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Exploring Urban Student Perspectives on Literacy Achievement

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Exploring Urban Student Perspectives on Literacy Achievement

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The College at Brockport: State University of New York

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A thesis submitted to the Department of Education and Human Development of The College at Brockport, State University of New York, in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Masters of Science in Education.
Abstract

This qualitative study explores urban adolescent students’ perspectives on their literacy achievement. It discusses the factors students feel impact their achievement in literacy, as well as what challenges they face in reaching academic achievement. This study also explores the reasons for students’ academic challenges and successes, how students feel about statistics about themselves, and what teachers can do to help students become the best literacy learners they can be. A vast amount of research in the field discusses external factors that influence a student’s literacy achievement, generally focusing on a deficit perspective. Previous research has also been done on student perspectives, focusing on the importance of student interest, choice, and identity. Six urban seventh grade students were interviewed one-on-one with their math teacher, given a Reading Attitude Survey, and a Writing Attitude Survey throughout the course of five weeks to explore the student perspective on what influences their literacy achievement.

*Keywords*: literacy achievement, urban students, student perspective
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Introduction

Imagine you are a student attending a school in the Rochester City School District, an urban setting in upstate New York. Now envision having a parent that has raised you on his or her own, working two jobs, one during the day and one during the evening. You see your parent for twenty minutes before you leave for school in the morning and twenty minutes when you get home from school. Then your parent has to go to work and won’t get home until after you’re asleep. This is just an example of one student’s home life in an urban setting. According to the Democrat & Chronicle (2015), graduation rates in the Rochester City School District for the 2014-2015 school year increased slightly to 51%, yet the Rochester City School District still holds the title for the lowest academic preforming large district in New York State based on the New York State Education Department. Picture having almost a 50/50 shot at graduating high school because of where you live and what school you attend in that district. I teach in the inner city of Rochester, New York and I often think about what challenges my students face being born with so much out of their control. How can my students beat the odds and be the 50% that succeed?

Problem Statement

Adolescent students in urban schools face academic obstacles when it comes to literacy, as well as external obstacles in their home life that could contribute to student literacy achievement in school. I define literacy achievement as the academic success students have with communicating through reading, writing, and thinking about the text, both within the text, and beyond the text. The factors in a student’s home life that could influence their literacy achievement are: parental involvement in academics (Wang & Sheikh-Khalil, 2014), literacy
development at home (Dodici, Draper, & Peterson, 2003), the number of hours/time of day a parent works (Han & Fox, 2011), socioeconomic status (Yelgün & Karaman, 2015), and single parent households (Lange, Dronkers & Wolbers, 2014). Lange, Dronkers & Wolbers (2014) discuss the idea that the household a student grows up in determines their success. Some research suggests that the environment created by a student’s parent could determine the child’s literacy achievement level.

Often teachers attribute academic success to hard work, although success also has to do with support. Teachers and parents alike support students through their academic journey in school. The number of hours a parent works and if they work the day shift, evening shift, or night shift may influence how much time parents get to spend with their child. This can determine how much time these hard working parents get to spend doing literacy activities and helping their children with homework to strengthen literacy skills. If a short amount of time is spent supporting literacy development at the home at the adolescent level, should that affect the student’s literacy achievement in school?

With the increased expectations of rigor and academic achievement through the Common Core Standards, there is even more pressure on students to perform at a high level (Conley, 2015). Parents at home may not be familiar with the Common Core Curriculum or may have struggled in school themselves. Single parents also face the challenging task of helping their children with academics and working towards providing food, clothing, and shelter for their children (Han & Fox, 2011). Socioeconomic status may also play an important role in students’ lives, impacting their achievement (Yelgün & Karaman, 2015). Gaining basic necessities for survival can sometimes take precedence over school-related activities.
Despite the complexity of poverty, research suggests literacy is an essential part of many urban families’ lives and so their children grow up with literacy all around them (Taylor & Dorsey-Gaines, 1988). Taylor & Dorsey-Gaines (1988) found in their ethnographic research with inner city students and their families that all children in their study read at home. Literacy can be brought to the home and have a positive impact on student literacy learning. Gonzalez, Moll & Amanti (2005) convey the importance of teachers getting to know their students because teachers need to see that the households students come from have valuable resources that students can and should use to their advantage in the classroom setting. The households students come from can provide essential cognitive and social skills necessary to achieve success in literacy in school.

**Rationale**

Parental influence is significant because it is suggested that parental influence plays an essential role in how students develop literacy in their early childhood education (Dodici, Draper & Peterson, 2003). In a study by Dodici, Draper & Peterson (2003), the researchers found the observations of interactions between children and parents were often valid predictors for what kind of early literacy skills children possess. Results of the study by Dodici et al. (2003) also state that parent language, parental guidance, and parental responsiveness are strongly correlated to emergent literacy skills; specifically recalling vocabulary words, relating pictures to a story, and letter-sound associations. Our students’ parents play an integral role in the early literacy journey their children embark on because they create the home environment students live in. I am interested in finding out what role parental influence and home life plays in an adolescent urban student’s literacy achievement according to my students. I would like to find out the
student perspective on what challenges urban students face and what teachers can do in order to help students reach literacy achievement in school.

I have seen students succeed academically, despite the challenges they have at home, and I have seen students fail. The answers I seek lie within the students I teach. I have never lived in an urban setting, therefore I have little insight into what my students’ home lives are like. Learning more about my students and understanding why there are such vast differences in literacy achievement levels and abilities is the goal of my research. It’s important to learn about my students’ home lives, as well as explore how that affects them academically, in order to understand my students better and meet all of their needs in my classroom. There is so much research about what factors are affecting literacy achievement, such as parental involvement in academics (Wang & Sheikh-Khalil, 2014), literacy development at home (Dodici, Draper, & Peterson, 2003), the number of hours/time of day a parent works (Han & Fox, 2011), socioeconomic status (Yelgün & Karaman, 2015), and single parent households (Lange, Dronkers & Wolbers, 2014). However, few researchers discuss the student perspective. This is why it is so important to find out the student perspective of what factors they feel influence their literacy achievement.

**Purpose**

The purpose of this capstone project is to explore urban adolescent students’ perspectives on their literacy achievement. I explore what factors students feel impact their achievement in literacy and what challenges they face in reaching academic achievement. I investigate if other external factors in students’ homes influence their literacy achievement, such as parental involvement in academics, literacy development at home, the number of hours/shift a parent
works, socioeconomic status, and single parent households. Identified patterns in student responses may or may not align with previous research. Furthermore, I explore ideas and strategies, for myself and other teachers working in urban settings, to use in order to help our students reach a higher level of literacy achievement.

**Research Questions**

The research questions of this capstone are: What do urban students view as factors contributing to their literacy achievement? What are the challenges urban students feel they face academically? How do urban students feel about the statistics about them? Do student perspectives align with research perspectives? What can I do, as a teacher, to help urban students reach a high level of literacy achievement?

**Literature Review**

**Introduction**

Student literacy achievement in school depends on various factors in an urban adolescent student’s life. Research in the education field has previously focused on factors affecting students such as parental involvement in academics (Wang & Sheikh-Khalil, 2014), literacy development at home (Dodici, Draper, & Peterson, 2003), the number of hours/time of day a parent works (Han & Fox, 2011), socioeconomic status (Yelgün & Karaman, 2015), and single parent households (Lange, Dronkers & Wolbers, 2014). These researchers have previously discussed how these factors negatively affect urban students’ literacy achievement in school. However, there is also research that counters this deficit perspective about urban students’ literacy achievement (Compton-Lilly, 2011: Francois, 2013: Groff, 2014). These research studies offer
the student and family perspectives of literacy achievement in school and found the significance of student interest, choice, and identity in literacy achievement (Compton-Lilly, 2011: Francois, 2013: Groff, 2014).

