations about reading purpose with the children unfolded, it became clear that their social-emotional gains were as essential to the young reading enthusiasts in this study as improving their comprehension. This experience correlates to an assertion by Johnston et al. (2019) who propose, "we need to use books to apprentice students into humanity, not just to learn to decode and answer questions about texts" (p. 7). When expressing their compassion for characters navigating diversity, bias, and intolerance, children revealed how their individual reading purposes enhanced their social and emotional skills and appreciation for the characters' tenacity, perseverance, and determination.

Finding Six

Access to book ownership and choice in book selection offer children increased opportunities to read inclusive books that feature authentic representations of diversity and foster individualized reading encounters that: (1) nurture hope, resilience, and optimism and (2) build meaningful connections that enhance book joy experiences and expand reading engagement.

Phase One Evidence: Inclusive Books Nurture Hope, Resilience, and Optimism.

Study outcomes demonstrated that reading books about fictional characters or real-life individuals who navigate diversity and who have overcome adversity to achieve their goals can be an empowering, life-changing experience for young readers, one that encompasses *radical hope* to provide an escape away from trauma and despair (Lear, 2006). Reading books to experience *radical hope* allows children “*to actively pursue a life away from traumatic and devastating events*” (Lear, 2006, p. 133). To accompany the opportunities for identity exploration that result from children reading inclusive books, data analysis suggested that these texts can also be a source of hope, resilience, and optimism for children living in communities experiencing economic hardship. When a child reads about another person who looks like them or who lives in similar circumstances who overcame obstacles to achieve their personal goals, this experience can decrease isolation and increase hope, as the individual serves as an exemplary model for surviving even the most overwhelming odds.

Further, when children choose reading to escape or to imagine that they are the characters in a book, they look to books as a source of hope and healing when coping with hardship. To support this premise, literacy specialist, author, and poet Nadine shared: “*The beauty and the power of reading is that reading the right book at the right time can actually change someone's life. It could potentially save someone's life.*” This concept of reading inclusive books as a coping resource and as a method of surviving adversity emerged from the data analysis as a

primary source of reader identity transformation for children in economically disadvantaged communities. To support this finding, Chantal recounted, *“Inclusive books can encourage children, and make them dream, to become something beyond their imagination. Books can help children see others in ways that their immediate environment doesn’t necessarily provide.”* Data analysis revealed that the eye-opening experiences that result from reading inclusive books can be especially relevant to children living in dire economic circumstances that may include urgent survival needs for food and shelter. Participant Amber noted that reading books about characters who conquered obstacles can convey to children that they, too, can become strong and resilient. Reading about individuals who have triumphed over personal challenges in life can serve as a powerful model of resilience and strength for children facing their own hardships.

In addition, inclusive books can serve as a lens or a window (Sims Bishop, 1990) for young readers to learn about educational opportunities, career paths, and travel experiences that may not be accessible or available to children in their everyday lives. In an observation that is similar to Lear’s (2006) concept of *radical hope*, Nadine expressed:

When children see themselves in books, there is some sort of magic that happens.

Inclusive books can give children that **hope**, you know, like *“Oh, I could do this. I could do that. I see that now. This is possible for me.”*

Insights from data analysis indicated that participants in this study provided inclusive books to children navigating diverse lived experiences. These books were chosen to share the critical importance of access to children’s books that open mirrors, windows, and sliding glass doors (Sims Bishop, 1990) to reveal the vibrant mosaic of human experience. As Rachel noted:

Inclusive books that feature authentic representation of diversity can be windows to a world that you're not part of, or something you've never imagined for yourself. That's really powerful, just to see outside of your experience, outside of your own life.

The idea of books as sources of textual mentoring or informal life coaching or career guidance was reported by many study contributors in their responses to the prompt: "*Tell me about a time when you saw the impact that owning a book had for a child.*" Data analysis indicated that for children who can see themselves reflected in books in characters who look like them and have similar lived experiences who can achieve their goals, there is a reassuring understanding that "*if they can do it, I can, too.*" Moreover, literacy advocates shared that for children who gain access to book ownership in economically disadvantaged communities, inclusive books can be a window into a new life that they may have never imagined (Sims Bishop, 1990). As pediatrician Amara shared:

Diverse books can help children see that someone that looks like them was, you know, the President of the United States, or maybe someone that looked like them was a marine biologist, or an astrophysicist, or a neuroscientist, or something like that. This representation is essential for children to develop a sense of hope for their futures.

Participant Daniel shared that representation is essential for young readers, as he noted, "*It is vitally important for all children to be able to see themselves being doctors and lawyers and vets and astronauts.*" He expressed that children should be given the opportunity to learn through inclusive books that wide vistas of opportunities exist for their future plans, as he noted that when he was a child, access to books, encyclopedias, and other media allowed him to be able to understand what was possible in life.

Further, inclusive books that introduce readers to diverse ideas, identities, and perspectives can provide counter-narratives to mainstream views held by those in the dominant culture. As Justin noted, most books about historical accounts are written from the viewpoint of those who have traditionally held influence, thereby excluding counter-stories about individuals whose cultures and identities have been marginalized. As Justin expressed:

Our story here in the United States is complicated. There are so many different viewpoints that people don't understand. And obviously certain narratives have been established about what people feel are the most important things to feel and understand. Right? The victors tell the stories.

All of the contributors to this study in phase one shared inspiring stories of children reading books and learning about careers that they never knew existed, such as an astronaut or a marine biologist or an ornithologist. As participant Amara expressed:

Once a child is able to read independently, they can sit by themselves and escape into a story, and make their own thoughts and ideas and decisions. I think that if they're seeing themselves in that book, through representation of diversity, it's just beyond words to be like, "*Wow. I can do that, too!*" This experience can plant an idea for a future career.

Moreover, Chantal shared that when she read *Mae Among the Stars* (Ahmed, 2018)—a picture book biography of Mae Jemison, the first African American woman to travel into space—to the young literacy learners in her class, several asked if they could visit the planetarium and use telescopes to explore the stars and planets and expressed curiosity about astronomy, a topic entirely new to them. As a result, this inclusive book about Dr. Jemison's experiences provided context for a new unit of study in Chantal's class about astronomy, as her students became fascinated by outer space exploration. This meaningful example illustrates one of the many ways

that inclusive books can open doors to promising opportunities and expand children's imaginations beyond their day-to-day lives.

In their professional experiences, study participants shared that they had all met young readers who expressed their fierce determination to visit distant locales to learn more about future opportunities as a result of reading books that featured these exotic locations. Participants noted that young reading enthusiasts gained insights into their futures from reading books about career paths and travel destinations that were new to them. These exciting experiences expanded their perspectives and revealed the wide array of possibilities that could exist.

Further, data analysis uncovered stories about young reading explorers who expressed intense curiosity about meteors and comets in astronomy or exotic plant life in tropical rainforests after reading books that featured these subjects. These hope-filled stories of seeing promise and possibility through literature conveyed the invaluable role of books in opening young minds to the endless opportunities that life can hold. Overall, study contributors agreed that young readers can learn from inclusive books that there is a life beyond the here and now.

In summary, access to inclusive books that inspire hope, resilience, and optimism in young literacy learners by featuring equitable representations of characters who demonstrate persistence, strength, and tenacity in overcoming challenges can change children's perspectives on what is possible in life. When thoughtful young readers connect with these multifaceted characters, they increase their awareness and build understanding about their future opportunities in life. Inclusive books often share the lived experiences of characters, real or imagined, who have triumphed over insurmountable odds. Reading encounters with inclusive books that feature authentic representation of diverse lived experiences foster hope and optimism in young

children, motivating them to persevere through their own hardships and learn about hope and resilience while enhancing their reader identity development.

Phase Two Evidence: Inclusive Books Nurture Hope, Resilience, and Optimism.

Similar to phase one study outcomes, data analysis in phase two revealed that reading books about characters who navigate diversity and who have emerged victorious over hardships can be a meaningful and life-altering experience. The theme of characters' perseverance in the face of adversity was woven throughout the many inclusive books that the child participants chose from *Find Book Joy* and was featured in the children's responses to the interview questions. Findings illuminated that a sense of admiration was expressed by the *Find Book Joy* book recipients as they recognized characters' tenacity and determination to conquer various forms of adversity in their lives. The children's thoughtful responses identified the characters' values of hope, resilience, and optimism as transformative, as they recognized how each character grew and changed by navigating their personal challenges.

As the interviews unfolded, child participants developed an understanding for the characters' journeys of self-discovery in each story, as they persevered through trials and discovered their personal strengths. These immersive reading encounters reinforced the transformative power of hope in young readers' lives. As Massey et al. (2021) suggest, hope may be an elusive concept, yet adults can intentionally provide text selections for young readers to choose from where characters exhibit and act on feelings of hope, either independently or collectively, to achieve their goals. All of the books selected by the children in this study featured main characters who exemplified how the value of *radical hope* (Lear, 2006) can transform one's life in the face of hardship and adversity, such as the protagonist Sassy in *Dancing in the Wings* (Allen, 2002), ballet dancer Misty Copeland in her biography (Howden, 2015), activist and

social justice crusader Harriet Tubman (McDonough, 2006), and astronaut and engineer Mae Jemison in *Mae Among the Stars* (Ahmed, 2018).

The values of hope and optimism were centered in each story as the characters' resilience propelled them to triumph over challenges. Hope exemplified how self-confident characters who believed in themselves could draw from inner strength and the support of family bonds to overcome obstacles. According to the data analysis, children took note of the character traits exemplified by the characters in their *Find Book Joy* books, most notably confidence, strength, tenacity, determination, and belief in oneself, and expressed how their own lived experiences reflected parallels to the lives of these characters. When responding to questions about the sources of their motivation to read more, young readers shared that they identified with main characters when they overcame bias, adversity, or intolerance in their inclusive books from *Find Book Joy*. The young readers often expressed their empathy and understanding for the hardships that the characters encountered and how they courageously triumphed over challenges. Admiration for characters' strength and resilience was expressed by the child participants, as they pointed out examples in the illustrations where hope and optimism were recurring themes in their inclusive books. Notably, child participants connected with the characters in their *Find Book Joy* books as if they were close friends or classmates, often sharing with exuberance how they would interact with the characters, if given the chance. In summary, data analysis indicated that children in this study identified characters' hope and resilience as admirable qualities in their inclusive books.

As Massey et al. (2021) suggest, hope may be an elusive concept, yet literacy leaders in children's lives can intentionally provide text selections for children to choose from where characters possess and act on feelings of hope, either independently and/or collectively, to

achieve their goals. In this study, all of the books selected by the child participants featured main characters who exemplified the value of *radical hope* (Lear, 2006) in transforming one's life. In their discussions about hope in children's literature, Massey et al. (2021) referenced Lucas and colleagues (2019), who wrote:

Hope is one of the most powerful psychological predictors of success in youth. It is what enables people to set valued goals, to set the means to achieve those goals, and to find the drive to make those goals become a reality. (p. 199)

Finally, data in both phase one and phase two indicated that when children connected to the lived experiences of characters in the stories they read in meaningful ways that suggested identity alignment, their motivation to read, enthusiasm, enjoyment, and engagement with reading increased significantly, thereby nurturing their reader identity development.

Phase One Evidence: Inclusive Books Help Children to Develop Meaningful Connections that Enhance Book Joy Experiences and Expand Reading Engagement.

Analysis of study insights gained from participants' responses about why representation matters in children's books suggested that access to book ownership must be rooted in an inclusive approach to meet the needs of the unique individuals who are living and learning in economically disadvantaged communities that their programs serve. While choice in book selection is imperative, the consensus among study participants was that the opportunity for children to choose books that feature broad representation and diverse lived experiences is required to support their reader identity development. This principle aligns with the fact that many children's books marginalize or exclude children from diverse backgrounds, including children of color, immigrant children, Indigenous children, children with mobility or cognitive differences, children living in economically disadvantaged communities, and/or children who are

multilingual (Ascenzi-Moreno & Quiñones, 2022; Ford et al., 2019; Hayden & Prince, 2023; Heineke et al., 2022; Kleekamp & Zapata, 2019; Ness, 2019; Tondreau & Rabinowitz, 2017). As participant Alisha expressed:

A goal that we're really intentional about as an organization is the access to multicultural literature. That's where our students are really able to not only see themselves reflected in books, but books that also serve as windows to the world, and really connect them to other communities and cultures beyond what they already know. We primarily serve children in Title I schools in the heart of New York City. Our participants represent a wide range of cultural and linguistic backgrounds. What we have learned is that children are more inclined to actually pick up a book when they can relate to the characters – both in their appearances as well as their lived experiences.

Analysis of the evidence supported the findings of Ascenzi-Moreno and Quiñones (2022), Ford et al. (2019), Heineke et al. (2022), and Kleekamp and Zapata (2019), who all emphasized the importance of children seeing characters who reflect their own identities, as they agreed that seeing characters who look like them and who navigate the many complexities that accompany diversity can help children feel connected to the characters in ways that develop pride in their identities. Phase one data analysis indicated that providing access to inclusive books that feature authentic representation of lived experiences is essential for children living and learning in economically disadvantaged communities. As Jade related, she encouraged a child to explore a book about a young boy being raised by a single mother who coped with health issues:

The next day, he ran up to me with the book and he had it gripped so tight. He said, "*This is the only book where I completely found myself.*" He continued: "*This kid's mom is like*

my mom. This kid survived." That book really spoke to him, and he genuinely connected to that character. I think he felt less alone.

Children's books that are inclusive of characters that represent diversity in race, culture, first language, family units, age, cognitive abilities and/or mobility, socioeconomic status, and/or lived experiences can provide young readers with opportunities to experience meaningful connections and develop a sense of identity alignment (Heineke et al., 2022; Kleekamp & Zapata, 2019). When asked "*How important is representation in children's books in reader identity development?*," each interviewee conveyed the invaluable importance of providing inclusive books to curious book explorers in their programs and classrooms.

In phase one, study contributors recounted firsthand experiences about children who, for the first time, met characters in inclusive books who looked like them and whose lived experiences were similar to their own. Literacy advocates agreed that access to book ownership is significantly restricted for children in economically disadvantaged communities, and inclusive books are especially rare in American classrooms due to the shortage of children's literature that authentically represents diversity in characters, settings, and plots, facts that are supported by the literature (Ascenzi-Moreno & Quiñones, 2022; Ford et al., 2019; Hayden & Prince, 2023; Heineke et al., 2022; Kleekamp & Zapata, 2019; Ness, 2019; Tondreau & Rabinowitz, 2017). As participant Justin, who identifies as having more than one racial background, noted:

I did not even see books with people who looked like me until I was in college. That was the first time that I encountered Black authors. Those books really opened me up. After that, I went looking for them. This takes initiative on the part of the individual to seek them out. I know for me that sparked curiosity that motivated me to read more.

In her response to the interview question about representation, Nadine suggested that the following thoughtful questions be considered when curating books for children: *“Do they speak more than one language? Were they adopted? Are they growing up in a single parent home? Have they experienced loss? Are they living in a multi-generational home? Does their cultural background include more than one culture? Are they navigating diversity in their day-to-day lived experiences?”* Participant Simone, an inclusive children’s book author, conveyed that children who read books where they could see their lived experiences reflected in the multifaceted lives of diverse characters gained an increased sense of promise and potential for their futures. Simone noted that this increased visibility results in a sense of connection and belonging that is invaluable for children who may feel different and/or isolated from their peers.

As Daniel shared, *“Finding oneself in a book changes a lot..... It changes everything.”*

Moreover, Amara, a pediatrician, conveyed that when she provided an inclusive book with a character who used a wheelchair to her six-year-old patient with a mobility difference, the child smiled and responded, *“She looks just like me! Someone wrote a book about me.”*

Data analysis revealed that reading inclusive books also increased children’s motivation to read. Participant Daniel expressed that children in his literacy program read more books and had more motivation to read when they were provided with access to inclusive books that featured diverse characters and lived experiences. As Daniel shared, *“There is a connection, or an authenticity to the narrative, and a sense of gratitude or reward, from the sense of reading an inclusive book. There is a new level of engagement.”* Participant Raven, an Indigenous person of Plains Cree and Taíno Nations and children’s inclusive book author, suggested that a child is more motivated to read more when they have access to books on topics that captivate them and characters to whom they can feel connected. Notably, participants Nova and Raven both

expressed that when increased access to books is provided to children, the adults providing the books at home and in the community must ask themselves if the recipients can *relate* to the characters, setting, and/or plot in fiction, or with the subject's lived experiences in biographies or other informational texts. Moreover, Nova connected access to inclusive books to reading volume and expressed that when children read books that feature characters, families, and lived experiences that reflect their own realities, "*this boosts their reading engagement and increases the time they spend reading each day.*" These rich connections to the inclusive books they read help children to expand their understandings of authentic diverse experiences, nurture their identity development, and deepen their awareness of the importance of embracing and valuing diversity in all its forms.

Authentic Representation in Inclusive Books. In their discussions about the importance of representation, participants in phase one noted that inclusive books that are provided to children in increased access to books initiatives must feature *authentic* representations of diversity, a theme that emerged from data analysis of the many thoughtful responses to the interview questions. In one example, participant Raven shared her concerns about inauthentic representation of Indigenous persons in children's books that portray them as stereotypes or mascots, as a form of cultural appropriation that compromises the integrity of Indigenous identity. Raven explained that cultural appropriation refers to the adoption or use of elements from one culture by members of another culture, often without consent or proper understanding. These decisions, she shared, are often made by those in positions of power and are irresponsible, especially when the appropriated culture belongs to a historically oppressed group, such as Indigenous persons. In discussing authentic representation, Raven conveyed her concerns:

There are books that aspire to be inclusive, yet they reflect me and my people in ways that actually make a joke out of me, and that takes away all of my culture, and by stripping me of that, it creates this negative stereotype that I have about myself, which further harms my own identity.

