DISSERTATION


SUPPORTING STUDENT ENGAGEMENT AND LEARNING THROUGH THE DIALOGIC-

INQUIRY ACTIVITY OF WRITTEN CONVERSATIONS IN AN ELEMENTARY

CLASSROOM: AN ETHNOGRAPHIC CASE STUDY



Submitted by

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ABSTRACT


SUPPORTING STUDENT ENGAGEMENT AND LEARNING THROUGH THE DIALOGIC-INQUIRY ACTIVITY OF WRITTEN CONVERSATIONS IN AN ELEMENTARY CLASSROOM: AN ETHNOGRAPHIC CASE STUDY

This study describes a fourth-grade elementary, general-education classroom located in a city in Colorado. The participating teacher was also the researcher in this study. She spent 10 weeks in field observation and data collection. The study was informed by two pilot studies, was based in the theoretical framework of constructivism, and an ethnographic methodology was utilized to describe the classroom environment. Analyses of the data were completed using the five parts of an ethnographic case study: (a) data managing, (b) coding and developing themes, (c) describing, (d) interpreting, and (d) representing.

The research question for this study focused on examining how the dialogical inquiry activity of written conversations supports or constrains student engagement and the learning process. The findings from the study present evidence that the dialogical inquiry activity of written conversations played a supportive role in the interconnection between relationship building and the emotional, behavioral, and cognitive (EBC) constructs of student engagement and the learning process. The study found that relationships were the integrated factor that tie the three EBC engagement constructs together. Findings illustrate how written conversations support building a classroom community, helping the teacher see students through a relational lens, and building student-to-student relationships and teacher-to-student relationships. Written conversations were also an effective pedagogical tool in supporting the learning process.

Findings illustrate how written conversations provided opportunities for engaging in a wide array of literacy practices through authentic writing activity. Multiple examples of students' written conversations demonstrate how student literacy practices grew more proficient through the written conversations over time. The findings also illustrate how teacher-researcher-devised assessment tools made visible a broad range of literacy skills that students developed and demonstrated through the practice of written conversations, addressing many learning standards that are less prevalent in other areas of the curriculum.

Although there is much evidence in this study of how written conversations support relationships, student engagement, and the learning process, one constraint should be noted. Written conversations are a tool that facilitates dialogue; but if the teacher attends to only what the writing looks like and not what the student voice is saying, the result could be a decrease in student engagement. Additional constraints to the effective implementation of written conversations that relate to culturally responsive teaching practices are addressed. In summary, written conversations supported student engagement and the learning process because written conversations played a key role in building relationships within a community of learners. Written conversations supported relationship building, relationship building supported student engagement, and student engagement supported the learning process.

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DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to my parents, the late Richard and Doris LaFond, who raised me in love and to have and use my voice. To my three sons, Joseph, William, and Michael, my family, and friends, without whose constant love and support I could not have made it through this process. Thank you all for believing that I could do this!

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DEFINITION OF TERMS

*Engagement* is a complex concept and is explained in further detail in the literature review. In this study, *student engagement* is defined as encompassing emotional, behavioral, and cognitive constructs and is referred to in the study as *EBC*. The working definition I have adopted reflects an ontological viewpoint in that student engagement is a state of being in which the whole child (emotionally, behaviorally, and cognitively) is actively involved in the learning process. It is my belief that the other terms that used to define engagement are closely linked and are an integral part of engagement but fall under the engagement umbrella.

*Emotional engagement* factors include interest, boredom, happiness, sadness, anxiety, identification, belonging, a positive attitude about learning, and the emotional reactions to school and the teacher.

*Behavioral engagement* factors include adherence to school rules and norms, positive conduct, effort, persistence, concentration, attentiveness, questioning, participation, and contribution to class discussion.

*Cognitive* factors include self-regulation, goal setting, investment in learning, a desire to go beyond what is expected, and the need to look for a challenge.

*Relational engagement* refers to a student's feelings of being supported, pushed to learn, and accepted at school.

*Concept of caring* is included as part of relational engagement. It is defined with the emphasis on both the recognition of growing competent, caring, loving people and the principle of developing caring relations. This attitude puts the focus on the educational setting to include

not only schooling for a student's head but also schooling for the learner's heart growth; in other words, on educating and engaging the whole child.

Dialogical Inquiry is defined as a philosophical belief about how children can learn through language. This approach centers on learners constructing knowledge through active investigation.

# CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

> In the end, the path to student engagement starts where young people are and helps them to chart a course that will take them where they need to go. On the way, the more they can find and use their voices to express who they are and what they want, the greater is the likelihood that they will seek and find what they need. Engagement is a habit of mind and heart. It is what we want young people to cultivate not just to get their diplomas, but as a lifelong way of being. It is what we want our schools and programs to foster with every aspect of their curriculum, organization, and culture. To engage young people requires of us what we ask of them: full commitment, a belief that it is possible, and a vision of a viable and productive future. (Joselowsky, 2007, p. 273)

## Statement of the Problem

Over the past 25 years, student engagement has become prevalent in education in an effort to address problems of student boredom, low achievement, and high dropout rates. As an educator, my colleagues and I have had many conversations about students who are not engaged in their learning. Research done by Harris (2008) found that students who are bored, unmotivated, and uninvolved in school are disengaged from the academic and social aspects of school life (Harris, 2008). "Some educationists consider engaging disengaged pupils to be one of the biggest challenges facing educators" (Harris, 2008, p. 57). According to Wang and Eccles (2012a, 2012b), when students are engaged with learning, they can focus attention and energy on mastering the task, persist when difficulties arise, build supportive relationships with adults and peers, and connect to their school.

If institutions of education view student engagement as paramount in student achievement, it is important that the construct be clearly defined and that educators and curriculum designers examine academic activities for their impact on student engagement and the learning process. Time is a precious commodity in the world of education, and the use of required curriculum for content learning leaves little time in the day for additional academic

activities that teachers may need to use to support the curriculum and help shape a student's learning to be more thought-filled and creative. Teachers surveyed from around the world were surprisingly similar in their philosophy that, for students to function in school, work, and life, they must persist when faced with adversity, solve cognitively complex problems, draw on vast reservoirs of knowledge, and work collaboratively. To strengthen these skills, educators need to have classroom activities that are reflective, complex, relevant, and engaging to the whole child (ASCD, 2007).

As a 16-year elementary school teacher (third and fourth grades), I have learned that finding academic activities that hold students' attention and support the learning process can be a struggle. In my first year of teaching, I was overwhelmed with trying to cover all the standards and keep up with the required curriculum. Therefore, my definition of student engagement was basic: if the students appear to be enjoying the learning activity, then they are engaged. With experience, I began to realize that the academic activities that allowed the students to talk and share with each other were the activities that were usually met with the highest level of interest. One activity that I became involved with because it met the criteria of allowing students to talk and share with each other was the dialogic-inquiry activity of written conversations (Burke, 1986). Written conversations generally involve two people taking turns writing questions and responses regarding a particular topic. Prompts might include "What did you do this weekend that made you smile?" or "Dialogue with your partner about the poem we read in class today." Often, written conversations are completed between peers, although they can involve an exchange with a teacher and even a parent. This practice engages learners in authentic conversation through literate practices of reading and writing. Researchers have pointed to a variety of benefits of written conversations. For example, written conversations can provide

students with exploratory talk time (Barnes, 2008); and when students are given time to dialogue with peers or a teacher, they gain a greater understanding of the topics being studied (Haneda, 2014). Written conversations allow students to be inclusively and actively involved in the learning process with each other and with their teacher (Jennings & O'Keefe, 2002) by providing a way for students to have open and honest dialogue. The writing requires the participants to contribute by making comments, offering observations and opinions, requesting and giving clarification, answering or asking questions, and allowing for immediate feedback, much like instant messaging or online chats do. Written conversations allow for dialogue between student-teacher, student-parent, and most importantly between student-student. Johnson (1981) found that student-to-student interaction, once a neglected variable in education, is now recognized as a highly impactful practice in education (Salomon & Perkins, 1998; Chi, 2009). Laman and Van Sluys (2006) found in their research on written conversations that it invites participants to explore language in ways that support learning about the complex ways language becomes manipulated and represented in written form.

In the fall of 2016 and the summer of 2018, I conducted two pilot studies on two different groups of students to examine how written conversations support and constrain student engagement and the learning process. This full study builds upon these pilot studies' findings to examine the extent to which student engagement is supported and constrained through the use of the dialogic-inquiry activity, written conversations. For this full study, student engagement is defined as engagement that encompasses emotional, behavioral, and cognitive engagement, which is hereby referred to as *EBC*.

During the first pilot study with my fourth-grade students during the fall of 2016, I was struck by the students' commitment and focus to the process. They looked forward to

communicating with a partner, and their behavioral engagement showed students who were smiling and relaxed. Emotional engagement was also evident because students would openly and honestly share their feelings about a topic. These personal connections could be seen in their writing with a partner or with the teacher. Examples of cognitive engagement were also noted. Students were stretching their thinking and probing the topics more deeply by the questions they were asking or the conclusions they were drawing from their partner's responses. Students were also persevering with their writing even though the process of writing was hard for some of them. Regarding the learning process, written conversations fostered skills such as paraphrasing, clarifying, questioning, and valuing others' viewpoints.

I did the second pilot study with a small group of multi-aged students during a summer-school program during the summer of 2018. Again, I was pleased with the students' willingness to take part in the written conversation activity and the honesty in which they shared their thinking. Even though the setting with the second pilot study was completely different then that of the first pilot study, students showed emotional, behavioral, and cognitive engagement. Both of these pilot studies are discussed in Chapter 3.

### Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this ethnographic case study was to explore how the dialogic inquiry-based activity of written conversations supports and constrains the learning process and EBC engagement among elementary students. The work of Vygotsky emphasizes the significance of dialogic talk in learning. He viewed the theory of dialogic inquiry as a philosophical belief about how children can learn through language (Vygotsky, 1978). With this type of approach, children are encouraged to ask questions and be receptive to alternative viewpoints. As a teacher who has been required to follow a set curriculum for many years, I have found that usually the questions

at the core of the curricula are "What subjects are we teaching?" and "How or what methods and techniques are required to teach it well?" There is nothing wrong with these types of questions, except they do not lend themselves to teachers connecting with their students and getting to know them as learners and children rather than just as students. The curriculum that I have been required to use did not usually allow for enough talk time, whether it was verbal or written dialogue. Vygotsky advocated for the importance of providing children with opportunities to talk. However, it is important that the teacher have an understanding and a belief about the use and importance of talk within a collaborative learning environment. Further, teachers need to incorporate dialogue not solely to meet the outer requirements of the students (covering standards and supporting the learning process of important skills such as paraphrasing, clarifying, questioning, and valuing others' viewpoints), but as a tool to explore the inner life of the learner. According to Vygotsky (1978), when we give our students practice in talking with others, we give them frameworks for thinking on their own. When dialogue puts too much emphasis on grammar and mechanics rather than just letting the students get their thoughts out (verbal or written), the opportunity for learners to discover and explore new experiences about the world and about each other is lost. In this study, I examine how written "talk time" impacts the learner's engagement with the learning process—a learning process that needs to include the whole child?

In a study by Mahn (1997), students disclosed that their anxiety over the fear of making mistakes in pedagogical approaches that put the major emphasis on form and mechanics, rather than on communicative intent, inhibited their writing and caused further frustration, as they felt stymied in their ability to communicate their ideas. This was especially true for the participating students who were learning English. One student in Mahn's study wrote that he felt released

from the verbs-tenses prison and grammar nightmare when the English teacher allowed him to focus on meaningful communication instead of mechanics. Mahn (1997) found that, students became less anxious about writing, they reported that they became more fluent in getting their thoughts down on paper because they were not editing and reediting in their minds before committing words to paper.

## Research Question

The central question guiding the collection and analysis of data in this study is "How do written conversations, an inquiry activity that encourages dialogue, support or constrain student engagement and the learning process?"

## Significance of the Study

There is much theoretical literature on student engagement and the importance it plays in education. However, the varying vocabulary and differences in definitions that are used for the term *student engagement,* and the ambiguity of the definitions can create a cloud of confusion for educators who are trying to examine student engagement or the lack of it. There are also many studies on the evolution of student engagement, ranging from a single-construct model to the concept being viewed as a meta-construct. These studies were in agreement regarding the multifaceted nature of engagement, but the models of engagement reviewed did not integrate the multidimensionality of engagement and did not take into account the interplay between students' emotional states, their behavioral engagement, and the cognitive way they learn academically (Fredricks, Blumenfeld, & Paris, 2004), especially when looking at students in elementary school.

This study clearly defined a three-construct model of student engagement and then examines how a dialogical inquiry-based activity called *written conversations* supports or

constrains student engagement with elementary-aged students. The study also explored how students, when given the time to dialogue with peers or a teacher, learn through language. Such knowledge may ultimately help educators and curriculum designers examine academic activities for their impact on students' engagement and the learning process.

Finally, in this this study, I examined the role that relationships and caring play on student engagement. What are the underlying commonalities of relationships with student EBC engagement? Each of the three constructs in this study's engagement model had its own set of defining factors. I looked at how all the factors fit together, their overlaps, and whether one defining factor links these engagement constructs. This information could add to the literature on student engagement and the learning process that includes classroom interactions and collaboration between students and students and students and teachers.

**Summary of Chapter 1**

In this chapter, I have introduced the reasons for studying the complex concept of student engagement through the use of the dialogic-inquiry activity of written conversations. I also provided a rational for developing the research question that guides the study, which centers on how written conversations support and constrain student engagement and learning. In Chapter 2, I review the literature on student engagement and dialogic inquiry, both of which are grounded in constructivist theory and specifically the social constructivism and genetic epistemology theories of constructivism.

**CHAPTER 2: REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE**

As a teacher-researcher seeking to better understand how to engage young learners through written conversations, I scoured the literature on engagement, dialogic learning, and written conversations. In this chapter, I present a review of the relevant literature on student engagement to frame my conceptualization of emotional, behavioral, and cognitive (EBC) engagement. This literature review provides a framework for thoughtfully and systematically examining what I was deeply curious to understand: how to help my students thrive as learners and be fully engaged in the classroom.

Figure 1 illustrates the major constructs of my study and their relationship to each other. I present an engagement model that encompasses three constructs of engagement. These three constructs are examined using the dialogic inquiry based learning activity of written conversations. The two-way arrows in this figure show the interconnectedness of student

| E | B | C |
|---|---|---|
| **Emotional** Construct of Student Engagement | **Behavioral** Construct of Student Engagement | **Cognitive** Construct of Student Engagement |

Dialogic Inquiry Based Learning

**Written Conversation**
(Student-Student; Student-Teacher)
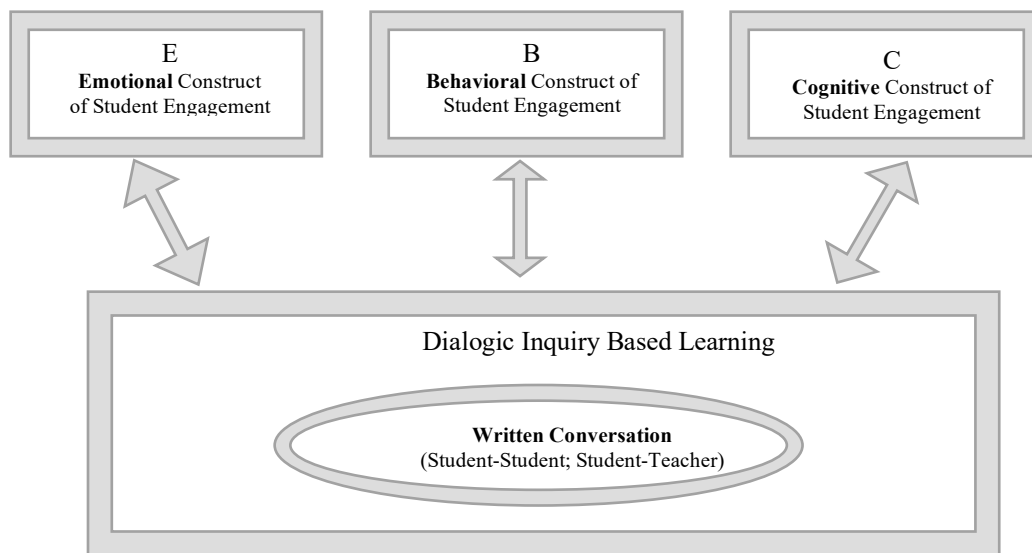
*Figure 1*. Framework for literature review.

engagement and the written-conversation activity. I also present a review of the literature on relational engagement, which includes the concept of care, and then expand the scope of the

study to incorporate the concept of relationships and learning. Next, I review the literature on the topic of dialogic inquiry, along with a discussion on the effects this approach has on the learning environment. I conclude with a review of the literature on the activity of written conversations and research on this subject.

## Conceptualizing Student Engagement

The term *engagement* is used loosely and broadly in research mainly because of the many different definitions that are used for this term. A review of the literature on this topic confirmed that there are also many different definitions for the term *student engagement*. For example, *the National Survey of Student Engagement*'s (*NSSE*, 2002) definition resembles a behavioral definition because it leans toward students' ability to be involved in activities and situations that are connected with high-quality learning. Another definition came from Hu and Kuh (2001); their definition also favors a behavioral definition that links student engagement to motivation and students' ability to choose to engage in learning and to learn independently. Coates defined engagement as "a broad construct intended to encompass salient academic as well as certain non-academic aspects of the student experience" (2007, p. 122). Yet another definition, from Trowler (2010), states that student engagement is the participation of students in quality-enhancement and quality-assurance processes that result in improvements in their educational experience. *School bonding, school attachment,* and *school commitment* are a few other terms that used in conjunction with student engagement. There is considerable inconsistency in the terminology used to define this term across studies (Fredericks et al., 2004; Furlong et al., 2003; Jimerson, Campos, & Greif, 2003). There are also many variations in how engagement is measured. Understanding the terms, factors, and associated measures is fundamental in advancing research and practice related to student engagement.

Most of the field research literature on student engagement shows that student engagement is both a process and an outcome that includes constructs of emotional engagement, behavioral engagement, and cognitive engagement (Bryson, 2014). As a result, studies on student engagement have evolved from using a single construct of engagement to viewing student engagement as a metaconstruct (Fredericks et al., 2004). The metaconstruct models of student engagement focus on two- or three-constructs models. The two-construct models include an emotional or affective piece (e.g., interest, boredom, happiness, sadness, anxiety, identification, belonging, positive attitude about learning) and a behavioral piece (e.g., adherence to school rules and norms, positive conduct, effort, persistence, concentration, attentiveness, questioning, participation in and contribution to class discussion) (Finn, 1989; Marks, 2000; Newmann, Wehlage, & Lamborn, 1992; Willms, 2003). Both of these pieces have been shown to be essential to understanding engagement. The three-construct models include an additional cognitive piece (e.g., self-regulation, goal setting, investment in learning, a desire to go beyond what is expected, and the need to look for a challenge) (Fredericks et al., 2004; Jimerson et al., 2003).

For researchers, the lack of multiconstruct engagement models has created a challenge. Researchers Guthrie and Wigfield found that not knowing which engagement factors or which combination of factors influences each type of engagement is one of the biggest challenges. (Guthrie & Wigfield, 2000). The focus of this literature review is not to determine which combination of engagement factors is most influential to student engagement; instead, it is to present how the literature defines the factor breakdowns of each of the three constructs of engagement, and then to offer a review of the limited research available on multi-construct engagement models, specifically in elementary grades. However, the connection between past

research and more current research shows that the three-construct model of student engagement has merit. The ongoing development of this idea of engagement justifies using the three-construct model in future research.

Nevertheless, there are still holes in the research on the three-construct model of engagement. Many of the engagement studies reviewed looked at only one construct and that construct's influence on an outcome of interest—for example, how behavioral engagement impacts achievement. The multidimensionality of engagement has resulted in models of engagement that do not take into account the relationship between students' emotional states, their behavioral engagement, and their cognitive engagement (Fredricks et al., 2004), especially in the limited engagement research done with students at the elementary level. If the focus is on only one construct of engagement, then our understanding about the process through which engagement is formed and that ultimately leads to academic achievement is minimal. Engagement can be viewed as the driving force that directs the emotional, behavioral, and cognitive capabilities of the learning process. Each of the three constructs is defined in detail in the following sections, followed by a discussion of the multi-construct model.

**Emotional Engagement**

Beginning with the construct of emotional engagement, the key factors are how students reacts in the classroom (e.g., with interest, boredom, happiness, sadness, or anxiety) (Connell & Wellborn, 1991; Skinner & Belmont, 1993), and the emotional reactions to the school and the teacher (Lee & Smith, 1995; Stipek, 2002)—in other words, how students experience the classroom climate. Solomonides and Martin (2008), offered a model of student engagement that falls into the construct of emotional engagement and emphasizes the ontological component of student engagement—how students develop a sense of self about aspects of the learning

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environment that are meaningful to them. These researchers believed this model gives the impression that student engagement is an internal part of a sense of being (Solomonides & Martin, 2008). Regarding the emotional engagement factors of relationships and classroom climate, researchers Willms, Friesen, and Milton (2009) focused on classroom climate in their work entitled *Transforming Classrooms through Social, Academic and Intellectual Engagement*. They found that one factor of relationship building that stands above others is "the importance of a positive classroom disciplinary climate. Students who describe their classroom disciplinary climate as positive are one and a half times more likely to report high levels of interest, motivation and enjoyment in learning" (Willms et al., 2009, p. 35). This finding led to their conclusion that "forming strong and supportive relationships with teachers allows students to feel safer and more secure in the school setting, feel more competent, make more positive connections with peers, and make greater academic gains" (Willms et al., p. 57). Subsequently, Perry (1999) and Wenger (1999) offered a different perspective on emotional engagement and regarding the notion that community enhances emotional engagement in the educational setting. Last, Elias et al. (1997) believed that emotional competency involves the acquisition of skills that include recognizing cues to labeling emotions. With age, these skills evolve into linking feeling appropriately to a range of situations.

Emotional engagement is grounded in strong, positive relationships, and that is not easy to measure because it is often not easily observable. Quantitative studies attempt to measure emotional engagement usually through self-report measures such as surveys. These surveys ask questions of the teacher and students, and have a variety of items about emotions regarding school, schoolwork, peers, or teachers. However, qualitative studies include the use of researcher observation and interviews in classrooms as tools to measure emotional engagement. For

example, Hamre and Pianta (2006) recommended that "talking with a teacher and conducting observations in the classroom will provide important and unique information for designing future academic interventions" (p. 55). And a case study conducted in 2014 in an elementary classroom in Rhode Island found that responses from student and teacher surveys pointed to classroom climate, classroom layout, teacher interaction, and instructional delivery as factors that impacted emotional engagement (Gablinske, 2014).

**Behavioral Engagement**

The next construct is behavioral engagement. The behavioral construct factors are defined as positive conduct (such as following school rules and norms) and not engaging in disruptive behaviors (such as skipping school and getting into trouble) (Finn & Voelkl, 1993; Finn, Pannozzo, & Voelkl, 1995; Finn & Rock, 1997). Behavioral engagement factors are defined as effort, persistence, concentration, attentiveness, questioning, contribution to class discussion, and self-control skills that allow for the ability to approach others in difficult situations.

Measuring the behavioral construct of student engagement is much easier than measuring the emotional construct, mostly because behavioral factors tend to be visible and observable. Measures of behavior include teacher self-report surveys and conduct measures such as completing homework, complying with school rules, participating in class, being involved in extracurricular school activities, and using observational techniques (e.g., determining whether students are off-task, deeply involved, doing the assigned work, showing excitement) (Birch & Ladd, 1997; Finn et al., 1995; Fredericks et al., 2004). However, one possible issue with observational techniques not taken into account is the quality of the effort of student involvement and thinking that is being observed. An observer may think that the student is not engaged

because they do not look like they are involved, or they appear to be off task; when in reality, they are thinking and trying to connect what they know to the new material (Peterson, Swing, Stark, & Wass, 1984).

Before defining the third construct of student engagement in detail—the cognitive construct—it is important to point out that a review was first made of the literature on two-construct models, where I found that those models often include the emotional or affective construct and a behavioral piece. Willms et al.'s (2009) research on emotional engagement mentioned previously suggests that classroom discipline is an extremely important factor of emotional engagement; and when a teacher handles classroom discipline in a positive manner, it can lead to a high level of students' emotional engagement. However, students following school rules and norms is a factor that falls into behavioral engagement. Therefore, we could infer that, when behavioral engagement factors are met (e.g., the teacher sets up a positive disciplinary environment), that will lead to emotional engagement factors (e.g., students feeling safe, strong supportive relationships with teachers) being met. This is not to say that as long as students' emotional factors are being met their behavior factors will automatically correspond, or vice versa, or that this correspondence will inevitably lead to engagement. A child may be having behavioral engagement problems in school due to a lack of motor or social skills that do not allow the child to participate; or she may have emotional engagement difficulties in school as the result of emotionally charged situations that have happened or are happening outside of school. These issues cannot be ignored or discounted. However, what the research is saying and what has been shown is that the two-construct model of emotional and behavioral engagement helps to mediate the experiences that students face outside of the teacher's control; and that effective

implementation of this model can contribute to a healthy school experience and increased

engagement (Bartko, 2005; Weiss, Little, & Bouffard, 2005).

A case study investigated the use of a two-construct model (emotional and behavioral) of

engagement with a lab teacher in an elementary classroom in Rhode Island (Gablinske, 2014).

The lab teacher's creation of learning opportunities that captivated student interests was a

purposeful act that reflected the relationships she had with her students. The teacher was engaged

in "active listening" throughout the day to capture student interests. During an interview with the

teacher, the researcher recorded the teacher stating,

> I think about the needs of students and also a lot about their personalities, you kind of
> figure out the child and learn what they need. There are a lot of things I have invested in
> to help children be successful. I listen to them talk about home and things they like to do
> and use that information to motivate them and create lessons. (Gablinske, 2014, pp. 90–
> 91)

Additional research showing the two-construct model of emotional and behavioral

engagement involved the observation of peer play in an early childhood classroom in

Philadelphia. The researchers' observation of peer play captured the students' interaction with

their peer group and the carrying out of shared activities (Fantuzzo & McWayne, 2002). The

positive climate created in the classroom led to the students' ability to engage in positive problem

solving with each other and self-regulation. The literature shows that the two-construct model of

emotion and behavior engagement has value. However, once again, the whole child is not taken

into consideration because the two-construct model of emotional and behavioral engagement

fails to incorporate the cognitive construct of student engagement.

**Cognitive Engagement**

The third and final construct in this model of student engagement is cognitive

engagement. Cognitive factors include self-regulation, goal setting, investment in learning, and a

desire to go beyond what is expected, the need to look for a challenge (Fredericks et al., 2004; Jimerson et al., 2003). In additional to these factors, Connell and Wellborn (1991) found that cognitive engagement factors also include flexibility in thinking and problem solving, a penchant for hard work, and perseverance in the face of failure. Finally, Elias et al. (1997) found that the acquisition of skills that can guide students in thoughtful decision making and problem solving when they are faced with problematic situations also falls into the cognitive engagement realm.

Cognitive engagement requires students to be able to employ self-regulation strategies in learning situations that can be distracting, in order to stay engaged (Corno, 1993; Pintrich & DeGroot, 1990). However, depending on the students' age, the ability to employ these strategies may not be fully developed. This limitation can cause difficulty in efforts to measure cognitive engagement with elementary-aged students. Cognitive engagement, like emotional engagement, can be difficult to measure because it is not easily observable. We could infer while watching students work that they are cognitively engaged because of the positive behavior factors they are displaying. But what is not visible is whether they are using surface-level or deep-level cognitive strategies. Surface-level strategies include the mindset of trying to quickly get the work done (i.e., "I skipped over the hard parts," or "I hurried because I just wanted to get the work done"). The deep-level learning strategies include the ability to regulate attention, show persistence, and relate new information to existing knowledge (i.e., "I went back and checked over my answers," or "I went back and reviewed the questions I did not understand") (Pintrich, Wolters, & Baxter, 2000; Winne & Perry, 2000).

Regarding the above-mentioned issue of cognitive development in younger students, research shows that, if students fall within a range of 3 years to 5 years of age, their ability to be

behaviorally engaged by following rules and instructions can be influenced by their cognitive development.

> The extent to which a child has an internal sense of control and can self-regulate his/her behaviors has been shown to influence that child's engagement in a learning environment, specifically the child's ability to participate in classroom activities, control attention, and stay on task. (Bierman et al., 2008, p. 825)

It can perhaps be assumed that, in early childhood, behavior-engagement factors and cognitive-engagement factors become highly influenced by each other and seem to blend together as one construct of engagement.

Moving into the middle-childhood age bracket of 5 years to 12 years, cognitive engagement can be hindered due to the level of development of their prefrontal cortex and limbic system, which support higher-order reasoning capabilities. Cognitive engagement with middle-childhood students centers on the children's knowledge about the activity they are being asked to complete, and on their belief about their ability to complete it (Appleton, Christenson, & Furlong, 2008; Ripke, Huston, & Casey, 2006; Rose-Krasnor, 2009: Simpkins, Fredricks, Davis-Kean, & Eccles, 2006). If they can complete the developmental task without much struggle, the experience tends to lead to a positive self-evaluation; and having positive self-efficacy is tied to higher cognitive engagement (Luo, Hughes, Liew, & Kwod, 2009). Consequently, these students will be more likely to maintain their engagement in school and activities over time (Ripke et al., 2006; Rose-Krasnor, 2009).

The tools used to measure cognitive engagement (e.g., questionnaires, rating scales, or self-reporting measures) can also be problematic when dealing with younger-aged students because the tools are developmentally inappropriate. These types of measurement tools may ask students to reflect or hypothesize, and these activities can be more difficult for younger students. Children's ability to be more reflective and focused and to contemplate different outcomes

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increases with age (Schneider & Pressley, 1997; Keating, 2004). The review of literature for cognitive engagement suggests that "more inclusive measurement tools need to be designed to fully assess a student's psychological investment in academic tasks and that researchers should consider including survey items from self-regulation literature or observational techniques that assess the quality of engagement" (Fredricks et al., 2004, p. 69).

**A Three-Construct Model of Engagement**

To take the discussion about student engagement a step further, research has shown that implementation of a three-construct model of engagement requires teachers to be aware of all of the engagement constructs simultaneously as they develop lessons. Classrooms in which students are being encouraged and supported (emotional engagement) feel comfortable asking questions and are expected to do their best; experience instruction as challenging (behavior engagement); and are encouraged to set goals, make choices in their learning, experiment with new ideas, and self-regulate their learning (cognitive engagement) are less likely to have bored and disengaged students (Gibbs & Poskitt, 2010).

