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LITERATURE CIRCLES:
OWNERSHIP AND ENGAGING MINDS

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RESEARCHER STANCE

I have loved reading ever since my mother introduced me to books when I was a little girl. As I grew older, we would take turns reading to each other before bed every evening. As the years went by, I continued to spend a lot of my time immersed in wonderful pieces of literature. My love for reading and children eventually led me to the elementary teaching profession.

As an undergraduate student at Moravian College, I was required to take a course entitled Reading in the Elementary Schools. I was extremely excited about this course because I assumed that I would be introduced to several exciting and challenging ways to teach reading and reading strategies to elementary school students. I never imagined that I would become so inspired by one specific reading technique until Dr. Connie Unger introduced literature circles to me. Dr. Unger's passion and enthusiasm towards literature circles were truly inspiring. It was at that moment that I knew I wanted to teach reading to my future students through the use of literature circles.

The first time that I wanted to implement literature circles was during my first student teaching experience within a third grade classroom, where my cooperating teacher would not permit me to do so. She taught directly from the manuals and rarely used cooperative groups. She did, however, allow me to create several math learning centers and I was also able to design an entire day around Johnny Appleseed. However, when it came to reading she said that I

should become accustomed to using the basal and the manual as much as possible. She also said that it would be a good idea for me to use the basal for the first several years of my teaching career and if and when I felt comfortable enough, I could try flexible reading groups.

I used the basal and followed the manual as she instructed me to do, but some of the students were quite bored. Several of the students came from a second grade classroom whose teacher used Guided Reading on a daily basis and had abandoned the basal. The other students were accustomed to using the basal and went on as though nothing had changed from second grade to third grade. I was uninspired by most of the selections and so were a lot of the students. Reading wasn't fun during those seven weeks because I did as I was told and followed the manual section by section, which allowed for little creativity. I was unable to let all of the students read or answer any questions each day in reading due to time constraints. It was at the end of this experience I realized that once the decision-making process of how to teach reading was in my hands, I would use an approach that involved students being able to discuss literature in small, cooperative groups.

As my second student teaching placement in sixth¹ grade approached, Dr. Unger requested that I use literature circles for the first time. When I first approached my 6th grade cooperating teacher about using literature circles during my eight weeks in her class, she immediately exclaimed, "Yes!" She told me that

she had heard of them and had always wanted to try them but had been too scared to do so by herself. She felt that the use of literature circles was an engaging way for students to read a particular piece of literature in its entirety and then discuss it with their peers in detail.

I then proceeded to ask her if there was a specific novel she had in mind for me to use, and she suggested *Bridge to Terabithia* by Katherine Paterson. I told her that that was one of my all time favorite novels, even though it is so sad. I then decided to find out why she wanted me to use this particular novel instead of a different one. She said that excerpts from the novel were in the students' anthology book, but she would prefer to have students read the entire story. At that point in time, we both agreed that *Bridge to Terabithia* would be a wonderful novel to use to introduce literature circles to the students.

When I first mentioned literature circles to the sixth grade students, they said that they never heard of them. The looks on the students' faces indicated to me that they were excited about approaching reading in a different way than they had in the past. The students had so many questions, and one by one I attempted to answer them. I recall that the children had many specific questions. What exactly are literature circles? What do you read in literature circles? Will we always be reading in school or will we have to read at home? Will we continue to write in our reading journals? What insightful questions! I was so excited to hear so many wonderful questions that I asked the students to take out their

reading journals and compile a list of all the questions they had about literature circles. I reinforced the fact that I wanted them to list as many questions as they had. I told the students that I would read through their questions that evening and then respond to any unanswered questions tomorrow.

I spent the entire eight weeks with the students reading and analyzing *Bridge to Terabithia* in literature circles. It was heaven! The students were always engaged in the reading of the novel and were extremely eager to discuss what they had read with the other members of their literature circle.

According to the surveys completed by the students, their parents, and my cooperating teacher, the literature circles were well received. The students told me that they did in fact enjoy reading an entire novel versus an excerpt. They also enjoyed being able to discuss a piece of a literature with their peers in a small group. The students enjoyed the freedom given to them to be able to sit down with their peers in a small group to openly discuss what they felt like discussing from their reading assignment. This enabled each student more time to discuss his/her thoughts, feelings, and reactions to the novel.

The surveys I received from the parents were also positive and informative. The majority of the parents told me that they also liked the idea of their child reading entire novels versus excerpts. They also liked the fact that each child had the opportunity to speak openly about his or her thoughts and feelings about a novel in small groups on a daily basis. Many of the parents also

said that they were happy their child was exposed to a new, exciting, and engaging approach to reading.

My cooperating teacher was extremely pleased with my implementation of literature circles into her classroom. She was most pleased with the in depth conversations and discussions the students were having on a regular basis at the end of my student teaching experience. After watching the students and me in action on a regular basis for seven weeks, she was more confident and willing to try them on her own. I am pleased to report that my cooperating teacher did in fact continue to use the literature circles in her classroom even after I left to take on a classroom of my own.

I left this experience feeling confident about the work I had done and the lives I had touched. It was at the end of this exciting and challenging experience that I knew for certain that I wanted to teach reading through the use of literature circles in the future.

My first full-time teaching position was in a relatively traditional school setting where I taught first grade. I used guided reading that year because at that time I believed that literature circles were for the intermediate grades and guided reading was for the primary grades. I taught second grade the next year and used guided reading again for the same reasons. It was not until my third year of teaching when I taught fourth grade that I began to use literature circles again. I first approached my principal about what I wanted to try in reading before

beginning. She was extremely supportive of my willingness and excitement to try something new. She then informed me that she had also used literature circles when she taught fourth grade and enjoyed them tremendously. She did remind me that I still had to teach all of the skills presented in the reading series even though I wasn't going to use the series, so with my principal's support, I abandoned the reading series and turned to literature circles.

MY FIRST YEAR USING LITERATURE CIRCLES

My first full year of using literature circles was both exciting and challenging. I spent the first several weeks of school introducing the concept of literature circles to my students and explaining my expectations of them. I spent a substantial amount of time describing and modeling the differences between open-ended questions and close-ended questions, also known as thick and thin questions (Lewin 2003). Before I began the introduction I told the students that they would need to pay close attention to everything I was about to tell them because most likely all of the material would be new to them. I also told the students that if they had any questions or comments throughout the upcoming lessons that they should not hesitate to ask right away.

Using transparency sheets, I projected the definitions of the two types of questions onto the screen. I gave the students a copy to keep for reference and they were also able to see the definitions on the screen in the front of the

classroom as I explained each one. I told the students that open-ended questions are questions that do not have one correct answer. I went on to explain that even once they read a passage in a novel, they still wouldn't know the answer to these questions. I then told the students that the answers to open-ended questions are based on one's opinions. As long as you can support your answer with details that make sense, then your answer will be acceptable. According to Lewin, open-ended questions tend to be more interpretative or evaluative, which move the students into deeper understandings of the text. Routman (1991) notes, "that open-ended questions should be genuine; that is, one right answer is not already in the teacher's head. A good open-ended question may elicit some surprising and varied responses." Finally, I moved on to giving the students the following example of an open-ended question: If the novel *Tales of a Fourth Grade Nothing* by Judy Blume had one more chapter in it, what would it be about? As soon as I finished sharing the question, several hands went up. I called on approximately four students to share their answers. One student said that she thought Peter would play a more important role in the story if there were another chapter to the novel. Another student said he thought Fudge would get into more trouble and possibly be grounded if there were another chapter. One boy said he thought Peter would finally get fed up with Fudge and stop paying so much attention to him. One girl said that she thought Fudge would learn how to behave himself better and not get into so much trouble if there were another chapter in the novel.

All of their responses were different, well thought out, and creative. I told all of the students that each had answered the open-ended question beautifully.

I then moved on to explaining that a close-ended question is the exact opposite of an open-ended question. I told them that these types of questions do have one correct answer and that the answer can be found in the reading. Lewin states that these types of questions tend to be recall questions that are factual in nature. I went on to give the students the following example: What is the setting of *Tales of a Fourth Grade Nothing*? As soon as I finished asking this question, almost all of the students' hands went up. I remember calling on a boy who was in fact able to answer the question immediately. The boy said, "*Tales of a Fourth Grade Nothing* mainly takes place in Fudge's house. Fudge and Peter do go with their father to where he works. They also go to the park to play. Most of the story takes place during the day, but a few parts take place in the evening." Students agreed that the answer to this close-ended question was correct and could be found in the book itself.

I proceeded to give each of the students a basic guided reading book. I instructed students to read the book given to them and design two open-ended questions and two close-ended questions. After about thirty minutes, several students shared their questions. I recall that the students designed good close-ended questions. What are the names of the main characters in the story? What is the setting of the story? Who went to the park with the little girl? The students

were also able to design good close-ended questions. What would happen in this story if there were a few pages in it? Why do you think the author only has two characters in this story? What do you think would happen if this story took place at a zoo instead of at the park? I finally collected all of the questions after the students were finished sharing so I could give feedback to the students.

My next major task was to describe each of the jobs (Summarizer, Illustrator, Literary Luminary, Discussion Director, and Connector) Daniels (2002) designed that the students would also be responsible for completing. (See Appendices A-E for modified versions of these jobs. A detailed description of each is provided in the next section of this document.) Daniels designed the job sheets to create positive interdependence by giving group members clearly defined and interlocking but very open-ended tasks. He believes that the jobs have both cognitive and social purposes: they help students read and discuss better.

Once again, I gave each student a copy of the five job sheets and I had each one printed on a transparency sheet. I spent several days explaining each of the jobs and modeling examples of how they might be completed. Most students were attentive and receptive while I was explaining and modeling the various jobs.

After I introduced each job, I instructed the students to complete a sample job sheet based on the guided reading book they had used to design their open-

ended and close-ended questions. Once the students finished each job sheet they had to get into a group with the other students that had the same book and share their job sheet responses and give feedback to one another. Many of the students told each other that they had done a nice job, but perhaps had left some important information out. Some of the students even helped other students revise their work by rewriting it on the back of their job sheet for me to see. As I took turns sitting with each group, I also provided feedback to the students. I did exactly what the students did. I tried to give each student at least one positive comment and then tried to help him or her revise the things that required revision. When the class convened as a whole group I had several students orally share their job sheets for more peer feedback. Afterwards, I collected all of the job sheets to personally respond to each individual student. I tried to focus my responses on all of the positive things each child did while also explaining how to improve the piece over time. It appeared as though many of the students were able to correctly complete the illustrator, literary luminary, and connector sheets. Many of the students did well on the summarizer sheet but missed some of the major details that should have been included. A little fine-tuning was really all most of the students required. The discussion director sheet posed the most problems because the students were still trying to get used to the new type of questioning. In time, I felt the majority if not all of the students would be able to grasp the

difference between the two types of questions that the discussion director would need to pose.

By the beginning of October I had the students divided into four different literature circles. Since I did not know my students well at this time, I designed the groups based on gender and the students' reading grade from third grade. I was quite comfortable grouping my students this way because I had done it that way in the past with guided reading and I wasn't especially comfortable grouping in a different manner at that point in time. I knew that the groups would definitely change over the course of the year once I got to know my students better and once I knew their individual reading level.

The first novel the students read was *Stone Fox*, and they spent roughly two months reading and discussing this novel as their main source of reading instruction. I was still able to teach the necessary skills to meet the Pennsylvania State Standards for Reading, Writing, Speaking, and Listening as students simultaneously learned how to complete the job sheets correctly and thoroughly for their discussions. The purpose of the standards, which are written for grades 3, 5, 8, and 11), is to ensure that students are being taught the necessary skills required to further their learning. In order to meet all of the state standards through a nontraditional approach to reading, I had to use a large number of mini-lessons to teach the various skills. For example, one of the state standards requires students to retell or summarize the major ideas or themes of a given text.

One of the major problems the students encountered was how to write a chapter summary that was short, sweet, and to the point. In order to assist the students I provided several mini-lessons to show the students how to write a good summary without including extraneous details. Another Pennsylvania State Standard requires that students in third and fifth grade be able to clarify ideas and understandings through reading and discussions. I also had the students work on learning to how to conduct a better discussion with their peers so that everyone in their group had an equal part in the discussion. To assist the students in becoming better at discussing pieces of literature, I had each of the groups conduct a fishbowl. According to Daniels (2002) a fishbowl is used for training and problem solving purposes. To conduct a fishbowl, Daniels states, "Ask one literature circle to hold its discussion in the middle of the room while everyone else observes, perhaps taking notes for later debriefing." McDonald (1996) notes that a fishbowl is used to discuss and provide feedback on a topic. The people who sit in a small circle in the center are known as presenters while the people sitting in a circle around them are known as reflectors. McDonald recommends allowing everyone to experience being a presenter and a reflector. I gave the students several opportunities throughout the year to be in the fishbowl. The majority of the students enjoyed this activity and enjoyed receiving feedback as much as they enjoyed giving it.

Once *Stone Fox* was completed, we moved on to another novel, *Sarah, Plain, and Tall*, which I selected because it was one of the required readings that accompanied the schools reading series. The entire class worked on the same novel once again. For the remainder of the year, I placed the students in literature circles according to their reading level. I assigned the groups, and I chose the books they read. Positively speaking, my decisions enabled the students to feel comfortable knowing they were reading a book that was on or close to their own reading level. This decision enabled students gradually to increase their reading level throughout the year, while not becoming frustrated. Day, Spiegel, McLellan, and Brown (2002) also agree that a struggling reader should not be expected to read a book that is too hard, even if he/she is given a peer as a helper. They also believe that a good rule of thumb to remember is that a more successful student can support a less successful student only if the struggling reader can almost be successful without help.

Negatively speaking, my decisions did not allow many students to be challenged over the course of the year in reading. Challenges are good as long as the person being challenged does not become too frustrated and give up. My decisions also did not enable my students to have a choice in who would be in their literature circle group or what novel they would read. I did not allow my students to have a voice in the classroom, which I now realize may not have been the best option for everyone. Students can, however, still be given a voice in the

classroom without the teacher having to give up total control of the decision making process.

By the end of the year I had four literature circles groups going on at the same time, two reading *Mr. Popper's Penguins* by Richard and Florence Atwater and two reading *Hannah's Helping Hands* by Jean Van Leeuwen. Once again I selected the novels for the students to read. *Hannah's Helping Hands* was a supplemental novel that went along with the reading series that was on a fourth grade reading level. This book was optional to use with the series. The PTA purchased *Mr. Popper's Penguins* for me as a gift, and this was a more difficult book for students to read and comprehend. I enjoyed the challenge of having two novels going at the same time. After a few weeks I became accustomed to moving back and forth between the groups and the novels. Many of my students also enjoyed the change I had made and enjoyed discussing the novel they were reading with the students who were reading a different novel. All of the students were good at not giving away the entire plot of their novel just in case the other students would want to read the same novel. They also enjoyed hearing about what was happening in the novel their friends in the other groups were reading.

The students also continued to use the job sheets for the remainder of the year for their discussions because they never really caught on to how to conduct a discussion without relying solely on them. I was not pleased about this, which made me realize that I would need to make changes for the following year in

order for my students to be able to move beyond the guide sheets to conduct a discussion. I did realize that perhaps not all of my future students would be able to handle an entire discussion without this aide, but I wanted to try and have as many students as possible conduct a discussion with as little support from the job sheets as possible. To assist with this process, Daniels (2002) suggests having the students complete the sheets, take them with them to their literature circle discussion, place them face-down on the table or on one's lap, and flip them over only if they completely run out of things to talk about. I knew that I would want to try this with my next group of students.

By the end of the year, I realized that I wanted to make and would have to make some changes to the literature circles for the upcoming year. I knew that I wanted to start the year off with all of the students reading the same novel to make it easier on the students to become acclimated to the concept of literature circles and to make the process more manageable for me until the majority of the students grasped the concept of what to do in a literature circle. I hoped that by the end of the first novel many of the students would learn how to complete the job sheets and hold a thought-provoking discussion with their peers.

I also knew that after having all of the students read the same novel first, I wanted to start breaking up the students up into different groups to read different novels. I realized that it would be a good idea for me to somehow give my students a choice in the novels that they would be reading. Brabham and

Villaume (2000) feel that student choice of a text is a defining feature of many literature circles, but selections are often constrained by availability of multiple copies. Maloch (2002) also agrees that the formation of literature circle groups should be based on student preference towards a particular novel.

I also decided that I would focus more of my time and energy on teaching the students how to move away from relying on the job sheets for their discussions. According to Daniels, the goal of literature circles is to have natural and sophisticated discussions of literature. Once that is happening, Daniels recommends removing any artificial elements immediately, job sheets included.

The most important realization I had made by the end of the school year was that students needed and deserved more choices when it came to literature circles. Whether it is in choosing the novels they wanted to read or who would be in their literature circle group, my students needed and deserved to have a voice in their classroom.

REASEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

Through inquiry into my teaching and my students' learning, I wanted to determine the impact literature circles have on students in an intermediate classroom. Further, I wanted to ascertain the students' attitudes, behaviors, and experiences associated with the use of literature circles. I designed this study first and foremost to expose students to a new way of looking at, reacting to, and

responding to a piece of literature. Second, I wanted to allow students the opportunity to interact with their peers on a regular basis to discuss a particular piece of literature in depth.

The use of literature circles was the main source of my reading instruction during this study. The students spent approximately one hour per day, five days a week with the members of their group. When the students required more time it was provided whenever possible. If the class as a whole did not need the entire hour to work, we moved onto something else. Some days would be spent reading and completing job sheets or designing open-ended and close-ended questions while other days were spent discussing the assigned readings.