In addition, participant Raven shared that careless errors by non-Native authors and illustrators often result in inaccurate illustrations of Native clothing and accessories. These types of missteps highlight the potential harm that is caused by using cultural symbols, practices, or expressions in children's books in ways that ignore the original context and convey the often-misguided perspective of the author and/or illustrator rather than the authentic voices from within the Indigenous community. To prevent these inaccuracies and honor authentic representation, Raven suggested that only Native illustrators should be chosen to accompany the work of Native authors who write children's books about Indigenous culture. Moreover, to further uphold the cultural integrity of North American Indigenous persons, Raven expressed that picture books that feature Native family units should aim to include intergenerational families, in contrast to the non-Native model of nuclear families comprised of two parents and their children that is most often portrayed in children's books.

Expanding the Lens of Authentic Representation. When asked about representation in children's books, the literacy advocates agreed that while the ability to recognize inclusion of all differences is an essential and humanizing facet of reader identity development (Niland, 2021), most children's books are centered in a linear, able-bodied mainstream narrative, with characters, setting, and plot that represent an ableist culture and one-dimensional approach (Adichie, 2009; Hayden & Prince, 2023; Tondreau & Rabinowitz, 2021). To respond to these inequitable

practices and expand the inclusive lens, participant Nova offered the following suggestions when providing books to children with intention:

It is imperative to look for choices that tell a good quality story that just happens to feature a person who uses a wheelchair, or someone who navigates a hearing impairment, rather than centering these human beings with differences as “less than” or in need of help or support.

Similarly, participant Daniel expressed his concerns about how characters who use wheelchairs or those who may need assistance with communication are portrayed as “*less than capable*” in children’s books, as ableism is often prioritized as a form of privilege in children’s literature.

These participant responses support the recommendations by Hayden and Prince (2023) that promote the use of inclusive books that feature characters who “change and grow” throughout the story (p. 246), and who are included with their peers in similar experiences in home, school, and recreational environments. In addition, participant Nadine shared that inclusive books provided to children should span a wide range of diverse abilities and lived experiences so that all children can find themselves in books.

Analysis of phase one data from the literacy advocates illuminated that most children’s books feature an ableist perspective that prevents children who are navigating various forms of diversity from feeling seen and heard. As evidenced in the responses above, study participants agreed that access to inclusive books that represent characters with diverse lived experiences can expand children’s views about classmates with mobility or cognitive differences while building empathy and promoting a strengths-based perspective. When asked about the importance of representation in children’s books, Kassandra shared:

In education, most discussions of diversity, equity, and inclusion often center on conversations about race, ethnicity, and LGBTQ, but we don't necessarily always remember to include people with disabilities in that framework, most notably those with invisible disabilities, such as dyslexia or neurodivergent diagnoses. It is imperative that we include individuals with these types of diversity, as well.

In response to the interview question on the importance of representation, Nova shared her thoughtful perspective on inclusive books and the critical importance of a broader representation of diversity, as well, and recommended that when curating inclusive books for children, it is also responsible to consider that diversity goes far beyond culture to include children who use a wheelchair, children on the autism spectrum, children who navigate visual or hearing impairments, or families that are intergenerational or untraditional. As Nova expressed:

Representation can reflect a broad spectrum of different lives and let all children be seen and heard in books. When children can read books that portray lives different from their own, this can reduce stereotypes and increase awareness.

In her responses, Nova shared that children's books that feature diversity should be about the characters, setting, and plot development, rather than a singular focus on the source of diversity.

Nova shared an example about the book *The Snowy Day*, by Ezra Jack Keats:

This book just happens to feature a child of color growing up in an urban environment. The focus is not on his race, nor is it even mentioned. The purpose of our work is to feature diversity and provide inclusive books, and to have a quality story **first** that also includes diverse characters. Another notable example of this approach is the book *The Last Stop on Market Street*, by Matt De La Pena. This author does a beautiful job at telling a story that has nothing to do with people in the book who may live in a shelter, or

children who use wheelchairs, or really any of that, but you can just see all of that reflected in the illustrations, as you read the book. The illustrations are incredibly important, especially for young children, as that visual imagery tells a story, and it is as meaningful to children as the words.

In summary, data analysis in phase one elucidated the premise that when children connect not only to the physical appearances of characters in stories they enjoy, but also, and perhaps even more meaningfully, to the characters' lived experiences, families, languages, and cultures, these connections support the moral imperative to provide inclusive books to children (Ascenzi-Moreno & Quiñones, 2022; Ford et al., 2019; Hayden & Prince, 2023; Heineke et al., 2022).

Phase Two Evidence: Inclusive Books Help Children to Develop Meaningful Connections that Enhance Book Joy Experiences and Expand Reading Engagement. When presented with a wide range of books to choose from for their participation in this study, the eager young book collectors in phase two all chose inclusive books that featured authentic representation of diversity in ways that provided opportunities for identity alignment and expanded their reading engagement. Evidence analysis indicated that children experienced validation from being seen and heard in the books they chose, developed personal connections, and increased their self-esteem by seeing characters who looked like them and whose lived experiences and family units reflected their own.

When asked if a book has brought them joy, in response to the interview question about book joy, the child participants unanimously chose inclusive books that featured diverse characters with physical traits and life experiences similar to their own as experiences that resulted in book joy. Children's responses to interview questions about their favorite books as well as the motivations behind these choices revealed valuable insights into young readers'

relatable bonds with characters in their inclusive books, and how these connections increased their reading engagement. This analysis is aligned with conclusions by Heineke et al. (2022), who suggest that access to inclusive books enables children to develop their reader identities through strengths-based representations of diversity and inclusion. Phase two data analysis reinforced insights from phase one that summarized how inclusive selections that feature a broad range of lived experiences allow young reading enthusiasts the opportunity to connect not only with the physical appearances of the characters in stories they enjoy but also, and perhaps more meaningfully, with the transformative experiences in the characters' lives.

Throughout the book discussions that scaffolded the interview questions, the child participants often spontaneously offered their keen understandings of the paramount importance of inclusion and representation in children's books and expressed admiration for characters' determination. In addition, young readers expressed identity alignment with characters who shared their day-to-day lives and bonds with their parents and caregivers, adding a reassuring sense of familiarity, which in turn resulted in increased connections. In the interview discussions, the children's heartfelt bonds with multifaceted characters whose physical features and lived experiences mirrored their own were clearly evident in their radiant smiles that reflected pure book joy. These reading experiences corresponded with findings by Heineke et al. (2022) and Kleekamp and Zapata (2019), who assert that children's books that feature authentic representation of characters who navigate diversity in culture, race, language, family units, lifestyles, age, ability or mobility, socioeconomic backgrounds, and lived experiences can foster deeply personal connections and emotionally resonant experiences for young readers.

Immersive Reading Engagement. Insights from data analysis revealed that when children connected to the lived experiences of characters in the stories they read, their motivation

to read, enthusiasm, and engagement with reading increased significantly, thereby nurturing their reader identity development. The immersive reading experiences by children in this study supported the belief that providing opportunities to read and respond to inclusive books allows avid readers from diverse backgrounds to see themselves reflected in their reading transactions (Rosenblatt, 1995), an experience that increased their reading engagement. In phase two of this study, authentic portrayals of diversity in the children's chosen books created an excitement for reading that resulted in increased motivation for children to read more books, thereby expanding their reading volume and motivation, key components in reader identity development.

Child participants expressed their book joy through meaningful connections with characters in the books they selected from *Find Book Joy*, as each child shared personal stories that reflected the characters' experiences, expanding their reading engagement. The enthusiastic young book explorers in phase two noted how their personal experiences strengthened their connections with the protagonists in their inclusive books and made their reading experiences more immersive. Moreover, the child participants' reading encounters revealed how young readers can become fully immersed in the stories they read, connecting with characters by understanding their intentions, aspirations, and personal journeys, a concept known as *story world absorption* (Prezioso & Harris, 2023). Further, these immersive reading encounters illustrated how vivid imagery and compelling plot development can serve as a gateway into the story's world for children, strengthening their emotional connections to the characters and increasing their motivation to read (Prezioso & Harris, 2023). Finally, these relatable bonds with characters in their inclusive books resulted in children's increased reading volume and motivation to read, thereby further enhancing their reading engagement.

Admiration for Characters' Determination and Resilience. Evidence analysis

demonstrated that during their interviews, children noted several key qualities exemplified by the characters in their *Find Book Joy* books, most notably confidence, persistence, tenacity, determination, and belief in oneself, and related how their lived experiences paralleled with the lives of these characters. There was a sense of admiration expressed by child participants as they recognized the protagonists' determination to overcome hardships. The children's responses to interview questions about books that they chose to read identified the characters' values of hope, resilience, and optimism as transformative, as each character grew and changed by facing their personal challenges with tenacity and perseverance. Overall, the child participants in this study were inspired to emulate the characters' determination to achieve their aspirations.

When responding to questions about the sources of their motivation to read more, children in this study shared their book joy as they identified with times when the characters overcame adversity in their inclusive books. Child participants often shared their admiration and understanding for the many challenges that the protagonists encountered and how they succeeded in conquering hardships. These instances seemed to provide the children with hope for the characters and for their own futures. In one example, Claudine discussed the bravery and courage of Harriet Tubman, a prominent leader in the Underground Railroad, a historical network of secret routes and safe houses used by formerly enslaved African Americans to escape to freedom (McDonough, 2006). In another instance, Imani pointed out how Misty Copeland faced bias and intolerance from her classmates, yet persevered to achieve her goals. These compelling examples from the children's narratives in phase two illustrated how access to inclusive books can provide opportunities for identity alignment and meaningful connections for young readers. Findings illuminated that characters' persistence and determination were identified as admirable qualities

by every child participant in this study. As exemplified in the children's own words in the child participant narratives, the concept of *radical hope* (Lear, 2006) emerged from the data analysis, as inclusive books opened doors for children in this study to learn about how others surmounted hardships and to envision an optimistic future that extends beyond their current circumstances.

Conclusion

In summary, phase one outcomes demonstrated that when children see themselves reflected in inclusive books and form meaningful connections with characters whose lives mirror their own, these reading experiences increase their self-esteem and strengthen their self-perceptions as readers. This theme was reinforced in phase two, as child participants expressed how choice in book selection deepened their identity alignment with the characters in their inclusive texts who overcame challenges to achieve their goals. Finally, analysis of study data revealed emotional responses to inclusive books that aligned with the aesthetic stance of the Transactional Theory of Reading (Rosenblatt, 1978), which centers the individual reader's immersive and imaginative engagement with the text. This viewpoint was conveyed by the participants' responses to the interview questions, as the aesthetic approach encourages readers to engage their imaginations and explore worlds, identities, and perspectives that differ from their own (Robinson, 2020). In this inquiry, inclusive books provided the child participants with rich material for personal exploration, allowing young readers to understand characters' lives that reflected diversity in the human experience (Sipe, 2008).

Chapter V shared the findings from a two-part investigation of the roles of access to book ownership and choices in book selection in transforming reader identity development for children in economically disadvantaged communities. In phase one, 20 literacy advocates in various professions were interviewed to explore the research question: In what ways can

increased access to book ownership and choice in book selection transform reader identity development for children in economically disadvantaged communities? Evidence analysis in phase one suggested a strong consensus amongst study contributors about the essential roles of home support and community involvement in access to books and reader identity development and identified access and choice as principal sources for building one's identity as a reader. Participants highlighted that choice in book selection increases reading volume and motivation to read, personalizes the reading experience, illuminates preferences, fosters autonomy, expands agency, defines reading purpose, and positively influences one's self-perception as a reader.

In phase two, eight children enrolled in 1st through 5th grade in Title I schools in southeastern Connecticut who were inclusive book recipients from the *Find Book Joy* program were interviewed to answer the same research question. Insights from evidence analysis in phase two correlated to phase one conclusions, confirming that increased access to book ownership and choice in book selection are key factors in reader identity development for children in communities experiencing economic hardship. Phase two data analysis illuminated how access and choice can inform a child's individuality as a reader and centered children's voices in their reading decisions, thereby transforming their reader identity development by fostering increased agency and independence. In addition, phase two data analysis elucidated the many ways in which access and choice can support children in defining their individualized purposes for reading and how book ownership expands book joy experiences by providing promising opportunities for children to build their own personally-curated home book collections. Moreover, findings from both phases demonstrated that autonomy in book selection empowered young readers to select books that were aligned with their individual reading goals.

Further, according to data from literacy advocates and *Find Book Joy* recipients, access to inclusive books fosters children's awareness of strengths-based representation of characters with diverse cultures, identities, lifestyles, and perspectives. Finally, offering inclusive books as choices to children in economically disadvantaged communities, in particular, opens doors for parents, educators, and literacy advocates to create more opportunities to meet the unique needs of the children they serve, thereby supporting their reader identity development.

The last chapter will summarize key findings, interpret them in relation to existing literature, and discuss their implications for theory, practice, and policy. In addition, correlations between phase one and phase two data analysis will be discussed to illustrate the insights gained from a thorough synthesis of the data. Chapter VI will discuss the findings in the context of the theoretical framework. The final chapter will address study limitations, offer recommendations for future research, and suggest ways to fill gaps identified as a result of the investigation. Finally, Chapter VI will conclude with reflections on the significance of the study and an exploration of the study's contribution to the field and to more expansive social justice issues.

Chapter VI: Discussion

The purpose of this narrative research inquiry was to investigate the ways in which increased access to book ownership and choice in book selection can transform reader identity development for children in economically disadvantaged communities. This qualitative study, with data collected in two phases from interviews with 20 literacy advocates and interviews with eight child participants enrolled in the *Find Book Joy* program, aimed to answer the following research question:

In what ways can increased access to book ownership and choice in book selection transform reader identity development for children in economically disadvantaged communities?

This chapter includes a summary and interpretation of key findings and situates the findings in the context of the theoretical framework and existing literature. Correlations between phase one and phase two are discussed to illustrate the interconnectedness of the insights gained from both phases of this study. This chapter also explores the implications of the findings for theory and practice. In addition, this chapter provides a summary of limitations and recommendations for future research, including suggestions for addressing gaps that were identified in the study, as well as suggestions for future methods of additional data collection. Next, counterpoints and complexities identified from the data analysis are explored. Finally, chapter six concludes with reflections on the significance of the study and a final statement on the study's contribution to the field and to more expansive social justice issues.

The Connection between Access and Choice: The Path to Reader Identity

In phase one of this study, the researcher investigated innovative ways to increase access to book ownership for children in communities of economic need by conducting an in-depth

analysis of book distribution endeavors and a thorough examination of the systemic barriers that limit such access through interviews with 20 accomplished literacy advocates from across the United States. These informative conversations identified practical and sustainable ways to increase equitable access to books at no cost for children living in *book deserts*, economically disadvantaged communities where the availability of books is significantly limited (Neuman & Moland, 2019). Analysis of phase one interviews with literacy advocates indicated that providing children with increased access to book ownership expanded their opportunities for choice in book selection. Knowledge gained from this initial exploration served as the catalyst for the formation of the *Find Book Joy* program, which was the context for the second phase of this study. Phase two explored the roles of access and choice in reader identity development through the eyes of eight children in grades one through five enrolled in the *Find Book Joy* program.

Insights from the data analysis with literacy advocates in phase one revealed that once children have access to books at no cost, they are empowered to make independent choices about developing their individuality as readers, including decisions about *what, when, where, and why* they read. In addition, opportunities to experience access and choice resulted in children exercising agency and autonomy, exploring new purposes for reading, developing knowledge of reading preferences, developing their individuality as readers, and expanding their reading engagement. Further, findings in phase one suggested that access and choice enhanced children's understandings of the value of reading and strengthened their self-perceptions as readers, leading factors in reader identity development. Insights from phase one data analysis indicated that increased access to books at home, shared reading experiences with caregivers, trusted community partnerships, and relationships with reading champions within the community

opened doors to book joy and reading achievement for children who were previously confronted by an insurmountable cost barrier to book ownership.

While phase one data analysis demonstrated the critical importance of home support, community partnerships and relationships, and systemic access to literacy resources in reader identity development, phase two provided a close examination of the firsthand experiences that resulted from increased access to books of choice through the eyes of children enrolled in the *Find Book Joy* endeavor. The individualized focus on access to book ownership and choice in book selection from children in the *Find Book Joy* program revealed that access to free books of choice encouraged children to develop their individuality as readers and expand their book joy experiences while shaping their reader identity development. Phase two data analysis reinforced insights from phase one that indicated access to book ownership and choice in book selection increased children's reading volume and expanded their motivation to read, key elements in reading engagement, an essential feature in reader identity development.

In addition, data analysis in both phases of the study revealed that providing choices in inclusive books that featured authentic representations of diverse lived experiences empowered children to explore topics of importance to them, learn about hope, resilience, and optimism, and experience meaningful connections. Moreover, in a finding exclusive to phase two, data analysis identified that the agency that children experienced by selecting their own reading materials centered their voices in their reading decisions and fostered a clearly defined reading purpose for each young reader. The ability to define one's reading purpose is correlated to the value one places on reading (Hall, 2012, 2016; Harvey & Ward, 2017; Konrad, 2023; Mackey, 2022; Neuman, 2022), a key factor in reader identity development, as once children develop a keen understanding of the many meaningful purposes for reading, they recognize its vital importance

in their lives. Further, pride in book ownership resulted in children in both phases of the study experiencing more book joy, as they built their own home book collections which strengthened their self-perceptions as readers. This study concluded that the interconnected relationship between access and choice is a primary factor in reader identity development, as equitable access to books provides a cohesive framework for children to exercise agency, expand their individuality as readers, expand their purposes for reading, increase reading volume and motivation to read, deepen reading engagement, and improve their self-perceptions as readers. Further, their reading encounters with inclusive books provided young readers with transformative opportunities for identity alignment with characters whose lived experiences reflected their own. This advancement reflects how access to book ownership, when accompanied by thoughtful self-selection and trust in children's choices, strengthened children's self-perceptions as readers.

