

Are Literature Circles an Effective Reading Strategy for Struggling Readers?

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

Throughout the country middle school and high school teachers are wrestling with the issue of why students are reading with such low level skills. Reading has been a struggle for many classroom teachers as they deal with the issue of students who lack the skills necessary to comprehend literature and informational texts. Teachers struggle with student statements, such as “I just don’t like to read!” or “Fiction is not real so why do we have to read it?” On top of this, many teachers struggle to have their students actually read the text. English teachers suffer through lesson plans because of students’ lack of reading the material necessary to make their lesson successful. Reading is an essential and vital foundation for all students’ learning across not only their academic lives, but their social lives as well. There are thousands of studies, articles and books on effective reading strategies and methods to engage students in literature. In many Language Arts classrooms, there is a large disparity between students reading ability, which is a constant obstacle for Language Arts teachers while reading a novel with their students. Many students who find Language Arts challenging struggle to comprehend text on their own, let alone engage in activities that supplement the reading. Educators must constantly ask the questions that try to answer the ever-present problem of apathetic attitudes towards reading. Questions such as: “Why do some students like reading and others do not? How do students become engaged in their reading and what do they “do” as engaged readers that makes their experiences satisfying and worthwhile? Teachers need to grapple with why reading is such a stumbling block for adolescent students and what qualifies certain

adolescents to be classified as “struggling readers?” Finally, what strategies work in helping these struggling readers become engaged and reflective readers?

In the early 1990s a new reading strategy was introduced in the English classroom that created an environment of engagement and collaboration among students. This strategy, known as Literature Circles, began an explosive movement that encouraged student choice in reading within the English classroom. On the forefront of this movement was Harvey Daniels, a professor at National-Louis University in Chicago. Daniels defines literature circles as, “small, peer-led discussion groups whose members have chosen to read the same story, poem, article or book” (Daniels, 2002, p.6). Within these groups, students create their own reading and meeting schedule while participating in discussions over the course of the book they are reading. With the opportunity to choose the book they want to read, students become responsible for their own learning. What is important to note here is the idea that the curriculum used during literature circles should be exploratory and student-led. Literature circles give students the chance to guide and direct their own learning as well as that of their fellow classmates. This Master’s Research Project explores the question of why students are struggling to read and whether literature circles help these students become engaged and reflective readers. To answer this question, this paper explores articles, journals and books that discuss and study adolescents, the characteristics of struggling readers and what literature circles can do to help them.

Overview of Research Design and Research Questions

The research is designed to assess whether or not literature circles help struggling readers become engaged and reflective. This Master’s Research Project will review the

current literature on strategies for struggling readers that can enhance comprehension skills that will create deep, meaningful discussion over literature in middle and high school classrooms and how to successfully implement these strategies in the classroom. To frame the effectiveness of these particular strategies, I will use research to assess how and why middle and high school students are continuing to struggle with reading. By examining the characteristics of struggling readers and the process that goes into reading, this study will draw conclusions regarding what makes a successful reader and reading environment at the middle and high school levels. Along with the review of current literature, this project will include action research in a high school classroom. The research took place in a sophomore Language Arts course in a small, rural public high school in Ohio. The curriculum for this particular course included the use of literature circles throughout the semester. This study will be partially based on the researcher's personal knowledge of how literature circles operate to accomplish the goal of effectively enhancing comprehension and discussion skills in struggling readers. The classroom in which this project was conducted was not separated by ability. In other words, strong, average and struggling readers were all together in an inclusive classroom. A main component of literature circles is the student choice in what book they will read. Students chose their top three choices from a given book list, which will contain different reading levels. Each group was formed with the intention of having each student, especially the struggling readers, receive their first or second choice. To be able to identify which students were "struggling readers" and which were not, there was a whole-class novel before students were separated into literature circles by book choice. This enabled the researcher to determine which students struggled in their comprehension and discussion

of the novel. After determining which students were struggling readers during the whole-class novel, the researcher, then knew which students needed their progress to be observed during the literature circles.

To frame the purpose of this Master's Research Project, four guiding research questions were used to determine whether or not literature circles are an effective reading strategy for struggling readers. These questions not only guided the review of the research literature, but also the research conducted in the classroom. The questions are:

1. How does a student become classified as a struggling reader?
2. Are literature circles an effective strategy for struggling readers? If so, what elements of literature circles help these struggling readers?
3. How can literature circles be effectively implemented within middle and high school classrooms?
4. How can struggling readers in a literature circle environment be effectively assessed in becoming engaged and reflective?

Limitations

This project included some limitations. First, I was the teacher in the classroom in which the study took place. The study could have possibly produced varied results if I acted solely as the researcher in the classroom to study the three struggling readers. I could not give my undivided attention to the participants as I had to attend every student's needs. I may have noticed more subtle improvements if I was able to just focus on the participants. Also, two out of the three students tended to not come prepared to some of the meetings. With this, the students affected their own progress. I offered the

class time for students to prepare for meetings, but if they did not take advantage of the time this directly affected their experience within the literature circle meetings.

Another limitation that could have affected the participants experience was their own group members. If group members did not come prepared, this could have had a direct effect on the quality of discussion that took place during the meetings. Lastly, every day in a classroom is different as is student performance and attitudes toward the day's activities vary. In addition, other factors such as the home environment, social factors and or other school related events may have impacted their performance as well.

Organization of Study

This Master's research Project will be separated into five chapters. Chapter Two will review and discuss current literature addressing literature circles. Chapter Three will discuss the methodology of how the research was conducted to create a deeper understanding of the findings of the study. Chapter Four will discuss the results and findings of the study that show give the evidence necessary to label literature circles as an effective reading strategy. Chapter Five will give suggestions and implications for teachers of the Language Arts classrooms.

CHAPTER TWO

LITERATURE REVIEW

The purpose of this literature review is to examine whether or not literature circles are an effective reading strategy for struggling readers. The literature review is divided into five subsections. They are: 1) Adolescent Development, 2) Rural Education, 3) Ability Grouping, 4) Struggling readers, 5) Literature circles. These sub-sections will seek to answer the question, “Do literature circles help struggling readers become engaged and reflective in their reading?” Although research has been conducted on literature circles, there has been a lack of research on whether or not literature circles should be put into place for struggling adolescent readers. The review of literature will build a foundation for answering the guiding question, while the research within the classroom will reach conclusions on implementing literature circles as a strategy to help struggling readers.

Adolescent Development

In order to understand how to teach students, teachers need to understand students’ development to better adapt their lessons and teach them in the most effective way. According to White, “adolescence is the transition from childhood to adulthood, a period during which an individual acquires the skills necessary to survive on his or her own, away from parents or other caregivers” (p. 4). He describes adolescence as a time of intense emotional, behavior and physical changes. This directly effects how adolescents interact with peers and elders, as well as, their performance in school. White also states that adolescence is a misunderstood stage of development, but that it is

essential to the development of every human being. Furthermore, he explains the changes that occur in sleep patterns during adolescence, and suggests that adolescents actually experience less sleep than what is widely believed. One explanation he gives is the lessened amount of melatonin in adolescents' bodies, a hormone associated with promoting sleep. He says, "Despite evidence that teenagers actually require more sleep than children or adults, the average number of hours spent sleeping decreases from 8.3 during Grade 8 to 7.3 during Grade 12" (White, 2005, p. 5). Tardiness, absenteeism, mood changes, lower test scores and failure to graduate can all be attributed to this lack of sleep. These effects directly affect adolescents' performance within the classroom. In addition, it is essential for teachers to understand what is going on inside the mind and body of adolescents in order to effectively teach their students.

According to Bateman, in her article, (2003) the perception of adolescents in society is one that is negative. She explains how peer culture plays a vital role in student achievement in and out of school. Bateman explains that adolescents began spending more time outside of the family during the industrialization of the United States during the early 1900's because, by law, students had to go to school while their parents worked. Bateman also cites studies that show the need for peers to interact with one another in order to develop healthy social skills. One of the specific studies she explains is Coleman (2000) argues that schools play a role in providing peers with whom adolescents can interact in order to develop into healthy adults. He also advocates that schools should provide opportunities for adolescents to be active, rather than passive learners. By doing this, students can then take ownership of their learning through more responsibility and practicing leadership skills.

Bateman also cites Brown's concept of the multiplicity of peer culture. Within this, Bateman explains the importance of educators recognizing the issue of cliques as an inevitable part of adolescence. She also explains the adolescent's need for independence from parents and adults. She says, "The need to establish a unique and autonomous identity different from that of one's parents is one of the driving forces behind adolescents' need to reduce their psychological dependency on their parents as well as on other adults" (Bateman, 2003, p.). While explaining the need for adolescents to find their own peer group, she points out how adolescents are directly, and indirectly, affected by their peer groups in their behavior, beliefs and values and how this plays an essential role in their development as young adults.

Clarke and Justice (2002) explain how children who enter adolescence form beliefs and values that will define the rest of their lives. They argue that adolescents begin to reason abstractly, allowing them to "think about the future and experiment with different identities" (p.198). They also suggest that identity development is important because, "it is associated with self-esteem, increased critical thinking, and advanced moral reasoning" (p. 199).