**Social Learning**

The core of Vygotsky’s work is centered on how society and social interactions affect child development. Vygotsky (1978) conveys “human learning presupposes a specific social nature and a process by which children grow into the intellectual life of those around them” (p. 39). A child’s home environment, the culture they are brought up in, parents, and peers contribute to language and literacy development. According to John-Steiner & Mahn (1996), “Vygotsky focused on the way that a child co-constructs meaning through social interaction, and the role word meaning plays in the development of thinking” (p. 341). Based on Vygotsky’s principals, Kozulin (2003) declares, “the activities that start as an interaction between the child and adult become internalized as the child’s own psychological functions” (p. 19). Kozulin (2003) discusses the idea of a human mediator, which is a part of Vygotsky’s sociocultural theory. A human mediator, a parent or adult in the child’s environment, is someone that the child learns from. The child interacts with an adult, observing the psychological function modeled by the adult, and then the child internalizes it as his/her own psychological function (Kozulin, 2003). The child is essentially taking the way of thinking that adults or peers have around them and adopting that way of thinking as their own.

**Parental involvement.** Parental involvement in children’s schooling is a highly researched factor in student literacy development. Students need positive parental and adult support emotionally and academically in order to be proficient in their literacy skills. For
adolescents, being supported at home with their emotional needs and academic needs are essential to a strong relationship with literacy in school. Parents and guardians can or cannot offer students extra support outside of the classroom, which may influence students’ abilities inside the classroom. Wang & Sheikh-Khalil (2014) observed the connection between parental involvement and students’ academic achievement. The researchers looked at different forms of parental involvement, such as “school-based involvement, home-based involvement, and academic socialization” (Wang & Sheikh-Khalil, 2014, p. 610). Wang & Sheikh-Khalil (2014) suggested in the findings of their research that parental involvement improved students’ academic achievement, as well as their mental health. Wang & Sheikh-Khalil’s (2014) research supports the idea that parental involvement in academics is an important part of student success in school. The research also stresses the significance of parental involvement to a child’s development cognitively (Wang & Sheikh-Khalil, 2014). Parental influence is a well-known researched factor of student literacy achievement.

**Home Environment.** The importance of parental involvement in a student’s early literacy development is shown in a study by Dodici, Draper, & Peterson (2003), where the relationship and interactions are observed between parents and children in 27 low-income families. In this study, interactions between parents and their 14, 24, and 36 month old children were videotaped. The language of children and parents, tone of voice, parental guidance, and parental responses were studied (Dodici, Draper, & Peterson, 2003). Results of the study state that parent language, parental guidance, and parental responsiveness are strongly correlated to emergent literacy skills (Dodici, Draper, & Peterson, 2003). The observations of interactions between children and parents were valid predictors for what kind of early literacy skills children possess (Dodici, Draper, & Peterson, 2003). Dodici, Draper, & Peterson’s (2003) study about
early childhood interactions with literacy clearly displays the importance of literacy in the home, even from an early age. This study shows the significance of parental influence on home literacy as a researched factor for student literacy achievement in school. The home environment a student grows up in and the social interactions the student has there influences a student’s literacy development in school. Wang & Sheikh-Khalil (2014) and Dodici, Draper, & Peterson (2003) are prime examples of the research that shows parental influence plays an important role in adolescent lives and their literacy development.

**Parental Work Hours**

The number of hours a parent works and how often can be an important factor in a student’s academic literacy performance. Parents or guardians being home for their children before and after school can influence the level of physical support they can offer their children emotionally and academically. Han & Fox (2011) center their research on the relationship between parental work hours and student performance in reading in school. The study’s purpose for researching this topic is based on a known association between a mother’s work schedule and a child’s well-being (Han & Fox, 2011). The researchers found there was a correlation between reading achievement and irregular parental work hours (Han & Fox, 2011). One of the results shared in the study was that “having a mother who worked more years at a night shift was associated with lower reading scores” (Han & Fox, 2011, p. 962). Therefore, the implications of working evening or night shift can have a negative effect on student performance in reading (Han & Fox, 2011). The study implies that parents working an evening shift, night shift, or irregular hours negatively impact their child’s home environment, parent-child relationship, and school achievement in reading (Han & Fox, 2011). I can see a need to seek more knowledge about
parental involvement and home life because those are external issues impacting our urban students every day. Parental work hours is a huge factor in the potential amount of support children get from their parents in their literacy development outside of school, therefore this may be a potential factor in student literacy achievement.

Studies on parental work hours have been done in different parts of the world. For example, a study by Norberg-Schöfeldt (2008) explored the connection between parental work hours and the academic achievement of secondary students in Sweden. The study also explored the number of hours a parent works, as well as the income of a parent. This study is based on the idea that parents need to play a more active role in their child’s education in order for their child to succeed in school. If parents or guardians are more active in their child’s schooling, there is a greater chance of success a student has with literacy development because the school and the parental figures are working together towards a common goal. Parental figures are forced to play a less prominent physical role in their child’s education when they are working an evening or overnight shift. The results of Norberg-Schöfeldt’s (2008) research suggested a positive correlation between parental income and students’ Grade Point Average. Norberg-Schöfeldt (2008) also found that “having a mother that works less than full time has positive effects on the child's grades throughout the schooling of the child” (p. 1). Norberg-Schöfeldt (2008) found there are substantial effects of a father’s work schedule as well, but only during upper secondary school. Norberg-Schöfeldt’s (2008) research suggests parents working more may be less active in their child’s schooling. There is certainly a need for Norberg-Schöfeldt’s (2008) study in order to understand the external issues my students may be going through daily that impact their school life. Norberg-Schöfeldt’s (2008) study was conducted in Sweden and has similar results as Han
& Fox’s (2011) study conducted in the United States. This suggests we are getting the same type of result in different parts of the world.

**Socioeconomic Status**

Socioeconomic status can play an important part in student literacy achievement because it is difficult for a student to focus on anything academic if they are constantly worried about basic needs for survival, such as running water, food, and adequate clothing. Yelgün & Karaman (2015) conclude that the socioeconomic condition of the families in an urban area is the primary negative factor affecting academic achievement. Other factors contributing to student achievement are the geographic location of the school, students, parents, teachers, school facilities and some characteristics of school administrators (Yelgün & Karaman, 2015, p. 251). The geographic location of the school is in an urban setting. Therefore, living in an urban area is a leading negative factor affecting academic achievement according to Yelgün & Karaman (2015). Yelgün & Karaman’s (2015) research suggests that socioeconomic status is a significant factor in student success at school.