Overview of Study Findings in the Context of the Theoretical Framework

The Transactional Theory of Reading (Rosenblatt, 1978) has the child at its heart, as when children are centered in the reading process as this theory suggests, their voices are respected, they are trusted to elucidate their individual responses, and the personal interpretations they create from the reading process are reexamined and reevaluated until the process makes sense for them (Davis, 1992). This alignment of this study's findings with the principles of the Transactional Theory of Reading (Rosenblatt, 1978) affirmed the perspectives of the literacy advocates in phase one by recognizing their interactions and experiences in supporting young readers, while also validating the distinct firsthand perspectives of *Find Book Joy* recipients in phase two. Further, the reader identity codes that were identified from the study data analysis led to actionable steps that were aligned with the theoretical framework, as shown in Table 6.

Table 6*Alignment of Reader Identity Codes to Actionable Steps and the Theoretical Framework*

| Reader Identity Codes | Actionable/Measurable Steps | Theoretical Framework |
|---|--|---|
| Choice Meaningful Connections Individuality as a Reader Book Joy Experiences Reading Volume Motivation to Read Reading Engagement | Provide children with increased access to inclusive texts and document observations about how their cultural backgrounds and perspectives guide their decisions and shape their individual reading choices. | The Transactional Theory of Reading recognizes the social and cultural aspects of the reading process (Rosenblatt, 1978). |
| Choice Agency Meaningful Connections Reading Purpose Individuality as a Reader Motivation to Read Reading Engagement | Offer choices in books that provide opportunities for children to connect to characters, setting, and plot in ways that bring their prior knowledge and lived experiences to their reading transactions (Davis, 1992). | Rosenblatt's (1978, 1995) Transactional Theory is reader-centered and focused on individual meaning-making, highlighting the essential role of the individual in the reading process. |
| Choice Agency Independence Individuality as a Reader Reading Purpose Self-Perception Book Joy Experiences Reading Engagement | Provide children with choice in inclusive book selection and time to read independently. Provide book recommendations for additional inclusive texts that connect to themes in books children have already read. | The Transactional Theory explores how readers select, read, interpret, and evaluate literature (Cai, 2008). These encounters become part of the reader's individual experience, "to be reflected on from any angle important to them as a human being" (Rosenblatt, 1978, p. 12). |
| Choice Agency Individuality as a Reader Hope and Resilience in Inclusive Texts Books as Textual Mentors "Radical hope" (Lear, 2006, p. 133). | Curate an assortment of inclusive books in a classroom library collection that provide opportunities for children to read about characters' hope and resilience. Provide journal prompts to children to encourage self-reflection. | The Transactional Theory (Rosenblatt, 1978, 1995) focuses on individual interpretations from the text, which allow young readers to see promise and potential beyond their current circumstances. |

This study centered the depth of children's individual reading experiences through the lens of this theoretical framework to ensure that their voices and perspectives were essential to the meaning-making process and contributed to their reader identity development.

Finally, as Rosenblatt (1978) notes, "The reader brings to the text not only their prior knowledge, but also a set of personal experiences, emotions, and attitudes that affect how the text is interpreted" (p. 25). This understanding aligns with the core values of this study, which prioritized children's individuality, interpretations, and lived experiences, while examining how access and choice informed their interactions with texts and transformed their reader identities. To further elucidate how the findings in this study align with the theoretical framework, Appendix J provides a clear and detailed table that connects the study's insights to its theoretical lens, the Transactional Theory of Reading (Rosenblatt, 1978, 1995).

The Children's Reading Experiences: Alignment with the Theoretical Framework

Findings in phase two of this study reflected the principles of the Transactional Theory of Reading (Rosenblatt, 1978), most notably the concept that meaning is co-constructed between the reader and the text within individualized reading experiences. The child participants' narratives, in which they shared their deeply personal *Find Book Joy* reading encounters, illuminated how their individual lived experiences and prior knowledge influenced their interpretations, aligning with the Transactional Theory's (Rosenblatt, 1978, 1995) focus on the reader's active role in the reading process (Davis, 1992). In addition, insights from data analysis identified the critical role of reader's choice in children's reading volume and reading engagement, reinforcing the Transactional Theory of Reading's focus on how individual decisions can shape one's reading purpose (Rosenblatt, 1978). While the tenets of this theoretical lens are integrated throughout this study's findings, the connection between the core principles of

the theoretical framework and the research findings is most evident in the outcomes that highlight individuality as a reader and reading purpose, as both outcomes center the role of the individual child in their reading encounters. An examination of the relevant evidence analysis follows in this chapter, exploring how these two particular findings aligned with the theoretical framework (Rosenblatt, 1978, 1995).

The aesthetic stance of the Transactional Theory (Rosenblatt, 1978, 1995), which values emotional and imaginative engagement with texts, was most apparent throughout the child participants' involvement in phase two, most notably in their personal responses and individualized interpretations about the books they read. The children's responses and immersive reading encounters were aligned with the aesthetic approach that encourages readers to engage their imaginations and explore worlds, identities, and perspectives that differ from their own (Robinson, 2020). Further, insights from data analysis demonstrated that reading inclusive books fostered deep personal connections, revealing how the children's participatory engagement with their *Find Book Joy* inclusive books supported Rosenblatt's (1978, 1995) Transactional Theory that centers the active role of the reader in the reading process. Finally, rich firsthand accounts of the ways in which the children's interpretations reflected the values of the Transactional Theory of Reading (Rosenblatt, 1978, 1995) were illustrated throughout their individual narratives.

The child participants' interactions with inclusive books from *Find Book Joy* revealed strong emotional connections to the characters that fostered expanded reading engagement. In the study's outcomes regarding inclusive books, data analysis indicated that access to book ownership and choice in book selection offered children opportunities to read inclusive books that featured authentic representation of characters and their diverse lived experiences. In addition, children's reading encounters with inclusive books fostered reciprocal reading

interactions (Rosenblatt, 1978, 1995) that nurtured hope, resilience, and optimism and resulted in meaningful connections that enhanced book joy experiences and expand reading engagement. Moreover, a thorough analysis of the children's narratives highlighted the aesthetic stance of the Transactional Theory of Reading (Rosenblatt, 1978, 1995), which illuminated the child participants' individual emotional and imaginative responses to the text.

In addition, engaging with inclusive books provided the young literacy learners with rich material for identity exploration, offering them rich opportunities to experience how literature opens doors to foster empathy, broaden perspectives, and deepen their understandings of the varied complexities of human life (Sipe, 2008). Since identity is shaped by broader social and cultural contexts that influence individual identity development (Ascenzi-Moreno & Quiñones, 2022; Ford et al., 2019), children in this study were able to explore their individual identities through their meaningful connections to characters, setting, and events in plot development in their inclusive books. This concept aligns with the Transactional Theory of Reading (Rosenblatt, 1978, 1995), which centers the individual reader in constructing meaning through personal connections with texts, suggesting that the inclusive books the children read provided robust opportunities for such connections to develop. Finally, this theoretical lens guided the process of reader identity development by situating the individual reader in the reading transaction, trusting their interpretations, and allowing their decisions to guide their reading purpose (Davis, 1992), experiences that were explored through their inclusive texts.

Individuality as a Reader: Connection to the Theoretical Framework

Individuality as a reader is at the heart of the Transactional Theory of Reading (Rosenblatt, 1978), which conveys that individual readers with varying prior knowledge will engage with the same text in entirely different ways, drawing from their lived experiences. This

theoretical lens allows for an abundance of individual meanings, rather than one definitive meaning, to be accepted as children's literary interpretations and individual reader responses (Cai, 2008). This focus on personal interpretation and meaning-making is at the core of reader identity development (Hall, 2012; Wagner, 2020) and is aligned with the theoretical framework. Individuality as a reader reflects the interests, preferences, prior knowledge, and lived experiences that shape a reader's engagement with texts (Scoggin & Schneewind, 2021). This concept aligns with Rosenblatt's (1978) Transactional Theory of Reading, which suggests that each reading experience is unique and individualized, as meaning is constructed through the reader's personal background, experiences, ideas, and interactions with the text. Also, as data analysis in the current study revealed, individuality as reader encompasses a reader's ability to exercise agency and autonomy in book selection, cultivate their personal interests, and identify their reading preferences, thereby supporting the theoretical lens' focus on the active role of the reader in the reading encounter (Davis, 1992).

In phase one, literacy advocates shared personal stories of children's interactions with inclusive texts that reflected their individuality as readers and reading engagement in emotionally immersive responses. In one such example, participant Zamira shared, *"Children who see themselves represented in books can say "I am in this story. I can see myself represented. I was important enough that someone wrote a book about someone like me."* Literacy advocates conveyed that children became more immersed in their reading experiences, framed by the aesthetic stance, when they had the ability to choose their own books and could relate to the culturally representative characters' lived experiences.

In phase two, child participants enthusiastically engaged with their inclusive books in individualized ways, as they became deeply engaged with the nuances and emotional layers of

the text (Rosenblatt, 1978, 1994). In one example that was aligned with the aesthetic stance, Jasmine's identity alignment with the protagonist in *Dancing in the Wings* (Allen, 2002) revealed a deeply immersive and participatory reading experience. Jasmine's admiration for the main character's perseverance and determination led her to actively participate in the reading experience by recreating the ballet poses from the illustrations, physically embodying the main character's movements and expressions. Further, Imani's engagement with the *Misty Copeland* early reader (Howden, 2015) was intensely personal, evoking strong emotions such as joy and empathy that illustrated the characteristics of her individuality as a reader, as the aesthetic stance guided her immersive encounter with the text. In this reading encounter, Imani's prior knowledge and lived experiences shaped her empathy for Ms. Copeland when she faced bias and intolerance. In addition, Josie's responses to the interview question about the reasons behind her choices in book selection reflected the principles of the theoretical lens (Rosenblatt, 1978), as her active role as a reader resulted in immersive experiences with the culturally diverse characters in her inclusive books. Josie provided her own individual interpretations for the book *Eyes that Speak to the Stars* (Ho, 2022) and expressed empathy for the protagonist, who felt marginalized by his peers after his classmate's inaccurate illustration of his appearance. In her response to this moment, Josie's prior knowledge and personal responses shaped her interpretation of the narrative and expanded her reading engagement (Rosenblatt, 1978).

Reading Purpose: Connection to the Theoretical Framework

While most children in the current study read with an aesthetic stance (Rosenblatt, 1978), experiencing participatory and immersive reading transactions, some experienced shifts on the continuum between the efferent and aesthetic stances (Rosenblatt, 1978, 1995) to make meaning from their reading transactions. In phase one, literacy advocates recalled children engaging

deeply with narratives through an aesthetic stance, while others noted young readers chose informational texts to gain knowledge, reflecting an efferent stance. According to data analysis in phase two, children experienced shifts along the continuum between aesthetic and efferent stances as they made meaning from their reading encounters. In the aesthetic stance in phase two, when the text was decentered and the reader took center stage, young readers immersed themselves in the narrative or imagery and experienced their interactions with the text as an emotional journey rather than seeing the book as a source of external information (Rosenblatt, 1995). In contrast, when adopting the efferent stance, some young readers chose biographies and other informational texts to gain knowledge or extract information. These examples illustrated how children, and all readers, often explore the full continuum, based on their individual purposes for reading and their choices in book selection (Rosenblatt, 1995).

Since aesthetic reading experiences reflect a wide range of emotions and invite readers to become deeply immersed in the characters' lives (Robinson, 2020), these interactions most commonly occur when children engage with fiction that sparks their imagination, as evidenced in several instances throughout the children's interviews. As Robinson (2020) notes, as young readers engage with text, they demonstrate various approaches to making meaning, moving along the efferent–aesthetic continuum in response to the images and information they encounter (Robinson, 2020). While the aesthetic stance focuses on emotional engagement in the reading experience, efferent reading focuses on extracting information or shared meanings from the text, making it a more analytical and abstract approach that is used when following instructions, solving problems, determining actions, or acquiring knowledge to remember beyond the reading experience (Rosenblatt, 1978, 1982). Children take an efferent stance when reading informational texts, such as books about music or animals or astronomy. Child participants in

this study who read to acquire new knowledge or to gain information took an efferent stance (Rosenblatt, 1978, 1982) when they read informational texts, such as when Claudine chose a biography on Harriet Tubman (McDonough, 2006) or when Cameron read books to learn how to improve his artistic skills and game-winning strategies. In an interesting shift, however, Cameron's reading experience with his informational text on sharks elicited a participatory and immersive response, reflective of the aesthetic stance (Rosenblatt, 1995). These examples from the findings support the premise that a child's individual reading purpose, as informed by the Transactional Theory (Rosenblatt, 1978) plays a crucial role in both defining and enriching their reader identity development. Finally, Appendix J illustrates how key findings in this study aligned with the core principles of the Transactional Theory (Rosenblatt, 1978).

The following section examines the alignment between findings from phase one and phase two, identifies shared patterns in data analysis, and illuminates how synthesis of the data refined interpretations and increased understanding of shared patterns and themes. The insightful synthesis of data from both phases of this study provided a comprehensive analysis of how access to book ownership and choice in book selection can transform a child's reader identity for young readers in economically disadvantaged communities.

An Overview of Findings Alignment between Phase One and Phase Two

The following discussion explores the most significant insights derived from this inquiry, focusing on themes that emerged from the data in both phases to address the research question and contribute to the existing research. Phase one data yielded rich evidence that offered valuable insights and expertise from 20 literacy advocates on how to address barriers to implement sustainable book access initiatives for children in economically disadvantaged communities.

Drawing from these findings in phase one, the researcher developed *Find Book Joy*, a local book

access endeavor developed to offer equitable access to the joys of book ownership and the freedom to choose books for children in communities of economic need. Phase two of this study investigated reader identity development through the eyes of eight *Find Book Joy* program recipients within the context of the same research question, thereby creating an integrated process of data collection, analysis, and synthesis.. This comprehensive approach allowed for an in-depth exploration of how access to inclusive books and opportunities for choice in book selection can transform reader identity development for children living and learning in communities experiencing economic hardship.

Evidence analysis across both phases of the study reinforced that providing children with agency and decision-making in book selection is a social justice practice that shapes children's reading preferences, nurtures their individuality as readers, and supports their reader identity development (Mackey, 2022). Given that children read more when they choose their own books (Miller & Sharp, 2018), the *Find Book Joy* book recipients' firsthand experiences with book ownership in phase two—evidenced by their increased book joy, reading volume, and motivation to read—affirmed the insights from phase one that conveyed how increased access to book ownership and choice in book selection play crucial roles in fostering reading engagement, a key component of reader identity development. Moreover, critical insights from both phases of the study revealed the paramount importance of home book collections in reader identity development. Further, data analysis revealed that choice in book selection strengthens and defines one's individuality as a reader, as choice provides the opportunity for children to learn who they are as readers, what they like to read about, and why they read the books they do.

The Instrumental Role of Choice in Book Selection Across Both Phases

Aligning with the insights gained from interviews with the 20 literacy advocates, data analysis from interviews with child participants identified that access to book ownership and choice in book selection are primary factors in shaping a child's individuality as a reader. When provided with access and choice, the *Find Book Joy* participants in this study cultivated their personal interests, developed an understanding of preferences, discovered favorite books, explored new genres, and developed connections with characters in their inclusive books. Further, young readers took pride in owning the books they personally selected from the *Find Book Joy* collection. As reflected in the individual participant narratives, book ownership fostered expanded motivation to read and increased reading volume, two key features in reading engagement. In phase one, data analysis indicated that reading volume and motivation to read increased when children were able to self-select books from a wide range of inclusive options. Phase two findings supported these trends, as *Find Book Joy* book recipients eagerly discussed their love for their chosen books and reported an increase in their nightly reading practices, even within the context of economically disadvantaged circumstances. According to Guthrie (2004), "engaged reading can overcome socioeconomic and parental education barriers to reading achievement" (p. 5). This assertion aligns with the outcomes across both phases of this study, as choice in book selection resulted in significantly expanded reading volume and reading engagement for children, even within the confines of economic hardship.

According to Allington and McGill-Franzen (2021), Guthrie and Wigfield (2017), and Ivey and Johnston (2015), providing children with the freedom to choose their own books can significantly enhance their motivation to read, another pattern evidenced in the data analysis. Additionally, Meier (2015) found that offering children freedom of choice in book selection fosters agency and autonomy and shapes their individuality as readers. Further, Meier (2015)

suggests that agency and choice provide children with increased responsibility, empowerment, enthusiasm, and a stronger sense of reading purpose. Table 7 provides an alignment table that demonstrates the correlations between phase one and phase two data analysis.