Eccles (2002), explains the many changes that happens in the life of adolescents. She classifies these changes as biological, psychological, and social. Specifically with psychological changes, Eccles explains that these major changes are linked to increasing social and cognitive maturity. In regards to cognitive maturity, Eccles explains that adolescents are able to increase their knowledge of a subject, they become able to apply what they learn to other subject areas, while simultaneously becoming aware of their strengths and weaknesses as learners are. She argues that, "With practice these new

cognitive skills can help adolescents become more efficient, sophisticated learners, ready to cope with relatively advanced topics in many different subject areas” (p. 9).

Monroe (2007) helps her readers understand the development process of adolescents, specifically in regards to middle school students through a comparison to pregnancy. She stresses the importance for educators and adults alike to understand the ever-changing bodies and minds of adolescents and how this plays a large role in their behavior and decision-making skills in and outside of the classroom. Concerning adolescents’ performance within the classroom, Monroe explains that the adolescent’s frontal lobe goes through a growth spurt. She states, “the expanded territory must be conquered and pruned in the following years before this potential increase in logic and judgment abilities will be readily available” (p. 42). She also explains that at this stage, adolescents struggle with multi-tasking, analyzing perspectives other than their own, and controlling their emotions through logical thought. Socially, Monroe states, adolescence is a pivotal time as they experiment with the questions, such as Who am I and what do I believe? Along with these questions, Monroe says that while adolescents push for interdependence they hold an egocentric view of the world. Her advice to educators is to respond with patience, as this is such an important time in their lives.

Rural Education

Since the research for this Master’s Research Project took place within a rural high school, it was essential to look at the characteristics of rural education. Bryant (2007) explains the need for the policymakers to take rural America into consideration rather than focus only on suburban and urban settings. He explains that throughout history, rural areas have been easily forgotten, and often been misconstrued as happy-go-

lucky places for children grow up, similar an episode from *Leave It To Beaver*. However, Bryant argues that rural America is largely misunderstood and is very much the same as the rest of the country. Bryant suggests that often times writers and journalists focus on the disparity between urban and suburban schooling, while neglecting similar disparities between suburban and rural education. Bryant explains that the blame can be placed upon the structure of school funding. He maintains that, “It is the reliance upon property taxation for the funding of schools that exacerbates this already dangerous problem in rural areas. In many of these rural areas, a persistent economic downturn has left rural school boards with a continually diminishing source of funding for their community's educational needs” (p. 7). Since rural school districts have lack of a strong property tax base, there is less funding per pupil in rural school districts. Bryant points out that the effect of this poor quality education for rural students. He also points out that through federally mandated programs and teacher hiring processes, schools are unable to hire government labeled “highly-qualified,” teachers because they cannot afford their salaries. This causes good teachers to become attracted to non-rural educational settings, which negatively impacts the quality of rural education. Along with school-funding problems and lower wages for teachers, Bryant points out that poverty adversely affects rural schools. His message is the urgent need for our nation’s capital to take notice of the plight of rural schools and to take the appropriate steps in combating the many obstacles they to face to adequately educate their students.

It is important for educators of rural students to model the characteristics of an adult who possesses high values and morals in order to be effective. Seaton (2007), conducted research using observations and interactions with eight middle school girls in a

rural school. During these interactions and observations, Seaton discusses the girl's desire for students to care for their students, and the girls' desire for teachers to model good behavior so they would be encouraged to act the same. She concludes that there is a disconnect between teachers and their students. Seaton points on the usual characteristics of a rural high school: a smaller setting where everyone knows everybody and where teachers have smaller class sizes that help in creating deeper relationships. However, through her research, Seaton points out the disconnect the girls felt toward their teachers. This was illustrated through the girls answers to the question of what adult would they go to if they had a problem. All expressed their desire to speak to an adult outside rather than inside the school setting.

Seaton also explains the gendered expectations that teachers and schools administrators have. She explains that girls are expected to possess, "traditional white middle-class values of femininity" (p.7) which she defines as the expectation of good girls to be "polite, kind, quiet, caring, docile, passive, cooperative, and lacking sexual desire" (p.7). Her suggestion to rural teachers is to first recognize their own thoughts, beliefs and opinions about gender. She also encourages teachers to have open and frank conversations with their students about gender roles. Another suggestion she gives teachers of rural students is to do their best in forgetting the reputation that precedes students, whether it is their siblings, parents, or relatives as a whole. Rather, Seaton suggest getting to know your students personally before forming an opinion on what type of students or person they are. To conclude, Seaton encourages teachers of not just rural girls, but boys as well, to create communities where they feel valued and respected.

Peden, Reed and Rayens (2005) offer a more in-depth look at rural adolescents by specifically explaining how depression plays a large role during their adolescence. They explain how rural youth have become more susceptible to mental illness in comparison to their urban peers. To explain this phenomenon, Peden, Reed and Rayens explain the misconception of rural life. In many circles, it is believed that rural life is a peaceful, quiet, carefree life, but that this perception of rural life was shattered by the farm crisis of the 1980's. They cite several studies that correlated the fall of the economy to depressive symptoms among farmers, including the use of alcohol and drugs. Other factors that affect the mental health of rural youth are poverty, lack of transportation and lack of support services. Conducting their study of their in a rural high school they found that 34 percent of the students suffered from depressive symptoms, such as negative perceptions of schools environment, and experiences with shooting, stabbing, assault, smoking and/or drinking alcohol. Peden, Reed and Rayens concluded that in comparison to urban you, rural youth are more susceptible to thoughts of suicide while also having depressive symptoms that can lead to mental illness. These findings must be recognized by educators, administrators, parents and communities as a whole and suggest that schools need to implement support programs to rural youth who suffer from depression.

Teachers have the responsibility of creating lesson plans that support their students learning abilities. In order to do this they must know their students. Hardré, Sullivan and Roberts (2008), explain that rural educators have the advantage of knowing their students well due to the fact that the school setting is significantly smaller in comparison to non-rural schools. The authors suggest that rural youth receive more motivation to do well in school from their teachers rather than their peers. Through the

interviews with and surveys of the teachers and students, the researchers identified four motivating strategies for teachers: supporting learning and future goals establishing relevance of the content, connecting to students' interests, treating students as uniquely valued individuals, and fostering students valuing perceived competence. Focusing on learning, students desired lesson plans focused on their learning ability rather than determining their learning through test scores. Treating each student fairly, and emphasizing differences as a positive thing also, will contribute to students' academic motivation. Spending one-on-one time with their students in order to encourage student motivation in the classroom. The authors note the importance of this strategy to rural education. They explain, "this strategy of showing caring for students, relating to them and treating them as uniquely valued individuals is the hallmark of rural education. It has been lauded for decades as one of the best reasons to keep small-schools small, and for families to live rural" (Hardré, Sullivan, & Roberts, 2008, p. 26). The authors also explain how rural students lack the ability to connect what they are learning in the classroom now can have an effect on them in the future. To conclude, the authors explain that students who have the ability for intrinsic motivation will enable them to take ownership of their learning inside and outside of the classroom. This is particularly significant to the study of literature circles because the foundation is for students to direct their own learning and reading of a book rather than a teacher telling, guiding, or explaining what they should think.

Ability Grouping

Larry (2007), in the National Middle School Association's summary of research of heterogeneous grouping versus homogenous grouping, also known as, tracking or

ability grouping, aims to define the difference between the two, while discussing what the best scenario is for young adolescents. He defines heterogeneous grouping as, “within-classroom groupings in which students of varying abilities learn together in cooperative learning arrangements” (p.1). Larry argues the purpose of heterogeneous grouping is to ensure the highest level of standards for all students, while also allowing every student access to the highest-level of instructional practices. Larry explains homogenous groups, or grouping students by ability as, “based on educator’s judgments of students’ abilities” (p. 2). In order for educators to place students in specific ability groups, they must examine previous test scores or other performance measures that are usually determined by the school.

Proponents of ability grouping uphold the belief that teachers can better address the needs of their students by targeting specific instruction. Opponents of ability grouping maintain that the goals of ability grouping fail to ever take place. Further, Larry explains that students are grouped not by learning ability, but instead, by socioeconomic status and race. Also, he argues that ability grouping leaves students stigmatized.

According to Larry, the research findings point in the direction of grouping all students together rather than by ability. Specifically, he discusses research that describes how students with special needs are affected. He explains that it is necessary for students with disabilities to have opportunities to interact with their peers and have access to curriculum that challenges them to higher-level thinking. Larry cites research conducted by Salvin (1990) and Villa and Thousand (2003) which indicates that heterogeneous classrooms have positive effects on students with special needs. Special need students are negatively affected by ability grouping due to lowered-expectations in low-ability

classrooms. Larry also argues that school communities need to support inclusion settings and that schools provide professional development in inclusionary practices. Larry recommends to schools, specifically middle schools, that they should gear their curriculum for heterogeneous grouping. He offers the suggestions to schools to begin this process through the elimination of ability grouping in specific subject areas. Lastly, he discusses the need for more research to be conducted locally in response to the ability grouping issue. Larry concludes, “National research findings are often over impersonal and meaningless to local educators and citizens. It is important that control groups be used as much as possible” (p.6). When this happens, educators can make the best decision on ability grouping that fits the profile of the school and community rather than a generalized study.