It is also common for adolescent students of low socioeconomic status to take on adult responsibilities, such as getting a job to support the rest of the family or taking care of their younger siblings while their parent is at work, cooking meals, getting siblings ready for school, etc. These responsibilities sometimes feel like the duty of the oldest sibling, putting a lot of pressure on this student and making it hard to focus on individual school work when he/she is focused on taking care of the family. Researchers, like Yelgün & Karaman (2015), suggest that students living in poverty at a low socioeconomic status are not as high achieving as those students of a higher socioeconomic status.
Single Parent Households

Another factor that may influence student academic success is the household dynamic that students come home to every day. Lange, Dronkers & Wolbers (2014) discuss the idea that the household a student grows up in determines their success. Children pick up on the social norms and cues of the adults around them and begin to mimic them. Vygotsky (1978) advises “children’s learning begins long before they attend school” (p.37). Everything students learn from their family from a young age in their home environment is taken to school them, influencing their literacy development. Lange, Dronkers & Wolbers (2014) found that “attending a school with more children from single-parent families affects the educational performance of all children negatively, but it particularly harms children from single-mother families” (p.329). Research suggests that single parent homes are environments that can influence a child’s literacy development and achievement in school. Lange, Dronkers & Wolbers’ (2014) study looks at multiple countries and allows for the data to speak to multiple perspectives about single parent families. The level of interaction students have with literacy at home can be affected if a student lives in a single parent home because one parent is influencing literacy development and engaging students in literacy activities instead of two parents. There may be less opportunity for literacy interaction in a single parent home. Single parents living in poverty also face the challenging task of helping their children with academics while working towards providing food, clothing, and shelter for their children (Han & Fox, 2011).

Student Perspectives

Student perspectives are extremely significant to the literacy achievement of students because students need a voice to tell educators what their challenges are, as well as what they
need in order to succeed academically. However, student perspectives on literacy only makes an impact if educators listen to what students have to say and adjust their teaching to their students’ needs. Research on student perspectives and literacy suggests that student identity, interest, and choice are major motivating factors of student literacy achievement.

**Student identity.** Student identity is a key factor of literacy achievement because when students see themselves in a story, they are more likely to read further and learn more because they can relate to the story. In a unique qualitative study, Compton-Lilly (2011) takes an in depth look at one African American female student over a period of eight years. Compton-Lilly (2011) took field notes and interviewed this student and her family to get their perspective on literacy and school over time. This student lived in an urban setting in a high poverty area, was raised by a single mother, and the study was done from first grade until she was in eleventh grade (Compton-Lilly, 2011). Compton-Lilly (2011) found that the student in her study grew disinterested over time with the books she read in school and it became something she no longer enjoyed. There were fewer times for this student to interact with texts with her peers and she could not connect with the white protagonists in the books she read in school (Compton-Lilly, 2011). This eighth grade student was reading at a tenth grade reading level, yet she earned a D in ELA. Why is a student that is so capable earning such a low grade? It is evident that this student did not relate her own personal identity with the characters in the books she was reading in school. Therefore, students need to identify with the characters in the books they read in school in order to be motivated to engage in literacy learning.

**Student interest & choice.** Student interest and book choice are important factors in literacy achievement because students are interested and motivated in participating in literacy learning when they pick the books they want to read. Compton-Lilly (2011) found that the
student in her study was highly interested in books that reflected her interests, such as romantic novels, as well as her identity, such as protagonists who are African American, female, and adolescent. She read these at home in her free time (Compton-Lilly, 2011). In a qualitative study, Francois (2013) explored the perspectives of students in grades 7, 10, and 11 through a focus group on the students’ reading experiences. Francois (2013) states, “Students’ comments suggest that the act of reading is a moment when young people negotiate identities, both individual and group-based, both familiar and possible” (p.148). If students can chose a book they identify with, they are more interested in reading that book. This can lead to higher student engagement, as well as meaningful and purposeful student discussions where students can convey their ideas, collaborate with their peers, and learn about literacy.

Identity, choice, and interest are themes throughout research on student perspectives and literacy. Groff (2014) discusses the perspectives of urban special education students in middle school. Data was collected through interviews, which were aimed to show teachers how to differentiate their literacy instruction (Groff, 2014). Groff (2014) conveys that when talking about middle grade readers, if we do not meet our students’ needs then we see a lack of motivation and interest in reading in our students. The way we can get our students interested in reading is by letting students choose their own books. This brings joy and excitement to reading because students are reading about their interests. The enjoyment of reading can be lost in middle school if we do not perk up our ears and listen to the voices of our children. Once students don’t enjoy reading and writing, they may start reading and writing less and less, their skills may deteriorate, students may fall behind their peers, and their confidence may decrease. Students’ identities, choices, and interests should be guiding teachers’ lesson plans to provide an environment for success with literacy in school.
Summary

There is so much research about what factors may affect literacy achievement, such as parental involvement in academics (Wang & Sheikh-Khalil, 2014), literacy development at home (Dodici, Draper, & Peterson, 2003), the number of hours/time of day a parent works (Han & Fox, 2011), socioeconomic status (Yelgün & Karaman, 2015), and single parent households (Lange, Dronkers & Wolbers, 2014); as well as the research on student perspectives, focusing on the importance of student interest, choice, and identity (Compton-Lilly, 2011; Francois, 2013; Groff, 2014). However, the gap in the research is that few researchers discuss the student perspective. I give urban students a voice to tell their stories from their perspective of what factors they feel are influencing their literacy achievement. This study builds upon previous research by focusing on the student perspective on literacy achievement in an urban setting.

Methods

Introduction

The purpose of this capstone project is to explore urban adolescent students’ perspectives on their literacy achievement. I explore what factors students feel impact their achievement in literacy and what challenges they face in reaching academic achievement. I investigate if other external factors in a student’s home influence a student’s literacy achievement.

Participants

The participants of this study are six adolescent students enrolled in my 7th grade mathematics classroom during the 2015-2016 school year. These 7th graders attend an urban high school in a large school district located in upstate New York. These students’ ages range from 11
to 13 years old. All of my students receive free breakfast and lunch, which means their parents are of low socioeconomic status. The children that make up my class are approximately 45% Hispanic, 43% African American, 9% Caucasian, 4% Asian, and 1% American Indian and Alaska Native. The participants in my study were selected because they are students in my math class. In addition, these students were the first six students I received signed parent and student consent forms from. Therefore, the participants were able and willing to participate in my study. I interviewed six participants with the intention of uncovering their perspectives on what factors contribute to their literacy achievement. I asked students what challenges they face academically, how they feel about the statistics about urban students found in the *Democrat and Chronicle* (2015), and what teachers can do to help students reach achievement in literacy.

**Setting**

The interviews for this study took place in my classroom during lunchtime because it was the most convenient way to get one-on-one time with students without interrupting learning throughout the school day. In some cases students were able to stay after school to be interviewed. Interviews during lunchtime happened about halfway through the school day during late morning. Interviews conducted afterschool took place in the late afternoon.

**My Positionality as the Researcher**

I am a 25-year-old graduate student attending the College at Brockport where I’m pursuing a Master’s degree in Literacy Education B-12. I completed my undergraduate studies in the spring of 2013 at St. John Fisher College in Rochester, NY. I’m certified by the state of New York to teach mathematics education to students from fifth grade to twelfth grade. The 2015-
2016 school year is my third year teaching middle school students in the inner city in upstate New York. This is also my third year teaching 7th grade math. As a 7th grade math teacher, I have had the tremendous opportunity to teach in a variety of schools and to work with diverse urban students. Presently, I teach 104 students throughout five classes every day.

I love my job and have such a passion for teaching my students. I feel that part of my job is to help each one of my students be successful academically. I believe an essential part of being successful in life is being able to be successful with literacy. Literacy plays such a significant role in all subjects and is the key to students being successful in school. To find out the best way to help my students achieve proficiency in literacy, I want to be able to understand what challenges they face and what they feel affects their literacy learning. In the future, I want to use this data and share it with my colleagues in order to help my students be more successful with literacy in school. In this study I am the classroom teacher and I take on the role of the participant observer.