Table 7

Alignment Table: Phase One and Phase Two Data Analysis

| Phase One Themes: Literacy Advocates | Phase Two Themes: Child Participants | Insights on Thematic Alignment |
|---|---|---|
| Increased Equitable Access to Books | Increased Equitable Access to Books | Access to books at no cost provides the framework for children to exercise agency and autonomy in book selection, defining their individuality as readers, increasing independence, and enhancing their identity development. |
| Choice in Book Selection | Choice in Book Selection | Choice in book selection is a primary source for building one's identity as a reader, as choice increases one's motivation to read, personalizes the reading experience, illuminates preferences, enhances book joy, expands autonomy and agency, and improves one's self-perception as a reader. |
| Individuality as a Reader | Individuality as a Reader | Individuality as a reader for children includes: (1) exercising agency and autonomy in book selection, (2) cultivating their personal interests, and (3) identifying their reading preferences, including the <i>what, when, where, and why</i> they read. |
| N/A | Reading Purpose | Reading Purpose encompasses reading to learn to read or to improve as a reader, including the use of strategies; reading for entertainment and enjoyment, including the use of the imagination; reading to acquire new knowledge or gain information, and reading to develop or expand social/emotional skills. |

| Phase One Themes: Literacy Advocates | Phase Two Themes: Child Participants | Insights on Thematic Alignment |
|--|---|---|
| Pride in Book Ownership | Pride in Book Ownership | Pride in book ownership empowers children to build their own personal book collections, which increases their reading volume, expands their book joy experiences, and strengthens their self-perceptions as readers. |
| Inclusive Books | Inclusive books | Inclusive books nurture a sense of resilience and optimism in young readers that expands their imaginations and provides a wider and more expansive understanding of their future possibilities beyond the here and now. Inclusive books provide opportunities for children to experience meaningful connections and relatable bonds. |
| Home Support | N/A | Home support for reader identity development encompasses parent engagement, shared reading experiences, interactive exchanges with books, and generous home book collections. Home literacy support early in life instills in children the belief that reading has value. |
| Community Partnerships: | Community Partnerships: | Community support emerged as a consistent theme across both phases of this study. Phase two shifted the focus to a focused, targeted initiative, the <i>Find Book Joy</i> program. |
| Phase one defined community support as encompassing increased access to books, school involvement, literacy leadership, tenacious advocacy, proximity of books in local venues, book heroes, and trusted partnerships. | Phase two community support focused exclusively on the <i>Find Book Joy</i> program, which provides children in economically disadvantaged communities with increased access to free books of choice. | This shift underscores how community-driven efforts can empower children by bridging access with the opportunity for choice to foster reader identity development. |

The Connection of Pride in Book Ownership to Book Joy Across Both Study Phases

Analysis of the literacy advocates' contributions in phase one demonstrated that choice in book selection resulted in pride in book ownership that inspired book joy for children in their programs. This book joy increased their motivation to read and expanded their reading volume, two leading factors in reader identity development. Phase two reinforced this concept, with child participants sharing how owning their own books motivated them to read more often and to read with intention and focus. While phase one highlighted how book ownership and proximity of books at home can result in increased reading volume for children, phase two's insights from *Find Book Joy* recipients revealed firsthand experiences about how owning one's own books of choice provides children with increased motivation to read more books and to read more often.

In phase one, literacy advocates shared that children in their programs were often overjoyed to finally own their own books and hugged their books or held them tightly as they danced around and jumped for joy. In phase two, the *Find Book Joy* recipients often smiled from ear to ear as they proudly shared their personal book collections with the researcher and expressed meaningful connections to their favorite selections. The *Find Book Joy* book recipients were excited to own their favorite books and joyfully expressed pride in their home book collections, some expressing their intention to sleep with their books under their pillows at night. The child participants' many lively personal stories about their reading encounters illuminated the strong relationship between book joy and reading volume and how each expanded as a result of increased access to inclusive books in the *Find Book Joy* program. Insights gained from phase one data analysis of the literacy advocates' experiences with young readers were aligned with perspectives shared by the child participants from *Find Book Joy* in phase two, as the

enthusiastic young readers shared that book ownership increased their motivation to read, expanded their imaginations, and ignited their determination to read more books.

Insights from data analysis in both phases aligned with Neuman's (2022) findings that suggest providing children with the opportunity to build a personally curated book collection that is comprised of books of choice can increase their pride in book ownership, enhance their self-perceptions as readers, expand their knowledge of preferences, and build their confident reader identities. Data analysis from phase one identified proximity of self-selected books at home as a key factor in children's motivation to read and their reading engagement. Phase two data analysis further supported this concept, as child participants expressed that owning books of choice markedly increased their reading volume and motivation to read. This pride in book ownership was a key factor in transforming reader identity development for the *Find Book Joy* book recipients. Expanding on the findings from phase one, phase two results indicated that pride in book ownership and reading books of choice motivated children to read more books and to consequently experience more book joy, as when they read to fulfill an internal desire and not for any external expectation, their reading engagement expanded.

Key Outcomes from Access to Inclusive Books in Both Phases

In discussions about books that feature authentic representation of diversity, data analysis in phase two further informed and contextualized the outcomes from data analysis in phase one, confirming that providing children with access to choices in inclusive books, in particular, provided opportunities for children to see themselves represented in books, resulting in meaningful connections that increased their reading engagement. Literacy advocates in phase one championed the compelling need to provide children with access to inclusive books that reflect realistic characterizations of diverse experiences. The interviews with child participants

brought these recommendations to life in the words of young literacy learners who saw themselves reflected in the lives of the characters of their *Find Book Joy* books. These meaningful reading encounters expanded the promising fulfillment of book joy.

Phase one data insights indicated that offering books with authentic representations of individuals with varied identities and multifaceted lived experiences to children is vital when selecting texts that represent the intersectionality of human experience (Heineke et al., 2022). Data analysis indicated that children connected with inclusive books in important ways that transformed their identities as readers, framed how they saw themselves as readers, expanded their humanity, and advanced how they connected reading to their understandings of diversity (Heineke et al., 2022; Wagner, 2020). Further, phase one participants enthusiastically agreed on the necessity of responsibly framing access to book ownership in an inclusive approach to effectively meet the needs of young readers living and learning in economically disadvantaged communities. Phase two data analysis, which centered children's voices, elucidated the profound impact that reading books that featured authentic representations of diversity had on their reading engagement. Moreover, the children's exuberant responses to their reading encounters in phase two demonstrated how these young reading enthusiasts connected deeply with culturally representative characters whose lives reflected their own lived experiences, fostering identity alignment and relatable bonds.

While choice in book selection is imperative, the consensus among the literacy advocates in phase one was that offering children the opportunity to select books that featured culturally responsive representation of diversity from a broad range of inclusive options is essential to supporting their reader identity development. The voices of child participants further illuminated how access to inclusive books improved their meaningful connections to characters, increased

their motivation, expanded their understandings of hope and resilience, and enhanced their reading engagement. Evidence analysis from phase two reflected that *Find Book Joy* book recipients fervently shared their enthusiasm for reading inclusive books that mirrored their own lived experiences. Further, each child participant noted relatable bonds that validated and affirmed their personal journeys of self-discovery as they learned about characters who shared similar lived experiences and explored their individuality as readers.

In addition, phase two data analysis provided evidence that complemented the insights gained from phase one, particularly in relation to how access to inclusive books nurtured a sense of resilience and optimism in young readers that expanded their imaginations and provided a wider and more expansive understanding of future possibilities. In phase one, study participants conveyed that inclusive books inspired children to look beyond their current circumstances, inspiring them with promising opportunities for their futures. This concept was further reinforced by phase two data analysis, where interviews with child participants underscored that reading about individuals who have overcome personal hardship to achieve their goals provided them with strong models of hope, resilience, and optimism, conveying the belief that a promising future is within reach, and anything is possible. The individual participant narratives reflected that children in phase two of this study expressed respect and admiration for the characters in their *Find Book Joy* books who had encountered struggles and overcame these obstacles with tenacity and determination. In their responses to interview questions, children identified the characters' values of hope and resilience as transformative, noting how these qualities shaped the characters' inner strength and determination when faced with personal challenges. Phase one evidence analysis from the literacy advocates revealed that choice in book selection increases one's motivation to read, illuminates personal preferences, expands autonomy, develops agency,

and improves one's self-perception as a reader. Children's reading experiences in phase two exemplified these same principles, as their pure elation for the inclusive books they chose from *Find Book Joy* was the catalyst for increased reading volume and motivation to read.

Investigation of data in phase two indicated that choice in book selection, a direct result of increased access to books, defines one's individuality as a reader by expanding knowledge of reading preferences and developing children's understandings of reading purpose. Finally, data analysis revealed that defining one's purpose for reading is closely tied to the value one places on reading (Hall, 2012, 2016; Harvey & Ward, 2017; Konrad, 2023; Mackey, 2022; Neuman, 2022), a key element in the development of reader identity, as when children begin to grasp the many different purposes for reading, they recognize reading as an essential priority in their lives.

Theoretical Implications

Findings in the current study supported Rosenblatt's (1978, 1995) Transactional Theory of Reading, offering additional evidence that reading is an active, individualized process that reflects a reciprocal relationship between the reader and the text. Expanding on Rosenblatt's (1978, 1995) framework, this investigation explored how centering children's interpretations in the reading process and providing access to book ownership and choice in book selection transformed their reader identities. According to data analysis, when children were centered in the reading process, their voices were acknowledged, their decisions as readers were respected, and they felt trusted to articulate their responses (Davis, 1992). These principles align with the Transactional Theory of Reading, which emphasizes the importance of trusting the interpretations of the individual in the meaning-making process. Insights from data analysis in both phases of this study suggested that when young readers had access to books that reflected their individual identities and interests and could choose their own books, their expanded reading

volume and motivation to read bolstered their self-perceptions as readers. This finding aligned with the core tenets of the Transactional Theory of Reading (Rosenblatt, 1978, 1995), which foregrounds the reader's active role in constructing meaning through their interactions with texts. Moreover, evidence analyzed from this inquiry reinforced Rosenblatt's (1978, 1995) position that conveys meaning emerges from the reader-text interaction by demonstrating how increased access to a wide range of books and choice in book selection broadened the assortment of texts available to children for reading engagement, informing their individual interpretations.

In the context of this study, the instrumental role of choice in expanding children's reading engagement reflected how young readers' personal interests, preferences, and motivations contributed to their interactions with text and shaped their reader identity development. Further, this inquiry's focus on encouraging choice in book selection enhanced aspiring readers' sense of agency and autonomy, which in turn deepened their engagement and connections with their inclusive books. This finding is aligned with the principle that conveys meaning is co-constructed between the reader and the text based on their individual interpretations (Rosenblatt, 1978, 1995). Most importantly, access and choice center children's voices in their reading decisions, thereby providing them with agency in their reading decisions and ownership over their reading encounters. Trusting children to select their own books and determine their purpose(s) for reading reinforced Rosenblatt's (1978, 1995) viewpoint that positioning each individual reader in an active role strengthens their reader identity and expands their individuality and freedom of self-expression.

In addition, data analysis of children's insights about their personal reading encounters supported Rosenblatt's (1978) assertion that all readers develop individual, reciprocal relationships with the text. The individuality as a reader that children developed as a result of

access and choice in this study provided further support for the Transactional Theory of Reading (Rosenblatt, 1978), as it highlighted the dynamic interactions between the reader and the text, where children actively constructed meaning based on their personal interests and contexts. Since this theoretical lens framed each child's individual reading journey, it illustrated how firsthand experiences, cultural context, and personal preferences shaped the way children engaged with and interpreted texts (Rosenblatt, 1978, 1995).

Additionally, findings in this study illuminated how the Transactional Theory (Rosenblatt, 1978) can be expanded to include an equity lens, as equitable access to inclusive books and choice in book selection deepened and extended young readers' abilities to make meaning from the text based on their individual lived experiences (Davis, 1992). The highly immersive and participatory reading experiences of the child participants reinforced the importance of offering young reading enthusiasts generous opportunities to engage with inclusive books, so that children from diverse backgrounds and lived experiences could see themselves represented in their reading transactions (Rosenblatt, 1995). As this study illustrated, expanding opportunities for children to construct meaning from texts involved providing young readers with inclusive books that featured authentic representations of diversity and lived experiences, thereby broadening their options to discover themselves reflected in their interactive reading encounters (Rosenblatt, 1995). Since the reader's personal identity plays a vital role in interpreting and finding meaning in a text, these instances of identity alignment resulted in increased reading volume, motivation to read, and reading engagement (Rosenblatt, 1978, 1995).

In addition, evidence analysis indicated that expanded choice in book selection supported both the efferent and aesthetic reading stances (Rosenblatt, 1978, 1995), as the literacy advocates responses about children in their programs and the child participants' individualized responses

were aligned with both the efferent stance that encompasses reading to gain knowledge or information and to the aesthetic approach that encourages readers to engage their imaginations and explore worlds, identities, and perspectives that differ from their own (Robinson, 2020; Rosenblatt, 1995). This feature of one's individuality as a reader was most notable in the book recipients' active engagement with texts they had each selected for deeply personal reasons from the *Find Book Joy* collection. Expanded choice in book selection not only fostered increased reading engagement but also affirmed the individuality of young readers, allowing them to navigate both efferent and aesthetic reading experiences in ways that were uniquely reflective of their individual identities as readers (Rosenblatt, 1995). Finally, the children's reading encounters that were analyzed for this study demonstrated how the individual reader's purpose shapes the stance they assume (Smith, 2012). In turn, the efferent and aesthetic stances can enhance and extend one's individuality as a reader, an instrumental feature in reader identity development, thereby expanding Rosenblatt's (1978, 1995) theoretical framework.

Implications for Policy, Education, and Practice

The current study's far-reaching implications for policy, education, and practice could have consequential effects that result in enduring change in the lives of young readers living and learning in economically disadvantaged communities. Findings demonstrated how increased access to book ownership and choice in book selection transformed children's reader identities in ways that enhanced the value they placed on reading and their self-perceptions as readers. Further, reading volume and motivation to read, two key factors in reading engagement and leading indicators in reading achievement, increased in substantial ways as a result of access and choice for children who participated in this investigation.

Policy Implications

Together, the literature and the study findings illustrated a clear picture of the critical need to provide equitable access to book ownership for children living and learning in communities of economic need. To expand awareness of the book access crisis in the United States, tenacious advocacy for meaningful changes in local, state, and federal policies that include increased funding allocation to local schools and libraries in economically disadvantaged communities is imperative. Children living in *book deserts* (Neuman & Moland, 2019), neighborhoods that have significantly limited access to books due to income inequities and restrictions in resources, must be provided with books and reading materials to meet their needs so that they can access the right of entry to reading achievement. Income-based segregation has led to vast inequities in resource distribution, limiting the capacity of families facing economic challenges to provide the necessary books and literacy tools that help children develop their reader identities (Bettencourt et al., 2020; Canfield et al., 2020b; Neuman & Moland, 2019).

In one example, the striking disparities in library funding that exist between communities of material wealth and communities of economic hardship must be urgently addressed on a policy level, so that the infinite gains that children can experience at no cost as library patrons can be fully realized. Libraries were often mentioned throughout the interviews as a “*lost resource*” for children living in economic need, as the literacy advocates shared that inequities such as reduced funding, limited hours, and outdated collections collude to exclude aspiring readers from the magic and wonder that can be experienced by exploring an abundance of free books in the children’s section of their local library. Moreover, during the interviews, the researcher learned that budgetary constraints had led to the indefinite closure of the school library where child participants were enrolled, depriving them of the opportunity to explore books at no cost and to develop knowledge of preferences. The suspension of school library

services caused children and their parents significant frustration and disappointment. Data analysis identified the imperative need for policies to be implemented to address the sharp disparities in how schools and libraries that are situated in communities experiencing economic hardship have markedly limited books and resources, while those in well-resourced, affluent neighborhoods are well-equipped with fully stocked children's bookshelves.

Educational Implications

Study findings provided a comprehensive perspective on the many enduring gains that resulted from increased equitable access to book ownership and choice in book selection for children in economically disadvantaged communities, including expansions in young readers' agency, confidence, reading volume, motivation to read, reading engagement, pride in book ownership, and book joy experiences. In addition, data analysis demonstrated how access to books and choice in book selection provided children with expanded opportunities to define their individual purposes for reading and enhance their individuality as readers. Finally, evidence analysis indicated that increased access to inclusive books fostered meaningful connections for children and instilled a sense of hope, resilience, and optimism.

Implications of Restrictions to Access and Choice on Reader Identity Development.

However, study findings clearly demonstrated that without the ability to physically access books and select their own books to read, children in communities of economic need would be faced with considerable restrictions on their reader identity development. This study's outcomes were contingent on providing a wide assortment of inclusive books to children and securing book ownership for them without a cost barrier in place. Consequently, the autonomy to select their own books freed children from external demands and allowed them to explore books freely, without any external expectations. Finally, this investigation invites the question: how would the

outcomes for these young readers' reader identity development be different if they had been deprived of access to book ownership and the freedom to choose their own reading materials?

Sustaining Access Efforts through School Partnerships. To achieve sustainable access to book ownership for children living and learning in communities of economic need beyond this study, partnerships between well-resourced schools and underserved schools would be an innovative solution. Schools in financially secure districts could host monthly book drives and volunteers could transport the books collected to the schools in communities experiencing economic hardship. In addition, to expand diversity in the books provided, an Amazon inclusive book list could be co-created by teachers and students in the recipient school(s) and shared with teachers and learners in well-resourced schools. In this model, schools in neighboring communities could partner at the start of the school year, with teachers enrolling their classes, and students at both schools could sign an informal book exchange agreement. This arrangement would suggest that the elementary schools with surplus books would commit to providing a consistent supply of books to children enrolled at the neighboring school in an economically disadvantaged community throughout the school year. In response, to sustain the partnership, children who are book recipients could become pen pals with children in the donor school, establishing relationships and exchanging reviews about the books that they have read and books they would recommend. These types of innovative community partnership may assist in overcoming the cost barrier to book ownership.