Larry explains that the longitudinal study conducted by Mulkey, Catsambis, Steelman and Crain (2005) is one of the most important studies on ability grouping. These researchers began following students in eighth grade mathematics. The purpose of the study was, “To increase the comprehension of tracking as an agency of differential outcomes, our investigation explores the interrelationships among gender, middle school tracking, social psychological characteristics, and high school mathematics experiences (test scores, grades, and course selection)” (p. 144). The findings suggest that students in untracked schools fared much better than their counterparts in tracked schools. Their success was marked by their attitudes toward math and their own self-concept of their academic ability was far more positive than students in tracked classes. They also found that students placed in high-ability mathematics courses in eighth grade had a lower self-concept, which in turn negatively affected their performance in the rest of their math

career in high school. Also, these negative effects played a part in what math courses they chose. In other words, students who were placed in high-ability math classes in eighth grade chose lower-tracked classes in the later years of their high school career.

Poole (2008) discusses how same ability groups have been regarded as harmful to students in regards to learning. She states, “Lower-ability groups receive an inferior form of instruction characterized by more skills-based and decoding activities as well as less emphasis on meaning and critical thinking” (p. 229). Because of this, lower-ability students lose motivation for reading and learning. On the other hand, Poole discusses the benefits of mixed ability groups, arguing that, “Less proficient readers have the opportunity to learn from their more proficient counterparts. That is, the poorer readers can develop their skills by observing and interacting with more effective readers” (p. 230).

In her case study of three struggling readers in mixed-ability groups, Poole notes that Shirley, one of the struggling readers, has a difficult time reading out loud the passage at hand. The teacher spends more time aiding Shirley, as compared to the other readers. There is also a notable difference with the other readers as they listen to Shirley reading. They interject help when she is stuck while also exhibiting signs of impatience as she reads through the passage. In response to this situation, Poole suggests that, “Peer assistance of this kind has been touted as a benefit of the mixed-ability group for the struggling reader; however, it can also serve to differentiate Shirley from her classmates in terms of reading ability so that their intervening turns signal her weak academic position in the group.” (p. 235). Poole also suggests that the “help” of her teacher and students does not aid Shirley in becoming more fluent in her reading, rather, the

suggestion just help her get through the passage. This in-turn brings the focus to her struggles with reading, and therefore alienates her from the group because of her low reading abilities.

In the discussion of her conclusions, Poole states that low-ability readers were treated the same way in mixed-ability as they were in a low-ability group. This shows that students with low-ability reading levels may struggle by being stigmatized in group contexts. Consequently, Poole suggests that teachers should recognize their own interaction with struggling readers to avoid treating them any differently than the other group members. For example, rather than focusing on fluency and decoding, the teacher can focus on comprehension of text, which will in turn let the low-ability reader to not be stigmatized when reading aloud. Thus the literature suggests that low- ability readers are never asked to read aloud, but rather to do so only in a personal context. Rather, low-ability readers have a model to look to during each literature circle meeting.

The Struggling Reader

The struggling reader has always been a conundrum inside the classroom. Educators across content areas, grades and school settings wrestle with incorporating the best methods and practices to help students improve in their reading. Brozo and Flynt (2008) that students who are motivated to read will lead them to engage and connect with texts will have a greater chance in becoming life-long readers. They place significance on engaging readers at a young age as this will carry middle and high school. Along with motivating struggling readers to engage with literature, educators have the task of engaging their students with content-based text. The authors explain that if students are not motivated to read literature, they are more likely to not read content text in other

subject areas. When this happens, students will start to fail in other subject areas and struggle academically.

In order to for teachers to combat lack of motivation with struggling readers, Brozo and Flynt provide six evidence-based principles that educators can use in their instructional practices. The first principle is the need for educators to elevate student self-efficacy, which they define self-efficacy, “the belief and confidence that students have about their capacity to accomplish meaningful tasks and produce a desired result in academic setting” (p. 172). Students with high self-efficacy are more engaged and motivated than students with low self-efficacy. The second principle is engendering interest in new learning. This principle of the need for educators to incorporate a variety of instructional practices to meet the needs of the diverse learners in their classroom. The third principle is connecting outside literacies with inside school literacies. This principle is geared toward content area teachers. The authors suggest using multiple media outlets to teach their subject area rather than just the provided course textbook. Some examples of media are graphic novels, participating in chat-rooms, and online computer games that engage students in learning. The fourth principle is making an abundance of interesting text available. The authors explain that, students lack the desire to read because there is a deficient amount of diverse reading material for students to choose from.

The fifth principle is expanding choices and option. The authors explain that educators need to allow students to have a say in what texts are available for them to read. Lastly, the sixth principle is structuring collaboration for motivation, which the authors define as teacher to student and student to student. Finally, Brozo and Flynt

(2008) argue, “Increased attention to social motivation in the classroom can lead to more intrinsically motivated readers and to increased achievement in reading” (pp. 173-174).

In “You Gotta BE the Book”, Jeffery D. Wilhelm (1997) discusses the idea of the “bottom-up approach” in teaching reading. He explains this approach as teaching “reading as a data-driven process, and is rather mechanical in that it emphasizes mastery of specific sub skills and skills, moving from small units such as letters to bigger units such as words, phrases and sentences” (p.13). In teaching reading this way, Wilhelm argues that students view reading as a decoding process, which is “regarded as a passive act of receiving someone else’s meanings” (p.13). Wilhelm, an eighth grade Language Arts teacher, decided to give surveys to his students in order to find out what their ideas and opinions were of reading. What he found was that students viewed reading as a “reception of another’s meaning” (p. 9). Wilhelm explains that the view of his students came from the teaching theory called New Criticism.

Defining New Criticism as “ a highly systematic and formulaic approach to rigorous, analytic reading of literary texts” (p. 13). Wilhelm explains that when teachers use this approach, students learn the behavior of passive reading. Instead of thinking for themselves, students expect the meaning of texts to be deciphered for them. Wilhelm notes that New Criticism emphasizes the idea of “rightness” when reading a text, which means that there is one correct explanation of a text, rather than understanding there can be different meanings for each reader. To combat the teaching practices of the bottom-up approach and New Criticism, Wilhelm insists on viewing reading in a whole new light. He posits that, “Instead of looking at reading as receiving the meaning in texts, reader-oriented theories regard reading as the creation, in concert with texts, of personally

significant experiences and meanings” (p. 16). Encouraging teachers to create classrooms that are “reader-centered,” Wilhelm argues that in order to help struggling readers to develop into engaged readers, “we must encourage and foster the creative attitudes and activities of engaged readers” (p.11).

Wood’s article (2006) discusses why there is a decrease in motivation to read in the middle school grades. She attributes this decrease in motivation to school environments’ lacking sensitivity to “the developmental needs of the young adolescent” (p.55). She supports this belief based on the findings from the National Assessment of Education Progress explaining that, “the average middle school student reads less than 5 minutes a day for his or her own pleasure, while about 10% read voluntarily for 30 minutes per day or more” (p.56). This is a serious concern for educators because of the negative effects lack of fluency and comprehension, while also not gaining the skills to engage and connect with text on struggling readers. She also states that as students move from the fourth grade to the seventh grade, their intrinsic motivation, which is “the desire to read out of curiosity and pursue their own interests,” decreases, while their extrinsic motivation, “the desire for higher grades, competition and cognitive competence,” tends to increase (p.60). Thus, Wood’s findings suggest the importance of helping struggling adolescent readers to implement strategies that help them recognize their strengths as readers.

Another characteristic of the struggling reader that is essential for educators to recognize the environment that students come from. In her article, Compton-Lilly (2007), describes three scenarios that include three different children. In each of the scenarios, she recognizes the need to connect what the students are reading to what the students are

familiar with. For instance, one of the students struggles with reading word-by-word, rather than a fluent rhythm. To help the student, the teacher tried saying the sentence like it was part of a rap song. She did this because of her knowledge of what kind of music the student liked out of the school setting. This connection allowed the students to understand how to read with rhythm rather than word by word.

The author explains why there is such difficulty in teaching struggling readers; every reader is different, complex and brings a variety of complexities, such as home environment, learning styles and motivation. She suggests that teachers of struggling readers make the effort to connect with students' life outside of school by communicating with parents and community members associated with the struggling reader. Also, she explains that teachers need to recognize exactly who their struggling readers are in order to observe their reading processes and abilities in order to incorporate strategies that work best for each individual student.

Literature Circles

Sandmann and Gruhler (2007) argue that when students are reading, deep, meaningful learning should take place. They argue that, "the central reason for instruction in literacy is to create lifelong readers- real learning, not school learning. If real learning is accomplished, school learning is accomplished" (p. 105). Literature circles allow this kind of learning to take place in the classroom. "Literature circles provide the opportunity for groups of students typically five or six, with the chance to make meaning from the text- independent of the teacher" (p. 106). Furthermore, "Literature circles allow children the opportunity become literate, to love literature and to think actively and critically with others about what they read" (p. 110).

