Empowering the Heroes of Tomorrow: A Literary Analysis of Portrayals of Protagonists' Agency in Award-Winning Fantasy Novels and its Educational Implications

Kelly Dickson

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Honors Thesis

EMPOWERING THE HEROES OF TOMORROW: A LITERARY ANALYSIS OF PORTRAYALS OF PROTAGONISTS' AGENCY IN AWARD-WINNING FANTASY NOVELS AND ITS EDUCATIONAL IMPLICATIONS

by

Kelly Dickson

Submitted to Brigham Young University in partial fulfillment of graduation requirements for University Honors

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June 2024

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ABSTRACT

EMPOWERING THE HEROES OF TOMORROW: A LITERARY ANALYSIS OF PORTRAYALS OF PROTAGONISTS' AGENCY IN AWARD-WINNING FANTASY NOVELS AND ITS EDUCATIONAL IMPLICATIONS

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Given the need for upper elementary students to develop a sense of their own agency, this research explored depictions of the agentic behavior of protagonists within the five most recent Newbery-awarded texts from the fantasy genre. Included is a reflexive thematic analysis of the agentic behavior of protagonists in the texts, an exploration of ways the constructed themes of agency may positively impact young readers’ agentic development, and potential implications for educators. The thematic analysis describes different types of agentic behavior in which the protagonists engage and how transacting with these textual examples can help students develop their own senses of agency. Implications for practice and future research are also discussed.
I’d like to take this opportunity to say thank you to my wonderful husband, Jonathan, for cheering me on throughout this whole process. Jonathan, your support in helping me pursue my academic goals and dreams has made all the difference to me, and I can’t thank you enough. Thank you to my parents as well, for teaching me to be a reader and a writer and helping me in more ways than I could possibly list. Thank you to Brynn, for your willingness to read my many drafts and your inspiring example of how to be a writer and a researcher in college.

I’d also like to say thank you to the BYU Honors Program faculty and my fabulous committee members for guiding me through the thesis process. Thank you especially to Paul, for your willingness to take on this project and your commitment to helping me achieve my goals. Thank you for the incredible generosity you’ve shown in sharing your expertise, your unfailing support and encouragement, and your time, throughout the many hours of work we spent together in the research and writing process.
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Table 1: Summary of Thematic Analysis .................................................................21
“If you could go inside any book or movie you wanted to, where would you choose to go?” I ask a class full of fifth graders one rainy morning. The daily “morning question” routine in my assigned mentor teacher’s classroom is designed as a chance for students to think creatively, build classroom community, and share their ideas and individuality with the class. In response to my question, I anticipated students might say they would like to explore Hogwarts, or maybe hang out with Shrek in his swamp. While a few students shared ideas similar to what I anticipated, many of them went above and beyond, to say the least.

“First, I would go into The Cat and The Hat,” one student begins, standing up to give his explanation the dramatic delivery it deserved. “I would bring him back here with me and use him as my comrade in taking over the world, because that guy can pretty much do anything.” “I would visit the Warriors series,” another student shares, “and throw Firestar into a volcano or something, because he’s so overrated.” She goes on to describe how she would change the plot and focus on characters she likes better. Many students agree with her sentiments and chime in with their own adjustments. To top it all off, another student proclaims, “I would go into the dictionary, and then erase all the boring words I don’t like and replace them with fun ones like antidisestablishmentarianism. And if anyone tries to disagree with me, I can just erase the words they’re trying to say from the dictionary so they can’t stop me!”

That day’s morning question discussion may not have gone quite the way I planned, but it highlighted an important principle that has been on my mind all throughout my classroom experiences as a pre-service educator; students are not simply empty, malleable young minds to be filled, shaped, and formed by a teacher’s carefully planned instruction (Freire, 1972). As Chambers (1993) writes, “any teaching that enables children in the honest reporting of their responses usually gives the teacher a surprise” (p. 43). This occurs because students are unique and blossoming individuals with their own identities, ideas, and values. School can be a much more engaging and educational place when students’ voice, agency, and development of decision-making skills are brought to the forefront of daily instruction. However, many traditional
classroom procedures and expectations place students in the role of quiet, obedient
listeners who only speak when called upon and are expected to sit at their desks for hours
and compliantly work on whatever the teacher assigns (Kohn, 2006). This vision reduces
students to the role of a blank slate or an empty vessel, ignoring the rich and complex
identities that make up each unique student. On the other hand, the chaos that can reign
in a classroom with no management also may prevent students from learning. How, then,
can teachers help their students develop agency and honor their individual identities in
the context of an orderly classroom environment where learning takes place? There is
clearly no one right answer to this, but it is an important enough question to warrant
serious attention from many different perspectives and approaches.

As a preservice teacher with a passion for reading fantasy literature, I was
interested in exploring the ways that protagonists of children’s fantasy novels exhibit
agency and how those portrayals could hold potential to impact students’ development of
their own senses of agency in a classroom setting. This led me to explore the research
question posed in this honors thesis:

How do the protagonists of award-winning fantasy texts exhibit agentic behavior
in ways that can develop the readers’ own sense of agency?

Statement of Problem

Although learning to use their agency in making decisions should be an important
part of students’ education at school, many classroom teachers struggle to know how to
help their students develop a greater sense of agency (Vaughn, 2020). However,
developing a sense of agency and learning how to use it to make autonomous decisions is
not only a key factor of social, emotional, and cognitive development (Bandura, 2006),
but it is also vital in students’ academic growth and progress (Reeve & Shin, 2020).
Classroom teachers must help their students develop their own agency while also learning
academic skills and content if they are to best prepare them to succeed in life.

Statement of Purpose

The purpose of this thesis is to offer a reflexive thematic analysis (RTA) of
portrayals of protagonists’ agency in five award-winning fantasy novels. The intent of my
analysis is to provide educators with insights into the ways that such literature can be
used to help students develop their own senses of agency and be empowered in making
decisions for themselves. As a preservice teacher, the insights I gain personally from this research also bear relevance in the development of my own teaching practices. My research is not intended to analyze the quality of the books nor the intentions of the authors, but rather to explore the potential that the behavior of the protagonists has to impact students’ agentic development as they read the texts and experience transactions (Rosenblatt, 1993) with them.
CHAPTER 2
Review of Literature

Defining Agency

Agency is a foundational aspect of both education and developmental psychology (Brod et al., 2023). It is one of the fundamental qualities that makes us human; rather than being limited to instinctive responses, humans can reason, reflect, and decide for themselves how to act (Bandura, 2006). Due to its relevance across a wide range of disciplines, there are many different definitions and perspectives that researchers and theorists have employed when discussing agency.

In defining agency, Albert Bandura (2006) stated that “To be an agent is to influence intentionally one's functioning and life circumstances” (p. 164). Bandura explored the role that agency plays in social cognitive theory in his many seminal works, describing how in contrast to a linear input-output of environmental stimuli dictating behavior, social cognitive theory positions agency as a key factor in contributing to behavior (Bandura, 1986, 1993, 2001). In approaching agency from this perspective, Bandura focused on self-efficacy as a foundational aspect of agency and identified intentionality, foresight, self-reactiveness, and self-reflectiveness as its core principles. According to Bandura, the exercise of agency over time contributes to the building of one’s identity, which is a commonly addressed theme in middle-grade literature, or literature written for readers between the ages of 8 and 12 (MasterClass, 2021).

While agency and identity are two distinct concepts, they have a reciprocal relationship; who we are and how we perceive ourselves impacts the decisions we make, and the decisions we make in turn shape who we are (Bandura, 2006; Frazier et al., 2021). In their MAPS (metacognition, agency, and possible selves) model of self-regulation, Frazier et al. (2021) describe the way agency intersects with metacognition and possible selves to impact behavior and identity development. In the context of this model, they defined agency as, “the exercise of control over our own thought processes, motivation, knowledge, and actions” (p. 306). Agentic development deals not only with external actions taken, but also the ways cultural context and individual identity interact to create an internal dialogue that provides the rationale for behavior. Thus, as I explore the portrayal of protagonists’ agency in this research, the portrayals of their identity
development will also play a role in my analysis of the impact the portrayals may have on young readers’ development of agency.

My research question specifically focuses on students’ development of a sense of agency, which Moore (2016) defines as “the feeling of control over actions and their consequences” (p. 1). In defining agency in the context of a developmental perspective, Schoon and Heckhausen (2019) state simply that agency comprises intentional action and action regulation. Developing a sense of agency is a key factor in an individual learning to take responsibility for their actions as well as feeling empowered to make decisions that will impact their life (Frith, 2014; Moore, 2016).

The cultural context of an individual’s life will also affect their agentic development. As described in Vygotsky’s (1978) sociocultural theory, the culture of the environment in which we learn and develop as children impacts our sense of self and our cognitive growth. The behavior of parents and other influential people in a child’s life impacts the way children behave, showing them how to wield agency as a tool in reaching desired outcomes (Brod et al., 2023). Different cultures also have different expectations and norms surrounding agentic development, especially surrounding what level of autonomy is appropriate for children (Yoon & Rönnlund, 2021). Therefore, an individual’s agentic development will be influenced by the social and cultural context in which they are raised.

However, as well-known literary scholar Louise Rosenblatt (1993) argued, one important aspect of agentic behavior is the capacity to choose to behave in a way that may be at odds with cultural norms and expectations. In discussing the role of individualistic agency, Rosenblatt stated,

But always there is an individual human being choosing, selectively constructing meaning, and consciously or unconsciously responding in terms of the factors, contextual and human, entering into that particular transaction. We can recognize the shaping power of the environment, the society, and the culture. Yet we should understand the possibilities of choice or aspiration within the parameters of our complex culture, with its many subcultures, its ethnic, religious, economic, and social groups, and the diversity of groupings any one individual represents or can
join—to say nothing of awareness of alternatives provided by knowledge of other major cultural patterns! (p. 385)

As Rosenblatt states, “the shaping power of the environment, the society, and the culture” (p. 385) plays a large role in how an individual decides to behave. However, contextual limitations and influences can only go so far in impacting someone’s behavior; each person’s individual agency, while impacted by both cultural factors and individual values, identity, and personality, is their own to control. Lewis et al. (2007) offer a definition of agency addressing this same idea, presenting agency as “the strategic making and remaking of ourselves, identities, activities, relationships, cultural tools and resources, and histories, as embodied within relations of power” (p. 18). This definition represents the complex interplay of cultural context and individual identity in agentic development.