The literature review on three-construct models of engagement identified examples of this model being used in a series of case studies with teachers who were successful in transforming reluctant students into focused, highly engaged students (Strahan, 2008). The teachers observed and interviewed in these case studies all appeared to

> demonstrate warm, supportive relationships by showing a deep knowledge of individual students. Not only could they describe in detail the emotional, physical, cognitive, intellectual and family needs, and circumstances of students in their classes, they addressed these needs by responding to students as individuals. (Strahan, 2008, p. 6)

One of these case studies was conducted in a school in which students were making significant academic gains. Strahan's research found that teachers had created a climate of trust, "shared responsibility through team building and positive discipline, taught explicit strategies for

performing academic tasks, and developed instructional activities that linked inquiry, collaboration and real-world experiences" (Strahan, 2008, p. 6). Because the students' emotional, behavioral, and cognitive needs were being met, the students were more likely to take risks in their learning and believe in their own learning, and the teachers held the belief that the students were highly capable learners (Strahan, 2008).

Even though the cognitive construct of engagement is much more difficult to measure in early- and middle-childhood students, and there is limited research available on the three-construct model of engagement for this age group, this model of engagement has merit. Current research has recognized middle childhood (5 years to 12 years of age) as a crucial developmental period to cultivate student engagement because children are moving into formal schooling and through these school experiences gain opportunities to develop their academic engagement (Mahatmya, Lohman, Matjasko, & Farb, 2012). Engagement is at its peak during middle childhood (Marks, 2000). It is during middle childhood that the classroom becomes the most significant learning environment, along with the other environments of home, after-school activities, and neighborhoods. These combined environments all offer experiences to students that contribute to the development of student engagement (Ripke et al., 2006; Rose-Krasnor, 2009; Simpkins et al., 2006). It is my belief that genuine student engagement is not possible unless all three constructs are joined in a way that adds to and enhances the others. This joining integration of emotional engagement, behavioral engagement, and cognitive engagement will assist in creating a more complete vision of what student engagement looks like:

> Engagement can be thought of as a meta-construct that should be reserved specifically for work where multiple constructs are present and where the fusion of behavior, emotion, and cognition under the idea of engagement provides a richer characterization of children than is possible in research on single constructs . . . considering engagement as a multidimensional construct argues for examining antecedents and consequences of

behavior, emotion, and cognition simultaneously and dynamically, to test for additive or interactive effects. (Fredricks et al., 2004, p. 61)

The research literature also lends itself to another argument to consider that supports the validity of using a multifaceted, three-construct model approach to engagement. Too often in education, changes or interventions are made to improve student engagement that end up addressing the constructs individually (e.g., improving school climate, or changing curriculum and standards); but just because students appear to be enjoying classroom activities does not mean they are truly engaged. Although enjoyment of school is part of engagement, it is only a piece, just one factor of the emotional construct.

If the impact of proposed changes in education is viewed through a lens that takes into consideration all three constructs and considers the interaction between individual students and the environment, the complexity of children's experiences in school would be exposed. Taking this more inclusive view would in turn lead to the field of education being more informed and better equipped to make changes or interventions more targeted. The connection between past research done 20-plus years ago and more current research shows the evolution of this idea of multiconstruct engagement and justifies using the three-construct model in future research.

The knowledge gained from this research has led me to a working definition that student engagement is a state of being in which the whole child (emotionally, behaviorally, and cognitively) is actively involved in the learning process. My reason for defining student engagement as a three-construct model and not using just one of the other terms, such as *emotional* or *motivation*,  that have been linked to engagement, is straightforward. The three-construct model of student engagement is the overarching concept, and each of the other terms that have been used in conjunction with student engagement fit into one of the EBC constructs of engagement. For example, when students appear to be enjoying classroom activities, it does not

mean they are truly engaged. Although enjoyment of school is part of engagement, it is only a piece of the emotional construct. Another example is the use of the term *motivation* to describe student engagement. Motivation fits into the cognitive construct of student engagement. Turner (1995) considered motivation to be synonymous with cognitive engagement, which he defined as "voluntary uses of high-level self-regulated learning strategies, such as paying attention, connection, planning, and monitoring" (Turner, 1995, p. 413). Other researchers have seen motivation as a prerequisite of and necessary element for student engagement in learning (Russell, Ainley, & Frydenberg, 2005; Ryan & Deci, 2009). According to Irvin, Buehl, & Klemp, (2007), "Motivating students is important—without it, teachers have no point of entry. But it is *engagement* that is critical, because the level of engagement over time is the vehicle through which classroom instruction influences student outcomes" (p. 8). Researchers Appleton et al. (2008) also had a theory regarding motivation and engagement. They believed that engagement is the effort directed toward completing a task, or the action or energy component of motivation. In other words, when students are motivated to complete an assignment or meet a goal, the energy they put forth is engagement. In that case, motivation can be viewed as the prerequisite to engagement. Looked at this way, it is clear that the terms *engagement* and *motivation* are being viewed as related but separate concepts. There is no question that engagement and motivation are closely linked. However, because the definition of motivation matches that of cognitive engagement, the belief is that motivation and engagement are associated but separate, and motivation is a part of engagement.

The research has been instrumental in helping determine that when factors from only one of the constructs is used to describe engagement as a whole, the description is missing the

integral pieces of the other constructs. Therefore, I have used three-construct model of EBC to define engagement for this study.

**Relational Engagement**

Clearly, student engagement is a large, complicated term. Since the pilot studies that I conducted prior to this primary study, the following question emerged: "Is there a common factor within the constructs of EBC that tie the three constructs together?" This question emerged because during the pilot studies it felt as if I was always looking at each of the EBC constructs separately as I observed the students interacting with the written conversation activity. It has been shown that each construct has its own set of factors, but I struggled with how to look at the findings through a more integrated lens of all three instead of separately applying each construct as students interacted during the written-conversation activity. Therefore, the stated question naturally evolved and was significant enough that it led me to further review the literature on engagement, specifically searching for how relational learning fit into student engagement.

The search began with looking for research that focused on the role relationships play in student engagement. To begin, I reviewed studies conducted by Marzano and associates. These studies presented a model of human behavior and engagement suggesting that, when the learner moves into cognitive engagement, it is because he made the choice to do so (Marzano, Pickering, & Arredondo, 1997; Marzano & Kendall, 2007; Marzano, 2010). The learner is presented with new information and a decision is made by him as to whether to engage in the new task or switch his attention to the new situation. According to McCombs and Marzano (1990), that decision is controlled by the learner's self-system. The self-system contain his beliefs about life, goals, and desires and the decisions he makes about what he does and does not do. Based on his interpretations, the learner either engages in a new task or continues with what he is currently

doing. His cognitive system is responsible for examining the demand of the new task and drawing conclusions on whether the new task can be completed or what the next steps will be.

In the classroom, students will make these cognitive decisions regardless of the level of relationships in the classroom, but if they feel safe and supported in the educational setting, then their cognitive systems will allow them to believe in themselves and to make the choice to try to complete a task. Consequently, a firm foundation of relationships allows learners to become cognitively engaged.

Next I read research conducted by The Center for Research for Girls entitled *21st Century Athenas: Aligning Achievement and Well-Being* (Liang & Spencer, 2013). The purpose of this study was to understand unique challenges adolescent girls face, and how relationships, stress, and other relevant factors contribute to their success. The teacher in the study understood the value of the relationship with her students, and she employed numerous strategies to utilize relationship as an important pedagogical tool. A noteworthy finding in this study was that when adults form close, high-quality relationships with students, those relationships contribute to higher levels of success and well-being for the students (Liang & Spencer, 2013).

Another study by researcher and author Rogers (2009), entitled *The Working Alliance in Teaching and Learning: Theoretical Clarity and Research Implications*, found that the specific tasks of any educator in maintaining a working alliance with students include the following:

- *Educators need to serve as the experts who will guide learning.* A teacher should teach with passion and show curiosity for the subject. They need to be able to plan, do, and adjust when learning objectives are not being met.
- *Educators need to be aware of the quality of the relationships they have with their students.* It is the teacher's duty to notice changes in their students. If a student who

usually participates has shut down, it is up to the teacher to privately address that
observation with the student.

- *It is the teachers' responsibility to address and repair any tension or breaks in their relationships with their students*. Teachers need to listen and act on feedback, be the first to apologize if need be, and always thank the students for their honesty and courage to speak up and communication.

Additional studies I reviewed discussed the impact of the student-teacher relationship on both student and teacher well-being. The findings were all in agreement that the implications of increased well-being of both students and educators are huge: decreased anxiety, depression, and stress-related aggression, and increased feelings of gratification, calm, and overall happiness (Childers-McKee, Boyd, & Thompson, 2016). This way of teaching can be transformative for students who are not of the typical mainstream and therefore do not always see themselves in the content. Culturally responsive teaching can also help the students who are in the majority to realize that. A review on the subject of culturally responsive teaching also produced literature that supported the importance in building relationships with all students. When teachers recognize the importance of representing all students in all aspects of learning, they are using culturally responsive teaching.  Not all students want to learn from their teachers because their teachers may not make them feel like they are valued. Teachers need to build relationships with their students to make sure they feel respected, valued, and seen for who they are. Building those relationships helps them build community within the classroom and with each other (Childers-McKee et al., 2016). It is equally important for them to learn about diversity. This way of teaching should not be looked at as teaching strategies for minority students but good teaching strategies for everyone (Childers-McKee et al., 2016). For teachers to be effective in

multicultural classrooms, they must connect the teaching content to the cultural backgrounds of their students. According to the research, students will resist when their behavior norms and ways of communicating are dismissed. However, teaching that is responsive to the students will prompt their involvement (Olneck, 1995). There is growing evidence that a holistic approach results in engagement for diverse students. This approach needs to include the how, what, and why of teaching and needs to be unified and meaningful (Ogbu, 1995).

Ian Solomonides from Australia presented a different way of looking at engagement and relationships. He contributed some of his research work on engagement and the findings in Chapter 3, "A Relational and Multidimensional Model of Student Engagement," of the book *The Student Engagement Handbook: Practice in Higher Education* (Solomonides, 2013). The purpose of his research was to "Redress the concepts of engagement by including more affective aspects of engagement" (p. 43). This new approach was based on research from discussion with learners. His model shows a variety of experiences that students focus on at different times during their experience of engagement and, consequentially, the elements policymakers and practitioners might seek to enhance to support student engagement (Solomonides, 2013).

In one of his studies, Solomonides' refers to the groundbreaking work of Marton (1981, 1986) and Salijo (1996), and their development of *phenomenography*, a methodology that investigates the relationship between the subjects (students) and the phenomenon (study of engagement). He uses this methodology in much of his research. In another of his studies with Martin (Solomonides & Martin, 2008), they used surveys with staff and students to quiz them on their conceptions of engagement, learning, and teaching. The researchers found that the school staff's viewpoint of engagement was more epistemic—that is, based on how they knew students were engaged (e.g., signs of effort; evidence that students were prepared, active, critical,

inquisitive, and constructivist; and deficits of engagement), and not engaged (e.g., they were being passive, detached, apathetic, alienated, unfocused, and distracted). In contrast, the students looked at engagement through an ontological lens (e.g., showing a desire for confidence, happiness, imagination, self-knowledge). These staff and student conceptualizations were similar but skewed. The staff focused on the cognitive factors and shortfalls, while students leaned more on emotion, focusing on personal and creative identity. Solomonides and Martin's thoughts about engagement were that engagement (at least academic engagement) was a process one must go through before one achieves engagement as an outcome (Solomonides & Martin, 2008).

Additional research conducted by Reid and Solomonides (2007) focused on engagement with a concentration on the learner's perspective. This study of 81 college students of architecture and design led to a model of engagement that is relational and multidimensional. Their model includes five components: The *sense of being* is central in their model, with *sense of transformation, sense of artistry, sense of being a designer,* and *sense of being within a specific context* as the remaining components. The students in the study reported their sense of being as a core feature of their engagement; this is why sense of being is central in Reid and Solomonides's model. The sense of transformation suggests the way students' sense of being is transformed through learning. It is as though the students are going through a transformation that leads them to the belief that they have become architects. To Reid and Solomonides, these pieces are paramount to engagement. Their model of engagement identifies an ontological perspective rather than epistemological perspective. This is different from other paradigms that put the focus on the learners and their efforts because this model puts the emphasis on affective relationships within the students' learning and the natural way the students may be relating to their learning.

Conversely, researcher Barnett found an issue with this model. According to Barnett (2007), "We do not properly understand the student *as* separate from their educational setting, we only understand the student as being *in* the educational setting. The question is: what is the nature of that being?" (p. 28). As researchers Dall'Alba and Barnacle put it, "knowing and being are interdependent" (2007, p. 681). Because of this different perspective, these researchers designed a different model to make the elements more applicable to students of higher education. The new model was called a relational and multidimensional model of student engagement, and it put both *sense of transformation* (Dall'Alba & Barnacle, 2007) and *sense of being* (Barnett, 2007; Barnett & Coate, 2005) as central, and the other elements conceptualized to a broader status.

This latter research was conducted in Australia and does not claim to represent all students in all disciplines and conditions in higher education. It definitely does not consider younger students in elementary school. This research on relationships and engagement does attempt to broaden the concept of engagement, which is why it is included in this study's literature review. According to Solomonides (2013),

> There is a steady emergent of writing that increasingly accommodates the affective dimensions of engagement as lived by the student and attempts to be more sensitive to the intersections between life, learning and work. This may sound overstated, but we believe that if we all strive for improved relationships in our work with adolescents, the world will truly be a better place. (p. 54)

**An Addition: The Concept of Caring**

Building relationships includes caring. With this new perspective, of relationships being vital to a student's engagement, the concept of caring also needs to be examined. Therefore, as the researcher, I did more review on the idea of caring and the part it plays in student engagement. Noddings is well known for her work around the ethics of caring and, in particular,

her explorations of the ethics of care and its relationship to schooling. In her research, Noddings has revealed the importance of caring and relationship both as an educational goal and as a vital part of education (1984, 1989, 1992, 1995, 2002, & 2003). Her approach has been to assess how caring is actually experienced: "What are we like when we engage in caring encounters? Perhaps the first thing we discover about ourselves is that we are receptive; we are attentive in a special way" (Noddings, 2002, p. 13). Noddings did not like to refer to this as empathy because "empathy is peculiarly Western and masculine in its Western usage and it does not capture the affective state of attention in caring" (p. 14). She went on to explain how receptive attention is an important piece of a caring encounter and includes a connection between the caregiver and the cared-for; both parties give and benefit in different ways. The area of her work that is most relevant to this study is her argument that education from the care perspective has four key components:

- Modelling—Educators cannot merely tell students to care; they must show them by their own behavior what it means to care.

- Dialogue—Dialogue is a necessary part of caring because as we try to care, we are helped along by the feedback we get from the recipients.

- Practice—"If we want to produce people who will care for another, then it makes sense to give students practice in caring and reflection on that practice."

- Confirmation—This component sets caring apart from other approaches. To confirm others, we must know them reasonably well. We recognize something admirable in others and do not judge them to be wrong. (Noddings, 1998, pp. 190–192)

In summary, Noddings viewed caring as a relationship that involves dialogue and exchange, and both participants benefit from the experience.

The preceding research clearly shows that students lean toward the affective side when questioned about engagement and learning. However, with adults at the helm of our education system, the goal of improving student engagement will fail if adjustments are not made to beliefs and practices to include more of an emphasis on listening to the voices of the students.

My question then became "How does this new knowledge on relationships and engagement fit into the EBC model of engagement that has been adopted for this study?" I discuss the answer to this question in the findings of Chapter 4.

**Dialogical, Inquiry-Based Learning**

My desire for this study was to add to the research on the three-construct model of student engagement. The approach I used in the study was to explore engagement through the dialogical, inquiry-based activity of written conversations and the impact that approach had on the EBC of student engagement and the learning process with elementary-aged learners.

The history of inquiry goes back to ancient Greece and the questioning methods employed by Socrates. Thousands of years later, the value of inquiry is still recognized. John Dewey, a philosopher, psychologist, and educational reformer from the early part of the 20th century encouraged K-through-12 teachers to use inquiry as the primary teaching approach (Dewey, 1938; Friesen, 2013). Teachers who are effective in using inquiry encourage students to make their thinking visible and to share their understandings with others. To allow this to happen, educators must understand that learning is interactive. When students encounter something new, they must be given the opportunity to reflect on it and use their prior knowledge and experiences to understand, or perhaps change, what they believe, or maybe reject the new information as irrelevant. Accepting that learners, through inquiry, will need to ask questions, explore, and assess their current understanding is necessary. Allowing learners to understand how

their thinking fits or how their thinking has changed because of new knowledge is paramount. Permitting learners to wade through uncharted waters and participate in conversations in which they are allowed to ask questions and reflect will lead to a depth of knowledge that would not happen if the new knowledge was just poured into them.

A range of pedagogical approaches are associated with inquiry. These approaches center on learners constructing knowledge through active investigation. Mills and Donnelly (2001) defined inquiry as a philosophical stance rather than a particular teaching method. Mills and her colleagues have drawn on Halliday (1978), Lindfors (1999), and the Santa Barbara Classroom Discourse Group (1993) to focus on the role of dialogue in supporting and propelling learning. For example, Jennings and Mills (2010) studied a public magnet school, the Center of Inquiry (CFI), which is organized around inquiry-based learning. They found that student talk and dialogic interaction was central to all learning activities. CFI stands on the principle that genuine inquiry is grounded in authentic conversations. Such dialogic inquiry involves students' supported use of talk (involving both teacher-to-student and student-to-student interactions) that includes open-ended questions, reflections, extended exchanges of dialogue, authentic feedback, and uptake/building on the ideas of others to collaboratively engage in knowledge construction within a safe learning environment (Callander, 2013). With this type of approach, children are encouraged to ask questions and be receptive to alternative viewpoints. Dialogic inquiry is not a program, like spelling or math, but a framework of understanding and beliefs about the use and importance of talk within a collaborative learning environment. Underlying dialogic inquiry is a supported philosophical belief about how children can learn through language (Callander, 2013).

*Oral Language*

Our society is based around talk; "language is fundamental to thinking, learning and communicating" (British Columbia Ministry of Education, 2006, p. 3). Language learning is a social process, and the more children are exposed to and provided with opportunities to experiment with language, the better they will become at using language. The work of Lev Vygotsky highlights the importance of dialogic talk in learning. The foundation of his work focused on dialogic teaching and learning, the social origin of cognition, the role of language as a tool for thinking, and the zone of proximal development. Vygotsky (1978) stressed that learning is social, and the "social origins of language and thinking" (p. 6). Vygotsky (1978) viewed "the relation between the individual and the society as a dialectical process" (p. 126).

The zone of proximal development (ZPD) is a key concept of Vygotsky's work. In simple terms, the ZPD is when a child works with an adult or a more knowledgeable peer to achieve a task or solve a problem that the child could not previously do alone. Vygotsky believed that "learning should be matched in some manner with the child's developmental level" (1978, p. 85). There are two levels of development in the ZPD: "the distance between the actual developmental level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or with more capable peers" (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 86). The ZPD suggests that because learning is a social process, children will learn through dialogue with others and develop their cognitive abilities through collaboration with more knowledgeable people (Berk & Winsler, 1995; Boyd & Markarian, 2011; Vygotsky, 1978). Vygotsky (1986) argued that "thought development is determined by language" (p. 94).

This kind of thinking gives language a critical role in the learning process. Dialogic inquiry takes the approach of language-specific routines and the reciprocal language that is

exchanged between students and between students and the teacher. The teacher focuses on questioning; prompting; eliciting and cuing student responses; they are pushing for more clearly articulated detail, information or explanation. The teacher repeats, reformulates, and elaborates on student responses, summarizing what they taught (Murdoch, 2014). Dialogic inquiry involves students working with the ideas of others. They are encouraged to consider and challenge evidence, worldviews, and perspectives, and then to reach logical conclusions. There is growing evidence that students develop a greater understanding of the topics they study when they have opportunities to engage in dialogue about them with their peers and their teachers (Haneda, 2014).

Scholar Douglas Barnes has written about the importance of students' active creation of knowledge through talk and its uses within the classroom. Barnes (2008) described two types of talk, *exploratory* and *presentational*, each with its own functions: "Exploratory talk is hesitant and incomplete because it enables the speaker to try out ideas, to hear how they sound, to see what others make of them, to arrange information and ideas into different patterns" (Barnes, 2008, p. 5) while sorting out one's own thoughts. In contrast, in presentational talk, "the speaker's attention is primarily focused on adjusting the language, content and manner to the needs of an audience" (Barnes, 2008, p. 5). During exploratory talk, new knowledge is created as learners use prior knowledge along with knowledge available to them through their peers to actively construct new meanings. Ideas can be tested and re-formed through conversations with both self and others. Within the classroom context, Barnes (2008) argued that "only pupils can work on understanding; teachers can encourage and support but cannot do it for them" (p. 4). This position strongly supports a dialogic approach to teaching and learning because it acknowledges that children need opportunities to talk in order to learn. Barnes argued that

children should be given more opportunities for talk within the classroom, along with increased responsibility for their own learning. Providing repeated and extended opportunities for talk within the classroom can provide optimal learning experiences for all learners, allowing for the knowledge of each learner to be brought forth and valued within a discussion. Collective knowledge is central to a dialogic approach.

Rosenblatt also stressed the social nature of teaching and learning, stating that humans are "continuously in transaction with an environment" (1994, p. 1059). Her transactional theory of reading, which basically says that we make sense of new situations or transactions by drawing upon our personal, first-hand language supply, drew upon the work of philosopher John Dewey(1938) and also Vygotsky (1986). Rosenblatt wrote about the importance of creating environments in schools where students draw on their knowledge and experiences to create meanings (1994). Dialogic interactions can provide opportunities for learners to play an active role in constructing understanding because children can incorporate personal experiences into their learning (Alexander, 2006; Hardman, 2008; Lyle, 2008a, 2008b; Rosenblatt, 1994; Vygotsky, 1986; Wells & Ball, 2008).

Gordon Wells is another key researcher of language development. He expressed the belief that individuals and society are intertwined, and so are learning and development (Wells, 2000). Wells discussed the application of Vygotsky's concept of the ZPD in regard to human development, noting that ZPD provides "a way of conceptualizing the many ways in which an individual's development may be assisted by other members of the culture, both in face-to-face interaction and through the legacy of the artifacts that they have created" (Wells, 2000, p. 55). According to Wells, learning within the traditional educational system does not allow for collaborative learning through the ZPD because "schools have a strong tendency to cultivate

conforming, risk-avoiding identities" (Wells, 2000, p. 57). In other words, a traditional classroom does not put the emphasis on encouraging students to take risks by discussing, inquiring, and sharing ideas; the emphasis is more on giving the students the knowledge rather than having them find it. As emphasized by Vygotsky, children need to be engaged with others to learn concepts and principles they can apply to new tasks and problems. Similarly, Wegerif has stated that "real education is about understanding ideas, not just learning how to repeat them, and understanding requires dialogic relations" (Wegerif, 2010, p. 28). Wells argued for classrooms to be reorganized as communities of inquiry featuring an exploratory and collaborative approach to learning and teaching, where students are "motivated and challenged by real questions, [and] their attention is focused on making answers" (Wells, 2000, p. 64).

The environment created is paramount to the success of dialogic inquiry. Researchers Claxton and Carr (2010) presented four different teaching environments in which they analyzed dialogic talk. These different types of educational learning environments can be easily observed within a classroom, differentiating among those that are dynamic and interactive and those that are strictly controlled and lacking opportunities for dynamic talk:

> A *prohibiting* environment consists of a tightly scheduled program where children are not engaged for lengthy periods of time. An *affording* environment provides a range of opportunities for development, although without the use of deliberate strategies to make clear these opportunities for children to engage in. An *inviting* environment affords time for and values the asking of questions. A *potentiating* environment both provides and develops individual expression through participation in shared activities where both students and teachers take responsibility for sharing the power to lead and learn. (Claxton & Carr, 2010, pp. 91–92)

A prohibiting environment is indicative of a classroom that follows a curriculum with fidelity. On the other end is the potentiating environment, which is perceived as optimal for a classroom, where dialogue is valued. Arthur Costa, coauthor of the four-volume series *Habits of Mind,* believes that curriculums need to become more thought filled to enlarge students'

capacities to think deeply and creatively (Costa, 2008). Classroom conversations are powerful to the learning process because they allow the teacher to hear students' thinking and to immediately offer feedback or address misconceptions or misunderstanding. These opportunities for dialogue also allow practice time with the important skills of questioning, clarifying, supporting thinking, and learning to value and understand others' viewpoints. For teachers, sometimes it is not so much what students say but what they do not say that drives the instruction; and so without these classroom conversations, the depth of teaching and the children's depth of learning does not happen at the level needed for thinking to grow.

In Maxine Greene's book *The Dialectic of Freedom* (1988), she urged educators to nurture a love of learning by creating spaces of dialogue in their classrooms in which learners are allowed to question, discover, and make meaning of their world. There is a connection between Greene's thinking and CFI's belief that genuine inquiry is grounded in authentic conversations. Authors Mercer and Dawes (2010) viewed *talk* as helping students do the hard work of learning; and author Peter Johnson said that "teachers' conversations with children help the children build the bridges from action to consequence and that develops their sense of agency" (*Choice Words*, 2004, p . 30). Researchers Mercer and Littleton stated that "supporting children in learning to talk as well as providing them with opportunities for talking to learn is key to building knowledge" (2007, p. 69).

Building knowledge, however, is not limited to oral speech; knowledge may be constructed through dialogue that uses writing. When dialogue is only in the oral mode, there is one serious disadvantage: There is no record of what has been jointly constructed (Wells, 2000). The last section will explain the dialogic inquiry activity of written conversations.

### *Written Conversations*

The practice of written conversations was first introduced by Burke (Short, Harste, & Burke, 1996). This practice involved children pairing up and passing paper and pencil between them to "chat" about their weekend or favorite pets. Although the process may appear to be a simple activity, this dialogic-inquiry activity offers so much more. Written conversations provide a way for students to have open and honest dialogue and at the same time be actively involved in the learning process. A current review of the literature on written conversations found that the term *written conversations* shares many of the same characteristics as the term *dialogue journals*. For example, they are both activities that allow the students or the teacher to choose topics to write about; both activities require the participants to contribute to the writing by making comments, offering observations and opinions, requesting and giving clarification, and answering or asking questions; and both activities require that the writing is student-centered, continual, functional, and varied.

However, there are differences between the two activities. Dialogue journals usually involve only the teacher and individual student writing to each other, whereas written conversations include not only dialogue between student and teacher but also between student and student, and student and parent. The importance of interactions between students has been minimized (Johnson, 1981), but now interactions are recognized as a vital piece in the classrooms (Salomon & Perkins, 1998; Chi, 2009). In fact, according to research done by Chi (2009), verbal dialogues between students either in the classroom or in smaller, online settings have been shown to be significant to students' developing a deeper understanding of the material being taught.

Another big difference between the activities of written conversations and dialogue journals is that dialogue journals usually have delayed feedback, which occurs over time. Written conversations, in contrast, provide immediate feedback, much like instant messaging or online chats. Laman and Van Sluys (2006) found in their research on written conversations that this approach invites participants to explore language in ways that support learning about the complex ways language becomes manipulated and represented in written form.

Research on written conversations suggests that they can support literacy development and can  in a relatively short period of time (20 minutes to 30 minutes) on a daily basis. Most importantly, written conversations can allow for students to dialogue with a partner in a way that would let the teacher literally see their thinking. As far as the writing component in this activity is concerned, *Colorado State Standards for Fourth Grade Writing W4.10* states that "students need to write routinely over extended time frames (time for research, reflection, and revision) and shorter time frames (a single sitting or a day or two) for a range of discipline-specific tasks, purposes, and audiences" (CCSSI, 2010).

In my experience, a majority of the writing done in classrooms focuses on research writing skills. Written conversations could be a way to incorporate shorter types of writing on a more frequent basis.

My research on written conversations also turned up an intriguing factor that involves parents. The CFI, which is located in a diverse district in South Carolina, stands on the principle that genuine inquiry is grounded in authentic conversations. All grades in the school have used the practice of written conversations regularly. Students are inclusively and actively involved in the learning process with each other and with their teachers. The CFI also includes parents in this written-conversation activity (Jennings & O'Keefe, 2002). The school encourages students to

have written conversations at home with their parents. This is an important piece to examine because this study's working definition of student engagement is one in which the whole child (emotionally, behaviorally, and cognitively) needs to be considered for true engagement to happen. A student's home-to-school connections are important pieces to the whole child. In his *Bristol Study* (1969–1984), Wells (2000) found that children who experienced more conversations with their parents and older siblings were more likely to make accelerated progress in learning to talk and more likely to be successful in school. Although Wells' study was referring to verbal conversations, it is important to examine student-student, student-teacher, and student-parent written conversations and how they impact students' EBC engagement and support the learning process.

A researcher whose work came up when I was searching for empirical literature on relationships and engagement was Csikszentmihalyi. The reason for including his work here in the "Written Conversation" section is that his work led to his "idea of flow" (1990). In the idea of flow, the learner moves through engagement, transforming and being transformed (Meyer & Land, 2005, p. 380). Csikszentmihalyi's idea of flow was discussed in an interview with a teacher during one of Solomonides and Martin's studies:

> Flow could include possible flow tasks or activities: clear goals, immediate feedback, matching skills and abilities; chance of completing task, open ended task. No matter how good you get it's always possible to go further. Are there things that could be built into the student experience? I think students can experience flow when working on essays or design work or other creative stuff. (Solomonides & Martin, 2008, p. 15)

The written-conversation activity could be a creative activity that falls into the category of a flow task. With written-conversations, students know the goal or the focus of the writing. Further, the nature of the activity has participants giving and receiving immediate feedback; the teacher can adjust the activity to accommodate student skills and abilities; and students can be encouraged to

use new learned skills during their written conversations (e.g., practicing the use of quotation marks during dialogue or applying questioning skills that practice asking open-ended and deeper-level questions).

## Summary of Chapter 2

In this chapter, I reviewed the literature on (a) student engagement and the constructs of emotional, behavioral, and cognitive engagement; (b) relationship engagement in which the concept of care was included; (c) dialogic inquiry; and (d) an explanation of the activity of written conversations and research on the activity. I emphasized the key points in each of these areas that will support this study. These explanations helped to inform the research design of the proposed study. In Chapter 3, I outline the framework and methodology for this study.

**CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY**

A qualitative, ethnographic case-study research design was used to address the study's research question. In this chapter, I discuss the theoretical framework and methods that support the research design, and the setting, participants, role of the teacher/researcher as the collection instrument, and pilot studies. I describe the qualitative-research data sources and collection methods, and I explain the process of data analysis. I conclude the chapter by addressing the limitations of the study.

**Theoretical Framework**

This study is grounded in a constructivist framework. The constructivist framework is based on the belief that knowledge is constructed by experiences, not given (Crotty, 1998; Fosnot, 1996; Phillips, 1995). Constructivism presents the view that knowledge is formed, but it can change. It is not stagnant. The formation of this internal knowledge can be influenced by social and cultural factors and existing and new knowledge (Fosnot, 1996; Richardson, 1997; Schunk, 2004). The kind of thinking that promotes students to be active participants in the learning process is one in which they are having discussions, asking questions, and solving problems. This perspective challenges traditional education in which learners are viewed as passive participants just waiting to be given information. "The locus of intellectual authority resides in neither the teacher nor the resources, but in the discourse facilitated by both teachers and learners" (Maclellan & Soden, 2004, pg. 255)

There are many types of constructivism (epistemological, social, psychological, genetic, and mathematical). The two types of constructivism that frame this examination of the

phenomenon of the dialogical inquiry-based learning activity of written communication and the role it plays with student engagement are

- *Social constructivism,* a type of constructivism that categorizes knowledge and reality as being actively created by social relationships and interactions. At the heart of social constructivism is Vygotsky's theory that highlights that learning is a social process that calls for an approach to learning and teaching that is both exploratory and collaborative (Vygotsky, 1978).