**Data Collection**

I collected the data for this study through interviewing six students in my 7th grade classroom, as well as administering a reading survey (McKenna & Kear, 1990) and a writing survey (Kear, Coffman & McKenna, 2000) to explore what my students’ attitudes towards literacy are. From interviewing my students, I have learned about their lives and how they learn best on a deeper personal level. From the surveys I have a good sense of how my students feel about literacy, as well as how they view themselves as readers and writers. I feel that I have built a trusting relationship with my students because of the information that they shared. The interview questions were intended to help me understand the urban students’ perceptions and
beliefs about who and what impacts their learning, challenges they face, and how their teachers can help them be successful literacy learners. I am also interested in my students’ home life, how they view themselves as students, how students view literacy, how they feel about statistics about themselves, and what challenges students face academically. The surveys were aimed to help me understand my students’ attitudes towards literacy and how they view themselves as readers and writers. During the interviews and surveys, I allowed the students to ask clarifying questions. In some cases I repeated questions or read the survey questions to the students as they appeared. I conducted the interviews one-on-one to ensure the student’s full attention and I scribed their responses in a research journal. In addition, I audio recorded their responses to ensure the accuracy of the students’ responses.

Procedures

The interviews were conducted at a time and place that worked with my schedule and my students’ schedules. It was important for these interviews to be conducted outside of instructional time so the students could feel more comfortable. It also gave the students an opportunity to be free from distractions of other students or class constraints. Before the interviews took place, I reminded the students that their responses and participation in this study were for the purpose of understanding how they learn best and how to help them be successful. All of the interviews were conducted in 5 weeks. There were only two interviews a week which allowed me time to transcribe the information from audio recordings and to analyze students’ responses. After transcribing the data, I utilized another two weeks to compare the students’ responses to one another to look for commonalities.
Trustworthiness

I conducted a qualitative study where I conducted one-on-one interviews and surveys for my research design. My research was conducted over five weeks. I utilized various types of data including audio recordings, observational notes, and two different surveys. I remained open-minded to diverse interpretations of my data, and understood that my data may differ from my original predictions. Strategies outlined by Clark and Creswell (2014), were used to confirm the trustworthiness of my research study findings. To validate my research study as credible, I triangulated information from several data sources, including individual interviews, one-on-one discussions, and surveys. Other strategies consisting of transferability, dependability, and confirmability all validate the quality of my findings. My study provides detailed descriptions of the participants I used, my research process, and my data so other researchers can analyze this study or conduct a similar study.

Analysis

My data analysis describes how I conducted my analysis and what themes emerged from my study on the student perspective of literacy achievement. Students were given the opportunity to voice their opinions on reading, writing, what factors contribute to their successes and challenges in literacy, how students felt about a statistic about their district, how they view themselves as students, as well as what teachers can do to help students achieve success in literacy.
Data Analysis

After all interviews were conducted I reviewed the audio recordings to verify that what I transcribed matched the students’ responses because I didn’t want to misrepresent student responses. All interviews were transcribed verbatim as soon as possible following the interview. After interviewing and surveying each student, I recorded memos of personal interpretations of the interviews and surveys. These were general initial thoughts after reading through the data for the first time. Then, I analyzed my data using the constant comparison methodology. The constant comparison methodology “involves deriving categories from data over time, and then using the categories to develop a theory” (Hubbard & Power, 1999, p. 120). After all the responses were verified for accuracy, I first analyzed each student’s responses to see what factors contributed to their success in literacy and school. Next, I compared the students’ responses to one another to look for commonalities to uncover any themes that may exist. Then, I compared what students saw as challenges in their literacy learning and noted the similarities and differences. In addition, I compared students’ responses about how they feel about a city school district statistic on graduation rates, how students feel about literacy in the surveys they took, how they view themselves as students, as well as what teachers can do to help students achieve success in literacy. I noted the similarities and differences in all responses.

I used an open coding process for analyzing my data, which means I remained open to the ideas that developed from my data. I also was open to new themes that emerged in my data, even if it did not fit the ideas of previous research in the field or my own previous expectations. Clark & Creswell (2014) state, “qualitative data analysis procedures should be a systematic, rigorous, and thoughtful process that researchers use to uncover detailed descriptions of and larger patterns about the central phenomenon from the collected data” (p. 355). The code list I
used to analyze my data was revised continuously to provide new perspectives and consolidate overlapping categories. I spent a vast amount of time preparing my data, coding my data, and analyzing my data to explore emerging themes. Eventually, central themes were identified to help explore the factors contributing to urban student literacy achievement. The data I have collected has allowed me to understand my students’ perspectives on literacy achievement, which was the purpose for my research.

I discovered themes throughout the interviews, the Reading Attitudes Surveys, and the Writing Attitude Surveys. I found similar themes in the surveys and interviews, triangulating my data and permitting for more accuracy in answering my research questions on the student perspective. All of my participants were excited and willing to share their insight about their literacy achievement. The findings that emerged from my data were 1) Students take personal responsibility for their challenges in literacy, 2) Students create their own success, 3) Students maintained positive attitudes towards literacy and themselves, 4) Students’ disassociation with a statistic about themselves, and 5) Students need teachers to listen.

**Findings**

**Students Take Personal Responsibility**

None of the students cited external factors as challenges contributing to their literacy achievement in school. Contrary to the research, students did not list parental involvement in academics (Wang & Sheikh-Khalil, 2014), literacy development at home (Dodici, Draper, & Peterson, 2003), the number of hours/time of day a parent works (Han & Fox, 2011), socioeconomic status (Yelgün & Karaman, 2015), or single parent households (Lange, Dronkers & Wolbers, 2014) as challenging factors to their literacy achievement. Conversely, all six of the
students interviewed looked internally for the challenges they faced in literacy. This was very interesting and certainly not what I expected to find. It was clear that students felt they were in control of their own learning and they had the power to dictate whether they succeeded or failed when it came to their literacy achievement. All students interviewed cited specific things they needed to work on in ELA class to become a better literacy learner. Please see the student responses below in Figure 5.1.

**Literacy Challenges as Reported by Urban Adolescent Students**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Challenge</th>
<th>Evidence of Challenge</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Student #1</td>
<td>New word meaning</td>
<td>“Figuring out new words is hard for me because I read around the words a lot. I have to look closely in the reading to find it [the meaning] out.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student #2</td>
<td>Ability to pay attention in ELA class</td>
<td>“I don’t feel like I have challenges, they are just small bumps in the road. When it comes to ELA I always tend to think about other stuff other than my work because I’m thinking about my future.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student #3</td>
<td>Reading out loud</td>
<td>“Maybe a challenge for me in ELA is reading out loud because when you are reading in your head it’s so fluent and you don’t make any mistakes. When I read out loud I make mistakes.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student #4</td>
<td>Reading out loud and writing</td>
<td>“Sometimes I get the words all messed up and it’s embarrassing. Writing paragraphs and essays are kind of hard for me because I get my b’s and d’s mixed up and repeat the same word sometimes.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student #5</td>
<td>Writing essays</td>
<td>“The hardest thing is writing an essay. It’s easier for me to plan with a planning page of what I’m going to write. This year I have to write without a planning page and that was hard for me.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student #6</td>
<td>Homework</td>
<td>“Homework is hard for me sometimes because I have trouble focusing and I want to be on the computer a lot at home instead of doing homework.”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Figure 5.1. Challenges toward literacy for urban adolescent students. All students in my study cite personal challenges towards literacy, not external challenges.