The students who chose to participate in the study had to have their parents sign a permission form authorizing their consent (See Appendix F). All seventeen students in my classroom for reading were given permission to participate. Two of the seventeen students opted not to participate in the one-on-one interviews with me. I did use pieces of data from all of the students throughout the study.

As a teacher-researcher I used qualitative research methods and collected data in the following ways:

Field Log: I kept a detailed field log from September through December to record all of my observations and personal thoughts and reflections. According to Ely (1997), "a field log consists of the tentative planning, reactions, lists,

descriptions, or bits of overheard conversation.” This log provided the data for the narrative pieces I share throughout this document.

Field Notes: I documented participant observation data in a field log on a regular basis from September through December. Ely (1997) defines fieldnotes as, “the written record of the data as shaped through the researcher’s eyes, with all that this implies about the way individuals see the world, how they interpret what they see, both explicitly and implicitly, and why” (p. 17).

Participant observation data: I observed and documented what the students said and how they acted and reacted in different situations while they were in their literature circles. I also observed their facial expressions to help reinforce their feelings. I documented this information by taking notes during my observations. After my observations I would take my notes home and type them up along with any personal reflections I had and incorporated these into my field log.

Parent surveys: At the beginning of this study I sent each parent a survey to share their perceptions of their child’s thoughts, feelings, and attitudes towards reading (See Appendix G). To assist me in designing the survey I turned to Allen (2000) who has developed several surveys on reading. I took some of her questions from her fall survey on reading and writing and modified them to meet my needs.

Student surveys: All of the students who participated in this study completed a survey about their thoughts, feelings, and attitudes towards reading

before I began the study (See Appendix H). To aid in designing this survey I turned to Allen once again. I took some of her questions from her fall survey on reading and writing and modified them to meet my needs. Allen suggests surveying the students to look at individual preferences towards reading and writing and to look at an individual's commitment to his/her own learning. She also suggests looking at the survey results to discover any class patterns that would aid in the planning and teaching of reading and writing.

Job sheets: I collected the students' completed job sheets on a regular basis to see if they were including all of the necessary information to take with them to their literature circle for their discussions. Over time I looked to see if the students were including more detailed descriptions on each of the tasks.

Open-ended and close-ended questions: When I had the students design questions or when they chose to design open-ended or close-ended questions, I collected them on a regular basis to see if they understood the difference between the two types of questions. Over time, I was looking to see if the students were developing more detailed and thought provoking questions.

One-on-One interview: I conducted two one-on-one interviews with the participants (See Appendix I), the first in October to see what the students really liked and disliked about literature circles and to ascertain their feelings and attitudes towards reading at the beginning of this process. I then conducted a

follow-up interview in December to see how their feelings and attitudes towards literature circles and reading had changed or remained the same.

Before I began this study, I discussed it with my principal to receive her support and approval. She signed a consent form allowing me to conduct the study in my fourth grade classroom (See Appendix J). I then proceeded to have my study reviewed and approved by the Human Subjects Internal Review Board (HSIRB) at Moravian College. The purpose of the HSIRB is to ensure the welfare and anonymity of all subjects involved. After reviewing my proposal for the first time, the HSIRB requested several changes before giving their final approval. Once I received their approval I was ready to begin my study and start collecting the data necessary to answer my research question.

I began by explaining to my students that I was not only their teacher, but I was also a student. I told them that I had a large project I had to complete as part of the requirements to earn my Master's Degree. I informed the students that I would be spending the school year working on a project based on literature circles, which would be an integral part of their language arts program. I told the students that I was looking for new ways to teach reading that would be exciting, engaging, and educational at the same time. I informed the students that if they chose to participate in addition to completing the assigned reading work, they would be asked to complete a few surveys and take part in two one-on-one interviews with me about literature circles. I invited all of the students in my

classroom to participate. I then proceeded to tell the students that their participation in the study was voluntary and their parents' consent was also required. I also told the students that if they chose not to participate, their grades would not be affected in any way, but they would still be required to participate in the literature circles, which would be used as the main source of reading instruction for the school year. In order to receive parental permission for the students to participate, I sent home a parental consent form that day with all of the students (See Appendix F). All seventeen students agreed to be part of the study, and they all received parental permission to do so. In order to protect the identity of each of the students I assigned each one a pseudonym.

Trustworthiness according to Ely (1997) "helps the reader to understand the empathy of the researcher, and, perhaps, to learn from the researcher's blind spots and blunders, as well as enabling biases and successes" (p. 358). To ensure trustworthiness my analysis was ongoing. I collected multiple forms of data by administering surveys to the parents and to the students, conducting one-on-one interviews with the students, observing the students discuss their novel in their literature circles, and analyzing student work over a prolonged period of time. The multiple forms of data, which I collected, enabled to triangulate my data. "Triangulation is a way to cross-check data sources and open up, for argumentation, the veracity of possible interpretations," according to Arhar (2001). My use of triangulation helped to ensure the trustworthiness of my study.

Keeping a field log enabled me to have one specific place for all of the participant observation notes I took and the personal reflections I made during the duration of my study. To help me keep track of what actually took place in the literature circles and what I interpreted, I used observer comments. According to Ely, “Observer comments are preconceptions, prejudgments, beliefs, biases, a researcher might have” (p. 351). I also put my observer comments in brackets so that it would be easier for me to distinguish between what actually transpired in my classroom and my own personal judgments. Ely believes, “bracketing asks us not to ignore or put out of our minds our responses to experience but to articulate them and deliberately distance ourselves to look at them” (p. 351). The following is an example of an observer comment from my field log that I placed in brackets:

[As I hung around that group a little longer, I continued to hear Brian make personal connections to the story even though it wasn’t his turn to be connector. Several times he began with, “I think...” As I recall, this is usually how he begins to share his thoughts. I’m extremely impressed with Brian’s conversational skills up to this point. He is an excellent role model for his group].

To assist me in understanding what I was observing in the literature circles, I wrote several reflective memos in my field log. According to Ely (1997), “Reflective memos can help researchers describe new understandings that may lead one to expand or revise previously collected data” (p. 179). For example, after observing a few students discussing a novel in their literature

circle, I would go home and write about my interpretation of what I felt took place, noting the reactions of both the students and me as well as how I interpreted the students' feelings during their discussion.

I was also fortunate to have a teacher inquiry support group who helped me see things in my data that I was unable to see because I was so personally attached. MacLean and Mohr (1996) state that,

“Teacher support groups read and discuss their research logs, data, analysis, findings, and drafts of articles. They challenge each other's assumptions, propose alternative interpretations, offer suggestions about research methodology, respond to drafts, and often lend personal as well as professional support. The group also validates the members' research data and analysis by questioning and offering a variety of interpretations in addition to those of the researcher (p. 21).”

My support group was able to offer me suggestions related to trying things differently. They were also remarkable in helping me through the many ups and downs during the course of my study. One of the most memorable moments I can remember was when my support group was rallying around me at the beginning of the writing process. I had an extremely difficult time writing my researcher stance. My ideas were all over the place and I was unable to make my writing flow well. A few of my colleagues let me read their stances to see what one

might look like. After several drafts, many revisions, and my groups' support, I was able to compose the final piece.

THIS YEAR'S STORY

This year's story takes place in my fourth grade classroom. I have nineteen students, twelve boys and seven girls. Two of the boys are not in classroom for reading because they are instructed by one of the special education teachers in the building. The school is comprised of approximately three hundred students and is situated in a rural area where many of the parents are professionals. I'd consider most of the parents to be middle to upper middle class. The students' parents are extremely active in the school's PTA and the student population is neither ethnically diverse nor transient. The school provides a vast array of services for the students ranging from assistance in reading by the reading specialist, to resource room and special education support from the special education teachers, to enrichment for the gifted individuals from the gifted teacher.

After having one full year of literature circles under my belt and the support and guidance of my principal, I was excited to get the second year underway. I was, however, extremely anxious about starting literature circles so early in the year because I had never done so before. My only concern was that I didn't want to rush into explaining how to conduct a literature circle and what my

expectations were for the students. I wanted to take my time and walk the students through the process at a nice pace so that they would have a good, solid foundation to build upon. On the other hand, starting the literature circles earlier in the year would allow the students to read and discuss more novels during the course of the school year. Starting earlier would also give the students more of an opportunity to become better at discussing pieces of literature in-depth with their peers.

A study by Lyle (1999) suggested that in order for students to hold meaningful discussions with their peers, the teacher must spend a vast amount of time modeling and explaining the proper way before having the students try it. Lyle immediately thrust her students into the discussion process before detailing her expectations for the discussions. The students were extremely excited and motivated to choose the novel they would read and how much they would read before discussing it. However, Lyle found her students just wanted to keep reading instead of stopping to discuss a specific portion of the novel. Lyle realized that she did a great job of motivating her students to read, but did not do as good a job when it came to modeling how to have a discussion about a piece of literature.

After I finished reading this article, I definitely realized that I needed to have a plan in place for how I was going to model and explain how to hold an in-depth, meaningful conversation with one's peers. I knew that I would have to

spend several days modeling what literature circles look like and what should take place in them. From working on a story together as a whole class to watching a videotape of literature circles in action, to having students do a fishbowl (a literature circle group sits in a circle in the middle of the room and discusses their assigned chapter, while the rest of the students sit outside the circle, observe, take notes, and provide feedback afterwards), I felt my students were well-prepared to delve into the world of literature circles by the middle of September.

On the fifth day of school, I administered a survey to my students to determine their reading interests, their personal feelings towards reading, what they enjoyed about reading, and what their reading classes were like in the past (See Appendix H). The majority of the students surveyed said that they liked to read "somewhat." One student, Tom, said that he didn't like to read at all. I was extremely shocked to find this out because I had Tom as a student three years earlier and he really enjoyed reading, or at least appeared to enjoy it at that time. As I recall, I remember Tom looking forward to reading out loud to his classmates and I would often see him spending his free time reading somewhere in the classroom. What happened to Tom during the three years since I had him as a student? Did I misinterpret what I saw three years earlier in my classroom or did something happen in Tom's life to change his attitude about reading? Brad, another student I had three years, said he really enjoyed reading on his survey.

His answer to this question was consistent with how I recall he felt towards reading three years ago.

After reading through the surveys I was so moved by the results that I composed a Patai poem to share an overall impression of my students' attitudes towards reading. Ely explains that this makes "spoken narratives more accessible by creating dramatic poetry from them. A Patai poem breaks the lines in the speaker's speech in the form of free verse," (p. 135). On the next page I share a Patai Poem entitled Up and Down.

Up	and	Down
Happy		Mad
Excited		Not excited
Glad		Bored
Don't want to stop		Don't really care for it
Great		
Proud		
Curious		
Content		
Relaxed		
Like I'm there		
Pretty good		
Good		
Okay		
Eager		
Good inside		
Feels like I'm a great reader		
Feels like I can read all day		

I felt that by creating this poem I would have a better perspective on how my students felt about reading. I was pleased to discover that the majority of my students like to read but disappointed to learn that three of my students said that they do not feel good when they read. I hoped that our use of literature circles would entice them, especially my three seemingly reluctant readers.

I introduced the concept of literature circles to my students on the sixth day of school by writing the words "Literature Circles" on the chalkboard in large letters. Next, I asked the students if they knew what literature circles were. Tonya raised her hand and said, "I think it's when you sit in a circle and read." I told Tonya that was part of what a literature circle is. No other hands were raised, so I proceeded. I told the students that literature circles were small, peer-led discussion groups whose members read a specific text. While reading, the students take notes if necessary to later assist them with their written work and their upcoming discussion. After reading and completing the required written work, all the students in a specific group meet in a circle to discuss the reading.

Brabham and Villaume (2000) view literature circles as "grand conversations," a term coined by Peterson and Eeds in 1990 because participants in literature circles are invited to develop and discuss their own questions and answers in ways that expand upon individual interpretation and evaluate responses to reading. Brabham and Villaume believe that these grand conversations can promote insights related to reading, writing, learning, and

thinking. Literature circles serve as launching devices or scaffolds that help students generate ideas and their own thoughtful conversations about what they have read. They provide conversational structures that help both students and teachers break away from typical classroom discourse patterns in which students respond only to the teacher's probes. Literature circles also 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. Brabham and Villaume (2000) believe routines and procedures vary when using literature circles, but the purpose remains constant: Readers come together to build conversational skills for talking about texts in enlightening, personal, and thoughtful ways.

Dewey (1938) states that education is essentially a social process. Literature circles are indeed social. They require students to engage in meaningful, thought provoking discussions about a piece of literature with other members of their group. The students are required to listen attentively, actively engage in the discussion, and assist other students in becoming better at the art of discussion.

After my explanation I asked the students if they had any questions or comments. Tonya immediately raised her hand and exclaimed, "This sounds cool!" I was thrilled! I was so happy to hear that one of my students was so

excited about literature circles. Another student raised his hand and asked if all of the work the students needed to complete for a discussion would be done in school or if they would ever have to finish things for homework. I told the students that they would receive time each day during reading class to work on anything they needed to complete in order to have a discussion with their group. I proceeded to inform them that if they did not finish their assignment, then they would have to finish it for homework, adding that they would have to have all of their work completed to be able to meet with their group to have a discussion in reading class. I proceeded to tell the students that if they did not come to reading class prepared for a discussion that they would have to sit out of the discussion and finish their assignment. Once their assignment was finished then they could rejoin their groups discussion. I explained to the students that I thought this was a fair way to make sure that all students completed their work for a discussion. As I finished explaining this policy, the majority of the students were nodding their heads in agreement. As I continued to look around the room, small conversations had begun taking place in the five table groups. Many of the other students appeared excited, which was evidenced by the looks on their faces.

I told the students that I would introduce the literature circle process to them by using the 1982 Caldecott award winning picture book *Jumanji* by Chris Van Allsburg. Daniels reports that Teresa Fluth, a fifth grade teacher in Texas, introduced literature circles to her students using *Jumanji* and was successful.

Fluth chose to model the five reading roles or jobs using *Jumanji*, a rather simple picture book. Fluth read the book to her students and modeled each of the five roles afterwards. As soon as I was finished telling the students about *Jumanji* they began chatting. When I asked the students why they were chatting Brad said, “*Jumanji* is a great book. So many people I know like it.” I was pleased to hear that some of my students liked my choice of a book to read. I felt that if some of the students liked *Jumanji* then they would hopefully stay focused long enough to learn how to complete the legwork required before having a literature circle discussion. I then informed my students that they would not be reading and discussing picture books in their literature circles, but novels, otherwise known to them as chapter books. I decided to use *Jumanji* to introduce literature circles to my students because it had worked so well for Fluth in the past. I also chose this book because it is one of my all time favorite picture books and I thought many of my students would enjoy it as much as I do. Lastly, I felt that using a picture book like *Jumanji* would be a simple way to introduce the concept of literature circles to the students along with the jobs associated with them for discussion.

Once the class settled down again, I began. I gave all of the students a copy of *Jumanji*. We took a picture walk through the story and predicted what the story would be about, for those who never read or heard the story before. I then instructed the students to enjoy the story and to listen carefully because they would be responsible for completing some various pieces of written work

afterwards. I then took turns calling on different students to read a page of the story out loud to the rest of the class. After reading the book, the students and I had approximately a twenty-five minute discussion about the book. The students verbally summarized the story, which is one of the jobs they would eventually take on in literature circles. They also discussed what their favorite parts were and why, which is similar to what the literary luminary's role is all about. A few of the students connected the story to their own lives by telling the class that they once found a game under a tree just as Peter, Judy, and the Budwing boys did in the story. I was so excited to see so many of the students participating and enjoying a discussion so early in the year.

After our discussion, I moved onto introducing the two different types of questions, open-ended and close-ended questions. I introduced the questions in the same manner except that I used the book *Jumanji* for sample questions. For example, I asked, "What do you think will happen to the Budwing boys?" I had all of the students write their predictions down on a sheet of paper and then I had them share their prediction with a buddy. Afterwards, I chose six students, three boys and three girls, to share their prediction. The students who orally shared their predictions came up with interesting and exciting ideas. One of the students thought that Peter and Judy would get into trouble in the story and their parents would have to rescue them. Another student thought that Peter and Judy would find a regular board game under a tree, play it together, and just have a fun time.

Another student thought that Peter and Judy would find a game and Judy wouldn't want to play it because she was too scared. This student went on to say that Peter would force Judy into playing and that bad things would happen to them. I then collected all of the students' predictions to read through myself to see what students knew the story and which students did not. For those students who hadn't heard the story before, I was curious to see what they envisioned happening in it. Little did I know in September, Chris Van Allsburg, the author of *Jumanji*, was coming out with the answer to my question in a new book entitled *Zathura* in October. When I found this out, I explained to the students that once *Zathura* came out, my question would no longer be an open-ended question but a close-ended question because we would know the correct answer.

Next, I asked a close-ended question, namely "What is the setting of *Jumanji*?" I then asked the students if anyone could explain what the setting of a story is in case anyone had forgotten over the summer vacation. Several hands went up. Amber told me that the setting of a story is where and when it takes place. I thanked Amber and moved to remind the students that when a story takes place can involve the day of the week, the season, the year, the time, etc. Many of the students were then willing to answer this question because *Jumanji* was fresh in their minds. From what I am able to recall, Brad said, "*Jumanji* takes place in Peter and Judy's home and at the neighborhood park." Brian said, "*Jumanji* takes place in the late afternoon or early evening because Peter and

Judy's parents are getting ready to go to the opera and people usually go to the opera during one of those times."