- *Genetic epistemology,* a type of constructivism established by Jean Piaget (1896–1980), which studies the origins (genesis) of knowledge and implies that the method by which the knowledge was obtained or created affects the validity of that knowledge (Piaget, 1970).

The basic constructivism principle that people construct their own understanding and knowledge of the world through experiencing things and reflecting on those experiences is at the core of my belief in teaching and learning. The constructivism principles are what guide me as I work to understand the nature of knowledge and how it exists to a learner.

**Method**

The primary purpose of this study was to learn about how written conversations support or constrain student engagement and the learning process. It is a descriptive study focusing on 18 fourth-grade students and their involvement with and interactions during the written-conversations activity. Ethnography is one of many approaches found in social research. Ethnography is not a fixed research design but an interpretation process generated out of data analysis (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007). I view the findings through the lens of the constructivist framework. Constructivism looks at knowledge as ever changing as the result of

social and cultural influences. This study relied on the ontological perspective that multiple realities exist and are dependent on the individual student participants and their written responses to the topics that they have read about. Although their knowledge is constructed and based on their engagement with other people and participants, students may give different meaning even to the same phenomenon (Crotty, 1998).

There are four key features of qualitative research incorporated into the present study. First, the study is *naturalistic* (Patton, 2001). In qualitative research, the setting and the people are the data, and the researcher is the tool that obtains the data. Data are collected mainly through in-depth interviews and participant observation. Second, the study utilizes *descriptive data* (Creswell, 2007). The data is in the form of words and observations rather than numbers. The reason for this form of data is that the researcher is looking for knowledge and understanding rather than an absolute answer. Third, the data are *analyzed inductively* (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). The data-analysis approach is a bottom-up approach. The picture of the results takes shape as the investigator examines the parts and then puts them into a theme or series of themes. Fourth, the primary goal of the study is the *search for meaning*, according to the participants' understanding (Merriam, 2009; Wolcott, 2009). For this reason, a study's main focus is on the point of view of the key informants, and making sure that these views are presented correctly. Unlike other research approaches, qualitative researchers attempt to answer their research questions holistically (i.e., contextually). The people, their activities, their interactions, their perspectives, and the setting are all taken into consideration. Qualitative researchers interview participants and spend time in the setting to understand the circumstances in which behaviors happen. Last, the researchers review documents related to the focus of the research to build the meaning that a certain situation has for the people who are a part of it (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007;

Wolcott, 2009).

**The Choice of Ethnographic and Case-Study Research Methods**

In his book *Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design* (2007), John W. Creswell identified five traditions in qualitative research: biography, phenomenology, grounded theory, ethnography, and case study. The purpose of the research determines the choice of methods that are used. An ethnographic research design is chosen when the researcher wants to gain knowledge and understanding of a particular culture-sharing group; in this study, that was a group of fourth graders from the same class.

This qualitative study is an ethnographic case study. It is ethnographic because it seeks to examine student engagement and the learning process through the use of the dialogical-inquiry activity of written conversations with a group (i.e., the fourth-grade students in one class). It is a case study because it is an analysis of a *single functioning unit* (i.e., one elementary school and 18 individual students) that defines the research (Merriam, 2009).

To address the research question within an ethnographic case-study research design, I obtained the data through the use of semistructured interviews, observations, a brief student questionnaire, and the students' written-conversation notebooks. To provide an in-depth picture of the case, I gathered related material from various sources. In the following sections, I describe the setting, participants, teacher/researcher's role, data sources and data-collection procedures, the pilot studies, the data analysis, and the limitations of the study.

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**Setting**

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An understanding of the setting is vital to data collection and data analyses in ethnographic research. The setting for this study was one fourth-grade class in an elementary school in Colorado. The school district where this school is located serves approximately 16,000-

plus students from five small, surrounding towns. The elementary school in which this class

resides is located in a middle-class subdivision. However, about 80% of the students are bused

in, with only about 20% of the students living within walking distance of the school. At the time

of this study, 430 students attended this K-through-5 school. These students identify primarily as

White, non-Latino (71%); Latino (25%); and Multiracial (5%). More than 50% of the 430

students qualify for free- or reduced-lunch prices. Four years ago, this elementary school started

a Spanish dual-language immersion program. The dual-language program has students spend

half their day in a Spanish-speaking classroom and half in an English-speaking classroom. The

program is presently in grades kindergarten through fourth grade.

As a teacher-researcher, I served as the instructional coach for the school and the morning

classroom teacher for the fourth-grade students who participated in this study. The students all

assented participate in the study; parents of all 18 students consented to their child's involvement

in the study; the administrator permitted the research to be conducted at the school; the district

gave its approval for the research to be conducted; and IRB approval from the university was

granted.

## Participants

There were 18 students in the fourth-grade class. The 18 student participants included 8

females and 10 males. Fifteen of the students identified as White, Non-Latino, and three of them

identified as Latino. Their ages ranged from 9-years-old to 10-years-old. Three of the students

received services from the school's English Language Acquisition program, two of the students

received services from the Talented and Gifted program; three of the students were on behavior

plans; one student had an individualized education plan (IEP) for literacy and math; and six of

the students received reading intervention. All the participants in the study are identified by pseudonyms.

I sent an informational letter home to all students and their parents to see who would be willing to participant in this study. All 18 parents agreed to allow their child to be involved in the research. I attempted to recruit parents to participate with the written-conversation activity at home. However, because only two parents agreed to do this, I did not proceed with that data collection, and it is not included in this study. The informational parent letter (Appendix A) and the student and parent consent-to-participate form (Appendix B) are included. There were no criteria for student-participant involvement in this 10-week study other than a willingness of students to conduct written conversations for 20 minutes to 30 minutes two to three times a week during class.

## Role of the Teacher/Researcher

My role was what Merriam (1998) called "observer as participant," wherein the goals of my study were known to the group and my participation in the group was secondary to the role of observer. Adler and Adler (1994) described this role as one in which researchers "observe and interact closely enough with members to establish an insider's identity without participating in those activities constituting the core of group membership" (p. 380).

In this study, the researcher also was the fourth-grade morning classroom teacher of the 18 student participants. There is much research on the dual role of classroom teachers as researchers, beginning with the fact that academic research has largely ignored the teacher's contributions and unique perspectives on teaching and learning (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1993). A study done by two teachers, Goswami and Stillman found that, when teachers are researchers, they become rich resources who can provide the profession with information it simply does not

have otherwise They can observe closely, over long periods of time, with special insights and knowledge. Teachers know their classrooms and students in ways that outsiders cannot (Goswami & Stillman, 1987). Bissex and Bullock (1987) argued that teacher researchers are the change agents from the inside out and from the bottom up. Teachers learn from and reflect on their practice from research conducted by fellow teachers who have walked the walk, and that is powerful.

As an elementary teacher for 16 years, I have experienced the struggle of keeping students engaged. Therefore, as it became time to focus on a topic of research for this study, student engagement was my area of interest. As a classroom teacher, I always started each school year with the same desire and focus: to purposefully create meaning and depth for my students in the subjects they are learning about in a way that has them engaged and enjoying learning. I am a learner who benefits greatly from the ability to process my thinking through talk. Therefore, adopting a teaching style that encourages "talk time" came naturally. However, the time to have in-depth conversations about topics we were studying was challenging because of the emphasis and time constraints required to implement our district's literacy curriculum. The disadvantage that curriculum can put on student engagement was discussed in the Purpose of the Study section in Chapter 1.

In my graduate studies, I was pleased to find empirical data that supported this talk-time style of teaching. I would include talk throughout the day, using a number of pedagogical strategies. The first and easiest way was by creating an optimal learning environment. This can start with the simple arrangement of the desks. I would put the desks into groups of four to five students, and every month the students were required to move their desks into new groups. This way, the students had a chance to get to know and interact with other students. Creating a

positive classroom climate and safe community was extremely important to me. Jones (2007) noted how "risk-free environments are fundamental to dynamic teaching/learning/ assessment" (p. 576).

Another easy way I incorporated talk was the strategy of "turn and talk with a partner." Doing this activity multiple times a day allowed students to share and hear others' thinking. One of the strategies that Mercer and Dawes (2010) suggested using to create an optimal environment for dialogic teaching and learning is to provide small-group discussions before whole-class discussions to allow students time to prepare their responses. For the times that the students were required to share their thinking with the whole class, I would frequently ask that they share what their partner had said; that way, they were also practicing the skill of listening. The ability to be an active listener is a skill that students need to learn. "Children who cannot stay quiet have a bigger impact on the listening environment than anything else" (Spooner & Woodcock, 2010, p. 40); and teaching within a noisy environment becomes difficult for both teachers and other students.

I also encouraged group projects so students were learning to collaborate and problem solve with each other. Most importantly, I facilitated on a daily basis multiple opportunities for conversations about what we were studying. This area causes me continued concern because following the prescribed curriculum too often leaves little time for talking. Allowing time for students to have conversations about what they are learning is critically important. Giving the dialoging process the time it deserves is necessary for optimal benefit to the students.

Two years ago, Louise Jennings, my advisor at Colorado State University, presented to me the dialogical-inquiry approach of written conversations. Louise had worked closely with educators at Center of Inquiry (CFI). CFI's mission statement centers on inquiry as all-

encompassing and a part of how we live and learn about the world we live in; a way of honoring and learning from the diversity that is humanity; a way of being true to ourselves, our children, and the profession; a way of fostering genuine professional development; and most importantly, a way of respecting, building upon, and supporting all learners (Jennings & O'Keefe, 2002). At that time, I saw written conversations as an activity that could not only engage students but also support them in developing skills I saw them struggle with, for example, the skills of questioning, organization, and clarity of thought; supporting a point of view; and demonstrating flexibility of thought when exposed to another person's point of view.

The purpose of the two pilot studies that follow was to practice the activity of written conversations and to dip into the role of being a researcher. My ability to collect data and analyze it was novice, to say the least. However, these pilot studies were a necessary step in my growth to prepare me for conducting this study.

## Pilot Studies

I chose written conversations as the focus of two pilot studies. The first was more of a practice pilot study that I conducted during the fall of 2016. The participants were the 29 students in my fourth-grade classroom. Several parents also agreed to participate in this first pilot study. I conducted the second pilot study during the summer of 2018, and the participants were nine multiaged students in one summer school program. No parents volunteered to participate with this second pilot study. The data gathered from the student participants' written conversations gave me evidence of student's emotional, behavioral, and cognitive (EBC) engagement with the activity, valuable information about the skills students were applying with ease, and about the skills that needed more targeted practice. Even though looking back now, I realize how shallow my ability was to analyze the students' written conversations, I still see the results from the

ethnographic pilot studies that presented the possibility that the activity of written conversations between student-student and student-teacher supported the EBC of student engagement and the learning process. There was even evidence in this first pilot study that the student-parent piece enhanced the EBC constructs of student engagement.

**Pilot Study #1**

The purpose of the first pilot study was two-fold. First, it was a practice opportunity to examine how the inquiry activity of written conversations supported or constrained student engagement and the learning process. Second, it allowed me to get comfortable with using basic data-collection strategies and interview formats. The practice study lasted 10 weeks, during which I conducted the written-conversation activity between 15 and 20 times. I gave the students short articles that supported the social-studies units being studied. The students would read the articles independently, and then pair up and have a written conversation with a partner on the reading. Each reading was guided by a prompt. The whole activity took about 20 to 30 minutes.

Up until the time of this first pilot study, my identity had always been that of a teacher. Taking off the teacher hat and looking at engagement through a researcher lens required me to step back and take a broader perspective when I looked at how written conversations impact student engagement and the learning process. My ability to adopt a participant-observer researcher's identity was not easy, and this first pilot study made that very apparent. Even though it gave me a glimpse of how written conversations impact student engagement with fourth graders, it also brought to the forefront how difficult it was to move between the teacher and research role. My novice ability as a researcher and my deeply ingrained identity as a teacher had me putting much too narrow a focus on the data. I struggled with breaking away from the teacher role, especially when I was examining the students' written conversations. In reflecting on this

first pilot study, I realize that I put too much emphasis on defining students' writing as either right or wrong. Observations on whether their writing was neat, whether they were using correct sentences structure, and their misspelling of grade-level, no-excuse words plagued my examination of their results from the activity. I realized I was not taking the time to look closely enough and ponder the underlying reasons of not only why and how students were engaged, but also what constraining factors were causing some students not to be as engaged. Did I miss evidence of what Lindfors (1999) called *language acts*? In her book, *Children's Inquiry* (1999), Lindfors defined language acts as the "seamless union of four aspects; communication purpose (or intention), expression (of purpose, of content, or stance), participants, and context. Language acts can be thought of as a turn in a conversation" (p. 28). Lindfors believed that language acts are the act of doing something (words uttered, sentences spoken, interpretation made, drawings executed), not the act of knowing something (sentence structure, words, phonemes) (Lindfors, 1999). I also did not take the time to examine the possibility that some students may actually have been more engaged than I realized; but because the engagement was not visible (behaviorally), I missed it.

Furthermore, at the time of the first pilot study, my definition of student engagement was not as fully developed as it is now. I was measuring the data with a two-construct engagement model, behavioral and emotional. Now, after having completed a thorough literature review of student engagement, I believe a three-construct model of student engagement that includes cognitive engagement is more appropriate. I say this because of my conviction to teaching the whole child. The whole child (emotionally, behaviorally, and cognitively) needs to be considered for true engagement to happen. Moreover, at the time of this first pilot study, I had not done a thorough literature review on dialogic inquiry. My teaching style regarding the subject of talk

and the research evidence on the benefits of dialogue in building knowledge further supports my choice in using written communications in the full study as the vehicle to examine the impact this dialogic-inquiry activity has on the EBC of student engagement and the learning process.

The advantage of this first pilot study was that I could practice the flow of the activity and how students interacted with it. Because of this opportunity to practice, I instituted two changes in the written-conversation activity that were different from the way the practice of written conversations was originally designed.

**First design change.** It quickly became obvious that to make the activity fit into an already jam-packed day, the topics would need to focus on issues that could easily fit into our social-studies units. I chose a total of six articles for the students to read over the 10-week duration of the practice pilot study. After reading each article, the students were paired up and given a prompt to help get the written conversations started. I added the prompt piece because of the limited timeframe I had for conducting the activity, and my belief that the prompt would help keep the writing more focused. In addition to looking for the EBC of engagement, the skills that I decided I would assess included academic growth by using questioning and higher-order-thinking (HOT) skills.

HOT skills are commonly known as *Bloom's taxonomy*, but they are an updated version. Lorin Anderson, a former student of Bloom, along with a group of cognitive psychologists, published a revised version of Bloom's taxonomy (Anderson & Krathwohl, 2001). Bloom's original six categories were nouns and included *knowledge, comprehension, application, analysis, synthesis*, and *evaluation.* In the new version, Anderson and colleagues changed the nouns to verbs to reflect thinking as an active process. The verbs used in the new version, starting with the shallowest of skills, are *remember, understand, apply* (transferring knowledge),

*analyze* (inferring, drawing conclusion, making comparisons), *design* (using background of prior knowledge; using text evidence to support thinking; justifying to support thinking), and *create* (planning, producing).

With my working definition of engagement being one in which the whole child is considered, the student's home-to-school connection is a piece that I believed needed to be included. Therefore, I decided to implement the student-parent piece. I asked for student volunteers who would be willing to have written conversations with a parent at home. I then contacted those parents and received a commitment to participate in this activity at home as an extra homework assignment. Six students were involved in the student-parent piece. The students would dialogue with their parents on the same article that we used in class.

**Second design change.** Within a few weeks of doing this activity, I noticed a glaring issue that led me to institute an additional step in the written-conversation activity. This additional step would be an oral discussion piece that would take place between student partners. The student partners would do this step only after they had an opportunity to complete a written conversation. The reason I added this step was the perceived difficulty I believed some students were having with the writing and questioning process. My thinking around students being labeled as struggling writers has evolved greatly since this first pilot study. But at the time I was of the opinion that writing could be a laborious process for some elementary-aged students. I believed that some students struggled with writing because trying to get their thoughts down on paper and then having to respond with questions to what someone else had written was not an easy task. However, this was the mindset of a teacher who valued only the conventional ways of writing and dialogue. My stance on this has changed drastically, and I discuss this change in both Chapter 4 and Chapter 5.

At the time of this first pilot study, I believed that, with the addition of oral conversations, those struggling writers' voices could be heard. My hope was to periodically include the oral-conversation step in the full study, as well. However, the change in my thinking (discussed in Chapters 4 and 5) regarding how I view students' writing made me decide not to include this step in this full study.

There were many examples from this first practice pilot study with the written-conversations activity that showed its potential power and the valuable information the activity could supply to an educator not only in the classroom but also when done at home with a parent. What can I learn from this child? What kind of background knowledge does the child bring with him? How can I move this child further in his overall literacy development? These were the types of questions that could be asked and answered as I reviewed students' written-conversation notebooks. It proved to be a classroom activity that not only presented the possibility of supporting student engagement and the learning process, but also an activity that encouraged talk time, to support and ensure that all student voices are heard. Teachers who display or celebrate only those children who demonstrate more conventional ways of writing are serving to constrain literacy development in children by sending the message that other forms of writing are not valid. Teachers who value the process of language and literacy development and all different representative ways of writing do more to move children forward (Callander, 2013). The growth in my thinking from the first pilot study to this study has me putting greater value on the process of language than on the skills of the writing process.

Even with the difficulty I experienced in the pilot study in moving from a teacher role to a researcher role, my knowledge and experience as a classroom teacher strengthened my role as a researcher. I was able to understand and relate to the day-to-day challenges of being in an

elementary school classroom, and I had an awareness that, for elementary-aged students,

learning is developmental, continuous, and ongoing, and not an event that happens in an instant.

Yin (2009) wrote that a qualitative researcher should use her own prior, expert knowledge to

demonstrate awareness of current thinking and discourse about the study topic.

**Pilot Study #2**

The purpose of the second pilot study was the same as the first: to practice the activity of

written conversation and examine how it supports or constrains student engagement. However, it

was also an opportunity to spend more time determining appropriate data-collection strategies,

interview formats, the role of the teacher-researcher, and the use of effective pedagogical

methods when engaging in the activity of written conversations.

In the second pilot study, the participants, setting, and atmosphere were completely

different than for the practice pilot study. The participants this time were nine students (five boys

and two girls) who were in grades 5, 6, 7, and 8. They were all students attending one summer-

school reading program. The setting of this summer school program was a large mobile-home

park located in a city in Colorado. The park feeds into the elementary school where I work. For

eight weeks on Tuesdays and Thursdays, the students attended the summer program for an hour

and a half each day. The focus and purpose of this program was to provide the children with

additional practice with reading skills. The majority of students from this park are below the

poverty level. Fifty percent or more of the students in the park are Latino. Of the nine

participants, six identified as Latino; the other three identified as White Non-Latino.

While attending the summer reading program, students rotated through centers. The

reading center, where I interacted with the nine student participants, was 30 minutes in length. I

was able to see two groups of students (usually in groups of four or five) each day. The students

and I were located outside in a grassy area underneath the shade of a big tree. We sat on the ground on blankets, and there was a peacefulness in the surroundings. It was fairly quiet except for the sounds of birds, barking dogs, playing children, light traffic, and an occasional plane passing by overhead. I provided the reading material, and it included a variety of nonfiction articles and poems. The director of the reading program purposefully gave me students to work with who, regardless of their grade, were all at about the same reading level. The selected pieces had a reading-level range from fourth grade to sixth grade. I had a few pieces available for them to choose from each day.  After reading one piece, I gave students a question to help them get started with their written conversations. The readings were fairly short, so that they could complete the reading and still be able to have a 15- to 20-minute written conversation with another student. However, as relaxing as this setup of the outdoor summer-school classroom with rotating centers was, it did create a limited timeframe within which to observe and collect research.

During this second pilot study, I took field notes during observation. As Fetterman pointed out, "field notes are the brick and mortar of an ethnography study and contain information from both observations and interviews" (1998, p. 107). I took abbreviated notes on those behaviors or actions that might be interpreted as significant to the question asked in the study. I attempted not to observe too much through a teacher lens, but to try to balance the two roles of teacher and researcher. I knew from the first pilot study that doing this was not easy because the teacher role is where I feel most comfortable. I know which pedagogy methods to use and when to use them; I know the skills my students need to be successful; and I know how to take student data, interpret it, and then give each student the individual instruction necessary to help him on the path to proficiency. When using the teacher lens, the work becomes more

focused, narrow, and specific; and the Common Core State Standards help to guide the way. In contrast, the participant-observer role of ethnography research felt big, undefined, and unfamiliar. The teacher role in the first pilot study kept taking precedence, which would at times cause issues with my recording of field notes or the opportunities to just sit and observe the students as they participated in the activity. Therefore, one big difference between the first pilot study and this second pilot study was the opportunity I had to sort through this obstacle and be aware of which lens I was looking through when evaluating the data-collection results. It was important that I regard the dual lens of teacher and researcher as a benefit and not a detriment to the research analysis.

The artifact collected during the second pilot study was the students' written conversation notebooks. These notebooks provided support to claims made as a result of the field notes and observations. The only interviews conducted were informal student interviews done regularly during the written-conversation activity and recorded in the field notes.

The results from the data gathered from this second pilot study appeared different from the results of the first pilot program; two main factors that led me to this conclusion. To begin with, in the first pilot study I was looking only for emotional and behavioral engagement because of my lack of research at the time on the three-construct, EBC model of engagement. In the second pilot study, I used the three-construct model of engagement.

Next, and probably the most prominent factor, was the realization that, in the first practice pilot study, my teacher lens took precedence, mainly because of my lack of experience as a researcher and the fact that the participants were my fourth-grade classroom students. However, in the second study, I was not the participants' teacher, and we were not in a classroom environment. My role was one of a volunteer teacher/facilitator at their summer reading

program. This time I was on the students' home turf; and because of that, they were much more relaxed and viewed me with what I would describe as a guarded curiosity. They did not know me as their teacher, and I did not view them as my students. I was accepted because many of them knew me from school; yet the acceptance was at a different level then it would have been if I had been their classroom teacher.

These new circumstances led to my researcher hat taking priority, and I felt I was much more open to seeing different types evidence of written conversations supporting or constraining the EBC of student engagement. The skewed teacher lens from the first pilot study that focused mostly on how the students' writing looked versus what it was saying had me looking for specific academic skills that supported the learning process. This lens became almost nonexistent when I was reviewing the written-conversation journals in the second pilot study. Although initially I felt that the students' written-conversation responses were somehow different when compared to the fourth graders' responses in the first practice pilot study, I quickly realized that even though this was a different group of students in a very different setting, what had really changed was the different lens I was using when examining their conversations. For example, I used a few of the same articles or prompts in both pilot studies. In the first pilot, I made a three-column chart of student responses to one particular article. These columns were categorized by student name, student response, and evidence of learning. Data existed indicating that written conversations supported the learning process, but minimal data collected showed any other kind of engagement.

Then, I had the second set of participants in the second pilot study read the same article. However, because the time for written conversations between students was so limited, I did not have enough data to evaluate evidence of learning. Therefore, my analysis was more focused on

recording what I was seeing, that observation piece that was missing from the first pilot study. Conversely, the lack of data from the students' written conversations in the second pilot study supported the need for the full study.

Conducting these two ethnography pilot studies was excellent practice for me and helped me prepare for conducting the full study. That process allowed me to scratch the surface on examining written conversations and how this dialogic-inquiry activity could support or constrain student engagement and the learning process with students of different ages in a variety of school settings, with an increased awareness of the importance of balancing the lens being used when I was analyzing the data. With the continuing push for education reform and evidence that disengaged students are one of the biggest challenges facing schools, I sought to gather information that would enhance the field of education and provide valuable information about the concept of student engagement with elementary-aged students by examining how written conversations, a dialogic-inquiry activity, supports or constrains student engagement and the learning process.

## Data Collection

I collected data through informal conversations and interviews, observations, field notes, and examination of the participants' written-conversation notebooks. I discuss the collection methods in the following sections. According to Hammersley and Atkinson (2007), these types of data collection are, for the most part, relatively unstructured. No fixed and detailed research design is laid out from the start that must be followed. What is produced are verbal descriptions, explanations, and theories; statistical analysis plays a minor role (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007). A Dissertation Data-Collection Timeline is available in Appendix C.

**Informal Interviews and Conversations**

In qualitative research, interviews are commonly used to obtain data. The type of interview conducted by the researcher is determined by the type of information the interviewer is hoping to obtain. Three types of interview structures are possible: (a) a highly structured or standardized mode, (b) a semistructured mode, and (c) an unstructured or informal mode (Seidman, 2006; Taylor & Bogdan, 1984).

In the highly structured or standardized interview, specific answers are sought to carefully worded questions. The primary use of this type of interview is to gather specific information (e.g., demographic data) from the interviewee or to respond to a specific statement or define a particular concept or term. This type of interview structure does not allow for any personal interpretation of the questions by the interviewee, and therefore does not obtain an individual's unique perspective (Seidman, 2006).

The semistructured interview contains a mix of structured and unstructured questions. During the interview, the interviewer will use structured questions to obtain the required data. They may also ask the interviewee to answer a particular statement or define a certain concept or term. The interviewer may also ask less structured questions that are designed to obtain the interviewee's unique perspective on the research topic. The questions used are open-ended and flexible. The interview is guided by the researcher's interest in a particular topic or subtopics, but the questions or their order are not determined ahead of time. Flexibility in the interview process allows the interviewer to examine the points of view of the interviewee, and then to follow up on any new ideas as they are presented (Seidman, 2006). "Semistructured interviewing is a more formal, orderly process that you direct to a range or intentions" (Glesne, 2011, p. 103).

The unstructured or informal style of interviewing is more like a conversation that is centered on a particular topic. This interview format is often used to determine some of the subtopics that could be examined. The time spent in an unstructured or a semistructured interview will allow for the interviewee to raise subtopics that the researcher may not have considered, or perhaps to add new insights that are related to the researcher's topic of interest (Merriam, 2009). Because ethnographic research is face-to-face, questions are asked when something is happening or there is something you are considering (2009).

My intent in this study was to try to have unstructured or informal interviews for the reasons just stated. However, during the written-conversation activity, the only time that I asked questions of the students was when I wondered about certain behaviors they were exhibiting (e.g., laughter, verbal conversation), or if I needed clarification about a symbol or picture they had drawn during their written conversation). Also, I used an open-ended, flexible questionnaire asking the students about their thoughts and feelings about the written-conversation activity and process at the end of the 10-week program. The questionnaire was submitted and approved by the Human Subject Office at the university. Appendix D shows the Post-activity Student Questionnaire.

**Observations**

When using the participant-observation ethnographic research method, the researcher enters the world of the people she wishes to study (Taylor & Bogdan, 1984; Wolcott, 2009). The degree to which the researcher participates and observes may vary. In some situations, the observer may have opportunities to participate in the activities of those she is studying:

> You can think about participant observation as ranging across a continuum from mostly observation to mostly participation. It can be the sole means of data collection or one of several. Although your actual participant-observer role may fall at any point along this

continuum, you will most likely find yourself at different points at different times in the data collection process. (Glesne, 2011, p. 64)

Because of the structure of the setting and the fact that I was also the participants' teacher, my place on the continuum put me most often as an active participant. I participated in written conversations with students and interacted with the students, yet I also observed the students as they had written conversations with each other.

**Field Notes**

In some forms of qualitative research, observation becomes the data-collection procedure and field notes become the data. According to Glesne (2011):

> The field notebook or field log is the primary recording tool of the qualitative researcher. It becomes filled with descriptions of people, places, events, activities, and conversations; and it becomes a place for ideas, reflections, hunches, and notes about patterns that seem to be emerging. It also becomes a place for exploring the researcher's personal reactions. (p. 71)

It "becomes critical for the ethnographer to document her own activities, circumstances, and emotional responses as these factors that shape the process of observing and recording others' lives" (Emerson et al., 2011, p. 15). My field notes contained reflective information with the emphasis on speculation, feelings, problems, ideas, hunches, impressions, and prejudices (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007) relative to the students' interactions with each other during the written-conversation activity and their journals. The reflective part of my field notes was intermixed with the descriptive notes. A typical 20-to-30-minute observation period during the written conversation activity generated two to three pages of handwritten field notes that describe the activities, interactions, behaviors, and comments of the participants, and also my reactions to what I was seeing and hearing. On the days that I was a participant in the written-conversation activity with another student, I jotted down my field notes quickly later in the day. The goal of the field notes is to quickly get as much down on paper with as much detail as possible, leaving

evaluation and editing until later (Emerson et al., 2011). Writing detailed field notes is key to helping make sense of and describing the phenomenon of student engagement. My field notes were typed and stored in my computer in my research files.

**Documents**

Documents can be categorized in different ways, and sometimes these categories overlap. Personal documents, public records, and official documents are common types of documents (Merriam, 2009). In addition, visual documents such as films, videos, photos, newspaper, television, and Internet blogs can be used (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). Official documents include internal communications from within an organization. Limited access is also available to documents such as student records and personnel files. Official documents also include external communications such as newsletters, yearbooks, and flyers that are produced by an organization for public consumption (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007; Merriam, 2009). Personal documents such as diaries, letters, and scrapbooks are defined as any first-person narrative that describes an individual's actions, experiences, and beliefs.

The documents I collected were personal documents, the students' written-conversation notebooks. When examining the notebooks for evidence of EBC, I paid careful attention to the inferences I made from the participants' words, the responses they made to each other's statements and questions, and to the lens (relational or academic) that I was using to explore the written conversations. To evaluate how written conversations impact the learning process, I assessed the students' use of the speaking, listening, language, and writing standards. I also employed a list of skills using an adapted "Checklist for Dialogic Talk" that Callander (2013) originally designed (see Table 14, Chapter 4), along with information from Mercer (2000), Dawes and Sams (2004), Alexander (2006), and Butler and Stevens (1997).

## Data-Analysis Procedures

Bogdan and Biklen (2007) found data analysis to be the most difficult and most important aspect of qualitative research. Data analysis is difficult because it is not an automated or practical exercise. It is an active, spontaneous, and creative process of reasoning, reflection, and theorizing (Merriam, 2009). Through analysis, the researcher attempts to understand at a deeper level what she has studied, and then to constantly improve upon the interpretations (Basit, 2003). The researcher draws on firsthand experience with the setting, documents, and participants to interpret the data (Bogdan & Bilkin, 2007; Merriam, 2009; Taylor & Bogdan, 1998).