Sandman and Gruhler (2007) identify five key features of literature circles. These features include student choice, mini-lessons, reading schedules, note-taking skills and assessment. Student choice gives students the opportunity to have a say in what books they read in school. Another element of literature circles is minilessons. Mini-lessons as “short, teacher-centered lesson which supports the current instruction needs of the students, either before or after (or both) a literature circle meeting occurs” (p. 111). The third element of literature circles is the reading schedule. This is where students create a calendar of what they need to have read by a certain time and thus have a say in their own learning. Next, is the necessary skill of note-taking. that in literature circles group members are assigned certain roles. They explain that these roles, as explained by Harvey Daniels, “scaffold students’ interactions with text and we recommend using them for a starting point for fiction and non-fiction” (Sandmann & Gruhler, 2007, p. 109). The last element of literature circles is assessment, which can take place through teacher observations, student evaluation and self-evaluation.

Sandman and Gruhler (2007) define the discussion in the literature circles as either functional or literate. Functional talk is “focused on negotiating and navigating the process of engaging in discussion with peers” (p.110). The talk emerged as facilitative, directive, assertive and reflective in nature. Literate talk is, “focused on contrasting meaning within and beyond text through collaborative conversation” (p. 110). The authors found that conversations went from being functional to more literate talk. With this said, the authors explain that the students in the case study went from merely stating the facts of books to collaborating with one another to create a meaningful discussion. The authors also explain that, “literal level talk decreased over time, while critical level

talk increased significantly” (p. 113). Peer-led discussion encouraged sincere questions and students pursued their own answers to those questions, suggesting that students “can think and speak in critical ways about literature, consider and value the viewpoints of others, and negotiate ways of engaging as a literate and interpretative community” (p. 113).

Brabham and Villaume (2000) discuss the importance of literature circles and the benefits it has for students of any age. “Literature circles support the repositioning of stances that control talk in the classroom, allow students to take responsibility for developing and discussing their own questions and interpretations for texts, and launch more complex levels of thought, language, and literacy for students and teachers” (p. 278). It is this complex thought and discussion that allows students of all reading abilities to increase skills in comprehension of texts. Brabham and Villaume note that struggling readers often do not come prepared to the discussions, which causes the students not to participate in discussion. In addition, they may lack the confidence to discuss what they have read because they feel as though they cannot voice what they have learned compared to students who read faster.

Brabham and Villaume also explain how, “Teachers may provide opportunities for students to hear the text read aloud or on tape, participate in paired reading, or read texts chorally” (p.279). These strategies will help students gain confidence in sharing their ideas regarding text and eventually will help them become more independent in their reading as the literature circle progresses. Brabham and Villaume conclude there is no one correct way of conducting literature circles and that teachers should make

accommodations whenever necessary based on their classroom culture and student characteristics.

Lin (2004) suggests there are four main benefits for using literature circles. They are: stronger reader-text relationships, improved classroom climates, enhanced degrees of gender equity and understanding and, lastly, a learning environment more conducive to the needs and abilities of English language learners..Lin suggests that “readers are those who not only recognize words while reading, but for which the text resonates through association with related life experiences or literary experiences which are familiar to other members of the same learning community” (p. 24). Lin also discusses Vygotsky’s theory, which discusses what effective learning looks like. She explains this as students who take ownership of their own learning in collaboration with other fellow students. Lin uses the findings from the studies and Vygotsky’s theory to help support the belief that literature circles give students the opportunity to create meaningful connections from the text to their own lives and, in turn, help struggling readers see that reading is a process they can connect to their own lives.

Peterson and Belizaire (2006) discuss the element of using role sheets to help guide discussion in literature circles. The authors discuss how in many circumstances students do not need to rely on role sheets to help guide their discussion as they can become a distraction when trying to participate in discussion of a text. The authors conducted an action research study to show how and when role sheets should be used. They found that role sheets help “struggling readers, by giving them a guide on how to start a conversation of what they read. However, Peterson and Belizaire suggest the end-goal of role sheets is for students to be able to let go of their dependency of the role so

thy can, “concentrate on gaining deeper insight into the book and learning alongside their peers” (p. 38).

Although there have been many positive findings with using literature circles in classrooms, Clarke (2007) observe that teachers can run in to difficulty while executing literature circles. To begin her article, Clarke gives rationale for why literature circles should be used in classrooms. She begins with Rosenblatt’s theory that reading is transactional, and literature allows transactional reading to flourish within the classroom. Clarke explains how educators recognized the need to provide opportunities for students to take ownership of their own reading, as opposed to the traditional approach of the teacher giving meaning to the text. These opportunities include allowing student social interaction centered on a common text. To investigate literature circles, Clarke conducted a study in an urban sixth grade classroom. She found, “sociocultural forces such as economic disparities, strong student animosity, and racial and gender tension had powerful influence on how these students discussed texts, despite the teacher’s best attempts to create a safe and trusting environment” (p. 22). One of the main reasons why there was such difficulty was that the classroom lacked harmony to conduct successful literature circles. “Many of their language practiced dominated discussion groups, such as giving orders, using insults and disagreeing” (p. 23). Another difficulty was structural barriers, such as students constantly moving out of the school or new students arriving while literature circles have already begun taking place. Another issue was the many school-wide activities and celebrations that took students out of classroom, which made starting literature circles nearly impossible due a lack of time to build classroom unity.

Clarke presents four strategies to help explain how to improve literature circles. She begins by explaining the need for teachers to use powerful mini-lessons to help teach students how to conduct successful literature circles. Mini-lessons provide teachers the opportunities to teach students best practices in discussing literature. One example of a mini-lesson is the use of membership grids. Created by Harvey Daniels and Nancy Steinkie, membership grids allow students a chance to warm-up to their discussion while getting to know one another. For each discussion, students choose a personal topic thus building community among group members. The second strategy in helping students improve their discussions was to video tape the meeting. The purpose of this is for students to see how they interact with one another. Clarke explains the sixth grade students were encouraged to have more positive conversations. She also explains that watching themselves on tape encouraged students to critically reflect upon the conversations with their group members. The third strategy Clarke proposes in combating struggling literature circles is to choose quality book choices for students to choose from. When choosing books, it is essential for teachers to recognize their students likes and dislikes. Clarke explains that by choosing quality books students will be more apt to read and willing to discuss what they have read. The last strategy that Clarke suggests is for teachers to constantly coach their students throughout literature circles. This can be done through mini-lessons and occasionally participating in the literature circle conversations themselves. Rather than telling students what they are doing wrong in literature circles, teachers can act as coaches, showing what an effective group member and conversation looks like.

Summary

This chapter sought to understand the different factors that play a large role in the research that was part of this Master's Research Project. The findings from the literature review created a deeper understanding of the research that was conducted in the high school language arts classroom. The first factor that was explored was adolescent development, which offers an explanation of why adolescents think and act the way that they do. The research showed that it is necessary for teachers to recognize that adolescents are at a stage when their bodies are changing, which in many cases can have a negative effect on their performance in school. In particular, many adolescents struggle with staying on task and maintaining a good work ethic. Also, it is essential for educators to provide students with room to explore their own identity as they begin to make decisions about the world in which they live. Through doing this, students are more apt to engage in their learning.

The research for this Master's Research Project took place in a rural community, which made it necessary to look at the characteristics of rural education. In the review of the literature, the obstacles rural educators deal with were apparent. Poverty, the most noticeable obstacle, negatively affects the quality of education rural students receive. It also prevents highly-qualified teachers from being attracted rural schools. In regards to the needs of rural students, the literature pointed to their need for teachers to be intentional in their efforts to know their students. Multiple studies suggest the need for rural students to feel that their teachers are people in their lives in which they can talk to. The literature suggests creating an environment that produces community among students and the teacher.

An issue that arises while using literature circles in the classroom is the problem of how to group students with one another. Although students have more of a say in what group they will be in when participating in literature circles, teachers have the important role in forming groups that will be beneficial for all the students' reading and learning levels. For this project, it was necessary to look at what type of grouping is best for students. The research points to grouping students in heterogeneous groups. Multiple studies found that homogeneous ability groups had negative effects on students. These negative effects included students acquiring a negative self-image. Heterogeneous grouping allows students, specifically, those with special needs, to learn from their peers, while not feeling like they are excluded from group interactions. Also, students with special needs in heterogeneous groups will be challenged to produce quality work while also being challenged to have critical thinking skills. It is critical for educators to create an environment for every student to feel a part of and excel in. The research explains that heterogeneous grouping does this for students.

The students who participated in this master's research project were struggling readers. In order to determine whether literature circles were an effective reading strategy, it was critical to look at the research on the characteristics of struggling students and what can be done to help them succeed in the classroom. The research literature suggests that it is crucial to provide struggling readers with texts that engage them. This engagement is what helps students make significant strides toward becoming proficient readers. The research suggests that many struggling readers continue to struggle because of the instruction they receive in the classrooms. It suggests that educators should create opportunities for students to be intrinsically motivated. When this happens, students will

take ownership of their reading, which includes creating their own meaning of text and choosing text that is meaningful to their own lives.

In reviewing the literature discussing literature circles, it is easy to recognize the benefits of using literature circles within classrooms. There is a common theme in the research literature which states that literature circles allow students to have a voice inside the classroom. Literature circles provide a support system for adolescents creating an environment in which they have a voice in their own learning and reading. This environment is what helps them feel accepted as part of a peer group, which is a developmental need all adolescents have. It was also clear that literature circles help students fall in love with literature. This is such an essential argument for why teachers should incorporate literature circles in their classrooms. Also, literature circles allow students to produce critical thinking skills due to the fact that they are in charge of their own learning. Further, it is this ownership that allows students to think for themselves rather than receiving the answers or interpretations from the teacher. Literature circles give students the opportunity to have a voice through choosing the books they will read, which allows them a better opportunity to engage with text in a school setting. In literature circles, struggling readers may well come to recognize that reading no longer means having the right answer or pronouncing every word correctly, but instead making meaning of the text in front of you and connecting it to your own life. Thus, the research suggests that literature circles constitute a method to help struggling readers become engaged and reflective.

CHAPTER THREE

RESEARCH DESIGN

Background

Setting

This research project was conducted in a rural high school located in a small town in Ohio. The high school and middle school were all located within the same building, which houses grades 7-12. According to the 2007-08 school report card, there was a total of 446 students: 52 percent of the students were male and 48 percent were female. Out of the 446 students, 115 were in the sophomore class. There is 17:1 student to teacher ratio with a total of 26 teachers throughout the building. 93 percent of the students are white, 5 percent were black and 2 percent were categorized as unknown. 59 percent of the students were eligible for free lunch while 19 percent were eligible for reduced lunch. 43 percent of students were economically disadvantaged. 17.5 percent of students are labeled with disabilities.

The research was conducted in a high school Language Arts classroom. The classroom was part of a flex room, which consists of two classrooms separated by a movable partition. The classroom was unusual in the sense that it was an unoccupied room within the high school. Acting as the researcher and the teacher, I was assigned the classroom to use during the second semester of the school year. Many of the desks were broken, while the shelves were filled with old, no-longer-used textbooks. The research was conducted between two class periods, both participating in the same whole-class novel and literature circles. The school did not group their students by ability, rather used a team-teaching approach, which involved having the core-content teacher to work

alongside a special education teacher to support the needs of special needs students within the regular classroom setting. In the first class, there were 3 out of 24 students with an Individualized Education Plan (IEP), while the second class had eight out of 22 students with an IEP. The special education teacher co-taught during the second period class due to the fact that 36 percent of the students had an IEP.

Book Selection

Students chose from a list of five different grade-appropriate novels that were a part of the tenth grade curriculum. The novels were:

- *Farewell to Manzanar* by Jeanne Wakatsuki Houston- The true story of a woman recalling the life-altering events of her family's placement in the United States Japanese internment camps during World War II.
- *October Sky* by Homer Hickman- A memoir about Hickman's adolescent years in rural West Virginia. He recounts the times with his friends that consisted of building and launching rockets.
- *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* by Maya Angelou- An autobiography that recounts the tragic events Angelou faced during childhood as well as adulthood.
- *Fallen Angels* by Walter Dean Meyers- A fictionalized story about a young African-American soldier's experience fighting during the Vietnam War.
- *A Separate Peace* by John Knowles- The fictional story of two teenage boys' friendship at a boarding school during World War II.

To choose a book, each student filled out a book choice ballot (see Appendix A) Most students received their first or second choice, with the exception of one student. The three students were given their first choice.

Literature Circle Meetings

There were a total of 11 literature circle meetings over the course of 5 weeks. Most literature circle meetings had the same format; students knew the expected procedures for each meeting and also how to come prepared to perform during the meeting. The circle meetings were held on Tuesdays and Fridays. Those days were chosen because they allowed for students to have time for reading between each meeting. The first day the groups met, students agreed upon a reading calendar in their individual groups, which dictated what was due at each literature circle meeting. Students had a set format of notes that were expected to be completed at the beginning of each meeting. The notes were written in their composition notebooks, which were also called reading journals with the page split down the middle. On the left side, students wrote questions they were either confused about or questions to ask the group to create discussions of depth. On the right side, students had to choose important passages from the novel. They had to copy the page number in the text as well as why they chose the particular passage. I conducted a mini-lesson on how to create questions that produced discussion of depth and how to find and choose important passages. This was done when I discovered after the first meeting that many of the students struggled with choosing passages that produced discussion.

On the back of the page, students were asked to make connections to the text. They could do this in three different ways: Text-Text, Text-World, or Text-Self. Text-Text consists of connecting the story to other novels or movies they have seen. Text-World has students connect events in the story to events that have happened in history or

current events. Text-Self asks students to connect the story to their own lives, choosing either their own personal experiences or people they know.

On three different occasions, students were asked to produce an illustration that represented their reading for that meeting. They could create an illustration of a specific scene or character, an abstract drawing or an illustration that represented a connection between their own life and the book. Before each literature circle meeting began, students completed a character journal while I walked around and completed quick check of their notes to determine whether they were completed or not. The students received credit on an all or nothing basis. If the notes were completed at the time of the meeting, they would receive a sticker. Each sticker was worth 20 points. I used this as a method of accountability by offering credit for the work they did and to assess whether they actually were keeping up with their readings to make sure that meetings were successful in discussion. I did not give students the opportunity to make up notes. If students were absent the day of the meeting, they were required to submit their notes the next day in order to receive their sticker.

Students began each of their literature circles meetings with a membership grid, which has group member choose a personal topic to discuss to start the meeting. This activity acts as a warm-up for the discussion and allows students to become more comfortable with one another. Next, the students had the choice to discuss the items at hand in whatever order they wanted. The expectation was that each group member discussed his or her character journals and notes. Also, during meeting 5, 7, and 9, they discussed their illustrations, letter to the authors, or other supplemental resources they were asked to complete. At the end of each meeting, the students either completed a self-

evaluation, group member evaluation, or a whole-group evaluation in which they discussed what they did well during that meeting, and as a group, what they needed to improve upon.

Selection of Students

To select the students in this study on literature circles, I assessed students' performance during the whole-class novel, *To Kill a Mockingbird* by Harper Lee. To make the final selections on students, I analyzed students' reading journals, which were completed during the whole-class novel to assess their ability to comprehend, make inferences and connect the text to their lives. Along with analyzing their journals, I also administered comprehension quizzes through the course of reading the novel. The quizzes consisted of questions that asked students to retell certain parts of the story. I used these to monitor student reading and understanding of the book. The quizzes provided an additional resource to see whether or not the students struggled with reading on an individual level.

I chose the three students for the study solely based on their struggle to understand the whole-class novel, *To Kill a Mockingbird*. They were chosen because they were the three students who were able to comprehend the novel the least, which was shown through their scores on the comprehension quiz. The average score on the comprehension quizzes between the two classes was 83 percent. The three students had the lowest scores out of the two classes.

Since most of my findings are of a qualitative nature, it was essential that I was able to observe each student a significant amount of time in order to guarantee the validity of my findings. If my role in the classroom was solely as a researcher, the

amount of students would certainly increase. Two out of the three students had an IEP. The study was based on students who I categorized as struggling readers. For the purposes of the study, each student was given a pseudonym to protect his or her anonymity.

Student Profiles

The first student, Liz, had an IEP that addressed her lack of comprehension skills. Her IEP goals stated her need to improve comprehension skills without the need to have an adult aid. She was a student who lacked intrinsic motivation, but responded well to the guiding of teachers to do her work. In other words, Liz would not start or complete her work if not prompted. Her reading was done word-by-word, with pauses between each word or every three words, yet she was willing to read out loud during the whole class novel.

Out of a total of six comprehension quizzes given throughout the reading of the whole-class novel, Liz averaged a 61 percent. With journals which required students to make inferences about what they thought the author meant in the book, she responded with merely retelling the events. Her journals also indicated that she did not fully comprehend the plot of *To Kill a Mockingbird*. For instance, one journal question asked students to explain how racism plays out as a major theme within the novel. Liz gave a broad answer, saying that white people in Maycomb did not like black people. When asked to explain how she knew this, she was unable to understand and explain the injustice that took place during Tom Robinson's trial. In class discussion, Liz was not hesitant to answer questions that asked to retell the story even though her answers usually were incorrect. Her answers during class discussion showed her lack of understanding of

the novel. On two occasions, her comprehension quizzes were higher when I read the chapter out loud to the class. This was an indication that she was able to comprehend the novel when the chapters were read to her. In order to gauge whether or not literature circles were an effective strategy to improve her reading, I concluded that Liz would have to show her comprehension of a book at an individual level.

The second student, Amber, had an IEP that addressed her lack of comprehension skills. Amber had severe learning disabilities when it came to reading aloud, comprehension, and fluency. She was a shy student whose work ethic improved throughout the semester. She was a student who struggled to understand anything she read at an individual level as well as that read aloud by her classmates and teachers. Amber did not like to read-aloud and sought to avoid having to do so when asked. She needed assistance to clarify assignments, especially if they consisted of multiple steps. I made many modifications to help Amber succeed during the reading of *To Kill a Mockingbird*. One specific modification was providing Amber with someone to read the reading assignments with her. However, Amber continued to struggle. She averaged a 24 percent on her comprehension quizzes; the lowest out of the three students. Not only did Amber struggle in forming complete sentences to answer journal prompts, she was not able to make inferences when asked to do so. She also avoided answering questions during class discussions, even when directly addressed. In order to gauge whether or not literature circles were an effective strategy to improve her reading, Liz would have to comprehend the text at an individual level, while also actively participating in discussion with confidence.

The third student, Brian, was in the first period class. He did not have an IEP. He struggled with connecting text to his own life and making inferences. Brian viewed text as mere words to be read and struggled in his comprehension of books, especially when the text did not interest him. Like Amber, Brian struggled with multiple step directions and needed clarifying directions to understand the task at hand. He lacked interest in reading novels, which effected why who would choose not to complete assignments. Brian was a student who constantly needed to be encouraged to do his work instead of recognizing the benefit in participating in discussion and coming prepared to class.

Brian averaged 52 percent on the comprehension quizzes. This was due to the fact that he missed multiple days of school and that he often did not often display effort needed to complete the assignment. When Brian did participate in discussion, he usually was not able to fully explain what happened in the book. In his journals, he struggled with making inferences. There were many times when he said that what was on the page was all the author meant, instead of realizing that you can read between the lines of a story in order to understand the novel at a deeper level. Recognizing authors' styles and themes of literature was difficult Brian. One journal assignment required him to identify what he thought was the most important theme of the novel. He answered with an event that happened in the story but did not illustrate a theme in the story. In order to gage whether or not literature circles were an effective strategy to improve his reading, Brian would have to comprehend text on a deeper level through making inferences and recognizing author's writing style.

Data Collection

The data was collected from four different sources. One source was through observations, in which I collected between literature circle meetings. My goal was to observe two literature circle groups per meeting day. During each observation I made sure that one of the groups observed was that of the students. During these observations I took field notes that recorded what students said during the discussion. The observations were recorded through open notes and a specific checklist (see Appendix B). I observed each of the three students six out of the eleven meetings.

Secondly, I collected data through document analysis. Because students' reading journals are a key part of literature circles they were the main document collected during literature circle meetings. In their journals, students responded to their readings at an individual level through the expected prepared notes for each meeting. They also responded to prompted journal questions and activities, which were completed independently before literature circle meetings or with the whole group during meetings. Some of these journal prompts included a weekly character journal, which students wrote from the perspective of a character of their choice from their literature circle novel. Each week, they wrote journal entries acting as if they were a character; students chose one character throughout all the journals. Also, on an individual level, they wrote a letter to the author, discussing what they liked and did not like about the book. As a group, during two different literature circle meetings, students looked at characterization within the novels. To do this, the groups members worked together to choose passages they thought helped define best who the character was and their role in the novel.

A third method of data collection was through self-evaluations. At the end of every other meeting, students filled out a self-evaluation (see Appendix C). The self-evaluation asked the students to rate how they thought they performed, while also providing a space for a narrative explanation telling what they did well during the meeting and what they thought they needed to improve upon for the next meeting.

Finally, after the last literature circle meeting, each student completed a survey in which he or she answered questions regarding the experience of participating in a literature circle (see Appendix D). The questions asked for their own personal opinions on whether or not they thought they had improved in their reading skills such as comprehension, making inferences and connecting the text to their lives. Also, they were asked whether or not they preferred reading a novel in the context of literature circles or a whole-class setting.

Data Analysis

In order to analyze students through my personal observations, I looked at whether or not students thought critically about text during discussion. For example, critical thinking was considered taking place when students were making inferences and connections to their own lives rather than just retelling the story. Because active discussion is indicative of an engaged and reflective reader, I also looked at whether or not students were actively participated in discussion, using their books and notes as references.

To analyze students' response journals, I identified instances, which suggested they were in engaging with the book. When analyzing their character journals, I searched for students' to convey a character's emotions and reactions to events that happened in

the novel. In analyzing students' notes for each discussion, I expected quality questions which were characterized as thought-provoking, such as inquiries about the author's style, applying the text to their own lives and predicting future events. If this was shown, this would be used as evidence that the students were improving in their reading.

Another element I analyzed was the quality of passages chosen for each reading. I sought to see passages that made the students question the text; strong responses were identified as passages where students made inferences and/or passages that made them connect the text to their own lives.

To first analyze the self-evaluations made by each of the students, I looked at how they interpreted their own reading. I used their answers as an indication of their own self-realization of whether or not they were improving throughout each of the meetings. Since the evaluations asked the students whether they came prepared and actively participated in discussion, I was able to draw conclusions about their performance. This was specifically useful since I was not able to observe all meetings. To find evidence to gauge the effectiveness of literature circles, I analyzed the data from the peer-evaluations to see what the students' peers thought of their performance. I would decide on whether or not students made improvements if students' peers said that they actively participated in discussion and used their books and notes.

To identify that literature circles are an effective reading strategy for struggling readers there must be evidence in the findings reported in Chapter Four that the students improved from the whole-class novel to the last literature circle meeting in three areas: Comprehension, making inferences, and connecting text to their own lives.

CHAPTER FOUR

FINDINGS

The findings of each participant's experiences are reported by separating 11 literature circle meetings into three groups, two consisting of four separate meetings and one group consisting of three meetings. The findings from the circle meetings will be reported in chronological order. The concluding section will report the students' responses, which were collected in the literature circle surveys.

Liz: *Fallen Angels*

Among the three participants, Liz struggled the most with reading. However, her enthusiasm to participate made up for her reading struggles. However, it was evident, especially during the whole class novel reading, that she truly struggled with comprehending texts in large chunks. In determining whether literature circles were an effective reading strategy, she had to improve comprehension of texts on her own. To do this, Liz needed to have a strong understanding of the book before she came to each of the meetings instead of depending on her group members to explain the text to her.

Literature circle meetings 1-4

Liz chose *Fallen Angels* by Walter Dean Meyer as her first book. She was excited from the beginning to be able to read this novel which I believed would be a good choice for her because she was interested in history, especially the topic of war. The main character, Perry, tells of his struggles during his time in Vietnam. One of the biggest struggles he had was how much he missed home while away at war. The novel was appropriate for Liz as the narration and dialogue were in the voice of an eighteen-year-old, which made the story easier for her to read.

Immediately, however, Liz struggled with understanding and completing the notes and the format required for each of the meetings. Before the beginning of the first meeting, I checked if Liz had completed her notes and whether she had done so correctly. She had notes, but instead of following the format, she merely retold events from the story rather than ask questions, choose important passages to discuss, or make connections to her own life. Since it was the first meeting and routines had not yet been established, I gave her credit for the work she did and explained the expectations for the notes so that she would have a clear understanding for next time. She then explained that she understood. During discussion in the first meeting, Liz was not hesitant to participate. When questions were asked, she was the first to volunteer to answer. However, she failed to answer the questions in a manner that held true to the story. At first she seemed unaware of the fact that she did not quite comprehend the text. However, through polite corrections from her group members, Liz was able to understand the text on a deeper level. In addition I noted that, "Liz has a tendency to get off track by telling stories. It is evident that she believes she is making connections to the text, yet they do not correlate with the events that have taken place in the novel. Her group members reel her back in through starting a new topic for discussion."

In the next three meetings, Liz continued to struggle to understand how to complete the notes. Although she began to go beyond simply retelling the story, which was a minor improvement, she continued to be confused about what she had to write in each of the two columns on the paper. The left column of the notes required the students to write questions for the group during discussion. The right column required them to record important passages from the text, note the page numbers, and offer an explanation

of why they chose the particular passage. Liz made the mistake of thinking that the quoted passages in the right column had to correlate with the questions posed in the left column. She only copied quotes from the novel without an explanation of why she chose the passages.

For the character journal, Liz decided to complete her journals on the main character, Perry. Her first journal entry was written from her own perspective of Perry rather than from his. She failed to make inferences about Perry and his feelings about the events that were happening around him. She merely retold events from the story, leaving out any type of emotion or reaction.

Literature circle meetings 5-8

I was able to evaluate Liz during the sixth and seventh meeting. My last observation occurred during the second meeting. I noted: "Liz's interpretation of the text has clearly improved since my last observation. This is clear through her answers to her group members' questions. The majority of her answers related to the text, although on occasion she still transgressed. I noted that Liz's participation took on a new form. She began to ask questions of her group members rather than wait to answer their questions. The fifth meeting marked the first time she understood the format of the notes. The biggest improvement was her selection of important passages. She was able to explain the reasons why she chose the passage and why it was important to the text.

For each of the meetings, Liz completed her character journals. She improved writing from Perry's perspective although she was still unable to make inferences about how he felt in certain situations. After the sixth meeting, Liz completed a self-evaluation. In the section to explain what she thought she had done well during the meetings, she suggested she was able to make connections for each reading. She also wrote: "I did not

think I could make so many connections to a book. When I read, I think about what I would do if I was in that situation.” This statement was a clear indication that Liz began to notice her own improvement while participating in a literature circle. She also completed another self-evaluation after the eighth meeting. In the section to explain what she needed to improve upon, Liz discussed her need to make detailed notes. She explained that her notes were vague and lacked content when it came time to use them for discussion. This observation of her own performance indicated Liz was beginning to understand what type of thinking she needed to do in order to have in-depth discussion during the meetings.

In her letter to the author, Liz explained how she liked Walter Dean Meyers’ writing style. She said, “I like reading your book because you write how like people talk. It makes the book seem more real to me. I also like the characters in the book because their personalities are so funny and they remind me of people in my own life.” This letter helped me to understand where Liz was in her thinking of the novel. She showed how she was engaging and connecting to the text.

Literature circle meetings 9-11

I was able to observe Liz during her last literature circle meeting. There was a stunning contrast in her performance in comparison to the first meeting. I noted, “Not only do her answers directly correlate with the text, but Liz is able to help lead the meeting in certain respects. It is evident that at certain points when Liz might not comprehend the text fully, she recognizes that she needs to reference the text when answering questions.” Liz demonstrated that she did not need her peers’ interpretations to understand certain parts of the text. It was obvious that she had become more comfortable

with discussing the text. Her notes were more detailed. The questions she prepared for her group members addressed what they would do in specific situations rather than ask them to merely clarify parts of the story. Her character journal for the ninth meeting was the first journal in which she made an inference about how Perry felt when he was injured in battle. Although the story did not include what he thought about the situation, Liz wrote a detailed journal entry discussing how he was scared of what would happen to him and how his family would react should he die in battle.

Literature circle survey

In the survey, Liz indicated that she preferred reading a novel in a literature circle setting rather than in a whole-class setting. She also explained that she believed her reading did improve. She said: “I think I read better because I know that if I don’t, I can’t talk much during meetings. I guess I pay more attention when I read now and I think this helps me understand better.” This suggests that literature circles encourage more student participation during a reading of a novel in literature circles rather than a whole-class novel because of the fact that students have to discuss every meeting.

Summary: Liz

The findings suggest that Liz was unable to think critically about the text at the beginning of the novel. After four meetings, she still did not understand how to complete her notes. Since the notes were in a simple format, her performance conveyed her lack of comprehending text beyond retelling the story plot. However, it became evident during later literature circle meetings that Liz benefited from being in a small group setting. This intimate setting allowed her to understand the text in a new way because of her fellow group members’ modeling. Liz had hesitations participating during the whole-class novel.

However, during the literature circle meetings, Liz did not hesitate to participate. It was evident she felt a part of a group rather than alienated because of her reading abilities. It was also clear through Liz's responses in the literature circle survey that the format of notes, once she understood them, helped her comprehension skills because she knew what she needed to look for while reading.

Amber: Farewell to Manzanar

In order determine whether literature circles were an effective reading strategy for Amber, she had improve her confidence reading text individually. Her comprehension of the plot of the entire novel, instead of mere parts, needed to be evident. Furthermore, Amber needed to improve her ability to discuss text. Literature circles could prove to be an effective reading strategy for Amber if they encouraged her to comfortably participate in discussion.

Literature circle meeting 5-8

Amber chose *Farewell to Manzanar* as her literature circle novel. This story was a good choice for Amber due to its short length in comparison to other novels. The story is predominantly written from a young girl's perspective, which made it easier for Amber to relate to the characters and plot. Furthermore, the length of the story was beneficial for Amber because of her slow fluency rate. She had an easier time keeping up with the reading as the chapters were short.

Like Liz, Amber struggled with completing the notes in the correct format. She did not come to the first meeting with a correct understanding of the notes. She copied the passage on the left column and on the right side she wrote her responses to the

passages. The notes indicated that Amber did not grasp the concept of the story. *Farewell to Manzanar* is the story, written by Jeanne Wakatsuki Houston, of a family that was placed in the Japanese internment camps during World War II. Amber believed that camps were there to protect the Japanese rather than realized that they were perceived as a threat by US government. During the first meeting Amber was the only group member who was prepared. Her group members completed the reading but struggled to have a conversation. Although Amber did not have her notes completed in the correct format, she took a leadership role in the discussion. I noted: "I am shocked by Amber's willingness to be the leader of this group. She has been such a quiet student that has avoided participation at all costs, but in this small setting she seems to feel comfortable with herself and the story she is reading." I noted that although this leadership role was a positive development for Amber, she needed to improve her comprehension of the story during the remaining meetings in order to be an effective discussion leader.

Before the second literature circle meeting, Amber wrote her first character journal. Even though her journal entry was short, she identified with the main character. She expressed the main character's emotions about her father's return from the camp and how he had become a different person. I noted: "It is clear that when Amber enjoys a book, she has a much easier time thinking critically. What is interesting is that she seems to struggle with comprehending the whole text. It is evident that while she appears comprehend certain aspects of the story she has difficulty understanding the story plot." I noted that literature circles would be an effective strategy for Amber if she could understand the whole text on her own by the last literature circle meeting.

In her self-evaluation after the fourth meeting, Amber discussed what she thought she would need to improve upon in future meetings. “I think I need to get better at not being confused so much when I read. I think that I should write the notes while I read, instead of waiting to do it all at the end” she wrote. This self-observation by suggests Amber began to recognize the need to think while reading rather than just “getting to the end of the chapter.”

Literature circle meetings 5-8

I was able to observe Amber during the fifth and seventh meeting. Since my observation during the third meeting, Amber continued to take the leadership role within her group. I noted how this was something unexpected. I also observed that her comprehension had improved since the first meeting. I noted, “She seems to be more confident than the last meeting when answering questions. Her growth is also evident in the questions she asks her group members. Her questions challenge her group members to recall past events from the story and connect them with current. This is a sure sign that Amber is definitely improving in her comprehension skills.”

By the fifth meeting, Amber displayed a strong and clear understanding of how to complete notes. Her questions about the actions of the story characters indicated that she was interacting with the text. Although her comprehension of the text appeared to improve, she still encountered some struggles, especially in her letter to the author, which was she was required to complete before the seventh meeting. Amber was told numerous times that this story was a memoir of the author’s life in the internment camp. In her letter she wrote, “Why did you write this story? Was it about your life or something? If it is, it might get me in the story even more.” Although, throughout the novel, makes it

clear that this is a true story of her life, Amber still struggled with understanding this aspect of the story.

Literature circle meetings 9-11

Because Amber was absent during the tenth meeting, I decided to observe her during the last meeting. I noted, “Amber seems to feel completely comfortable in a literature circle meeting. She stays on task, listens to others and responds with great questions that challenge her group members’ thinking. She seems to have finally grasped the fact that the book is in fact a true story, which has made her engage with the text even more. She had also made great connections by connecting her own father to the father in the story. She also started connecting the main character to other main character in books she has read in the past.”

In her last self-evaluation Amber explained that she needed to improve on her follow-up questions during discussion. She noted, “Sometimes I ask a question and my group members answer and then I move on to the next thing without trying to talk about it more.” This suggests that Amber was challenging herself to improve her performance without my intervention. Her peer-evaluations indicate that she was valuable asset to the group and that she was a good person to work with.

Literature circle survey

In her survey, Amber explained that she preferred to read a novel in a literature circle setting rather than in a whole-class setting. She wrote that, “I feel like I can talk about a book more in literature circles. I never want to talk about the book when we talk about it with the whole class.” She also explained that she thought that she improved in her reading because she was able to actually participate in discussion. She explained that she

usually did not want to participate in discussion because she was afraid that she might say something “wrong.”

Summary: Amber

Among the three participants in this research project, Amber made the most improvement from the first meeting to the last. First, she took upon herself the responsibility to be the leader of her group. Secondly, she came prepared for each of the meetings. This was a significant improvement because it was evident during the previous whole-class reading of *To Kill a Mockingbird* that Amber did not put much effort into completing the required activities. There was eagerness in her notes and journals that she did not display during the whole-class novel. Like Liz, it appeared to be the intimate setting that made a drastic positive change in Amber’s reading. While she refused to participate during the whole-class novel, it was she who led the group to be successful in its meetings.

Brian: Fallen Angels

As stated in his profile, Brian had the ability to read text individually. In order to determine whether literature circles were an effective reading strategy for him, Brian needed to present evidence that he could engage and interact with a text. Since Brian appeared to lack intrinsic motivation as demonstrated during the whole-class novel, Brian needed to demonstrate self-motivation through active participation during literature circles.

Literature circle meetings 1-4

Brian started off his literature circle meetings by not being prepared. It was evident that he had not completed his readings nor that he cared, as he later realized

himself. He did not participate in any discussion in any of the first three meetings although I had encouraged him to come prepared to discuss and suggested he would be able to add great perspectives. After the third meeting, Brian completed a self-evaluation. The evaluation was the first time Brian suggested he realized it would be better to participate in the discussion rather than come unprepared. He wrote, "I know I can do better at reading and doing my notes. I like what I have read in the book and I like what my group talks about. I didn't think that would happen."

The fourth meeting indicated improvement. Brian came to the meeting with prepared notes, although not in the correct format. Like Liz and Amber, he wrote out the passage without the page number and explanation of why he selected the particular passage. I noted, "Although his notes are not in the correct format, I was pleasantly surprised by Brian's addition to the discussion. His thinking showed that he was engaging with the text, specifically through his connection of the main characters to his own friendships." His character journal before the fourth meeting showed that Brian was able to identify with the main character and discuss how much Perry missed his family during his time in Vietnam.

Literature circle meetings 5-8

I was able to observe Brian during the sixth and eighth circle. Brian began to exhibit progress in his reading ability. Most notably, he consistently came prepared and actively participated in discussion. I noted, "Brian is no longer sitting back and waiting for people to ask him questions, instead he initiates topics of discussion, which show a deep understanding and engagement with the text." His notes suggested he understood how to follow the required assignment format. He also used the novel as a resource to

discuss the novel. His greatest improvement was his ability to make great connections between the text and his own life. When he was asked to do this during the reading of *To Kill a Mockingbird*, he was unable to do so. He explained that he couldn't make connections because he didn't live during that time period and didn't understand the plight of African-Americans. He failed to realize that he could easily relate to how characters felt and the relationships that were discussed in *To Kill Mockingbird*. However, Brian was able to do this for almost every reading assignment for each literature circle meeting. He showed the most improvement in making connections. He usually initiated the discussions about the personal connections he made to the text.

In his self-evaluation, Brian discussed what he thought he did well. He said, "I think that I helped discussion get going this meeting. I normally wait for other people to talk about the book, but this time I was able to start discussion on my own. I think it's because I like the book."

In his letter to the author, Brian discussed how *Fallen Angels* had become one of his favorite books. He said, "I have really enjoyed reading your book. I like to talk about it with my group members. I can make a lot of connections from the story to my own life."

Literature circle meetings 9-11

I was able to observe Brian during the tenth meeting. The most noticeable difference in his reading was his choice of passages. It marked the first time that he chose passages because he didn't agree with the author. This indicates that he began to question the story. He began thinking in ways that were not asked of him. I noted, "Brian has changed from night to day. At the beginning of the meetings he showed no interest in

what was happening and did not even come prepared. But it seems that as he gets farther into the book he goes above and beyond what is asked of him. His discussions with his group members indicate that he is really enjoying reading this book. He even read more than he was supposed to!" His notes indicate he increasingly questioned the text. His questions required his group members to think about what they would do if they were in similar circumstances as the characters in the book rather than merely ask for text clarification. His character journals also took on a more serious tone, as he discussed the grim side of war and what it was like to be a soldier fighting in Vietnam. This showed Brian's deep engagement with the text.

Literature circle survey

Brian said that without a doubt he preferred to read a novel in a literature circle rather than in a whole-class setting. He said, "I like how we got to choose our own books. That made want to read the book more because I wasn't told that I had to read a book that I didn't pick myself." He also said that he thought he became a better reader because he was able to actually think about what he was reading. He said that he normally reads to just get through the text without really understanding what is going on. He argued that literature circles challenged him to actually think while reading because he knew he had to complete the notes and then discuss them with the group.

Summary: Brian

It is obvious that Brian drastically improved his reading. The biggest improvement was his motivation in reading a book. It was difficult to get him to read during the whole-class novel. Instead the literature circles appeared to encourage him to actively participate in discussion through making connections. The literature circles were

an effective strategy for Brian because he was able to take ownership of his own reading due to choosing his own novel. It was this choice he said that allowed him to improve his reading while the whole-class novel did not.

CHAPTER FIVE

SUMMARY, CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Summary

This study had two main objectives. The first objective was to examine the research literature discussing the effectiveness of literature circles while also examining other factors that could affect outcome, such as adolescent development, struggling readers and ability grouping. The second objective was to present the findings from a study whose purpose it was to determine whether or not literature circles were an effective reading strategy for struggling readers. This study evaluated three students, each labeled as a struggling reader during the reading of a whole class-novel, *To Kill a Mockingbird* which preceded the literature circle study. These three students chose their own novels and were put into literature circle groups. I, the researcher and the teacher in the classroom in which the study took place, observed and analyzed the students' performance during eleven literature circle meetings. Other analyses consisted of students' self-evaluations, reading journals, peer-evaluations and a survey completed after the last meeting.

Conclusions

The findings suggest that literature circles are in fact an effective reading strategy for struggling readers. Each participant had a successful experience reading a novel within his or her literature circle groups. Three conclusions can be made on how and why literature circles are effective.

The first conclusion suggests that literature circles are effective due to the fact that students have a choice in which novel they want to read and what they want to discuss. It was this ownership of their own learning and reading that made the students eager to participate in discussion of the text. This was especially evident with Brian. Although Brian was a student who did not show much motivation or interest throughout the reading of the whole-class novel, literature circles proved to be a powerful strategy for him. This was evident in his participation in the literature circles. He moved from not reading and not preparing for meetings to initiating discussion. Utilizing literature circles in the classroom allows teachers to extend beyond the prescribed reading curriculum and allow students the opportunity to connect to text through their own personal choice. Also, it is through this freedom of discussion that literature circles provide such a successful reading strategy. Students are in charge of their own discussion of the text. This shows the organic nature of literature circles as compared to the teacher-directed discussion that can be artificial to students.

The second conclusion to suggest the effectiveness of literature circles is the benefit of the small intimate setting literature circles provide for students. This was the most evident in Amber's case. Her avoidance of participation during the whole-class novel is typical of many students who miss the opportunity to engage with text because of the large group setting. The small setting literature circles provide allow students to feel comfortable and confident sharing their thoughts and ideas regarding literature. Amber was the quiet girl in the back during a whole-class novel, but during literature circles she blossomed into the leader and facilitator of the group. Also, Brian and Amber recognized the effect they had on discussion when they did not come prepared. Brian

realized he wanted to come prepared so he could add to the discussion. Literature circles allow students to become intrinsically motivated to participate rather than wait for the teacher to ask direct question. Also, literature circles allow for struggling readers to observe modeling by their peers. Liz benefited from literature circles because of the support her group members provided. They modeled what quality notes and discussion look like. Also, Liz's peers helped her improve her comprehension skills by helping her understand the novel. This modeling supports heterogeneous grouping and the positive benefits they provide to students.

The third conclusion is that the notes students were required to prepare for each literature circle meetings improved their reading skills. All three students explained how the notes helped them comprehend the text better because of the fact that they knew they had to have questions, important passages and connections chosen in order to discuss the novel. It became apparent during the whole-class novel that all three of the students were reading to get to the end of the chapter because they knew they did not necessarily have to participate in discussion. Because were required to participate in discussion, the notes helped them to read more closely and think more critically in order to produce quality notes. Thinking critically was demonstrated in their connections to the text, important passages and the questions they asked.

Recommendations

While the findings of this study suggest that literature circle played a significant role in improving the observed students' reading ability, it would be beneficial to conduct a larger follow-up study in order to further validate effectiveness of literature circles on struggling readers. Numerical data, such as measuring comprehension through quiz

scores may well have improved the validity of the findings as compared to the narrative reporting of the findings.

The collection of data through video and/or audio recordings of the students' conversations during literature circle discussions would allow for a measure of student progress throughout the course of the literature circle cycle. This would aid researchers to avoid bias and allow them enhance the validity of the findings.. Analysis of the transcripts of the recordings could potentially provide a more in-depth analysis of student conversation and levels of participation.

To conclude, the findings in this master's research project suggest that teachers should incorporate literature circles in their classrooms. One of biggest of hopes English teachers have for their students to fall in love with literature and become consummate readers. Literature circles allow students to experience how literature can enrich their lives. They give struggling readers the opportunity to recognize that reading no longer means having the right answer or pronouncing every word correctly. Instead, it means making connections with the text. Literature circles are one way of helping struggling readers become engaged and reflective readers.

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Appendix A

Name _____

Literature Circle Book Choice1st Choice: _____2nd Choice: _____3rd Choice: _____

Name _____

Literature Circle Book Choice1st Choice: _____2nd Choice: _____3rd Choice: _____

Appendix B**Performance Assessment**

Student	Participated	Prepared	Thinking Skills
	Social Skills		

Performance Assessment

Student	Participated	Prepared	Thinking Skills
	Social Skills		

Appendix C

Name _____

Meeting # _____

Literature Circle Self-Evaluation

Name _____

1 - 2- 3 - 4 - 5

____ Came prepared
share

____ Encourages others to

____ Focused on group members

____ Actively participated in
discussion

____ Actively used book and notes for discussion

I think I did well:

I need to improve on for next meeting:

Name _____

Meeting # _____

Literature Circle Self-Evaluation

Name _____

1 - 2- 3 - 4 - 5

____ Came prepared
share

____ Encourages others to

____ Focused on group members

____ Actively participated in
discussion

____ Actively used book and notes for discussion

I think I did well:

I need to improve on for next meeting:

