



A New Vision for Literacy Research in Iowa

Strong Girls Read Strong Books: Selecting Texts and Developing Reading and Response Practices in an Afterschool Book Club

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Strong Girls Read Strong Books

As literacy researchers, we talk often about who we are as readers today and who we were as young readers, and we believe that the literature we read as children and adolescents was very influential in shaping who we are as adults. We want children today to also have that opportunity, but in the climate of accountability that is prevalent in most schools today, children do not have as many opportunities as we did at that age to read real books during the school day (Stillman & Anderson, 2011; Valli & Buese, 2007). We know that today, when teachers and parents are selecting engaging, accessible, and challenging books for children, they consider different factors including reading abilities, previous experiences with books and attitudes toward reading, social and cultural backgrounds, and general interests. But, we also believe that gender matters and that girls—as a group—still benefit from seeing themselves reflected in strong female protagonists as they strive to become strong girls and women. We are interested in helping girls see themselves as complex individuals who can be whomever they want in the future.

The feminist movement certainly provided many new opportunities and freedoms to today's girls. In addition, contemporary understandings of gender have become increasingly fluid (Butler, 1999), creating questions about the salience of gender categories such as *girl* and *boy*. Yet, the material realities of gender binaries remain. Harris (2004) points out that, despite images of *girlpower* that feminism has introduced into contemporary culture, girls still often grow up to be women who are under-employed and systemically oppressed. She explains:

Education, employment, health and safety are precarious experiences for many girls who bear the full impact of economic rationalism, new security concerns and dismantling welfare. Young women appear to have it all, and yet many constitute those hardest hit by

the effects of the new global political economy on jobs, resources and community. (p. xvii)

In other words, although today's girl may have ambitions and dreams that girls in past generations might not have entertained, those dreams often do not come to fruition because women are still categorically positioned as second-class citizens. As Hartman (2006) stated, "women's potential to be put into a gendered role at almost any moment, regardless of their background or experience, is 'women's' commonality" (p. 12). For girls and women, then, gender clearly still matters.

Does reading books have the potential to help girls resist gender positioning? Research on girls' reading practices suggests that reading has distinct transformative power for girls, helping them negotiate relationships, acquire agency, grapple with fears and desires, and experiment with gender roles (Davies, 2003; Enciso, 1998; Hicks & Dolan, 2003). Therefore, we argue that providing girls with high quality children's literature that depicts strong female protagonists *does* have real potential for helping girls grow into strong women.

Determining what constitutes a strong female protagonist is no small task. Strength in a young girl is difficult to define given that conceptions of ideal girlhood have shifted radically even in the relatively short time since scholars began studying *girlhood* (Gilligan, 1982; Walkerdine, 1990). Bettis and Adams (2005) explain that, "Contemporary meanings of ideal girlhood have changed to accommodate shifting expectations about normative femininity and the role of women in the 21st century. Normative femininity is in a liminal state with the old markers of normative girlhood such as prettiness alongside the new markers of assertiveness and independence" (p. 10). Many female protagonists in contemporary popular culture texts represent tensions in those shifting ideas about who girls should be. Disney princess films, that

for years featured female protagonists who had little agency or ambition other than winning a prince, now feature female protagonists such as Elsa and Anna (*Frozen*; Buck & Lee, 2014) who have their own dreams and ambitions and are willing to speak up rather than pipe down when it comes to taking charge. However, at the same time that Elsa and Anna have ambition and spunk, they bear a striking physical resemblance to princesses past: doe-eyed, tiny-waisted, and normatively beautiful. Moreover, they share unquestionable heteronormativity and traditional feminine sexuality with their predecessors. Are Elsa and Anna strong female protagonists?

In this paper we document our efforts to answer this, and similar questions, in an afterschool book with fourth- through sixth-grade girls and university teacher education graduate and undergraduate students. The Strong Girls Book Club is both a program and a longitudinal research project. In this paper, we explain procedures and practices that drawn upon in our work.

Program Context

Mapleton Elementary (pseudonyms are used for the school and students in the project) is one of the lowest academically performing elementary schools in this Midwestern U.S. mid-sized community. Students in this particular elementary school represent a more diverse group of ethnic and racial backgrounds than most schools in this state; some students speak languages other than English and non-standard forms of English at home; and some have experienced challenges in their young lives such as domestic and/or sexual abuse, loss of or abandonment by a parent, poverty, or a parent in jail. Most formal afterschool programming at this elementary school ends after third grade, and many intermediate grade elementary students are required to babysit siblings or complete other chores at home after the school day ends.