"Data collection and analysis is a *simultaneous* activity in qualitative research" (Merriam, 1998, p. 151 [italics in original]). With an inductive approach to qualitative data analysis, you work from the bottom up, where your lowest level consists of relatively descriptive codes that you apply directly to the data. At the next level, you gather similar codes into more conceptual categories. Finally, you summarize what you have learned with a limited number (often between three and five) of interpretive themes. Analysis begins following the very first time the students participate in the written-conversation activity. For this study, data collection and analysis began on October 3, 2018, and concluded on December 20, 2018. The written-conversation activity was conducted a total of 17 times over a 10-week time period; two of those times were only practice and no data were collected. The written conversations focused on prompts that I gave as the teacher. The prompts either asked the students to respond to selected articles that they read, or asked them about their feelings regarding certain situations that were occurring or had already occurred.

Creswell (2007) divided data analysis in an ethnographic case study into five consecutive parts: (1) data managing, (2) coding and developing themes, (3) describing, (4) interpreting, and

(5) representing. The researcher moves through the analysis in logical circles that spiral upward. This approach allows her to produce a more detailed analysis. The researcher enters the analysis with data as text and exits with a narrative account (Creswell, 2007). This analytic process is different from the direct line of reasoning that is found in quantitative analysis.

**Phase 1: Recording and Organizing Data**

The process of data analysis begins with organizing the data, or data management. The researcher organizes data into file folders, index cards, computer files, or some combination of these. The data in this study was organized into file folders and then into computer files. I created and organized daily folders for each day that I collected data in the classroom. The folders included all my daily field notes, both description and analytical notes, and the written-conversation notebooks. I wrote analytic memos at the end of each week. These beginning steps were a way of organizing the data. As transcripts and field notes were typed, read, and reread, I analyzed them for themes or categories. I identified tentative themes for future coding.

 **Phase 2: Analyzing the Results**

Coding is one of the most important steps taken during analysis. The purpose of coding is to organize and make sense of textual data. Codes or categories give meaning to the text that is collected during a study. Codes usually are attached to chunks of words, phrases, sentences, or even whole paragraphs. Codes or categories can come from a researcher's ideas or from the words and phrases that are used by the participants. Codes can be straightforward or more complex (Miles & Huberman, 1994).

In an ethnographic case study, it is important to gain an understanding of the data. To accomplish this, I read the typed field notes and the copies I had made of the students' written conversations many times. On each of the data-collection days, I analyzed the data, looking for

how EBC engagement was evident or not through the written conversations of that day. I specifically examined the unfolding interactions to look for: how the students became engaged, what their interactions were, how literacy learning was supported, and what the constraints were. I used a focused lens to try to understand how the students constructed knowledge together through the written-conversation activity at that moment in time. These steps helped me to narrow the focus of the research. I began by making notes and highlighting key words, phrases, or concepts that I felt related to the research question of how written conversation supports or constrains student engagement and the learning process. For example, I noted students' use of emotion words, such as *scared, happy, confused, mad, sad,* or student phrases that started with *I feel. . . , How do you feel. . .* In my field notes, I highlighted the areas in which my comments focused on their observable behavior. Finally, I highlighted any personal connections I could see students making to the prompts, to each other, or to their use of convention skills that we had been working on in class. These highlighted areas began to identify some of the codes or categories that I could use. I would consider these the low-level descriptive codes. This process continued, creating ever-more-refined data sets (Ely, Anzul, Friedman, Garner, & Steinmetz, 1991).

Coding can be described as noticing, collecting examples, and analyzing experiences to find commonalities, differences, patterns, and structures (Merriam, 2009; Wolcott, 2009). It is also another way to organize the data. These commonalities, differences, patterns, and structures within the data are referred to as *themes*. The researcher will begin to ask questions and to compare and contrast the themes. Some of the questions I began to ask were, "How did the students' learning progress during the 10 weeks of data collection?" "Did learning ever stop during the written conversation activity and why?" "Did the students show signs of becoming

bored with the activity?" "Did the conversations become more in-depth as time went on" and "Did the students became more comfortable with the activity?" This was the beginning of the coding at the next level.

However, these codes did not provide the depth in connections or themes that I had hoped for. I was grappling with the feeling that I was missing something in the data. I knew I was focusing too much on academics, and I had learned from my pilot studies that I needed to use a more balanced lens and be more open to seeing different types evidence of written conversations supporting or constraining the EBC of student engagement.

Also during the pilot studies, it felt as if I was always looking at each of the EBC constructs separately as I observed the students interacting with the written-conversation activity, or when I was reading their written-conversation notebooks. I knew that I was falling into this pattern again with this study.

The question then became, "Is there a common factor within the constructs of EBC that tie the three constructs together?" I felt that this question emerged because of my struggle with looking at the findings through more of an integrated lens of all three engagement constructs instead of separately applying each construct as students interacted during the written-conversation activity. Wrestling with this question, and reading the students' responses to a prompt that produced very emotional answers regarding our classroom community, I began to wonder about the part that relationships played in engagement. This question was significant enough that it led me to further review the literature on engagement, specifically searching for how relational learning fit into student engagement.

With the knowledge gained from the literature on relational engagement, I examined wondering whether relationships could be the missing piece that tied the three engagement

constructs together. The following question emerged: "How does this new knowledge on relationships and engagement fit into the EBC model of engagement that has been adopted for this study?" Researchers often write as though themes emerge, but it requires a critical eye to find the themes that may otherwise go unseen, and to fully develop those themes (Gibson & Brown, 2009).

At this point, I stepped back and reexamined the individual factors of each engagement construct. I began putting the constructs into a three-ringed Venn diagram (see Figure 2 in Chapter 4). I started noticing how the factors were overlapping, and in each of those overlaps were components of relational engagement. I recoded the data, looking for evidence of the role written conversations played in building a classroom community; seeing students through a relational lens, focusing on student-to-student relationships and teacher-to-student relationship building. Organizing the data this way produced new commonalities and patterns, or themes, around written conversations and how they can support relationship building.

Not forgetting the evidence in the pilot studies of the strength written conversations had with supporting the learning process, I went back and reexamined the codes for how written conversations supported the learning process. This time I recoded the data into more conceptual categories. Instead of looking at specific academic skills, I grouped those academic skills into codes for how the written conversations supported the Speaking & Listening, Language, and Writing standards of the *Common Core State Standards Initiative* (*CCSSI*, 2010). I also grouped and coded students' written conversations, looking for elements from the "Checklist for Dialogic Thought" (Figure 4, Chapter 4). From this reorganization, I constructed themes that focused on written conversations as a pedagogical tool that supports student engagement.

The data-analysis process of establishing codes and themes is most useful for descriptive reporting and theory building (Basit, 2003). Patton (2001) expressed the belief that the foundation of qualitative research is description. The researcher weaves a story and allows the reader to see through the researcher's eyes.

Data analysis is the process or interpretation. When the researcher moves from the observable data to analysis of the data, the use of concepts help in describing the phenomena in the data. At the interpretation level, the researcher is making inferences and developing theory. Eventually, the data are presented in a narrative form. The narrative includes direct quotations that support the theme and offers commentary regarding how the theme relates to the research question (Creswell, 2007).

### Addressing Validity and Reliability Issues

In qualitative research, the means of determining whether a study is valid and reliable is different than in quantitative research. This difference is mostly because the purpose for the research is different. In most quantitative research, the purpose is to test a hypothesis, but in qualitative research the purpose is to gain new knowledge from examining and understanding at a deeper level the context of a topic and the phenomena and the people pertinent to that topic.

*Internal validity* of a research study is dependent on how compatible the findings are with truth or reality, and this is determined by analyzing the methodology and findings of the study. One of the assumptions at the core of qualitative research is that reality is holistic, multidimensional, and ever changing (Creswell, 2007). Because the researcher is collecting the data and analyzing it, the participant's view of reality is evaluated through the researcher's interviews and observations. Consequently, the internal validity of any study, regardless of the study's purpose, is only as reliable as the person collecting the data. Therefore, qualitative

researchers use many different strategies to ensure internal validity. In this study, no prerequisites were involved. All 18 students in my class who were willing to participate in the study and whose parents gave permission were included in the data collection. Also, each student was free of constraints when responding to prompts given during the written-conversation activity. All 18 students read the same articles and wrote to the same prompts, and their opinions and viewpoints were their own. Last, the expectations and protocol of the activity were the same for each participant. These measures allowed me to feel confident of the internal validity of the data in this study. The three data-collection techniques I used were interviewing, observations, and written-conversation notebook review. I used these data collection methods to ensure the internal validity of this ethnographic case study.

*External validity*'s focus is to what degree the findings of one study can be applied to other similar situations (Merriam, 2009). Even if both case studies are focused on the same topic, it is not possible to generalize from one ethnographic case study to another because the individual stories or narrative cannot be duplicated. This is a specific limitation of qualitative research. Likewise, however, a limitation of the reliability in quantitative research is based on the assumption that there is a single reality, and that studying that reality repeatedly will produce similar results (Tawney & Gast, 1984). Qualitative research does not meet this criteria of replicability. Qualitative researchers assume that there are multiple realities that are always in flux, and that each researcher will view those realities through her own reality (Creswell, 2007). Qualitative researchers also believe that human thoughts and actions are not unique (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). It becomes the researcher's job to supply enough detailed description of the study's context, methods, and findings that readers can compare those details to their own situation and decide whether there are any useful similarities between the two.

**Strengths and Limitations of the Study**

This ethnographic case study has both strengths and limitations. One of the strengths of this study is its internal validity. It has internal validity as a result of the research procedures I used, which included interacting personally with the context and the participants, and at times being a participant in the written-conversation activity with students. This first-hand experience is the best way to determine the reality of that situation (Creswell, 2007). I worked hard to distinguish between objective and subjective observations.

One limitation of the study is the fact that because qualitative research cannot be duplicated or generalized, the study does not have external validity. It cannot be duplicated because another researcher would see and hear things differently than I did. Another limitation is research bias. The purpose of this type of research is to tell a unique story rather than present generalizable findings. The researcher's history, culture, life experiences, and biases can influence how the data is interpeted. As the researcher, I brought a "construction of reality" to the findings. I did my best under certain circumstances to demonstrate trustworthiness of the data by "detailing those circumstances to help the reader to understand the nature of my data" (Glesne, 2011, p. 214). There is also the limitation that the study was biased because not all the students were able to participate each time the written-conversation activity was conducted. In fact, the time during the morning when the activity was usually completed was when the three Latino students were pulled out for language services. Unfortunately, this schedule meant that their unique, individual perspectives on the topics discussed were not included as were those of the other student participants. Furthermore, the lack of parent involvement in the activity, which was a key factor in students' emotional engagement, happened so infrequently that it did not generate enough data to use in the analysis. Regardless of these limitations, it is my hope is that

the findings of this study will sound familiar to some readers and provide them with useful

knowledge.

## Summary of Chapter 3

In this chapter, I have presented the methodological choices and the framework used in

this study to examine written conversations and how they support or constrain student

engagement and the learning process. I discussed the context of this study by describing the

participants, the setting, my role as the teacher/researcher and my possible biases, and the pilot

studies. I explained the data-collection and data-analysis procedures, and I concluded by

addressing the validity and reliability issues, and the strengths and limitations of the study.

# CHAPTER 4: FINDINGS OF THE STUDY

The data of this study were constructed using qualitative research methods, (i.e., informal interviews, observations, and document review). The results from the data are best interpreted through the themes and thematic narratives obtained from the analysis of the data (Creswell, 2007, Merriam, 2009; Patton, 2001; Wolcott, 2008). I present the findings from the study in this chapter.

As stated previously, the purpose of the full study was to examine the role of written conversations in supporting/constraining student engagement and the process of learning. However, as I examined the students' written conversations, it became apparent that there was more to consider related to the role written conversations played in building relationships within a community of learners. Therefore, I also analyzed that component regarding the interrelationship between relationship building, learning, and engagement. In this chapter, I examine how written conversations supported relationship building, how relationship building supported student engagement, and how student engagement supported the learning process. I seek to let my participants speak by bringing the students' voices and words to the foreground here, with little inference from me.

The results of the analyses of the students' written conversations in this study were surprising. There is evidence that the dialogical-inquiry activity of written conversations played a supportive role in the interconnection between relationship building and the EBC of student engagement and the learning process. The results of the literature review in Chapter 2 support the perspective that relationships are a key factor in student engagement. According to Solomonides (2013),

There is a steady emergency of writing that increasingly accommodates the affective dimensions of engagement as lived by the student and attempts to be more sensitive to the intersections between life, learning and work. This may sound overstated, but we believe that if we all strive for improved relationships in our work with adolescents, the world will truly be a better place. (p. 54)

Not only do the findings support this view that attention to relationships is paramount in teaching and learning, but I also found that, in this case, relationships are the factor that ties the three engagement constructs (emotional, behavioral, and cognitive) together (see Figure 2 later in this chapter). In the following section and related subsections, I focus on the role of written conversations in (a) building a classroom community; (b) building relationships; (c) helping the teacher see students through a relational lens, (d) supporting student-to-student relationships, and (e) supporting teacher-to-student relationships. I discuss the findings within each of these subsections in detail.

## Written Conversations for Student Engagement and Learning

From the pilot studies in the fall of 2016 and the summer of 2018 until this full study conducted in the fall of 2018, I, as the teacher/researcher, went through a transformation. Although the research question, "How do written conversations, an inquiry activity that encourages dialogue, support or constrain student engagement and the learning process?" has remained the same, the lens I used to examine this activity has morphed.

As I reflected on the two pilot studies that I conducted, I became aware that I had evaluated the data superficially. During the pilot studies, when I observed the students as they were involved in the activity, I analyzed each factor of the EBC constructs on an individualized basis. For example, were the students making connections in their writing with each other as they wrote back and forth (emotional)? Were the students focused on the activity (behavioral)? Did I find evidence of students making connections to other topics of study (cognitive)? I was also

looking at the data only through a lens of academic skills. My overall finding after the pilot studies was that written conversations could be used as an academic tool that could support the EBC of student engagement and the learning process. Teachers could use written conversations as an emotional, behavioral, and cognitive engagement activity and at the same time collect data on students' progress with their academic skills (i.e., handwriting, writing skills, questioning skills, and thinking skills), and then use that data to help drive their classroom instruction. I now know that analyzing the data in this way actually narrowed the range of possibilities for this activity.

Throughout the pilot studies, I had this nagging thought in the back of my mind that I was missing some integrating piece. Had I had overlooked some connection between all three constructs, a common piece that all three constructs shared that would tie them together? Moving into this study, I was grappling with this question and struggling with how to go about finding the possible missing piece. When I began analyzing this study's data, I fell back into looking at it in much the same way that I had analyzed the pilot studies, looking for evidence of student engagement by looking at each engagement construct separately. However, with this study compared to the pilot studies, I inadvertently used written conversations differently in one important way. Only because the students and I were struggling with building our new classroom community, I decided on the spur-of-the-moment to use written conversations as a facilitation tool to try to get to the heart of the classroom community problem. In doing this, it became readily apparent that, although the written-conversation activity could support student engagement when used as an evaluation tool of academic skills, the activity could also be a powerful engagement tool when used to build and support relationships.

I began to wonder whether relationships could be the missing piece, the common denominator that would tie the three constructs of engagement together. Consequently, I broadened my focus and began to examine and analyze the written conversations for evidence of relationship building. I chose not to focus on what the student writing looked like (handwriting, spelling, punctuation), but instead to focus on what the conversations were saying. There was noteworthy evidence in the written conversations that the activity was playing a supportive role in building relationships between students and students, and between students and the teacher. I start here by examining the role of written conversations in building a classroom community.

**Written Conversations: Role in Building a Classroom Community**

The data collection for this study had a rocky start. Originally, my intent with this study was not to serve in the dual role of teacher and researcher. I had arranged with another teacher to use her classroom students as my participants. However, because of unforeseen staffing issues 6 weeks after school began, it became necessary for me to take over as teacher of a class of 18 fourth-grade students. I would be the third teacher these students had had since school started 6 weeks previously. I would have these 18 students every morning for 3.5 hours. I was to cover literacy (including reading, writing, and foundational skills) and math during this time. In the afternoons, these 18 students would return to their homeroom classrooms for their social studies and science block.

Building a classroom community is always the first step for a teacher with a new class at the beginning of the school year. However, we were now 6 weeks into the year, so the pressure was high to get these students quickly settled into what would be their third and final change with routine and teacher. On October 1, 2018, during our first day together, introductions were

quickly made, hastily designed classroom rules and expectations were given, and the new, fourth-grade classroom, 4C, was up and running—or so I thought.

These 18 students would now be the research participants in this study. The class consisted of nine females and 11 males. Colorado State University requires that all research using human participants obtain IRB approval. I obtained parental and student consent, along with consent from the school district and the school principal to conduct research.

During our second week together as classroom 4C, I introduced the written-conversation activity to the students. I explained that this was an activity where they would have a conversation with their partner, but they could use only their pencil to "talk." All students were given their own written-conversation notebooks and instructed that each time we did the activity, they were to answer the prompt, then switch notebooks with their designated partner and respond to their partner's writing on the prompt. The protocol was for them to end their comments with an appropriate question for their partner before switching the notebooks back. They were to continue to switch their notebooks back and forth and respond to what their partner had written until the timer went off. The timer would be set for at least 20 minutes. The intent was for me to model the activity for them, give them a few generic prompt, practice rounds, and then have the prompts be in response to something that I would give them to read, similar to how the two pilots had been done. However due to the circumstances of the beginning-of-the-year staffing situation, the data collection for this full study started about 2 weeks later than had been planned. Therefore, to stay current with my data-collection timeline (see Appendix C), the time that should have occurred to introduce and then practice the written-conversation activity was truncated.

For the first practice round of this activity, I had the students respond to the following prompt: "Write about something that made you smile this past weekend." The activity did not go well. The students talked constantly when they should have been writing, and there was lots of giggling and moving around. This was not really surprising to me because the first couple of times I did this activity with the pilot studies, the outcome was the same. It was interesting to see this pattern again. Behaviorally, the students did not look engaged in the activity; but it was their first time, and I knew from past experience with the pilot studies that sometimes when students did not *look* behaviorally engaged, their written conversations would show evidence of emotional and cognitive engagement. However, as I looked over these first written conversations from 4C, I was initially disappointed. Many of the student pairs' conversations were somewhat rambling, on and off the topic; there did not appear to be much depth in their writing or their responses; the actual handwriting of many of the students was difficult to read; and convention and sentence structure were almost nonexistent for a number of them. I was very aware as I reviewed these early writing conversations that I was looking only through the lens of a teacher who was worried about the number of students whose writing skills appeared to be below grade-level expectations.

I attempted the written-conversation activity a second time. I had a website of educational videos and let the students choose one of them to watch. The prompt this time was for them to have a written conversation with their partner about what they learned from the video. They were encouraged to describe what they had watched, and then to ask questions of their partner, to learn about their partner's video. I randomly chose partners this time and allowed the students to sit wherever they wanted in the room. I again set the timer for 20 minutes. The second time doing the activity produced similar results as the first time. Behaviorally, students still appeared to be

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disengaged (off task, talking when they should have been writing, etc.); and again when reviewing their notebooks, I was seeing the same writing-skill issues. As a teacher, I was seeing areas in the written conversations that I could use to begin to support students with writing instruction; but as a researcher, I wondered, "What about evidence of student engagement?" A larger issue also was becoming evident, and it had nothing to do with the study: The class and I were having trouble bonding.

It quickly become apparent that my decision to rush through the beginning steps of building a strong classroom community was problematic. After one rather difficult day with an emotional student who just wanted to stay in his homeroom class because he did not like our new classroom, I decided at that moment to use written conversations to help me get to the heart of what was going on emotionally with these students. As stated earlier, I had primarily used written conversations during the pilot studies to get at students' thinking regarding a specific topic. This would be the first time that I used a prompt that specifically asked them how they felt about a situation they were all personally involved in.

The prompt I asked students to write to was "What are your feelings on 4C's most recent change in classroom, location, and teacher?" I explained that no one, including myself, would be upset by anything that they wrote, so they should not be afraid to say how they really felt on this topic. They were allowed to pick their partners. I gave them time to get their notebooks and get settled before I set the timer for 20 minutes. For the first time since I had introduced the activity of written conversations, the class was completely quiet as they wrote back and forth. Following in Table 1 are portions of four student pairs' written conversations. I chose these four student pairs because they clearly showed evidence of distress regarding their most recent changes in classrooms and teacher. In typing up the written conversations, I made no corrections to their

original writings. I put correct spelling of words that may be hard to decipher within brackets,

and all names are pseudonyms.

Table 1
*Written Conversations: Samples of Student Pairs*

| | |
|---|---|
| Wayne: | How are you feeling about 4C change |
| Tommy: | I feel terrified |
| Wayne: | Why? We have cool chairs |
| Tommy: | I mean the teacher. You need a period. |
| | |
| April: | I feel cofused [confused] becase so much change. How do you feel? |
| Cindy: | I feel hapy i like the Red and green sine [sign]. Why do you feel cofused? |
| April: | I don't know. I just am. |
| Cindy: | You can't not know you must know why you are confused. |
| April: | Way to confused way to much new change here! |
| | |
| Kelly: | I feel sad about it because its a new room and we have moved so much and… NO RECES |
| Gina: | ok what about the teacher? |
| Kelly: | Oh! I like her shes nice and funny. But about the no recesses? |
| Gina: | What about it? |
| Kelly: | I need recess!!!! |
| Gina: | ok |
| | |
| Kevin: | How are you feeling about 4C change sad, mad, cufesed (confused), not happy? I Don't like it. |
| Allen: | Yeah I kinda agree with u I kinda liked Mr. Mconell Better why don't u like it? |
| Kevin: | cus Mr. Conley is not our tether [teacher] |
| Allen: | I No [know]. |
| Kevin: | it makes me sad |

These few written conversations illustrated just how hard these first 6 weeks of school

had been for these 18 students. They expressed feelings of sadness over leaving their last teacher.

Some talked about missing their old classroom, and how sad they were that this new classroom

was on the other side of the building, far away from their homeroom classrooms and their

friends. Many clearly stated that they did not like the changes that I had made to their routine

(i.e., the change in recess). These responses openly state the students' displeasure and discomfort

with the changes that they had to endure. As a teacher, my heart broke for these students, who did not have a say at all in the significant changes that affected them. Their writing did not express anger as much as sadness. It was immediately clear to me that I had made a huge mistake in not dedicating more time to building a stronger and safer classroom community. Reading their words revealed the negative impact that all this change and turmoil had created for these students.

In my analysis of the students' written-conversation notebooks, the above student responses reflect the EBC constructs of engagement. The four sample conversations show emotional engagement. Tommy states he is terrified of the changes; April states she is so confused with the changes; Kelly states she is sad; Kevin states he does not like the changes and he feels sad; and his partner, Allen, agrees with those feelings. Within each pair, one of the partners asks the other why the other is feeling that particular emotion; and then the partner goes on to respond appropriately to the partners' expression of emotion. For example, when Cindy asks April why she is feeling confused with the changes, Cindy is looking for clarity in trying to understand April's emotions; April's response show she is trying to explain her emotions. All of these examples are factors of emotional engagement. The examples show the students are behaviorally engaged because they are fully participating in the activity. Also, my field notes recorded that students were following the expectations set for conducting this activity: They were quietly writing back and forth with little to no movement for 20 minutes, and this was the first time doing the activity that all the students were behaviorally engaged. In terms of evidence of cognitive engagement, these written-conversation examples show that the students were mindful of their own feelings and, in their responses to their partners, also mindful of theirs. They appeared invested in the conversations with their partners and expressed that by asking probing

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questions. Moreover, they were observed taking their time and not rushing through the activity by staying focused for 20 minutes.

However, more important than EBC engagement evidence was my realization that our classroom was in crisis mode, and the first step in solving this problem would be to acknowledge the feelings that the students had expressed in their writings. They needed to know that their voices had been heard, and that I had learned an important lesson about the value of taking the time to build relationships, regardless of time constraints. Written conversations had given me insight into how the students were feeling. They were a tool the students used to express both their personal and interpersonal voices. I had read their comments, listened to the questions they asked of each other, watched as they built ideas and knowledge together, and felt their frustration over their perception of the imbalance of power that these changes had over them.

I immediately took the necessary steps to change the culture of our classroom for the better. The class and I had an open and honest conversation about what I had read in their written conversations. I thoroughly explained the reasons behind why they had been required to make these final changes to their classroom and teacher. I spent a lot of time reintroducing myself to them and shared some of my history (how my own children had gone to this school, how long I had taught at our school, why I decided to get into teaching, etc.). Most importantly, I told them that I had heard them, and that I valued their voices. I acknowledged their sadness and confusion, and said that I was more than willing to comprise on any changes that I had made that they did not like. You could literally see their relief. None of them could name the feeling, but I know they could feel the shift, the feeling that there was a balance of power in their relationship with me. In fact, April, who had voiced her confusion in her writing and had up to this point been very distant towards me, looked me straight in the eye, nodded, and smiled.

The written-conversation activity had opened the door to a verbal dialogue between me and the students. I do not believe that this verbal dialogue and the subsequent improvement in our classroom community would have occurred as quickly without me reading their concerns in their written conversations. As the classroom teacher, I realized there were problems going on; but the written conversations gave me the specifics of exactly where change needed to be made. My initial impression about this group of students had been troublesome. I was making negative assumptions about this class and deciding that this was going to be one of those challenging years with a class who was not going to put in any effort. I have always perceived myself as a caring teacher, but my negative thinking was causing me to unconsciously communicate a very different message to my students. That thinking could have led to irreversible damage in my relationships with these students and to the culture of our classroom. Instead, written conversations facilitated our new and improved classroom community.

**Written Conversations: Role in Building Relationships**

As the researcher in this study, I knew from my pilot studies that written conversation could support student engagement and the learning process, but now I had my first glimpse of how the written-conversation activity could play a supportive role in building relationships, which in turn could support the EBC of student engagement. I knew I was moving past looking primarily at written conversations as solely an academic activity and was seeing their potential as an effective communication tool for building classroom communication and relationships within that community. For this prompt, I had not asked the students how they felt about an abstract topic, such as something they did over the weekend that made them smile or what they learned from the video they watched I had asked them how they felt about a particular situation that they were personally involved in.

At this point, I went back to the research and did a literature review on relational engagement (this information is included in Chapter 2). A key finding in this literature review was that, when schools emphasize teaching and modeling of social and emotional skills to the students, the academic achievement of children increases, the incidence of problem behaviors decreases, and the quality of the relationships surrounding each child improves (Elias et al, 1997). How would this new insight regarding relational engagement fit into my research question, "How do written conversations . . . support or constrain student engagement and the learning process?" Student engagement in this study is defined as a three-construct model that includes EBC constructs. In other words, the whole child is considered when evaluating engagement. This new information on relationships and the role they play in students' academic success led to the following questions: "If each of the EBC constructs has its own factors, how do they all fit together so that the three engagement constructs are viewed as one all-encompassing construct?" "What are the overlapping EBC factors?" "Is there a common thread that binds the EBC factors together as a whole?" And most importantly, "What role does written conversations play in supporting or constraining student engagement and the learning process if there is a new common thread in the EBC factors?" For my analysis to continue, these questions needed to be answered.

These questions led to the creation of the following Venn Diagram of Engagement (Figure 2), which illustrates the interconnectedness of the three constructs of engagement. The diagram design and factors came to completion only after my additional review of the literature on relational engagement. The research presented in Chapter 2 on the theories and models of relationship engagement, caring, and a sense of transformation and being were the underpinning of my increased understanding of the interconnectedness of student engagement and

**Emotional Engagement E**
Understanding social cues, being able to link feelings to a range of situations—emotional awareness and regulation (executive functioning).

**EB**
Self-control skills to deal with feelings when involved in stressful situations at school.

**Behavioral Engagement B**
Participation in the classroom and school community.

*Relational Engagement*
**In this case, relationships are the integrated concept that ties emotional, behavioral, and cognitive engagement together. Without quality relationships, emotional awareness and regulation, participation in school, and psychological desire to be successful in school would not happen.**

**EC**
Emotional awareness affects performance and understanding of academic content.

**BC**
Behavior and motivation in the classroom affects performance and understanding of academic content.

**Cognitive Engagement C**
Psychological—perseverance in carrying out academic tasks, strategies for learning.

*Figure 2*. Venn diagram of engagement.

relationships. The Venn diagram has three interconnected circles, each circle labeled with one of

the engagement constructs. The factors of each construct are represented either inside the circles

or in the overlapping portions of the circles. Relationships are represented at the midpoint as the common factor that binds the three constructs together. This claim became obvious as I examined the factors of the three engagement constructs.

For example, if we consider the Emotional Engagement construct (E), the factors are understanding social cues, being able to link feeling to a range of situations, having appropriate emotional awareness and regulation (executive functioning). Noddings' (2002) research on caring found that empathy, or *receptive attention*, as she preferred to call it, is an emotional feeling that is an essential characteristic of a caring encounter; this empathy, or receptive attention, reflects a connection, or a relationship, between the caregiver and the cared-for. A caring relationship is necessary for emotional engagement.

Then, if we consider the Behavior Engagement (B) construct, the primary factor is having the ability to participate in a classroom and school community. Gibbs & Poskitt's (2010) research found that when relationships exist in the classroom, students feel comfortable asking questions, and when the expectation is that students do their best, even when the instruction is challenging, they perform better in school. Fantuzzo and McWayne's (2002) research found that strong relationships create a positive climate in the classroom, and this positive climate allows students to engage in positive problem solving with each other and participate in the classroom community—to be behaviorally engaged.

Last, when we consider the Cognitive Engagement (C) construct, the factors are setting goals and adopting strategies for carrying out academic tasks. Cognitive engagement with middle-childhood students (fourth- and fifth-graders) centers on the children's' knowledge about the activity they are being asked to complete, and on their belief about their ability to complete it (Appleton et al., 2008; Ripke et al., 2006; Rose-Krasnor, 2009: Simpkins et al., 2006). Their

cognitive system is responsible for examining the demand of the new task and drawing conclusions about whether the new task can be completed or what the next steps will be. These cognitive decisions will be made regardless of the level of relationships in the classroom, but if students feel safe and supported in the educational setting, then their cognitive system will allow them to believe in themselves and to try to complete a task. It is clear that relationships are interwoven among the three engagement constructs. Relationships are the integrated concept that ties emotional, behavioral, and cognitive engagement together. Without quality relationships, emotional awareness and regulation, participation in school, and the psychological desire to be successful in school would not happen.

The factors within the Venn Diagram of Engagement have been worded to represent observable skills. In the E circle, the skills that could be observed are students exhibiting an understanding of social cues, showing the ability to link feelings to a range of situations, and demonstrating emotional awareness and regulation. In the B circle, the skills that could be observed are students participating in the classroom and school community. In the EB overlap, observed skills are students' ability to self-control and to deal with feelings when they are involved in stressful situations at school. In the C circle, the skills that could be observed are psychological in nature: Are students showing a perseverance in carrying out academic tasks and strategies for learning? In the EC overlap, observed skills include students showing emotional awareness and an understanding of the effect that awareness has on their performance of academic content. The observable skills in the last overlap, BC, are identifying and observing how students' behavior and motivation in the classroom affect their performance and understanding of academic content. Young students benefit from instruction on these skills.