Students Create Their Own Success

Internal reasons for success. Another theme that emerged was that students believed they determined their own success. Students said their own work ethic, ability to pay attention, not be distracted by others, and making a personal change, like coming to class on time, were factors contributing to their academic success. 4 out of the 6 students interviewed cited internal reasons for their academic success. The remaining two students cited the support of their parents as a reason for their success in school. Internal reasons for student academic success is a new theme that I did not find in any of the research. The impact of students taking personal responsibility for their individual successes and challenges with literacy was a refreshing idea my students brought to light. Please see the student internal success responses below in Figure 5.2.

**Internal Reasons for Academic Successes as Reported by Urban Adolescent Students**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Success</th>
<th>Reason for Success</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Student #1</td>
<td>Getting a good grade on a test and the teacher using it as an exemplar for the whole class this year</td>
<td>“I tried really hard and studied a lot.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student #2</td>
<td>Having a 4.0 GPA this school year</td>
<td>“I wasn’t as serious last year as I am this year. I am a lot more serious this year because of this school. I am having fun and learning a lot at the same time, which is weird for me. I think it’s good though that learning is fun for me.”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Student #3 | Getting good grades on report card this year | “I tried hard. I studied, I paid attention.”
---|---|---
Student #4 | Got a special classroom job in 4th grade to be the teacher’s secretary | “I was always paying attention, getting my work right, and I always got done fast with nothing to do.”

*Figure 5.2.* Internal reasons for academic successes of urban adolescent students. 4 out of 6 students in my study cite internal reasons for academic success in school.

**External reasons for success.** 2 out of 6 students cited the support of their parents as a reason for their success in school. These two student perspectives support previous research that parental involvement in academics and parental influence at home plays an important part in student success in school (Wang & Sheikh-Khalil, 2014: Dodici, Draper, & Peterson, 2003). Having parental support at home can be a motivating and encouraging factor in a student’s academic life. These student perspectives also support Vygotsky’s idea of social learning, where students “grow into the life of those around them” (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 39). In this case, the parents of these children model the social interactions in the home that students learn from and influence student academic success. These students’ parents value good grades and academic success, which are the values their children internalize and portray as their own values. Please see the student external success responses below in Figure 5.3.
External Reasons for Academic Successes as Reported by Urban Adolescent Students

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Success</th>
<th>Reason for Success</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Student #5</td>
<td>Increasing science grade from a D to an A</td>
<td>“I started paying attention, stopped fooling around, came to class on time, and I also knew my mom wasn’t going to like me having a D at all.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student #6</td>
<td>Finalist at a spelling bee</td>
<td>“I practiced a lot and my mom helped me with the words I didn’t know. We chopped the words up into smaller parts of the words to make it easier for me. My family helped me practice a lot.”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 5.3. External Reasons for Academic Successes of Urban Adolescent Students. 2 out of 6 students in my study cite external reasons for academic success in school.

Students Maintained Positive Attitudes Towards Literacy and Themselves

All participants described themselves as good students. 5 out of 6 of the students interviewed had positive thoughts and comments about their performance in ELA class. Most students felt they were good literacy students. In addition, most students had a positive attitude towards reading and writing at least some of the time. Attitudes about reading and writing in the interviews reflected similar responses in the Reading Attitude Survey and Writing Attitude Surveys shown in Figure 5.4 below. It’s important to note that in both these surveys, students were able to circle a picture of the Garfield that best described their attitude when asked a question about reading and writing. There was a very upset Garfield, scored as a 1; a mildly upset Garfield, scored as a 2; a slightly happy Garfield, scored as a 3; and a very happy Garfield, scored as a 4. I refer to these terms below in the key in Figure 5.4. I averaged each student’s final
score and converted it to a percent in order to generalize each student’s overall attitude towards reading and writing.

**Reading & Writing Attitudes Survey Results**

**Key:** 0-24%=very upset, 25-49%=mildly upset, 50-74%=slightly happy, 75-100%=very happy

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Reading Attitudes Survey</th>
<th>Writing Attitudes Survey</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Student #1</td>
<td>58.75%</td>
<td>75%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student #2</td>
<td>62.5%</td>
<td>58.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student #3</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>91%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student #4</td>
<td>62.5%</td>
<td>67.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student #5</td>
<td>63.75%</td>
<td>82.14%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student #6</td>
<td>63.75%</td>
<td>66.96%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Figure 5.4. Reading and writing attitudes survey results. These survey results illustrate each of the six participants’ attitudes regarding reading and writing.*

Based on the data in the Reading Attitudes Survey and the Writing Attitudes Survey, all students were slightly happy or very happy about reading and writing in school and recreationally. Most students, however, were only slightly happy about reading and writing because of the reading and writing they did in school. This was also apparent from the responses in the surveys and interviews.

**Student interest.** During an interview, one of the students said, “Sometimes the books at school are not as interesting as the ones I have at home.” Another student stated, “Reading is kind of boring, it makes me fall asleep a lot because I don’t read a lot. Sometimes it’s exciting, but it has to be particular books like adventure books. *The Adventure of Tom Sawyer* is one of my favorites.” A different student added, “I don’t really like it [reading], but I need it to learn. Reading makes me tired and it’s boring.” A student also explained her love for books and told me
how she has a whole collection of the books she loves to read at home. Compton-Lilly (2011), Francois (2013), and Groff (2014) suggest in their research that student interest, student choice, and student identity are so essential to urban student literacy achievement. Specifically, Compton-Lilly (2011) discovered that the student in her study became disinterested in the text she read in school because she could not relate to the protagonist. However, this student was an avid reader outside of school because she was able to choose the books she loved to read, romantic novels (Compton-Lilly, 2011). Consequently, students are writing about topics that they don’t necessarily care about or connect personally to because the topics in the texts they read in school aren’t always relevant or interesting to urban students and their lives. For example, one student told me about how she loves to write stories about her family. The reason this student loves to write so much is because her church has encouraged journaling daily and it is something she shares with her family as well. Yet she struggles with writing essays in school. Four other students expressed their interest in writing their own stories.

**Disconnect from inside to outside of the classroom.** The common theme here seems to be that students are not reading the types of books that they love in school and therefore, not writing about what they love. The reason some of these students like reading and writing comes mostly from the books they have learned to love outside of the classroom and their own stories they have written. Groff (2014) conveys that when talking about middle grade readers, if we do not meet our students’ needs than we begin to see a lack of motivation and interest in reading in our students. Students do not get a chance to choose the books they want to read in our school, since the ELA teachers follow the texts listed in the Common Core Curriculum. There is also a push to constantly write essays. There isn’t much time in the curriculum that allows for free writes, quick writes, or journaling.
Students’ Disassociation with Statistic about Themselves

Every student I interviewed was read the statistic from the Democrat and Chronicle (2015), which states, “51% of students graduated from the Rochester City School District last year. The Rochester City School District is the lowest academic performing large district in New York State based on the New York State Education Department.” Then students were asked, “How does that statistic make you feel? Why do you think the graduation rate is so low?” The student responses were surprising. All students felt strongly that this statistic did not represent them. It was an overwhelming and reoccurring theme of students distancing themselves from the statistic. One student said, “Honestly, it feels like no one is trying anymore. Everyone is trying to act out and not pay attention. No one is trying to get an education.” Another student thought, “It makes me feel not mad but not sad, like disappointed because this is true because kids are not focusing on academics in school, they’re focusing on other things.” A student passionately conveys, “That [statistic] does not count for me because I do my work. I’m really good so I’m not a part of that. I also feel like I haven’t graduated yet so it doesn’t count for me.” It was almost like my students were not given the opportunity to prove they could graduate yet, so they felt they should not be including in this statistic.