An important goal of our book club is to read and respond to literature in ways that are different from school, especially in the current climate of accountability (Stillman & Anderson,

2011). Our three rules (i.e., read, respond, and respect one another) are meant to help us encourage a lifelong love of reading in a casual setting. One hundred forty-eight different girls have attended the book club at some time in the past three years, and girls often re-enroll and attend every year that they are eligible. We usually begin the book club with a whole-group session where we offer a text that we can read and discuss together. Then we move to small-group sections for more intimate discussions about books that girls have chosen to read.

Thein and Schmidt, the authors of this paper, are teacher educators who have worked in elementary and secondary public school settings. Because of the high number of girls who are interested in this reading experience, graduate and undergraduate students from the College of Education also are invited to work with the girls in small-group book clubs.

In this paper, we will discuss our methods for choosing literary texts for the book club and highlight key practices we have found useful in reading and responding to those texts.

Selecting Texts for Book Club

Before our work with girls began, we read and discussed a variety of new texts and talked with a number of scholarly experts about how to define strong girls in life and in books. Those conversations and readings provided new thinking about how teachers and teacher educators might look at gender in classroom reading instruction (Schmidt, Thein, & Whitmore, 2013). In our discussion of the texts here, we will first share themes we found in our own discussions and the discussions we had with scholars, authors, and teachers, and then we will offer questions that evolved as we considered positive female gender characteristics. Throughout the paper, we will share quotations and anecdotes from recent literature with strong female protagonists as well as highlight new practices for reading and discussing texts that will challenge both teacher and student readers to become agentic and flexible readers.

Strong Girls Can Be Like Strong Girl Book Characters

In preparation for beginning the Strong Girls program, we worked to clarify and articulate what we mean when we say “strong girls” and “strong books.” One way we approached with task was in discussion with strong women educators and scholars about what it means to be a strong girl or woman. In these discussions, we found evidence for our belief that reading can inform our identities. First, we highlight Linda Parsons (personal communication on 1/19/2012), a member of the Amelia Bloomer Project an annual booklist of the best feminist books for children and young adults, for the words she used to show connections between reading books with strong female characters and learning about how to be a strong girl or woman. In her words,

Is there really a difference between characteristics of strong girls and characteristics of strong girl characters? I find myself constantly referring to characters as if they’re real people. Because they are for me, you know.

Parson’s thinking exemplifies what we hope to accomplish in this work. In our own reading of books with strong female protagonists, we see endless possibilities for dreaming about becoming people like the ones we admire within the books. We believe girls in the book club also will have that reaction, and we want it to motivate them for the future. Some of the characters motivate us to be just like them, but others are not completely flawless as we discuss in the next section.

Strong Girls Are Complex and May Have Flaws

Rachel Williams (personal communication on 1/6/2012), a feminist scholar who participated these early discussions, described strong girls in this way:

There is an underlying message of desirability, which I think is really disturbing—desirability to the opposite sex or sometimes just in general. A lot of the books that I read where there's a female protagonist, often she's paired with a male protagonist, and the female protagonist is always the rational one, the practical one, the smart one, but she's not intrepid. And the male protagonist is the sort of impulsive, intrepid one that drags her along... So that irritates me.

Williams wants girls and girl characters to be impulsive and intrepid sometimes, and she does not want them always paired with boys who get to be impulsive and intrepid. It is not that she does not like strong girls to be rational, practical, and smart. She wants them to be more than that and she wants them to be alone, in groups, and with friends from various genders and sexualities. For Williams, the definition of strong girl is “individual in a way” and not predictable when it comes to “inculcated” female behaviors. She goes even further by saying,

...It's probably not a bad idea to have protagonists that have some flaws—whether they're emotional or physical or in some way realistic, something that they're dealing with, not actually a barrier, but something that they have to come to terms with in some way. That's not a bad thing to have.