The research I reviewed supports the opinion that student engagement in school is more likely to happen if students have been taught the social skills that allow for engagement. The importance of social-emotional learning for successful academic learning is based on relationships (Brendtro, Brokenleg, & Van Bockern, 1990; Perry, 2006). Many social and emotional programs are available for schools to use to help build these skills in students. *MindUP* (Hawn Foundation, n.d.; Scholastic Inc., n.d.), *In Focus* (McSheehy, 2013, and *PBISWorld.com book* (2012) are a few programs that our school has used for whole-group, small-group, and individual instruction; but that is not the focus of this study. The focus of this study was to examine how written conversations supports or constrains student engagement and the learning process. Once it became evident to me through the study that relationships are a part of engagement, the analysis of this common EBC factor was done.

**Written Conversations: Role in Helping Teacher See Students Through a Relational Lens**

Realizing the power the activity of written conversations could have on relationship building, I reexamined the students' earlier conversations responding to the prompt "What was something you did this weekend that made you smile?" I coded the conversations for evidence of relationship building by looking for and recognizing the factors of a safe and culturally competent classroom: respect and understanding; critical thinking when sharing new ideas; participation and involvement; and support in overcoming fears of mistakes, inclusion, and equity (Center for Community Health and Development, 2019).

The tables that follow (Table 2 through Table 6) reflect conversations between five different pairs of students (all names are pseudonyms). I have transcribed the writing from the students' notebooks exactly as written by the students. In some instances, I have put correct spelling of words in brackets.

Although written conversations can be a perfect opportunity for students to get their

thoughts down and not to worry about conventions, a teacher still must be aware of the students'

writing ability. Therefore, a teacher looking at Holly and April's data in Table 2, with a focus on

writing skills, may be concerned. It is obvious that both students are struggling with spelling

basic fourth-grade-level words (i.e., line 4, *stood, nite, cep*; line 7, *dowing, ething, spesh*; line 8,

*reley, aje*; line 9, *thet*; line 11, *kleend, plaing*). Almost every line has evidence of such

misspellings. The students' lack of incorrect ending punctuation is also a concern. In many of the

Table 2
*Student-to-Student Written Conversation: Holly and April, 10/1*

Prompt: "Write about something you did this weekend that made you smile."

1  Holly: On Saterday I made slime. What did you Do this weekend.
2  April:  I got a new back pack. A panda one! Are you happy that to day is school!
3  Holly: no I am so tired are you happy today is school!
4  April:  no not at all I stod [stayed] up all nite because I cep [kept] on waking up!!!!
5  Holly: Well me to!
6  April:  Every day im so gigaly [giggly]. What time do you wake up?
7  Holly: 5.00 are you Dowing [doing] ething [anything] spesh [special] to day
8  April:  not reley I just waching ICS [Ice] Aje [Age]
9  Holly: thet is cool.
10 April:  yes
11 Holly: I kleend [cleaned] My room and I was Dancing on my Deck with a Broom.
12       I also was plaing with Dirt.
13 April:  You had a funer weekind than me. Did you get drity?
14 Holly: Yes I Did. Are Bruthers (brothers) fun cus I have no siBlings.
15 April:  I have 3 brothers and no sisters. My brothers scer [scare] me so much. What
16       are being for hallowing [Halloween]?
17 Holly: Im Being a wich What are you Beig for hoolwen [Halloween]!
18 April:  I don't know whats for lunch?
19 Holly: I don't now [know] I don't know anything thet is for school lunch.

lines (1, 7, 11, 13, 15), Holly was capitalizing words that began with *D* or *B* in the middle of

sentences. Many times she made lowercase *b* and *d* backwards. Overall, their writing was not

meeting the fourth-grade language convention standards (I address standards in a later section).

However, when we look past what their writing looks like and instead focus on what their conversation is saying, we can see evidence of relationship building. These girls are clearly working very hard at getting to know each other. The expression of their written communication is friendly and upbeat. They both use exclamation marks throughout their conversation to show excitement to their partner. On lines 1, 7, 13, and 15, Holly asks April several questions: "What did you do this weekend?" "Are you doing anything spesh [special] today?" April also asks questions: "Are you happy today is school?" and "What time do you wake up?" The girls' conversation shows elements of relationship building throughout. The written conversations allowed for authentic learning of literacy skills and authentic expression in their writing.

Written conversations not only supported relationship building between students, but they also helped me in building relationships with students. On line 4, April states she is not happy it is a school day, and then refers to her lack of sleep. As her teacher, I am immediately concerned, and my field notes indicate a question to myself, "Why is this child not sleeping?" In my notes, I make the comment that being tired makes it so hard to focus. I find it interesting that all of a sudden I center on April as a child instead of a student. My concern with her lack of sleep obviously tapped into my emotional, care-giver side.

On line 6, April states that she is so giggly. In class, her constant giggling was beginning to become a regular disruption, and I had to speak to her about it several times. However, now knowing that she is tired, and her giggling is probably a result of that, I am suddenly not feeling so bothered by it; in fact, I feel somewhat protective towards her.

On line 13, Holly is curious about siblings and asks April, "Are Bruthers (brothers) fun cus I have no siBlings. April's response is, "I have 3 brothers and no sisters. My brothers scer [scare] me so much." Again, as I read this, I could not help but wonder what she means when she

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says they scare her. Suddenly, I want to have a heart-to-heart talk with this little girl and find out more about her. Her lack of writing skills is not as important to me as spending some time getting to know her better. These written conversations opened the door for me to learn more about her and to see her through a relationship lens.

Natalie and Katie are the next pair of students I focus on; the example of their written conversation is represented in Table 3. Originally, when looking at Natalie and Katie's conversation only through an academic lens, I noted in my field notes that there were a few spelling and punctuation issues, but nothing too alarming. Both girls appeared to be good writers as far as sentence structure, using details, and asking relevant inquiry-type questions were concerned. However, on lines 15 through 25, they begin talking about things that their brothers made and how these items broke. Originally I believed that their writing started to lose focus. However, when I reviewed their conversations for evidence of building relationship, my assessment shifted.

The first thing I noticed was how funny these girls were! Starting on lines 6 and then throughout till the end, they really seemed to be enjoying their conversation with each other. In the beginning lines (1 through 5) Natalie does a good job keeping the conversation going by continuing to ask questions about what Katie did over the weekend, even though Katie does not initially ask any questions in return. However, when Natalie responds to Katie's comments with humor (line 7 and line 10), Katie's personality seems to open up, and she starts to respond back with humor (lines 8 and 9, and lines 23 and 24). Then on line 13, she jumps into sharing something else that made her smile over the weekend, building a house for her lizard. She then immediately asks Natalie a question about whether she made anything over the weekend. Lines 15 through 21 show the two of them having a conversation about things that either their brothers

Table 3
*Student-to-Student Written Conversation: Natalie and Katie, 10/1*

Prompt: "Write about something you did this weekend that made you smile."

1   Natalie: Something that made me smile was I had a soccer game and I was goalie the
2   first halve and I made a save and blocked a goal and then we won 9 to 1. Did you play
3   a sport over the weekend?
4   Katie: I road my byicle on saturdy.
5   Natalie: That sounds like fun! Were did you go on your bike?
6   Katie: I went around the block and got shot by a sprinkler. it was cold.
7   Natalie: it sounds cold! Did the sprinkler get in trouble and did it go to jail
8   Katie: No but it did try getting the grass or the grass tried getting the sprinkler. Did
9   you do anthin that was cold or invaled [involved] cold and hopefuly it din't try
10 attacking you?
11 Natalie: I fell in a puddle yesterday! And I almost called safe to tell! have you ever
12 fell in a puddle
12 Katie: Yes I did and it was in the winter I fell and had geens (jeans) on and now I
13 don't know why I don't like jeans. Something else that made me smile this weekend is
14 when I finished my two layer house for my lizzard. Did you made anything this
15 weekend?
16 Natalie: No. But my brother made a widturbine.
16 Katie: what is a widtwbine?
17 Natalie: a windturbine is a gint [giant] fan that my brother really like seeing it fall!
18 And just so you know its taller than two houses! do you like seeing things break?
19 Katie: yes once I brook a realy big tower that my brother made and I knowled
20 [knocked] it over. did you eve knock anything over?
21 Natalie: yea I have I knocked my brother over and a fack [fake] brick tower that my
22 brother made. have you ever cut down a tree and seen it crash?
23 Katie: No but that would be cool I wounder how slow it would go? Did you ride it did
24 you need a sadle?
25 Natalie:  What! Yea I did but it whent into the street.

or they have built, and how these buildings were knocked over. This is not a loss of focus, as I

assumed earlier; they are very much relationally engaged in finding out more about each other,

which is exactly what I asked them to do when I asked them to talk about something they did

over the weekend that made them smile. In fact, the girls could very well have found common

ground: quick wits and humor! I realized the activity showed me more valuable information

about them as children than what I would have learned about them by just looking at their

writing skills. Written conversations can serve as a literacy tool for expression.

Wayne and Tommy are the third pair of students I focus on, represented in Table 4. My field notes on Wayne and Tommy included comments about how the boys were giggling throughout the activity, and how often they moved and fidgeted. They did not appear to be behaviorally engaged. With this somewhat negative point of view, I examined their writing and at first was only able to see writing skill concerns: mistakes with spelling, capitalization,

Table 4
*Student-to-Student Written Conversation: Wayne and Tommy,10/1*

Prompt: "Write about something you did this weekend that made you smile."

1  Wayne:   Something that made me smile this weekend was villager news.
2  Tommy:  I thougt you said villigers nuks [nukes].
3  Wayne:   What does nuks mean
4  Tommy:  I ment NUEKS!!!
5  Wayne:   villagers are not nueks!!!
6  Tommy:  did I spell it right!!!!!
7  Wayne:   no! [the *no!* is circled]
8  Tommy:  WOW!!!!!!!!!! Oh my gosh! Do you get me!?
9  Wayne:   of course
10 Tommy:  good!!! Something that I did that made me smile was playing madden Mike
11            hike thru to randy moss and when it went thru the Defender he cout [caught] the ball I
12            fell off the couch [he drew a smiley face on the page] was playing madden Mike
13 Wayne:   I thought that wasn't a game?
14 Tommy:  no I said Madden not madden Mike Mike is a football player
15 Wayne:   ooooohhhhh what post [position] oooooooh It means I miss understood you
16 Tommy:  you totally understood me
17 Wayne:   no I didn't!!!!!!!!!
18 Tommy:  shut up Wayn!! please
19 Wayne:   thats not how you spell my name!
20 Tommy:  I don't care

punctuation, and an overuse of exclamation points. This latter concern further validated my thinking that the boys' writing content was rambling and silly.

When I looked at their writing a second time with an emphasis on relationship building, all I could see were two boys who obviously connected during this activity. Lines 8 and 9 are key

in their interaction because Tommy is obviously delighted that Wayne "gets him" and shows that by capitalizing *WOW* and then adding several exclamation points. The two seemed to figure out that they had the same humor. Looking at their conversation through a relationship lens rather than an academic lens, I now see a teasing and playful conversation—a much better indicator of who these boys were than my initial thinking that they were boys who could not stay focused and were off task.

The fourth pair of students, represented in Table 5, were Amy and Kelly. I wrote in my field notes when first reviewing Amy and Kelly's written conversations that they were off topic. Now looking back through the same conversation but with a relationship lens, I see they are making a real effort to get to know each other. Many lines of their transcribed conversation are full of them learning about each other in this brief conversation (favorite shows, characters, food, hobbies). I know that relationship building is not about staying on topic; it is about getting to know each other. And it is obvious that these two girls learned a lot about each other in this brief activity. When I looked only through an academic lens, I missed the subtle and obvious hints of relationship building that written conversations allowed for.

Finally, the last pair of students, Joe and Anthony, are reflected in Table 6. Similar to my initial reaction to the other written conversations, all I saw first in Joe and Anthony's written conversations were issues with their writing skills: spelling, sentence structure, lack of punctuation, hand writing, they all seemed like glowing beacons. Then, when reviewing them with a relationship lens, the issues with their writing skills fade away and all I see are examples of relationship building. Throughout most of their conversation (lines 16–27), Joe and Anthony seem to find common ground with their mutual interest in video games. However, one area that seemed different with this conversation than the three prior student examples is that there seems

Table 5
*Student-to-Student Written Conversation: Amy and Kelly, l0/1*

Prompt: "Write about something you did this weekend that made you smile."

1  Amy:    Talk about what made you smile this weekend? I got a panint [paint] palette and
2          a treasure chest to paint. I moved my easil by my desk and painted a bunch of
pictures.
3  Kelly:  Waching my show.
4  Amy:    I love watching TV.
5          Mine was on my ipad. The show was make mermaids. What is your favorate show?
6  Kelly:  OMG!!! I watch that. but its not my favorite. This anime called SAO is my
7          favorite
8  Amy:    Do you watch the one that is h20 just ad water with ricey and Imma or the one
9          Mix it
10         Lila, and Srina?
11 Kelly:  yea who's you favorit caricter [character]
12 Amy:    Mimi from season 2, 3, and 4.
13 Kelly:  Something that made me smile during the weekend was for my sisters birthday
14         on Theirsday we selabrated [celebrated] on Saterday my dad said it was a gift for
15         whole family was a Nintendo switch that made me smile
16 Amy:    What is your favorate game on the Nintendo switch? I love playing incredible 2
17         lego on my cousins.
18 Kelly:  Mario. Whats your favorite food
19 Amy:    My favorate food is chicken nuggets. What is your favorate food?
20 Kelly:  PIZZA! What about you?
21 Amy:    I just told you chicken nuggets. What else makes you smile?

to be an authentic level of shared respect in their responses to each other. Although both boys ask

an equal share of inquiry-type questions, it is how they answer these questions that feels different

than the other student conversations, it feels more authentic and almost a little sad, at least as far

as Joe's responses. For example, right away on lines 1 and 2 Joe states that he only did chores

and stuff on the weekend and Anthony, on lines 4 and 5 responds with, "What do you mean

chores and stuff?" Joe responds on line 6 with exactly what chores he did and then goes on to ask

Anthony if he cleans at his house? Most of the other student conversations revolved around play

and fun things they did that made them smile. However, Joe states that not much happened but

chores. Although these two do talk about video games, Joe's talk in particular regarding the

Table 6
*Student-to-Student Written Conversation: Joe and Anthony, 10/1*

Prompt: "Write about something you did this weekend that made you smile."

1 Joe:        tell about something that made you smile this weekend. In my weekend, much
2            dident happen, just chourse [chores] and stuf like that.
3 Anthony:  [He puts a big circle around each of his responses and only puts a few words
4            on each line, he does not write margin to margin on the paper.] What do u mean
5            chours and stuff like that?
6  Joe:       basicly clening and by choures I meen mopping, vacuuming, picking up stiks and
7            abunche [a bunch] of things. By the way do you ever do chours like cleaning at
your
8            house
8 Anthony:  Oh u said chores but yeah I have to but not that oftin becus I have a lot of
9            siBlings But thei never around so not a lot no but yeah I have to do chores. What els
10           did u do and u exided [excited] for this weeks 3 day weekend [drew a happy face]
11           yeah!
12 Joe:      I did not know that we had a 3 day wekkend. I might play some vidogames so this
13           mighte be a good time to play videogame.
14 Anthony:  Yeah remember the anonsment [announcement] this freday [Friday] that we
15           don't 14 have school
16 Joe:      I know in p.e [He drew a circle around this response]
17 Anthony:  Did you get any victory batleRoers this weeken i got like 10.
18 Joe:      so this is fortnight. if you got to 10 batlereports in fortnight you must be Realy
19           good. I'm not a big fan of fortnight and eventhou I have never plade [played] I have
20           seen vidios of it and I dount [don't] realy like it.
22 Anthony:  thanks But they onley got that many was B-cau I was playing 50v50 It's this
23           mode where U have a team of 50 agents. Whate do u Like to play?
22 Joe:      when I play viddo games I usly [usually] play oblivion or skirom. They are
23           basicly anchent [ancient] or back then midevel times, here are the simbols [He drew
24           the symbol for Skifrome and then a symbol for oblivion and he again put a big
circle
25           around this response]
26 Anthony:  oh that's cool
27 Joe:      yha I dount play much so its beaus [because] my dad says that its not helthy for
28           people and that sighents [science] has all Redy [already] proven it.

video games is that he doesn't play that often because his dad believes it is not healthy. On line

10, Anthony asks Joe if he is excited for the 3-day weekend and Joe responds that he did not

even know there was one. Anthony tries to jog his memory by reminding him about the

announcement they made about no school on Monday. Their conversation feels polite and

genuine as they acknowledge what each other said. There appears to be equal curiosity to learn about each other.

This sampling of written conversations between students shows elements of relationship building. Looking back, I see that my field notes were filled with personal information about my students that I gathered through their written conversations. Again, this may have been information that I eventually would have learned about them, but perhaps not. Valenzuela, author of *Subtractive Schooling* (1999), found in her study when interviewing teachers and students from a high school in California that only a few teachers indicated they knew their students in a personal way; and very few students stated that they thought their teachers knew them or that they would be willing to go to their teachers for help with a personal problem. The written conversations in this study were a literacy activity that gave the time needed for students to get to know each other and develop social skills.

**Written Conversations: Role in Building Student-to-Student Relationships**

Written conversations helped me see that some of my students needed support building stronger relationships with each other. I began looking closely at one student in particular, Kelly. When I first met Kelly, she was one of the students who was the most distant toward me. She acted almost distrustful of me. She did not like most of the new changes that had occurred, and she let me know that by constantly questioning everything we did. Then she would shut down if she did like the answer she received. She rarely participated in class those first few weeks we were together. The only time she would contribute was when she had a story to share. Otherwise, she appeared very disengaged. At times when others were sharing in class, her disengagement was so obvious that it appeared disrespectful and rude. I also was beginning to get feedback from her peers that she was not being very nice when they were out at recess.

When I began to view the students' written conversations through a relationship lens, I was curious to see whether Kelly's trait of disengagement with her peers in class was also coming out in her written conversations. Tables 7 through 10 contain a few excerpts of early conversations Kelly had with her peers.

Table 7

*Excerpt of Conversation Between Kelly and Amy About 10/4 Prompt*

Prompt: "Write about the learning video you chose to watch."

| 1 | Amy: | The video I watched was about deer migrating 150 miles in 2012 across |
| 2 | | highways and going over and under fences the deer came across many hard |
| | | obsticles. |
| 3 | Kelly: | yea, but where is the question? |
| 4 | Amy: | Have you ever seen a deer or a few deer? |
| 5 | Kelly: | Yes I have |
| 6 | Amy: | I have seen a lot my nana and papa live in the mountains when I stay we see a |
| 7 | | lot. |
| 8 | | Where have you seen them? |
| 9 | Kelly: | Mountains, BTW next time you get football |
| 10 | Amy: | have you ever see three baby and two adult at the same time? |
| 11 | Kelly: | nope and what about the football |
| 12 | Amy: | I am not getting the football. I have also seen two baby and a mom at the same |
| 13 | | time at my nana and papa water tub. |
| 14 | Kelly: | ok Bye |

In this excerpt, Kelly's responses feel short and disinterested in Amy's attempt to tell her about the video she viewed. On line 3, she does not respond to what Amy has described, but just says, "yea, but where is the question?" I believe this is in reference to me asking the students to try to end each of their statements with a question. However, it is notable that never when Kelly responds does she end with a question. On line 8, Kelly completely switches topics and asks Amy about football. Kelly never really responds to any of Amy's questions, and she never mentions the video she watched. On line 11, Amy tells Kelly she is, "not getting the football" or, as I interpret it, not understanding why she is all of a sudden asking about football. Amy then

tries again to come back to the video, but Kelly abruptly ends the conversation and says, "ok

Bye."

The following week, the students did written conversations again. This time, Kelly was

paired with Gina (see Table 8). As you can see from this excerpt, Kelly, as she did with Amy, is

again displaying disinterest in the conversation with Gina. As the adult and teacher in the

Table 8
*Excerpt of Conversation Between Kelly and Gina About 10/9 Prompt*

Prompt: "Write about your favorite subject we are studying or have studied."

| 1 | Gina: | I like the math we are doing now. |
|---|-------|-----------------------------------|
| 2 | Kelly: | hmmm… I forgot what I was going to say |
| 3 | Gina: | I like the brain break to! What brain break do you like to do? |
| 4 | Kelly: | My favorite is math witch is better taffy or gum |

classroom, it is important to me to know which students may need support with specific social

skills. My job is not to just teach academics but also to continually model life skills. Kelly was

not the only student in the class who could use support in social skills and relationship building.

The written-conversation activity had helped me quickly recognize a potential social problem

relative to which students could use extra support and guidance in relationship-building skills.

In our school, we serve breakfast every day to our students. I realized that our whole-

class breakfast time would be the perfect time to periodically include some relationship-building

activities. I specifically incorporated these activities to help students with the skills of listening

and responding appropriately to others. It did not take long before I began to see a positive

change with Kelly and other students in their student-to-student interactions. I was curious to see

whether there was also a positive difference in how Kelly, in particular, interacted with her peers

during the written-conversation activity. Would the relationship-building activities that we had

been doing allow her to connect on a more personal level with her peers during the written

conversation activity? The following section includes a few excerpts from Kelly's later

conversations with peers, in which her conversations give an impression of stronger relationship

connections being made.

### *Positive Changes in Student-to-Student Interactions*

Because I was seeing improvement in Kelly's social interactions with other students, I

paired her with Mark. Mark was a student who struggled with controlling his emotions. He had a

lot of social anxiety, and I wanted to see how Kelly would interact with him (see Table 9).

Table 9
*Excerpt of Conversation Between Kelly and Mark About 10/23 Prompt*

Prompt: "How is life like a race?"
(This prompt was given after students read an article on the Hopi tribe's tradition of running.)

1  Mark:  Life is like a race because the fake in everybodys life. That is like a race to me
2  Kelly:  Oh! So you mean there is like a lot of lies and drama
3  Mark:  Yeah, that is what mean they are a lot of fake and real but . . .  I think I will just
4        Die with these lies "and drama". I hate it.!!
5  Kelly:  WHAT!?!? don't die just ignor it. By the way what was your favorite part of
6        the article?
7  Mark:  The Hopi high school is still there?
8  Kelly:  I think life is like a race because you are constantly going places and doing
9        things
9  Mark:  Yeah, but sometimes I just don't like to run because I am not that kind of
10      person I ride my bike.
11 Kelly:  Ok . . . I mean just going places. . . but ok
12 Mark:  I don't want to go places I stay home and play my xbox 360 when my mom
13      goes to the store for an hour
14 Kelly:  Yeah. But I mean to school and stuff
15 Mark:  Yeah!

Right away, I could see that Kelly was engaged because she asked for clarification, which

meant she was listening. On line 5 she seems genuinely concerned and empathetic with what

Mark said on lines 3 and 4; and she even offers him advice on how to handle his issues

surrounding "lies and drama." She also politely tries to keep him on track (line 5), and goes out

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of her way to keep the conversation going. This is a big change from her conversations just a few weeks before, when she showed little interest in what her partners had to say. Now she appears to be more in the moment by asking several questions.

When Kelly paired up with Gina again on 11/2, her demeanor was again curious and patient, as she had been with Mark, as she tried to get Gina to have an opinion about the article that they read (see Table 10).

Table 10
*Excerpt of Conversation Between Kelly and Gina About 11/2 Prompt*

Prompt: "What are your thoughts on the 'Video Gaming and the Brain' article?"

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| 1 | Gina: | What do you think about Hook on games. I think that we sould not even have |
| 2 | | video games. |
| 3 | Kelly: | Well I agree to disagree because some video games help with learning . . . Like |
| 4 | | mincraft. What about you. |
| 5 | Gina: | No I can't play video games |
| 6 | Kelly: | I mean't like . . . whats you opsion [opinion]? |
| 7 | Gina: | I don't have one. |
| 8 | Kelly: | Everyone has an opsion. What do you agree with. |
| 9 | Gina: | I don't know |
| 10 | Kelly: | I play at most 30 min on xbox. What about you? |
| 11 | Gina: | Not at all. What games do you play? |
| 12 | Kelly: | I play…Mincraft, Ark, lego world, and trival pursue |
| 13 | Gina: | Wow that is a lot of video games you play right? |
| 14 | Kelly: | Yeah! But do you disagree with anything in the article |
| 15 | Gina: | I think we sould not play at all. |

On line 2, I can see the improvement in Kelly's social skills because she very politely agrees to disagree. This is an example of civil discourse. She then goes on to ask her partner what she thinks. Her partner, Gina, is having difficulty stating her opinion and finally says that she does not have one. Kelly, on line 8, encourages her by saying, "Everyone has an opinion, what do you agree with?" When Gina still does not know, Kelly helps her by giving her examples. She does not let Gina off the hook. She keeps asking her for an opinion, and I get the

feeling that she really wants to know how Gina feels about the article. Finally, on line 15, Gina

states her opinion. This is a real success story with lots of examples of Kelly showing civil

discourse, patience, kindness, and encouragement with her partner. Another observation is that

Kelly's conversations have become longer, mostly because she is now asking a lot more

questions and making real attempts to keep the conversation going.

Another positive outcome of the written conversations between students was that they

helped students get to know each other better. Every once in a while, I started allowing them to

have free choice of topics during written conversations. That means I would let them write with

their partner on whatever subject they wanted rather than giving them a set topic to write about.

Over time, when students completed work and had free time, they would ask me if they could do

written conversations with a partner. During one of these times, I heard Tommy and Wayne

giggling as they passed the notebook back and forth. They seemed to have struck up quite a

friendship after bonding over video games during their very first written conversation (on 10/1).

I asked them what was so funny, and Wayne responded, "We just make each other laugh with

what we write; we have fun doing written conversations." In the next section, I focus on the

teacher being an active participant with students during the written-conversation activity.

**Written Conversations: Role in Building Teacher-to-Student Relationships**

Nel Noddings (1988) talked about reciprocal relationships between teachers and students

being the basis for all learning. When I could be an active participant in the written-conversation

activity with a student as my partner, the student's desire to form a relationship with me was

evident, as was my desire to connect and form a relationship with them.

I learned through written conversations that viewing through my academic lens

influenced my interactions with students. In Table 11 and Table 12, I give examples to explore

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the relationship-building process between myself and students via written conversations. A

conversation between Mark and myself is the first example (Table 11).

My perception of students and relationships grew from written conversations. It was only

after analyzing the conversation that I had with Mark that I saw how difficult it was for me to

remove my academic lens. In the moment, I believed that my comments to Mark during our

Table 11
*Excerpts of Conversation Between Mark and Teacher About 12/6 Prompt*

Prompt: "What have you enjoyed learning this year?"

| 1 | Mark: | I have been intrestid in writing stories and now I might be a good writer |
| 2 | | so when I get older I will be good at my grades in college, high school, middle, |
| 3 | | elementary. But the real think I worrie about is math. I struggle with it so |
| 4 | | much. |
| 5 | Teacher: | Mark, I am so proud of how far you have come with schoolwork. |
| 6 | | When I first met you, you didn't want to try but now you do and I can tell you |
| 7 | | want to do well. Don't worry too much about math, some kids really have a |
| 8 | | hard time and then all of a sudden they get it. I know because I was one of |
| 9 | | them. I finally let my mom help me and she taught me a different way and I got |
| 10 | | it. Keep working, don't give up! |
| 11 | Mark: | I know will keep tring so you will be proud |
| 12 | Teacher: | You are a good boy, always remember that. Your heart is who you |
| 13 | | are! |
| 14 | Mark: | I hope I will see you next year. |

written conversation were coming across as genuine and caring. But in examining them again, I

could see my old thought patterns showing up.

For example, my initial evaluation of Mark's behavioral engagement during math

had been that he was very disconnected and did not put forth much effort. I found myself

having thoughts such as "If he would just try and stop goofing off." These thoughts were

obviously still overshadowing my interaction with him in the written conversations

because, on line 3 of our transcribed written conversation, Mark makes reference to how

scared he is during math time. My ability to see his true fear of failure with this subject

fell short because, even though on line 5 I tell him how proud I am of him, I continue on line 6 saying, "When I first met you, you didn't want to try but now you do and I can tell you want to do well." This response clearly shows that my interaction with Mark was clouded with misconceptions about him and math. It was eye-opening for me to realize how difficult it was for me as a teacher to give up this narrow academic viewpoint. I learned from analyzing, not only this conversation with Mark, but also my other interactions with students, that I was not as genuine in my interactions with them as I wanted to believe I was. This new insight led me to stop and think about how I was going to respond to students so that I was truly looking through a relationship lens, and that my words on the page matched what I was thinking.

Of course, the academic lens for a teacher is important, but not at the expense of building a relationship. This pivotal moment influenced the way I began to view my role with the students when I was their partner during a written conversation. I made a conscience choice when communicating with them to first be an adult having a conversation with a child before I became a teacher evaluating a student's work. I believed that in doing this, my interactions would naturally come across as genuine and caring. I was glad to see that even though my own misconceptions showed up in the written conversation with Mark, I was still able to repair the damage; this was evident because on lines 11 and 14, Mark was making a connection to me.

The next student I had a conversation with was Tommy, for whom school came easily. However, something was holding him back from connecting with me. It seemed almost like a trust issue because he really struggled with taking feedback from me, especially in regard to math. After what I realized about myself when I analyzed my

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conversation with Mark, I was observant as I analyzed my conversation with Tommy, for

any signs of misconceptions or judgements in my comments (see Table 12).

Table 12
*Excerpts of Conversation between Tommy and Teacher About 11/2 Prompt*

Prompt: "What are your thoughts about the article on video gaming and the brain?"

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| 1 | Tommy: | I think it should be Limited for tim [time]. What do you think? |
| 2 | Teacher: | I believe everything we do should be in moderation (eating, |
| 3 | | exercising sports, hobbies, work). When you start overdoing one area of your |
| 4 | | life, things start changing. What would you do if video games went away? |
| 5 | Tommy: | I would go play sports and eat. But Do you every think about video |
| 6 | | games? |
| 7 | Teacher: | I have never really played video games other than a few quick times |
| 8 | | with one of my boys. They were not around when I was a kid. I don't like how |
| 9 | | too many kids over use them and then they don't or won't do anything else. I |
| 10 | | feel sad that kids today don't play many board games. Do you have a favorite |
| 11 | | board game? |
| 12 | Tommy: | I like Candy Land. What is your Favoret board game? |
| 13 | Teacher: | The game Sorry! |
| 14 | Tommy: | we shold play it some time!! |

I knew from reading some of Tommy's previous written conversations with other

students that he loved video games. I chose the article on video games and the brain because I

knew he and several other students would connect with it. Tommy and I ended up being partners

for this prompt by chance. He was not thrilled with the idea. He was one of the students who had

written about his feeling regarding the changes in his classroom and teacher; he had stated that

he did not like the change in our new 4C classroom, and he really missed his other teacher.

However, on line 5 of our 11/2 written conversation, Tommy appears intrigued with my thinking

about video games when he asks, "But do you ever think about video games?" I believe that his

inquiries and curiosity with my opinion of video games would have continued had I not changed

the course of the conversation by asking him (on lines 10 and 11) if he ever played board games.

On line 12, I feel he was trying to make a connection to me when he said in regard to my

response that *Sorry!* was my favorite board game, "we shold play it some time!!" In my field notes, I made the comment that, at the next indoor recess or free time, I needed to make sure to bring out the game *Sorry!* and play it with him. It was not too long after that the weather required us to have indoor recess, and I brought out *Sorry!* for us to play. There was a noted positive change in the way he started interacting with me. Now, when I needed to work with him in math, either one-on-one or in a small group, he would come willingly and without pushback. It felt as though I had been accepted by him and he had decided I could be trusted. I believe this was not just the simple act of actually playing a game together, but also the fact that I remembered what he had said and had acted on it. It was a pivotal moment for both of us in our relationship.

Valenzuela (1990) wrote in her book *Subtractive Schooling* about her interviews with high-school students and their teachers that

> teachers expected students to demonstrate caring about schooling with an abstract or aesthetic commitment to ideas or practices that purportedly lead to achievement. The teachers' were displeased with students' self-representations and that led to the adults' perspective in the way youth dress, talk and generally show themselves "proves" that they do not care about school. Students, on the other hand, argued that they should be assessed, valued, and engaged as whole people, not as automatons in baggy pants. They preferred a model of schooling that was promised on respectful, caring relations. (Valenzuela, 1990, p. 61)

Originally, I believed that the written conversations between myself and students would be the easiest to code for relational-engagement elements. However, after continued examination, I realized they were actually the most difficult to code. I say this because my academic lens was so embedded that, even when I thought I was evaluating with a relational lens and not judging or making assumptions on students' self-representations or off-task behaviors, I was in fact still doing so. It took many analyses before I was able to really hear what the students' words were saying. Through written conversations, I was able to truly hear how they felt about issues. Most

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importantly, I took the opportunity and used that knowledge to help build relationships with the students, which in turn supported their engagement in learning.

In both of these conversations with Mark and Tommy, the time spent one-on-one between student and teacher and the information gathered by both participants in each case during the conversations supported the building of relationships. To review, this study's definition of student engagement includes the three EBC constructs, with relationships at the center of those constructs. Student engagement in this study was not measured by student test scores. Instead, the EBC of student engagement was measured through the teacher/researcher narrative describing written conversations as an activity that supports relationship building.

As the classroom teacher, when I used the information collected from the written conversations to support building relationships, the EBC of student engagement happened. For example, the written conversation with Mark allowed me further insight into the extent of his fear of math and the avoidance behavior he was exhibiting during math time. The result of this insight was the realization that the skill I first needed to focus on with him was not math; instead, it was helping him have the confidence to advocate for himself. According to Gordon Well, in traditional classrooms, "Schools have a strong tendency to cultivate conforming, risk-avoiding identities" (Wells, 2000, p. 57). For Mark, learning how to recognize his feelings of being overwhelmed and ask for help during math was the more important skill for him to learn, and also the first step in setting the stage for him to learn. It was obvious to me that he viewed asking for help as a risk; so he avoided it and instead chose to be off-task or disruptive.

When looking at the factors that make up the Venn Diagram of Engagement (Figure 2), it is easy to recognize the ones that were causing Mark's inability to emotionally, behaviorally, and cognitively engage in math. First was his inability to link feelings to a range of situations,

emotional awareness, and regulation (E–emotional engagement). Next was a lack of self-control skills to deal with feelings when he was involved in stressful situations at school (EB– emotional/behavioral). Third was his inability to understand the effects of his limited emotional awareness on performance and his understanding of academic content (EC–emotional/cognitive). Last was Mark's inability to persevere in carrying out academic tasks and strategies for learning (C–cognitive). His ability to engage in the math content would never happen if the above-mentioned engagement factors were not addressed.

Therefore, I began to regularly schedule times that Mark and I could have lunch together at school in an area separate from the classroom, so that it did not feel like a student-to-teacher interaction but more like an adult-to-child interaction. I chose the room that I used in the afternoons when my 4C class returned to their homerooms. This room had a rocking chair and a bouncy chair, a few tables to sit at, and my bookcases. The room felt comfortable and Mark would not experience it as a formal classroom, even though we would be working on math skills after we had eaten our lunch together. I already knew from his written conversation with me that he really wanted me to be proud of him (line 11); so I used this budding relationship between us as the springboard to work with him on his confidence in math.

During our time together, I immersed Mark into being an active participant in his learning. I would use good teaching strategies with him (scaffolding, breaking problems down, manipulatives, etc.) to help him with the math concepts we were working on. Being comfortable using these strategies led him to use them in class and in turn allowed him to participate at a level he had not experienced before. Now, his participation in class included him asking clarifying or inquiry questions, not only of me but also of his peers. This interaction eventually led to him believing that he was a student who could be an active participant during math and, in

turn, be engaged in the learning. All of this happened because of what I had learned from Mark in our written conversations.

As I discussed previously in Chapter 2, Reid and Solomonides's model of a student's sense of transformation suggests that a student's sense of being is transformed through learning, and that these pieces are paramount to engagement (Reid & Solomonides, 2007). In this model, the authors identified an ontological perspective rather than an epistemological perspective. This was different from other paradigms that put the focus on the learner and his effort. This model puts the emphasis on affective relationships within the student's learning process, and the natural way the student may be relating to his learning. Math may never be an easy subject for Mark; but the difference is that, at least for the present, he was no longer afraid of it. The written-conversation activity was the catalyst that moved me to quickly see where the breakdown was with him; and it was clear that it was a breakdown in his inability to take a risk, and to ask for and accept help. Once he made that hurdle and began to slowly see himself as a math student, we could address the gaps in his math skills.

In terms of using the information collected from the written conversations to support relationship building with Tommy, all it took was for me remembering to bring out the game of *Sorry!* during indoor recess (which happened a few weeks after our written conversation) and asking him to play. In our 11/4 written conversation, Tommy had mentioned that we should play *Sorry!* sometime (line 14). The fact that I remembered and actually sat down and played the game with him and two other students changed our interactions for the better. It was not about his academic skills because he was not a struggling student. It was about the fact that he was still sad over the loss of his previous teacher, and that was preventing him from forming a relationship with me. The simple act of my taking the time to sit down on the floor and play a

board game with him made all the difference. Putting relationships first led to the EBC of student engagement happening for him. Keeping the factors that are listed on the Venn Diagram of Engagement (Figure 2) in mind when analyzing students' written conversations was the point at which I could truthfully say that written conversations supported student engagement.

Other examples in this study of written conversations supporting student engagement is when I encountered the negative comments about the classroom climate while I was reading some of their first written conversations. These comments were probably not comments the students would have come to me personally with, either because they thought they would get in trouble or they were not cognitively aware of how they really felt. However, when I asked them to write to the prompt about how they felt about the changes to their classroom and teacher, and I gave them an unobtrusive way get their thoughts out, they were able to put into words their feelings. I could then take immediate steps to acknowledge and address those concerns.

These changes led to an improved classroom climate. The improvements enriched the relationships between the individual students who were struggling to connect with me and I with them. Also, the written-conversation activity led to me finding out about students' interests and then being able to acknowledge their interests by choosing topics I knew they would enjoy as areas of study in the classroom. Written conversations also provided an opportunity for me to learn about things students enjoyed so that I could chat with them individually about those things.

Another quality of the written conversations was that they gave me regular one-on-one interactions with students because I could be their written-conversation partner. Most importantly, the knowledge I gained through the conversations regarding students' negative feelings toward certain subjects helped me improve instructional delivery and support those

students with the belief that they could do it. Overall, students were able to become more emotionally engaged because they felt safe, cared for, and accepted for who they were. They were able to become behaviorally engaged because I was purposefully connecting our units of study to their personal interests, and they become cognitively engaged because, in learning about each other, they developed more perseverance in subjects they might not have had interest in otherwise. They also were able to draw on the support and encouragement that they received from each other during written conversations.

All in all, written conversations presented the opportunity for me to get to know my students: what they liked, what they did not, and how they felt about situations that were important to them. I then used this knowledge to have face-to-face conversations with them and to support the connections that were being made between them and the subjects they were learning about. I made them a part of their learning; and in turn, they grew more engaged in the learning process, emotionally, behaviorally, and cognitively. All the factors of each of these three constructs were working because the one common factor, relationships, was present.

**Written Conversations: Role in Students Getting to Know Others As People**

Interestingly, the students also expressed through their written conversations how important it was for all of us to know each other as people. The comments the students made in the Postactivity Student Questionnaire supports this claim (see Appendix D). Following are student responses to Question 1 and Question 2 on that questionnaire. There were 18 students in 4C; 15 of them participated in the student questionnaire. Three students did not participate because they were always in their second-language learners' support class during the time we did the written-conversation activity. Of the 15 students who did participate, many gave duplicate or similar responses to these questions. Therefore, I have included those responses only one time. I

typed the responses exactly as the students wrote them and put in brackets correct spelling if it was necessary.

Question 1 asked, "Do you think this activity helped your learning, or not really? Please explain to help me understand your thinking." A number of students did describe how the written-conversations activity helped them learn "because I could express everything I was thinking," "it helped us with reading and writing," "it help me get like better at writing and at asking questions," and "now I give long answers and ask deeper questions." However, multiple students commented about how they believed their learning improved because they were able to hear about other people's thinking and feelings:

- Kinda Because it helped me now [know] how people explain their thinking in different ways.

- Yea cus we where talking about it together

- This help me learn what other peopel's feeling are.

- I do because it experesis [expresses] everyones idea and how thay feel.

- It really helps my learning and my social skills

- Yes it helped me understand how my friends feel

- I thout it was grate Because I got to learn what others thout

- yes, I think talking to a partner helps you learn what they think. And might change your point of viow [view]. It also will help you practice writeing.

In fact, more students commented about how they believed their learning improved because they were able to hear about other people's thinking and feelings than those who commented on how it helped them with academic skills. Exposing students to others' thinking and feelings is the first step in creating a culturally competent classroom. These young students

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implicitly described the value of learning activities such as written communications that support learning through relationship building.

Question 2 also showed students' comments that valued relationship building. Question 2 asked, "What did you like or not like about doing written conversations with a partner? (Please give me as much details as possible.)" With this question, a few students addressed the fact that they could not talk ("we cant talk at all becase I like talking"). The few students who enjoyed the silence of the activity responded with "I love it Because you don't need to talk you can writ" and "I liked that we didn't need to talk but what I also did not like is that sometimes we don't understand what the other person was saying in thir [their] writing if you coluld change this I would probably like, if you cant it's fin or ok." Most of the students, however, responded with comments that related to the positive effects of doing the activity with a partner:

- I like doing written conversations and talking to a partner I especaly like when we get to chose your partner to work with.

- I liked everything exept when you [meaning the teacher] choose are partners. Then you might choose to pair us with someone we don't now [know]. That is also good because you could get to now them.

- I could get my thinking out and tell someone about my thinking and not have to keep it to myself.

- I liked hearing what my partner had to say about the same thing I had to say.

- I liked how when we gave it to her [the teacher] we could see emotion in her eyes and that helps me learn how to right whith emotion.

- I liked that we could express our conversations in Different ways. I also liked the conversations we had because they were topics that are happening.

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- I liked that we had very good conversations and I could learn about other things that arnt in the curiculem

The student responses to Question 2 were positive in regard to the students' feelings about doing the written-conversation activity with a partner. Students stated that they liked the activity because they liked that they could express themselves in different ways; they liked that they could get their thinking out and not have to keep it in; they liked that they could hear what their partner had to say; and they liked that they had good conversations with their partners support this claim. This was an activity that the students had never done before, yet they embraced it and were not intimidated by the fact that their conversations were being held in written form. In fact, it seems many preferred sharing their feelings with partners in this manner. The activity of written conversations allowed students who may have been reluctant to share out loud during class another option.

In summary, the sections in this chapter focusing on building relationships through written conversations show that, for these fourth-grade students in 4C, written conversations played a supportive role in the interconnections between relationship building and student engagement and the learning process in three major ways:

(a) First, the interconnections between relationship building and student engagement and the learning process was evident. The activity of written conversations was the literacy tool that facilitated building relationships through writing between student and student, and between student and teacher.

(b) Second, written conversations helped me, the teacher, relate to the students by giving me a window through which to see them as children in ways that I might not otherwise have seen them.

(c) Last, written conversations have helped me see literacy differently. The activity

enlarged the capacity of students to express themselves differently by creating new

ways for them to communicate through shared writing.

In the next section, I focus on the coded theme of pedagogy and written conversations. I

examine how written conversation, when used as a pedagogical tool, supports or

constrains student engagement and the learning process.

### Written Conversations as a Pedagogical Tool

As important as written conversations became for supporting relationship and building

community in this study, they were also an important pedagogical tool for literacy learning.

Through written conversations, students could practice literacy skills such as the skill of writing,

the conventions of writing, vocabulary, and speaking and listening. The students' written

conversations showed them regularly using the fourth-grade Common Core State Standards for

Writing (CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W4.1, hereafter referred to as W.4.1) for fourth-grade writing

for a purpose and with an opinion (CCSSI, 2010). They also regularly used many of the fourth-

grade Colorado Common Core State Standards for Language (CCSS.ELA–Literacy.L4.1–4.3 and

L4.6). These standards focus on conventions:

- CCSS.ELA–Literacy.L4.1F: Produce complete sentences, recognizing and correcting

  inappropriate fragments and run-ons.

- CCSS.ELA–Literacy.4.2A: Use correct capitalization.

- CCSS.ELA–Literacy.L4.2B: Use commas and quotation marks to mark direct speech

  and quotations from a text.

- CCSS.ELA–Literacy.L4.3D: Spell grade-appropriate words correctly, consulting

  references as needed.

- CCSS.ELA–Literacy.L4.6: Acquire and use accurately grade-appropriate general academic and domain-specific words and phrases including those that signal precise actions, emotions, or states or being. (CCSSI, 2010)

I was pleasantly surprised that the written-conversations activity addressed quite naturally the SL Standards. In fourth grade, these standards are CCSL4.1 through SL4.6. I found evidence of the students regularly meeting three of these SL standards:

- CCSS.ELA–LITERACY.SL4.1: Students are expected to engage effectively in a range of collaborative discussions (one-on-one, in groups, and teacher-led) with diverse partners on grade 4 topics and texts, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly.

- CCSS.ELA–LITERACY.L4.1C: Pose and respond to specific questions to clarify or follow up on information, and make comments that contribute to the discussion and link to the remarks of others.

- CCSS.ELA–LITERACY.SL4.6: Differentiate between contexts that call for formal English (e.g., presenting ideas) and situations where informal discourse is appropriate (e.g., small-group discussion). (CCSSI, 2010)

Table 13 shows examples of four pairs of students' written conversations. The student excerpts are in the first column; evidence of the skills that I could see they were practicing, along with the standard that skill addressed, are in the second and third columns. The prompt that the students were writing to was "Do you think the global community is doing enough to help the refugees?" The unit of study was a social-studies unit that focused on the essential question, "How does the movement of people affect cultures and the land?"

Table 13

*Written Conversations: Excerpts, Skills, and Standards*

| Excerpts | Skill | Standard |
|---|---|---|
| Prompt: "Do you think the global community is doing enough to help the refugees?" | | |
| Pair #1 | | |
| Kelly: So your saying the refugees are providing stuff for themselves? U.N. are a world wide orginazation that is trying to protect the refugees by getting them to safty. | Writing for a purpose and with an opinion | W4.1 |
| | Produce complete sentences | L4.1F |
| | Use correct capitalization | L4.2A |
| | Use commas in a series | L4.2B |
| | Choose punctuation for effect | SL4.3B |
| Tommy: NO! I am trying to say that the U.N.I.C.E.F, U.R.C. and Sesame Street is tring to make them happy. | Engage effectively in a range of collaborative discussions | SL4.1 |
| | Pose and respond to specific questions to clarify or follow up on information and make comments that contribute to the discussion and link to the remarks of others | SL 4.1C |
| | Express and explain their own ideas and understanding in light of the discussion | SL4.1D |
| | Differentiate between contexts that call for formal English and situations where informal discourse is appropriate | SL4.6 |
| Pair #2 | | |
| Holly: I think the globalcommunity is providing enough for the refuges because the refugy kids are getting school and thay are learning and thare all so getting selter and food. What do you think about the refugy kids? | Writing for a purpose and with an opinion | W4.1 |
| | Use correct capitalization | L4.2A |
| | Choose punctuation for effect | L4.3B |
| | Engage effectively in a range of collaborative discussions | SL4.1 |
| | Pose and respond to specific questions to clarify or follow up on information and make comments that contribute to the discussion and link to the remarks of others | SL4.1 |
| Wayne: I think that they are tefifide [terrified] because they have been taken from | Express and explain their own ideas and understanding in light of the discussion | SL4.1D |

| Excerpts | Skill | Standard |
|---|---|---|
| there homes and have seen violence. Do you think the refugee kids are terrified? | Differentiate between contexts that call for formal English and situations where informal discourse is appropriate | SL4.6 |
| Holly: YES I DO I Bet They cry there selfs to Bed every night. What would you do for the refugy kids | | |
| Wayne: I would tell them about America and that they should come to America. Would you tell them that? | | |
| Holly: Ya But How would they understand you. I would have to think about that. Would you want to walk as far as they did? | | |
| Wayne: no way!! | | |
| Pair #3 | | |
| Katie: I feel sorry for the refugees that leave their home they might have been happy. How would you feel if people tried attacking this country? | Writing for a purpose and with an opinion | W4.1 |
| | Produce complete sentences | L4.1F |
| | Use correct capitalization | L4.2A |
| | Spell grade-appropriate words | L4.3D |
| Joe: I would feel upset that I have to go through that because its hard to live like that. | Engage effectively in a range of collaborative discussions | SL4.1 |
| | Pose and respond to specific questions to clarify or follow up on information and make comments that contribute to the discussion and link to the remarks of others | SL4.1C |
| Katie: I agree. But I think its nice that some countries are letting them stay in their | Express and explain their own ideas and understanding in light of the discussion | SL4.1D |

| Excerpts | Skill | Standard |
|---|---|---|
| country and providing them with shelter.<br><br>Joe: Are you glad you have a sigseful [successful] life unlike the refugees? They are not feeling good probably. Its nice that they can now have a sigseful life.<br><br>Katie: What if the refugees had a speshal thing and left it behind. Would you be sad if you had to leave something really speshal?<br><br>Joe: I would care and not care because if I bring it, Im taking a risk for my life. Do you want youre speshel thing instead of your life? | Differentiate between contexts that call for formal English and situations where informal discourse is appropriate | SL4.6 |
| Pair #4 | | |
| Katie: I feel sorry for the refugees that leave their home they might have been happy. How would you feel if people tried attacking this country? | Writing for a purpose and with an opinion | W4.1 |
| | Produce complete sentences | L4.1F |
| | Use correct capitalization | L4.2A |
| | Spell grade-appropriate words | L4.3D |
| Joe: I would feel upset that I have to go through that because its hard to live like that.<br><br>Katie: I agree. But I think its nice that some countries are letting them stay in their | Engage effectively in a range of collaborative discussions | SL4.1 |
| | Pose and respond to specific questions to clarify or follow up on information and make comments that contribute to the discussion and link to the remarks of others | SL4.1C |
| | Express and explain their own ideas and understanding in light of the discussion | SL4.1D |

| Excerpts | Skill | Standard |
|---|---|---|
| country and providing them with shelter.<br><br>Joe: Are you glad you have a sigseful [successful] life unlike the refugees? They are not feeling good probably. Its nice that they can now have a sigseful life. | Differentiate between contexts that call for formal English and situations where informal discourse is appropriate | |
| Katie: What if the refugees had a speshal thing and left it behind. Would you be sad if you had to leave something really speshal?<br><br>Joe: I would care and not care because if I bring it, Im taking a risk for my life. Do you want youre speshel thing instead of your life? | | SL4.6 |

In the afternoon when my students would return to their homerooms, they studied this essential question using material that focused on the early people in Colorado history. When the students were with me in the morning, the material I chose to use to examine the same question focused on the plight of refugees from around the world. In the final assessment of this unit, I asked the students to write an essay that answered the essential question and to use examples from the materials that we had studied as supporting evidence. When the unit of study ended in early November, I wanted the students to have a written conversation using the global-community prompt so that they could share and organize their thoughts one last time before the final assessment. The stories (both historical fiction and nonfiction) that we read during this unit were told mostly through the eyes of children refugees.

Written conversations are a valuable tool to evaluate academic skills. Through written conversations, I could assess certain standards that we had been working on in class and then use that information to help drive instruction.

The writing standard W4.1 and the Speaking & Listening standards relate to expressive skills regarding expressing and responding to opinions through discussion with others. All of the students used standard W4.1, writing for a purpose and with an opinion. However, it is evident in each of the four pairs of conversations that the students were also meeting several of the Speaking & Listening standards. of SL4.1 (building on each other's ideas and clearly stating their own). One example of this is the conversation between Natalie and Jacob. Natalie asks, "Would you be traumatized if your school got blown up by a bomb?" Jacob responds with, "Yes, I would then we could not learn and we would be in danger." Jacob answers Natalie's question, but builds on it by connecting it to his world. An example of standard SL4.1C (posing and responding to specific questions that contribute to the conversation) is when Katie asks, "What if the refugees had a speshal thing and left it behind. Would you be sad if you had to leave something really speshal?" Joe responds with, "I would care and not care because if I bring it, Im taking a risk for my life. Do you want youre speshel thing instead of your life?" Not only does Joe respond to Katie's questions, but he also follows up with another question that connects to Katie in a personal way. The last standard, SL4.6 (using informal discourse appropriately) was shown regularly. Student examples of this are when Holly uses the informal response of "Ya"; when Wayne used two exclamation marks in his response, "no way!!"; and when Tommy capitalized the letters in his response and used exclamation marks, "NO!!" It was interesting to see how the students used informal discourse with each other without thinking, yet they did not use this type of friendly discourse when they turned in writing assignments to me. They clearly

understood the difference between the type of talk they used with each other, and that it was not the type of talk they were to use when the teacher was their audience.

As a classroom teacher, the only time I would evaluate their Speaking & Listening standards were during a student presentation. The problem with this approach is that I was evaluating the speaker on the speaking part of the standards and the student audience only on the listening part of the standard. Now, looking back, I see this was a surface level way to evaluate these standards. Also, in doing it that way, I was limited in the standards I could use. There are 10 Speaking & Listening standards, and only one of them, SL4.4 (report on a topic or text, tell a story in an organized way; speak clearly at an understandable pace) is appropriate for a presentation. As far as the student listeners were concerned, I could evaluate only those who participated. Even if every student was required to ask at least one question of one presenter, that was not a lot of evidence to conclude that a standard has been met. The written-conversation activity provided many more authentic examples of students using the Speaking & Listening standards and showed that students were able to construct knowledge together, in contrast to what they could demonstrate via individual essays. Now, out of the 10 Speaking & Listening standards, written conversations allowed me to confidently evaluate students on eight of them. Also, I could see their use of these standards much more often and be assured of having the evidence to support my assessment of whether the standard had been met.

**Checklist for Dialogic Talk**

A tool that I used to help me evaluate students' written conversations for academic skills was the Checklist for Dialogic Talk (Callander, 2015, p. 20). I revised the original checklist, adding to it so it would better fit the written-conversation activity (see Table 14). The checklist was quick and easy to use, and the skills on the checklist are very similar to the Speaking &

Listening  standards presented earlier (CCSS.ELA–LITERARY.SL4.1 through CCSS.ELA–

LITERARY.SL4.3C), but in more user-friendly language. The additions I made to the checklist

in Table 14 are in italics.

Table 14
*Revised Checklist for Dialogic Talk*

1. **Uses exploratory phrases** (I think, because, if, why) when sharing and discussing ideas with others.

2. **Provides reasoning** for ideas and responses *or seeks clarification.*

3. **Listens attentively** using whole-body listening—responds to partners' questions or comments appropriately, uses capitalization of words or punctuation for effect and exaggeration.

4. **Listens carefully** to and accepts others' opinions and ideas (and negotiates viewpoints when necessary) —*using words of agreement or disagreement, civil discourse.*

5. **Uses appropriate conversational skills** with conversational partner (i.e., turn taking) — gives partner the time they need to respond, asks for partner's opinion, asks partner what they think.

6. **Engages in uptake** during discussions (building on others' ideas) —uses phrases like: so what you are saying is. . . , I like that idea and what about. . . , Have you ever thought about. . .

7. **Uses various types of talk for different audiences and purposes**—expression—there is a noted difference in the way they are writing with a partner they know versus a partner they do not or when their partner is an adult (i.e., high use of abbreviations: lol, cuz, ya, yeah, u, kinda verses more formal conversation.

8. Describes their discussions and sets personal and group **goals for talk**—explains their thinking and/or feelings, offers feedback, tries to follow the protocol of ending their responses with a question for their partner.

9. **Asks higher-level thinking questions**—will ask questions to help with understanding, analysis, or evaluation: how, what, why, can you explain.

Note: Adapted with permission from Callander, D.(2013), *Dialogic approaches to teaching and learning in the primary grades;* Figure 3, Checklist for Dialogic Talk, p. 20).

I have divided the next portion into two subsections that include a total of eight student

examples in which the dialogic checklist has been applied to all students' written conversations.

Tables 15, 16, 17, and 18, respectively, in the first subsection contain four student-pair excerpts.

The students were having written conversations on four different opinion prompts. The students were being asked for their input on something personal or something they read: "What is something that made you smile this weekend?" "What are your thoughts on the article 'Video Gaming and the Brain'?" "What are your thoughts on the article on the Hopi high school's cross-country track team?," and the prompt, "How is life like a race?" I believe that these prompts were broad and easier for the students to connect to and have an opinion on.

**Checklist for Dialogic Talk** *Application: Opinion Prompts*

      I have shared all of the student excerpts that follow earlier in this chapter. I presented the first four in the "Written Conversations: Role in Building Relationships" section, and the last four in the "Written Conversations as a Pedagogical Tool" section. For the study, I then used these student excerpts again and coded the conversations a second time using the revised *Checklist for Dialogic Talk*. Beginning with Table 15, all the student excerpts are formatted into two-column tables. The first column contains the student responses, and the underlined parts show the elements from the checklist. The second column lists the element number from the checklist that supports the response and includes the keywords from the checklist. A summary follows each pair of student conversations, with an overall summary at the end of both subsections.

Table 15
*Checklist for Dialogic Talk Application: Wayne and Tommy*

| Student Responses | Elements From the Dialogic Checklist |
| --- | --- |
| Wayne:  Something that made me smile this weekend was villager news. | |
| Tommy:  I thougt you said villigers nuks [nukes]. | 2—seeks clarification |
| Wayne:  What does nuks mean | 2—seeks clarification |

| Student Responses | Elements From the Dialogic Checklist |
|---|---|
| Tommy:  <u>I ment NUEKS!!!</u> | 3—listens attentively; punc. and cap. for effect |
| Wayne:  villagers are not <u>nueks!!!</u> | 3—listens attentively; punc. for effect |
| Tommy:  <u>did I spell it right!!!!!!</u> | 3—listens attentively; punc. for effect<br>2—seeks clarification |
| Wayne: no! [the "no!" is circled] | 3—listens attentively; responds and punc. for effect |
| Tommy:  <u>WOW!!!!!!!!!! Oh my gosh! Do you get me!?</u> | 3—listens attentively; cap. and punc. for effect |
| Wayne:  <u>of course</u> | 2—seeks clarification |
| Tommy: <u>good!!!</u> Something that I did that made me smile was playing madden Mike hike thru to randy moss and when it went thru the Defender he cout [caught] the ball I fell off the couch [he drew a smiley face on the page] | 3—listens attentively; responds<br><br>3—listens attentively; punc. for effect |
| Wayne: <u>I thought</u> that wasn't a game | |
| Tommy: <u>no I said</u> Madden not madden<br><br>Mike Mike is a football player | 2—seeks clarification<br>3—listens attentively; responds |
| Wayne: <u>ooooohhhhh</u> <u>what post [position]</u> <u>oooooooh means I miss understood you</u> | 3—listens attentively; exaggeration<br>8—goals for talk<br>2—provides reasoning |
| Tommy: <u>you totally</u> understood me | 7—uses various types of talk |
| Wayne: <u>no I didn't!!!!!!!!!</u> | 3—listens attentively; punc. for effect |
| Tommy: <u>shut up</u> Wayn<u>!!</u> please | 7—uses various types of talk<br>3—listens attentively; punc. for effect |
| Wayne: thats not how you spell my <u>name!</u> | 3—listens attentively |
| Tommy: <u>I don't care</u> | 7—uses various types of talk |

Evaluating Tommy and Wayne (Table 15), you can see that element 3 ("listens attentively using whole-body listening—responds to partners' questions or comments appropriately, uses capitalization of words or punctuation for effect and exaggeration") has been coded most often. Of the factors listed for element 3, the students' use of element 3 falls mostly into the capitalization of words or punctuation for effect and exaggeration. Their conversation is full of exclamation marks and words circled for effect. They are actively involved in this written conversation activity, and that is evident in their choice of punctuation, capitalization of words, and use of exaggerated words ("ooooooohhhhh"). With this pair, the coding of element 3 usually led to the coding of element 2 at the same time ("provides reasoning for ideas and responses— seeks clarification"). The same was true for element 7 ("uses various types of talk for different audiences and purposes") being coded often with element 3. You can tell that they are comfortable with each other by their casual word usage which is element 7 ("Oh my gosh," "totally," "shut up," "I don't care"). The blending of these three elements (2, 3, and 7) created a written conversation that appears as friendly banter; yet the boys clearly understand word choice, punctuation for effect, expression and voice, and how to set a tone in their writing.

Joe and Anthony are the next pair of students (see Table 16). In examining this second pair of students, element 2 ("provides reasoning or seeks clarification") and element 3 ("listens attentively") were used the most and were always coded together. Whenever element 3-listening attentively was coded it was usually because they were responding to each other's question appropriately. This was most often followed by element 2—giving reasoning for their response. The use of these two elements together makes their conversation easy to follow and shows that they have no difficulty explaining their thinking. Their written conversation sounds comfortable as they move through a number of topics with ease (chores, excitement over a 3-day weekend,

and their experiences with video games). With the use of these two elements and the fact that they did not use the factor of element 3—"uses punctuation for effect," a mellow, polite conversational tone is created. It was nice to see that these two boys can carry on a very clear written conversation with ease.

Table 16
*Checklist for Dialogic Talk Application: Joe and Anthony*

| Student Responses | Elements From the Dialogic Checklist |
|---|---|
| Joe: tell about something that made you smile this weekend. In my weekend, much dident happen, just chourse (chores) and stuf like that. | |
| Anthony: [he puts a big circle around each of his responses and only puts a few words on each line, he does not write margin to margin on the paper.] <u>What do u mean chours and stuff like that?</u> | 2—Seeks clarification |
| Joe: basicly clening and by choures I meen mopping, vacuuming, picking up stiks and abunche [a bunch] of things. <u>By the way do you ever do chours like cleaning at your house</u> | 3—listens attentively; responds<br>2—provides reasoning<br>8—goals for talk |
| Anthony: <u>Oh u said chores</u> but yeah I have to but <u>not that oftin becus</u> I have a lot of siBlings But thei never around so not a lot no but yeah I have to do chores. <u>What els did u do</u> and u exided [excited] for this weeks 3 day weekend <u>[drew a happy face] yeah!</u> | 3—listens attentively; responds<br>2—provides reasoning<br><br>8—goals for talk<br>5—uses appropriate conversational skills<br>3—listens attentively; punc. for effect |
| Joe: <u>I did not know that we had a 3 day wekkend.</u> I might play some vidogames so this mighte be a good time to play videogame. | 3—listens attentively; responds |
| Anthony: <u>Yeah</u> remember the anonsment (announcement) this freday [Friday] that we don't have school | 3—listens attentively; responds |
| Joe: I know in p.e (he drew a circle around this response) | 3—listens attentively; responds |
| Anthony: <u>Did you get any victory batleRoers this weeken</u> i got like 10. | |

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| Student Responses | Elements From the Dialogic Checklist |
|---|---|
| Joe: <u>so this is fortnight</u>. if you got to 10 batlereports in fortnight <u>you must be Realy good. I'm not a big fan of fortnight</u> and eventhou I have never plade [played] I have seen vidios of it and I dount [don't] realy like it. | 5—uses appropriate conversational skills<br><br><br><br><br>2—seeks clarification<br>3—listens attentively; responds |
| Anthony: <u>thanks</u> But they <u>onley got that many was B-cau</u> I was playing 50v50 It's this mode where U have a team of 50 agents. <u>Whate do u Like to play?</u> | |
| Joe: <u>when I play</u> viddo games I usly [usually] play oblivion or skirom. They are basicly anchent [ancient] or back then midevel times, here are the simbols [he drew the symbol for Skifrome and then a symbol for oblivion and he again put a big circle around this response] | 3—listens attentively; responds<br>2—provides reasoning<br><br><br>8—uses goals for talk<br><br>3—listens attentively; responds<br>2—provides reasoning |
| Anthony: <u>oh that's cool</u> | |
| Joe: <u>yha</u> I dount play much so <u>its beaus [because]</u> my dad says that its not helthy for people and that sighents [science] has all Redy [already] proven it. | 3—listens attentively; responds<br><br><br>3—listens attentively; responds<br>2—provides reasoning |

The next pair represented in Table 17, are Gina and Kelly. Gina and Kelly used element 8 and element 3 most often, and they were usually clumped together (8—"goals for talk" follows the protocol of ending their responses with a question for their partner; 3—"listens attentively—responds to partner's questions or comments appropriately, uses capitalization of words or punctuation for effect or exaggeration"). It makes sense that these two elements appear together because as the girls follow protocol by ending their comments with a question, their partner would then respond appropriately. However, they do not elaborate with their responses (element 2) as Holly and Wayne did. All of this combined makes their written conversation feel rushed, with a tone that is fast paced.

Table 17

*Checklist for Dialogic Talk Application: Gena and Kelly*

| Student Responses | Elements From the Dialogic Checklist |
|---|---|
| Gina: <u>What do you think</u> about Hook on games. <u>I think that we</u> should not even have video games. | 5—uses appropriate conversational skills<br>1—uses exploratory phrases |
| Kelly: <u>Well I agree to disagree because</u> some video games help with learning…Like mincraft. <u>What about you.</u> | 4—listens carefully; civil discourse<br><br>8—uses goals for talk |
| Gina: <u>No</u> I can't play video games | 3—listens attentively; responds |
| Kelly: I mean't like…<u>whats you opsion [opinion]?</u> | 5—appropriate conversational skills |
| Gina: <u>I don't have one</u>. | 3—listens attentively; responds |
| Kelly: <u>Everyone has an opsion. What do you agree with.</u> | 5—appropriate conversational skills |
| Gina: I don't know | 3—listens attentively; responds |
| Kelly: I play at most 30 min on xbox. <u>What about you?</u> | 8—uses goals for talk |
| Gina: <u>Not at all</u>. <u>What games do you play?</u> | 3—listens attentively; responds<br>8—uses goals for talk |
| Kelly: I play . . . Mincraft, Ark, lego world, and trival pursue | |
| Gina: Wow that is a lot of video <u>games you play</u> <u>right?</u> | 3—listens attentively; responds<br>2—seeks clarification |
| Kelly: <u>Yeah!</u> <u>But do you disagree with anything in the article</u> | 3—listens attentively; responds and punc. for effect<br>5—uses appropriate conversational skills |
| Gina: <u>I think</u> we sould not play at all. | 3—listens attentively; responds<br>1—uses exploratory phrases |

The next pair of students, Mark and Kelly, is represented in Table 18. Mark and Kelly

used elements 2 ("provides reasoning") and 3 ("listens attentively—responds to partners'

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questions or comments appropriately, uses capitalization of words or punctuation for effect")

equally, and they are most often used together. Originally, I believed that this written

Table 18
*Checklist for Dialogic Talk Application: Kelly and Mark*

| Student Responses | Elements from the Dialogic Checklist |
| --- | --- |
| Mark: Life is like a race <u>because</u> the fake in everybodys life. That is like a race to me | 1—uses exploratory phrases |
| Kelly: <u>Oh! So you mean there is like a lot of lies and drama</u> | 2—seeks clarification |
| Mark: <u>Yeah,</u> that is what I mean they are a lot of fake and real but…..<u>I think I will just Die with these lies "and drama". I hate it.!!</u> | 3—listens attentively; responds<br>1—uses exploratory phrases |
| Kelly: <u>WHAT!?!? don't die just ignor it</u>. By the way <u>what was your favorite part of the article?</u> | 3—listens attentively; responds<br>8—uses goals for talk |
| Mark: The Hopi high school is still there | |
| Kelly: <u>I think </u>life is like a race <u>because you</u> are constantly going places and doing things | 1—uses exploratory phrases<br>2—provides reasoning |
| Mark: Yeah, but sometimes I just don't like to run <u>because</u> I am not that kind of person I ride my bike. | 3—listens attentively; responds<br>2—provides reasoning |
| Kelly: <u>Ok…I mean just going places… but ok</u> | 3—listens attentively; responds<br>2—provides reasoning |
| Mark: <u>I don't want to go places</u> I stay home and play my xbox 360 when my mom goes to the store for an hour | 3—listens attentively; responds<br>2—provides reasoning |
| Kelly: <u>Yeah. But I mean to school and stuff</u> | |
| Mark: <u>Yeah!</u> | 3—listens attentively; responds<br>2—seeks clarification |
| | 3—listens attentively; responds and punc. for effect |

conversation between Mark and Kelly was disjointed and hard to follow, especially with some of Mark's responses. However, once I was coding it, I could see that both students used element 3 and then element 2. That shows that they were able to explain their thinking. This skill is important in fourth grade because they need to provide evidence to support their thinking. Overall, I think their conversation has a caring tone, especially in regard to Kelly's responses and advice that she gives her partner, Mark.

In summary regarding the opinion-prompt section, it was interesting to see that, with the four pairs of student partners, all of the elements of the checklist were used except for element 6 ("engages in uptake during discussions, building on other's ideas"). I am not sure why that was, but it told me this is a skill that I as the teacher need to address. Also, element 9 ("asks higher level thinking questions") was used only two times. Again, as the teacher, this information allowed me to quickly see skills that students were not using very often and presented an opportunity for further instruction.

In contrast, written conversations aided me, as the teacher, to see areas of strength in the students' writing. Element 2 ("provides reasoning for ideas and responses or seeks clarification") and element 3 ("listens attentively-responds to partners' questions or comments appropriately, uses capitalization of words or punctuation for exaggeration and effect"), were two areas that students used most frequently. Within element 2, the factor used the most was "provides reasoning," and the factor within element 3 was "responds appropriately." This outcome could be because of the social/emotional lessons that I had incorporated in the morning during our whole-group breakfast time. Many of the activities we did involved learning about, and then practicing, how to listen and respond appropriately. As far as the frequent use of element 2 ("provides reasoning") was concerned, this outcome was exciting to see. During class, when the students are

writing in response to reading, I regularly have to remind students to explain their thinking. I strongly encourage them to use the exploratory phrase, "I think this because. . . ." Written conversations provided an authentic and unobtrusive way for them to use element 2 ("provides reasoning") with ease and for me to observing their use of this skill. It also became apparent which students were not using element 2 very often, and that then became a focus of attention for those students. There were also the students who used element 2 with the factor of seeking clarification. This fact shows that students were trying to construct knowledge together by clarifying what their partners had said so that they were responding appropriately.

**Checklist for Dialogic Talk** *Application: Academic Prompt*

This subsection includes the remaining four student-pair excerpts in Tables 19, 20, 21, and 22. All the students were responding to an academic prompt in the Refugee unit we had been studying: "Do you think the global community is doing enough to help the refugees?" These excerpts were also coded using the Dialogical Checklist.

Tommy and Kelly are the first pair of students in this section (Table 19). These two students did a good job with their use of element 2 ("provides reasoning") throughout their written conversations as they explained their thinking, and with using the element 2 factor of seeking clarification. With Tommy's last response, I can feel his frustration when he was trying to explain his thinking; that is because of his use of element 3 ("use of punctuation for effect"). Kelly sounds like a teacher when she asks Tommy to clarify (element 2) "who is they." As I read their conversations, there was a feeling of confidence in their responses to each other that tells me they felt comfortable with their knowledge regarding the refugee-unit content.

The next pair, Holly and Wayne, shown in Table 20, used similar checklist elements, but the overall feeling of their conversation is different. Holly and Wayne also used element 2

Table 19

*Checklist for Dialogic Talk Application: Kelly and Tommy*

| Student Responses | Elements From the Dialogic Checklist |
|---|---|
| Tommy—<u>I think</u> they are providing enough for the refugee <u>because</u> they give them food water school I mean those three thing are my favorite things | 1—uses exploratory phrases<br>2—provides reasoning |
| Kelly—<u>First who is they?</u> Second <u>I think</u> so <u>because</u> I.R.C. teaches refugee kids and UNICEF opens a lot of learning senters. | 2—seeks clarification<br>1—uses exploratory phrases<br>2—provides reasoning |
| Tommy—<u>Yeah</u> that's what I just said they are refugees | 3—listens carefully; responds |
| Kelly—<u>So your saying</u> the refugees are providing stuff <u>for themselves?</u> U.N. are a world wide orginazation <u>that is trying to</u> protect the refugees by getting them to safty. | 6—engages in uptake<br>2—seeks clarification<br>2—provides reasoning |
| Tommy—<u>NO!</u> <u>I am trying to say</u> that the U.N.I.C.E, U.R.C. and Sesame Street is tring to make them happy. | 3—listens attentively; responds; and punc. for effect<br>2—provides reasoning |

Table 20

*Checklist for Dialogic Talk Application: Holly and Wayne*

| Student Responses | Elements From the Dialogic Checklist |
|---|---|
| Holly—<u>I think</u> the global community is providing enough for the refuges <u>because</u> the refugy kids are getting school and thay are learning and thare all so getting selter and food. <u>What do you think</u> about the refugy kids? | 1—uses exploratory phrases<br>2—provides reasoning<br><br><br><br>8—uses goals for talk |
| Wayne—<u>I think that</u> they are terrified <u>because</u> they have been taken from there homes and have seen violence. <u>Do you think</u> the refugee kids are terrified? | 1—uses exploratory phrases<br>2—provides reasoning<br>8—uses goals for talk |
| Holly—<u>YES I DO</u> I Bet They cry there selfs to Bed every night. <u>What would you do</u> for the refugy kids | 3—listens attentively; responds; and capitalization for effect<br>8 —uses goals for talk |
| Wayne—I would tell them about America and | 3—listens attentively; responds |

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| Student Responses | Elements From the Dialogic Checklist |
|---|---|
| that they should come to America. <u>Would you tell them that?</u> | 8—uses goals for talk |
| Holly—<u>Ya But How would they understand you.</u> I would have to think about that. <u>Would you want</u> to walk as far as they did? | 2—seeks clarification<br><br>8—goals for talk |
| Wayne—<u>no way!!</u> | 3—listens attentively; responds; and punc. for effect |

frequently ("provides reasoning") to support their thinking. The students' word choice shows that

they are choosing words for effect and emotion (*terrified, violence, cry* [themselves] *to sleep*),

and also their use of element 3— "listens attentively; (uses capitalization of words or punctuation

for effect)". Their regular use of element 8 ("follows protocol of trying to end their response with

a question for their partner") keeps their conversation moving. Overall, their conversational tone

shows concern and empathy for the refugees.

The next two partners in this section are Katie and Joe, shown in Table 21. Katie and Joe

are also using element 2 ("provides reasoning") most often. The use of this element along with

element 4 ("listens carefully") and element 3 ("listens attentively") gives the conversation a clear

focus and makes it easier to read and follow their thinking. Their tone is also one of concern and

empathy for the refugees' plight, which is noticeable by their word choice.

The next pair are Jacob and Natalie, reflected in Table 22. At the time of this written

conversations (11/11), the students had been doing written conversations regularly since 10/1;

subsequently, following protocol was much easier for them than in the beginning. Natalie and

Jacob used element 8 ("uses goals for talk-follows protocol of ending response with a question

for their partner to answer") regularly. The pair also used element 3 ("listens attentively;

responds") along with element 2 ("provides reasoning") frequently. In doing so, their

conversation is smooth and their thinking visible. The overall tone of their conversation is one of

care and concern for the refugees, and their word choices help to reflect this.

Table 21

*Checklist for Dialogic Talk Application: Katie and Joe*

| Student Responses | Elements From the Dialogic Checklist |
|---|---|
| Katie—<u>I feel sorry</u> for the refugees that leave their home <u>they might have been happy.</u> <u>How would you feel</u> if people tried attacking this country? | 2—provides reasoning<br>8—uses goals for talk |
| Joe—<u>I would feel upset</u> that I have to go through that because its hard to live like that. | 3—listens attentively; responds<br>2—provides reasoning |
| Katie—<u>I agree.</u> <u>But I think</u> its nice that some countries are letting them stay in their country and providing them with shelter. | 4—listens carefully—words of agreement<br>2—provides reasoning |
| Joe—<u>Are you glad</u> you have a sigseful [successful] life unlike the refugees? They are <u>not feeling good probably</u>. Its nice that they can now have a sigseful life. <u>What if</u> the refugees had a speshal thing and left it behind. <u>Would you be</u> sad if you had to leave something really speshal? | 5—appropriate conversational skills<br><br>2—provides reasoning<br>5—appropriate conversational skills<br><br>8—uses goals for talk |
| Katie—<u>I would care and not care</u> because if I bring it, Im taking a risk for my life. <u>Do you want</u> youre speshel thing instead of your life? | 3—listens attentively; responds<br>2—provides reasoning<br>8—uses goals for talk |

Table 22

*Checklist for Dialogic Talk Application: Jacob and Natalie*

| Student Responses | Elements From the Dialogic Checklist |
|---|---|
| Jacob—<u>Yes, I think</u> the global community provides enugh support to the refugee <u>cause</u> when the refugee's walked into Bangladesh they let them go to school there and let them life there. | 1 —uses exploratory phrases<br>2—provides reasoning |
| Natalie—<u>Yeah,</u> <u>I do agree</u> that they provide enough support. <u>Would you let</u> refugees stay in your home? | 3 —listens attentively; responds<br>4—listens carefully—words of agreement<br>8—uses goals for talk |

| Student Responses | Elements From the Dialogic Checklist |
|---|---|
| Jacob—<u>Yes because </u>they need the help and support. <u>If you could would you</u> let the refugees go to your school? | 3—listens attentively; responds<br>2—provides reasoning<br>8—uses goals for talk |
| Natalie—<u>Yes I would</u> <u>so they could</u> learn new stuff and get jobs. <u>Would you be</u> tramatized if your school got blown up by a bomb? | 3—listens attentively; responds<br>2—provides reasoning<br>8—uses goals for talk |
| Jacob—<u>Yes I would</u> <u>then we could</u> not learn and we would be in danger. <u>Would you</u> want the refugees to join our school? | 3—listens attentively; responds<br>2—provides reasoning<br>8 —uses goals for talk |
| Natalie – <u>Yes I would</u> whant them to join our school <u>so they</u> could learn and have fun. <u>What questions would you ask them</u>? | 3—listens attentively; responds<br>2 —provides reasoning<br>8 —goals for talk |
| Jacob—<u>The questen I would ask</u> them is did you leave anything important behind. <u>What would you ask them?</u> | 3 —listens attentively; responds<br><br>8—uses goals for talk |
| Natalie—<u>I would ask them how</u> far did you have to walk. <u>Would you</u> whant to walk as far as they did? | 3—listens attentively; responds<br>8 —uses goals for talk |
| Jacob—<u>No, I feel bad for them</u>. <u>I think it</u> was tramitizing and they did not like it. <u>Would you like it if</u> a war happened in our city and you had to walk that far? | 3 —listens attentively; responds<br>2—provides reasoning<br>8—uses goals for talk |
| Natalie —<u>No I would not</u> I would be tramatized. <u>What do you think</u> would happen if the city the refugees whent to didn't whant them? | 3—listens attentively; responds<br>8—uses goals for talk |
| Jacob—<u>I don't know</u> <u>I feel so bad for</u> the refugees. | 3—listens attentively; responds |

To summarize the academic prompt section, the results from the four pairs of student partners were as interesting as the student pairs in the opinion prompt section. The students in this section used all of the elements of the checklist, except that one student used element 6 ("engages in uptake during discussions, building on other's ideas") once and none of the students

used element 9 ("asks higher level thinking questions"). It is obvious, as it was with the first group of students, that more time needs to be spent working on the skills of "building on other's ideas" (element 6) and "asking higher level thinking questions" (element 9). These are both skills that students need to see modeled for them to recognize a surface-level question from a higher-level thinking question.

Another academic skill that the written conversations supported was for me and the teacher to be able to quickly recognize obstacles to students meeting the standards. When I used the *Checklist for Dialogic Talk* to code students' written conversations in both sections, it allowed for a narrower view of the students' use of the Speaking & Listening standards, and a clearer picture of where a teacher could support students. For example, if a student is not using element 1 of the checklist ("uses exploratory language") [I think, "*because, if, why*"] when sharing or discussing ideas with others, then that student will probably have a harder time meeting standard SL4.1C ("pose and respond to specific questions to clarify or follow up on information and make comments that contribute to the discussion and link to the remarks of others"). Written conversations allowed for me as the teacher to drill down and find the obstacles that might be preventing students from meeting certain standards. As stated earlier, the academic information gleaned from students' written conversations allows a teacher to quickly see skills that the students are not using very often and presents an opportunity for further instruction.

Written conversations showed the students who responded to the prompt "Do you think the global community is doing enough to help refugees?" also using other skills. First, there was an increased use of element 8 ("goals for talk") from the student responses to the opinion prompts through their responses to the academic prompt. The protocol for the written-conversation activity is that students end their comments or responses with a question. The

students in the second section asked their partners twice as many questions as the students in the first section. The refugee unit of study was content that the students had been exposed to many times for several weeks, and I believe that exposure gave the students extra time to become more familiar with the material and to naturally develop inquiry/probing-type questions, such as "How would you feel if. . ."; "What would you do if. . ."; What do you think about. . ."

Next, these same students writing appeared to bring out more emotional writing than the prompts in the opinion section. Most of the students used comments such as, "they must have been terrified"; "would you be traumatized if our school was blown up by a bomb"; and "I feel so bad for the refugees." These comments are somber and matched the students' shock during this unit of study as they learned about children in other parts of the world who lived in constant danger. The tone of the students' conversations in this section showed they were very concerned and empathic regarding the terrible hardships that the refugees live with. These tones were very different than the student pairs in the opinion section, where they were asked to write about something that made them smile, or their opinion on an article that they had read. Those conversations seemed to produce more easy, comfortable, friendly tones. The student pairs in both of these sections were clearly able to develop an opinion, support it with reasoning, use words that enhanced their opinion, and in doing so create a tone that was appropriate for the type of prompt they were writing to. Another skill written conversations supported was that they led to students writing like authors.

**Developing the Skills of Authors**

It was only with continued analysis of the students written conversations that were coded with the *Checklist for Dialogic Talk* (Callander, 2013) that I started to see that the students' dialogue had developed a tone and a voice. The activity of written conversations was an

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opportunity for me as their teacher to view their conversations as though the students were indeed authors. Narrative writing is one genre of writing that students can struggle with. They will lose their voice because they are so focused on the process of writing. When one is teaching narrative writing to students, one of the first steps is to examine the skills authors use when they write stories. A few of the skills that we focus on in fourth grade include: developing dialogue between characters to show the tone the author wants the reader to feel; noticing the word choice the author used to help develop the characters in a story; and having discussion about when the author's deliberate use of punctuation and capitalization for effect and exaggeration helps readers understand situations. The fourth-grade standards that match these skills include: W4.3A ("orient the reader by establishing a situation and introducing a narrator and/or characters; organize an event sequence that unfolds naturally"), W4.3B ("uses dialogue and description to develop experiences and events to show the responses of characters to situations"), L4.3A ("choose words and phrases to convey ideas precisely"), and L4.3B ("choose punctuation for effect"). When students use their own written conversations to examine these skills, especially skills they struggle with such as their voice and their practiced use of punctuation (i.e., quotation marks), they can begin to see how they are naturally using the same skills that authors use. This connection can then serve as a bridge for them to connect what they are already doing in their own writing to other writing activities and assignments that we do in class. Transference of skills can be challenging for students, but written conversations could be a tool to aid in this transference. Clearly written conversation is an activity that can facilitate students in learning communication and listening skills, and in constructing knowledge together; it can offer them evidence of an easy and non-intimidating way to practice writing and other academic skills, and

to see themselves as competent writers. When the students believe they are writers (their sense of transformation), they become writers (their sense of being).

**Changes in Student Writing Over Time**

The last student examples in this section focus on the findings that reflect noted improvement in students' writing skills. Table 23 displays a comparison of seven students using their 10/9 and their 12/20 written conversations. On 10/9, the students wrote to a prompt that asked them how they felt about the changes that the 4C class had experienced. On 12/20, the students were asked to reflect back to their 10/9 writing and have a written conversation on how they felt about the 4C class now. Before their 12/20 writing, I asked them to go back and reread their 10/9 conversation so that they could remember what they had said. I chose these seven student examples because I believe they show some of the most dramatic improvement during this timeframe in their writing. I have typed their writing exactly as it appeared in their notebooks.

Table 23

*Comparison between Student Writing Samples Over Time*

| 10/9 Student Writing Sample | 12/20 Student Writing Sample |
| --- | --- |
| "How do you feel about the changes in 4C?" | "How do you feel about 4C today verses how you felt on 10/9?" |
| April: mad!!it not good chang | April: I like it because it is now like home to me. If you stay for a long time it starts to feel like home. Is it home to you yet? On a skal of 1-10 rate the clas. |
| Anthony: I kinda like mr. conelly  Better | Anthony: Anthony said, "Before I cant belev I said that stuff about I liked Mr. Conelly better. Mr. Connely left and chose 2nd graders and that was hard because we had bonded with him but I like our class now and I like our teacher." Anthony asked, "What are your feelings about our teacher?" |
| Kelly: [this is her response to her partner who | Kelly: I think my feelings have changed. I |

| 10/9 Student Writing Sample | 12/20 Student Writing Sample |
| --- | --- |
| stated she liked the new class] same. . . what else | still miss Mr. Conelly but I also like it here. I enjoy being here each day. The only thing I still don't like is going one lap around the school but I'll be fine. |
| Christian: I feel weird how bout you | Christian: My feelings have changed by a longshot I used to hate running and sticky note tests but now I love them. What else do you like? |
| Cindy: How are you feeling about change | Cindy: Do you still like the chang? I do! Which class this one or the other one? It was hard to lose Mr. Conolly was it hard for you??? |
| Mark: I feel relived | Mark: I think I like our teacher but she gets on our tail for things but she cares. Things like math or reading, writing, stuff like that. She wants us to get our brain strongr |
| Joe: I feell kind of strest alitle bit but I am getting use to it. | Joe: I am making a connection to our refugee unit. My connection is that when we had Mrs. A then Mr. M and now Ms. L it was like our room was our home or country and the 2nd graders are like the solders that kicked us out of our home and made us move except for Jacob he wasn't here yet. |

When I first began the written-conversation activity, I used the information gathered regarding student's writing skills to form small groups in which I could meet with the students and work on areas of concern. As seen in Table 22, all seven student examples have much longer and clearer responses in their 12/20 written conversations than in the examples from October. You can also see in the 12/20 write that the students were using open-ended questions—"What else do you like?"; "What are your feelings now?" In the 10/9 write, they hardly asked any questions. I can also see students using the punctuation on 12/20 that they had been learning about in class. For example, Anthony is using quotation marks, which is a skill we had been

practicing in class. Overall, I see much improvement in their spelling, capitalization, and punctuation. As a pedagogical tool, written conversations offered me as the teacher in this study a variety of benefits. First, they were a way for me to see the progression of skills that had been taught, and to see the areas that needed additional support. Second, written conversations were a dialogical tool for me to get a glimpse into students' thinking. Third, they gave students a platform to share their opinions, thoughts, and feelings about a variety of topics. Fourth, written conversations were a tool that addressed many of the standards, including writing standard W4.10 ("writing routinely over extended time frames and shorter time frames for a range of discipline-specific tasks, purposes and audiences") and, as noted above, several of the Speaking & Listening and Language standards. Fifth, it was a flexible activity that could easily fit into the day, taking not more than twenty to thirty minutes. Finally, for those students for whom the process of writing was difficult, the activity could easily be modified and used with computers so that the partners could type back and forth rather than write with pencil and paper.

**Student Perspectives on the Value of Written Conversations as a Learning Tool**

Another interesting finding that fits into this section of "Written Conversations as a Pedagogical Tool" were the student responses to Questions 3, 5, and 6 on the Post-activity Student Questionnaire. In 4C there were 18 students; 15 of them participated in the student questionnaire. Three students could not participate in this study was because, as noted previously, they were in their second-language learners class during the time that the written conversation activity was occurring. I was disappointed that these students' voices could not be heard; but with the tight schedule with the students in 4C, conducting the written-conversation activity at a different time during the morning was not possible. Of the 15 students who did participate, many gave duplicate or similar responses to the questions asked. Those duplicate

responses are only included one time. I typed the responses exactly as the students wrote them and put in brackets the correct spelling if necessary.

Question 3 asked, "What was it about this activity that helped you stay focused/kept your attention or not?" The students' comments reflected that they regarded the written-conversation activity as one that supported their learning; but even more noteworthy was the number of students who felt that this activity helped them stay focused:

- "That you included topics we wanted to learn and they were topics we could talk about for hours."

- "I would say the articles read were realy intertaining (entertaining)."

- "it ceaps (keeps) my attention and ceaps me from drawing"

- "I think it helps us pay attention because when we do it we be quite."

- "I think it helped me stay focus because with all my thoughts in my brain"

- "I was distracted and with all my thoughts out and expressed to other people I was able to stay calm."

- "My partners had interesting things to say."

- "I think it helps expand our thinking about a topic when you read what the other person has to say."

Question 3 responses included students stating that they could talk about the topics for hours because the topics were entertaining, calming, interesting, and expanded their thinking, and so they were hearing what their partner had to say. All of these are examples of the factors of emotional, behavioral, and cognitive engagement, and they demonstrate the benefit the written-conversation activity offers in supporting student engagement.

Question 5 asked, "What were some of your favorite things to write about and why?" Representative student responses include the following:

- "I like writing about what we did over the weekend. I like reading about what other people did over the weekend."

- "crismas (Christmas) brak (break) Becase I got to here abuot what other kids are going to do"

- "The videos, refges, freetime, what did you do over the weekend and opions."

- "My favorate were writes about the holidays and free write. I liked the holidays because you can learn what you partner does."

- "Reffugee, because you are learning history and you know how oter (other) pepol feel."

- "The chrismas quistons because we were to busy doing other stuff written conversations was a time to express my thoughts."

- "the refueeges because it made feel like we should help them."

- "refugees its interesting"

In question 5 when students were asked what were some of their favorite things to write about, many responded that they enjoyed the topics that allowed them to learn what their peers did outside of school. Several students also stated that they liked our unit on refugees. The students were making meaning of academic content. Written conversations served many instructional purposes, and student engagement with the learning process was enhanced when the relational piece was present.

Question 6 asked, "If you could give me any advice about this written conversations activity to help make it better for other students, what would it be? (This question is really

important!)." The responses to this question fell into two different categories: social and academic. Social responses included the following:

- "I would probably say that we should be able to write whatever we want all the time because it would be funner for everyone."
- "not let the people be with the people there going to talk to."
- "I think it is perfict you don't need to chang it"
- "for them to Be with someone that they wont't talk about something else like Minecrift, fortnite, and other stuff"
- "I would say let the kids pick there partner and if there talking find them a different partner."

Academic responses included these:

- "maybe be like how to ask a question after your thought."
- "Maybe letting them have more time to express themselves."
- "we can have more time in writeing"
- "if we keep on doing this it will help us with writeing"
- "that righting is really good for your eggucation (education) and its smart writing sometimes to other people"
- "after your done whith the written conversations you could share whith the class so they get ideas or you could do like a war on who could write better or whith CUPS."

Question 6 was my favorite question of the questionnaire because I knew it would generate true feedback about the activity. The students' responses were thoughtful and their advice was honest. Some of them wanted more freedom with writing topics and picking their own partners, and others thought it would be best to not have partners whom they knew well

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because then they would not talk out loud during the activity. My overall impression was that the students enjoyed the activity because none of their comments alluded to the activity being one that they did not like doing. I know from their comments that they made with the other questions that the time spent conversing with other students was something that they enjoyed; but it is also obvious that they liked the structure of the activity, and that shows in the advice they gave to me on how to make the activity better. These authentic student responses were validating in that, as I read the students' thoughts about the activity, those thoughts matched many of the conclusions I had come to.

**Constraints of Written Conversations on Student Engagement and the Learning Process**

During this study, constraints on student engagement and the learning process that the students experienced during the written-conversation activity were minimal. I did not have any students who required accommodations such as using a computer to write. However, I would have allowed any of them to use a computer if they wanted. My philosophy was to give them whatever tools they needed to allow for success during this activity. The students enjoyed the activity, and that was evident when their responses on the Postactivity Student Questionnaire were discussed. The only areas that some of them struggled with was not being able to always pick their own partner, and that some of them liked to talk, so the silent dialogue was a challenge for them. But, because the students knew that my focus was not on what their writing looked like but on what their voices had to say, they never viewed any written conversations in which the lack of conventions could lead to difficulty in reading their writing as a constraint, as it had been in my earlier pilot study. If a teacher's focus is on how a students' writing looks, and that focus stops the teacher from hearing what the students are saying, that focus could then become a big

constraint to the activity of written conversations and in turn affect student engagement and the learning process.

The written-conversation activity is a dialogical-inquiry activity. Its strength is that it promotes dialogue between partners and in turn has participants learning through language. A lack of the use of correct conventions in writing is not a language issue. If a teacher views students' written conversations with a monolinguist lens, chances are that will end up putting too much focus on how the writing looks (Are there reversal of letters, misspelled words, fragmented sentences, no word spacing?), and not what their writing is saying (Escamilla et al., 2014). Looking through a narrow lens on a topic of this magnitude will end up stifling students' voices and become a huge, invisible constraint to students' engagement and learning. At the beginning of this study, stifling students' voices is exactly what I did as I reviewed and analyzed students' written conversations. My initial findings were that they were rambling on and off the topic, there did not appear to be much depth in their writing or their responses, the actual handwriting of many of the students was difficult to read, and convention and sentence structure was almost nonexistent for a number of them. I was very aware as I reviewed these early writing conversations that I was looking only through the lens of a teacher who was worried about the number of students who appeared to be below grade-level expectations in their writing skills. The value that I originally put on the benefits of written conversations was students' ability to show me areas that I could begin to support them with writing instruction. It was only when I coded their written conversations for elements of relationships that I was able to look more deeply, moving from how their writing looked to focus on what their writing was saying. I began moving past looking at written conversations as solely an academic activity and instead saw the

much larger potential of written conversations as an effective communication tool for building classroom communication and relationships within that community.

**Summary of Chapter 4**

In analyzing the data collected during this study, I looked at a variety of ways written conversations interacted with relationships and relationship building, and the value of written conversations as a pedagogical tool. At the surface level, written conversations may seem like a simple activity; but in reality, they are a very purposeful activity that offers a way for students to have rich dialogue and use their voices to express who they are and what they want. The activity was also a literacy tool for personal and interpersonal expression and knowledge construction. Students may have a variety of needs in their reading and writing skills, but they do not lack in voice. In this study, written conversations became the instrument that students could use to share their thinking in their own voices.

The purpose of the full study was to examine the role of written conversations in supporting/constraining student engagement and the process of learning. In this chapter I have examined how written conversations supported relationship building, how relationship building supported student engagement, and how student engagement supported the learning process. The most significant findings in this study were that written conversations did play a supportive role in the interconnection between relationship building and the emotional, behavioral, and cognitive constructs of student engagement and the learning process in a community of learners. I have also discussed the constraints of written conversations. The study found that the biggest constraint to the written-conversation activity falls on the shoulders of the teacher when she is reviewing students' conversations. They are a useful tool to examine student writing, but not when the focus is on how the writing looks. The power of the activity is when the focus is on

what the students are saying. In Chapter 5, "Conclusions and Implications," I discuss these

results and possible implications, and present suggestions for future research.

# CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

In this chapter, I present a brief summary of the study, followed by a discussion of the findings as they relate to the relevant literature. Also included is a discussion of the potential implications of this study for classroom teachers and teacher educators, suggestions for further research, followed by final summative comments.

## Summary of the Study

Using a constructivist framework, this qualitative classroom study describes a fourth-grade elementary classroom in Colorado that examined the role written conversations played in supporting/constraining student engagement and the process of learning. I served as a teacher-researcher of this study.

Based on the study, I found that written conversations supported student engagement and the learning process because written conversations played a key role in building relationships within a community of learners. Written conversations supported the interconnection between relationship building and learning and engagement. In other words, written conversations supported relationship building, relationship building supported student engagement, and student engagement supported the learning process.

When I started this study, I knew from the pilot studies I had done that written conversations supported engagement and learning, but I did not fully understand the role they could play in building relationships. Through this study, I found that relationships are the common denominator that tie together the three engagement constructs (emotional, behavioral, and cognitive). In the next section, I present and explain the findings presented in Chapter 4.

# Conclusions of the Findings

In this study, written conversations supported student engagement and the learning process because written conversations played a key role in building relationships within a community of learners: Written conversations support relationship building, relationship building supports student engagement, and student engagement supports the learning process. The findings are presented in two parts: (a) written conversations and relationships and (b) written conversations as a pedagogical tool.

## Written Conversations and Relationships

In this study, written conversations supported relationships and relationship building. The findings discussed in this first part are how written conversations supported the building of a positive classroom community, how written conversations impacted the teacher's ability to see students through more of a relational lens, and finally, how written conversations fostered student-to-student relationships and teacher-to-student relationships.

### *Building a Classroom Community*

Scott (2014) said, "I believe that when teachers connect with students in meaningful ways, they improve their students' academic achievement, social and emotional skills, and sense of purpose" (p. 74). The literature review in Chapter 2 maintains that relationships are a key factor in student engagement, and the results of this study are consistent with that view. I believe taking the time to spend my emotional and intellectual energy on being fully present with kids is a much smarter investment than spending the same energy simply preparing to teach them. Before we as teachers know what to teach, we need to know whom we teach. It is easy to take shortcuts when we are getting to know our students. It can quickly become obvious who are the students who live to please us and who are the students who live to avoid us. We all know the

students who get things done on time and those students who do not even notice there are things to be done. We all have students like that every year. In the beginning of the year craziness, it can become convenient to use what worked the year before. However, doing this can be dangerous because we are basically erasing the new students that we have in front of us. When last year's solutions do not work for this year's class, as educators we sometimes tend to blame the class and ask ourselves, "What is wrong with these kids? My class last year never did this." This thinking has the potential of silencing and stripping away identities. Young students rarely can name the feeling this attitude conveys, but they feel it, and they will respond to it. This was the case with the students in 4C. Rather than looking at them as new students who needed the time to get to know me, and for me to take the time to get to know them, I rushed in and did not dedicate the time needed to building relationships. Reading those first student written conversations presented in Chapter 4, I learned about the students' negative feelings and distress regarding the recent changes in their fourth-grade classroom. "I'm terrified"; "I'm confused"; "I'm sad"; "I don't like it"; and "I miss my other teacher" were words that students used in their written conversations when discussing the changes. These words were my wake-up call. Written conversations gave me the opportunity to hear the students' voices and then to make the necessary changes in our classroom to build a positive community of learning.

The Venn Diagram of Engagement (Figure 2, Chapter 4) visually shows how the three constructs of engagement (emotional, behavioral, and cognitive—EBC) worked together. Relationships emerged as the common denominator that ties the three engagement constructs together. My argument is not whether relationships are at the heart of engagement, but that relationships are the common thread woven throughout the three engagement constructs.

Relationships do not reflect an additional construct; instead, they are a common factor of the three constructs.

The factors of each EBC construct and the factors within the overlaps can come to fruition only if strong relationships within the classroom between students and students and between students and the teacher are in place. For elementary students, having the awareness and the skills to deal with any of these engagement construct factors will happen only if they feel supported, safe, and connected to school, their teachers, and their peers. In other words, they need to feel that they have relationships with those who are trying to help them. In this study, the use of written conversations gave me as the teacher the awareness of where the students were within each engagement construct. I then used this information to recognize and make adjustments when learning objectives were not met, to notice whether any students who usually participate had shut down, and then make the effort to reach out to them. In reading students' written conversations, we must pay attention to truly listening to their voices and the feedback they are giving, apologize when necessary, and thank them for honest communication. As the results of this study show, all of these opportunities led to improved classroom climate and student-to-student and teacher-to-student relationships, which in turn improved student engagement.

### *Seeing Through a Relational Lens*

In this study, written conversations provided a window for me as the teacher to see my students as children. The children explored their feelings with each other rather than only writing to the teacher directly. Their personal and interpersonal expression helped them express their views and feelings in pairs. For example, with April and her partner Holly's conversations, I learned why April was giggling all the time in class—it was because of her lack of sleep. This

knowledge tapped into my care-giving side and all I wanted to do was comfort her. If I had *asked*

her why she was always so giggly all the time, I do not believe she would have been able to put it

into words like she did when she told her partner about it during their written conversation.

Looking through a relational lens also made me realize how often I had come to the conclusion

that the students were off task and off topic. When I put my academic lens to the side, I saw

students who were funny (Natalie and Katie), students who were playful and fun (Wayne and

Tommy), students who were open to forming new relationships (Amy and Kelly), and students

who showed real respect with each other (Joe and Anthony). I saw children first, and this

perspective helped me to form stronger relationships with them all.

### Student-to-Student Relationships

In this study, I found that written conversations were a quick and easy way to create

opportunities for relationship building. For example, in Chapter 4, Tommy and Wayne state how

much they liked the written-conversation activity because they had fun and made each other

laugh. The study showed students constructing knowledge together, learning about language

together, and forming friendships with one another.

At the same time, the study showed that, through written conversations, I as the teacher

was able to recognize potential social problems with students that could inhibit their ability to

build relationships with their peers. Research presented showed that academic learning is based

on relationships, and there is a greater capacity for student engagement if students have been

taught the social skills that allow for that engagement (Brendtro et al., 1990; Perry, 2006). When

I instituted whole-class activities to support social skills, I could see one student in particular,

Kelly, make a positive change in how she interacted with her peers. There is evidence in this

study that students' written conversations gave me a deeper insight into students who may have subtle holes in their social ability to interact with peers.

### *Student-to-Teacher Relationships*

If an educator has ever wondered what is it about that one teacher whom every student seems to love, I believe it is not because the teacher is "cooler" than other teachers. It is because the teacher has realized that it is not student performance that makes a successful year where every student is thriving and growing; instead, the teacher has formed relationships with their students.

As an educator, I realize how easy it is to get caught up with everything that must be covered in the curriculum during a school year. However, if we are trying to engage students, then it seems that, as educators, we will need to dedicate as much time uncovering who our students are as we spend uncovering and meeting the standards of what needs to be taught. Solomonides and Martin's research (2008) showed that most teachers' viewpoints of engagement tend to be more epistemic—how the teacher knows students are engaged (evidence of effort; evidence that students are prepared, active, critical, and inquisitive), and how the teacher knows students are not engaged (evidence they are being passive, detached, apathetic, alienated, unfocused, and distracted). However, Solomonides and Martin's research goes on to find that students looked at engagement through an ontological lens (the desire for confidence, happiness, imagination, and self-knowledge). When the school staff in their research focused on students' cognitive factors and shortfalls, the students leaned toward emotions, focusing on personal and creative identity in their learning (2008). As educators, we need to make a shift and put more focus on the emotional factors of students. If we want to engage students, we need to listen to them; anything short of that is oppression.

Once students' feel their emotional engagement is being fulfilled, they can then become behaviorally and cognitively engaged as well. In this study, I used written conversations as the gauge to measure students' emotional needs so that they could succeed with the other constructs of engagement. Written conversations became a tool to listen to the students' voices, and then I used that information to support their engagement in the learning process. Several examples of this are included in Chapter 4. One is the written conversation I had with Mark. Through our written conversation, I heard from Mark how big his fear of math was, and I realized just how big of an obstacle this fear was to allowing him to believe he was a math student. Listening to him caused me to put a plan into place that would help to build his confidence in math and support him in taking the risk of asking for help and participating in class.

My written conversation with Tommy was another example. My following through with his suggestion to play a game with me was like a breakthrough. Almost immediately, there was a positive change in him regarding his attitude toward me; I believe that, because I listened to him and acted, a bond was formed. In the end, these findings and the insight that the students' voices gave to me about what they needed, all through their written-conversations activity, led to the conclusion that written conversations support student engagement in the learning process.

In a culturally competent organization, leaders take knowledge they acquire about different groups of people and transform it into standards, policies, and practices that make everything work (Center for Community Health and Development, 2019). This is what the leader/teacher of a classroom should be doing. Educators need not only to know the curriculum that is used to teach subjects, but more importantly to know their students and then use that information to set up and run the class in a way that enhances learning. In a school setting, this is the same as being a culturally responsive teacher. As teachers, we do not get to pick our

classroom students. At the beginning of the year, we have a variety of very different students with different cultures, at different stages of learning, and with different behaviors. Sometimes this diversity is in the form of different nationalities, ethnicities, languages, customs, race, gender, sexual orientation, spiritual beliefs and practices, and physical and mental ability. Sometimes the diversity is in the form of family status, health status, skills and talents, ideas, or socioeconomic status. Our students are all different, and they need to know that their differences are supported and respected. In this study, written conversations became the conduit for me to learn about my students beyond what I could see, and it became a way for students to learn about each other and form relationships. However, in this study, the power of the written-conversations activity was not in the students doing the activity; rather, the power was in what the teacher/leader did with the information. A culturally competent organization happens when leaders take the knowledge that they gain about their people and use it to create or transform the standards, policies, and practices that have been put into place. In 4C, the information I gathered from the students' written conversations gave me the building blocks to create a culturally competent and culturally responsive classroom community. I used the information I had learned from my students written conversations to adjust our classroom schedule; to change the lens in which I was viewing some of them into one that was truly more caring; and to set up opportunities to spend more quality, one-on-one time with them regardless of time constraints. In turn, relationship building ensued, and the door to student engagement was opened. Nel Noddings' (1988) concept of authentic caring found that sustained reciprocal relationships between teachers and students is the basis for all learning. By encouraging students to share their feelings during the written-conversation activity, I had essentially given them a platform in

which they felt heard, valued, and cared for. All of this paved the way for students to be engaged in the learning process.

This study suggests that the emotional, behavioral, and cognitive constructs of student engagement hinges on the school environment being able to meet the students' emotional needs. If emotional needs can be met through the building of relationships and the learners feel valued, not so much as students but because they were treated as persons separate from the educational setting, they can begin a transformation into believing that they are learners. The relational and multidimensional model of student engagement, presented in Chapter 2, which puts both the *sense of transformation* (Dall'Alba & Barnacle) and *sense of being* (Barnett 2007; Barnett & Coate, 2005) as central to student engagement, supports this conclusion. All teachers know the importance of building relationships with their students. The written conversation activity is a tool that can support and deepen those relationships.

**Written Conversations as a Pedagogical Tool**

Pedagogy is an approach to teaching. The written-conversation activity is a pedagogical tool because it is a teaching approach for students to learn through dialogue. As important as written conversations became for supporting relationship and community building, this study showed that they were also an important pedagogical tool with merit for literacy learning in ways that other literacy activities do not necessarily support. Through written conversations, students could practice literacy skills such as writing, writing conventions, vocabulary, speaking and listening, and language skills; written conversations also support a student's development of content knowledge.

During my first pilot study, I assessed student's academic skills using the higher-order-thinking (HOT) skills discussed in Chapter 3. However, these HOT skills (evaluating, applying,

synthesizing, creating) were developed from the standards. With the standards as our guideposts, spelling out what students were expected to learn in each grade and each subject, I changed how I assessed students' academic skills with this study by using our grade-level standards. Written conversations allowed me to assess certain standards that we had been working on in class and then use that information to help drive instruction. The *Checklist for Dialogic Talk* tool (Callander, 2013), which I modified to be used with written conversations, also allowed me as the teacher to drill down and find the obstacles that might be preventing students from meeting certain standards.

At the same time, written conversations aided me, as the teacher, to see areas of strength in students' writing. Using the checklist, I could see students who, together, were trying to construct knowledge and clarify what their partners had said, so they responded appropriately. I could also see students developing the skills that authors use in their writing (e.g., developing dialogue between characters to show the tone the author wants the reader to feel; noticing the author's word choice to help develop the characters in a story; and producing dialogue that had tone and voice). Finally, I could see written conversations as a catalyst for students' narrative writing. Their past conversations, which were kept in notebooks, became diaries that they could pull from in order to write their stories in more detail.

In 4C, written conversations seemed to support improvement in students' writing skills. As a pedagogical tool, written conversations offered a variety of benefits that facilitated students in learning communication and listening skills, and in constructing knowledge together; and the conversations also offered an easy and nonintimidating way to practice writing and other academic skills.

**Constraints of Written Conversation on Student Engagement and the Learning Process**

There is much evidence in this study of how written conversations supported relationships and student engagement and the learning process. However, there are also a few constraints that should be noted. First, although the group of students in this study did not struggle with the process of writing, many students do. The activity of written conversations could be a laborious activity for those students who are struggling writers or readers. A strong trait of this activity is that it is easily adaptable. Using computers to ease the process of writing and using the voice-to-text features would benefit struggling writers. Or allowing students who are learning English as a second language to write in their first language, or use a combination of their first language and English when writing, and then allowing them to read their responses to their partner could also be an option. Another idea for struggling readers would be to allow their partner to write and then read their responses to them. Finally, for young students who are learning to write, having them draw pictures and then explain their response to their partner is an option. These options for struggling writers and readers could be designed to support those students so that they feel they are still participating and being successful in the classroom activity.

A second constraint to the activity of written conversations that in turn could affect student engagement and the learning process is if a teacher's main focus is on how a student's writing looks, and that focus stops the teacher from hearing what the student is really saying. The conclusion can be made that student engagement in the learning process is an outcome of relationships being made in the classroom. One barrier to making these relationships is the teacher not taking the time to listen to what a student is saying. Written conversations are a tool

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that facilitates dialogue; but if the teacher sees only what the writing looks like and not what it is saying, the result could be a decrease in student engagement.

Other possible constraints to student engagement that could show up in students' written conversations are silent ones; for example, students' inability to see the need to be culturally sensitive, or the lack of understanding about why an issue may be more important to others than to themselves. These kinds of constraints could inhibit student engagement and the learning process because they could break down relationships. However, awareness of these types of constraints would be available to the teacher through the students' written conversations so that the teacher could intervene and help the students address them.

## Implications

The results of this study help to fill two gaps in the research. First, there has been a gap in the research on a defined, three-construct model of student engagement. In contrast, this study's engagement model includes the emotional, behavioral, and cognitive states of elementary students and shows the interconnectedness of the three constructs. Researchers have stated a need for a model of engagement that integrates its multidimensionality and takes into account the interplay between students' emotional states, their behavioral engagement, and, academically, how they learn cognitively (Fredricks et al., 2004). Most of the research on engagement has focused on either a single-construct or two-construct model. Some literature shows that information about engagement is evolving to include three constructs (Bryson, 2014), but the lack of these multiconstruct models has created a challenge because researchers have not known how the different constructs of engagement interact. Also, much of the previous research has relied on examining engagement through the use of self-reporting measures, such as surveys and questionnaires, or interviews of participants. This type of research may not allow researchers to

see what occurs in the lives of students that makes them respond with their particular answers. In contrast, this qualitative ethnographic study makes a sincere contribution to the field of student engagement because it has explored the concept of student engagement through the use of the dialogical-inquiry activity of written conversations. The knowledge from this study could add to the literature on student engagement and the learning process that includes classroom interactions and collaboration between student and student and between student and teacher.

The second gap focuses on the lack of research on the dialogic-inquiry activity of written conversations. There is research on dialogue journals but written conversations are not dialogue journals; they are a unique activity that promotes dialogue between student to student or student to teacher. Whereas dialogue journals end up with responses that are delayed, written conversations are actual conversations in real time. The work of Lev Vygotsky emphasizes the significance of dialogic talk in learning. Vygotsky viewed the theory of dialogic inquiry as a philosophical belief about how children can learn through language (Vygotsky, 1978). Vygotsky advocated for the importance of providing children with opportunities to talk. But most importantly, he promoted the use of dialogue as a tool to explore the inner life of the learner. This important skill is most often not found with much depth in the curriculum; therefore, it likely will not be taught at the level that it should be. Written conversation is a quick (20-minute), in-the-moment activity that this study's findings show can be used to support dialogue in the classroom. As for the writing component in this activity, *Colorado State Standards for Fourth Grade Writing W4.10, Section 3. Writing and Composition* states that students need to write routinely "over extended time frames (time for research, reflection, and revision) and shorter time frames (a single sitting or a day or two) for a range of discipline-specific tasks, purposes, and audiences" (*CCSSI*, 2010, p. 19, para. 2). In my experience as a classroom teacher, a

majority of the writing done in classrooms focuses on research writing skills or writing assignments that are spread out over the course of a unit. Written conversations could be a way to incorporate shorter types of writing more frequently. They also produce dialogue that is not in oral mode. The advantage to written conversations is that there is now a record of what has been jointly constructed (Wells, 2000).

## Implications for Classroom Teachers

There are also implications for classroom teachers. For teachers who are interested in an academic activity that focuses on the significance of dialogic talk in learning and its impact on student engagement and the learning process, here are some suggestions based on the conclusions of this study regarding the use of written conversations:

- Educators must attempt to use the knowledge they have learned about their students through dialogical activities, such as written conversations, to build relationships between students and between students and the teacher. Student engagement requires looking at the whole child. When looking at students, the lens an educator looks through must be a relational one first and an academic one second.

- When using written conversations, students' writing must be examined with the purpose of hearing their voices, not of seeing what the writing looks like. Students who were encouraged to communicate, or talk, through writing disclosed that their anxiety over the fear of making mistakes in pedagogical approaches that put the major emphasis on form and mechanics rather than on communicative intent inhibited their writing and caused further frustration as they were stymied in their ability to communicate their ideas (Mahn, 1997).

- Written conversations can be a powerful pedagogical tool, but the teacher's thinking must shift from understanding that students are learning through language and that writing conventions are not a part of language. Effective teachers of inquiry encourage students to make their thinking visible and to share their understandings with others. Dialogic inquiry is not a program, such as spelling or math, but a framework for understanding and beliefs about the use and importance of talk within a collaborative learning environment. Underlying dialogic inquiry is a supported philosophical belief about how children can learn through language (Callander, 2013).

- Written conversations can aide in promoting a positive classroom community because they are a tool that can be used to ensure that all students are given a chance to share their voice in a nonthreatening, safe way. The prompt given for students' response to can focus on whatever area the teacher wants feedback on or wants that students to "talk" about. The point to remember is that it is up to the teacher to act on what students are saying, address any obstacles or concerns, and be willing to change things in the classroom if necessary.

### Areas for Future Research

Recommendations for future research in the area of student engagement include the following:

(a) Replicate the present study, adjusting for several design limitations (e.g., increase student interviews, increase the number of classrooms involved in the written-conversation activity, interview teachers from the classrooms added) to explore how

written conversations support/constrain student engagement when the researcher is not in the dual role of researcher and teacher.

(b) Replicate this present study but include a parental home piece to examine how written conversations when done at home and at school support/constrain student engagement. At the Center of Inquiry (CFI), parents are included in the written-conversation activity. Students at this school are encouraged to have written conversations at home with their parents (Jennings & O'Keefe, 2002). Because of the success this parent piece has at CFI, I also included the school-to-home piece during my first pilot study. There were six students involved in the student-parent piece. The students would dialogue with a parent on the same article that we used in class. Students' home to school connection reflects  important pieces of the whole child. In his *Bristol Study* (1969–1984), Gordon Wells (2000) found that children who experienced more conversations with their parents and older siblings were more likely to make accelerated progress in learning to talk, and more likely to be successful in school. Although Wells' study was referring to verbal conversations, it would be important to examine the student-to-parent written conversations and how they impact students' engagement and support the learning process.

(c) With adults at the helm of our education system, the goal of improving student engagement will not be met if adjustments are not made to beliefs and practices to include more of an emphasis on listening to the voices of the students. Additional research needs to done on richer characterizations of how students describe how they behave, feel, and think. This kind of research could aid in the development of finely tuned interventions.

(d) This study was conducted in one fourth-grade, general-education classroom. More

research could be done on how written conversations support/constrain student

engagement in a variety of classroom settings—for example, students in second-

language learning classrooms. As an example, in Mahn's study (1997), one student

wrote that he felt released from the verbs, tenses prison, and grammar nightmare

when the English teacher allowed him to focus on meaningful communication instead

of mechanics. Mahn went on to find that, as the students in the study became less

anxious about writing, they reported that they became more fluent in getting their

thoughts down on paper because they were not editing and reediting in their minds

before committing words to paper. How could the activity of written conversations

play into this scenario? Or how might written conversations impact younger students

in primary grades in which their writing skills are not yet fully developed so they are

using their own written symbol system. However, their voices are still present in their

own symbol systems. Laman and Van Sluys (2006) found in their research on written

conversations that written conversations invite participants to explore language in

ways that support learning about the complex ways language becomes manipulated

and represented in written form.

### Final Comments

In summary, the dialogical activity of written conversations in this study helped support

relationship building and student engagement and the learning process in two big ways. First, it

offered a window that the teacher looked through to see the learners' thinking—not focusing on

how their writing looked, but to actually examine their thinking. The written-conversation

activity did not just have students responding to a prompt; instead, it gave them a space that

permitted them to bring their own lives and experiences into the writing. In allowing for this, the activity then became a way for students to express their thinking and ideas versus just an opportunity to practice writing.

> Laboring to know children and using our most audacious creativity to act on that knowledge leaves us with a curriculum, that authentically seeks to teach and not just to instruct or to control. Additionally, an approach to curriculum that labors to see and to know kids for who they are and then acts on that knowledge helps to grow us into sharper professionals. It broadens the concept of assessment to include not just knowing what people can do but knowing the people. It deepens our knowledge of content by helping us to become more flexible practitioners of what we teach, and it keeps the focus of our work on transference by ensuring that the things that we teach can be used by children to impact life beyond our classrooms. (Minor, 2018, p. 25)

Second, written conversations gave the teacher of the classroom the knowledge needed to facilitate relationship building, which led to the development of a culturally competent and responsive, safe, caring, and inclusive classroom. Depending on the topic that the students were writing to, the teacher used the information gathered in a number of ways: to find out how students felt about an issue, and then creating opportunities to have further dialogue; to address areas of concern; and to learn about and build on or support students' strengths. Although it did not happen in this study, a teacher could also use written conversations to seize the chance to recognize and actively eliminate any prejudices that may arise around the topics of students' conversations. The dialogical activity of written conversations supported student engagement and the learning process because this activity facilitates the building of relationships and, in this study, relationships were the tie that bound the three engagement constructs together. Just think what our educational system could be if we spent as much time instructing students on what relationships look like, how to form them, and how to recognize and address when something has damaged them as we do on teaching academics.

"What can I learn from this child?" "What kind of background knowledge does the child bring with him?" "How can I move this child further in his overall literacy development?" These are the types of questions that can be addressed by reviewing students' written conversations. Written conversations proved to be a classroom activity that not only presented the possibility of supporting student engagement and the learning process, but also an activity that encouraged talk time to support and ensure that all student voices were heard.

With the continuing push for education reform and the evidence that disengaged students are one of the biggest challenges facing schools, my goal in conducting this full study was to gather information that would enhance the field of education and provide valuable information on the concept of student engagement with elementary students. By examining how written conversations, a dialogical-inquiry activity, supports or constrains student engagement and the learning process, I believe this study fulfilled that goal.

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**Parent Information Letter**

Dear Parents/Guardians,

My name is Kitty LaFond, and as you know from the attached letter, I will be your child's fourth-grade teacher every morning from 8:00 to 11:30 for the duration of the year. I am also a student in the PhD program for Educational Leadership at CSU. Under the guidance of my advisor, Louise Jennings, PhD, I am conducting a research study on student engagement. The title of our project is "An Examination of how the Inquiry-Based Activity of Written Conversations Supports or Constrains Student Engagement and the Learning Process." The Principal Investigator is Louise Jennings, PhD, Professor in the Education Department, and I am the Co-Principal Investigator.

I am asking for your permission to have your child participate in this study. For the next 10 weeks, beginning on October 1st through December 20th, 2018, two times a week for 20 to 30 minutes each time, your child will be involved in a dialogical inquiry activity called Written Conversations. Each student will be given a short nonfiction article or poem to read that relates to the social-studies units they are studying. Then, either your child and myself or your child and another student will have a written conversation about what they have read. This written conversation will consist of your child and their partner passing a notebook back and forth and writing comments and questions about the reading. Your child's participation in this research is voluntary. If your child decides to participate in the study, s/he may withdraw their consent and stop participation at any time without penalty. Whether your child participates or does not participate in this research will have no effect on your child's grade or status in the class. At the end of the program, I will ask your child to complete a brief paper-and-pencil survey.

While there are no direct benefits to your child associated with this research, we hope to gain more knowledge on how this written conversation activity impacts student engagement and the learning process. Your child's information will be combined with information from the other students taking part

in the study. When we write about the study to share it with other researchers, we will write about the combined information we have gathered. Your child will not be identified in these written materials.

There are no known risks associated with participation in this research. It is not possible to identify all potential risks in research procedures, but the researcher(s) have taken reasonable safeguards to minimize any known and potential, but unknown, risks.

I have enclosed the consent form for you and your child to read and sign. Please return to me, Ms. LaFond, by Friday, September 28th. If you have any questions about the research, please feel free to contact me at: kathleen.lafond@thompsonschools.org or my cell phone 970-581-6974 or my advisor, Louise Jennings, PhD, at louise.jennings@colostate.edu If you have any questions about your rights as a volunteer in this research, contact the CSU IRB at  RICRO_IRB@mail.colostate.edu; 970-491-1553. Sincerely,


Kitty LaFond                                              Louise Jennings, PhD

Student at Colorado State University,          Advisor at Colorado State University

PhD program for Educational Leadership

**APPENDIX B**

**Consent Form**

**Consent to Take Part in Research**

**I, _____ , understand that my parents/guardian have given permission for me to participate in a study concerning the activity of written conversations under the direction of Kitty LaFond.**

My participation in this project is voluntary and I have been told that I may stop my participation in this study at any time without penalty and loss of benefit to myself.

_____

Child's signature

**Parental Signature for a Minor**

As the parent or guardian, I authorize _____(print child's name) to become a participant for the described research. I understand that audio and video equipment will sometimes be used to help supplement field notes. These recordings will be kept in a secure location and only the research team will have access to them. When Ms. LaFond writes about the study to share it with other researchers, she will write about the combined information that was gathered. My child will not be identified in these written materials. There are no known risks associated with participation in this research. It is not possible to identify all potential risks in research procedures, but the researcher(s) have taken reasonable safeguards to minimize any known and potential, but unknown, risks.

The nature and general purpose of the project have been satisfactorily explained to me by Ms. LaFond in the attached parent letter and this consent form and I am satisfied that proper precautions will be observed.

I also understand that my child will be asked to complete a short paper and pencil survey at the end of the data collection.

_____        _____

         *Parent/Guardian Printed Name*                 *Parent/Guardian Signature*

# APPENDIX C

## Dissertation Data-Collection Timeline

Fall, 2017                                    Pilot Study #1

Summer 2018                                    Pilot Study #2

October 1, 2018                                First day of the new 4C class

October 3–December 20, 2018                    Field notes and data collected in a fourth-

grade classroom

October 4–December 20, 2019                    Within this timeframe, the written-

conversation activity was conducted

15 times.

December 21, 2018                              Student Post Questionnaire given

# APPENDIX D

## Postactivity Student Questionnaire

*Name:*

1. Do you think this activity helped your learning or not really?  Please explain to help me

   understand your thinking!

2. What did you like or not like about doing the activity of written conversations with your

   peers?  (Please give as much detail as possible!)

   . . . with your teacher? (Only answer if you wrote with me; please give as much details as

   possible!)

3. What was it about this activity that helped you stay focused/keep your attention, or not?

   (Think about your partner, the location, the articles read, or the topic I gave you).

4. Did you like the articles/topics that we read?  Why or why not?

5. What were some of your favorite things to write about, and why?

6. If you could give me any advice about this written-conversation activity to help make it

   better for other students, what would it be? (This question is really important!)

# RESEARCHER VITA

Kathleen (Kitty) LaFond was born and raised in Michigan; however, she has spent the past 21 years in Colorado and considers it to be her home. She is a 1980 graduate of J. W. Sexton High School in Lansing, Michigan. She earned a BS degree in business with a major in marketing in 1988. She went on to earn her teaching certificate in the State of Colorado in 2001 and has taught and supported teachers for 18 years in the elementary school where this study took place. She earned a Master's in Teaching degree from Grand Canyon University in 2005 and anticipates a PhD in Educational Leadership from Colorado State University in the spring of 2020.