While some definitions focus on agency primarily as a rejection of norms and expectations in favor of more independent, unconventional actions (e.g., Guilherme, 2006), other sources acknowledge that the expression of agency can also be seen in willing compliance or submission to authority figures or cultural norms (e.g., Brekus, 2011). In contrast to Giroux’s definition of agency as “the ability to imagine the world differently and then to act differently” (in Guilherme, 2006, p. 167), Brekus (2011) offers an expanded definition of agency which includes the “reproduction of social structures as well as the transformation of them” (p. 78). Agency is therefore expressed not only when one endeavors to change the world around them, but also when they accept and maintain the status quo. As a facet of identity development, I would posit that the choice to reproduce social structures, such as complying with parental limits, is similarly agentic to the decision to reject such limits.

For the purposes of this study, I have chosen to synthesize this wide range of perspectives on agency into a definition I will use to guide my data collection and analysis of the portrayal of protagonists’ agency across my text set. While some might find tensions between the different perspectives of agency (undoubtedly, certain scholars would see their work as being at odds with that of others), I have chosen to incorporate what I feel are the most salient concepts present in each perspective so as to encapsulate many different aspects of agency in my own working definition. This takes into account
the role of agency in different disciplines such as psychology, education, and philosophy, (Brod et al., 2023). It also bears in mind perspectives that view agency as “an individual-level construct fundamental for social action and choice” as well as perspectives of those who “focus on the dynamic interrelations between a changing individual and changing social structures,” two differing perspectives of agency contrasted by Schoon and Heckhausen (2019, p. 136). In crafting this synthesis, I define agency as the capacity to think, decide, and act for oneself in identity formation and the optional acceptance of socialized norms.

**Agency in Education**

Multiple perspectives on agency are relevant to the role of an educator because of the crucial impact that students’ sense of agency has on their learning (Patall et al., 2019; Brod et al., 2023). Critical theorists have long advocated for empowering students through supporting the development of their agency, such as in Freire’s (1972) concept of “praxis,” or the distinctly humanizing practice of “reflection and action upon the world in order to transform it” (p. 52). Facilitating praxis in the classroom requires educators to support and encourage students’ development of agency so that they can see themselves as capable of changing the world around them through their thoughts and actions. Giroux pointed out in an interview in 2019 that,

> Education, in the final analysis, is really about the production of agency. What kind of agents are we going to produce? What kind of narratives are we going to produce that students can understand, that enlarge their perspective not only on the world but on their relationship to others and themselves? (in França, para. 3)

Whether teachers choose to acknowledge it or not, the classroom environment that they facilitate influences students’ sense of agency and world views (Anderson et al., 2019). When educators deliberately address students’ agentic potential in their pedagogy, they can empower students to take responsibility for their own decisions and see themselves as capable of influencing not only their academic progression, but the course of their lives (Vaughn, 2020).

Recent publications of scholars exploring educational settings continue to emphasize the importance of facilitating student agency in the classroom setting. Vaughn (2020) asserts the key role of student agency in education and frames it in three major
dimensions, including a dispositional dimension, a motivational dimension, and a positionality dimension. Vaughn further states that in a classroom setting, students’ dispositions are manifested through their agentic intentions and purposes, while persisting and choice-making show the impact of agency on motivation. Students’ interactions and negotiations represent the positionality dimension of agency, showing the influence of both cultural and individual identity development on agentic behavior.

Relating to Vaughn’s motivational dimension of agency, Reeve and Shin (2020) point out that “Agency is motivation. It is the student’s desire, intention, and sense of purpose to produce intentional and strategic changes in one’s functioning and in one’s surrounding environment” (p. 151). Motivation is crucial in students’ achievement and engagement in the classroom, so teachers who cultivate an increased sense of student agency are thereby reinforcing students’ motivation to learn (Vaughn, 2020; Weinstein, 2022). With all the different demands placed on instructional time, it may seem too difficult or inconvenient to teachers to prioritize student agency and voice in their classrooms. However, the research suggests that opportunities to practice agency in students’ learning helps students gain motivation and confidence, as well as critical thinking and other important 21st century skills (Wagner & Dintersmith, 2015). By sacrificing student choice and voice in favor of predetermined, teacher-centered instructional activities, educators rob their students of opportunities to see themselves as powerful, unique, and agentic individuals who are capable of taking responsibility for their learning. Thus, student agency is a key issue in the modern classroom, worthy of further exploration into ways to better support its development.

Literature surrounding student agency suggests myriad ideas for its implementation in the classroom. Practices such as inviting student self-assessment, implementing an autonomy-supportive classroom management, and centering instruction around topics that students find relevant and engaging have been explored as ways to facilitate student agency in the classroom (Nieminen & Tuohilampi, 2020; Reeve, 2020). Another important contributor to a classroom environment that supports agency is the incorporation of children’s literature that can provide opportunities for students to engage with the agentic behavior (or the lack thereof) shown by characters.
Children’s Literature in Education

Children’s literature plays a crucial role in all domains of students’ learning and as such is an invaluable resource in educating young learners (Bettelheim, 1976; Young et al., 2020). Beyond the obvious role children’s literature plays in language arts instruction, it also has potential for integration with other subjects such as social studies, science, art, and math (Burns, 2010; Morrison & Young, 2008; Thatcher, 2001; Tunnell & Ammon, 1993). Additionally, children’s literature can be used to illustrate principles of social and emotional development in ways that children can naturally understand and apply to their own lives, especially with teacher-provided scaffolding (Cartledge et al., 2022). For many students, there is an inherent attractiveness in children’s literature that teachers can capitalize on as they seek to create a classroom environment that supports all domains of children’s development. The incorporation of children’s literature in classrooms, both through a rich, diverse, and accessible classroom library and through literature integration in many areas of instruction allows students to enjoy the many developmental benefits children’s literature has to offer (Young et al., 2020).

Children’s literature is a highly relevant resource in supporting students’ sense of agency because it could allow for exploration of unfamiliar settings, perspectives, and behaviors (Young et al., 2020). Sims Bishop’s (1990) seminal scholarship describing different works of children’s literature as mirrors, windows, and sliding glass doors powerfully illustrates this concept by describing the unique opportunities for cultural learning that literature provides children. While students may have limited opportunities to interact with individuals who have different backgrounds or experiences from their own, literature can offer vicarious experiences with countless different cultural environments and perspectives (Newstreet et al., 2019). These experiences can increase students’ empathy and encourage them to reflect on their own cultures and perspectives more critically. Tatar (2009) supports this same line of reasoning, pointing out that,

Children, unable to choose the social and geographical setting in which they grow up, are dealt an environmental hand that they have little power to change. Even family wealth cannot guarantee the comforts of friendship and the enabling power of agency. (p. 23)
Tatar further explains how reading about characters in books who “challenge social conventions and aspire to become agents of change” (p. 27) empowers and inspires children to imitate agentic traits shown by the characters. Stated simply and profoundly, “Read early in life, words and stories powerfully affect the formation of identity.”

**Analyzing Agentic Behavior in Literature**

Previous studies have explored depictions of agency in different genres and categories of texts. For example, McDowell (2002) explored how the novel *Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry* encouraged subversive child agency through “the demystification of history and the unveiling of power structures” (p. 213). In contrast to the commonly didactic tone of classic children’s literature, *Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry* presents a story where adults empower children by teaching them to think critically about the way the world works and then to respond to circumstances according to the dictates of their own consciences.

Vaughn et al. (2021) completed a similar investigation with a set of nonfiction picture books, analyzing the contextualization of agency in Orbis Pictus Award-winning texts from 1990 to 2021. They categorized each act of agency by protagonists across the text set, analyzed the positionality of the protagonists, and identified barriers to their agency. Overall, the trends seen in the text set suggested that many nonfiction picture books lacked agentic characters with whom children could relate, leading Vaughn et al. to “call to action the authors of nonfiction and informational texts to create texts that reflect children engaging in opportunities for agency” (p. 48). In a related study, Vaughn et al. (2022) analyzed agentic depictions of protagonists in fifteen Pura Belpré awarded texts. Their critical analysis of the texts resulted in the identification of two main themes of agency: shifting identities and relationality. In contrast to child protagonists of nonfiction picture books, the protagonists of the Pura Belpré texts were “depicted as active individuals who are able to express their ideas, make decisions, and exert influence to transform their environments” (p. 355). These various investigations of the ways agency is portrayed in children’s literature offer insights about how agentic portrayals of protagonists can promote readers’ development of agency.

In a more fantasy-specific context, Chappell (2008) examined the relationship between agency, resistance, and the postmodern child in J.K. Rowlings’ internationally
bestselling Harry Potter series. Chappell explored how the Harry Potter series, in contrast to modernist fantasy literature such as The Wizard of Oz and Charlie and the Chocolate Factory, “may be preparing young readers to critically engage with power structures in their lives and become architects of their own agency” (p. 282). By exploring the students’ experiences with different power structures in the wizarding world such as the wizarding community, the Ministry of Magic, Hogwarts Academy, and Lord Voldemort, Chappell concludes, “The Harry Potter series suggests to young readers that they can embrace qualities of postmodern childhood—ambiguity, complexity, agency, resistance—rather than accept binaries promoted and constructed in traditional literature” (p. 292). As a groundbreaking series that catalyzed the repopularization of children’s fantasy, Harry Potter set the stage for authors of fantasy texts to further explore the potential for protagonists to navigate issues of agency and autonomy in fantastical settings (Gunelius, 2008).