Students also added their opinions about why the graduation rate was so low, saying, “The students are not as serious as me. They don’t realize the path they are on is bad and can also affect other people around them, not just them. That is probably why it’s 51%.” Another student exclaims that the graduation rate is so low “because kids don’t really try hard but some do.” A student articulates, “It’s a good thing that even though a little bit of kids graduated, at least they did. I think the other kids could have done it. Maybe those kids [that didn’t graduate] didn’t do their work or pay attention or do what they were supposed to do to get the credits to graduate.”
These student responses reinforce the trend that students believe they are responsible for their own learning, a new theme that was not found in previous research in the field.

**Students Need Teachers to Listen**

What can teachers do to help students and their literacy learning? The main theme that emerged from the data between all student responses is that teachers can help students achieve success in literacy by making themselves available to students and their needs. One student suggests, “They [teachers] can start by helping us write, more reading out loud, giving us books to read and take home, writing stories and doing projects on them.” Another student proclaims, “Put me in the front of the room, never put me in the back.” A student affirmed, “I also would like to read more books that kids will pay attention to and that aren’t boring.” The other three students said they would like an opportunity to come see their teacher for extra help, ask them questions about what they don’t understand, and have extra credit work. The bottom line is teachers need to listen to what their students want from them if they expect to make any progress with student literacy achievement. For example, teachers of the student in Compton-Lilly’s (2011) study could have seen that this student was disinterested in reading the school texts. Little did they know, this student was reading romantic novel after novel at home (Compton-Lilly). Every student is interested in something, but it’s the job of a teacher to find out what each individual student’s interest is and then give students a chance to read and write about their interest of choice. It’s time for teachers to take action by having conversations with students about their interests and how that relates to their reading and writing in school. Francois (2013) suggests “the act of reading is a moment when young people negotiate identities” (p.148). It’s essential that students read books they identify with. When students develop a personal
connection to text it can lead to higher engagement, motivation, and enjoyment. It’s important for teachers to get to know their students in order to provide for their literacy needs.

**Discussion**

**Summary of Findings**

All six students in my research study did not say external factors were reasons for their challenges in literacy. In fact, all students took personal responsibility for their learning by citing specific things they need to work on in ELA class. This was extremely different than any of the research surrounding external factors. Research has said, in often a deficit viewpoint, that parental involvement in academics (Wang & Sheikh-Khalil, 2014), literacy development at home (Dodici, Draper, & Peterson, 2003), the number of hours/time of day a parent works (Han & Fox, 2011), socioeconomic status (Yelgün & Karaman, 2015), or single parent households (Lange, Dronkers & Wolbers, 2014) were factors contributing to urban students’ literacy achievement. What I found in my research study was the exact opposite, students looked internally for their challenges. It was very clear that all students were aware of their specific content area struggles and were open to practicing their skills because they want to improve their literacy learning. Just like their challenges, most students in my research named themselves for the reasons for their successes. 4 out of 6 students said that they created their own success in school.

Most students, 5 out of 6, were found to have positive attitudes towards literacy and their performance in ELA class. The overwhelming pattern that was seen in both surveys and the student interviews was that students are not reading the types of books that they love in school and therefore, not writing about what they love. However, my 7th grade students generally have positive attitudes towards literacy. Why is that? The reason most of these students like reading
and writing comes mostly from the books they have learned to love outside of the classroom and their own stories they have written. Groff (2014) conveys that when talking about middle grade readers, if we do not meet our students’ needs then we begin to see a lack of motivation and interest in reading in our students. If students continue to read and write about subjects they aren’t interested in and don’t relate to, then these positive attitudes may decline in years to follow. This was seen in Compton-Lilly’s (2011) case study of an African American student over 8 years. This student was earning a D in ELA class, yet at home she was an avid reader of romantic novels and was completing engaged (Compton-Lilly, 2011).

During the student interview, each student was read the statistic from the Democrat and Chronicle (2015), which states, “51% of students graduated from the Rochester City School District last year. The Rochester City School District is the lowest academic performing large district in New York State based on the New York State Education Department.” Then students were asked, “How does that statistic make you feel? Why do you think the graduation rate is so low?” All students disassociated themselves from this statistic. They all felt that this statistic does not represent them. I think these students are aware of the problems that exist in the Rochester City School District, but they want to be a part of the solution. Students want to be in charge of their own learning.

One of the research questions that was extremely significant for me to answer was: What can teachers do to help students with literacy achievement? When I asked students this question, the responses varied and I began to gather vital pieces of information from all of the data I collected on my students. One of the most important themes in my data was that students are longing for their voices to be heard. I think students were very honest and happy that they were
able to give their opinion on literacy. Students need teachers to listen to their literacy needs in order to have an impact on student learning.

Conclusions

Student literacy challenges are not external factors. Urban students’ challenges and successes with literacy are often not related to external factors in their lives, according to the student perspective. The types of challenges that students in this study say they face academically are word work, paying attention in class, reading out loud, making mistakes, writing essays, and doing homework. One student said, “Figuring out new words is hard for me because I read around the words a lot. I have to look closely in the reading to find it [the meaning] out.” Another student discusses her struggle to pay attention in ELA class because her mind is elsewhere. One student conveys, “Maybe a challenge for me in ELA is reading out loud because when you are reading in your head it’s so fluent and you don’t make any mistakes. When I read out loud I make mistakes.” Another student makes a similar remark regarding reading out loud as a challenge, discussing, “Sometimes I get the words all messed up and it’s embarrassing.” The same student also talked about struggling writing essays. Similarly, a student says, “The hardest thing is writing an essay. It’s easier for me to plan with a planning page of what I’m going to write. This year I have to write without a planning page and that was hard for me.” Another student cites homework as a challenge because that student would rather be on the computer at home instead of doing homework.

Student perspectives and most research perspectives did not align. Student perspectives did not align with the research on external factors, which were mostly a deficit perspective on urban students’ families. Parental involvement in academics (Wang & Sheikh-
Khalil, 2014), literacy development at home (Dodici, Draper, & Peterson, 2003), the number of hours/time of day a parent works (Han & Fox, 2011), socioeconomic status (Yelgün & Karaman, 2015), or single parent households (Lange, Dronkers & Wolbers, 2014) were not factors that students saw as challenges contributing to urban students’ literacy achievement. However, previous research on student perspectives did align with my study. It was also clear from studies by Compton-Lilly (2011), Francois (2013), and Groff (2014) that student interest, student choice, and student identity are essential to urban student literacy achievement.