Several of the books we have chosen to use with the book club exemplify this way of thinking about strong protagonists. Thannha Lai's poetic novel *Inside Out & Back Again* tells the story of Ha and her family as they are forced to leave South Vietnam at the close of the Vietnam War. Based on Lai's own escape from Vietnam, we meet two strong female characters: Ha and her mother. Although Ha's mother shows her strength in traditional ways of strong single mothers, Ha is more defiant and wily in the ways she stands up to her brothers and other boys in the story.

Strong Sense of Self and Staying True to that Sense

Our conversations with scholars, authors, and other female professionals also show overwhelming support for the idea that strong girls have a strong sense of who they are and stay true to that sense of self even in difficult circumstances. As we look across our early interviews, scholarly reading, and text selections, we see qualitative descriptions of women and girls that include words such as *independent*, *intrepid*, *resourceful*, *assertive*, and *resilient*. These qualities or characteristics mesh with ideas within feminist literature as well. Roberta Seelinger Trites (1997) draws particularly on strength in human character. One important attribute she describes in feminist literature for children is the evolution of resourcefulness in strong female characters. She notes that the feminist movement encouraged changes in the ways resourceful book characters behave. “Protagonists in novels influenced by feminism...have slowly evolved an ability to think about their place in the community without becoming so community-oriented that they become self-effacing. The feminist protagonist cares about other people but she cares about herself, too” (p. ix).

The evolution of characters Trites discusses in the quote above is obvious in a comparison of an older female book character, such as Pippi Longstocking (1988), with a more recent character, such as Caitlin in Kathryn Erskine’s *Mockingbird* (2009). Although Pippi Longstocking lived a carefree life with absent parents—no mother and a pirate father who was frequently not present or attentive to her escapades, this lack of adults in Pippi’s life is not fully explained or transparent for readers. *Pippi Longstocking* is a magical book and Pippi is outrageous and even impolite. In the more current *Mockingbird*, Caitlin’s life is described more realistically and tragically. Caitlin lost her mother to cancer and her brother in a senseless school-shooting incident, and she also is struggling with Asperger’s syndrome and a very depressed

father. Like Pippi, Caitlin has verbal outbursts, especially with adults who are insensitive, and both characters have seemingly rational thinking for some of their impolite and outrageous behaviors. Pippi is not afraid to tell the storekeeper who is selling Freckle Cream that she is not suffering from freckles but rather likes them, and Caitlin wants her father to know that she hides her face in the cushions of the sofa because it helps her escape the traumas of her life.

Throughout *Mockingbird* readers see Caitlin's struggle to maintain her composure in school and at home when she is misunderstood, and they feel her anger and pain as she confronts various characters in the book.

Using Caitlin's voice as the narrator, readers are invited to crawl inside Caitlin's mind, and it is there that we discover her internal resolve and struggle to move out of her comfort zone as she makes friends and pushes her father into accepting the death of her brother. Caitlin's voice helps the reader know her and discover what she is thinking.

Caitlin struggles with many life tensions, but it may be because of these discomforts that readers begin to understand how this character stays true to herself. Asperger's syndrome is a developmental disorder that affects people's ability to socialize and communicate and, although it is considered part of the autism spectrum, it is a milder and treatable form that offers successful strategies for socialization and communication. Caitlin is often frustrated by other characters in the book, and readers are provided her rationalizations and thinking throughout *Mockingbird*. The opportunity to hear Caitlin's thinking privileges or complicates the reader's thinking about Caitlin as a person with Asperger's syndrome, for people with disabilities like Asperger's Syndrome are not always seen as complex individuals. That also helps the reader understand Caitlin as a strong girl. Caitlin knows who she is and she is trying hard to stay true to

herself throughout the book, no matter what others seem to think of her or what happens with other characters.

Parsons (personal communication on 1/19/2012) also reminded us of the importance secondary characters can play in helping readers determine the qualities of primary characters.

I am always very sensitive to secondary characters in a book, a lot of times a mother or the friend of a mother, a secondary character who might be in a very submissive role...they can almost serve as a foil for a primary character.

So just as Pippi has the prim and proper Annika and Tommy as playmates, Caitlin has the young and innocent first grader she befriends on the playground and her depressed father who needs love and companionship. With these characters and the situations the authors place them in, we see Pippi's outrageousness become rational and kind and Caitlin's verbal outbursts as a kind of wisdom.