**The Truth in Fantasy**

While all genres of literature offer different experiences and benefits to the reader, this study focuses specifically on the unique potential of fantasy literature to impact students’ lives. Fantasy literature by nature is a genre that defies definitions and limitations (Zipes, 2009). However, it is typically described as a subgenre of speculative fiction that often incorporates magic, imaginary worlds, epic quests, aspects of folktales and mythology, and the like. Due to the freedom with which fantasy authors can wield their imaginations as they write, fantasy literature creates a uniquely agentic space for both the writer and reader by transcending the limitations of reality and allowing for exploration that is not possible anywhere else (Zipes, 2009). The characters in fantasy novels also tend to have a greater level of both agency and responsibility than their realistic fiction, historical fiction, or nonfiction counterparts, due to the fantastical powers and environments in their stories (Chappell, 2008). In my own experience as a reader, there is both a sense of freedom from the mundane and a sense of responsibility for characters to act nobly in fantasy texts that seem to empower the reader to step up and similarly become the heroic protagonist in their own life. These different attributes have piqued my interest in fantasy texts as a resource for building readers’ sense of agency.
In contrast to the sentiments shared above, fantasy literature for children has sometimes been criticized as overly escapist, violent, frightening, and simply a waste of time (Tunnell, 1994). However, research that has been done to investigate these objections dismisses them as largely unfounded (e.g., Tunnell, 1994). In fact, Tunnell asserts that the opposite has been shown to be true in many cases; low-fantasy children, or children who have less interest in or access to fantasy literature tended to be less in touch with reality and more prone to aggressive behavior, while high-fantasy children were likely to be more creative, more resilient in the face of real-world challenges, and less aggressive. Tunnell states, “Instead of a genre that threatens our children, fantasy is fundamentally the most important kind of story to share with them” (p. 606). Fantasy empowers humanity by freeing our imaginations from the limits of reality, which in many cases allows us to more fully explore how the world works.

Zipes (2009) argues for the importance of fantasy by pointing out that it is impossible to truly know the difference between fantasy and reality, and Tunnell (1994) further supports this claim by identifying fantastic imaginings as the inspiration for many scientific advances throughout history. In addressing concerns about the potential for fantasy literature to frighten children, C.S. Lewis (1980), author of the well-known children’s fantasy series The Chronicles of Narnia, stated, “Since it is so likely [children] will meet cruel enemies, let them at least have heard of brave knights and heroic courage” (p. 216). The real world is full of monsters and perilous situations just as frightening, if not more so, than those depicted as the villains of fairy tales and epic journeys. When children read fantasy literature, they can learn to use their agency in ways that demonstrate resilience, courage, and determination from the examples of fictional characters.

Summary

Because of the crucial impact that a child’s sense of agency has on all domains of their development, educators should be facilitating classroom environments where students’ agentic development is promoted (Vaughn, 2020). An important aspect of a classroom environment is the classroom library and the way children’s literature is viewed and integrated into instruction (Young et. al, 2020). Due to its creative and unconventional nature, children’s fantasy literature has unique potential to exemplify
agentic behavior of protagonists in a way that can benefit readers’ development of agency.
CHAPTER 3
Methods and Theoretical Framework

Reader-Response Theory and Transactional Theory

I collected the data for this thematic literary analysis using the theoretical framework of reader-response theory, which focuses on a reader’s personal experience reading a text and responding to it rather than the author or content of a text. I chose to use this framework because it addresses students’ authentic responses to books, which I believe play a more powerful role in the book’s influence on its reader than other factors such as perceived authorial intent. Within the umbrella of reader-response theory lies the more specific transactional theory, as formulated by renowned scholar Louise Rosenblatt (1993). She categorizes different types of reader responses, or “transactions” between the text and the reader, as being on a spectrum from aesthetic to efferent—aesthetic meaning that the reader is approaching the text for the purpose of experiencing a private, personal response to the text, and efferent meaning that the reader is approaching the text with the intent to analyze the “public, verifiable aspects of what is being evoked” (p. 383). As Rosenblatt states, “both aspects of meaning…are always present in our transactions with the world.” Therefore, readers experience transactions with texts on a continuum from the aesthetic to the efferent perspective, and, depending on what intentions a reader brings into a transaction, they adopt one or the other as the more influential stance.

As both a preservice teacher wanting to be informed of current trends and influential books, as well as a lover of children’s literature in general, I had previously read each of the texts used in this study with a predominantly aesthetic stance. Returning to each text for the purpose of analyzing the agentic behavior of the protagonists represented a more efferent stance on my part, although I also attended somewhat to my own personal feelings and experiences as I read. My experiences reading these novels with two different stances expanded my perspective and allowed me to view the books as capable of offering readers enjoyable and thought-provoking personal experiences, as well as containing potential for a more in-depth literary analysis of themes of agency.

In addressing the issue of helping students develop their senses of agency, there are many approaches I could have taken. As I mentioned in Chapter 2, I chose to focus on literary analysis because of the prevalent role of children's literature in the classroom
environment as well as the powerful impact children’s literature has on student’s development. I have seen through my own experience how students’ responses to the literature they consume impact their beliefs and behavior, and the research cited above supports the analysis of children’s literature as a meaningful way to explore its potential uses and impact in a classroom setting.

**Reflexive Thematic Analysis**

I analyzed the texts in this study through the methodological framework of reflexive thematic analysis (RTA). RTA describes a family of qualitative methods that are used to code qualitative data and then generate themes to analyze the data. It is described as rigorous and systematic, but also fluid and recursive to allow for flexibility in deriving themes from the data collected (Braun & Clarke, 2019). Rather than producing an in-depth analysis on each case of study (i.e., each novel, in the context of this literary analysis), RTA aims to develop themes “across cases from codes, following the coding of the entire data set” (Braun & Clarke, 2021, p. 41). These themes, as described by Braun and Clarke (2019) are “patterns of shared meaning underpinned or united by a core concept” (p. 592). Thus, the themes created through RTA are not ideas already present in the data that emerge through analysis, but rather ideas that are constructed by the researcher. “Themes are creative and interpretive stories about the data, produced at the intersection of the researcher’s theoretical assumptions, their analytic resources and skill, and the data themselves” (p. 594).

Terry and Hayfield (2020) describe the six main steps of creating a reflexive thematic analysis as “(1) familiarising yourself with the data; (2) generating codes; (3) constructing candidate themes; (4) reviewing potential themes; (5) defining and naming themes; and (6) producing the report” (p. 434). This process is “creative, reflexive and subjective, with researcher subjectivity understood as a resource” (Braun & Clarke, 2019, p. 591). I chose to use RTA in analyzing my text set for portrayals of protagonists’ agency because of its flexible and recursive nature in allowing for data gathering and analysis that is shaped by my own transactions with the texts. As the data analysis in this study is qualitative by nature, RTA provided a productive and systematic way for me to approach the concept of agency and how it is expressed through textual examples from a researcher’s perspective.
Text Selection

In selecting texts to analyze in this research, I chose to use the criteria of middle-grade fantasy novels that have won the John Newbery Medal in the past fifteen years. As mentioned above, middle-grade novels are defined as literature written for readers between the ages of 8 and 12 (MasterClass, 2021). This age range of books was most relevant to me as an upper-grade elementary school educator, as students ages 8-12 are typically in grades 3-6. The John Newbery Medal is awarded annually to “the author of the most distinguished contribution to American literature for children” (American Library Association, n.d.). I chose novels that have won this medal not only because the award attests to the quality of the texts, but it also makes it more likely that these texts will be found available for students in school and classroom libraries (Wolf et al., 2010). I focused specifically on the fantasy genre because of the unique potential I saw in fantasy novels to portray protagonists’ agency in insightful ways, as I described in Chapter 1.

By choosing to analyze novels published in the last 15 years, my criteria resulted in a text set that offered a wide range of fantasy subgenres (including high fantasy, animal fantasy, supernatural fantasy, folklore, and science fiction) as well as diversity in the authors, characters, and contexts of the novels. I personally joined the ranks of middle-grade readers 15 years ago, so the earlier books in the text set are ones my own peers and I might’ve read, while many of the later books are now popular among middle-grade readers of today.

Researcher Influences and Identities

Since the data collection in this research was done through my own perspective as a unique individual and teacher candidate, an important aspect of the methodology called for by the framework of RTA is my prospective reflexivity. In approaching this research, I positioned myself relative to the text in the context of two main perspectives; I found myself identifying and describing the agentic behavior first through the lens of a former, child self, and second, as a preservice teacher who was interested in its potential as a teaching tool. My own past experience as a young reader played a potentially powerful role in my interpretation of the texts, and my experiences in various classroom environments as a preservice teacher have also certainly played a role in my process.
Thus, in this brief section, I will describe aspects of my own identity and perspective, both from my own childhood as well as clinical preservice teaching experiences, that likely played a role in the way I collected and analyzed the data regarding protagonists’ agentic behavior.

As a child, I had the privilege of growing up in an upper-middle class home with two White, college-educated parents and a high focus on literacy. My house was full of both books and people who valued them. My parents would not only read books to my siblings and me, but they also read for pleasure in their own spare time. I believe that my parents’ attitude to the importance of literacy and the value of books as sources of information, entertainment, and valuable life lessons has impacted me and the high importance that I place on literacy and literature as well. Further, many of the books I remember my parents reading aloud to me as a child were fantasy literature, including books such as C.S. Lewis’s *The Chronicles of Narnia*, J.R.R. Tolkien’s *The Hobbit* and *Lord of the Rings*, J.K. Rowlings’ Harry Potter series, Lloyd Alexander’s *The Chronicles of Prydain*, and P.L. Travers’ *Mary Poppins* series. I believe that these early exposures to fantasy literature paired with my own strong imagination and love for storytelling have contributed to my personal love for fantasy literature.

In school, I was a very obedient, well-behaved, “teacher’s pet” type of student, and I felt high pressure to live up to others’ expectations of me and perform well academically. I would even go as far as to say that I was intimidated by freedom because of the many opportunities for “failure” or “deficiency” it presented. However, I liked reading, not only because it was something that I excelled at, but because it was not something that could go wrong. I had the chance to explore an endlessly vast range of experiences and situations, many challenging and dangerous, without personally having to take those risks. This provided me with opportunities to grapple with difficult feelings, decisions, and circumstances in a safe space, which I believe has benefited me in my academic, social, and emotional development. Therefore, my own past experiences with reading have doubtlessly influenced the way I approach the topic of reader response-theory and student agency by providing me with personal evidence to suggest that reading can provide a powerful learning space for students.
The attitudes toward student agency that are taught by my university professors, as well as those that I have observed in the different classrooms where I have been placed for clinical teaching experiences, have also played into my own perspective on the identification and analysis of the agentic behavior of protagonists in my selected texts. For example, many of my professors have recommended very intentionally facilitating student agency only within a teacher-directed framework that protects against disorder and confusion. Much of the research I have done on student agency in relation to this study suggests that prioritizing student agency in the classroom is also a key factor in educational best practices (Reeve & Shin, 2020; Vaughn 2020). As a preservice educator, I am learning to balance many sources of information, such as expert advice of professors and mentor teachers, educational research, and my own life experiences as I craft my own teaching philosophies and practices.

In my first clinical placement, spending a few days a week in a third-grade classroom, I observed an environment similar to those described by my professors, where the students’ opportunities for agentic learning were presented in the carefully crafted context where the teacher determined what students would and would not participate in deciding. Of course, all classrooms function under the direction of the teacher, as she or he is the professional in the room, responsible for the wellbeing and academic progress of all the students. However, in my second clinical experience, I have had the chance to experience a much lower teacher control style of management and teaching in a fifth-grade class that is more closely aligned with principles described in research that advocates for student agency (Nieminen & Tuohilampi, 2020; Wagner & Dintersmith, 2015). This experience has opened my eyes to both the benefits and challenges of such a setup, leading me to place higher value on the importance of facilitating a high level of student agency in the classroom, but also making me more cognizant of the challenges that goal presents. Thus, the contrast between the idealized concept of championing student agency that is presented in much of the forward-thinking research on the topic, and the realities of the challenges of classroom management and organization in practice contributes significantly to my opinions and perspectives on the role of student agency in child development and education.
Data Collection and Construction of Thematic Analysis

My first step in completing this reflexive thematic literary analysis was working cooperatively with my thesis advisor to explore the process of literary analysis with a selection of fantasy picture books. We discussed the kinds of behavior I might be looking for in the novels and how I could employ the efferent perspective as I approached the texts, looking for potential evidence that the protagonists would provide examples of agentic behavior which readers could consider, respond to, and learn from. My working definition of agency included Bandura’s (2006) idea of agentic behavior as acting to “influence intentionally one's functioning and life circumstances” (p. 164), as well as the perspective of Lewis et al. (2007), who included the concept of “the strategic making and remaking of ourselves, identities, activities, relationships, cultural tools and resources, and histories, as embodied within relations of power” (p. 18). This led me to approach the process by beginning to read the first novel of my text set, taking digital handwritten notes on every instance of behavior I observed where the protagonists intentionally influenced their own functioning and life circumstances and strategically acted to make and remake themselves and other aspects of their contexts.

After an initial pass of the first novel I chose, The Girl Who Drank the Moon (Barnhill, 2017), I reconvened with my collaborating advisor to go over the notes and discuss the process of collecting them. Armed with encouragement and advice to deepen and expand my perspective on the identification of behavior, I repeated the process with the rest of my four novels, moving first to Flora and Ulysses: The Illuminated Adventures (DiCamillo, 2013), then The Last Cuentista (Higuera, 2021), followed by The Graveyard Book (Gaiman, 2008), and finally When You Trap a Tiger (Keller, 2020). The order in which I read the novels was largely determined by a desire to alternate the different types of fantasy (i.e., high fantasy, animal fantasy, science fiction, supernatural, folklore) and keep a fresh perspective about each book as I read it.

After I had completed the reading and annotation of each of the texts, I converted my digital handwritten notes into digital text and went through the notes for each book, highlighting and categorizing each instance of agentic behavior into major themes of agency. First, I defined the most salient themes of agency I observed within the notes recorded for each individual book, and then I looked for intertextually overlapping
themes and overarching concepts. As I wrestled with the naming and construction of united themes across the whole text set, I revisited my definition of agency by completing my literature review of relevant research and writing on the subject. My refined definition of agency helped me construct themes to describe and analyze the data I had recorded across the text set into six key categories: intentional identity construction, authorial framing of experiences, transfer of agency, adoption or rejection of mentors, prosocial behavior, and moral discretion.

During the reading process, I also noted and acknowledged the presence of significant themes of agency in relation to supporting characters. These additional examples were shown both by young peers of the protagonists, as well as caregivers and other adults in positions of power in the lives of the protagonists. These observations are not directly linked to the agentic behavior of the protagonists, and therefore did not play into my analysis and coding process, but they could be relevant in another study more focused on the portrayals of the agentic behavior of supporting characters in these novels. There are also many intriguing differences in the positionality of the protagonists, such as gender, race, and home or family situation, which likely influenced the opportunities they had to act agentically. These considerations were also not the focus of this specific study but could be investigated further in future research.

After defining the six themes, I revisited my textual annotations and selected the most salient examples of each theme across the texts to describe in conversation with one another. While many of the themes showed up in most, if not all, of the novels, I chose to describe in more depth two or three specific novels for each theme and explore the ways their protagonists exhibited agentic behavior that characterized the essence of the theme. Following the construction of those examples, I examined and discussed the educational implications of each theme and its relevance to educators.
CHAPTER 4
Findings and Discussion

In analyzing the agentic behavior of the protagonists in each book from my text set, I noticed the emergence of some common themes. Despite each protagonist’s unique personality, setting, and challenges, I observed specific trends that were present across the novels. After reading the texts and taking notes on all the agentic behavior I observed, as detailed in the previous section, I then went through the data and began to sort the protagonists’ many thoughts, decisions, and actions that I had recorded into different categories. This process led me to construct six themes within the two major aspects of agency in my definition (i.e., identity formation and the optional acceptance of socialized norms). I recognized the underpinning role of agency in each character’s coming-of-age arc, as each of the texts could be described as a *bildungsroman* of sorts, focusing on the formative moral and psychological development of the protagonists. Within the coming-of-age motif and the two major aspects of agency from my definition, I categorized the protagonists’ various agentic behavior into six themes: intentional identity construction, authorial framing of experiences, transfer of agency, adoption or rejection of mentors, prosocial behavior, and moral discretion. (See Table 1 for brief descriptions of each theme with textual examples and implications for educators.) While each of the discussed themes is relevant in every novel in my text set, I will discuss just the most salient examples from two or three of the novels in addressing each theme.

Table 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Textual Example</th>
<th>Possible Implications for Educators</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Intentional Identity Construction</td>
<td>The agentic behavior protagonists display in the ways they actively and intentionally construct their own identities.</td>
<td><em>When You Trap a Tiger</em> (Keller, 2020) Lily first meets with the tiger and is afraid to accept the deal she offers. The second time they meet, Lily chooses to be bolder and accept the deal (pp. 95-99, 144-149).</td>
<td>Educators can teach students to make text-to-self connections in small group or whole class discussions to help them learn from protagonists’ examples.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Authorial Framing of Experience</td>
<td>Protagonists using their agency to frame events in a</td>
<td><em>Flora and Ulysses: The Illuminated Adventures</em> (DiCamillo, 2013)</td>
<td>Educators can lead students in exercises to teach concepts like</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transfer of Agency</td>
<td>Protagonists’ behavior in navigating the shifting of agency and roles between caregivers and children over time.</td>
<td><em>The Girl Who Drank the Moon</em> (Barnhill, 2020)</td>
<td>Xan accidentally enmagicks Luna as an infant by feeding her moonlight. Later, Luna drinks moonlight herself, and feeds it to Xan when she is weak and in need (pp. 25, 340, 352).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adoption or Rejection of Mentors</td>
<td>Intentionally following the examples or advice of people or other resources, or intentionally rejecting the available exemplars.</td>
<td><em>The Graveyard Book</em> (Gaiman, 2008)</td>
<td>Initially, Bod doesn’t like Miss Lupescu and thinks her instruction is pointless, but in moments of peril, he recognizes the value of her lessons and afterwards is more attentive and respectful to her (pp. 72-97).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prosocial Behavior</td>
<td>Using agency to take responsibility for helping and leading others</td>
<td><em>The Last Cuentista</em> (Higuera, 2021)</td>
<td>Petra decides to help the other children in her situation by telling them stories of hope and then planning and executing an escape against all odds (pp. 122-125, 152, 294).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Moral Discretion</td>
<td>Using agentic discretion to determine when to discard conventional moral expectations (i.e., lying to protect someone).</td>
<td><em>The Last Cuentista</em> (Higuera, 2021)</td>
<td>Petra chooses to eavesdrop in order to gather information and lies to her friends to try and protect them and help them escape (pp. 15, 101, 189, 302).</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Intentional Identity Construction**

I observed protagonists in the selected texts make many conscious, purposeful decisions to shape the development of their identities. Despite the notable influence that
each protagonist’s circumstances have on their identity development, the forward progression of the protagonists’ identity formation seems to be largely determined by the decisions and actions they take in pursuit of becoming who they want to be.

**Textual Examples: When You Trap a Tiger**

Lily, the protagonist of *When You Trap a Tiger* (Keller, 2020), goes through a deep and intense process of self-discovery as she and her family members learn to embrace a new facet of her identity. While Lily initially feels invisible and trapped in a stereotype described by her sister Sam as the QAG (quiet Asian girl) stereotype, she discovers a fierceness under her layers of shyness and fear that she chooses to explore and embrace. Lily’s world is changing as her Halmoni battles brain cancer and Lily meets a mythical tiger who claims she can help her. Lily is unwilling to stay invisible while her beloved Halmoni suffers, and she decides to step into a new, proactive role to try and help. It takes time and commitment for Lily to readjust her self-perception and habits as she copes with the growing pains that accompany the process of intentionally reshaping one’s identity.