The next day I began reading class by summarizing what took place the day before. I began by writing the names of the two types of questions on the chalkboard. As I turned around from the board, Brad and Tonya had their hands up. I asked Brad what he wanted and he responded, "I know the difference between them." I told Brad to remember his answer for just a few moments. Tonya's hand then went down. I asked her what she wanted and she said, "I know the difference too." I said that I was glad, but to wait for a few moments. I then gave students a piece of paper and asked them to write the definitions of the two types of questions. I told the students to do the best job they could and that I would go over their answers in a few minutes. After about five minutes I told the students to find a buddy, swap papers, and see if their answers were the same or different and then discuss them. The students were eager to get a buddy. I decided to have the students share their answers with a buddy to start getting them used to sharing their work with their peers. As soon as I mentioned the word buddy many of the students started looking around the room to find a buddy. While the students shared, I walked around and listened to some of the answers. A lot of the students appeared to have the correct definitions. After about ten minutes the students returned to their seats and two of the students put their answers on the board, both of which were correct.

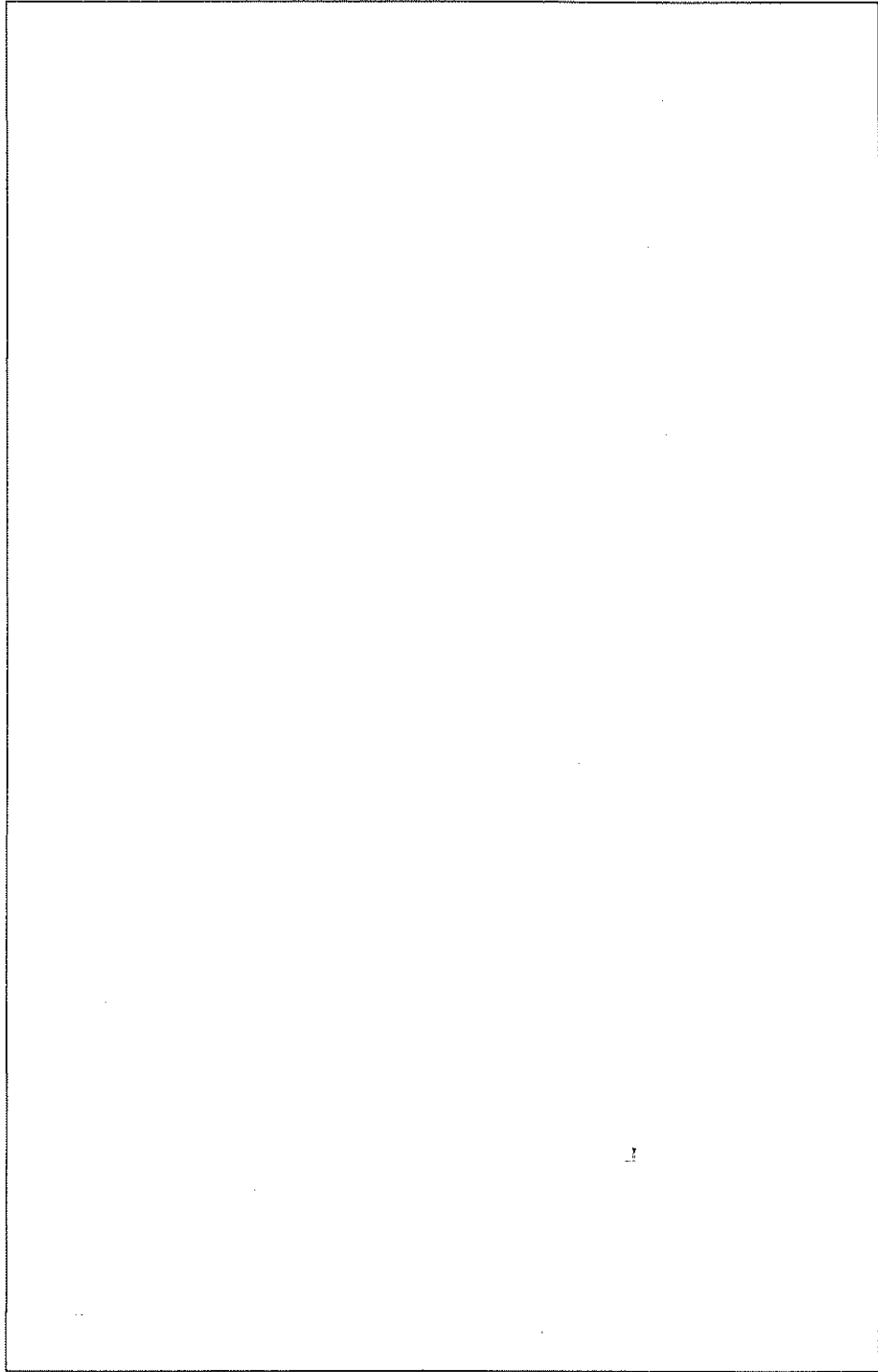
I then introduced two of the five different jobs that the students would be responsible for holding. The first job was summarizer (See Appendix A). Another state standard requires that students be able to summarize the major ideas or themes of a text. In order to meet this standard I gave a summarizer sheet to each student to look at, explaining that this student is responsible for writing a brief summary of the reading. The members of each group will be counting on the summarizer to give a quick statement that conveys the key ideas of the reading. After I was finished explaining the job, Wendy raised her hand and said, "The teacher I had last year had her students write summaries all the time. Those of us who had her should all be good at writing summaries." I thanked Wendy and asked which students had been in Wendy's class last year. Six other students raised their hands, and I was glad to see that seven of my seventeen students already had experiences writing summaries.

I then instructed the students to write a summary of *Jumanji*, reminding them that they needed to include all of the major events that took place in the beginning, middle, and end of the story. I walked around the room to assist those students who might require assistance while they were working on their individual summaries. As I approached Justin's desk, he stopped me and asked me to read what he had written so far. Unfortunately, Justin's ideas were scattered all over the place. He needed assistance with sequencing all of the major events that took place in *Jumanji*. I immediately went to my filing cabinet

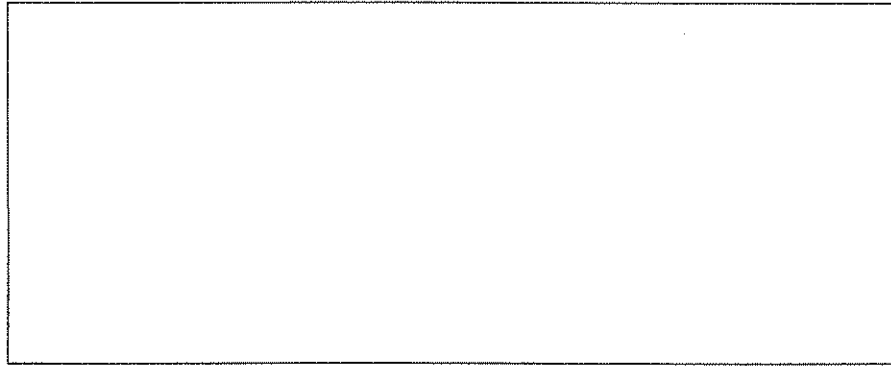
and pulled out a sequence chart to help Justin organize and sequence all of the major events. I instructed all of the students to put down their pencils and watch as I showed them the sequence chart that I had just pulled from my files, I told them that if any of them were having trouble writing their summary they could take a sequence chart to help them list the major events of the story before beginning the actual write-up of their summary. Approximately seven students out of seventeen took a chart. I then went back to Justin to offer assistance, but he said he was fine now that he had a sequence chart to help him.

I called on four students to share their summaries once everyone was finished. Two of the students who shared used the sequence chart before writing and two did not. After listening to the four summaries, the two students who had used the sequence charts wrote more detailed summaries than the other two. I then encouraged the students to use either a sequence chart or a piece of paper to make a list of all of the major events that happen in their readings before they actually write a summary in the future.

Tonya did especially well on her first summary of a story in fourth grade. She kept her summary short and to the point, but she did leave out many of the important events that took place in *Jumanji*. I hoped that with time and practice Tonya would learn to write a more detailed summary.



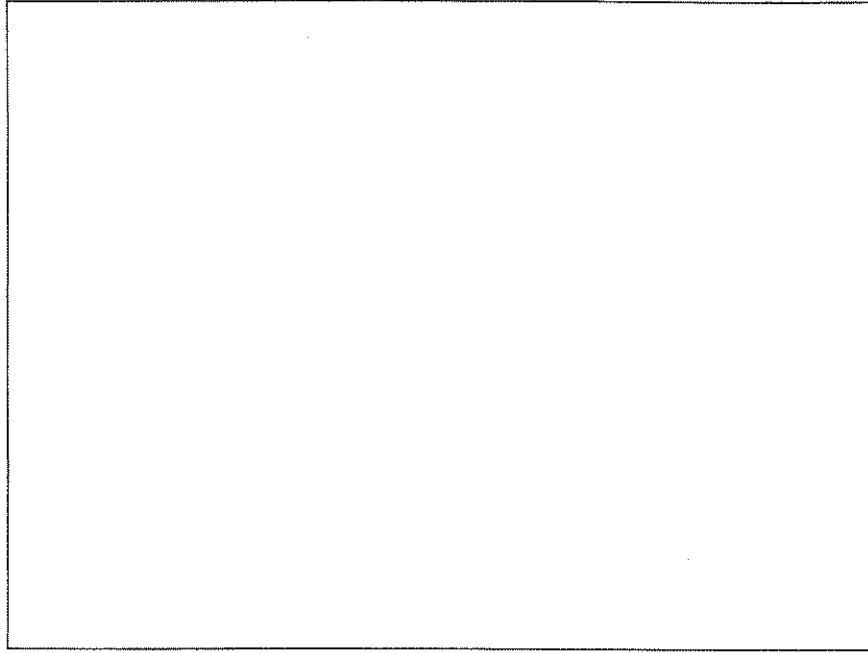
As is evident did a spectacular job of including almost all of the important events that took place in *Jumanji*. The most important detail that she left out was that after placing the game back under the tree in the park, the Budwing boys came and took it. The Budwing boys are notorious for not reading directions and for not finishing things they start, which would have a tremendous impact on them in this particular story.



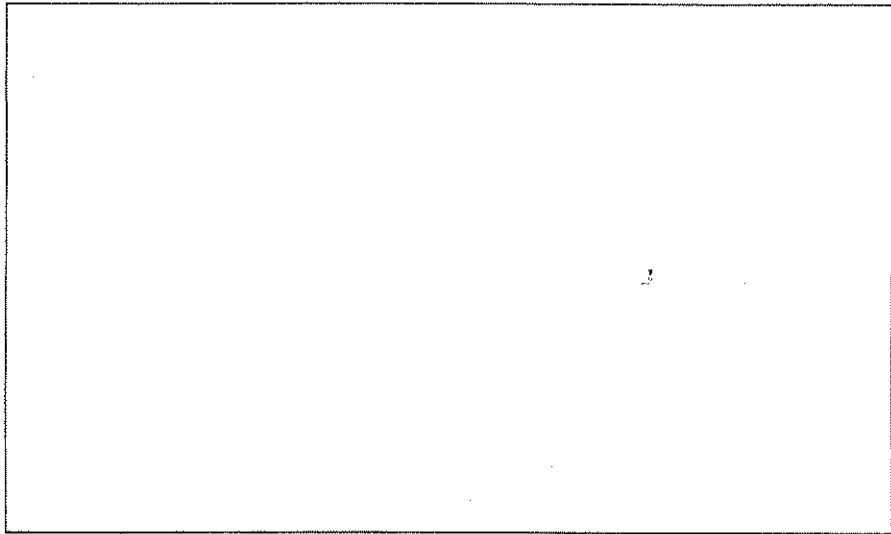
Next I introduced the Illustrator job sheet (See Appendix B), explaining that the student who is illustrator is responsible for drawing a picture related to the reading. I continued to explain that their illustration could be a picture of something that's discussed specifically in the book, something that the reading reminded them of, or a picture that shows any idea or feeling they got from the reading. Kyle raised his hand and said, "I love to draw. I will like being the illustrator." I told Kyle that I was happy to hear that he would enjoy taking on this role.

After explaining the instructions I had the students get started on their illustration. I reinforced the fact that I wanted their illustrations to be unique and creative. The students worked for approximately twenty-five minutes before I had them share. Several students who volunteered to share came up to the front of the classroom and explained their illustrations to the rest of the class. The students clapped for them, and then I asked the class to clap for everyone because all had done a beautiful job. All of the students drew a picture of a scene from the story or drew pictures of several of the things that happened in the story. Some of the students even added some to color to their illustrations to spice them up a bit, even though the story we read was not presented in color. Afterwards I told the students that if they wanted their illustration hung up in the classroom to bring it to me, and to my surprise and delight every student in the class asked me to do so. I was shocked. In the past, I have had students who never even liked to show their illustrations to a small group of students let alone have it hung up in the room. I took this as a good sign that these students were not shy and were willing to take risks by displaying their artwork for the first time in a new environment.

Brenna's illustration takes place outside in the park where Peter and Judy found *Jumanji*. This scene is important to the story because if Peter and Judy hadn't found the game the rest of the story never would have taken place. In the future I would like to see Brenna include more than just one scene in her illustrations.



Tonya's illustration depicts several of the key events that took place inside of Peter and Judy's house. These events are important because they comprise most of the story. In the future I would like to see Tonya continuing to include as much detail as she has in this illustration in her future illustrations.



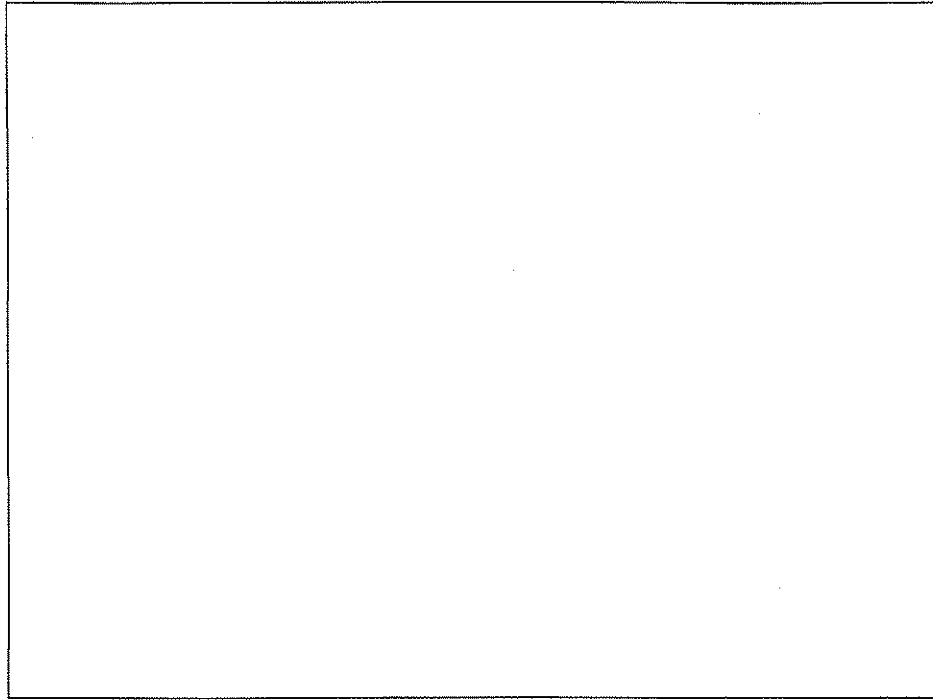
The following day I introduced the Literary Luminary job sheet (See Appendix C). To change things a little, I had a student read the instructions for this job and Brenna volunteered. After she finished, I asked if anyone could summarize what Brenna just read. Several students raised their hands. Brian answered, "The job of the literary luminary person is to go back into the reading and find four parts that they would like to have the group reread and discuss. The parts you choose to reread can be interesting, funny, important, or confusing. You must explain why you choose each piece and who will read it." I thanked Brian for doing such a wonderful job of summarizing this job, which brought about a spontaneous round of applause.

To help students try out this task, I asked them to look back through the story of *Jumanji* to find four parts that they would like to hear read again, instructing them to fill in the page number and paragraph number of the passages along with a brief explanation of why they wanted those parts reread. I walked around the room as the students worked, noting that this job sheet appeared to take the students a lot longer than the previous two, probably because they literally have to go back into the text to find parts they would like to have reread. To assist the students in this task of locating passages to be reread, Simpson (1994/1995) had her students use Post-It Notes, or as she referred to them, stickums, to mark the passages in the book as the students were reading through it the first time. Simpson also had her students write down any thoughts about a

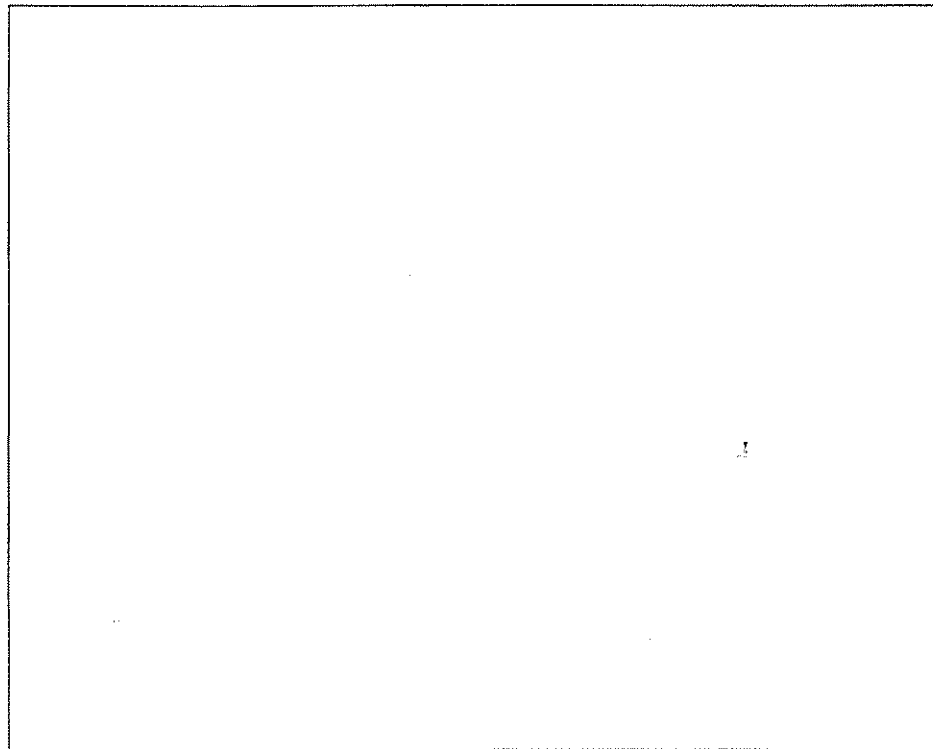
particular passage on the stickum. Brabham and Villaume (2000) also suggested having students write down their thoughts about a particular part in the story on a Post-It Note and stick it to the corresponding text. I decided that I would try this approach once the students got started in their first novel.