Characters' interactions with other characters also help readers capture the feeling of a character's strong sense of self and staying true to that sense. A sixth grade teacher we spoke with in this early phase of the study said it this way:

I think that sometimes when I fall in love with a character, it's not just because of them. It's because of how they view other characters. How they interact with other characters...

Sometimes, you know they might do the wrong thing. And you might be like, "Why are you doing that?" But, eventually, they get it and eventually that's like them, the character growing and so it's kind of that connection between how all the characters perceive each other.

When we select books for the book club, we look at award book lists such as The Amelia Bloomer list, Notable Books for a Global Society, and various American Library Association awards (e.g., the Newbery, Caldecott, Sibert, and Printz Awards). We also remember classics from our own youth and books for children we discover in our readings and work with children. Appendix A offers a more complete list of books we have read in the book club.

In the next section, we turn to practices we used to engage girls in reading and responding to the texts we used in book club.

Ways of Reading

Each week when we arrive at Mapleton Elementary School, cars and busses line the road to the school, and we see children scurrying to leave the building. However, members of the Strong Girls Book Club are excited to stay for the extra two hours after school. As we make our way down the hall to the classrooms, girls rush to find us, and we greet the fifty girls who are ready to work with us on reading and responding to literature. Currently we have nine adults (Schmidt, Thein, two doctoral students, and five undergraduate students) working with the large and small groups.

Organization of spaces, readers, and books are crucial elements to the success of this book club. We have tried different arrangements for organizing girls into supportive groups and thought hard about different ways to use the physical space available to us at Mapleton Elementary School. We knew that we wanted the girls to work in comfortable group settings, so the first year we organized everyone into multi-grade home groups where they met with the same adult leader each week, talked about what was on their minds, and ate a snack. After about 30 minutes, everyone moved to a different multi-aged small book group for reading and discussion. In recent years, we have moved to grade-level grouping, not because of developmental

differences in reading levels, abilities, or interests, but because we found that girls are most comfortable reading and discussing tough topics with grade-level friendship groups. In Strong Girls Book Club, we have found that *across* grade levels girls are capable and interested in reading books *across* Lexile levels—sometimes reading higher than recommended levels but other times reading lower than recommended levels. Our primary concern is to provide girls with texts that are engaging, relevant, and challenging in a variety of ways.

The first year of the book club, we met in the school library. This space offered us a large and open spot for whole group meetings on the carpeted floor, but also afforded us the opportunity to separate into small groups within the library. We could see one another and yet work separately with different ways of reading and responding. Now in our fourth year of the project, we have moved to the intermediate hallway, and we work in two sixth-grade classrooms and a fourth-grade classroom. These are the classrooms of our participants, and the teachers and students seem comfortable to have us in this setting. Smaller rooms provide more desirable acoustics and yet offer us the opportunity to move back and forth between classrooms for larger group conversations.

Each week, we strive to meet with the participants in whole group, small group, and even individual settings. Sometimes a group moves to the hallway for more privacy or for opportunities to respond in more active ways. Other times, we meet in circles on the floor or even seated at the desks in the classroom. It is our aim to build community, ensure success and enjoyment for every reader, and model respect for all readers—all tenets of good reading instruction (Routman, 2003; Sibberson & Szymusiak, 2003).

We typically begin book club with a whole-class text. We use a variety of texts for this opening whole-class activity: poems, commercials on YouTube, magazine advertisements,

picture books, choral reading, and even reader's theater. Sometimes, we surprise the girls with an impromptu presentation that we have prepared ahead of time. For example, we created the reader's theater from *Me and Rolly Maloo* by Janet Wong (2010). We also read texts together, usually interactively, and then break into small groups within the larger room to talk more intimately, with books such as *Night Flight* by Robert Burleigh (2011) or poetry by Shel Silverstein (1974) or Janet Wong (2007). Our university students move easily between and among the girls, creating impromptu groups for discussion that were not planned ahead of time. Every adult learns the names of the girls quickly so we can interact and model the idea that everyone in the book club is important to us and is someone we want to know and help.