When first conversing with the cunning magical tiger about a deal that might help Lily’s sick Halmoni, Lily feels too frozen and trapped in her own thoughts to agree to the deal until the tiger leaves and it is too late. Despite her desire to be a hero, she is “so afraid of saying the wrong answer that [she doesn’t] say anything at all” (Keller, 2020, p. 99). At her next encounter with the tiger, however, she describes herself peeling back her layers of fear to find a “tiger-hunting fierceness,” and she imagines herself “grabbing that feeling, gripping so hard it hurts” (p. 148). She is “sick of being a QAG, too afraid to do anything” and she agrees to the tiger’s daunting deal. In another encounter, Lily experiments with the power dynamic of conversation with this tiger, first apologizing for her lateness, but then regretting her submission to the tiger’s domination. Lily then demands that the tiger “say please” (p. 186) for the rice cakes she brought her, trying to sound “confident and commanding.” After the tiger responds with “a look as sharp as her teeth,” however, Lily mumbles an apologetic “never mind”.

Over time, Lily progresses in her efforts and becomes more courageous, even audacious, in her behavior, doing things such as filling her friend’s pudding cup with mud when he is unkind about Halmoni’s quirks. When her mom asks her why she did it
and points out how “this isn’t you,” Lily defiantly realizes that it really is her, thinking to herself, “I’ve changed. Maybe the star stories really have changed me, or maybe I’ve changed myself. Somehow that’s both thrilling and terrifying” (Keller, 2020, p. 219). In their final conversation, the tiger encourages Lily to “Take your history, understand where you came from and who you are—then find your own story. Create the story of who you are yet to be” (p. 268). The novel ends with Lily’s commitment to face her own story as it changes and grows, accepting that she is a “tiger-girl,” with both softness and fierceness within her.

**Textual Examples: The Last Cuentista**

Petra, the protagonist of the dystopian sci-fi novel *The Last Cuentista* (Higuera, 2021), also takes a very active role in crafting her own identity rather than letting it be shaped by her circumstances or by others. Her scientifically minded parents valiantly strive to interest Petra in their fields of botany and geology, but she decides to instead aim to be a storyteller like her grandmother, Lita. For example, Petra reminisces on a time when her mother started a fairy-hunting game among the desert plants because she knew Petra loved imagining fairies flitting around among the flowers and cacti. However, while Petra imagines a fairy city “as big as Albuquerque” (p. 106) under a Giant Pipe cactus and invents obstacle courses and riddles prerequisite for entrance to the city, her mother pulls her out of the fantasy to quiz her on the names of the plants around them. “Isn’t botany great?” Petra’s mom asks. “Mmmh,” Petra responds, “realizing what this really is. It was fun while it lasted though” (p. 107).

In contrast to her indifference to botany, she loves the stories Lita tells her from their oral traditions. Lita not only tells stories that fire up Petra’s imagination, but she also invites her to take responsibility for her own identity development, saying, "Set your intention. Proclaim to the universe what you will be" (Higuera, 2021, p. 59). Petra responds, deciding she will always say what she really feels, wear long flowy dresses like Lita, let her hair grow long and wild, and become a storyteller. Even after reluctantly stepping into her role as a botany specialist under the rule of the authoritarian Collective, she resists repressing her inner stories. Her memory is inexplicably not wiped like the other children, perhaps because she clings to the stories of the past during her reprogramming. Through claiming and sharing the stories of her heritage, she goes on to
plant seeds of memory, hope, and freedom in the hearts of her companions and eventually leads them to safety.

**Reflexive Interpretations**

Beyond the examples shared above, I observed many others of the protagonists in the text set displayed this type of agentic, intentional identity construction. This may suggest a trend in fantasy books to feature protagonists who are proactive and intentional in determining the paths of their own destinies and development. For young readers who vicariously accompany said protagonists on their heroic journeys, this trend could be a powerful tool for educators in shaping the ways those readers see themselves and their agency. It has the potential to empower them to explore their own capability to decide for themselves who they want to become and helps them understand how they can go about enacting changes in themselves.

Notably, the characters generally worked against challenges and setbacks as they strove to construct the identities that they desired for themselves. I would suggest that these examples of persistence and commitment to goals and values despite obstacles also have powerful potential to inspire readers to persist in the face of challenges. As students interact transactionally with these and similar texts, they can make meaning of the examples they observe in unique ways that are connected to their own experiences and knowledge. Galda (2013) comments on this phenomenon, stating that,

*The transactionality, or mutuality of the process—reader infuses meaning, text guides and constrains—and the individuality of the process leads to the logical conclusion that there is no one right or fixed meaning, as the language of the text is understood through individual experiences and knowledge, even as it is socially situated, as all language is. (p. 6)*

This would indicate that reading texts with agentic protagonists such as those analyzed in this study can be a powerful way to help students consider deep and important topics such as their own role in the development of their identities because of the versatility of the possible transactions. The novels offer portrayals of young characters taking the initiative in intentionally constructing their own identities, considering their lived experiences and personal desires, in addition to guidance from others. By introducing young readers to fantasy novels that feature protagonists who
demonstrate agentic behavior in the context of intentional identity construction, teachers may be able to help empower students to see themselves as capable of taking action in the deliberate crafting of their own identities while balancing the many factors that influence the decisions they make.

**Authorial Framing of Experiences**

A second theme that I observed across the text set was the protagonists’ use of their agency to frame events in a more familiar, metaphorical, or otherwise preferable context. I was surprised to notice the significant role this theme appeared to play in the majority of the books as I observed situations where the protagonists position themselves as the authors of their own perspectives, telling stories to help them frame their experiences or restating facts in different language to better cope with them.

**Textual Examples: Flora and Ulysses: The Illuminated Adventures**

Flora Buckman, the protagonist of *Flora and Ulysses: The Illuminated Adventures* (DiCamillo, 2013), is struggling to cope with her parents’ divorce when Ulysses, a superhero squirrel, enters the scene. Flora is an avid reader of comic books despite her mother’s claims that the “idiotic high jinks of comics” pale in comparison to the “bright light of true literature” that Flora ought to be reading (p. 5). When an incident involving Ulysses, the formerly ordinary squirrel, and Flora’s neighbors’ new vacuum cleaner leaves Ulysses with powers of consciousness, super strength, and flight, Flora steps eagerly into the role of Ulysses’ new sidekick. Flora’s behavior stands as a prime example of this authorial framing of experiences through the way she situates her experiences in comic book language. Flora regularly offers evidence to the reader of her inner workings and decision-making processes by her dramatic, comic book-inspired utterances. For example, throughout the novel Flora states aloud the phrase, “this malfeasance must be stopped!” (p. 7) as a way to motivate herself to action and, occasionally, to communicate her intentions to others.

In some cases, her perspective-framing is more internal, such as imagining to herself the words, “A superhero squirrel rested at her feet, and so she was not lonely at all” (DiCamillo, 2013, p. 37) or “Destiny could no longer be forestalled, the arch-nemesis must be faced!” (p. 134). Flora understands that words are powerful, and she utilizes that by agentically wielding her words as a tool for understanding the world around her and
responding to it. Aside from framing experiences with catchy phrases, she also interprets events through her comic book frame by “casting” herself and others in archetypal roles: Ulysses is the superhero, Flora herself is his sidekick, Flora’s mother is the arch-nemesis, etc.

**Textual Examples: The Last Cuentista**

Revisiting Petra in the distant future (Higuera, 2021), we see comparable behavior in the way she shapes her own experiences by telling stories not as they were told to her, but with her own perspectives and experiences woven in. She takes her rich heritage of stories from Lita and crafts them into a living, changing, malleable mechanism to describe and shape her experiences in her strange new environment. For example, Petra changes the description of an ogre in a story she tells her young friend Zeta-4, describing him as having “see-through skin and a voice like a serpent” (p. 122) to liken him to the unnatural appearance of the members of the Collective all around them. She also ends the story with a nontraditional twist, giving the victory and ownership of the kingdom to the princess in the end, rather than the prince.

Over time she becomes more and more confident stepping into the world of folklore as an agentic author, harnessing the power of storytelling to help her process her experiences and move forward confidently into the future. In the final pages of the novel, Petra retells a story Lita told her of a fire snake who flies too close to his mother, Earth, and destroys her, just as the comet destroyed Earth at the start of the book. Petra expands the story, imagining spaces in the aftermath of the collision where she and the others would share stories of loved ones they lost on Earth. She states that the fire snake “sends his comforting winds to the humans, a promise he will keep a safe distance, but send his breath to keep them warm. A reminder that he’s here to protect us, the other children of his mother, Earth” (p. 312). This heart-warming ending is followed by the children discovering the smoke of a campfire that leads them to the surviving colony of humans from the first ship to leave Earth. Petra has come full circle as a storyteller, crafting her own stories to help her and others process what has happened to them and be empowered to act, just as Lita inspired her.
Reflexive Interpretations

This theme of agentic behavior may be my personal favorite because of how unexpectedly yet powerfully it manifested across the different texts. Beyond Flora and Petra, the other protagonists also showed similar authorial framing of their experiences by choosing to shape their thoughts and feelings about what they’ve gone through and what they will do next in the format of a story. In framing this theme, I would argue that this type of agency represents a powerful claim of both capability and responsibility, as the protagonists see themselves as being able to influence events by the way they think about and respond to them.

In a classroom setting, this could be a very helpful attitude for teachers to help instill in their students. For example, students who learn to apply this mindset during writing instruction can grow to see themselves as individuals capable of writing things that will impact the lives of their readers and change the world for the better (Harste et al., 1988). While it is important for them to learn from model texts and other examples of writing they encounter, to truly blossom as great writers, students must be confident that their own individual voices matter, and by writing, they add a valuable contribution to the world at large (Coker & Ritchey, 2015).

In addition to the ways this type of agentic behavior impacts students’ academic development, it also may help students know how to be resilient and cope with challenges, especially confusing ones. Just as Flora goes through the complications of her parents’ divorce and Petra grapples with the oppressive ideology of her dystopian society, every young person in every classroom faces complex challenges and concerns that have no easy solution nor one-size-fits-all response. It can be very discouraging for teachers to try and help students who struggle because of challenging home situations, but by empowering students with an authorial mindset, teachers may be able to play a significant role in helping students learn to cope. By teaching students to see themselves as the authors of their own lives and actions, teachers could potentially equip students with the mental and emotional tools necessary for them to deal with the complicated issues they face by reframing them in a more approachable or familiar way.
Transfer of Agency

The next theme that I observed across the text set was the transfer of agency from caregiver to child as the child matures. This is often considered a natural process that all children must go through with their caregivers (Abebe, 2019), and the novels in my text set explore this process with many examples of how the protagonists and their caregivers navigate their shifting agency and roles in the relationship.

Textual Examples: The Girl Who Drank the Moon

In *The Girl Who Drank the Moon* (Barnhill, 2016), an infant is taken from her unwilling parents by the Elders of the Protectorate and left in the forest as a sacrifice to placate the “evil” witch. Xan, the witch in question, is not evil and simply rescues and rehomes the infants she finds mysteriously abandoned in the forest year after year. When Xan rescues this girl in particular, she becomes attached and absently feeds the child moonlight, enmagicking her. Xan decides to adopt the girl herself and names her Luna. Xan initially refuses to use magic to influence Luna as a baby, such as to keep her from crying, because she believes that “magic should never be used to influence the will of another person” (p. 36).

When Luna turns five, however, she begins to wield her powerful, chaotic magic without any grasp of accountability for the pandemonium she creates; she turns bread dough into a hat, houses into birds, a stream into cake, and her bog monster friend Glerk into a bunny. Xan frantically tries to keep up by undoing all her spells, but Luna’s magic drains Xan’s own magic, leaving Xan exhausted and depleted. She eventually resorts to casting a spell on Luna to put her to sleep, breaking her commitment to never interfere with the will of another, and doing so makes her feel ill. “What have I done? Xan asked herself” (Barnhill, 2016, p. 55, emphasis in original). Xan tries to teach Luna to control her magic, but Luna doesn’t understand what she is doing, or even what magic is. Soon Xan sees no alternative to casting a spell to lock Luna’s magic away inside of her until she grows old enough to control it responsibly.

Xan’s spell, while preventing the chaos of Luna’s magic usage, has unintended consequences that lead to Luna being unable to even know of the existence of magic. This effectively removes Luna’s agency in learning about and using her magical abilities, as Luna lives day to day with no knowledge of the great power concealed within her.
When she approaches her 13th birthday, her magic begins to re-emerge just as Xan’s own magic and energy begins to drain away from her. This symbolically initiates the transfer of agency; as Xan becomes less and less capable of caring for Luna, Luna starts to gain power to not only take care of herself, but also to take care of Xan.

In an act veritably dripping with symbolism, Luna gathers moonlight for herself to drink, echoing Xan’s act that enmagicked her as a baby: “The moonlight was delicious. She gathered it on her hands and drank it again and again” (Barnhill, 2016, p. 340). The theme continues as Luna asks how she can help her ailing grandmother, and Xan replies by instructing her to “Raise your hand. Let the moonlight collect on your fingertips and feed it to me. It is what I did for you, long ago, when you were a baby” (p. 351). Luna gathers and feeds the moonlight to Xan, signifying that she has stepped into a new role, not only being more responsible for herself, but also for caring for and protecting others. In the end, Luna, her grandmother, and her mother use their combined magic to protect all the people from the eruption of a volcano, and long after Xan is gone, Luna continues to protect and bless the people of the freed Protectorate with her magic. Luna’s journey from being a child bursting with repressed magic to becoming a young woman who claims her magic and uses it to help all around her symbolizes the way that agency transfers from caregiver to child as they mature mentally, physically, and emotionally.

**Textual Examples: The Graveyard Book**

A similar circumstance is presented in *The Graveyard Book* (Gaiman, 2008) as Nobody Owens, Bod, for short, matures and leaves the nest—or graveyard, in this case. Bod first arrives at the graveyard as a young child, following the tragic murder of the rest of his family. The inhabitants of the graveyard decide to take him in, committing to care for him and protect him from those who murdered his family. He is adopted by a family of ghosts and has many of his needs met by his guardian Silas, who is a vampire. However, Bod is a living boy, who ages and progresses despite the stagnant nature of the deceased all around him. A transfer of agency occurs between Bod and the ghostly residents of the graveyard, as he goes from being protected, taught, and cared for by the graveyard as a young child, to stepping up to protect his home from the villainous Jacks of All Trades.

For example, Bod’s original childhood playmates remain ghostly children, while
Bod himself ages normally and seeks out new peers throughout the progression of his growth and maturing. When he reaches a certain age, he recognizes that he can no longer stay in the graveyard and is ready to go out and experience the world of the living. Bod expresses his readiness to step into the drivers’ seat of his own life, saying,

“I want to see life. I want to hold it in my hands. I want to leave a footprint on a desert island. I want to play football with people. I want,” he said, and then he paused, and he thought. “I want everything”. (p. 304)

The graveyard, with its inhabitants who neither age nor change, can no longer keep Bod from the world of the living where he truly belongs, so he moves forward in his life, claiming the right to decide his own destiny for himself.

**Reflexive Interpretations**

Understanding the natural process of the gradual transfer of agency from caregiver to child could help children be prepared to productively handle that ongoing transition themselves, and reading about fictional children successfully navigating that process might offer students insights on how to navigate it in their own lives. Every child eventually grows up and must go through the process of learning to make decisions for themselves that were previously decided for them by others. Abebe (2019) describes this concept of agency as interdependent agency, or “the way in which intergenerational relationships between adults and children play out in everyday life” (p. 10). The interdependent agency of children changes over time; learning to make decisions for oneself is not a one-time event when a child turns eighteen years old. As young children transition into older childhood and teenagerhood, they often begin to take greater ownership of their opinions and desires to make their own decisions regarding many aspects of their lives.

By reading novels that address this transfer of agency from caregivers to children, readers can also have a chance to learn from both positive and negative examples of how this process occurs for others. For example, in Luna’s case, it could be argued that Xan was overly limiting and controlling Luna’s magical growth and development. However, the reader understands why Xan has chosen that course of action and sympathizes with the difficulties that young Luna’s irresponsible use of magic presented. Thus, readers may be able to apply lessons learned from fantasy novels, despite the fantastical contexts
in which they take place, and still apply them to their own experiences. In fact, as Zipes (2009) points out, fantasy novels can be especially relevant in addressing real life concerns because of the freedom with which they can explore the differences between reality and the way we might prefer the world to be. He claims,

> It is through difference that the fantastic provides resistance and illuminates a way forward. It shows what is missing in our lives and refuses to compensate for the lack by proposing solutions and providing categories through which we can define people and situations. (p. 82)

Thus, because of fantastical settings and situations, as well as many characters’ magical abilities, fantasy novels can explore phenomena such as the transfer of agency between a child and their caregiver in uniquely flexible and insightful ways. Through reading and responding to such stories, students may be better able to understand the reasoning that caregivers use when deciding what boundaries may be appropriate to put in place for children in their care, while also learning from examples of ways they can effectively work with their caregivers to negotiate more opportunities to make decisions for themselves as they grow and mature.

**Adoption or Rejection of Mentors**

Since children learn and develop by following the examples of others around them (Vygotsky, 1978), one key aspect of agency to take into consideration is how it enables us to select both examples and nonexamples for who we become and how we behave. Many of the protagonists in my selection of award-winning novels make this type of agentic move by either intentionally following the examples or advice of people or other resources in their lives, or intentionally rejecting the available exemplars and choosing another path.

**Textual Examples: The Graveyard Book**

Bod, the protagonist of *The Graveyard Book* (Gaiman, 2009), is a clear example of this theme of agency in the ways he seeks out the advice of others. Bod is a naturally curious child and is constantly asking questions of anyone who will answer him. He is instructed by his guardian Silas, various other deceased tutors around the graveyard, and later by a matronly werewolf named Miss Lupescu. At his first encounter with her, Bod is uninterested in what “pointless” information and suspiciously healthy food she has to
offer, but during his mishap with a company of ghouls, he suddenly finds great value in the lessons she had forced upon him. Following his rescue from Ghoulheim, Bod returns to his lessons with Miss Lupescu with new appreciation for her expertise and her willingness to pass it on to him.

Bod also has a strong desire to attend school, despite Silas’s misgivings. Bod eventually prevails and attends school for a few short weeks before being forced to withdraw due to his own actions; his efforts to protect the children in younger grades from being harassed by cruel bullies draws exactly the kind of attention to himself that Silas told him he needed to avoid. After dealing with the many unfortunate consequences of that conflict, Bod apologizes to Silas, acknowledging that what he did was “stupid” and “put things at risk”, and promising, “I won’t go back…. Not to that school, and not like that” (Gaiman, 2009, p. 205).

Later in his life, Bod is faced with new challenges and questions surrounding his friend Scarlett and his family’s murders. He seeks out advice, first from the Owenses, his adopted ghostly parents, then from the ghost of the poet Master Trot, and finally from the ancient and malicious spirit, the Sleer. The Owenses don’t have much by way of advice, but Bod is motivated by the responses of Master Trot (“If you dare nothing, then when the day is over, nothing is all you will have gained” [Gaiman, 2009, p. 232]) and the Sleer (“Then go and find your name” [p. 249]) to move forward in learning more about his family’s murders. The decisions Bod made and the person he became over time as a result of those decisions were impacted by the advice he assimilated from the inhabitants of the graveyard where he was raised.

**Textual Examples: Flora and Ulysses: The Illuminated Adventures**

In DiCamillo's (2013) Flora and Ulysses, Flora also exemplifies this type of behavior, first by rejecting the example and advice of her mother in literature preference and instead seeking guidance from sources such as The Illuminated Adventures of the Amazing Incandesto!, Terrible Things Can Happen to You, and The Criminal Element. Throughout her adventures with companions including Ulysses, the superhero squirrel, William Spiver, the temporarily blind neighbor, and Dr. Mescham, the elderly German philosopher, Flora learns to see things from a new perspective and becomes less reliant on her comic books for advice.
For example, when she is at Dr. Mescham’s house, she considers a depressing painting of a giant squid attacking a boat and comments on the tragedy and injustice of the villainous squid’s attack. Dr. Mescham replies by pointing out that giant squids are “the loneliest of all God’s creatures”, and that “loneliness makes us do terrible things” (DiCamillo, 2013, p. 124). Flora considers this and files it away along with her comic book wisdom. Later in the conversation, Flora announces, “I’m a cynic,” and Dr. Mescham points out that “cynics are people who are afraid to believe” (p. 129). Flora asks her if she believes in things, and she says yes. Throughout the book, Flora grapples with the dichotomy presented by her self-proclaimed cynicism and her faith in Ulysses as a superhero squirrel. Flora’s belief in Ulysses as a superhero leads her to accept a new view about herself and the world, which is heavily influenced by advice and examples of others.

**Textual Examples: The Girl Who Drank the Moon**

Finally, in *The Girl Who Drank the Moon* (Barnhill, 2016), Luna goes through a journey of learning to make decisions for herself rather than simply relying on the examples of others to dictate her actions. As Luna grows up, her guardian Xan refuses to discuss the changes that are occurring due to the reemergence of Luna’s magic, including the waning of Xan’s own magic. Luna is painfully aware that Xan is becoming more and more frail, sleeping late into the day and lacking energy for simple tasks. However, Xan refuses to acknowledge or address the changes, and Luna follows suit, thinking to herself, “We are both lying to each other, and neither of us knows how to stop” (Barnhill, 2016, p. 183). As time goes on and the situation worsens, Luna decides she is no longer willing to go along with her grandmother’s pretenses and seeks solutions alone, which leads to her rediscovering her hidden magic and setting off on a journey to try and help Xan, against Xan’s own wishes.

**Reflexive Interpretations**

This theme of the adoption or rejection of mentors is linked with Vygotsky’s (1978) theory of social emotional development and the extent to which we all rely on models for behavior to instruct how we act. While it is very important for young children to learn how to behave based on the examples of others, it is also vital for them to learn to
distinguish between behavior that they should emulate and behavior that they should avoid.

It’s natural for students to look to their family members, peers, and teachers for models of how to behave (Valiente et al., 2020). This adoption of modeled qualities and behaviors can be a very agentic process, as students notice the behaviors of others and strive to match them in their own behaviors. I would suggest that it also may be a process that limits the student’s agency, however, as they may unwittingly prioritize matching the opinions and behaviors of others instead of developing their own opinions and desired behaviors. In these circumstances, it is important for students to understand that they can use their agency and decide to reject aspects of the examples they see around them and either replace them with aspects of behavior that are modeled elsewhere (such as in literature), or with original behavior coming from the student’s own ideas.

I posit that the instances of protagonists both adopting and rejecting mentors in these novels can serve as an example that the students can then look to in agentically determining how they will behave. Students can learn to identify possible sources of good advice and information and be empowered to know that they do not need to make the same decisions that others do, even if they are others that students look up to and admire. By reading and learning from the examples of agentically portrayed protagonists, students may be able to learn to utilize the examples and advice they receive from mentors in their lives, while placing their own internal values and desires as the central guide in determining how they will act.

**Prosocial Behavior**

The protagonists in these award-winning novels also display agentic behavior in the context of taking responsibility to help others. This altruistic behavior shows that a major motivator for many of the decisions the characters make is the happiness and well-being of others.

**Textual Examples: The Last Cuentista**

For example, Petra in *The Last Cuentista* (Higuera, 2021) is a natural leader and cares deeply for the people around her. The reader learns of these qualities from early in the novel, as Petra cares for her younger brother Javier. She feels the desire and responsibility to encourage him and cheer him up when they embark on the frightening
journey of leaving Earth, even though she is afraid herself. This pattern of looking out for others continues as Petra finds herself among a group of peers known as the Zetas who have been brainwashed by the authoritarian Collective. She is trying to blend in with them and is almost ready to give up on resisting, but when one of her young companions has a nightmare, she decides to tell her a story to comfort her. After the Zetas are all uplifted by the story, Petra realizes she feels a responsibility to keep trying for all their sakes. She thinks to herself, “This can’t be the end. This can’t be the way my story ends” (p. 125). Petra continues to tell stories, comforting and encouraging the other Zetas to remember their lives on Earth, while she makes plans to help them all escape. She knows she might have better chances of surviving if she escapes alone, but she feels a responsibility and desire to help her friends escape as well, against all the odds.

Beyond just helping her human friends, Petra also acts agentically to help even members of the Collective. When an individual named Len travels to the surface of the new planet with the Zetas, he begins to have a dangerous reaction to something he encounters. Petra doesn’t want to blow her cover, but she can’t stand by and watch him suffer, so she tries to help him survive. Later, she also feels compassion for Voxy, the young charge of the Collective’s Chancellor. He wants to listen to her stories and help her escape, and he eventually stows away on their escape ship. At the risk of the whole group, Petra allows him to come with them because she believes he deserves freedom just as much as the rest of them. Even in dire circumstances, Petra pushes through, leading the others to safety.

**Textual Examples: The Graveyard Book**

In *The Graveyard Book* (Gaiman, 2008), Bod also uses his agency to help others around him. Upon meeting the ghost of a young witch, Bod feels inspired to help her obtain her own headstone to mark her grave. He is willing to steal a valuable, ancient brooch and sneak out to try and sell it to earn money to buy a headstone just to help his new friend. Even after his efforts to sell the brooch turn out unsuccessful, he is resourceful in using a paperweight and some paint to make a headstone himself. When Bod convinces Silas to let him attend school, he decides to help some younger kids he meets stand up to the bullies that have been terrorizing them for months. This eventually
results in Bod having to leave school because it drew too much attention to himself, but his desire to help others is what motivated his action.

Lily exhibits this theme of agentic behavior throughout the novel *When You Trap a Tiger* (Keller, 2020) as she takes the responsibility upon herself for helping Halmoni. She is used to being the “invisible” one in the family, but she is motivated to step up and be more assertive because of her love and concern for her grandmother. For example, when the mythical tiger requires her to bring rice cakes to their next meeting Lily tries to insist that her family make them together that day, even when no one else wants to. When her efforts to convince her family prove unsuccessful, Lily goes as far as to ask her new friend Ricky if she can come over to his house and make them there. Motivated by the tiger’s promise of being able to help Halmoni, Lily dares to do many assertive things that she never would have done otherwise.

Later in the book, Lily lashes out in anger at Ricky for making fun of Halmoni with his other friends and she tricks him into eating mud. Afterwards, she realizes that Ricky’s dad had just offered Lily’s mom a job and she is worried her action would make her mom lose that opportunity. When her mom insists, she go to Ricky’s house to apologize to him, Lily feels responsible to also apologize to Ricky’s dad: “And I really, really don't want to say anything to Ricky's dad, but when something's wrong, you have to fix it. Especially when it's wrong because of you” (Keller, 2020, p. 231). This reaction demonstrates not only a willingness to do things to help others, but also a sense of responsibility for apologizing to others after knowing you’ve done something wrong.

**Reflexive Interpretations**

These portrayals of prosocial behavior could open spaces for students to learn about ways they can use their agency to help other people, which is an important part of social and emotional development (Gross, et al., 2017). As a preservice teacher, I imagine this would be important for teachers to emphasize in the classroom through interdisciplinary instruction addressing concepts spanning both literacy standards as well as social-emotional wellness standards.

According to Weinstein (2022), one of the main ways that public school impacts children’s development is by facilitating opportunities for students to interact with peers and develop important prosocial skills and behavior. The instruction that takes place in a
classroom regarding healthy relationships has been shown to have a reciprocal impact on the relationships that students develop with one another. Weinstein (2022) argues that by developing a sense of belonging and responsibility to help others in their classroom community, students are better able to engage with academic content. Moreover, by learning about the importance of prosocial behavior through classroom instruction, students are then more able to participate meaningfully in relationships with others.

Beyond the skill of developing meaningful relationships with their peers, the examples presented in the texts I analyzed emphasize the importance of knowing how and when to step into a leadership role to help others, despite the challenges the protagonists and supporting characters face. Becoming creative, proactive, and leadership-oriented individuals is an important aspect of students being prepared to succeed in the innovation era (Wagner & Dintersmith, 2015), and by learning from the agentic behavior of characters developing those skills, students can begin to better practice and develop those skills in their own lives.

**Moral Discretion**

Like most children, the protagonists in the texts understand that there are things that they are supposed to do (or not do) based on a contextual moral code of expectations (Brod et al., 2023). This moral discretion evidences the protagonists’ use of their agency, as each of them encounter situations that they determine call for exceptions to the rules.

**Textual Examples: The Last Cuentista**

The clearest example of this theme is Petra (Higuera, 2021). While she is admittedly one of the protagonists experiencing a lesser amount of influence from trusted parents or guardians during much of the novel, Petra displays this type of agency even before the death of her parents. For example, when she hears her parents talking late at night, she eavesdrops on them discussing the social and political conflicts surrounding the impending destruction of the Earth. She already has a ready-made decoy of herself to tuck into her bed, suggesting that this wasn’t the first time she snuck out of bed to listen in on her parents.

Throughout her journey across space, she regularly tells lies, not only to the controlling officers of the Collective, but also to her companions in the Zeta squad and to her friend Voxy. Her lies are often framed in the context of being for others’ own good,
such as telling the other Zetas she is acting on orders from the Collective, when really, she is working to help them all escape. Petra’s behavior indicates an agentic decision that the exceptional circumstances of her experiences called for an adjusted moral code as far as lying and eavesdropping is concerned.

**Textual Examples: The Graveyard Book**

Bod also shows this type of agentic disregard for conventional moral expectations, particularly in the final conflict with the Jacks of All Trades in the graveyard. In dealing with the Jacks, he enacts consequences on them such as falling down an old grave and breaking an ankle, being trapped in the land of Ghouls, and, most chillingly, being trapped forever in the clutches of the malicious ancient spirit, the Sleer. Even Bod’s companion, Scarlett, is horrified when she realizes he intentionally chose to allow the Sleer to trap Jack Frost, and she calls Bod a monster. However, he grimly stands by his decision, justifying it by the fact that Jack Frost had murdered his family and was doing everything in his power to kill Bod as well.

**Textual Examples: Flora and Ulysses: The Illuminated Adventures**

Flora shows many instances of choosing to do things she knows would normally be considered morally wrong but that she deems acceptable under the circumstances. For example, when she first brings Ulysses home, she decides not to tell her mom, and then she later lies about whether she did bring a squirrel home. When her mom confronts her and tells her she can’t keep the squirrel, Flora doesn’t listen. “Flora turned away. She had a superhero under her pajamas. She didn’t have to listen to her mother, or anybody else for that matter. A new day was dawning, a girl-with-a-superhero kind of day” (DiCamillo, 2013, p. 71). Then, on the advice of a short column called *The Criminal Element*, which is published at the back of her comics books, she eavesdrops on her parents’ conversation as a “Giant Ear” (p. 72). Near the end of the novel, when her mom kidnaps Ulysses, Flora decides to take her mom’s beloved shepherdess lamp as a hostage to bargain with. These actions all evidence intentional decisions to cast off conventional moral expectations when deemed appropriate.

**Reflexive Interpretations**

As explored by Brod et al. (2023), the societies in which we live are interlaced with a huge range of moral expectations and norms that we are all expected to follow.
Adults strive to instill many moral imperatives into children’s lives, teaching them to shun behaviors such as lying, hitting others, speaking unkindly, or disobeying adults. However, an important responsibility that comes along with having agency is understanding that sometimes there are exceptions; lying can be acceptable when it’s to protect others’ feelings or to avoid spilling important secrets, some unkind things do need to be said at times, and not all adults ought to be obeyed. To determine when these exceptions occur, agentic discardment of conventional moral expectations is required. By reading about the examples of protagonists such as those featured in my text set, students may be able to begin to develop a sense of how to identify and respond to situations that call for such exceptions.

This is especially relevant in the classroom because of the central role that classroom management and behavioral expectations play in creating a rich learning environment (Weinstein, 2022). Whether they recognize it or not, all students are using their agency throughout the day as they balance their own goals and desires with classroom procedures, rules, and expectations to determine how to act in the many different situations they encounter (Weinstein, 2022). Classroom management plans that dictate every aspect of students’ behavior will likely leave them less capable of knowing how to determine appropriate behavior themselves. In contrast, the careful construction of classroom goals and expectations that empower students to understand their roles and responsibilities in the context of the classroom can enable them to develop their sense of agency in the context of appropriate moral behavior.

Examples in the texts mentioned above can serve as fruitful starting points for conversations at school about important questions such as “Is it ever okay to lie?” or “What should I do if I disagree with my parents or other adults?” The events in the novels can serve as both positive and negative examples of the results of exploring the boundaries of moral behavior. These conversations surrounding textual examples can not only build students’ social, emotional, and moral development, but they are also opportunities for students to respond meaningfully to literature and construct opinions and generalizable principles based on textual evidence. By using children’s literature to open discussions about using agency to decide what situations may call for moral discretion, educators can support students’ development and prepare them to respond
agentically to the many complex and nuanced circumstances they will undoubtedly encounter throughout their lives.
CHAPTER 5
Conclusions

As previously mentioned in the introduction, a class full of students like those in my mentor teacher’s classroom provide ample evidence that students are not simply blank slates to be written upon by well-meaning adults (Wilson & Peterson, 2006). Rather, each student is a complex and unique individual who is in the process of constructing their evolving identities and world views as they attend school each day and learn both the planned and unplanned curriculum of the classroom. Teachers have a responsibility to establish a classroom where students learn not only state mandated content standards, but also key life skills such as agency and decision-making. My analysis of five Newbery-winning fantasy novels showed that one way to help students develop a sense of agency is through meaningful transactions with children’s literature that features empowered, agentic protagonists.

Looking Inward

In analyzing these novels, my own philosophies about student agency have shifted and broadened, and I have gained many valuable insights regarding teaching practices that may support students’ developing agency. Specifically, studying the ways that protagonists exhibit agentic behavior immersed me in the experiences of children exploring their developing capacity to make decisions that positively impact the paths of their lives. One of my greatest interests in this research as a preservice teacher was to better understand the balance between empowering students to make their own decisions and guiding their behavior and decisions with the experience of an adult and professional educator.

I admit to being surprised by the way my constructed thematic analysis highlighted the importance of agency in children’s moral development and perspective framing. While some of my themes, such as intentional identity construction and adoption or rejection of mentors, represented more conventional, anticipated types of decisions on the part of the protagonists, moral discretion and authorial framing of experiences represented less conventional ways of viewing children’s agency. The idea of empowering children to make their own decisions about what is right and wrong is somewhat nerve-wracking to a young adult being held responsible for the education of a
classroom full of impressionable, developing children. I wonder how the parents of my future students may respond to my construction of that theme. However, in addition to the research base that supports the facilitation of student agency in the classroom, when I remember how soon these children will head out into the world with the responsibility of making life-changing decisions resting on their shoulders every day, I feel the importance of affirming students’ need to begin developing their sense of agency and decision-making skills (with the guidance of trusted adults) from a young age.

Looking Outward

As children’s literature scholar Perry Nodelman (1996) suggests in his book *The Pleasures of Children’s Literature*, best practices in literature instruction dictate that teachers focus on helping children have authentic experiences with reading. This places the primary focus on the experience of the reading process, rather than extracting a message or theme of some kind to live by. He states in regard to authentic reading approaches, “we tend to see our reading of literature as a source of questions for us to continue to think about, rather than answers for us to accept” (p. 29).

Along this same vein, Chambers (1993) poses as a central question when discussing literature with students, “what does the teacher do that enables child readers to speak for themselves?” (p. 33). This perspective led me to approach my analysis in the light of different ways that the agentic behavior of protagonists may bring up questions or responses in potential student readers. Teachers can use student transactions as starting points for discussions about various facets of agency and how the textual examples might be related to students’ lives and experiences. Thus, I hope that my findings will lead educators to be more intentional in promoting student access to high-quality fantasy literature in the classroom, teaching critical literacy skills, and encouraging students to make meaningful text-to-self and text-to-world connections as they read.

To encourage richer and subtler responses to literature, Nodelman also recommends giving children a say in what literature they are interested in reading and discussing, and situating their authentic responses to literature as the central focus of instruction and discussions. This also means that while teachers should encourage students to read high quality literature in a variety of genres, including fantasy, students should have many opportunities to practice using their agency in the context of deciding
what they are interested in reading. For Nodelman (1996), the more important issue is how we as teachers help students learn to read consciously and to critically analyze their responses: “We want to encourage them to be conscious of the degree to which they actively intervene in and even manufacture their own reading experiences” (p. 31). Therefore, rather than teaching about agency through literature by addressing the examples of agentic behavior as indisputable life lessons on how we ought to behave, the more authentic and productive way to address it is by guiding students to consider their own responses to the behavior they observe in the texts they read and make meaningful connections between the texts and their own experiences.

When fielding questions after presenting my research to others, a few concerns were brought up about the possibility of students being influenced by protagonists exhibiting negative behavior, especially when inappropriate independence and recklessness masquerades as age-appropriate agency. In response, I found myself thinking through and commenting on the important role that critical thinking plays in language arts curriculum, as well as in a focus on students developing crucial 21st century skills. Teachers cannot possibly protect students from reading about protagonists making poor decisions, or reading literature that advocates a kind of behavior that parents and teachers would discourage (Burmester & Howard, 2022). In fact, in trying to do so, adults could inadvertently keep students from having transactions with texts that could drive home the exact lesson that adults want students to learn (Leland et al., 2013).

Literature offers children the chance to vicariously experience the consequences of poor decisions and learn for themselves why they are taught not to do or say certain things (Voelker, 2012). Additionally, when a character makes an objectionable decision without suffering negative consequences, students have an opportunity to practice their critical thinking skills as they can decide for themselves (using their agency!) whether that decision was one they should emulate or not. Though I am at the very beginning of my journey as an educator, I nevertheless suggest that parents and educators would do well to have more faith in children’s abilities to think for themselves, especially when pairing that faith with the intentional facilitation of opportunities and instruction to build children’s senses of agency and critical thinking skills.
While my own identities and individuality were valuable in my construction of a Reflexive Thematic Analysis (RTA) of the text set, researcher bias does represent a limitation in the scope of my research. Thus, there is space for future scholarship by researchers willing to share about their own interpretations and analyses of textual examples to widen the scope of insights offered and provide valid yet potentially contrasting perspectives as to the possibilities for children’s transactions with texts. This research also focused specifically on recently published, award-winning novels of a specific genre, which means the findings cannot be assumed to apply to all children’s literature. I imagine other scholars will wish to conduct similar studies but with different text sets, based on criteria such as popular fantasy considered to be “modern classics,” or comparable texts in other genres such as realistic or historical fiction.

As a lover of reading who is preparing to teach my own fifth grade class soon, this research will certainly inform my teaching practices. That said, one obvious limitation of my research is that I performed a “dead study,” or one examining books, rather than living, breathing students. Future research could be done in this same vein but in field research, to study students’ responses to reading fantasy novels with agentic protagonists. I suspect, however, that the insights I gained will prove invaluable preparation as I begin my first year of teaching. I look forward to further refinement of my philosophies and teaching practices as I learn through my own experiences while guiding my students in having authentic transactions with texts that portray agentic protagonists.
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