After the students worked for approximately thirty minutes, I asked if anyone was willing to share their work. I called on Tom first and instructed him to tell the class what page his first passage was on and what number paragraph it was. Tom spoke loudly so everyone could hear and selected Kyle to read the passage. When Kyle began to do so, he was too soft, so I kindly asked him if he could please read the passage just a little bit louder so all of the students could hear him. He responded, "Sure," and was much louder the second time around. After Kyle finished reading, I asked Tom why he had selected that passage and he said, "It was exciting. There was so much action taking place in this part of the story. I like action!" I thanked Tom for his willingness to share with his classmates and explained to the students that Tom did exactly what I was hoping students would do. I had four other students share in the same manner as Tom did before ending reading class for the day.

Here I've opted to share Justin's literary luminary sheet because he followed directions well easily explained why he selected the passages he chose to have reread. I trust that in time Justin will be able to add a little more detail to his reasons.



Amber did an excellent job of explaining why she chose each passage to be reread. I liked how she was able to bring her mother into her reasoning.



To help more students succeed as well as Justin and Amber in the future, I will continue to review their examples with the class and leave them out on display for all to refer to. By exposing the students to such wonderful examples of work on a regular basis, my hope is that more and more students will become accustomed to completing their work in the same manner.

The following day I introduced two jobs, the Discussion Director (See Appendix D) and the Connector (See Appendix E). Like yesterday, I asked the students if any of them would want to read the directions for the discussion director job. Many hands went up, and I chose Justin, who read the directions clearly and loud enough for everyone to hear. Afterwards I asked if anyone could summarize what Justin had read. Kim said, "The job of the discussion director is to come up with five questions based on the reading." Her eyes literally widened as she said that we should focus on the BIG ideas in the reading instead of the little ones. The best questions usually come from our own thoughts and feelings as we're reading the story." I thanked Kim for her excellent summary and then instructed the students to come up with three close-ended questions and two open-ended questions each time they take on the role of discussion director.

I then asked the students if they remembered the difference between the two types of questions and many of the students nodded their heads to show they did. To make sure they understood I asked if anyone would be willing to explain what a close-ended question is. Matt said, "A close-ended question is a question

that has a correct answer which can be found in the reading.” I complimented for being absolutely correct. Then I asked if anyone could tell me what an open-ended question is and Tracy said, “An open-ended is a question that doesn’t have one correct answer. It is more of your opinion, but you must support it with details.” I was impressed, knowing for certain that Matt and Tracy knew the difference between the two types of questions and knowing that they would be able to assist their peers if necessary in understanding the difference.

I gave the students time to design three close-ended questions and two open-ended questions based on *Jumanji*. As I began walking around the room, I saw some of the students writing an O or a C in front of their questions to stand for open-ended and close-ended. I told those students that I was pleased to see them do that without even being asked to do so. The students’ faces lit up after my compliment. I had the students stop working as I told them what I saw some of their classmates doing, adding that they could do so as well if that would help keep them organized that they should also do that.

When I saw that most of the students were finished, I asked for volunteers to share. Amber shared one of her close-ended questions, asking, “What are the names of the two main characters in *Jumanji*?” Almost all of the students raised their hands, and I called on Steve who said, “Peter and Judy.” I asked Steve to rephrase his answer in a complete sentence, and he responded, “Peter and Judy

are the main characters in *Jumanji*. I told him how pleased I was with his great sentence.

I then asked if anyone else would like to share one of his or her close-ended questions. Several hands went up again. I called on Matt, who asked, "Where did Peter and Judy's parents go at the beginning of the story? Many students raised their hands to respond. Tracy answered, "Peter and Judy's parents went to the opera at the beginning of the story," an excellent answer to Matt's question.

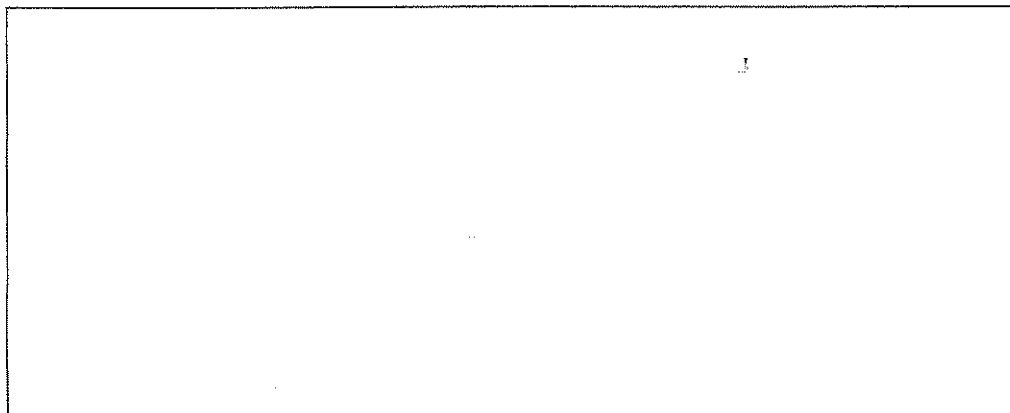
Students continued to share their close-ended questions for approximately ten minutes, nearly every student wanting the opportunity to ask one of their questions. This made me believe that they were comfortable enough in the classroom environment to share their questions and also that they were enjoying the activity.

Finally I asked the students if any of them were willing to share their open-ended questions. Several hands immediately went up. I think the students were anxious to share the open-ended questions they had designed because they genuinely wanted to see what types of responses they would receive. Brian asked, "Do you think Peter and Judy would take the game home again if they ever came across it again?" Brenna replied, "I don't think Peter and Judy would take the game home again. I think they had enough excitement the first time." I was proud of Brenna's answer because I felt she really thought about her response for

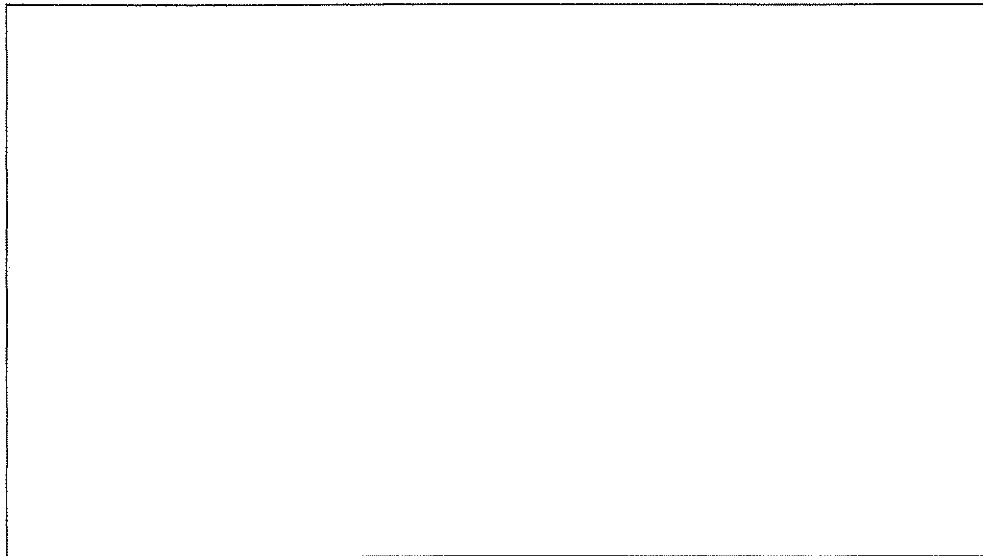
answering and because that is perhaps how she would have felt after having the same type of experience. I then asked Justin to share his response. He said, "I think Peter and Judy would take the game home again because I think they would want to see if the same things happened to them." Another great response." I explained to the students that both Brenna and Justin had explained their answer by supporting it with details.

I finally collected the students' work to provide them with feedback on their open and close-ended questions. Twelve of the seventeen students correctly designed wonderful, thought-provoking questions for their peers to answer. The five other students had difficulty distinguishing between the two types of questions. To assist these students I conducted a few mini-lessons with them until they are able to distinguish the difference.

The only two discussion director sheets that I had to use were Wendy's and Brenna's. Brenna did well discerning between open-ended and close-ended questions and labeling them. Her close-ended questions were well thought and her open-ended questions were creative.



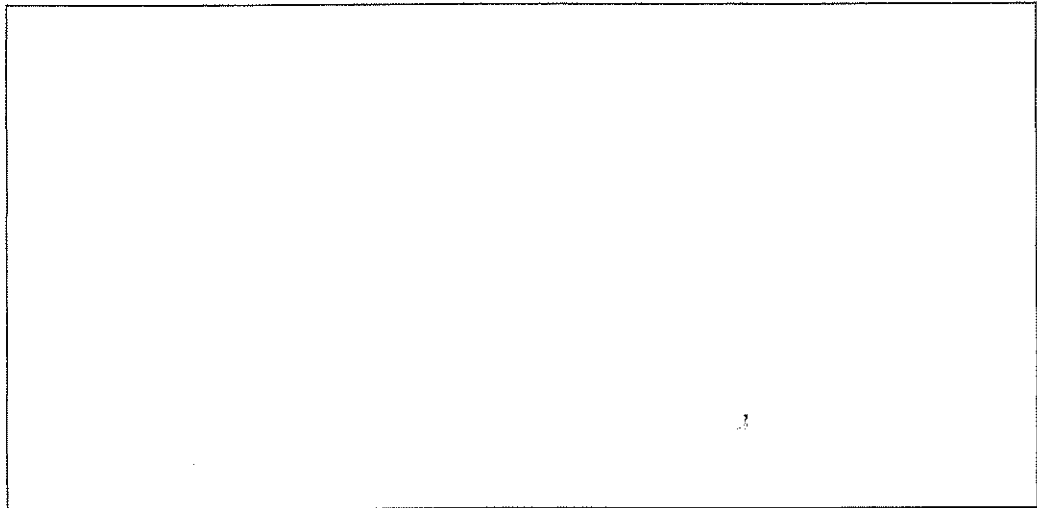
Wendy also did a nice job of discerning between open-ended and close-ended questions even though she did not label hers. Wendy's questions were also well thought and creative, but in number four she should have also asked why so the person responding to her would give more than a simple yes or no response. Wendy just needs to remember to ask herself if all of her open-ended questions will receive more than a yes or no answer from the student responding to her questions.



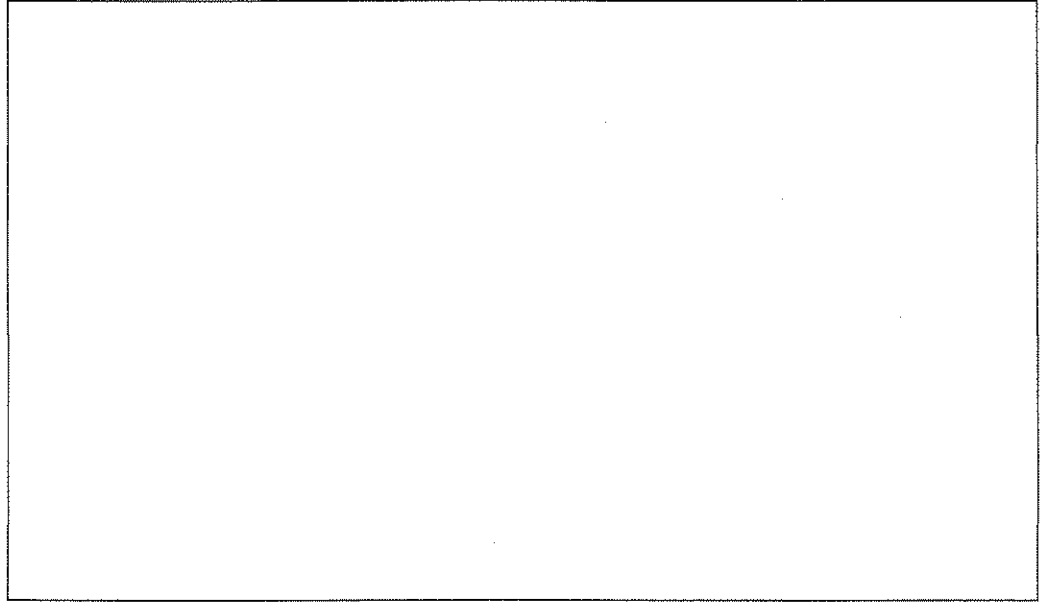
The final job to introduce was the connector, who is responsible for making connections between the reading and the world outside. I added, "This means connecting the reading to your own life, to happenings at school, to similar events in other times and places, or to other people or problems you are reminded of." Students might also make connections between the reading and other pieces

of literature they have read before or other pieces of literature written by the same author. As I finished explaining the requirements of the connector, Michael raised his hand and said, "This job sounds like fun!" A few other students shouted out the same sentiments. It appeared to me that some of the students viewed this job as being fun versus seeing it as work. I was pleased to hear that a few of the students viewed this job as fun versus as work because hopefully they will put more effort and creativity into their responses now.

Amber connected the children in *Jumanji* to children in her family, like her brother and her two male cousins. She also connected her mother to the story as well. I was glad to see Amber be able to relate the story so well to her own family.



Wendy also made personal connections to both Peter and Judy. I was also pleased by her ability to connect a dream she had to *Jumanji*. I was glad to see that Wendy really took the time to think about the story and relate it to her own life so well.



After introducing all of the jobs, I showed the students a video of some of my previous students engaged in literature circles discussions, so they could see what actually transpires in them and what I would be expecting of them. All of the students were focused on the video throughout its duration. Afterwards, the students began talking with one another about the video. I asked them what questions they had. There was only one. “When will we get started, Mrs. Polgar?” “First thing tomorrow,” I answered with a grin.

The next day I asked the students if they were finally ready to get into their literature circles and start working, and students eagerly shouted, "Yes!" Once again I felt so good to see and hear so many students excited about reading class. Since I did not know the students particularly well at this point I split them up into groups according to gender and the reading grades they had received the previous year. Since I only have seven girls in my class, I asked the girls if any of them would be willing to be in an all boy group. I suppose I could have placed three girls and two boys in one group, but I was curious as to the group dynamics of a group with four boys and one girl. Kim immediately raised her hand after I asked the question. Tonya and Wendy followed Kim, slowly raising theirs. I was surprised that I had three girls who were willing to be in an all boy group so early in the year. I thanked them for their willingness and asked Kim to be the lone girl since she had been the first girl to raise her hand. I thought that if there would be any issues among all of the boys, Kim might be able to assist them in coming to a resolution so they could move on to more important things. I then split the students up into four groups, three groups of four and one groups of five. I placed Kim in the group with four boys.

When Close (1992) introduced literature circles to her students, she split them up into groups of four. She preferred groups of four because she was able to balance out the boys and girls more evenly. Close also believed that four heads seemed to come up with more ideas in a discussion versus three. She also felt that

if a student were absent in a group of four, the group would function better with three members than with just two.

I have also been fortunate to be able to split my students up into groups of four or sometimes five due to an odd number of students for the literature circles. I have also found that when a student is absent in a group of four, three students do, in fact, tend to carry on a good discussion. However, I assume that if there is a group of three and one student is absent, an in-depth discussion is less likely to occur.

Next I informed the students of who would be in what group. I then had the students get together into their groups to talk and to get to know each other a little better. I asked the students to share five things about themselves that they wanted their group members to know about them. As I walked around, the classroom was filled with laughter and non-stop chatter. I heard some students talking about their siblings, their pets, what subjects they liked and disliked in school, and what they had done over the summer. After about twenty minutes I asked the students to return to their seats for further instructions.

I explained how to get the literature circles started once all the students were settled. I began by introducing them to their first novel, *Stone Fox* by John Reynolds Gardiner. I gave all the students a copy and told them to look at the front and back covers of the novel and to page through it to see the illustrations. I then instructed the students to take out their reading journal and write down a

prediction for *Stone Fox*. I gave the students approximately twenty minutes to look through the novel and make a prediction. Afterwards, four students shared their predictions with the class. From what I can recall, one student felt that little Willy would enter a dogsled race and be the youngest person entered. This student went on to say that she thought little Willy would win the race because he had the fastest dog and sled. I recall another student telling the class that he thought little Willy would also enter a dogsled race, but he would get injured during the race and be unable to finish. The students in the audience sat attentively and clapped after each student shared, which was wonderful for the students' self-esteem so early in the year. I suspected that feeling comfortable would help these students have more effective discussions in their literature circles.