**Student interest, choice and identity are related to literacy achievement.** Teachers incorporating student interest, choice, and identity in their literacy instruction is related to students connecting to text, student engagement, and students enjoying literacy learning. Based on my data, urban students are interested in reading and writing and students want to read and write. Literacy learning should be fun for the students. Unfortunately, most students are not motivated to read and write because of the texts and topics given in school, but because of the books they read at home and the personal stories they write outside of the classroom. This tells teachers that the content they are teaching students is something that students cannot identify with, does not adhere to students’ interests, and does not provide students choice. Compton-Lilly (2011) found that the student in her study grew disinterested over time with the books she read in school and it became something she no longer enjoyed. There were fewer times for this student to interact with texts with her peers and she could not connect with the white protagonists in the books she read in school (Compton-Lilly, 2011). Francois (2013) states, “Students’ comments suggest that the act of reading is a moment when young people negotiate identities, both individual and group-based, both familiar and possible” (p.148). If students can chose a book they identify with, they are more interested in reading that book.
Implications

Teachers need to integrate student interest, choice, and identity in literacy instruction. Vygotsky (1978) conveys “human learning presupposes a specific social nature and a process by which children grow into the intellectual life of those around them” (p. 39). A child’s environment and the culture of learning they are brought up in contribute enormously to student language and literacy development. It is so important to remember that so much of this environment that a student grows up in is the school environment. What happens within a classroom is directly related to student literacy achievement. Teachers have so much power and control over what kind of instruction and activities students do around literacy. There are numerous research studies that cite external factors as challenges for urban student literacy achievement. Conversely, in my research study urban students feel that they need to take accountability for their challenges and successes with literacy. Most urban students do not blame anyone but themselves for the reasons for their challenges and successes. Students are in charge of their own learning. Therefore, teachers should be in charge of their own valuable literacy instruction for students because it has such a large impact on student literacy achievement and how students view literacy.

In their research, Francois (2013) and Compton-Lilly (2011) talk about how students need to be able to see themselves in the text they read because adolescent urban students are developing their identity. The texts assigned by the Common Core Curriculum in schools do not always lend themselves to connecting directly to all diverse groups. That is exactly why teachers need to find text and topics for students to read and write about that students can connect to in their urban adolescent lives now. If students are given an opportunity to choose a text they want to read, write about a topic of their choice, or choose from a list of literacy activities, students are
more likely to enjoy literacy learning and have a more positive attitude about literacy in school. Furthermore, when students are interested in what they are reading and writing about, they are engaged and motivated to learn. Students reach literacy achievement when they connect, enjoy, and engage in literacy because their teachers are providing that environment and opportunity for students. Therefore, it is vital that teachers provide literacy instruction to urban students that values student interest, choice and identity.

**Student voices need to be heard.** There is a clear need for teachers to make student interest choice, and identity a focus of literacy instruction in the classroom. What does this mean for students? Students’ voices are being heard by their teachers. It is important for students to share with their teachers what they need, as well as for teachers to listen and use that information to plan purposeful literacy instruction. Groff (2014) tells us if we do not meet our students’ needs, than we begin to see a lack of motivation and interest in reading in our students. The way we can get our students interested in reading is by letting students choose their own books. We can get students interested in writing by letting them write their own stories through journaling or free writing. This brings joy and excitement to reading and writing because students are reading and writing about their interests. Teachers incorporating student interest, choice, and identity in their literacy instruction allows for students to be connected, motivated, engaged, and enjoying literacy. This leads to literacy achievement of urban students.

**Limitations**

The purpose of my study was to give a voice to urban adolescent students because it’s important for these students to have an opportunity to talk about what influences their literacy achievement from their own perspectives. However, there were limitations to my study. One
limitation was the number of participants in my study. I only had six participants, which is a small sample size. Therefore, the results and findings I collected in my study cannot be generalized and are not transferable to a larger population. I also only conducted my research in one grade level, in one school, and in one city. Hence, my study could not be generalized as the thoughts and ideas for all urban adolescent students. Another limitation of my study is time. My study was done over a five week period, which is not a long period of time.

Future Research

Exploring a study done over time. My study was not done over a long period of time, which means the results could be different when a study similar to mine is done over the course of several years, following students through their adolescent grade levels through middle school and high school. I think it would be absolutely interesting to explore how urban student perspectives on literacy achievement varies or stays constant from 7th grade through 12th grade. My students are in 7th grade currently, so an extension of my study could be to follow them on their literacy journey over time in their adolescent years to follow.

Collecting more data. Another idea for future research is a need to collect more data. I would love to collect data from a much larger sample size over the course of a full school year. This sample could also include students from various schools in different urban cities throughout the United States to have an accurate representation of the urban population. It would also be significant to survey and interview students from multiple grade levels at the same time to see if diverse or similar patterns and themes emerge from the new abundant data.
Closing

The purpose of my study was to give urban adolescent students a voice to tell a story from their perspective about what influences their literacy achievement. This study builds upon previous research by focusing on the student perspective on literacy achievement in an urban setting. Research has said, in often a deficit viewpoint, that parental involvement in academics (Wang & Sheikh-Khalil, 2014), literacy development at home (Dodici, Draper, & Peterson, 2003), the number of hours/time of day a parent works (Han & Fox, 2011), socioeconomic status (Yelgün & Karaman, 2015), or single parent households (Lange, Dronkers & Wolbers, 2014) were factors contributing to urban students’ literacy achievement. These research ideas did not align with the urban student perspective in my study. Instead, my research aligned with previous studies on urban student perspectives centering on valuing student interest, choice, and identity in literacy (Compton-Lilly, 2011; Francois, 2013; Groff, 2014). Based on my data, it is clear that student interest, choice, and identity are related to urban student literacy achievement.

Teachers want to create the best classroom environments for students, the best instruction, and provide help in any way possible. In order for teachers to teach students best, they need to develop relationships with students to get to know them and their individual interests. When students are open to sharing this personal information about their lives and their interests, then teachers can give students individual meaningful literacy tasks. Students want to love reading and writing; most of all, students want to do well in school and reach literacy achievement. In order to do that, teachers must include student interest, choice, and identity in their literacy instruction. Then students are able to reach literacy achievement because they are relating and connecting to text, they are motivated and engaged in literacy learning, and they are enjoying reading, writing, and thinking about relevant texts.
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http://doi.org/10.1111/cdev.12153
Appendix A

**Interview Questions**

1. What are your thoughts about reading? Why?
2. What are your thoughts about writing? Why?
3. What are your thoughts about working with other students? Why?
4. How do you feel you are doing in ELA class? Explain why that is.
5. Describe yourself as a student every day in school.
6. What kinds of challenges do you face in ELA class? In other classes? Why?
7. Tell me about a time where you were successful in school.
8. What do you think the reasons were for your success in that particular situation?
10. 51% of students graduated from the Rochester City School District last year. The Rochester City School District is the lowest academic preforming large district in New York State based on the New York State Education Department. How does that statistic make you feel? Do you feel like there’s close to a 50% shot of you graduating from high school? Why?

What can your teachers do to help you be successful in school, specifically in ELA?
Appendix B

Reading Attitudes Survey

Elementary Reading Attitude Survey

School _______________ Grade _____ Name _______________________

Please circle the picture that describes how you feel when you read a book.

1. How do you feel when you read a book on a rainy Saturday?

2. How do you feel when you read a book in school during free time?

3. How do you feel about reading for fun at home?

4. How do you feel about getting a book for a present?
Please circle the picture that describes how you feel when you read a book.

5. How do you feel about spending free time reading a book?

6. How do you feel about starting a new book?

7. How do you feel about reading during summer vacation?

8. How do you feel about reading instead of playing?
Please circle the picture that describes how you feel when you read a book.

9. How do you feel about going to a bookstore?

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10. How do you feel about reading different kinds of books?

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11. How do you feel when a teacher asks you questions about what you read?

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12. How do you feel about reading workbook pages and worksheets?

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</table>
Please circle the picture that describes how you feel when you read a book.

13. How do you feel about reading in school?

14. How do you feel about reading your school books?

15. How do you feel about learning from a book?

16. How do you feel when it’s time for reading in class?
Please circle the picture that describes how you feel when you read a book.

17. How do you feel about stories you read in reading class?

18. How do you feel when you read out loud in class?

19. How do you feel about using a dictionary?

20. How do you feel about taking a reading test?
Elementary Reading Attitude Survey Scoring Sheet

Student Name ____________________________________________

Teacher ________________________________________________

Grade __________________ Administration Date __________________

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<tr>
<th>Scoring Guide</th>
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<td>4 points</td>
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<th>Academic reading</th>
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Raw Score: ____ Raw Score: ____

Full scale raw score .... (Recreational + Academic): ____

Percentile ranks: ............ Recreational [ ]

............. Academic [ ]

............. Full scale [ ]

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Survey designed by Dennis J. Kear, Wichita State University
Elementary Reading Attitude Survey
Directions for use

The Elementary Reading Attitude Survey provides a quick indication of student attitudes toward reading. It consists of 20 items and can be administered to an entire classroom in about 10 minutes. Each item presents a brief, simply worded statement about reading, followed by four pictures of Garfield. Each pose is designed to depict a different emotional state, ranging from very positive to very negative.

Administration
Begin by telling students that you wish to find out how they feel about reading. Emphasize that this is not a test and that there are no “right” answers. Encourage sincerity.

Distribute the survey forms and, if you wish to monitor the attitudes of specific students, ask them to write their names in the space at the top. Hold up a copy of the survey so that the students can see the first page. Point to the picture of Garfield at the far left of the first item. Ask the students to look at this same picture on their own survey form. Discuss with them the mood Garfield seems to be in (very happy). Then move to the next picture and again discuss Garfield’s mood (this time, a little happy). In the same way, move to the third and fourth pictures and talk about Garfield’s moods—a little upset and very upset. It is helpful to point out the position of Garfield’s mouth, especially in the middle two figures.

Explain that together you will read some statements about reading and that the students should think about how they feel about each statement. They should then circle the picture of Garfield that is closest to their own feelings. (Emphasize that the students should respond according to their own feelings, not as Garfield might respond!) Read each item aloud slowly and distinctly; then read it a second time while students are thinking. Be sure to read the item number and to remind students of page numbers when new pages are reached.

Scoring
To score the survey, count four points for each leftmost (happiest) Garfield circled, three for each slightly smiling Garfield, two for each mildly upset Garfield, and one point for each very upset (rightmost) Garfield. Three scores for each student can be obtained: the total for the first 10 items, the total for the second 10, and a composite total. The first half of the survey relates to attitude toward recreational reading; the second half relates to attitude toward academic aspects of reading.

Interpretation
You can interpret scores in two ways. One is to note informally where the score falls in regard to the four nodes of the scale. A total score of 50, for example, would fall about mid-way on the scale, between the slightly happy and slightly upset figures, therefore indicating a relatively indifferent overall attitude toward reading. The other approach is more formal. It involves converting the raw scores into percentile ranks by means of Table 1. Be sure to use the norms for the right grade level and to note the column headings (Rec = recreational reading, Aca = academic reading, Tot = total score). If you wish to determine the average percentile rank for your class, average the raw scores first; then use the table to locate the percentile rank corresponding to the raw score mean. Percentile ranks cannot be averaged directly.
Appendix C

Writing Attitudes Survey

1. How would you feel writing a letter to the author of a book you read?

2. How would you feel if you wrote about something you have heard or seen?

3. How would you feel writing a letter to a store asking about something you might buy there?

4. How would you feel telling in writing why something happened?
5. How would you feel writing to someone to change their opinion?

6. How would you feel keeping a diary?

7. How would you feel writing poetry for fun?

8. How would you feel writing a letter stating your opinion about a topic?

9. How would you feel if you were an author who writes books?
10. How would you feel if you had a job as a writer for a newspaper or magazine?

11. How would you feel about becoming an even better writer than you already are?

12. How would you feel about writing a story instead of doing homework?

13. How would you feel about writing a story instead of watching TV?

14. How would you feel writing about something you did in science?
15. How would you feel writing about something you did in social studies?

16. How would you feel if you could write more in school?

17. How would you feel about writing down the important things your teacher says about a new topic?

18. How would you feel writing a long story or report at school?

19. How would you feel writing answers to questions in science or social studies?
20. How would you feel if your teacher asked you to go back and change some of your writing?

21. How would you feel if your classmates talked to you about making your writing better?

22. How would you feel writing an advertisement for something people can buy?

23. How would you feel keeping a journal for class?

24. How would you feel writing about things that have happened in your life?
25. How would you feel writing about something from another person’s point of view?

26. How would you feel about checking your writing to make sure the words you have written are spelled correctly?

27. How would you feel if your classmates read something you wrote?

28. How would you feel if you didn’t write as much in school?
# Writing Attitude Survey Scoring sheet

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Student's name</th>
<th>Teacher</th>
<th>Grade</th>
<th>Administration date</th>
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## Scoring guide

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Score</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
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<td>Very happy Garfield</td>
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<td>3</td>
<td>Somewhat happy Garfield</td>
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<td>2</td>
<td>Somewhat upset Garfield</td>
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<td>Very upset Garfield</td>
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## Item scores:

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Full scale raw score: 

Percentile rank: 

Writing Attitude Survey
Directions for use

The Writing Attitude Survey provides a quick indication of student attitudes toward writing. It consists of 28 items and can be administered to an entire classroom in about 20 minutes. Each item presents a brief, simply worded statement about writing, followed by four pictures of Garfield. Each pose is designed to depict a different emotional state, ranging from very positive to very negative.

Administration

Begin by telling students that you wish to find out how they feel about writing. Emphasize that this is not a test and that there are no right answers. Encourage sincerity.

Distribute the survey forms and, if you wish to monitor the attitudes of specific students, ask them to write their names in the space at the top. Hold up a copy of the survey so that the students can see the first page. Point to the picture of Garfield at the far left of the first item. Ask the students to look at this same picture on their own survey form. Discuss with them the mood Garfield seems to be in (very happy). Then move to the next picture and again discuss Garfield’s mood (this time, somewhat happy). In the same way, move to the third and fourth pictures and talk about Garfield’s moods—somewhat upset and very upset.

Explain that the survey contains some statements about writing and that the students should think about how they feel about each statement. They should then circle the picture of Garfield that is closest to their own feelings. (Emphasize that the students should respond according to their own feelings, not as Garfield might respond!) In the first and second grades read each item aloud slowly and distinctly, then read it a second time while students are thinking. Be sure to read the item number and to remind students of page numbers when new pages are reached.

In Grades 3 and above, monitor students while they are completing this survey. It is not necessary for the teacher to read the items aloud to students, unless the teacher feels it is necessary for newer or struggling readers.

Teachers should review the items prior to the administration of the survey to identify any words students may need defined to eliminate misunderstanding during completion of the instrument.

Scoring

To score the survey, count four points for each leftmost (very happy) Garfield circled, three points for the next Garfield to the right (somewhat happy), two points for the next Garfield to the right (somewhat upset), and one point for the rightmost Garfield (very upset). The individual scores for each question should be totaled to reach a raw score.

Interpretation

The scores should first be recorded on the scoring sheet. The scores can be interpreted in two ways. An informal approach would be to look at where the raw score falls related to the total possible points of 112. If the raw score is approximately 70, the score would fall midway between the somewhat happy and somewhat upset Garfields, indicating the student has an indifferent attitude toward writing. The formal approach involves converting the raw score to a percentile rank by using Table 1. The raw score should be found on the left-hand side of the table and matched to the percentile rank in the appropriate grade-level column.