Optimizing an Equity-Centered Approach in the Classroom. In the classroom setting, once increased access has been achieved through community partnerships and established book donor relationships, educators could optimize choice for children by providing time each day for young readers to browse through bookshelves and explore various genres to expand their

knowledge of preferences. Further, in an equity-centered framework, the books that are offered as choices to children in economically underserved communities must reflect the diverse identities of the young readers in those schools. Enhancing children's reader identities can be achieved by offering access to inclusive literature, allowing young readers to see their own experiences represented in the books they encounter (Ford et al., 2019; Heineke et al., 2022; Ness, 2019; Sims Bishop, 1990). In this approach, access to book ownership and choice in inclusive book selection could transform children's reader identity development by fostering meaningful connections and instilling a sense of hope, promise, and resilience, as children see their diverse experiences and cultures reflected in literature.

Inclusive Book Selections to Advance Equity and Disrupt the Deficit Narrative. An additional consequential benefit from providing children with access to inclusive reading selections in the classroom setting is how young readers' immersive reading encounters can disrupt the deficit narrative and dismantle false assumptions about literacy learners living and learning in circumstances of economic hardship. This shift fosters the formation of readers' self-perceptions that are defined by confidence and independence (Abodeeb-Gentile & Zawilinski, 2013; Hikida, 2018; Mackey, 2022; Neuman, 2022). Moreover, offering access and choice in inclusive books to literacy learners in school settings helps educators counter the socially-constructed institutional labels that portray children in economically disadvantaged communities as solely struggling or dealing with academic deficits, labels rooted in biases and assumptions held by educators in the dominant culture that fail to recognize the intersectionality of children's identities (Hikida, 2018). When educators focus on culturally responsive book choices for children, they foster an equity-driven approach by making instructional decisions that extend

beyond teaching academic skills, as they center social justice principles and create an environment where young literacy learners can embrace their full identities (Muhammad, 2020).

Supporting Reading Engagement and Strengthening Children's Self-Perceptions as Readers by Fostering Choice in the Classroom Setting. As the findings in this study illuminated, when children read books of choice based on personal interests and individual preferences, their reading volume and motivation to read increase in substantial ways. Moreover, the pure book joy that young readers experience when they develop meaningful connections with the characters in their inclusive books energizes young readers to expand their reading engagement. Children in this study noted over and over again how when they chose their own books, those selections became their favorite books, and they read them every night. According to the data analysis, autonomy in book selection and pride in book ownership increased children's self-perceptions as readers. Since a positive self-perception as a reader is imperative to nurture confidence and belief in one's reading potential, child participants fully embraced their identities as book collectors and experienced pure book joy. In this study, young readers' self-concepts significantly influenced the choices they made about reading, a core principle in their reader identity development (Luttrell & Parker, 2001; Vaughn et al., 2020).

Self-perception, pride in book ownership, trust in one's choices, and knowledge of reading preferences all resulted in children's increased intrinsic motivation to read. As data analysis in phase one revealed, intrinsic motivation increased when children were driven by personal reasons to select books that resonated with them, as opposed to reading books and materials that were driven by external expectations from parents or teachers. Phase two data reflected this pattern, with the children's enthusiastic book joy and increased motivation to read resulting from their ability to choose their own books and read for pleasure on their own time.

Propelled by intrinsic motivation, child participants increased their reading volume while also embracing their individual purposes for reading as independent decisions. Data analysis revealed that children expressed they were less motivated to read if they were required to do so in order to record minutes on reading logs or to read selections chosen for them by parents or teachers. While mandated reading requirements can discourage children's desire to read, providing them with opportunities to choose and read the books they *love to read* and *want to read* helps them view themselves as readers, bolstering their self-perceptions and increasing their confidence.

Educators can foster agency and autonomy by providing expanded access to books for children to explore. While some mandates are clearly necessary to meet curriculum requirements, young reading enthusiasts should be given equal time to explore books of choice and develop knowledge of preferences to transform their reader identities. Moreover, exploring genres, discovering series books, and exchanging book recommendations with peers can provide children with rich opportunities to enhance their self-perceptions as readers. These literacy learning endeavors highlight the essential connection between access and choice. In summary, when a child reads solely to experience book joy, free from any mandates or external expectations, this practice can create a passionate reader for life (ILA, 2018).

Implications for Practice

Insights from the Find Book Joy Book Fair

In December 2024, *Find Book Joy* hosted a no-cost book fair for over 300 children at a Title I elementary school in the district where the study participants attend school. The 1200 free books that were distributed to children in Pre-K through grade six were donated from a Parent-Teacher Association (PTA) in a neighboring well-resourced district within the same county in southeastern Connecticut were in excellent condition and met the following *Find Book Joy*

criteria: they were inclusive, accessible, developmentally appropriate, and represented a wide range of genres. In addition, books that met the *Find Book Joy* criteria for this book fair were clean and the book covers and pages were all intact, with content that was not outdated, and subject matter that was developmentally appropriate. Additional books were purchased for children from the Amazon wish list from generous members of this same PTA and provided to children as choices at this book fair. This new book donation option was recommended by private donors who were seeking more ways to support the *Find Book Joy* mission to increase equitable access to book ownership for children in economically disadvantaged communities. The Amazon wish list had been curated by the researcher to increase access to inclusive books.

The *Find Book Joy* books that were provided to children at this book fair were sourced from well-resourced families who partnered with this endeavor to share their existing book wealth in hopes of providing equitable reading opportunities and increased choice in book selection to children most in need. This book wealth was then sorted and categorized by volunteers for distribution to book fair attendees eager to own their own books. Since literacy is a civil right that should not be restricted by financial limitations or family income, literacy-centered events that provide free books to children are one sustainable way for the community to expand equitable access to book ownership. In this joyful endeavor, young readers were provided with the gift of choice in book selection without a cost barrier or restrictions on access due to limited economic resources. Further, unlimited choice in book selection at these literacy celebrations provides children with pride in ownership, agency, autonomy, a sense of dignity, expanded reading engagement, and increased motivation to read.

Representation and Inclusion Criteria for *Find Book Joy* Books. Keeping in mind the identities of the young readers in communities and schools served by *Find Book Joy*, a curated

list of children's books that reflect authentic, multifaceted portrayals of diversity that span a broad continuum of backgrounds, identities, cultures, languages, abilities, and experiences was developed by the researcher from the literature and sent to potential book donors in advance of the book fair (Ford et al., 2019; Hayden & Prince, 2023; Heineke et al., 2022; Page, 2017; Pennell et al., 2018; Kleekamp & Zapata, 2019). The *Find Book Joy* inclusive approach is framed in a keen understanding of the critical necessity of children seeing their diverse lived experiences represented in the books they read and the books that are read to them.

Book Fair Setting and Logistics. The *Find Book Joy* book fair was held in the library of the Title I elementary school during a school day and each grade level (Pre-K to Grade Six) visited to receive free books. Twelve tables were filled with a wide assortment of children's books that encompassed picture books, early readers, chapter books, graphic novels, and informational texts. The children were enthusiastic young readers who entered the library with high energy and bright smiles, eager to explore the books and grateful to choose their own books to take home. In an example of how choice and preferences inform individuality as a reader, many children inquired about specific book titles and/or authors and asked for books that reflected their personal topics of fascination, such as dinosaurs, sharks, dancers, astronomy, Disney, and Dr. Seuss. The book fair participants appreciated the opportunity to take their books home and often asked, "*Can I keep it?*" about the books they chose from the hundreds of books available. In one example, a child was overheard asking the school principal if he could keep the book that he had chosen. When she replied "*Yes, of course!*," this excited young reader asked, "*Forever?!*" At the end of the school day, the principal expressed that several teachers reported that the children were so excited to read their new books once they had returned to their classrooms. In addition, the principal shared that many young readers asked if they could keep

their new books and not have to return them to school the next day. When the children learned that the books belonged to them, they were elated to take their selections home, highlighting the powerful connection between book ownership and book joy.

Book Joy and Book Ownership at No Cost. Children at the book fair experienced pure book joy in response to the promise of book ownership and felt proud to be able to choose their own books to take home. Throughout the event, young readers were beaming with pride to share their chosen books with their teachers and peers. These experiences exemplified how well-organized book fairs that provide inclusive books to children support autonomy in book selection that builds confidence. As phase one data analysis indicated, unlimited access to books of choice at no-cost book fairs allows all children, regardless of family income, to exercise agency in book selection and experience free book joy without the burden of a cost barrier. Once children understood that there was no monetary expense to take home books from the book fair, they felt free to explore the books without cost restrictions.

In addition, another important gain from this joyful literacy-centered event is that children were provided with time to learn about their preferences in books to read and discover new genres, titles, series, and authors for the first time. Offering children the gift of time to peruse the *Find Book Joy* collection and select books at their own pace is imperative for young readers to expand the knowledge that shapes their individuality as readers. On this day at this particular event, the priority was pure book joy and finding books of choice based on personal preferences, rather than meeting reading level requirements or comprehension assessments. The infinite possibilities for children to expand their reader identities and increase their knowledge of genres by having the ability to choose freely from 1200 books at no cost was a remarkable experience for all involved. This joyful event provided an entire school of eager young readers in an

economically disadvantaged community with free access to an abundance of books, choice in book selection, and the opportunity to take home books and read books of choice without limits on time, all core social justice practices that support children's reader identity development (Mackey, 2022; Massey et al., 2021).

In summary, the primary factors that contribute to reader identity development, such as choice, agency, delight, motivation, independence, knowledge of preferences, and an understanding of the value of books and reading (Mackey, 2022), were all present at this joyful literacy celebration. Overall, with limited time to plan and execute an event on this scale, and with 1200 books for 300-plus children, the *Find Book Joy* no-cost book fair was a resounding success in the most valuable metric that matters: the children all experienced abundant book joy and further defined their reader identities.

Children's Book Joy Experiences at the *Find Book Joy* Book Fair. In one example of how choice informs reader identity and fosters individuality as a reader, a child named Kayla was observed at the book fair sharing her personal reasons for selecting two of her books from the *Find Book Joy* book collection. The first book that she chose was *Jump at the Sun: The True Life Take of the Unstoppable Zora Neale Hurston* written by Alicia D. Williams and illustrated by Jacqueline Alcántara. This young reader shared that she noticed this book “*since the main character looks happy and she is jumping for joy on the cover.*” In response to a question about why she chose this book, Kayla expressed that she feels as joyful as this character on the book cover, since she had the opportunity to visit this book fair. As Kayla explored the illustrations in this book with her teacher, she learned that this main character conquered racial, gender, educational, and financial barriers to become a renowned writer, anthropologist, and folklorist. Kayla chose a second book, *Rocket Says: SPEAK UP!*, written by Nathan Bryon and illustrated

by Dapo Adeola. This book tells the story of a child named Rocket who finds out that the library in her town is closing due to reduced funding. Motivated by Rosa Parks' activism, Rocket mobilizes her peers, and the four of them stage a peaceful protest that raises awareness and funds to save their treasured library. Kayla shared that she chose this book from the book fair selections “*since the main character has courage and confidence.*” During the book fair, Kayla expressed to the principal that she has learned only recently how to “speak up,” and she chose this book to learn how to speak up more to self-advocate. The illustrations prompted this young reader, who has a facial difference, to share that she had been bullied at her previous school due to her physical appearance. In a personal disclosure, Kayla expressed that since she transferred to her current elementary school, she has been accepted in ways that she had never experienced before in her life. The empowering cover art, as well as the illustrations inside the books, resonated with this young reader and resulted book joy as she selected these two stories about self-advocacy, optimism, hope, and resilience from the *Find Book Joy* book collection. This encounter clearly demonstrates how an individual’s prior knowledge and lived experiences can inform their book selections, fostering meaningful connections.

In another informal observation, Maria, a first grader, chose the picture book biography *A Girl Named Rosita: The Story of Rita Moreno: Actor, Singer, Dancer, Trailblazer!* written by Anika Aldamuy Denise and illustrated by Leo Espinosa about the life of Academy Award winning actor Rita Moreno. Maria excitedly looked through every page and smiled broadly while evaluating this book. She exuberantly shared the vibrant illustrations of the main character dancing in exquisite costumes with the researcher. In a brilliant and unforgettable moment of pure book joy, Maria hugged the book tightly and began dancing around in wide circles with the *Rosita* book held securely in her arms. Maria blissfully expressed, “*I love to dance, just like she*

does!" and shared that she could not wait to get home to read the book with her mother. This young reader was bilingual in English and Spanish, as evidenced by her conversations about books with her peers. It is possible that the identity of the protagonist in this story, Rita Moreno, in her appearance and her childhood experiences, provided a connection for this young reader, as she could see the main characters' experiences as mirrors to her own life (Sims Bishop, 1990). Maria's personal reading encounter and others at this book joy event exemplified this study's findings in action—demonstrating in practice how increased access to book ownership and choice in book selection can expand book joy experiences and transform reader identity development for children in economically disadvantaged communities.

Improvements in Access to Inclusive Books and the Role of Parental Involvement

While this inquiry examined the indispensable value of access, choice, and home support in children's reader identity development as well as the critical role of inclusive books, the complexities of these dimensions required a closer look at the intersection of access and inclusive books and a detailed analysis of the primary factor of parental involvement.

Inclusive Books: Found in the Find Book Joy Collection vs. Missing in the Classroom

In this study, prior to the interviews, child participants were provided with independent choice in book selection from a wide range of options in the *Find Book Joy* collection. While culturally responsive books that feature authentic representations of diverse backgrounds and lived experiences were included as *part* of this expansive collection, there were many book choices, such as informational texts and chapter books, that were *not* considered inclusive books by criteria defined in the literature. However, when given the freedom to choose, the *Find Book Joy* book recipients overwhelmingly selected books that featured culturally representative characters and lived experiences that mirrored their own lives in uniquely personalized ways. Authentically

representative children's books were the first choice for every child participant in this study, as they explored engaging stories that featured multifaceted characters who navigated the many complexities that accompany diverse identities, faced adversity, and overcame hardship.

Providing children with choices in culturally responsive books is a practice rooted in equity that centers social justice values in meeting the needs of all children and helping them recognize, affirm, and celebrate their identities (Muhammad, 2020). Literacy advocates, educators, community partners, and parents seeking to increase access to book ownership for children in communities with limited financial resources must provide texts that feature authentic representation of individuals with diverse and complex identities to fully capture the intersectionality of lived experiences (Heineke et al., 2022). When presented with opportunities to choose their own books without meeting any external expectation or demand, children in this study decisively selected mirror books that affirmed their diverse identities (Sims Bishop, 1990).

This informative experience raises the following concerns for future study: What happens in classrooms when book collections are **not** inclusive? How can one measure what is lost when children are not provided with inclusive books that feature authentic representations of diverse identities and lived experiences? Finally, how much of the book joy that was experienced by children in this study stemmed from young readers feeling affirmed and validated by characters whose identities, cultures, family lives, challenges, and achievements reflected their own – representation that books centered on White, ableist, mainstream narratives could not provide?

Given all that was explored in this study and gained from the literature and data analysis, one may infer that the exceptionally heightened motivation to read, markedly increased reading volume, and expansive reading engagement that were observed in both phases of this study may not have been achieved had the children not been provided with access to inclusive books and the

ability to choose these books without adult-imposed expectations. Therefore, the question of access to books, in this investigation, was intimately linked to access to *inclusive books*, as the children connected with characters in life-altering ways that transcended the mainstream narrative.

Educator Resources to Select Inclusive Books. Keeping in mind that authentic representation of individuals with diverse identities and complex lived experiences are key when selecting texts that accurately represent the intersectionality of human experience (Heineke et al., 2022), book choices that are provided to children must uphold the values of inclusion. To increase awareness of inclusive books and expand classroom libraries, educators can rely on well-informed recommendations from the team at *DiverseBookFinder* (<https://diversebookfinder.org/>) that has evaluated thousands of children's books showcasing BIPOC representation, specifically highlighting books with Black, Indigenous, and People of Color characters that have been published or distributed in the United States. *DiverseBookFinder* began cataloging and analyzing picture books in 2002 and recently broadened its scope to include additional types of books, such as early readers, chapter books, middle-grade fiction, and young adult titles published from 2022 onward. This useful site is a supportive resource designed to catalog and analyze culturally diverse children's literature by offering tools to assess books based on cultural representation.

An additional resource for evaluating culturally relevant texts is the helpful rubric by Sharma and Christ (2017), included as Appendix K. This practical resource addresses the criteria for evaluating inclusive books for cultural relevance and offers ways to understand the multiplicities and intersectionality of characters' varied identities. Further, the rubric provided by Kleekamp and Zapata (2019) in Appendix L offers evaluative criteria and guiding questions for how to select picture books for children that feature authentic characterization of disability, most notably for picture books that feature children who navigate diverse abilities in their own lives.

Finally, the Images and Encounters Profile by Blaska (2003) that can be found in Appendix M provides educators with a set of thoughtful questions to guide their decisions on selecting books that feature characters with a range of capabilities. These helpful resources can assist educators seeking to evaluate books to ensure cultural integrity and equity-centered representation.

Parental Support vs. Parental Vulnerabilities: The Impact on Reader Identity Development

Children raised in supportive home literacy environments, with access to books and reading materials and caregivers who are willing and able to read to them, attain higher levels of reading achievement when compared to young readers who lack the same literacy support (Canfield et al., 2020b; Neuman & Moland, 2019; Tichnor-Wagner et al., 2016). Reading to a child at home is the single most important determinant for their future reader identity development, as children who are read to by their parents and caregivers learn that books are important and reading has value (Canfield et al., 2020b). Moreover, print-rich homes send the non-verbal message that books are an essential part of everyday life. When parents and caregivers engage children in reading experiences and participate in interactive conversations about books within the home setting, these practices nurture young readers' curiosity and help them develop as inquisitive learners (Bettencourt et al., 2020; Canfield et al., 2020b; Johnston, 2019). Further, these shared reading encounters are situated in a safe and welcoming social context that promotes interaction and conveys the importance of literacy to children. However, persistent barriers exist to providing children with a supportive home literacy environment that extend well beyond the financial component to include systemic issues such as parental reading vulnerabilities and intergenerational mindsets about reading to children at home. These obstacles require parental support and education so that children can develop strong reader identities.

Parental Support in Reader Identity Development. When early childhood reading experiences begin at home from birth, well prior to kindergarten (Anderson et al., 2019; Bettencourt et al., 2020; Canfield et al., 2020b), children demonstrate a strong interest in books and reading, build background knowledge, develop storytelling skills, view reading as enjoyable, acquire new vocabulary, and gain knowledge of print concepts (Anderson et al., 2019; Bettencourt et al., 2020; Canfield et al., 2020b; Fagan, 2022; Neuman & Knapczyk, 2020; Neuman & Moland, 2019). Moreover, when parents and caregivers enjoy reading to their children and see these encounters as pleasurable experiences, their children initiate interest in reading on their own from an early age (Raban, 2022). This home support is paramount, as it fosters book joy early on in life and is invaluable in building children's reader identities.

In homes where encouragement to read is provided to young readers by parents and caregivers alongside generous access to books and literacy materials, children see themselves as readers from an early age. Young readers develop confidence and self-reliance in their reader identities well prior to kindergarten in homes that provide a supportive literacy-centered framework. Engaging in book discussions and shared reading experiences, providing books in every room, setting aside time for home reading routines, receiving books as gifts, co-writing books together, visiting the library, and embarking on road trips that include favorite books are just some of the ways parents in supportive home literacy environments can nurture their children's nascent self-perceptions as readers. These early interactive reading experiences convey to children that reading has value, a primary feature of reader identity development.

In this study, parents who provided support for home reading experiences, enrolled their children in *Find Book Joy* and the *Imagination Library*, found innovative ways for their children to access books at no cost, and, most importantly, read to their children at home were invested in

their children's love for books and their future reading achievement. As one parent expressed, "*I want him to love books as much as I do.*" Some parents openly shared that they were not read to when they were children and, due to intergenerational struggles and societal inequities, they did not own books as children. In contrast to this deprivation of books and literacy resources and in response to their childhood experiences, they became determined to read to their own children, and to intentionally change the enduring patterns and behaviors that had existed for generations.

Parental Vulnerabilities in Reading at Home to Children. In contrast to supportive home literacy environments, the absence of parental support and shared reading experiences—due to a complex constellation of factors—can have lasting consequences for a child's reader identity development. The literature has identified how the presence or absence of a literacy-focused home environment can lead to monumental differences in how children view the importance of reading in their lives. Factors such as parental reading vulnerabilities, competing demands on time, urgent survival needs, language barriers, and intergenerational influences on home reading practices significantly curtail the opportunities for parents and children to engage in reading together at home (Canfield et al., 2020b; Williams & Lerner, 2019). Moreover, parents' previous lived experiences may alter their perceptions of the importance of reading to their children, as some parents were not read to at home or supported as children in their own reader identity development. Further, parents who experience vulnerability about their limitations as readers may feel hesitant or insecure to read aloud to their own children, resulting in strikingly limited shared book interactions and joyful home reading experiences.

Parental Responses to Study Recruitment Efforts. In an example of how limited parental support can impact a child's potential for reading engagement, recruitment for child participants in this study was challenging at times, as several parents of *Find Book Joy* book

recipients were less than motivated to agree to their child's participation, citing the requirement of their children reading their *Find Book Joy* books at home as a deterrent. Even with books provided for free and the cost barrier removed entirely, reading was not always prioritized at home due to a range of complex reasons. Further, some parents of *Find Book Joy* recipients asked the researcher *why* the children's books were sent home, and one parent inquired if the purpose of sending books home was for the child to read them. In addition, some parents and caregivers shared that the *Find Book Joy* books were not kept safe and had somehow gotten lost and the child enrolled in the program had never read the books. In response to lost books, the researcher invited the children to choose a second set of free books from the *Find Book Joy* collection, yet those books were not accepted by parents and the interviews never materialized. Finally, several instances resulted in last-minute cancellations of the interviews due to children reportedly not finding or not having read their *Find Book Joy* books in advance. Reading was not prioritized in every home due to competing demands and broader social challenges.

Since these young children were in the elementary grades and in early developmental stages, the value of reading and the commitment to enrollment in the book access program were shared responsibilities with their parents and caregivers. However, complex factors that were framed by decades of societal inequities contributed to children not receiving the home support they needed to develop confidence and independence as readers. Book joy experiences are substantially limited when a child is isolated in their fervent hopes for book exploration. While reader identity development in the context of access and choice is primarily an individualized pursuit, certain instrumental sociocultural contexts, such as their home and school environments, factor decisively into children's self-perceptions as readers. The substantial barriers to reading to children at home that have been illuminated in this study must be met with community support

for parents and caregivers that provide not only access to books, but access to coaching, mentoring, and education. Further, to confront ideologies and shift mindsets that may be entrenched in intergenerational beliefs about reading as the school's responsibility, guidance must be provided to parents and caregivers that models the home-school partnership.

In contrast, in homes of study participants where reading and books were supported and valued, parents eagerly responded to the researcher's initial introductory email about the study and its parameters. This strong motivation to agree to their child's participation in the study, often accompanied by expressions of gratitude to the researcher for having been invited to join the project, was clearly mirrored by their children's enthusiasm to become involved. Parents and caregivers who were excited to learn more about this endeavor were accompanied by equally enthusiastic young readers who could not wait to share their impressions of their *Find Book Joy* books with the researcher. Moreover, parents expressed their involvement in shared reading experiences at home and provided their impressions of their children's *Find Book Joy* inclusive books. There was a direct relationship between the level of parental involvement and excitement for study participation and each child's motivation to join. While the many meaningful gains that resulted from this study primarily stemmed from access and choice, the crucial role of parental support cannot be overlooked as a critical influence in shaping children's reader identities. In summary, parental support imbued many levels of this study and has been identified as a complexity that may not have been evidenced without deeper examination.

Limitations of the Study

This section outlines the study's limitations and identifies variables that may have influenced the scope and interpretation of the research findings, such as small sample sizes for the literacy advocates and the child participants, the absence of a quantitative data collection

method such as a survey, and decisions to omit certain data sources, and how these decisions may have affected the scope of the study and the potential to generalize results.

Sample Size and Scope Limitations

The study encompassed two sets of data collection, identifying the distinct perspectives of the adult literacy advocates and child book recipients. Although the 20 literacy advocates contributed a range of diverse insights, findings could not be generalized to broader populations due to the limited sample sizes in both phases, as the perspectives captured may not have fully represented the diverse experiences of all potential participants (Fraenkel et al., 2019). Further, the narrative research methodology in the current study provided highly individualized responses from the children, offering personal insights into their reading encounters with inclusive books and their interpretations of the key factors in reader identity development. Although the study included interviews with only 20 literacy advocates and eight child participants, their insights were instrumental to the strength of this investigation. Further, the young readers' personal contributions in particular created nuanced understandings that can inform future research on the roles of access and choice in reader identity development for children in economically disadvantaged communities.

Methodological Considerations

The narrative research methodology chosen for this qualitative study, while valuable for centering participants' voices in their lived experiences, resulted in certain limitations. If this study had included a quantitative measure such as a survey for both the literacy advocates and the *Find Book Joy* recipients, for instance, the scope of the investigation may have been expanded by capturing a wider range of perspectives. Moreover, had a survey been utilized, the survey data would have been analyzed by statistical techniques that identified patterns and

correlations among variables that may have revealed broader patterns and trends across a larger population. In this inquiry, the inclusion of a quantitative instrument could have complemented the narrative data by incorporating measurable variables. Finally, while the narrative research approach in the current study shaped the interpretation of findings by focusing on an individual storytelling model that centered participants' voices, a quantitative instrument, in contrast, would have provided statistical correlations, numerical patterns, and universally applicable trends.

Recommendations for Future Research

The findings of this study have highlighted key areas for further exploration in the field of literacy education, particularly regarding the roles of access and choice in reader identity development for children in economically disadvantaged communities. Future research could build on these insights to examine the broader implications of the study findings and explore strategies for sustaining and expanding these practices in equity-centered classrooms.

Reader Identity Development through the Eyes of Young Readers

Children's voices were positioned at the heart of the current study, which aimed to center children as authors of their own stories, as they provided thoughtful counternarratives to mainstream perspectives. The intentional decision to conduct a second research phase that centered on listening to and elevating children's voices resulted in a deeper and more nuanced understanding of how their identities as readers were informed by increased access to book ownership and choice in book selection. Moreover, encouraging children to make independent choices and decisions about the books they read for this study was an important way to honor their voices and respect their autonomy and independence as valued participants.

Future research could be expanded in scope if children were centered as active participants in the investigations of subjects that focused on improving their lives. The

determination to share the children's personal narratives in this study honored their authentic lived experiences and the knowledge that was gained from these important encounters. All too often, adults conduct research about children that is framed by assumptions about children's perspectives in relation to their reader identity development and many other topics of interest to young readers. As Fane et al. (2016) suggest, despite notable progress in valuing the importance of honoring children's voice in qualitative research, the "how to" for implementing research methods and ethical considerations that involve young children is an ongoing process that continues to unfold. This gap is significant, as it illuminates the need to expand the fairly limited body of research on how to increase considerations for children's involvement in qualitative research, which provides a thorough exploration of individual experiences.

In this study, the term *children's voice* referred to "children's expressions, perspectives, experiences, attitudes, views, and beliefs that are expressed through verbal and non-verbal communication" (Sun et al., 2023, p. 2). When children are centered in research, their voices are elevated, their authority as readers is acknowledged (Davis, 1992), and they are trusted to share their interpretations without adults framing their expectations. Fane et al. (2016) recommend recognizing and acknowledging child participants as credible sources of knowledge. As Malaguzzi (1994) asserts, providing space for learning to unfold while observing children may shift adults' perspectives. Most importantly, listening to children's voices in the current study often resulted in brilliant surprises, such as the knowledge gained about their individuality as readers and the constellation of factors that contributed to their reading purposes. Additionally, the expansion of imagination emerged unexpectedly as a purpose for reading in phase two, as this concept was not a part of any of the scripted interview questions. Reading to explore and enjoy the many wonders of the imagination surfaced in multiple child participants' narratives as

a key source of reading purpose and book joy experiences. These compelling revelations demonstrate how children's voices illuminated many facets of their realities that may have remained hidden without their active participation.

In a narrative research model, in particular, there is an authenticity to centering children's voices, to learn from them firsthand, in their own words, that transcends any assumptions that could be made about their lived experiences. If future investigations could situate children at the center, with full adherence to ethical considerations and proper protocols, the directions that the research could take and the possibilities for discoveries would be expansive and revealing.

Finally, future research endeavors in reader identity development that explore choices in inclusive books should involve the perspectives of children who navigate diversity in their own lives, as their views on how inclusive literature that features authentic representation of diversity enhances their lives are critical to moving forward. Children's voices should be valued in decisions about books to include in classroom libraries, so that the selections chosen encompass a wide range of identities, backgrounds, and lived experiences.

Future Method of Data Collection: Story Circles (Parks, 2023)

The initial data collection plan for this study included the Story Circle method (Parks, 2023), an innovative research methodology that focuses on participants' narrative voice, for both phase of data collection and analysis. Parks (2023) explains that the Story Circle method as narrative research serves as a valuable approach for studying identity development, as it focuses on gathering and sharing individuals' stories and life experiences. In thoughtful consideration, the researcher reached the decision not to pursue the Story Circles method (Parks, 2023) for the current study, as the theoretical framework centered the individual child at the heart of the study. Therefore, it was determined that interviews as a data collection method were distinctly aligned

with this study that foregrounded the lived experiences of each individual reader and centered individual interpretation at its core (Rosenblatt, 1978).

In future studies, however, Story Circles (Parks, 2023), would be well-situated for a narrative research endeavor that explores reader identity development, as narrative research can also focus on the interpretation of human experience by examining the personal stories that individuals tell in a social context (Parks, 2023). In adult data collection, the Story Circles (Parks, 2023) would resemble a traditional focus group, with the participants responding to prompts and sharing their stories and insights with each other within a group setting. This methodology would result in large quantities of qualitative data to explore patterns and themes. According to Parks (2023), in a previous study where the Story Circle method (2023) was implemented, more than two hundred anecdotes were collected from six one-hour sessions. If the Story Circles model (Parks, 2023) is implemented in future studies with young readers, child participants would first listen to a story read aloud by the researcher from an inclusive book in a group setting, and then interact with each other in a small group by responding to a series of prompts about the book that elicited personal storytelling opportunities. These lively data collection events, shaped as focus groups, would extend the narrative research model through social interactions. In summary, the Story Circle model (Parks, 2023) offers an alternative narrative research methodology to explore how access to book ownership and choice in book selection can shape reader identity development in future educational research.

Future Method of Data Collection: Visual Art Interpretations

In future studies, a content analysis of visual art that represents the child participants' individual interpretations from their reading experiences with *Find Book Joy* books could be included as an additional data source (Pantaleo, 2023). In this model, researchers could invite

children to create visual art interpretations following their interviews about reader identity development. The choice of visual art as a method of meaning making to connect to children's individual reading experiences is aligned with the Transactional Theory of Reading (Rosenblatt, 1978), as this theoretical lens is focused on the reciprocal and interactive relationship between the reader and the text. Since visual art is individualized, participatory, and immersive, this method of data collection would provide an opportunity for content analysis that is framed by the principles of the Transactional Theory of Reading (Rosenblatt, 1978). In future research endeavors, it would be imperative to trust the child participants as competent and capable meaning-makers and to value their artwork as significant (Papandreou, 2014).

Recommendations for Future Find Book Joy Book Fairs

The December 2024 *Find Book Joy* book fair event included children of every grade level and aspired to accommodate all of the students' visits prior to the holiday break. This decision by school administration resulted in all 300 students visiting the book fair in one afternoon. Consequently, the children's individual interactions about books seemed compromised by time constraints. Since choice in book selection is a sacred opportunity for exploration, it must be honored by providing adequate time for intentional decisions. While the children were all grateful to have the opportunities to select their books of choice to take home, future book distribution events could be organized more effectively to optimize children's experiences.

In one recommendation for future practice, the available children's books could be categorized by genre or by grade level or by topic rather than presenting assorted books on tables, thereby providing a more structured and cohesive framework. However, the overall objective was met and exceeded, as the *Find Book Joy* book fair endeavor succeeded in getting as many books into the hands of as many children as possible. In future book fair endeavors,

open communication about how to organize the books for children more effectively would be recommended to school administration. Additional future plans may include recruitment of parent volunteers to assist with the organizational efforts required to properly sort and categorize 1200 children's books. Alternatively, children could attend the next *Find Book Joy* book fair in small groups and be provided with ample time and opportunities to explore books, browse the collection, request preferences, and share book recommendations with each other. This type of informal book talk that takes place in social interactions allows children to share, recommend, and discuss books with peers and can help to build communities of readers (Cremin et al., 2014). Choice in book selection is a core value of the *Find Book Joy* program, as protecting children's rights to choose their own books creates space for curiosity and book exploration and provides them with opportunities to explore preferences that may be instrumental in their lives.

Conclusion

In summary, the current study explored how infinite book joy experiences can be discovered when children are provided with opportunities for access to book ownership and choice in book selection. Loris Malaguzzi, the Italian early childhood educator and philosopher regarded as the father of the Reggio Emilia approach, strongly believed in incorporating joy in all learning environments, most notably in those that involve children. Malaguzzi (1994) trusted children as capable, competent, and curious learners who are active participants in their own learning. While the guiding principle of his approach, *nothing without joy*, is widely credited to Malaguzzi (1994), he often acknowledged its origins in the work of French philosopher Michel de Montaigne (Reggio Emilia Australia Information Exchange, n.d.).

This core value of *nothing without joy* was evident throughout the current study, as it was adapted to suit *book joy*, since children actively engaged with choosing their own books and

joyfully exploring their book selections in ways that revealed their curious and inquisitive minds.

Once access to books and choice in book selection were provided, children led the way to discovering their individuality as readers through self-guided journeys imbued with their personal interests and knowledge of preferences as they made autonomous decisions that shaped their reading purposes. Throughout these enriching literary experiences, children became immersed in their book joy experiences as they explored their inclusive books, expanded their individuality, and realized their potential as confident, independent readers.

This investigation of how increased access to books and choice in book selection, particularly inclusive books, could intersect to transform reader identity development for children in economically disadvantaged communities resulted in rich multidimensional outcomes that welcomed young readers into the captivating realm of literary exploration. Findings indicated that when access and choice were integrated early in children's lives with home support and community involvement, these factors played instrumental roles in the formation of their reader identity development. Moreover, equitable access to book ownership and choice in book selection resulted in increased reading volume and motivation to read, key elements in reading engagement, an essential feature in reader identity development. In addition, pride in book ownership resulted from providing children with access and choice, which led to abundant book joy experiences that empowered children to create their own personal book collections. Consequently, children joyfully and proudly identified as book collectors and curated their own home libraries with books of choice, thereby strengthening their self-perceptions as readers. Further, access to book ownership expanded children's individuality as readers, offering them multiple opportunities to explore books to cultivate their personal interests, learn about genres, and discover their individual reading preferences.

Access and choice opened doors for children to explore their unique reasons for reading books, including *what, when, where, and why* they read. These varied dimensions illuminated the authentic individuality in each young reader that was shaped by access and choice. To continue, the freedom to choose books from a wide assortment of free available options offered children the possibilities to read for different purposes. While some children chose books to learn how to improve as a reader or to use their reading strategies, other young readers selected books that entertained them and expanded their imaginations. Moreover, some young readers who experienced book ownership and self-selected their own books read to acquire new knowledge or gain information from informational texts. Finally, other child participants read to expand their social-emotional skills by developing empathy for the characters in their inclusive books. All of these purposes for reading fostered children's reader identity development in meaningful ways.

In closing, the many authors and illustrators whose inclusive books were featured in this study provided the transformative framework for young readers to want to read more books, to expand their identities as readers, and to experience the pure elation that resulted from their book joy experiences. This investigation is valuable as it centered children's voices in their reading encounters and demonstrated the importance of including young readers in qualitative research endeavors. In this study, children boldly led the way on their paths to self-discovery and identity exploration. Finally, research findings demonstrated that fostering access to book ownership and choice in book selection for all children across all socioeconomic backgrounds aligns with the belief that joy—in this case, *book joy*—is vital to transforming reader identity development.

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Appendix A: Northeastern University IRB Protocol Approval

Northeastern

NOTIFICATION OF IRB ACTION: Protocol Approved

February 28, 2023

IRB #: 23-02-21

Principal Investigator(s): Wendy Crocker & Carolyn Polchinski

Department: CPS

Title of Project: Redistribution of Book Wealth

Informed Consent: verbal consent script & use of photos consent

Approval Status: Approved

DHHS Review Category: EXEMPT, CATEGORY #2
Revised Common Rule 45CFR46.104(d)(2)(ii)*Human Subject Research
Protection*Mail Stop 560-177
360 Huntington Avenue
Boston, MA 02115617.373.7570
fax 617.373.4595
research.northeastern.edu/hsrp/**This approval applies to the protection of human subjects only. It does not apply to any other university approvals that may be necessary.****No further action or IRB oversight is required, as long as the project remains the same. However, you must inform this office of any changes in procedures involving human subjects. Changes to the current research protocol could result in a reclassification of the study and further review by the IRB.**

Appendix B: Northeastern University IRB Modification Approval



Northeastern

NOTIFICATION OF IRB ACTION Modification Approval

4/3/2023

| | |
|-----------------------------------|--|
| IRB #: | CPS23-02-21 |
| Principal Investigator(s): | Noor Ali, Carolyn Polchinski |
| Department: | CPS |
| Title of Project: | Increased Access to Book Ownership |
| Modification: | Change of PI (from Wendy Crocker), Change Title, Refocused purpose statement and research question |
| Updated Documents: | Updated Application, Updated Recruitment Letters, Interview and Focus Group Protocols, Photo Voice Protocol, Photo Voice Consent, Updated Participant Info Sheet |
| Human Subject Research Protection | DHHS Review Category: Exempt |

Mail Stop 560-177
360 Huntington Avenue
Boston, MA 02115

617.373.7570
fax 617.373.4595

research.northeastern.edu/hsrp/

This approval applies to the protection of human subjects only. It does not apply to any other university approvals that may be necessary.

No further action or IRB oversight is required, as long as the project remains the same. However, you must inform this office of any changes in procedures involving human subjects. Changes to the current research protocol could result in a reclassification of the study and further review by the IRB.

Appendix C: Widener University Institutional Review Board Approval



Widener University

Widener University Institutional Review Board

Memorandum

October 26, 2024

To : Carolyn Polchinski and Project Team

From: Barbara J. Patterson, PhD, ANEF, FAAN

Associate Dean for Scholarship and Research
Widener University Institutional Review Board

Date: 10/26/2024 7:30:06 PM

RE: FINDING BOOK JOY: THE PATH TO DEFINING A READER IDENTITY

This letter serves to inform you that your **Research Application ID # 365-25 was reviewed and approved AS-SUBMITTED** by the Widener University Institutional Review Board (IRB).

Download [the Research Status Form](#) and save for later submission. This form is submitted prior to the time your Research Study expires.

Your authorization to solicit participants is in effect until **2025-10-26** and is eligible at that time for potential renewal. Upon completion of your research:

- If you have not already, download and complete the [Research Status Form](#) .
- [Submit the completed form to the following link](#) .

Resources to support your project including forms can be found on the IRB University Office webpage. If you have any questions, please submit them formally with any supporting materials required here <https://forms.office.com/r/dizRH3w3Eq> .

Institutional Review Board
Widener University
One University Place
Chester, PA 19013

Appendix D: Widener University Child Assent Form



Widener University

Children's Assent for Youth Ages 7–11

Widener University Child Assent (The Child Agreement) Form

Study Title: Finding Book Joy: The Path to Defining a Reader Identity

Widener University IRB Protocol Number _____

Hello _____,

Your mother has said that it will be OK for you to join a reading project with me. This project is called a “study.” First, I would like to tell you about it so you can decide if you will agree to join.

If you have any questions, you can ask me. You can call me Miss Carolyn. I help children learn more about books they like to read and give them more books. Maybe you remember me from meeting me at the *Find Book Joy* book fair when I gave you new books.

What is this study about?

I would like to learn more about children and the books they like to read and what books are their favorites. I would like to learn more about the enjoyment of reading.

What will happen?

You will get some books from me to read at home. Next, I will visit you on Zoom, and we will talk about the books that you read. You can bring the books with you to our visit to help answer my questions. I will record what you tell me about the books on Zoom.

After we talk, I will ask you to draw a picture and tell me about the books that you read.

Do I have to join the study? No, you don't have to join if you don't want to join. If you do join the study, you can stop at any time. No one will be upset. If you decide to stop answering questions, you will still get books from me.

If you have questions or don't like something, please tell your Mom or tell Miss Carolyn. If you don't understand something in the book or don't understand my questions, please ask me for help.

Who is in charge of the study? The person in charge of the study is me, Miss Carolyn.

OK, I have talked about the project, and you have had some time to ask me questions.

By signing your name below, you are saying that you would like to be in this book project.

_____ Child's Signature _____ Date

_____ Name of Person Obtaining Assent

_____ Signature of Person Obtaining Assent _____ Date

- The person obtaining assent read the assent information to the child.
- The child read the assent him/herself

Appendix E: Widener University Informed Consent

Informed Consent

Widener University

Study Title: Finding Book Joy: The Path to Defining a Reader Identity

Widener University IRB Protocol Number _____

Investigator(s) Name: Carolyn Polchinski, a Doctoral Candidate in Educational Leadership at Widener University and the Founder of Find Book Joy. www.findbookjoy.org

Study Title: *Finding Book Joy: The Path to Defining a Reader Identity*

Purpose: The purpose of this study is to learn how giving children in communities with less resources more free books and choices in books they read can help their reading development.

My child is being asked to join the study because they are a recipient of free books from the *Find Book Joy* program, are in 1st, 2nd, 3rd, 4th, or 5th grade, can read independently, and can speak, read, and write in English.

My child attends a Connecticut public school that gets extra funding to help students. My child reads books at home from *Find Book Joy* and does not have many books at home to read other than the books from *Find Book Joy*. I understand that I will need to agree and give permission for my child to join the study.

Description of the Study:

If my child joins the study, they will read books at home that were given to them for free by the researcher. The researcher will give your child four new books for the purpose of this study. They will still receive more free books if they decide not to participate. There is no condition to participate in the study to receive books.

The Process Involved:

My child will have a 30-minute conversation with the researcher **ON ZOOM**. The interview will include questions about the books from the Find Book Joy program. After the interview, my child will be invited to create a picture to show what they learned from the books.

The study will require about 15 to 20 minutes of my child reading the Find Book Joy books at home each night for one to two weeks leading up to the researcher's library visit with my child.

This visit will include one 30-minute interview, and 10 to 15 minutes after the interview for my child to create a piece of artwork. My child's responses to the questions will be audio recorded.

I understand that there will be no cost to me related to study participation.

Risks and Discomforts:

My child's participation in this study is completely voluntary. My child will also have to agree to participate in this study in addition to my giving my consent.

I understand that my child might feel upset or stressed if they cannot answer the interview questions or if they think they will not receive more books if they do not answer questions.

If my child feels uncomfortable at any time, they can tell the researcher, take a break, skip questions, or stop being part of the study. If my child decides to leave the study, then all of their data will be deleted.

Another possible risk is that my child's information might not stay private. The researcher will do their best to protect my child's privacy.

My child's answers will be kept anonymous, and their real name or any other identifying details will **not** be used in this study. To protect my child's identity, the researcher will use fake names instead of real ones in any reports about the study.

The researcher will keep all the data on a computer that is protected with a password and stored in a locked cabinet at the researcher's home office. My child will be reminded that they can take a break or skip questions if they feel stressed or upset. They can also stop being part of the study at any time. If my child decides to leave the study, all of their data will be deleted.

Benefits:

There may be no direct benefits from participating in this study, but my child may develop a greater love for reading. The knowledge gained from this study could contribute to the researcher's understanding of childhood literacy development and the importance of giving all children opportunities to own their own books.

Alternatives to Participation:

The alternative to participating in this study is not participating. There is no penalty for choosing not to participate.

Confidentiality:

All documents and information related to this study will be kept private and confidential, following all federal, state, and local laws. The data from this study may be reviewed by the Widener University's Institutional Review Board to make sure the study has been completed correctly and has followed university rules and regulations. If the study is shared or published, my child's real name will **not** be used. All names will be protected by pseudonyms.

The information collected will be stored on a password-protected computer in a locked cabinet at the researcher's home office. My child's real name will not be used in any written documents.

The researcher will protect my child's privacy by using pseudonyms, or fake names, and by not including any details that could identify them. All research data will be stored securely, and only

authorized people will have access. The researcher will explain how my child's data will be used and who will have access to it. If I have any questions, I can ask the researcher to explain how they will keep the information private.

Optional Termination of Participation:

My child may choose to withdraw from this study at any time and without any reason without any penalty. If my child chooses to end their participation in this study, I will contact the researcher, and any data collected will be destroyed.

The researcher might end my child's participation if the study ends earlier than expected or if time runs out for the interviews due to unforeseen circumstances. If this happens, all data will be kept private and secure, and my child's identity will remain anonymous. The data will be protected and stored safely, as explained previously in this document.

My child's real name will **not** be used, and the data won't be analyzed or published unless I agree. If I prefer that my child's data not be used, I can tell the researcher, and it will be deleted from their records.

Compensation:

I understand that I will not receive any payment for being in this study. Participation in this study is strictly voluntary. There will be no cost to me for participating in this research.

Injury Compensation:

Neither Widener University nor any government or other agency funding this research project will provide special services, free care, or compensation for any injuries that may result from this research. I understand that treatment for such injuries will be at my expense and/or paid through my medical plan.

Questions:

All of my questions have been answered to my satisfaction and if I have further questions about this study, I may contact Carolyn Polchinski, at _____ or copolchinski@_____.

If I have any questions about the rights of research participants, I may call Widener University's Institutional Review Board at 610-499-4110 or email them at irb@widener.edu.

Voluntary Participation:

I understand that participation in this study is entirely voluntary, and refusal to participate will involve no penalty or loss of benefits. I am free to withdraw or discontinue my child's participation or to refuse consent at any time without penalty.

I voluntarily give my consent for my child to participate in this research study. I understand that I will receive a copy of this consent form.

Signatures:

Child Participant's Parent's Name (Print) _____

Child Participant's Parent's Signature _____ Date _____

I, the undersigned, certify that to the best of my knowledge, the subject signing this consent form has had the study fully and carefully explained by me and has been given an opportunity to ask any questions regarding the nature, risks, and benefits of participation in this study.

Investigator's Name (Print) _____

Investigator's Signature _____ Date _____

Widener University's IRB has approved the solicitation of participants for this study until: October 26, 2025.

Appendix F: Phase One Interview Protocol: Literacy Advocates

1. Why is book **choice** important for children?
2. How important is it for children in economically disadvantaged communities to **own** their own books?

Follow-up: What are some barriers to book ownership?

3. How would you suggest that we increase access to books for children in economically disadvantaged communities?
4. Why is it important for children to read culturally and linguistically diverse books?
5. What factors do you believe contribute to building an identity as a reader?

Follow-up: How important is representation in children's books in building this identity?

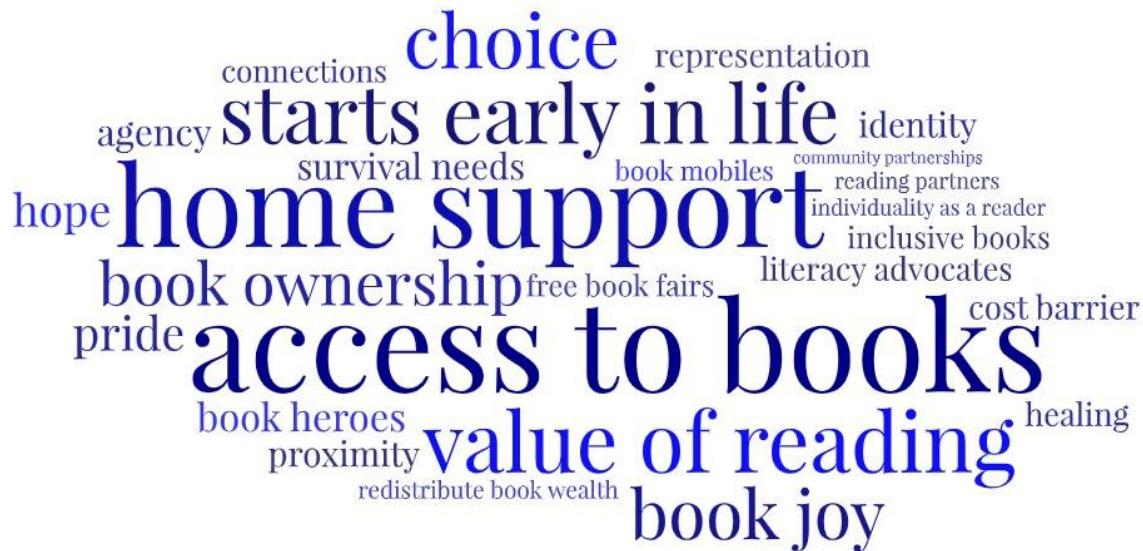
6. What do you see as the primary characteristics of a "reading culture"?
7. What do you believe are the factors that encourage children to read outside of school?
8. What have you learned from parents/caregivers about their perspectives on book ownership for their children?

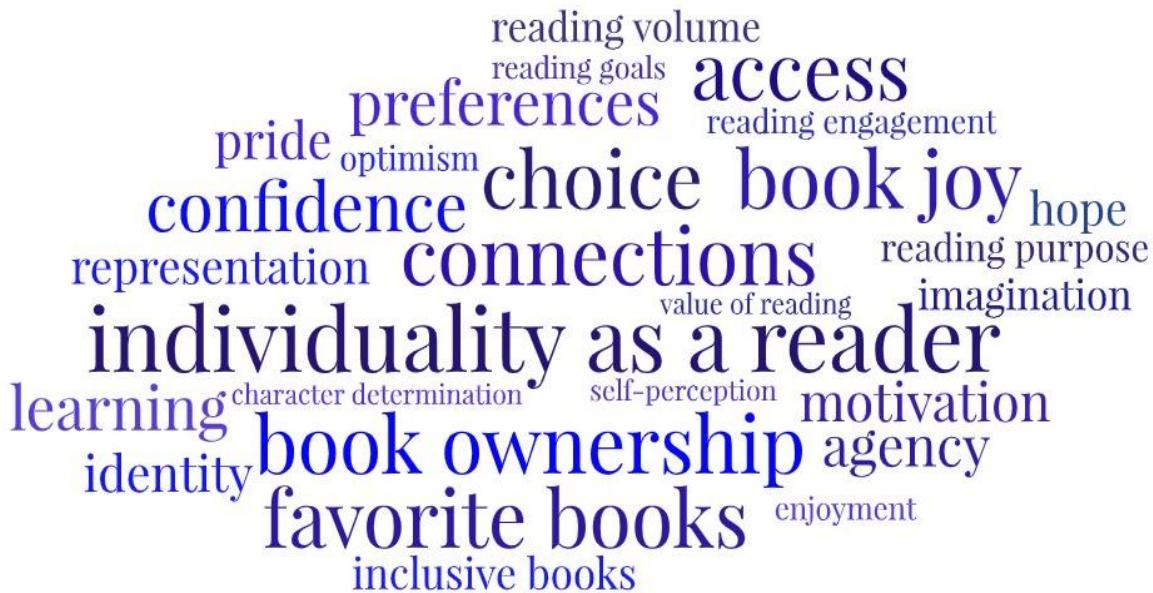
Follow-up: What are some ways that you have engaged parents and caregivers in their child(ren)'s literacy development?

9. If you could create a literacy workshop for parents/caregivers and their children, what would you include?
10. Tell me about a time when you saw the impact that **owning** a book had for a child.

Appendix G: Phase Two Interview Protocol: Child Participants

1. How did it feel when you were able to choose your own books from the many choices of books provided by *Find Book Joy*?
2. What types of books do you like to choose to read, and why?
3. How did it feel to know that you can keep your books from *Find Book Joy*? Do you have any favorite books that you like to read?
4. Is there a story that you can share about a time when you felt joyful when reading a book? What was it about that book that made you feel joyful?
5. Please tell me about a time that you wanted to read more books. What made you want to read more books?
6. How does it feel to be a book collector?

Appendix H: Word Cloud: Phase One Data Analysis

Appendix I: Word Cloud: Phase Two Data Analysis

Appendix J: Findings and Connections to the Theoretical Framework

Finding

Finding One: Access to book ownership and choice in book selection transform reader identity development for children in economically disadvantaged communities when home support and community support are provided to children as early in life as possible.

Finding Two: Access to book ownership and choice in book selection transform reader identity development for children in economically disadvantaged communities by increasing children's reading volume and motivation to read, key elements in reading engagement, an essential feature in reader identity development.

Finding Three: Access to book ownership and choice in book selection transform reader identity development by fostering pride in book ownership, which increases book joy experiences and empowers children to create their own personally curated book collections that strengthen their self-perceptions as readers.

Finding Four: Access to book ownership and choice in book selection transform reader identity development by providing children opportunities to expand their individuality as readers, cultivating personal interests and discovering their reading preferences, including the *what, when, where, and why* they read.

Connection to the Transactional Theory of Reading (Rosenblatt, 1978)

- Social and cultural contextual influences such as home and community support are crucial in shaping children's reading experiences and their reader identity development.
- This illustrates Rosenblatt's (1978) assertion that reading is not an isolated endeavor, but is embedded within social and cultural contexts.
- This finding aligns with the reciprocal interaction between the reader and text, a core principle of the Transactional Theory of Reading (Rosenblatt, 1978).
- Rosenblatt's (1978) asserts that prior knowledge and lived experiences inform the meaning that is created in the reading transaction (Davis, 1992).
- Book joy connects to the aesthetic stance, where reading is an immersive, imaginative, and participatory experience (Rosenblatt, 1978, 1995).
- Meaning making takes place through readers' personal engagement with texts, aligned with the Transactional Theory (Rosenblatt, 1978).
- Each reading experience is individualized, as meaning is interpreted through the reader's personal background, prior experiences, and interactions with the text (Rosenblatt, 1978).
- Narratives shared by the literacy advocates and the child participants were guided by the principles of the Transactional Theory of Reading, which centers the reader in the transaction (Rosenblatt, 1978, 1993).

Finding

Finding Five: Access to book ownership and choice in book selection center children's voices in their reading decisions, transforming reader identity development by fostering increased agency and independence as children define and pursue their individualized purposes for reading:

- (1) reading to learn to read or reading to improve as a reader
- (2) reading for entertainment and enjoyment, including use of the imagination
- (3) reading to acquire new knowledge or to gain information
- (4) reading to expand social/emotional skills.

Finding Six: Access to book ownership and choice in book selection transform reader identity development by offering children increased opportunities to read inclusive books that feature authentic representations of diverse lived experiences and individual reading encounters that:

- (1) nurture hope, resilience, and optimism and
- (2) develop meaningful connections that enhance book joy experiences and expand reading engagement.

Connection to the Transactional Theory of Reading (Rosenblatt, 1978)

- Children made meaning from their reading transactions (Rosenblatt, 1978) when they defined their individual purpose(s) for reading, most notably when they were given the opportunity to exercise agency to explore books and reach autonomous determinations.
- Young readers' independent decisions about their individualized purpose(s) for reading fostered their increased agency and confidence and reinforced their active roles in reading engagement. These gains align with the core principles of the Transactional Theory of Reading (Rosenblatt, 1978, 1995).
- In their decisions about reading purpose, children's intentions reflected the efferent stance, when they read to gain information, and the aesthetic stance, when they engaged deeply with the text in ways that were immersive and participatory, with emotional connections (Rosenblatt, 1978).
- This aligns with the meaning-making process that is central to the Transactional Theory (Rosenblatt, 1978), as inclusive narratives serve as both mirrors and windows (Sims Bishop, 1990) for children, allowing young readers to see themselves in stories while exploring new identities and perspectives.
- Further, when young readers experienced hope, resilience, and optimism, they immersed themselves in the characters' lives in participatory encounters, reflective of the aesthetic stance (Rosenblatt, 1978).
- Meaningful connections resulted in children's deep engagement with the text in ways that were immersive and participatory, transforming each child's reader identity.

Finding**Connection to the Transactional Theory of Reading (Rosenblatt, 1978)**

Appendix K: Cultural Relevance Text Evaluation Rubric
(Sharma & Christ, 2017)

Table 2
Cultural Relevance Text Evaluation Rubric

| Book title and author: | 1 | 0 |
|---|---|--|
| How the book portrays culture, part 1 (Sims, 1983; Sims Bishop, 1991) | <i>Culturally conscious</i> books validate a culture through accurately portraying language and experiences in their illustrations and words. | <i>Socially conscious</i> books perpetuate stereotypes. <i>Melting pot</i> books ignore cultural differences (e.g., <i>The Snowy Day</i> by Ezra Jack Keats). |
| How the book portrays culture, part 2 (Ebe, 2010; Walters, 1998) | The author or illustrator are of the background being portrayed in the book. | The author or illustrator are not of the background being portrayed in the book. |
| Analyzing cultural relevance, part 1 (Ebe, 2010) | The main characters are the same race/ethnicity/religion as the reader. (Characters' cultural markers are relevant.) | The main characters are <i>not</i> the same race/ethnicity/religion (or other cultural marker) as the reader. |
| Analyzing cultural relevance, part 2 (Ebe, 2010) | The main characters are the same age/gender as the reader. (Characters' cultural markers are relevant.) | The main characters are <i>not</i> the same age/gender as the reader. |
| Analyzing cultural relevance, part 3 (Ebe, 2010) | The main characters talk like the reader. (Characters' cultural markers are relevant.) | The main characters <i>do not</i> talk like the reader. |
| Analyzing cultural relevance, part 4 (Ebe, 2010) | The reader has probably lived in or visited places like those in the story (relevant place), and the story could take place this year (relevant time period). (Settings are culturally relevant.) | The reader has probably <i>not</i> lived or visited places like those in the story, or the story could <i>not</i> take place this year. |
| Analyzing cultural relevance, part 5 (Ebe, 2010) | The reader has probably had an experience similar to one in the story. (Events are culturally relevant.) | The reader has probably <i>not</i> had an experience similar to one in the story. |

Appendix L: Guiding Questions to Select Picture Books with Representations of Disability
(Kleekamp & Zapata, 2019)

Table 1
Using Guiding Questions to Select Picturebooks With Representations of Disability

| Guiding question | Description | Example |
|---|---|--|
| How is the life of the character with a disability presented as multidimensional? | Humanizing texts feature characters that are varied and well-developed as people, not just as invitations to define labels through single-story representations. | In <i>Kami and the Yaks</i> (Stryer, 2007), Kami is represented as a family-oriented, hard-working problem solver who is also deaf. |
| Whose voice is represented and emphasized in the telling of this story? | Texts that offer perspectives from the point of view of the character with a disability typically offer more humanizing representations. | <i>A Boy and a Jaguar</i> (Rabinowitz, 2014) is a first-person autobiographical account that highlights Alan's journey to becoming a jaguar advocate who also stutters. |
| How are readers positioned to think and feel about the character with a disability? | Humanizing representations may give insight into instances in which a character is ostracized but also offer moments of character agency and opportunities for inclusion. | In <i>The Girl Who Thought in Pictures</i> (Mosca, 2017), readers are given an opportunity to see how Temple was excluded and bullied as a child and an adult with autism. Temple's agency and talents as an animal scientist serve as openings for respect and inclusion. |
| What steps has the author taken to create and present authentic relationships? | Texts with humanizing approaches offer representations of relationships and friendships that are built on mutual interests and enjoyment. | In <i>Kami and the Yaks</i> , Kami's family positions him as an independent child who is capable of solving problems. Kami's father and brother engage with Kami's advice by communicating in alternative ways. |

Appendix M: The Images and Encounters Profile (Blaska, 2003)

The Images & Encounters Profile invites reviewers to examine storyline, language or illustrations in children's books that feature characters with diverse abilities and to indicate if the criteria listed below are present in each book (Blaska, 2003).

Reviewers should check YES if the criterion was addressed positively, NO if the criterion was addressed negatively, and NP if the criterion was not present. YES is the preferred response. The reviewer is cautioned to be aware of the NO responses when reading and / or discussing each book as these responses may influence how they choose to use the book.

The ten criteria are:

1. Promotes empathy, and not pity.
2. Depicts acceptance, not ridicule.
3. Emphasizes success rather than, or in addition, to failure.
4. Promotes positive images of persons with disabilities or illness.
5. Assists children in gaining accurate understanding of the disability or illness.
6. Demonstrates respect for persons with disabilities or illness.
7. Promotes attitude of "one of us" not "one of them."
8. Uses language which stresses person first, disability second philosophy, i.e., Jody who is blind.
9. Describes the disability or person with disabilities or illness as realistic (i.e., not subhuman or superhuman.)
10. Illustrates characters in a realistic manner.

Appendix N: Phase One Themes, Descriptions, and Adult Participant Quotes

| Theme | Description | Illustrative Quotes |
|---------------------------|--|---|
| Equitable Access to Books | How children gain increased access to book ownership and reading materials at no cost and the role of these literacy resources in supporting reader identity development. | <p><i>“Surround children with all the books. Just surround them. Having this access to an assortment of books can help young readers define the different parts of who they are.”</i></p> |
| Choice in Book Selection | How agency and autonomy in book selection foster increased independence and reading engagement. Choice in book selection builds stronger reader identities, as children explore books that align with their personal interests and reading preferences. | <p><i>“We provide a free bookstore, so children have access to books. It's a similar to a Scholastic book fair, but it's completely free for the children that we're serving in the community.”</i></p> |
| Individuality as a Reader | <p>Individuality as a reader develops when children are given the opportunity to:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li data-bbox="404 1417 882 1465">(1) exercise agency and autonomy in book selection; <li data-bbox="404 1480 882 1529">(2) cultivate personal interests; <li data-bbox="404 1537 882 1586">(3) discover reading preferences; and <li data-bbox="404 1594 882 1643">(4) identify individualized reading purpose(s). | <p><i>“Choice is everything.”</i></p> <p><i>“Children build a love of reading when they choose books on topics that they love. When children have choice in book selection, they're going to be more invested in the process, and they will tend to read more.”</i></p> <p><i>“There is agency right there, in the ability to make your own decision; choice is power.”</i></p> <p><i>“Build exposure to as many different types of books as possible for children to create their own understanding of how their individual literacy journeys can be shaped by books and reading.”</i></p> <p><i>“He loves to read books about sharks, and we read sharks books together. Now he knows more about sharks than he ever knew about his whole life.”</i></p> <p><i>“The moment that child can pull that favorite book off the shelf and ask for it to be read to them, they're going to have that reader identity.”</i></p> |

| Theme | Description | Illustrative Quotes |
|--|---|--|
| Pride in Book Ownership | The importance of owning books empowers children to build their own personal book collections, which expands reading engagement, strengthens their self-perceptions as readers, and provides opportunities to experience book joy. | <p><i>“Children who own books have a better sense of their identity as a reader. They also have a stronger sense that they can excel more in school. They see themselves as readers.”</i></p> |
| Book Joy | The feelings of pure elation and excitement that accompany pride in book ownership and meaningful reading experiences that children love to read and choose to read. Book joy is a source of motivation for children to increase reading volume, build connections to books, and expand their reading engagement. | <p><i>“Once they own their own books, they’re already identifying themselves as a reader. They’re proud to show you their book collection.”</i></p> |
| Inclusive books Inspire Hope, Resilience, and Optimism | Inclusive books that feature authentic representations of diversity can nurture a sense of hope, resilience, and optimism in young readers that expands future possibilities and deepens reading engagement, an essential feature in reader identity development. | <p><i>“Children were so excited to take the books home when they learned that they could keep the books. When they found out that they could take the books home, they hugged the books!”</i></p> |

| Theme | Description | Illustrative Quotes |
|--|---|--|
| Inclusive Books Build Meaningful Connections | Inclusive books that feature authentic representations of diversity can provide opportunities for meaningful connections in young readers based on their personal experiences that expand reading engagement, an essential feature in reader identity development. | <i>“Children who see themselves represented in books can say “I was important enough that someone wrote a book about someone like me.”</i> |
| Home Support | Home support for young readers includes parent engagement, shared reading experiences, and generous home book collections, and instills in children the belief that reading has value. Home reading experiences inspire a love of reading and are key factors in reader identity development. | <i>“He came up to me with a book, and he and he had it gripped so tight. He said: “This is the only book where I completely found myself.” He continued: “This kid’s mom is like my mom. This kid survived.” That book really spoke to him; he connected.”</i> |
| Community Support | Community support that is contextualized in local settings and rooted in book joy can increase children’s awareness of reading practices, convey the value and importance of reading, improve family engagement, connect children to literacy advocates, and prioritize reading as an integral part of everyday life. | <i>“The understanding that books have meaning, that books are important, really starts before the child even understands what a book is, when they are exposed to books and reading at an early age.”</i> |

Appendix O: Phase Two Themes, Descriptions, and Child Participant Quotes

| Theme | Description | Illustrative Quotes |
|--|--|--|
| Reading Purpose | <p>Reading Purpose encompasses:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li data-bbox="421 477 899 572">(1) reading to learn to read or to improve as a reader, including to demonstrate strategies; <li data-bbox="421 578 899 694">(2) reading for entertainment and enjoyment, including to expand one's imagination; <li data-bbox="421 701 899 796">(3) reading to acquire new knowledge or gain information; and <li data-bbox="421 802 899 897">(4) reading for social-emotional reasons, such as to develop empathy for characters. | <p><i>“Reading makes you smarter. The more you read, the smarter you get.”</i></p> <p><i>“When you read more books, you can learn new words.”</i></p> <p><i>“I like to read so I can use my imagination.”</i></p> <p><i>“Books that are funny and silly make me laugh. That’s why I like to read them.”</i></p> <p><i>“I read so I can I learn new facts that I never knew before.”</i></p> |
| Individuality as a Reader | <p>Individuality as a reader develops when children are given the opportunity to:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li data-bbox="421 1163 899 1237">(1) exercise agency and autonomy in book selection; <li data-bbox="421 1243 899 1275">(2) cultivate personal interests; <li data-bbox="421 1281 899 1313">(3) discover reading preferences; and <li data-bbox="421 1320 899 1389">(4) identify individualized reading purpose(s). | <p><i>“When I choose books, I will read more books, since they are my favorite books.”</i></p> <p><i>“When you choose a book, it is not anyone else’s choice; it is your choice.”</i></p> <p><i>“I like to read books about sharks and dinosaurs.”</i></p> <p><i>“I like books about action heroes and superpowers.”</i></p> <p><i>“I read books about ballet, since I love ballet and gymnastics.”</i></p> <p><i>“I like to read series books, because they go on fun adventures.”</i></p> |
| Representation in Inclusive Books Builds | Inclusive books that feature authentic representation of diversity provide opportunities for meaningful | <i>“This book reminds me of my dad and me in real life. She rides her bike without training wheels, and her</i> |

| Theme | Description | Illustrative Quotes |
|---|---|--|
| Meaningful Connections | connections in young readers based on personal experiences that expand reading engagement, an essential feature in reader identity development. | <i>daddy helped her ride her bike just like my daddy helped me. When I read this book, it made me think that I did this with my daddy!"</i> |
| Representation in Inclusion Books Inspires Hope, Resilience, and Optimism | Inclusive books that feature authentic representation of diversity nurture a sense of hope, resilience and optimism in young readers that expands their imaginations and provides a wider and more expansive understanding of future possibilities. | <i>"I can make snowmen and snow angels just like Peter does in the book!"</i> <i>"I felt so happy when I read this book, since she looks just like me."</i> <i>"She looks like me and she followed her dreams to be an astronaut."</i> |
| Pride in Book Ownership | The importance of owning books empowers children to build their own personal book collections, which increases reading volume, enhances expands reading engagement, and | <i>"Misty Copeland became the first African American principal dancer in the American Ballet Theatre."</i> <i>"Mae Jemison was the first African American woman astronaut ever to go into outer space. She was a believer. She believed in her dreams."</i> <i>"I like to draw plans, just like she does. She draws staircases. We learn from books what we can do."</i> <i>"I like to do ballet, and I am confident just like the girl in the story. She does not give up on herself. When I read the book, I thought that if she can do it, then I can, too."</i> |

| Theme | Description | Illustrative Quotes |
|--------------------|---|--|
| | provides endless opportunities to experience book joy. | <p><i>"I felt good when the book had my name in it."</i></p> <p><i>"It is so fun to be a book collector!"</i></p> |
| Book Joy | The feelings of pure elation and excitement that accompany pride in book ownership and meaningful reading experiences about books that children love to read and choose to read. Book joy is a source of motivation for children to increase reading volume, build connections to books, and expand their reading engagement. | <p><i>"If you really like a book that you have at home, then you can read it over and over again."</i></p> <p><i>"I LOVE to read books out loud. Can I read this book to you?"</i></p> |
| Reading Engagement | How readers interact with texts and demonstrate curiosity, persistence, and enthusiasm. Reading engagement involves the effort and motivation a reader puts forth to achieve their individual reading goals. Further, reading engagement reflects the intersection of reading volume and increased motivation to read. | <p><i>"I have so many books at home, it is like I have my own library!"</i></p> <p><i>"Look! I have so many books on my shelf! I love to collect books!"</i></p> <p><i>"This book made me feel joyful. Everyone is important. Everyone looks different, their names, their skin, their hair, their voice. Nobody has to be the same. If we are all the same, it is just not fun in the world."</i></p> |