I moved on to the assignment for the day, telling students that they would first read chapter one and then complete one of the five job sheets. I then explained the following three ways the students could read chapter one in *Stone Fox*: as a whole group in their literature circle, with a buddy in their literature circle, or independently somewhere in the classroom. I suggested to the students that they choose a different way to read each time a reading assignment is given, thereby allowing for variety and for everyone to read the way he/she likes to read. After deciding how to read chapter one I instructed the students to create a chart with the group members' names down the side and the names of the jobs across

the top. I told the students to put a check in the box according to what job each student was going to complete for that chapter. This way everyone would get an equal chance to complete each job. I also informed the students that they could not have the same job twice before everyone in their group had had the job. None of the students questioned this, so I believe that they thought my decision was fair. The students were extremely attentive during all of my instructions. When I asked if anyone had any questions, Matt raised his hand and asked, "When are we going to get started? I'm ready!"

I smiled at Matt and said, "As long as nobody has any questions the four groups can find a comfortable spot in the classroom and get started. I'll be walking around if anyone needs any assistance or has any questions." With that said, the students started getting all of their materials together and began finding a comfortable place to work.

As I walked around the classroom, the students were settling in and beginning to read chapter one, except for the group with Tonya, Steve, Tracy, and Michael. As I approached them they were trying to decide what job they would each take. I stopped and asked why they were choosing jobs instead of reading first, and Tonya responded, "It makes more sense to choose our jobs first because if in the future we decide not to read as a whole group, we can start on our job sheets as soon as we are finished reading."

“I’m impressed. That makes a lot of sense. Keep up the great teamwork!” I responded. The entire class was focused on deciding how they would read chapter one, designing their job chart, and finally reading chapter one. The students stayed on task for the duration of reading class by completing the above three items.

The next day several students approached me first thing in the morning and asked when reading class would be held. I asked them why they wanted to know and they all agreed that they wanted to start discussing the first chapter of *Stone Fox* in their literature circles. I decided to put the time on the chalkboard so that all of the students would know when reading was going to be taking place. I pondered whether their excitement was a result of the new school year or a belief that reading class this year would be so different from any they had experienced before.

When our reading time arrived, I asked the students to brainstorm a list of rules they felt should be followed when they are in their literature circles. As the students came up with the rules I wrote them on the chalkboard and later transferred them onto a large poster that would hang in the classroom for all to refer to each day. A list of the student-generated rules can be seen in the poster on the following page.

Literature Circles Rules

- Come to class prepared
- Use quiet voices
- Cooperate
- Compromise
- One person speaks at a time
- Respect the ideas of all members
- No thought or idea is dumb
- Everyone has a turn to speak
- Try to get along with all group members
- No making fun of group members

Following the creation of the literature circle rules, I had the students brainstorm a list of polite manners to be used when they are in their literature circles. As the students came up with the polite manners, I wrote them on the chalkboard and later transferred them onto a large poster that would hang in the classroom for all to refer to each day. A list of the student-generated manners can be seen in the poster on the following page.

Polite Manners to be used with Literature Circles

Excuse me

I disagree

I think differently

I don't understand

May I say something

My point of view is...

I think...

You're right

Great idea

Wait until someone is finished speaking

I told the students that later in the day I would put the rules on one chart and the polite manners on a different chart and hang them up in the classroom for them to see and refer to when necessary. I also informed the students that we would take a few minutes each day in reading class for the first next several weeks to review the list of rules and polite manners they designed, so that the ideas would stay fresh in their minds.

When it was time for students to begin discussing *Stone Fox* in their literature circles, I quickly went over the order in which I wanted them to share their jobs in their literature circle, namely Summarizer, Illustrator, Literary Luminary, Discussion Director, and Connector. I chose this order because I felt that summarizing the assigned reading was the most important job to share before discussing what took place. I chose Illustrator second because I felt the illustrator could help the other students understand more of the reading by sharing and describing a specific part of the story. The student who has the literary luminary role helps the other students by taking them back into the text to reread important, troublesome, or funny parts of the text. After reviewing the story in such detail, the discussion director comes along and probes the students with open-ended and close-ended questions. The connector is last because he/she moves beyond the reading to connect people, places, and events in the story to their life and the world.

I then instructed the students to gather all of their reading materials and find a comfortable place to hold a discussion. I told the students that I would be around to observe and provide assistance as needed and reminded them to sit knee-to-knee and eye-to-eye in order to see and hear one another.

During one of my participant observations in late September, I tried to capture in my field log what transpired between four students in one of their literature circle discussions. I have tried to compress what transpired in that

discussion into the following playlet. Ely (1997) explains that drama brings into immediate focus the conversations, human responses, and actions that accompany events.

On the day I conducted my observation, Tom was the summarizer, Tara the literary luminary, Kyle the illustrator and Amber the discussion director. I observed their discussion for approximately thirty minutes and have compressed it here. I have included what I felt were the most important aspects of their discussion, only leaving out times when they continued to discuss one particular topic for an extended period of time.

The Mammoth Discussion

[*Stone Fox* is a story about a ten-year-old boy named little Willy, who lives on a farm with his ailing grandfather. Little Willy needs to come up with five hundred dollars to pay off ten years' back taxes, or the farm will be taken away from them. Little Willy enters a dogsled race with his dog Searchlight and competes against the best dogsled racer in the country, the legendary Indian, Stone Fox.

TOM: [Reading from his summarizer sheet.] In chapter three of *Stone Fox* it started to snow. It was beautiful. Little Willy and his grandfather had a lot of food and wood. Little Willy got ready for school and then made breakfast. Little Willy had \$50 in his savings account that his grandfather wanted him to use for college. [Tom stops looking at his job sheet and

continues from memory.]

AMBER: You did a really good job! I can't believe you shared most of your summary from memory.

Tom: When I try to write the information down there are no ideas in my head. As soon as I get into my literature circle group the ideas just pop into my head and then I just add more details to them.

Amber: Your summary was so good because you added so many words to make it more interesting. You did a great job. I'm so glad you're in my group.

Tom: Thanks. Who's next?

[No response for 40 seconds. The students look at their job sheets.]

AMBER: I believe the person that has the literary luminary job sheet is next according to the chart.

[No response for 10 seconds.]

TARA: Oh, that's me. I have my job sheet somewhere. Let me look. [10 seconds pass] I've found it. [Reading from literary luminary job sheet.] The first passage is on page 22, paragraph 1.

Tom will read it.

TOM: [Reads from text.] It's easy to tell when it's winter in Wyoming. There is snow on everything: the trees, the houses, the roads, the fields, and even the people, if they stay outside long enough. [Stops reading] Tara, Why did you pick this passage?

TARA: It was snowing out so it was probably a beautiful scene. I thought it would be nice to reread and picture the scene in our heads.

[Silence for approximately forty seconds. The students looked towards Tara.]

TARA: [Reads from literary luminary job sheet.] The second passage is on page 24, paragraph 1. Amber will read it.

AMBER: [Reads from text.] Each morning he would get up and make a fire.

TARA: Excuse me, but you are reading the wrong paragraph.

KYLE: That is the paragraph you told Amber to read.

TARA: Oh, I meant the next one. I'm so sorry.

AMBER: I think it would be a good idea to review how to count paragraphs so we all know how to for sure. You look at where the sentences are indented a few spaces and that makes a new paragraph.

KYLE: I agree. Good job!

TOM: I agree with Kyle. [Amber, Kyle, Tom, and Tara review how to count paragraphs by actually pointing to them and counting them one at a time out loud.]

KYLE: Let's continue on.

Amber: [Reads from text.] After breakfast little Willy would hitch up Searchlight to the sled. It was an old wooden sled that Grandfather had

bought from the Indians. It was so light that little Willy could pick it up with one hand. But it was strong and sturdy.

Tom: That passage included a lot of social studies facts, mainly Indian facts.

Amber: I agree and we've talked a little about Indians this year in social studies.

Kyle: [Directed to Tom and Amber] Great job making the connection to a few of our social studies classes.

Tara: I chose this passage because I thought it would be cool to get something from the Indians.

Amber: I think that would be neat too.

Tom: Should we move on?

[Yes.]

TARA: [Reads from literary luminary job sheet.] The third passage is on page 27, paragraphs 1 & 2. Kyle will read them.

KYLE: [Reads from text.] Searchlight waited too- ears perked up, eyes alert, legs slightly bent, ready to spring forward. B-O-N-G! [Kyle commented on the two paragraphs he read by saying it was so neat to hear about a dogsled!]

TARA: I chose this passage because I thought it would be fun riding on a dogsled in a race.

AMBER: I never thought about that before. I also think it would be neat to be in a dogsled race. It might even be scary!

TOM: I'd like to ride on a dogsled one day.

KYLE: I would too. I love animals.

TARA: I love animals too.

[The group goes on to talk animals and their pets for about 12 minutes.

They continue to take turns sharing and listen attentively to one another.]

AMBER: Perhaps we should move on.

TARA: I agree. [Reads from literary luminary job sheet.] The fourth passage is on page 28, paragraph 2. I will read it. [Reads from text.] The small building up ahead was Grandfather's farmhouse. When Searchlight saw it, she seemed to gather up every ounce of her remaining strength. She forged ahead with such speed that the sled seemed to lift off the group and fly. I chose it because I think it would be awesome to fly on a sled being pulled by a dog.

AMBER: Don't you think it might be scary? I think it would fun and scary at the same time.

TARA: Maybe it would be a little scary, but I would still want to do it.

TOM: It would be cool. If the sled is light I think it would go faster.

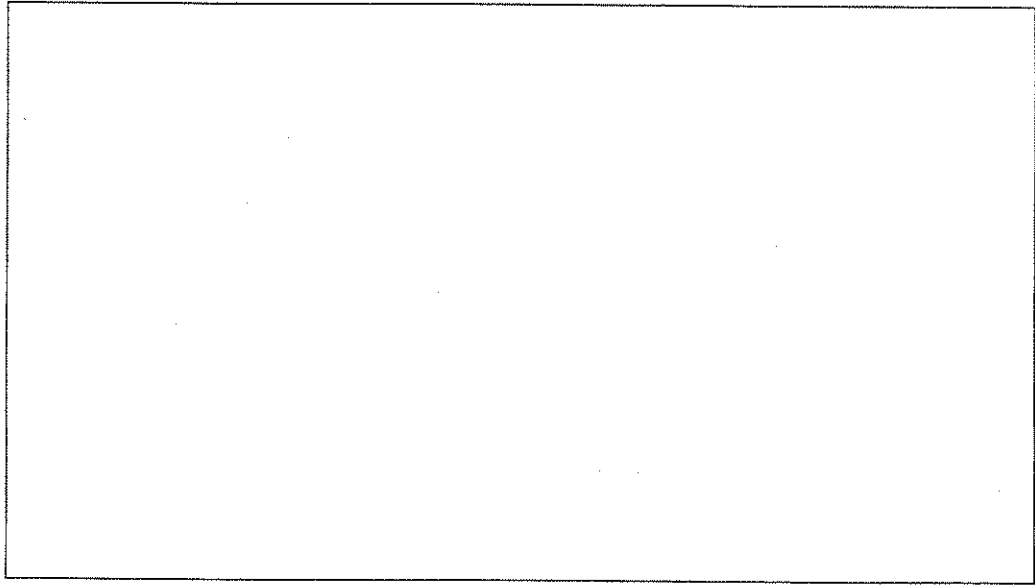
KYLE: Great thoughts.

AMBER: I think we should move on. Who's next?

KYLE: I'm the illustrator. I'll go next.

AMBER: That sounds good.

KYLE: [Shares his illustration] I drew a picture of little Willy being pulled on the sled by Searchlight.



TOM: Wow! You are such a great artist. I could never draw like that.

AMBER: I agree. I still draw stick figures. Great job!

TARA: I really like your illustration. It is so full of details.

KYLE: Thank you. I'm glad all of you liked my illustration. I love to draw. Now let's move on. Who's up next?

AMBER: I am. I'm the discussion director. I'm the last to share because we didn't have a connector this time. Remember, we only have four people in our group so one job is always not completed. This time it was the connector job. Here goes. [Reading from discussion director job sheet.]

My first question is a close-ended question. Did Willy chop en-
wood? [All raise their hands]

AMBER: I choose Kyle.

KYLE: Yes.

AMBER: That's right. My next question is also a close-ended question.
Willy make and eat for breakfast in this chapter?

[Kyle's hand and Tom's hand go up.]

AMBER: I choose Tom this time.

TOM: I think little Willy made and ate oatmeal mush.

AMBER: That's correct. My next question is my last close-ended question.
[Reading from discussion director sheet.] What did Searchlight pull
miles?

[All hands go up.]

TARA: Searchlight pulled a sled.

AMBER: You're right. My next three questions are all open-ended questions.

[Reading from discussion director sheet.] How much money will Willy
have in another month?

[Tom and Kyle raise their hands.]

KYLE: I think little Willy will have \$52 in another month. He already has
and I don't think he got paid much working on the farm back then.

TOM: I think only \$50.50 because they didn't have much money back then.

he probably only made a few cents a day.

AMBER: I'm not really sure. I think maybe he'll earn a \$1 next month so he'll have a total of \$51. I know he didn't earn much working on the farm because times were tough. When times are tough you don't make much money. That is what my parents tell me when I want something and there is no money for it.

KYLE: That's a great answer Amber. It makes a lot of sense.

AMBER: Tara, do you have anything to add?

TARA: I know that years ago, like when this story took place, people didn't have a lot of money so I think maybe little Willy was paid \$.75 for his work on the farm. This would give him \$50.75 in a month.

AMBER: Great job. [Reads from discussion director sheet job sheet.] My next question is how much snow does Willy get where he lives? [Tara's hand goes up first.]

AMBER: I choose Tara first.

TARA: Little Willy lives in Wyoming and I think it is very cold there in the winter so I think he might get 40 inches of snow.

KYLE: I also know that it is cold in Wyoming so I think they get a lot of snow. I'm going to say 65 inches of snow.

AMBER: I don't know anything about Wyoming. Where is it located on the map?

TOM: Let's show her on the map.

[All stand up and walk over to the map in the classroom. Tom shows Amber and the other students where Wyoming is located.]

AMBER: Thanks a lot. That helps me. If all of you agree that it is usually cold there then I'll say about 30 inches.

TOM: I'll say about 62 inches because I know it is cold in Wyoming.

AMBER: I think we should move on to my last question.

TARA: I agree.

AMBER: Here's my last question. [Reads from the discussion director job sheet.] Who was the horse's owner?

TARA: That's a tough question. I think the horse belongs to Mayor Smiley because he probably rides around on a horse and not in a car.

KYLE: I think the horse belongs to a character that hasn't been introduced in the book yet. Maybe the stranger will be introduced in chapter 4.

TOM: I like your answer. I think the horse belongs to Mr. Foster from the bank. He needs a way to get to work in the morning and back home at night.

AMBER: I think the horse belongs to Doc Smith because he definitely needs a horse to ride on to travel through the town to visit all the sick people.

TARA: I think we had a really good, interesting, and long discussion today.

AMBER: I agree. Good job everybody. Is there anything else we have to do?

TOM: No. Maybe we should start rereading the chapter for our upcoming quiz

because one group is still working.

AMBER: That sounds like a good idea.

[They begin taking turns rereading chapter 3.]

I left the group's discussion astonished, quite impressed with their entire discussion. The group members took turns speaking and sharing and helped one another along the way when necessary. As I watched Tom at the beginning of the discussion, I noticed that he had his Summarizer sheet in his hand and he read some of the information directly from his paper, but he shared the remainder of his summary without reading, which is what I want the students eventually to be able to do. I want them to view the job sheet as a tool that helps them prepare for their literature circle discussion. Ideally, I'd like them to read a specific chapter, comprehend it, and take the important information back to their group, to share and discuss in detail. Tom clearly has made progress in this direction.

As the literary luminary, Tara appeared unorganized, with papers everywhere instead of hooked to her clipboard. This is not typical of her. However, Tara did a nice job of participating in her group's discussion by answering questions and providing feedback to the students in her group. Tara likes to talk, and she sure did her share of talking in her literature circle today.

I really liked how Tara, Amber, Kyle, and Tom continued to talk about animals in general and about their pets after the second passage on the literary luminary's job sheet was read. They enjoyed talking to each other about animals,

and it was gratifying to see them use the literature as a springboard into a genuine discussion about something that matters a great deal in their lives. I was impressed with all of them for staying focused on one topic for an extended period of time and for taking turns listening to one another carefully, and providing all with ample opportunities to share.

I was also impressed with how the students, mainly Amber rallied around Tara to review how to count paragraphs with her. A visitor may have thought Amber was the teacher, and I was just an observer in the classroom. I was extremely impressed with her willingness to jump in and assist another student with something she was so confident in doing herself. This eventually led to a whole group mini-lesson at the end of class on how to count paragraphs. In order to conduct the mini-lesson I pulled out a few paragraphs from *Stone Fox* that I had previously copied onto transparency sheets in case I would ever need them. I explained to the students that paragraphs are indented in a text to make it easier for people to see where one paragraph begins and one ends. I also told the students that the first word of a paragraph must begin with a capital letter. Then I called on one student to come up to the overhead projector and mark the first paragraph with a number one using a purple marker. I continued this until we had reached the bottom of the page. When I moved to the next transparency, the first word of the page was directly at the left hand margin of the page and did not begin a capital letter. I explained to the students that this word was part of the

paragraph on the previous page. I reminded them that the first word of a new paragraph had be indented and capitalized. I then called on several students to come up to the overhead projector and mark the paragraphs like we did on the previous page. All of the students that came up to the projector were able to mark the paragraphs correctly.