Then we break into small groups for novel discussions. At the beginning of the semester, and then once or twice more during the semester, we *book talk* books (provide quick summaries) and allow the girls to vote on what they want to read next. Although we typically select a set of books from which the girls can choose, we also have taken recommendations from the girls about books they would like to read. Our aim is to provide every girl with her first or second choice from the book ballot voting, and groups are based on the books the girls choose to read. Sometimes, girls are persuaded to vote in particular ways by their peers, and sometimes girls are persuaded to vote for books because of the way we *book talk* the books. These are dynamic events that cannot really be explained fully here, and we believe anyone who tries to start their own book club should address these issues by considering the context of their own unique group. In Strong Girls Book Club, we may allow the girls to stay with their friends, or we may encourage or place girls in different groups from what they chose. Currently, we are reading *The Music of Dolphins* by Karen Hesse (1995) in three different grade-level groups, *Stella by Starlight* by Sharon Draper (2015) in fourth and sixth grade, *Ruby on the Outside* by Nora

Raleigh Baskin (2015) in fifth grade, and *Flora and Ulysses* by Kate DiCamillo (2013) in a fourth-grade group. We use books with strong female protagonists and are always striving to complicate our definition of what it means to be a strong girl.

Currently, the fourth graders meet in three groups in one classroom, the fifth graders are in two groups in another classroom, and the sixth graders meet in two to three groups in the third classroom. In the book groups, we typically begin a book with the leader reading orally to the girls. Nestling or settling into the story world of the book takes different amounts of time, depending upon the context of the book and the background knowledge of the readers (Parsons, 2006). Every girl will be allowed to keep her copy of the book, so we encourage the girls to write their names in the books and underline and write notes during reading.

The girls who attend the book club love to read aloud in performative ways. Sometimes we read together, but at other times we pair the girls to read in twos so they can be more active while reading the text. We do read around the circle at times, with every girl taking a turn if she wishes to read. We resist calling this Round Robin Reading because we know Round Robin Reading is not a practice sanctioned by research as good practice (Opitz & Rasinski, 2008). Instead, we see our small groups as safe places where girls know and respect one another enough to support the performance and experimentation that happens when oral reading happens.

Ways of Responding

Reading with real books is different from reading leveled texts and basal reader anthologies. As you read in the sections above, in our book club, we choose texts that complicate girlhood and life and allow us to have *grand conversations* (Peterson & Eeds, 1990) about *tough topics* (O'Donnell-Allen, 2011) related to real life situations. The girls read and talk about books but we also use journals for frequent written responses, and we encourage girls to sketch their

way into meaning, dramatize what they are thinking and feeling, and even dance their response to the text as ways to support understanding (Leland, Lewison, & Harste, 2013).

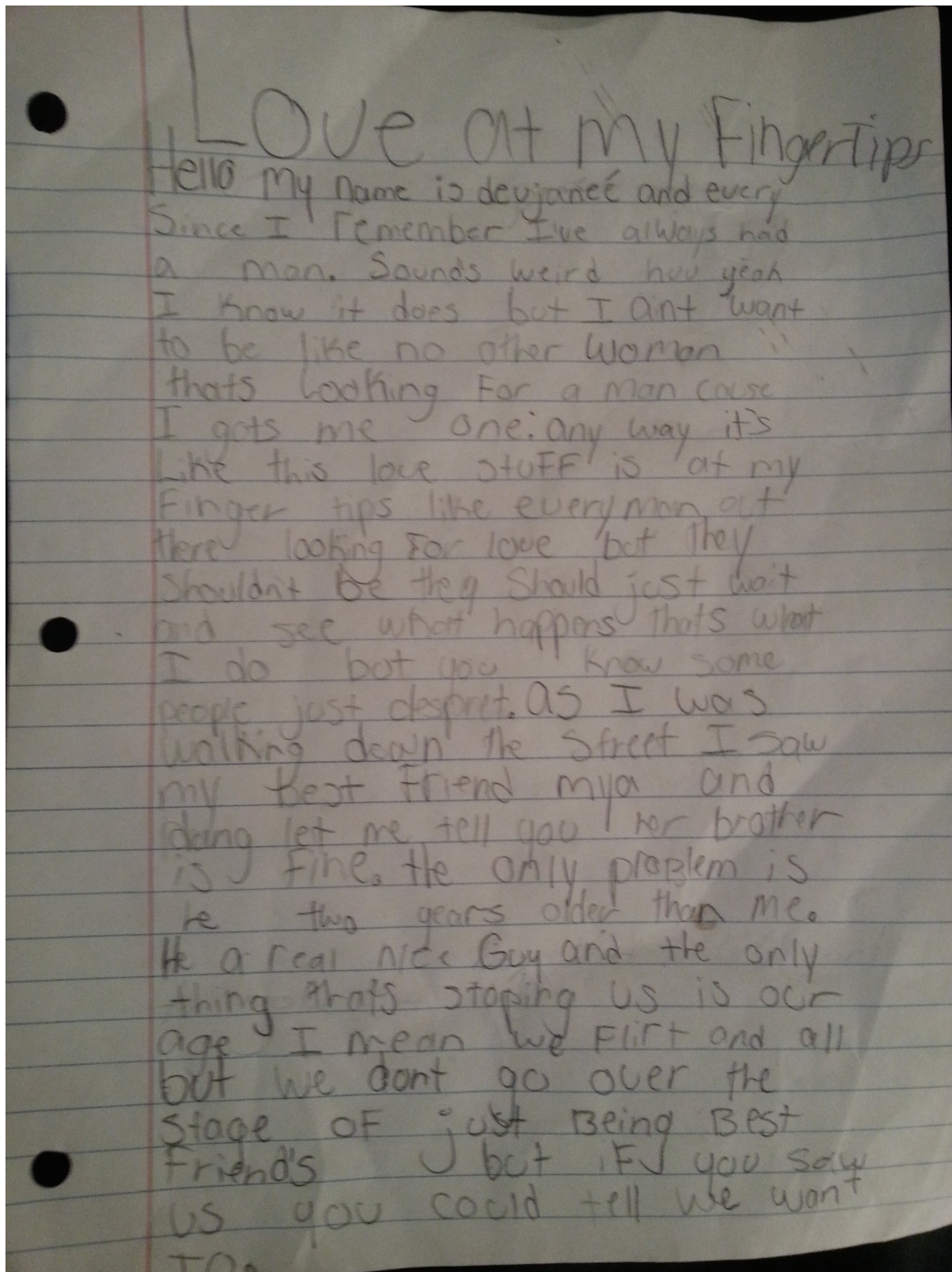


Figure 1. Writing Inspired by Flake and Woodson

Writing

Sometimes, girls take up a particular voice they hear in a text they read. After Maizie read *Money Hungry* and *The Skin I'm In* by Sharon Flake (2001; 2007) and *After Tupac and D Foster* by Jacqueline Woodson (2008), she was inspired to use African American vernacular to begin her own story. Although teachers at her school would not encourage writing in African American vernacular because of ideologies they hold related to the privileging of Standardized English, we encouraged her to write in the voice of the authors she loves and see this writing sample as a way to encourage her to possibly become a writer in the future (see Figure 1).

Drama

The girls in Strong Girls Book Club also are very interested in acting out scenes from the books we read and presenting them to one another and to other teachers in the building. The girls write the scripts and practice their parts all week during recess and free time. Girls have dramatized scenes from *Drama* and *Smile* by Raina Telgemeir (2010, 2012) and *Roller Girl* by Victoria Jamieson (2015).

Teleconferences with Authors

We also have teleconferenced with two authors: poet Janet Wong and graphic novelist Victoria Jamieson. Both authors have been very open to answering questions from the girls and showing them examples of their writing and revision process in completing a book for children.

Identity Building Activities

Some of the work we do in response to literature is meant to help girls see themselves in new ways. We read portions of *The Best Part of Me* by Wendy Ewald (2002) and then helped the girls create pictures of what they considered to be some of their best parts. Figure 2 is an example of the written work created.

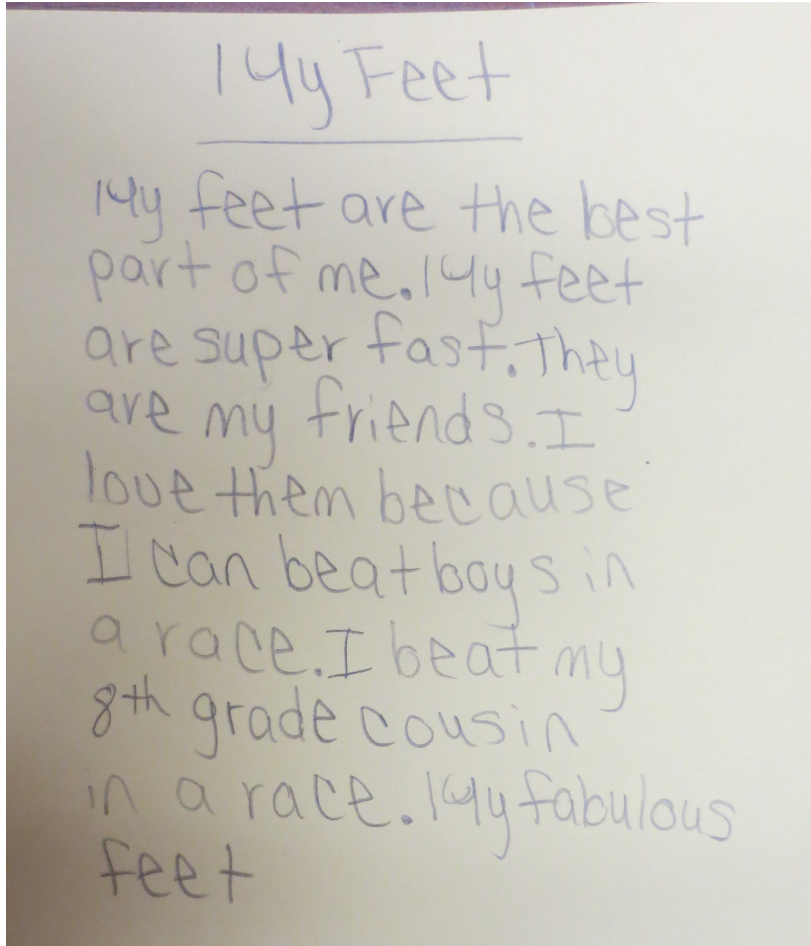


Figure 2. The Best Part of Me

We close this section with an example of the Wordle (Figure 3) that was created by the girls when they came to Strong Girls the first year. We asked them to write their thoughts on a chart of paper and then inserted those thoughts into Wordle.net to create a Word Cloud that shows what we were all thinking as we began this work.

exploring literature in a variety of ways makes a difference in the lives of tweens. In Strong Girls Book Club, we believe readers must learn to decode texts, but we also believe that readers must think hard about what texts mean, consider what texts do to readers, and delve into how readers can use texts in a variety of ways (Luke & Freebody, 1999). Those are important reading strategies for future citizens in this world, and they support our thinking and the thinking of critical theorists such as Freire (1970) who strive for a democratic society that *reads the word but also reads the world*.

Appendix A

Strong Girls Read Strong Books Renita Schmidt, Ph.D., and Amanda Thein, Ph.D., The University of Iowa Book Titles and Authors
El Deafo by Cece Bell
Night Flight by Robert Burleigh
Hunger Games by Suzanne Collins
Flora and Ulysses by Kate DiCamillo
Out of My Mind by Sharon Draper
The Firefly Letters by Margarita Engle
Mockingbird by Kathryn Erskine
The Perfect Place by Teresa Harris
Sunny Side Up by Jennifer and Matthew Holm
Rollergirl by Victoria Jamieson
The Skin I'm In by Sharon G. Flake
Money Hungry by Sharon G. Flake
Stella by Starlight by Sharen G. Flake
The Thing About Luck by Cynthia Kadohata
Abduction by Peg Kehret
Song Lee and the "I hate you" Notes by Suzy Kline
Inside Out and Back Again by Thannha Lai
Savvy by Ingrid Law
Rules by Cynthia Lord
Brave Girl: Clara and the Shirtwaist Makers' Strike of 1909 by Michelle Markel
How To Steal a Dog by Barbara O'Connor
Call Me Hope by Gretchen Olson
Ninth Ward by Jewett Rhodes
Cartwheeling in Thunderstorms by Rebecca Rundell
Divergent by Veronica Roth
Counting by Sevens by Holly Sloan
Star Girl by Jerry Spinelli
Drama by Raina Telgemeir
Sisters by Raina Telgemeir
Smile by Raina Telgemeier
As Simple As It Seems by Pam Weeks
So B. It by Pam Weeks
Amber Was Brave, Essie Was Smart by Vera B. Williams
One Crazy Summer by Rita Williams-Garcia
Make Lemonade by V. Wolff
Me and Rolly Maloo by Janet Wong
After Tupac and D Foster by Jacqueline Woodson
Brown Girl Dreaming by Jacqueline Woodson
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