While I was understandably pleased with the outstanding job this group did discussing chapter 3, I believe that in time students will become even better. My hope for them is that they will spend more time discussing more than just one thought in detail. I also hope that in time more of their discussions will come more naturally to them. I want the students to be able to carry on a discussion as they would an every day conversation, without relying upon their notes in front of them. Unfortunately this remains merely a somewhat distance goal at this point in the school year because they have only just begun discussing pieces of literature differently than they have in previous years.

By the beginning of October many of the students were well on their way, however, to becoming good conversationalists. I had spent a vast amount of time sitting in and listening to each of the groups hold their discussions. I held mini-lessons when necessary to assist some of the students with some of the skills they had not yet mastered, including how to count paragraphs, how to write concise paragraphs, how to choose passages to be reread, and how to find connections to the story. I believe that the use of various mini-lessons was more effective than

basic skills sheets on these topics because I was able to include all of the students in each mini-lesson because each lesson was short and included an activity that all of them could participate in, versus only calling on a few students.

By the end of October I began interviewing because I wanted to personally sit down with all interested students and talk to them about their experiences thus far with literature circles. [My interview protocol can be found in Appendix I].

Before interviewing the students, I referred to Seidman (1998) for some advice on how to conduct a good interview. Seidman believes that listening is the most important skill in conducting an interview. While listening it is also important for the interviewer to give the interviewee space and time to think, reflect, and add to what he or she said. Seidman also makes note, “ that it is in response to what the participant says that the interviewer follows up, asks for clarification, seeks concrete details, and requests stories.”

When I designed the interview questions for these interviews, I knew that I wanted the majority of my questions to be open-ended because this would allow students the opportunity to share their own thoughts, feelings, and opinions, while knowing that none of their responses would be deemed wrong. Seidman agrees that open-ended questions, unlike leading questions, establish the territory to be explored while allowing the participant to take any direction he or she wants.

I randomly chose the order in which the students would be interviewed by picking a stick out of a container that had their name on it. As I began to the

interview the students, I told them that I was going to ask them at least seven questions and that I would like an honest response to as many questions as possible. I instructed the students to listen carefully to each of the questions, think about what I was asking them, and then respond. I told the students that if they did not understand a question to ask me to reword it so that they would understand what I was asking for. I went on to tell the students that if they did not have a response shortly after I asked the question that I would move on to the next question and then ask the question again at the end. Many of the students appeared calm versus scared about this task, by the looks on their faces.

When I approached the students about sitting down and being interviewed, many of them began to chat to their neighbor, a few of the students just staring in wonderment. This was clearly a new idea, and students appeared pleased to have the opportunity to share their thoughts and feelings about literature circles with me. I spent approximately ten minutes interviewing each of the students during their snack time. I instructed students to be honest with their responses, telling them their answers would not upset me in any way. I also informed the students that their answers would in no way impact their reading grade. I told the participating students that my reason for wanting to interview them was to see what they honestly thought about literature circles. I wanted to provide them with a voice in the classroom by allowing them to be up front and honest about their likes and dislikes concerning literature circles.

As I interviewed the students over the course of a week, I was pleasantly surprised by how attentive students were as I asked the questions about their feelings towards literature circles. Most of the students listened to my questions and thought about them for a few moments before responding. A few students even asked if it would be okay for them to come back to a particular question and add to it if they thought of something, which, of course, I allowed them to do.

All of the students interviewed said that they liked at least one thing about literature circles. The items most frequently mentioned were being able to choose how to read the novels with their group, completing the job sheets, discussing the story with their peers, spending time with their group members, designing open-ended questions, answering open-ended questions, and receiving feedback from me on their written work.

Seven of the fifteen students interviewed said that there was nothing they disliked about the literature circles. At this point in time I accepted their answers at face value. I did not probe any deeper into perhaps what they liked the least. This is something I will need to consider during my next action research cycle. The things the students did not like were not discussing the assigned readings long enough in their literature circles, reading only one chapter a day, sitting in the same place in the classroom for discussions, being in the group that sits in the middle of the fishbowl, other students not being prepared for the discussion, and having to complete the literary luminary job sheet.

While interviewing the students I was surprised to discover how much Michael really despised taking on the role of the literary luminary and his reasoning behind his displeasure. Shortly before interviewing Michael I overheard him tell Tonya, a member of his literature circle group, that he hated this task. His responses during the interview confirmed what I had overheard. I felt that Michael had a story that needed to be told to understand his thoughts and feelings about the role of literary luminary since no one else in the class admitted to disliking this task. I've chosen to introduce Michael in an I story, which is a type of vignette told in the first person. According to Ely (1997) a vignette is a compact sketch that can be used to introduce a character. It is a composite that encapsulates what the researcher found through his/her fieldwork. Arhar (2001) sees a vignette as a representation of life on paper. To compose this I story I integrated data from the following sources: my observations in my field log, information I received from Michael during his one-on-one interviews with me and from his survey responses, and information I gathered during whole group discussions.

I Like Literature Circles, Just Not the Literary Luminary Job

I know that you, Mrs. Polgar, know that I like to read and write because you see me reading and writing in the classroom at times. I think the literature circles are fun! I have enjoyed reading *Stone Fox* and I can't wait to find out what novel you'll have me read

next. I like to read at home too. I bet you didn't know that I have taken *Stone Fox* home with me a few nights and read it with my family. Afterwards I made up some open-ended and close-ended questions. Then we took turns asking and answering the questions. My family caught on quickly and did well. They got most of the answers correct. I liked that they all had different answers to the open-ended questions. I enjoyed discussing the novel with my family.

What I don't think you know is that I HATE the literary luminary job sheet. I have hated having that job since the first time I had it in September. I hate it because it takes me FOREVER to find the passages I want to reread. I know that you tell us it is a good idea to reread things we have already read, but I would rather reread the whole novel than have to choose a few passages to reread. Even if you were willing to make changes to the job, I still don't think I would like it. If you made us only find two passages to reread instead of four that would make things a little better, but it would still be too hard for me. It's just too hard for me! I hate the literary luminary job sheet!

After composing the I story I sat down with Michael and talked to him about how I interpreted his feelings towards the literary luminary role. Michael

told me that I was correct in interpreting his feelings. Once again he expressed his dislike for the task and told me that he would always try his best to complete it throughout the rest of the year. Michael then told me that his parents continue to tell him that there will always be some things in his life that he doesn't like to do but will have to do for various reasons and that he should always do his best no matter how he feels about the task. I told Michael that my father has always said the same thing to me and that it is indeed true. However, I did tell Michael that perhaps he could spend some time thinking of a new role to replace the literary luminary role and share his ideas with me and with the rest of the class for consideration. Michael told me that he would be more than happy to do that and did begin trying to come up with some ideas of his own.

After listening to all of the valuable feedback I received from the students in their interviews, I began to reflect on my teaching practices. According to Freire (1970), reflection, true reflection, must lead to action. Being able to reflect honestly on my own teaching practices will enable me to understand and accept the realization that change is sometimes necessary.

Following my reflection at the beginning of November, I began to change some of the things the students disliked about literature circles. I began by informing the students that several things would be different with the second round of literature circles because of what I had learned from their one-on-one interviews.

The first change I made was allowing the students to choose their next novel after listening to a book talk on each of my selections, which were limited to those novels I had multiple copies of. I gave book talks on the following novels: *Jip* by Katherine Paterson, *Mr. Popper's Penguins* by Richard and Florence Atwater, *A Year Down Yonder* by Richard Peck, *Nory Ryan's Song* by Patricia Reilly Giff, *Sarah, Plain, and Tall* by Patricia MacLachlan, *Charlotte's Web* by E.B. White, *The Secret School* by Avi, and *Because of Winn-Dixie* by Kate DiCamillo.

Realizing the important emphasis on reading and discussing unabridged, unexcerpted pieces of children's literature, Whang, a fifth/sixth grade teacher, along with the assistance of Samway, an associate professor at San Jose State University (1991), revamped her approach to reading and began using literature circles. Whang began by choosing four or five different novels that she felt would interest her students and generate good discussions. She then gave a book talk in which she enthusiastically described each book followed by each student being allowed to select the novel he/she wanted to read. If too many students wanted to read the same title, a lottery system was employed to see who got to read the novel. The novels were usually available on more than one occasion, and if the students did not get to read the novel of their choice for their literature circle, they were always able to read it as outside reading.

Whang and Samway's approach to literature circles reinforced the fact that choice is an important aspect of them. After reading this study I immediately realized that choice was crucial to my students and that I would have to find some manageable way to give them a choice in the novels they would read this year. Even though it wasn't until their fourth novel, I did give my students a choice of novels to choose from. Like Whang, I also decide to give a book talk on each of the novels. Students were also permitted to ask questions, but I told them that I didn't want to give too much information away, especially the ending of each of the novels. Once again I selected the books because I only have a select number of novels to choose from with multiple copies. I explained to the students that I would break them up into their new literature circle groups, which, is explained shortly, and then conduct the book talks. Tonya raised her hand before I could continue and said, "Thanks for thinking about what we want. That's really neat!" Several of the students smiled broadly and began to chat to their neighbors about the changes. I was pleased to find out that at least some of the students were happy that I was taking their thoughts and feelings into consideration.

After giving the students a few moments to chat I broke them up into their new literature circle groups, which for this round, I did according to students' instructional reading level as determined by several tests that the reading specialist administered to all students in the school. I formed the groups according to reading level because all of the students are required to spend time

each day reading on their reading level. As I called out their names and they began to assemble with their new group members, the majority of the students began talking to their new group members. The major advantage to designing my groups this way is that I know the students are receiving instruction on their level. Another advantage is that the students will feel more comfortable reading a novel that is on their level and advancing to another level at their own pace. A major disadvantage by grouping the students this way is that the two average groups will not be able to look to the two higher groups as models to learn from.

Unfortunately at this time, the students did not have any say in the novel they were going to read. I did not take their interest level into account at this time. That is something I plan to do in the future. In turn, these students will need to depend one another and me to become better at reading and comprehending pieces of literature. As far as I was able to tell, the students did not have any issues with their placement.

I instructed two of the groups to take a look through the four novels I had displayed on a table in the back of the room while I gave four, small book talks to the other two groups. I gave a book talk on each of the following books to the two high groups: *Jip* by Katherine Paterson, *Mr. Popper's Penguins* by Richard and Florence Atwater, *A Year Down Yonder* by Richard Peck, and *Nory Ryan's Song* by Patricia Reilly Giff. After the book talks I let those students have some time to look through the four novels while I met with the other two groups. I gave

a book talk on the following books to my other two groups: *Sarah, Plain, and Tall* by Patricia MacLachlan, *Charlotte's Web* by E.B. White, *The Secret School* by Avi, and *Because of Winn-Dixie* by Kate DiCamillo.

For each of the eight book talks I gave a brief summary of what each novel was about. For example, I gave the following summary of *A Year Down Yonder* by Richard Peck to the two top groups: *A Year Down Yonder* takes place in 1937 during the recession. A fifteen-year-old girl named Mary Alice who lives in Chicago, has to go live with her grandmother, Grandma Dowdel, for one year. Mary's father lost his job due to the recession and they have to move into a "light housekeeping" room, which is only big enough for her mother and father. Mary's brother is out west planting trees for the Civilian Conservation Corps so Mary Alice will need to live with her grandmother until her parents can get on their feet again. When Mary Alice arrives at her grandmother's house she feels very unwelcome. After some time, Mary Alice becomes accustomed to her feisty and conniving grandmother, while enduring many outrageous schemes. Eventually, Mary Alice learns to appreciate her grandmother's wisdom and ways.

For the other two groups, I shared the following summary of *Because of Winn-Dixie* by Kate DiCamillo: *Because of Winn-Dixie* is about a girl named India Opal Buloni, known as "Opal," whose mother left her and her father when Opal was only three years old. Opal and her father, a preacher, decide to move to Naomi, Florida one summer day. One day Opal's father sends Opal to the Winn-

Dixie grocery store for a few necessary items. Opal ends up returning home with a dog she names “Winn-Dixie.” Opal’s father begins to tell Opal ten things about her mother, since Opal is ten years old. Over time, Opal and Winn-Dixie meet many interesting people. Opal spends much time collecting stories and thinking about her mother. Eventually, Opal learns to let go, just a little, and that friendship and forgiveness can sneak up on you.

After the book talks I told the students that the novels would be chosen by a majority vote. I gave each student a piece of paper and had them put the four novels in order from their first choice to their last choice. I then collected all of the papers and tallied the votes. Unfortunately, I failed to record the tallies to include in my write up, which is something that I will clearly include in my next action research cycle. The two novels chosen were *A Year Down Yonder* and *The Secret School*. Many of the students clapped while smiling, seemingly excited by the choices. I did inform the students that several copies of *Jip, Nory Ryan’s Song*, *Charlotte’s Web*, and *Sarah, Plain, and Because of Winn-Dixie* would be available to them if they wanted to read them independently or for a book report. I did not make all of the novels available to them because I knew I would have to include some of them again in my next round of literature circles.

I told the students that they would start their new novel shortly, but first I had to explain a few more changes to them. Several students in their one-on-one interviews indicated that they would like to read more than a chapter a day, so I

suggested they try that when appropriate. Michael raised his hand and said, "I said I wanted to read more than a chapter a day in my interview with you. Thank you for listening to me." I thanked Michael and opportunity to read more each day for an extended period of time and would also enable them to have more to discuss the following day. This would also allow the students to read many more novels throughout the entire school year.

The next change involved the illustrator job sheet. In his interview, Kyle informed me of his love for drawing, explaining that he liked being the illustrator but that he would also like to write a few sentences to explain his illustration to his group members. When Kyle mentioned this in his interview I also thought it would be a great idea, but I wasn't sure how the rest of the class would feel about it. I explained that I wanted the class to try this and that I also wanted to know how they felt about the change. Tom immediately raised his hand and said, "That sounds great!" Steve said, "I don't really like to write, so I don't really like the idea." Tonya said, "Sounds good." Wendy said, "Let's give it a try." After several students shared their opinions I expressed how important I thought it was for them to write on a daily basis in as many different subjects as possible. I went on to say that writing a few sentences about their illustration should not take them long to complete after their illustration is finished. At that point I told the students to give this new idea a try for a few weeks and then we'll reconvene and discuss their feelings on the subject again.

I told the students that the next change concerned vocabulary. Up until this point, I had chosen the vocabulary words that the students were required to define and know for a quiz. Now I would empower students to select the vocabulary words. I gave the students a Puzzling Words Sheet (See Appendix K) that I created and explained that while they were reading they should record any words they come across that they couldn't pronounce or didn't know of. I explained that at a later time we would define the words together using dictionaries and websites on the Internet. I told the students that they should use context clues from the reading to assist them with the words they didn't know while reading and if that didn't help, then they could use the dictionaries or the computer in the classroom to look up the word immediately. Tara said, "I like to look words up in the dictionary." A few students shouted out, "Me too," and of course, I was glad to hear that.

Finally, I told the students that the last change for this round centered on the literary luminary job. Since the students are not allowed to write in their novels I wanted to find a way to help them mark the specific passages they wanted to reread in their group. Simpson (1994/1995) found "that with her students one of the most useful ways to remember the things a student wanted to comment on was to make little remarks or jottings on yellow sticky labels (which she called stickums) and stick them onto relevant pages of the text." I liked this idea because it was simple and easy to implement. I explained to my students that

I thought using the stickums would allow them to mark a specific page, paragraph, or sentence in their novel, that they would like to reread. I told my students that if they wanted to jot down some important points on the stickums they were free to do so, but it was not a requirement.

With all of the changes explained and the new novels chosen, the students were ready to begin their second round of literature circles. As the students began making predictions about their new novel, the classroom was overflowing with energy. Laughter, and conversations about who would be responsible for what job for the first assigned reading filled my classroom. It felt so good inside to see and hear my students so excited about reading and engaged in the process.

Recognizing how crucial a child's voice can be, hooks (1994), noted that it had been her experience "that one way to build community in the classroom was to recognize the value of each individual voice" (p. 40). The students in my classroom have loved it whenever I've given them a choice between things. They have felt empowered by having a choice to make.

Many times throughout this study I gave my students a choice between completing a job sheet or designing six questions, some open-ended and some close-ended. My only request was that all the members of a literature circle group complete the same writing assignment. My reason for this was to maintain consistency within a group. I thought the discussions would flow better if all of the students in a group would either have job sheets or open-ended and close-

ended questions to base their discussion on. The students truly enjoyed having a choice in what their written assignment was going to be. Some of the groups chose job sheets while some groups chose to design questions. These opportunities for student choice showed the students that I cared about them, their feelings, and their interests. Providing choices enabled my students to have a voice in their written assignments and in the classroom.

By the following week I was ready to incorporate another change into the world of literature circles. I instructed students to meet me on the front carpet, where I told them that I was going to spice things up a little in their literature circles. Instead of completing a job sheet for the next discussion students would write three close-ended questions and two open-ended questions to guide their discussion. I explained that I wanted to try something new so that the routine would not become so mundane for them or for me. I also said that I wanted to eventually wean them from the job sheets. I told the students that my main goal was to have them discuss a piece of literature without the job sheets, just as they have normal conversations every day with nothing scripted in front of them.

I observed the students as they assembled into their literature circles to decide how they were going to read the latest installment.³ As the groups were finishing up the required reading, I watched as they began writing their open and close-ended questions. Students worked diligently, seeming to enjoy the change

and taking full advantage of it by staying on task and by completing their new assignment.

From this point on I decided that I would allow my students to choose between completing a job sheet or designing open-ended and close-ended questions for their upcoming discussions. When it came to read the next installment in their novels, I explained that each group would have to work as a team to decide what their written assignment would be by coming to a consensus. I told the students that one member from each group would have to tell me what they decided to do for their written assignment. I walked around the room to observe the groups discussing what they wanted to do. I overheard the groups talking about how shocked they were that I was making another change to the literature circles. I heard a few students talking about being grateful for being given another change. I also overheard a few students say they really liked taking turns having each of the five roles. With this change in place, only Wendy's group decided to design their own questions. From the conversations that I overheard, I assume the other groups liked the idea of choice, but chose the job sheets because they were more comfortable completing them than designing their own questions at this point in time.

A few days later when it was time to read on, I gave the same choice, job sheets or questions. This time around two groups opted to design questions. I

suspect the students just needed some time to think through the concept of choice before they jumped into it.

By the next round of reading, all four groups decided to design their own questions. From that point on, most of the time the groups decided to do so. Occasionally some of the groups would return to the familiarity of completing job sheets versus creating their own questions. Each of the groups worked as a team to decide what their written assignment would be. At times I overheard students say that wanted to return to the roles because they had designed questions the last several times or vice versa. From what I was able to gather from my observations, the groups alternated back and forth between the two choices so things would remain interesting and not become mundane.

Students devised a wide variety of open-ended and close-ended questions dealing primarily with plot events in *A Year Down Yonder* and *The Secret School*. Students often selected minute details that they felt were of great significance.

Some of the open-ended questions the students reading *A Year Down Yonder* designed were, “What was grandma’s first name? Explain your answer. Do you think grandpa died? Explain your answer in detail. What do you think Mary Alice would do without her radio? Why do you think grandma lets Mary Alice drink coffee?” I felt that these open-ended questions allowed the students the opportunity to share their own personal thoughts and reasoning behind their answers with the other members of their literature circle. At that point in time I

would not have made those students change anything about their line of questioning.

A few of the close-ended questions designed by the students reading *A Year Down Yonder* were, "Did Mary Alice go to the turkey shoot? What year did the Great War take place? Did Mary Alice ever complain to grandma? Where was the Armistice Day turkey shoot held at?" I thought these close-ended questions were fabulous because they were important questions from the novel that all of the students would be able to find the correct answer to.

The students who read *The Secret School* designed the following open-ended questions: Do you think Ida will become the new teacher at school? Why or why not? What do you think Ida looks like? What do you think will happen in the next chapter? Explain at least two things that you think will happen. I liked these questions because the students were required to answer the questions and explain some of their answers to the members of their literature circle. I want the students to continue to design questions that other students are required to answer and explain their reasoning or logic behind their answers.

Some of the close-ended questions designed by the students reading *The Secret School* were, "Does Tom hang around Ida a lot? Where is Miss Fletcher going and why? Who is the head of the school board?" These close-ended questions were great because the answers to them were significant to the novel.

These students clearly demonstrated that they understand how to design a close-ended question.

Over time and with a lot of practice, the students were able to design more in-depth and thought provoking questions for their peers to try and answer. I feel that if the students are given even more time to practice writing and answering the two types of questions, they will only improve.

As the school year progressed, most of the students grew better at conducting longer, more in-depth discussions and didn't seem as worried about rushing to finish and move on to something else. A few students, however, had trouble staying focused at times, while other students did not always come to class prepared for a discussion, which led to them sitting out of their group until they finished the required assignment. Once a student finished his/her assignment then he/she could rejoin his/her group for the remainder of the discussion. These students required more guidance and support from me when they were working with their group. I would sit with them in their group while they were reading to make sure they were listening and staying on task. I offered support and guided students in the right direction when necessary while they were completing their job sheets or designing their questions. To assist the students, I walked around the room looking at their written tasks while they were working. If I noticed that a student needed more detail or I was unsure of what that student had written, I asked the student to read his or her work to me and then we discussed it and came

to a consensus on how to make it better. I was also more than happy to assist students if they raised their hands and asked for my advice or assistance.

By the middle of December I decided to interview the students once again to see if their thoughts, feelings, or attitudes toward literature circles had changed since October. I was pleased to discover that the students interviewed still liked or even loved literature circles and did not want to stop using them. Several of the students said that they like their discussions better now than they did in October because now they are better at discussing the important parts of the novels. Most students interviewed said they liked the changes made at the beginning of November, especially the one about choosing to complete job sheets or designing six questions. These students said that they were thankful for the changes and were glad that I listened to them in their October interviews.

On the other side, two of the students interviewed said that they no longer liked the connector job because it was becoming more and more difficult to make connections between the book they were currently reading and their lives. However, these two students did say that sometimes their group members were able to assist them in making the required connections. Perhaps with a little help from a friend now, these students will soon be able to complete the job sheet on their own again. According to Vygotsky (1978) what is in the zone of proximal development today will be the actual developmental level tomorrow. To paraphrase Vygotsky, what a child can do with assistance today he/she will be

able to do by himself/herself tomorrow. A few of the students also went on to say that they didn't like when a student in their group didn't follow along when they were reading. They noted, however that if they said something to the person who wasn't paying attention, these students would usually get back on track. I was glad to hear the students are able to get other students back on track instead of always having to come to me for assistance.

Now that this round of inquiry has come to an end it is time for me to reflect on my personal feelings towards literature circles. I can honestly say that I love literature circles more now than I did when I used them in my second student teaching placement. I have learned so many different and exciting ways to implement them in my classroom after taking an in-depth look at the research that exists pertaining to them, from analyzing and reflecting on my own teaching practices, and from listening to my students' voices. Literature circles are an exciting and engaging way to teach reading while at the same time giving some ownership to the students.

Even though my journey into the world of literature circles has only just begun, I still have a lot of research to look at and new ideas to try to make my literature circles the best they can be. In order to make them better I will have to spend time trying new ideas and modifying them to meet the needs of my current students. Each school year will bring a new group of students who will ask for changes to be made to the literature circles to meet their needs as individuals and

as a whole class. I always need to remember that I need to keep an open mind and try new things with my students to broaden their horizons and my own.

ANALYSIS

According to Ely (1997) qualitative research is emergent. "It requires that the researcher go back again and again over the accumulated field log material in a process that has a cyclical feel" (p.175). Arhar (2001) noted that, "analysis means taking things apart. We use analysis to "get it right" by carefully looking at data, looking for holes, patterns, secrets, and the hidden assumptions" (p. 191).

I observed and took notes that reflected the significant events of their discussion while the students were working. I wrote about what the students did well with and what they struggled with during their discussions. After taking notes in school I would go home and type up analytic memos in my field log. Arhar states, "Analytic memos are personal field notes to ourselves, helping us to notice things that we did not notice before. Written periodically, analytic memos can help a researcher to look carefully at the data collected" (p. 189). Some of the topics of my analytic memos included the difficulty of counting paragraphs in the novel, deciding how to read the next chapter, who would complete what job for the next days discussion, and how to expand each group's discussion time. From these analytic memos I was able to see the emerging patterns associated

with literature circles and what I wanted to have the students focus on next in their groups.

While I was collecting data I coded it. Ely defines coding “as the process of reading and rereading a portion of data and providing labels, usually notes in the margins of the field log that identify a meaning unit” (p. 162). Bogdan and Biklen (1998) refer to coding, “as a means of sorting the descriptive data you have collected so that the material bearing on a given topic can be physically separated from other data.” To code my log I read and reread all of the data I had typed in my field log. I read one paragraph at a time and then assigned a two to four letter-meaning unit to it that summed up the main idea of that particular paragraph. For example, a code from my field log is “WOEQ.” This code stands for “writing open-ended questions.” I did this throughout my field log.

After I coded my field log I began sorting the codes into broad categories known as bins. Bins help to bring order to the collection of unmanageable data. To do this, I created a list of the thirty-two codes I found in my log. From this list I was able to sort the codes that were alike into bins. An example of a bin from my field log is “The Positive Aspects of Literature Circles.” I finally created a graphic organizer, which resembled a web to organize the bins.

Next I looked for relationships among the categories and arranged them into an organized form. I then used that information to create theme statements. Ely (1997) states, “Themes are statements of meaning that run through all or most

of the pertinent data” (p. 206). She goes on to say, “The basis for writing theme statements is for lifting the information to a more abstract or interpretive presentation” (p. 162). In time, I took the emergent theme statements I created and turned them into the findings of my study.

RESEACRH FINDINGS

The first theme to emerge was *that students do not like or learn from all literature circle roles equally well*. When I asked the students to rank the jobs in order from their favorite to their least favorite, the majority said, “Illustrator, Discussion Director, Summarizer, Connector, and Literary Luminary. The majority of the students said that they enjoyed being illustrator for one reason or another. These students said they liked the task because it’s fun and they like to draw. A few students said they have become better at drawing from completing this task so often. I recall one student telling me that he didn’t feel like he was working when he had this task because it was so much fun to do. A few of the students said they thought being the illustrator was still difficult because they felt they were poor at drawing illustrations.

Being the illustrator enabled many of the students to become more comfortable with drawing and sketching and with sharing their artwork with their peers. The illustrator job allowed the students the opportunity to learn how to

express their thoughts, feelings, and interpretations about a piece of literature through a drawing versus words.

All of the students stated that they enjoyed being the discussion director. Only two reasons were noted for liking this task. First, several of the students said they enjoyed designing questions, especially the open-ended questions because they liked to hear all of the different responses given by the peers in their group. Second, some students shared that they thought it was fun to look back in their novel for assistance in designing close-ended questions, but that these questions were not as much fun to answer compared to open-ended questions because if everyone read and understood the reading, a correct answer would be given immediately. This meant that if the first student chosen to answer the question were correct, no other student would be able to share his/her response because there is only one correct answer to this type of question.

Being the discussion director helped the students to learn how to design and respond to open-ended and close-ended questions. This job also assisted the students in analyzing the text to discover what the important parts of the story were. Learning how to design thought provoking and higher level thinking questions was the crux of this job.

The majority of the students noted that they liked being the summarizer because it was easy to write a summary if they had paid attention to what was happening in the story while reading. A few students said that they have always

been good at writing summaries of stories they have read. One student noted that he does not like this task because he still is not a good writer. Other students said they thought being summarizer was fun because they enjoyed writing and retelling the events of the reading.

Having the opportunity to be the summarizer allowed all of the students the opportunity to read a given text, take it apart, and decide what parts were the most important to share with their peers. Learning how to differentiate between the major and minor events in a story is an important skill to have in life.

Most of the students noted they enjoyed being the connector because they liked being able to make connections between their own life and the story. These students said that it was fun for them to see if their own lives were similar to the lives of the characters in the story they were reading. A few students noted that at times it was difficult to make connections because they were unable to relate to any of the characters in the story or to any of the events that took place.

By being the connector, the students were able to learn how to take a story they were reading and connect it to their own life, to the lives of people around them, and to other stories they have previously read. Being able to make these connections to other things shows others that one has truly comprehended the text.

Many of the students said they liked being literary luminary for several reasons. First, a few of these students said they liked going back into the story to

find passages to reread with their group. Some noted they liked being able to choose who would reread each passage during their discussion. Finally, other students said they liked writing an explanation about why they chose each passage to be read. The students who said they did not like this task much said they felt it was boring and time consuming to go back in the reading and find special passages to reread in their discussion.

While having the literary luminary role, students learned how to choose what parts of the text they felt were worthwhile to reread in their literature circle. Learning how to pick out the most significant parts of a story was a challenging task for many of the students. Having this job also helped the students to understand and realize that rereading sections of a text is important to comprehending the underlying meaning of the story.

The second theme to emerge showed *that the majority of the students had positive feelings about the various aspects of literature circles*. I was initially surprised to discover how the majority of the students felt while reading in their literature circles because I wasn't certain whether some of the students really liked them versus using the reading series. Many of the students said they were comfortable reading with their peers and they felt happy and excited. A few girls said that they love to read with their peers in school because they also love to read outside of school. One girl commented that she feels imaginative when reading with her peers because she is able to draw pictures in her mind of what she is

reading with her friends. All of the students except for one boy, spoke positively of his feelings about literature circles. This student said he felt nervous because his group sometimes required him to read more than the other members of his group, and he did not feel that this was fair.

Working in small groups also proved to be a positive aspect for the majority of the students. Many students pointed out that in previous years the majority of their reading class time was spent working as a whole group rather than actually reading and discussing literature. These students said they preferred smaller groups so they would have more of an opportunity to read and share their thoughts, feelings, and opinions about a particular story. The students said that literature circles enabled them to engage in the activities on a daily basis in reading class.

The students' feelings towards the discussions in their literature circles were quite positive overall. Many students described their feelings during literature circles as good, happy, talkative, interested, and excited. One student noted, however, that he becomes bored when the discussion goes on and on about a subject he does not know too much about. The students noted no other negative feelings.

Many of the students noted that using literature circles has made reading and reading class more fun. Many of the students said they enjoyed completing the various job sheets because they helped them prepare for their upcoming

discussion. All of the students agreed that the sheets were different from the day-to-day worksheets they were use to in the past because these sheets helped them to prepare for an upcoming discussion versus completing a sheet because it went along with the story they were reading during a particular week. The students also noted that even though the jobs remained the same, the information they would write about would always be different. All of the students said they enjoyed reading and discussing the novels with their peers in small groups because many of them were use to reading and discussing stories in whole groups. The students said they were able to talk and share more in small groups versus in a whole group setting. Many of the students expressed interest in designing and answering open-ended questions because they enjoyed doing so. These students also said that they enjoyed hearing the various answers given to open-ended questions by their peers because the answers would spark even bigger discussions in their literature circle. The students also noted that they liked hearing the opinions of their peers, especially when those opinions differed from their own because it helped them to appreciate the differences between people. All of the students noted that they enjoyed choosing whether to complete a job sheet or designing several open-ended and close-ended questions for their discussion. One reason for this was that the students felt they would never get bored completing either of the two tasks because they could alternate back and forth between the two if they chose to. I believe the students liked this choice because it enabled

them to have a voice in the classroom. One boy said that the most positive aspect for him has been the increase in his vocabulary since he started reading novels in the literature circles. Unfortunately I do not have any data to show how his vocabulary has increased from September to December because I did not focus my data collection on that aspect. Perhaps this is something I need to keep in mind for my next action research cycle.

The third theme to emerge suggested *that literature circles are not a panacea but rather bring a host of new challenges and potentially negative experiences to the classroom*. Most of the negative aspects stem what some of the students do not do in their literature circles. Some of the students said that they become upset when students are not prepared for the discussion by having their job sheets or questions prepared because then their group is short a person. A few students said that they wished I would tell them how to read their assigned reading so their group wouldn't spend so much deciding how to do so. For one student, the literary luminary sheet remains a negative aspect of literature circles. This student dislikes this job for two reasons. First, it takes so long to find passages that he wants to reread. Second, he struggles to explain why he chooses the passages he does. I have continued to work with him on a regular basis to help make this task easier when he is responsible for it, but he continues to dislike it for the same reasons.

I believe that I have attempted to respond well to constructive criticism that my students have shared with me regarding literature circles. I have taken the time to listen to all of my students and their likes and dislikes towards literature circles. I have tried to make some of the changes that the students requested to this point and I am continuing to work on the others. I realize that I may not be able to make all of the changes requested, but I will try to make as many as possible, while still maintaining the goals I have for my students. I have recently attempted to make several changes based on student input. For example, the students now include several sentences to a paragraph about their illustration; students are responsible for finding the vocabulary words that they are responsible for learning; and students continue to have a choice as to whether they complete job sheets or design questions for their discussions. The one change that I have not been able to implement is replacing the literary luminary role with a different role. I personally feel that it is an important role because it requires the students to go back into the novel and find passages to reread for better understanding or for discussion and cannot be eliminated. In order to help scaffold instruction for those students who struggle with this task, I will continue to use mini-lessons to help those students become better at completing this task.¹

The final theme to emerge from the data is *that students respond well to changes made in the day-to-day operation of literature circles based upon their input*. The first change involved the illustrator sheet. During one of my

interviews with a student, he said that he wished he could write a sentence or a paragraph about his illustration to share with the members of his literature circle. He told me that he loved to draw but that he also liked to write. He said he liked being the illustrator but would enjoy it even more if he could explain it in words. I thought this was a fabulous idea because it is the only job that the students do not have to write anything for, not even a simple sentence. In my opinion it is important for the students to be writing on a daily basis so I thought it would be extremely simple to implement this change. Having the students write a minimum of one to three sentences about their illustration would not consume much for more of their time. The majority of the students were receptive to this idea and were willing to try it. Steve was not receptive since he does like to write, but at least he and his classmates are writing at least three sentences to a paragraph about their illustration each time they take on this task.

The second change originated from a student who told me that he wished he could read more than one chapter in the novel at a time. He said that he didn't like to be left hanging for so long and if he was allowed to read more in one sitting he would know more about the novel sooner rather later. This was another easy change for me to make as well. When I first introduced the idea of reading more than one chapter a day, all of the students clapped their hands as a sign of approval. The class as a whole was equally excited about reading more chapters in a day. Reading more would enable the students to be exposed to a wider array

of novels throughout the course of the year. To implement this change I instructed the students to look at each chapter to see how many pages each contained. I then instructed the students to work together as a team to decide what they thought was a reasonable amount of pages to read in a given day. I also told them that the number of pages or chapters they read a day could change when deemed appropriate. I finally informed the students that they would have to work within the time constraints of our reading time to complete their work otherwise they would need to finish it for homework.

The third change involved choice for the students. I decided to gather all of the novels that I had multiple copies of and let the students vote for the next novel they would read. I gave several book talks to two groups at a time and then allowed them to look through each of the novels before voting on which novel they wanted to read. I used the same procedure with the other two groups. I gave the students a piece of paper to list the order in which they wanted to read the novels, from first to last once they were finished looking through the novels. I then tallied the votes and told the students that the winning novels were *A Year Down Yonder* by Richard Peck and *The Secret School* by Avi.

The final change involved allowing the students to choose whether they wanted to complete job sheets or design open-ended and close-ended questions for their discussions. By the beginning of November I felt the students were capable of deciding in their groups what they wanted to have prepared for their

discussion after having been exposed to completing the job sheets for almost two months. The first day I let the students choose, only one group decided to design questions. The second time I allowed the students choose, two groups chose to design questions. From that point on, all of the students went back and forth between the jobs and the self-designed questions. This enabled the students to choose what they wanted to do every day in order to prepare for their upcoming discussion.

Since literature circles are my students' main source of reading instruction I have had to modify them to meet the requirements of my reading program compared to how Daniels and other experts intended to them to be used. I am able to report that my students are able to hold in-depth discussions with a small group of their peers about a novel. The students are currently working on moving away from using the job sheets to conducting their discussions without them. I also believe that many of my current students have come to appreciate reading in their lives more this year through the use of literature circles. My students look forward to reading class on a daily basis and once they finish a novel they are looking to start the next one immediately. Even though my main goal of having all of the students hold a discussion without any scripted material hasn't occurred yet, I believe in time it will.

WHERE DO I GO FROM HERE?

After completing this most recent action research cycle, I still have unanswered questions that I would like to explore. To begin to do so, I must complete a new round of inquiry.

Since I believe that choice is so important to all students, I still want to find out how I can let the students choose their own literature circle groups and the novels they will read, while at the same time, making sure they are reading a novel that is on or near their individual reading level and not too overwhelming for them to read or comprehend. I am required by my school district to ensure that each student spends time each day reading material that is on his/her reading level so that we can help the students meet the required benchmarks. Perhaps I will incorporate a guided reading time into my schedule, which will ensure that every student is reading and being instructed on his/her reading level during that period of time. I could also incorporate the stories that are in our new reading series into my schedule, since the stories in the series are extremely close to grade level. Doing this would also ensure that my students are receiving instruction on their own reading level. All of the students have access to these books in the classroom during their silent reading time each day or during their free time, but have chosen not to look at or read them. Providing students with a challenge is

good, but I must also take into consideration the frustration level of each individual student.

I would also like to find out how I can allow students to choose the novels they want to read according to their interest level when I do not have multiple copies of many novels. Since literature circles are my main source of reading instruction throughout the school year, the students are held accountable for the novels they read in their literature circles by taking quizzes and completing various projects. Daniels and Brabham and Villaume (2002 and 2000) all believe that student choice of a text is a defining feature of many literature circles. Since I am currently limited to offering only these few novels that I possess multiple copies of, my students must choose from the novels I am able to offer them at this point. With the assistance of one of the members of my support group, I am going to look into applying for several grants that will hopefully enable me to purchase more novels for my classroom that are of particular interest to my students. One of my goals is to have several novels, three or four, being read at the same time in the classroom. In order to do this I would need to read all of the novels in advance for my own comfort level to make sure the language and content was appropriate for my fourth grade students. This would most likely occur about half way or more through the school year, once I knew that the majority, if not all, of the students were able to work independently without

excessive guidance from me for an extended period of time while I worked with and observed the groups in action.

I also would like to figure out a way to wean my students off of using the job sheets for their discussions earlier in the school year. I have never heard any of my students compare the job sheets to regular every day dittos because I believe my students see the job sheets as a tool to help them have a better discussion rather than just a worksheet to complete to pass the time. I want my students to be able to carry on a conversation about a novel they are reading just like they carry on conversations with their friends on a daily basis. I need to do more research to find out how to scaffold my students into becoming effective conversationalists when it comes to discussing a piece of literature. Perhaps Arthur Applebee's *Curriculum as Conversation* and Judith Langer's *Envisionment Building* can help to guide my next action research cycle. I hope that one or both of these authors are able to provide me with more insight on how to help my students become better conversationalists.

In order to help make my next round of literature circles more meaningful, more exciting, and more choice oriented for my students, I will need to turn to Daniels, Brabham and Villaume, Maloch, and other researchers to assist me in this process. I also recently came across the following resources that might be of value to me as well: *Literature Circles and Response* and *The Literature Circles Resource Guide*, both written by Bonnie Campbell Hill, Nancy Johnson, and

Katherine Schlick-Noe. Susan McMahon and Taffy Raphael wrote a book entitled *The Book Club Connection*, which contains descriptions of many different classroom book clubs, with a strong focus on teachers doing their own research on them. Since I just recently discovered these new resources, I look forward to reading them and seeing what they have to offer that I can implement into my classroom. Looking to the literature to help me find ways to give my students more choices when it comes to choosing the novels they want to read, while at the same time, making sure the students are reading a novel that is on their instructional level and that can be held accountable for, will be extremely insightful and tremendously useful to me.

As this school year nears the end, I must begin to think about next year and how I plan to incorporate literature circles into my reading program. I do realize that next year will bring a new host of successes and failures associated with using literature circles, but I must continue to turn to the literature to help me transform my agenda to meet the needs of my students each and every year. Continuing to let my future students have a voice in their classroom will also enable me to modify the literature circles to meet their needs while still obtaining my goals for them.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A

Summarizer Job Sheet

Adapted from: Daniels, H. (2002). *Literature circles: Voice and choice in book clubs and reading groups*. Portland: Stenhouse.

Appendix B

Illustrator Job Sheet

Adapted from: Daniels, H. (2002). *Literature circles: Voice and choice in book clubs and reading groups*. Portland: Stenhouse.

Appendix C

Literary Luminary Job Sheet

Adapted from: Daniels, H. (2002). *Literature circles: Voice and choice in book clubs and reading groups*. Portland: Stenhouse.

Appendix D

Discussion Director Job Sheet

Adapted from: Daniels, H. (2002). *Literature circles: Voice and choice in book clubs and reading groups*. Portland: Stenhouse.

Appendix E

Connector Job Sheet

Adapted from: Daniels, H. (2002). *Literature circles: Voice and choice in book clubs and reading groups*. Portland: Stenhouse.

Appendix F

Parental Permission Form

Dear Fourth Grade Families,

Your child has been asked to participate in a study to learn more about literature circles, which will be an integral part of your child's language arts program for the entire school year. According to Harvey Daniels, literature circles are small, peer-led discussion groups whose members read the same book. While reading, members make notes to help them contribute to the upcoming discussion, and everyone comes to the literature circle with ideas to share.

This study will be conducted by Mrs. Stacey Polgar from September 2002 through December 2002, as part of her requirements for her Master's Degree in Curriculum and Instruction at Moravian College. Her faculty sponsor is Dr. Joseph Shosh, Director of the Master's Program in Curriculum and Instruction at Moravian College. Dr. Shosh can be contacted by phone at (610)861-1482, or via U.S. mail at Moravian College 1200 Main Street, Bethlehem, PA 18017.

I understand that Mrs. Polgar will be observing my child while he/she is working in his/her literature circles. I further understand that Mrs. Polgar will interview interested student participants about their experiences with literature circles and with reading. Participation in this study will involve the time spent in reading class each day and approximately 40-50 minutes of interviewing time. I also authorize Mrs. Polgar to use any written work that my child creates for the literature circles.

I understand that my child's participation in Mrs. Polgar's study is entirely voluntary and will not affect his/her Language Arts grade in any way. I understand that my child may withdraw from this study at any time and that if he/she chooses to withdraw, they will still need to complete all of the activities and assignments associated with the literature circles, but Mrs. Polgar will not use any of their information in the study. Although my child will receive no direct benefits from participating in this study, except perhaps a better appreciation for reading and discussing pieces of literature, this research may help others to better understand the experiences of fourth grade students who use literature circles as part of their Language Arts program.

Mrs. Polgar has assured my child that she will ensure the confidentiality of all involved. Neither my child's name, my name, the name of any student, the name of the public school or location, the college's name or location, or the teacher's name will appear in any written report or publication of the study or its findings. Throughout the study, all research materials will be kept in a secure location in which Mrs. Polgar is the only person who access to the materials

I have received an unsigned copy of this form to keep, and Mrs. Polgar has answered any questions that my child has about this study. If I have any further questions in the future, I know I can reach Mrs. Polgar by phone at (area code plus phone number), or via the U.S. mail at (school name, address, city, state, zip code).

_____ Printed Name

_____ Signed Name

_____ Date

Appendix G**Parent Survey**

Name _____ Date _____

Parent Reading Survey

Please answer the questions honestly and in as much detail as possible.

1. To what extent does your child like to read?

1	2	3	4	5
not at all	very seldom	undecided		a great deal

2. Place an "X" next to the following items your child does:

*Talks about books he/she is reading _____

*Chooses reading as an activity over television _____

*Chooses reading as an activity over playing a game _____

*Reads some part of the newspaper daily _____

3. List other things your child does which suggest he/she enjoys reading.

4. How many hours a week does your child read at home? Please circle one.

less than an hour 1 hour 2 hours 3 hours more than 3 hours

5. When you read to your child, does he/she prefer hearing excerpts from a book or hearing the entire book?

6. Please explain your answer to number 5 in detail.

7. Explain in detail what you feel reading instruction in fourth grade should look like.

Appendix H

Student Survey

Name _____ Date _____

Student Survey

Please answer all questions as honestly and as in as much detail as you can.

1. How much do you like to read? Please circle your answer.

1	2	3	4
not at all	very seldom	somewhat	a great deal

2. Explain your answer to number 1 in detail.

3. Describe how you feel when you read.

4. Do you prefer reading parts of a book or the whole book? Please circle your answer.

parts of a book	the whole book
-----------------	----------------

5. Explain your answer to number 4 in detail.

6. Have you enjoyed your reading classes in school in the past?

1	2	3	4
not at all	very little	somewhat	a great deal

7. Explain in detail the specific things you liked about your reading classes in the past.

8. Explain in detail the specific things you didn't like about your reading classes in the past.

Appendix I

Interview Questions

The following is a list of potential interview questions for my one-on-one interviews. I do realize that once I begin each of the interviews I may have to add new questions that may come to mind, alter the questions in some way, or even discard some of these questions. This list of interview questions will continue to be a work in progress.

1. Describe what a typical literature circle is.
2. What do you like about literature circles? Explain your answer in detail.
3. What do you dislike about literature circles? Explain your answer in detail.
4. How do you feel when you are discussing a novel with your group?
5. Have literature circles encouraged you to read more on your own? Explain your answer in detail.
6. If you could change anything about the literature circles, what would you change and why? If you would not change anything, explain why.
7. Is there anything else that you would like to tell me about your experiences so far with literature circles? If so, explain in detail.

Appendix J

Principal Consent Form

Dear (principal's name),

This letter is in regards to requesting permission to conduct the following study in my classroom during the current school year.

The students in Mrs. Polgar's fourth grade class have been asked to participate in a study to learn more about literature circles, which will be an integral part of the student's language arts program for the entire school year. According to Harvey Daniels, literature circles are small, peer-led discussion groups whose members read the same book. While reading, members make notes to help them contribute to the upcoming discussion, and everyone comes to the literature circle with ideas to share.

This study will be conducted by Mrs. Stacey Polgar from September 2002 through December 2002, as part of her requirements for her Master's Degree in Curriculum and Instruction at Moravian College. Her faculty sponsor is Dr. Joseph Shosh, Director of the Master's Program in Curriculum and Instruction at Moravian College. Dr. Shosh can be contacted by phone at (610)861-1482, or via U.S. mail at Moravian College 1200 Main Street, Bethlehem, PA 18017.

I understand that Mrs. Polgar will be observing the students while they are working in their literature circles. I further understand that Mrs. Polgar will interview interested student participants about their experiences with literature circles and with reading. Participation in this study will involve the time spent in reading class each day and approximately 40-50 minutes of interviewing time. I also authorize Mrs. Polgar to use any written work that the students create for the literature circles and the student's dialogue journal, where they will communicate back and forth with Mrs. Polgar about literature circles and reading.

I understand that the student's participation in Mrs. Polgar's study is entirely voluntary and will not affect the student's Language Arts grade in any way. I understand that the students may withdraw from this study at any time and that if they choose to withdraw, they will still need to complete all of the activities and assignments associated with the literature circles, but Mrs. Polgar will not use any of their information in the study. Although the students will receive no direct benefits from participating in this study, except perhaps a better appreciation for reading and discussing pieces of literature, this research may help others to better understand the experiences of fourth grade students who use literature circles as part of their Language Arts program.

Mrs. Polgar has assured the students that she will ensure the confidentiality of all involved. Neither the name of any student, the name of any parents, the name of the principal, the name of the public school or location, the college's name or location, or the teacher's name will appear in any written report or publication of the study or its findings. Throughout the study, all research materials will be kept in a secure location in which Mrs. Polgar is the only person who has access to the materials.

All of the students have received an unsigned copy of this form to keep, and Mrs. Polgar has answered any questions that the students have about this study. If I have any further questions in the future, I know I can reach Mrs. Polgar by phone at (area code plus phone number), or via the U.S. mail at (school name, street address, city, state, zip).

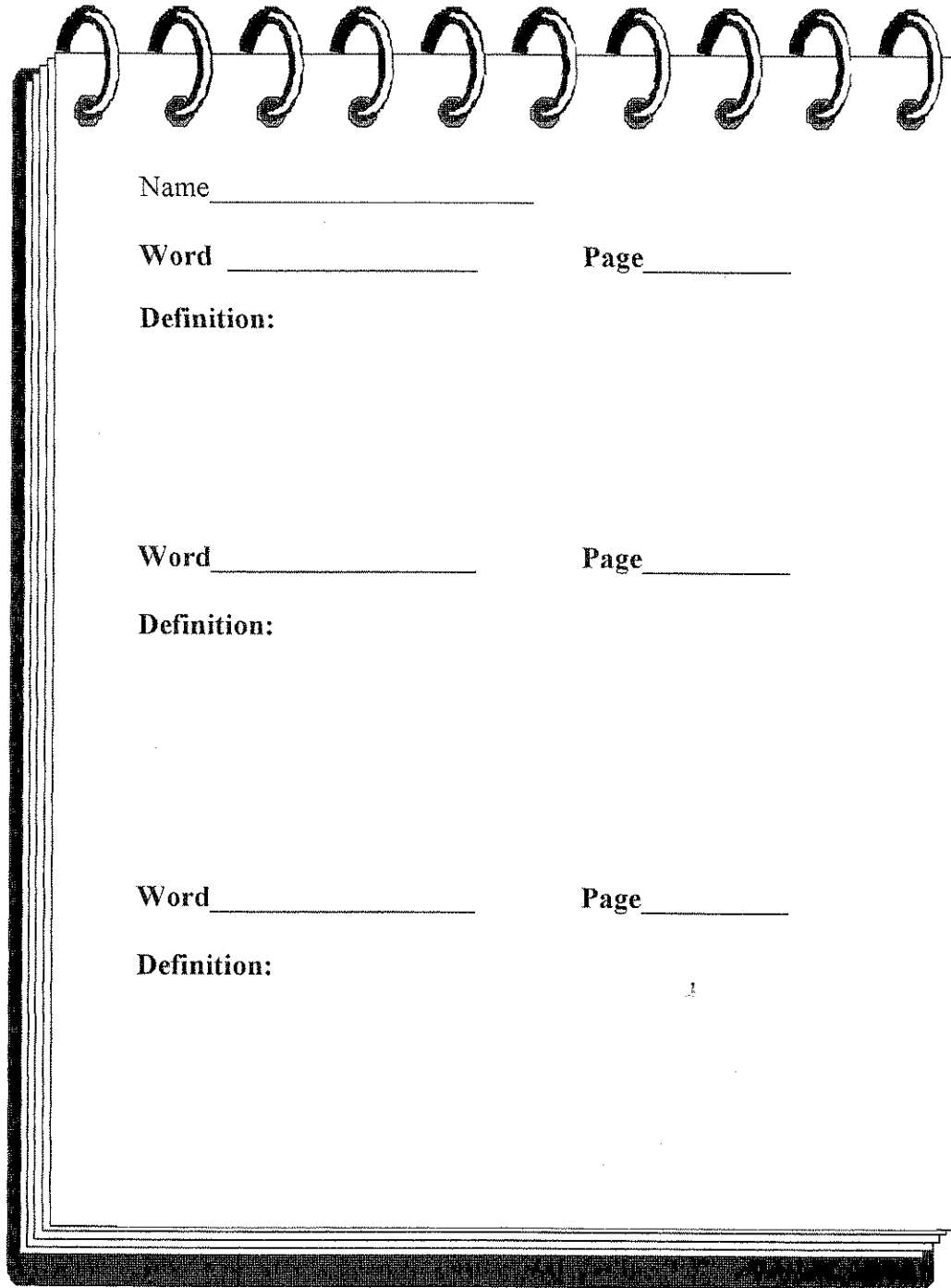
_____ Printed Name

_____ Signed Name

_____ Date

Appendix K

Puzzling Words



A spiral-bound notebook with a metal spiral binding at the top. The notebook is open to a blank page with a double-line border. The page contains three sets of fields for recording information about puzzling words.

Name _____

Word _____ Page _____

Definition:

Word _____ Page _____

Definition:

Word _____ Page _____

Definition: