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IMPLEMENTING STUDENT-CENTERED LITERATURE CIRCLES
IN A FOURTH GRADE CLASSROOM

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Submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Education
Moravian College
Bethlehem, Pennsylvania
2004

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to express my sincere appreciation to Dr. Shosh for assisting me through this process. I have learned a great deal about the writing process, qualitative research, and teacher reflection because of his guidance throughout our seminars. More importantly, I have learned more about my practice, my students, and myself. The Moravian faculty has been an instrumental part of my research journey, as each class throughout this program has prepared me to be a better writer, researcher, and teacher.

Without the support of Professors like Dr. Shosh and Ms. Modjadidi as well as my fellow degree candidates, I may not have had the confidence or resources necessary to complete my research agenda. My fellow classmates have provided academic advice and support, as well as personal encouragement and solace along the path we have taken together. I have been truly inspired by the dedication of these individuals and hope that my own children will be fortunate enough to learn in a classroom like any one of theirs.

I would also like to express my gratefulness to my husband who has not only put up with the extra time I have spent with this study and my computer, but has also supported and encouraged me every step of the way. The care and effort he puts into his own teaching practice continues to impress me every day.

I would be remiss in neglecting to thank my past and present students who have given me the motivation to reflect upon and improve my teaching. It had been a pleasure to learn along with them. Their smiles and hugs have made any struggles along the way worthwhile. Although the process has been a long one, it has been an invaluable journey toward understanding what I do each day, and why I do it. It is my sincere hope that my students have, and will continue to benefit from all that I have learned.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	iii
RESEARCHER STANCE.....	1
REVIEW OF LITERATURE.....	7
METHODOLOGY.....	17
THIS YEAR’S JOURNEY.....	31
Susie’s Survey.....	36
Pete, Jay, and Susie’s Voice.....	38
Anecdotes.....	44
Tia’s Book Pass Chart.....	47
Poem: Can We Read These?.....	48
The Word Eater Literature Circle.....	51
Kyle, The Awesome Artist.....	54-55
Toby, The Awesome Artist.....	56
Pastiche: What Students Said During a Book Pass.....	59-60
Don, The Quizzical Questioner.....	64
Anne, The Awesome Artist.....	65
Kyle, The Fact Finder.....	66
ANALYSIS.....	67
FINDINGS.....	73
THE NEXT CHAPTER.....	85
REFERENCES.....	89
APPENDICES	
A Principal Consent Form.....	91
B Parent/Guardian Consent Form.....	93

C	Reading Survey 1.....	95
D	Literature Circle Role Descriptions.....	97
E	Book Pass Chart.....	98
F	Literature Circle Student Evaluation.....	99
G	Reading Survey 2.....	100
H	Field Log Page.....	102
I	Student Interview Questions.....	103

RESEARCHER STANCE

My interest in literature circles comes from experiences with various children throughout the past six years of my teaching career as well as experiences from my personal life. As a child, I enjoyed reading, and it came relatively easy to me. I was not a gifted student, but I never truly understood what it meant to struggle through decoding, comprehending, analyzing, or responding to literature. I could contribute each day in reading class with a comfortable degree of confidence that any participation on my part would result in a favorable comment from the teacher or my peers. I could enter a test situation or a writing assignment without the fear, or worse yet dread, of being completely wrong. I could answer questions or discuss a piece of writing in a group without being overly anxious or nervous.

As a child in elementary school, I enjoyed reading the books I received as gifts from my parents and grandparents and created my own personal library in my room. The books were mine, and I could choose any book at any time to read for my own pleasure. It was not until later in high school and college that I began to view reading in a slightly different light. Gone were the days of paging through Nancy Drew or Judy Blume, and here were the days of trying desperately to muddle through *The Odyssey* or *Economics 101*. The latter selections may be of

great interest to others, but they were completely void of any personal interest from my perspective. I suspect I am not the only one who preferred those opportunities in life where our personal interest allowed us to make our own reading choice over that obligatory trip to the college bookstore.

Having a twin brother without similar positive memories of reading class in elementary school has helped me examine another aspect of school, one that many of my students experience as well. He, like many of my struggling readers, had been told that he was “slow” in reading. He, like many of my struggling readers, came to doubt his abilities and his “smartness.” He was placed in lower-level reading groups, termed by fellow eight-year-olds as “low reading.” Going into a testing situation or a group discussion brought about feelings of anxiety and despair, and even migraine headaches as my brother got older.

Students who have had reading difficulties often feel “dumb.” They learn to dislike reading and associate it with tasks that are often laborious and dull. I believe that many of my students have been exposed to reading in a traditional manner, that is, reading a story and answering a series of long comprehension questions to prove their knowledge and test their memory about various events in the text. They begin to associate reading with proving one’s intelligence by responding correctly in written format. I believe that many teachers, too, have grown accustomed to assessing students’ comprehension by checking their answers to a series of questions. Educators may often tell their students what to

read because of a belief that as teachers, it is our responsibility to do so. Under the umbrella of this viewpoint, students are not capable of making appropriate decisions about what to read themselves; the experts need to make that decision for them.

My desire to use literature circles instead of the traditional comprehension question format comes from my belief that students may not be learning to comprehend stories using the traditional approach. In many instances, students may not even be remotely interested in the prescribed literature, and therefore reluctant to respond right from the start. In order to comprehend anything, one must make some sort of connection to the new material. Literature circles are an exciting way to promote these connections through student choice and various response methods.

I hope to promote more interest in reading and responding to literature in my classroom. I hope to reach various levels of students through literature circles and show the “struggling readers” that they too have valuable insights and abilities. I feel that the use of literature circles incorporates Multiple Intelligence Theory and can reach students with all types of learning styles at the same time. Literature circles can also promote social interaction and cooperation because of the group format. Students are also using critical thinking skills and interacting with the text more so than when using the traditional question-answer format. I hope to provide my students with choices and guidance so that reading and

responding becomes a positive experience where students can show others how they connected with the text, instead of creating an experience where students feel pressured to respond with only one right answer. I hope that I am setting them up to succeed rather than fail.

As I progress through my research study I am expecting students to enjoy the freedom of choice they will have. I am hoping that that freedom will spark interest and inspire hard work as well. As my students engage in literature circles, I am hoping that another outcome will be that students with all levels of ability will be able to showcase various talents by responding in writing, orally, through art, and in other ways as well. Perhaps the most important outcome I am hoping for is that my students' self-esteem will increase as will comprehension abilities. I hope that they begin to view reading as a positive experience, and that the connections they make to literature begin to pave the road toward lifelong learning.

My hopes are high. I know that I have the best intentions, yet somewhere along my action research journey, the outcomes may not parallel my expectations. I know that it is possible that I may not be able to help ALL my students make the connection I was hoping for. I can try my best through modeling the various response techniques associated with literature circles, but some students may simply not connect to the literature. They just might not "like" what we are doing, no matter how exciting I think it is.

In these cases, I will need to examine my practice carefully through participant observations, shadow logs, and student interviews. I am sure that the most valuable insights I get will be from the students themselves. Perhaps I will find something valuable as I go back into my field log and also write observer comments. I think it will be important to go back into my notes after some time has passed. I may see a student's behavior differently after I am more removed from it.

An area of difficulty for me may be found in assessing students' comprehension of the literature. I may mistake a student's effort and enthusiasm for actual comprehension of the material. I will have to make sure that I create and use various assessment techniques throughout the research process. I think it will be important to keep records of students' responses to the literature circle activities so that I can monitor comprehension. Another key in assessment will be discussion. I will need to keep accurate notes pertaining to discussions with students so that I can gain insight about their comprehension and connections with the literature.

One key component to literature circles is student choice. Another difficulty that may arise as I continue my action research is that student may not make choices for reading that I feel are appropriate for them. It will be essential to provide students with quality literature so that they feel empowered to make good choices, but also so that I can feel confident that they are reading something

valuable. I hope to provide a sufficient amount of high quality options in order to eliminate disappointment in any possible student choice. Even if some students select the shortest book, as I anticipate, the selection will have appropriate content and serve as a valuable learning experience.

A final challenge that I may face concerns teacher input. A literature circle can be just as valuable to the students, sometimes more valuable, if the teacher is not present. I am going to have to find a way to capture students' comments and discussions even if I am not an integral part in their group that day. I am hoping that interviews will provide some information about group work. Collecting students' responses via a journal or various task sheets may help me gain information as well. It will be vital to my research that I create an environment where my students feel safe in responding to the literature both with each other and with me. I plan to work on this continuously throughout the year by encouraging students to read through various incentive programs, and also by my daily interaction with the students. I try to encourage participation and risk-taking. I also try to create an emphasis on respecting others in our classroom.

Although my action research fills me with some anxiety concerning students' comprehension and their interest in reading, I am excited to begin the journey. I feel that there are wonderful possibilities waiting for my students to enjoy responding to and connecting with literature. I know that my past

experiences, and also my ongoing desire to reach all levels of students, have contributed to my desire to take this journey.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The use of literature circles, where groups of students join together to discuss literature, can have a positive effect on students' literacy learning (Bond, 2001; Brabham & Villaume, 2000; Burns, 1998; Daniels, 1994; Manning & Manning, 1995). Although literature circles can take on many forms or configurations, Daniels (1994) describes them as flexible discussion groups composed of students reading a similar piece of literature.

Students engaged in literature circles have the opportunity to choose their own path. They are also making connections, which enables them to construct meaning from the text in a valuable way. Their social interaction contributes to students' ability to make meaning from text (Noll, 1994; Renegar & Haertling, 1993). Various types of literature can be used in literature circles, making the technique useful across the content areas (Manning & Manning, 1995). Teachers can integrate literature study into subject areas to help promote interest and understanding.

A key aspect of literature circles involves student choice. Allowing students to choose what piece of writing they are going to read, along with how

they will respond to that writing can change the climate of a classroom (Burns, 1998; Day, 2002; Wood, 2001). Students may become more motivated to learn new material and may also be more interested in responding to the literature when they have a choices pertaining to what they are reading. Students in Burns's classroom became more comfortable taking academic risks. Students were in heterogeneous discussion groups, so they were able to help each other in many instances. They also became more accountable for their work as more control was placed with the students as opposed to the teacher.

When using literature circles, teachers can introduce a variety of novels, articles, poems, or other types of writing thorough book talks (Brabham & Villaume, 2000). Students then have the opportunity to make reading selections as opposed to the more traditional teacher selection based on ability. In addition to selecting a multitude of genres, teachers must also consider the background, culture, and heritage of their students (Ioga, 1995; Webster, 2001). It is essential to provide reading choices that engage or invite students to participate.

Teachers need to choose books that students can connect with in some way. Webster (2001) found that students whose schema did not match up with the cultural information within various texts were hindered by an inability to truly enter the text or identify with characters and themes present in the text. By incorporating multicultural literature we can teach students to be tolerant of those

who are “different” and reduce stereotypes. At the same time literature circles can help foster a love for reading and increase higher level thinking skills.

Using multicultural literature in literature circles can provide an ESL student, for example, with a chance to help his or her peers better understand that child’s background. This increased understanding would come from discussion and dialogue within a peer group. Incorporating multicultural literature in literature circles can lead toward acculturation, which “. . .allows the individual to become part of the mainstream culture without discarding past meaningful traditions and values,” (Ioga, p. 44, 1995). ESL students can use strategies to connect to literature that is in English while remaining connected to themes present in the literature.

Many teachers provide students with the opportunity to select not only the literature used, but also the means by which they will respond to the literature. Traditionally, Daniels (1994) suggests providing students with choices for various roles to fulfill. These roles are “. . .designed to invite different cognitive perspectives on a text,” (p. 25). For example, the Discussion Director may be in charge of posing various questions to the group based on different perspectives, themes present, or connections to personal experiences. It is important for teachers to model the types of questions that will engage groups in quality discussion. The Illuminator draws a favorite scene; the Passage Master reads a

section that may have been interesting or humorous aloud to the group. There are many adaptations of these and other roles suggested by Daniels.

Students can meet to discuss their findings in small groups on scheduled days. They can even meet in sectioned-off areas of a classroom simultaneously. George (1997) found that physically separating groups with gym mats set up end on end significantly eliminated off task behavior and reduced noise. Students in his classroom began to ask for the mats during other group work times throughout the day.

Students can prepare for the roles in various ways. They may use notes that stick to the text, complete webs, task sheets, journal entries, or copy passages. Brabham and Villaume (2000) find that while scaffolds like the aforementioned help readers become more comfortable using literature circles, they can become scripts causing non-authentic discussion among groups. They suggest avoiding an overemphasis on procedural aspects of conducting literature circles, and instead, focus on requiring students to develop their conversations together including questions and connections more fully.

Key to the concept of using literature circles is allowing students to direct the conversation (Daniels, 2002, & Bond, 2001). Both researchers emphasize the importance in allowing students to select the literature. They also encourage students to decide on particular assignments and sometimes roles to be shared with the group. The students pose questions, ideas, and connections to the story.

Teachers may contribute to or participate in discussions, but they do not drive or determine them. Students are also able to share multiple perspectives on literature.

Lisa Delpit (2002) emphasizes the importance of students' motivation and the connections necessary for new learning to occur.

“The students don't identify with the teachers who question their intelligence or with a curriculum that ignores their existence. They have little opportunity to speak, and become overanxious about being corrected when they do. Subsequently, even when given teacher-sanctioned speaking opportunities, they opt not to. And they are not motivated to learn the new dialect because nothing presented within it connects to their own interests.” (Delpit, p. 41)

Whether you are referring to the acquisition of a different dialect, as Delpit was, or the acquisition of a scientific theory, students will not retain information when they cannot perceive a connection to it. The very heart of my study rests on making connections to literature, through the selection process, the reading process, and the responding process. As teachers, we must find a way to help our students make these connections. This means we need to understand their own lives and interests to the best of our ability.

Kaufman, Kaser, Kahn, and Crawford (1999) found that teachers do not necessarily have to be present in the literature circle for a quality discussion to ensue. Audiotapes in this study provided teachers with insights about students' responses to literature. While the students may have been more likely to discuss issues for longer periods of time when teachers were absent from the group and disagree with one another's point of view to greater extent, they remained focused

on the literature. They also made valuable connections to the literature and uncovered important themes present in the literature together. There may be instances where teachers should not feel the need to meet with literature groups. As Kaufman et.al remind us, “We all have days when we can’t attend because of other issues in the classroom. Instead of joining a group because we feel we ‘should,’ it’s better for students to meet by themselves”(p. 381).

Teachers usually provide students with various texts based on a particular theme or genre (Davis, Resta, Davis, & Camacho, 2001). The texts may also be organized by author, or by a particular topic of interest. Since many types of literature can be utilized in literature circles, teachers can try them across subject areas like science, social studies and even math. Experiences with biographies and expository pieces in literature circles can promote interest in various different subjects (Manning & Manning, 1995).

Literature circles usually consist of four to six students. However, it is important to consider the many circumstances surrounding a particular class. Based on students’ needs and interests groups may be smaller or larger. Brabham and Villaume (2000) suggest that the size of the group should not interfere with the students’ ability to thoughtfully respond to the text and respond to the contributions of other group members.

Teachers must carefully consider the individuality of our students when implementing literature circles or any other method of instruction. We must also

consider this point when making decisions about group composition. As Renegar & Haertling (1993) found, several different leadership styles may emerge within groups. Student leaders may attempt to dominate conversations and compete with one another while quieter students may tend to remain silent. Groups containing a balance of learning and personality styles may be more successful in completing any assigned work.

There are many positive outcomes associated with the use of literature circles in the classroom. Students in one study felt greater competency in remembering what they read, self-assessment, explaining what they read, and understanding what was read after the literature circles were implemented (Blum, Lipsett, & Yocom, 2002). The researchers noted that students with learning disabilities had the perception that their reading abilities differed greatly from those of other class members. After implementing literature circles, the same learning disabled students still noted a difference in reading ability, but the discrepancy was significantly reduced.

The researchers were able to successfully match literature circle response roles to students' IEP goals. Also, the use of literature circles seemed to be an effective tool for one particular student diagnosed with Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder. Most students were able to improve communication and listening skills, as well as their self-esteem and willingness to take risks.

Blum (2002) found that the use of literature circles serves as an effective accommodation tool for students in an inclusive classroom. Since students are choosing the literature, they may be more motivated to respond. Heterogeneous groups allow struggling readers to hear meaningful information about literature from above-level readers. This grouping may also cause anxiety, however. Teachers need to incorporate scaffolds to help struggling readers feel comfortable sharing in the group setting. Brabham and Villaume (2000) suggest that partners could share jobs, or the class could perform the same role during the beginning stages of the program.

Noll (1994) reminds us that students can learn how to work together in the classroom. As any negative behaviors or counterproductive discussions take place, those negative events can become targets for improvement. The group can make note of any difficulties and work toward correcting them during the next literature circle meeting. Students will become aware of social issues that need attention, as well as group behaviors beneficial toward achieving goals and objectives.

In Vygotsky's Mind in Society (1978), he discusses social issues in the classroom. In the case of literature circles, the teacher or predominantly other students, are providing assistance to one another in efforts to understand and connect with new material. This can be seen as an example of Vygotsky's zone of proximal development. Peers in a discussion group can be valuable teachers as

well as adults in the classroom. By mixing students in heterogeneous literature circle groups, the zone of proximal development can lead students toward making valuable connections with new, and sometimes more difficult literature. Students can learn from each other's art, stories, opinions, and instruction during literature circle conversations.

As Vygotsky presents his thoughts on language, one can reflect upon the value of discussion groups. He says, "Language arises initially as a means of communication between the child and the people in his environment. Only subsequently, upon conversion to internal speech, does it come to organize the child's thought, that is, become an internal mental function," (p. 89). Before students can internalize concepts or connect to new literature and its themes, communication between peers or adults should occur. Through literature circle discussion groups, students are taking in new information that can later be internalized upon reflection.

Mizokawa and Hansen-Krening (2000) remind educators that a primary goal of reading instruction is to move students toward critical thinking. We want to encourage students to make personal connections to text and to evaluate the author's intentions and ideas. Responses grow deeper and more complex when students have to defend their ideas. Literature circles can reinforce students' abilities to evaluate text as they agree and disagree during discussions of literature. Through questions they pose to each other, or questions posed by the

teacher, students are developing critical thinking skills. Students are also able to critique text, thus bringing literature to life (Mizokawa & Hansen-Krening, 2000).

As students share experiences together, they are gaining multiple perspectives on text. Students may see the text in a new light through conversations and questions posed by other group members. In addition to sharing the various roles suggested by Daniels, students can bring other ideas to a literature circle. Whitin (2002) has students make sketches in order to create personal interpretations of text. Students illustrate colors and symbols as well as provide justification for their choices. They are moving beyond a literal retelling of the story and moving toward the extension of ideas, themes, and values existing in a story. This type of sharing also allows students to make connections to themselves and the outside world. Those connections are bridges toward deeper understanding of literature.

Teachers must remember that literature circles are one of many techniques that will enhance a classroom. We need to remain flexible and attend to students' needs. Literature circles are not a quick-fix, meant to stand alone in a language arts classroom. Spiegel (1998) emphasizes the importance of utilizing a balanced approach to literacy instruction. The author suggests that literature circles succeed in connecting reading to writing as well as in requiring students to take a stance when reading. Literature circles also promote teacher reflection and flexibility, two additional components of a successful literacy program. Spiegel cautions

teachers to include these key components in literacy instruction through literature circles, while also supplementing the program with a focus on word identification and grammar.

Although the research reviewed here suggests various ways to implement literature circles and many different tools to use, a few key components remain steadfast. Students are making informed choices from the literature they select to the ways in which they respond. Also, students are sharing multiple perspectives on literature, thus deepening their understanding of it. Many students involved in this type of literature instruction are more motivated and more confident in their reading abilities. They are better able to respond to future texts in a meaningful way. Students can also learn to value one another's ideas and can become self-motivated, lifelong learners.

METHODOLOGY

As I began the implementation of my study, I proceeded at a slow pace. I wanted to be sure of my students' readiness for what can be an extremely student-centered approach. I also wanted to make sure my students could experience literature circles authentically, without my research getting in the way of a normal classroom activity. I developed the following question to guide my research, "What are the observed and reported experiences of fourth graders when engaging in student-centered literature circles?" In order to maintain the regularity of my

reading classroom, I explained my study to the students, trying not to overemphasize the research, so as to overshadow the new process with which we were about to engage.

My students were quite familiar with the idea that I, too, was a student. They had heard me talk about the fact that I had homework assignments just as they did. They had become accustomed to my leaving early once a week to attend class. I drew upon their familiarity when explaining that as part of my homework, I would be collecting information about what we experienced during reading class. I assured them that their participation, or non-participation in the study, was in no way going to affect any aspect of their schooling. I also explained that no actual names would ever be used in my “homework” and that the research I was doing would help us learn what kinds of things work or don’t work well during reading class, namely literature circles.

After receiving written consent from my building principal, I handed out a form requesting student and parent consent to participate in the study included as Appendices A and B. I reminded students to show their parents. I received permission slips back from thirteen students. Only data from those thirteen students was used in my study. After permission to conduct the study was granted by Moravian College’s Human Subjects Internal Review Board (HSIRB) and from my students and their parents, I was ready to research!

The first decision I made pertained to the frequency of literature circles. Ideally, I would have liked to provide students with choices for reading throughout the data collection period as Burns (1990) advocates. Providing students with choices for reading and responding can increase motivation and learning. Bound to some degree to our school's reading curriculum, I knew that I would also have to integrate the fourth grade reading series selections, along with student selected novels during the data collection period. I decided to use the series selections for modeling and preparation in order to satisfy curricular obligations, and then move on to the student selected pieces once we all felt more comfortable with the literature circle process. Doing so might help me instruct the class as a whole and monitor progress with each new response role before moving on to more independent tasks.

In September, students completed the first reading survey as seen in Appendix C. I wanted to gain perspective on students' backgrounds with literature circles and their attitudes about reading in general. I was particularly sensitive to the fact that I had some struggling readers in the group, and I wanted to find a way to help those students feel like "good readers" too. Blum (2002) found that literature circles could serve as an effective accommodation tool for students in an inclusive classroom by increasing motivation to respond to literature. Blum also asserts that heterogeneous grouping allows struggling readers to hear meaningful

information from above-level readers. I would also suggest that above-level readers can learn new ideas from struggling readers as well.

Students were asked to respond to questions asking whether or not they enjoyed reading and what types of activities were typical during reading class. I included a rating scale for students to use in order to ascertain their interest level about various types of reading and also included an open-ended section to capture student voice.

After I was able to assess students' familiarity with the literature circle process through the survey and informal class discussion, I began the modeling process. There are a variety of ways students can respond to literature via roles or jobs to be later shared with the group after a reading assignment (Daniels, 1994). Although based on his suggestions, I decided to modify the roles Daniels uses in order to individualize the process to my classroom and also in order to spark student interest. The roles I created were the following and can be seen in Appendix D:

- ❖ discussion director
- ❖ word wizard
- ❖ quizzical questioner
- ❖ cool connector
- ❖ fact finder
- ❖ awesome artist

The first four roles were specific suggestions from Daniels, although the titles and students responsibilities vary. For example, Daniels suggests having the

discussion director pose questions to the group. I modified the role to be that of an organizer or manager of the group, and developed a separate role for creating questions for the group. I designed the fact finder role specifically to engage students in topics of interest that may form a bridge with topics discussed in literature. The awesome artist job also stems from research done by Whitin (2002) highlighting the value in personal interpretations of text as seen in students' sketches.

I wanted to make sure that students felt comfortable with each role before they engaged in group discussions utilizing those roles. I felt that quality discussion was essential to one of my goals, increasing comprehension of literature. A primary goal of reading instruction is to move students toward critical thinking. We want to encourage students to make personal connections to text and to evaluate the author's intentions and ideas. Literature circles can reinforce students' abilities to evaluate text as they agree and disagree during discussions of literature. Through questions they pose to each other, or questions posed by the teacher, students are developing critical thinking skills. Students are also able to critique text, thus bringing literature to life (Mizokawa & Hansen-Krening, 2000).

Brabham and Villaume (2000) suggest that in the beginning stages of implementing literature circles, students may share jobs or the whole class may attempt the same role simultaneously. Bond (2001) also modeled the jobs for

several months in her own classroom before conducting actual literature circle groups. The first job I modeled for students was the quizzical questioner. In efforts to integrate required curriculum in addition to commencing with data collection, I decided to have the students independently read a short story, “The Flying Train Committee”, taken from *Tales of a Fourth Grade Nothing* in their reading books. Instead of having students create their own questions to prepare for discussion, we analyzed some teacher-generated questions. Students are so used to responding to teacher-generated questions, I thought it would be important for students to identify different types of questions and how they help us understand literature better.

We passed out highlighters and identified what I called “search and explain” questions as opposed to “right there” questions, modified from a district workshop on question-answer relationships. I defined “right there” questions as those that could be answered in a single sentence, or even a single word. They are detail-oriented and do not ask about significant information from the text, but rather surface information. “Search and explain” questions require students to use information from the text as well as personal experience to make an inference about important parts of the story structure like character or plot. We discussed the components of each type of question, including key words used and then moved on to an assignment. Students were to generate their own questions of interest for our next short story, “Koya DeLaney and the Good Girl Blues.”

The next role I modeled was the cool connector. Utilizing the aforementioned story, students shared personal stories connecting themes in the literature with experiences from their own lives. Students used post it notes or note cards to jot down their connections and questions. The materials were kept in the room so students would have access to them whenever they were reading.

After monitoring students' progress and familiarity with the questioner and connector roles, I felt they were ready to move on. Before beginning new sets of novels, I reviewed each of the roles on the handout illustrated in Appendix D that students would be using to respond. Each time I introduced a new set of novels, which would occur three times throughout the data collection period, students conducted a book pass (Allen, 2000). Allen used book passes as an effective way to allow her students to sample books in their classroom library and evaluate them for readability and interest.

For our first book pass, I collected several titles based on the first theme suggested in our reading series, "It's Cool, It's School." During the book pass, students spent approximately three to five minutes with one selection. They used a chart as seen in Appendix E, to record information about the book for later discussion. Students recorded the title, author, and other notes that might be of interest to the child such as length, chapter titles, illustration descriptions, word choice selected, and other first impressions.

After a class discussion on each reading selection, students then wrote down their top two choices for reading. I was able to select book groups based largely on interest. As Burns suggests (1998), students can experience a variety of literature including novels, short stories, articles, poems, or other genres based on interest as opposed to teacher selection based on ability. I also included multicultural selections in the book pass as well. As Ioga (1995) and Mathis (2001) suggest, including multicultural literature can help students from diverse backgrounds understand one another without abandoning their own individuality. It is important to provide literature in the book pass that can allow all students to connect in some way to that literature. Although my class population this year was not very culturally diverse, I will keep this point in mind each time I select literature.

Based on the students' selections, I formed literature circle groups containing three to six students. Traditionally, literature circles contain between four to six students. The number is not a recipe, rather a guideline. Individual teachers must consider their own classroom composition. I did not want the size of the group to interfere with the students' abilities to respond meaningfully to one another, or to contribute to the group discussions (Brabham & Villaume, 2000). Since there were six roles designed, I decided to keep the numbers between three and six so students would be able to complete either one or two jobs in preparation for each group meeting.

Students were given the novels and asked as a group to divide the novel into five separate assignments. Those assignments would be read either individually or as a group, depending on the students' decision and time available in school. Students would be assigned reading assignment one and a role to complete on day one. On day two, students would meet to share their roles. With any extra class time, students would begin their reading and role responsibilities for assignment two. The next day, they needed to be prepared for sharing that assignment. It took approximately eight class periods to finish the novel. I made sure that the students had at least one weekend assignment because some of the reading was lengthy.

I was careful not to expect myself to meet with each group each day. I was extremely cautious about devoting my time to the group meeting I was attending. Rather than rush from group to group as I had done in the past, I resolved to spend quality discussion time with one group, possibly two. Some research suggests that students may still have quality discussions without the teacher present (Kaufman et. al, 1999). I was careful to make sure that there were no more than three group meetings occurring at once in the classroom because of management issues and noise levels.

We began our first novel by having each student in the class complete the same job so I could determine if any additional minilessons were necessary. The discussion director job was not included in the first trial because I felt students

needed little practice with this role. The role was mainly designed in this study to serve as a leader to get the group started and collect any materials needed.

The next time a novel was introduced, the second trial, I introduced the responsibilities of the discussion director. This time around, students also completed evaluation sheets, as seen in Appendix F, assessing one another's preparation for the group meeting. The evaluation sheets were used for accountability and were handed in to me at the conclusion of the group meeting. I could use the evaluation sheets to determine the need to conduct minilessons on various roles, or to conduct individual conferences with students having difficulty with the roles. The same procedure would be followed during the third trial. The following data collection methods were used as I circulated to various group meetings.

Arhar, Holly, and Kasten (2001) suggest that shadow studies or shadow logs "...help us derive insights from first-hand experience of what it is like to be a student," (p. 141). I observed two different students of different ability levels during two separate book passes. I recorded notes focusing predominantly on one child, so as to gain perspective on that child's actions, feelings, and experiences. I recorded observable behaviors, quotes, and my own comments as the behaviors were occurring. As was the case with any information collected during my study, all observer comments were set off in brackets in order to distinguish them from observable behaviors.

Participant observations served as a way for me to include a specific, detailed account of daily events, while at the same time including my own observer comments and personal reflections (Ely, Vinz, Downing, & Anzul, 1997; Bogdan & Biklen, 1998). During my study I collected data by observing various group discussions, class discussions, or individual conversations where I was either a direct or outside participant. Each time I took notes on those experiences, times and dates were recorded, as were specific student behaviors. I also tried to capture as much student conversation as possible in order to give my participants a voice in the data.

After keeping notes on specific behaviors, quotes, and my own reactions during those instances, I used a word processing program to type the observations making sure to include line numbers on the page, as seen in Appendix H, for easier later reference. All subjective observer comments were set off in brackets. I also revisited the data at a later time in order to write additional notes in the margins. The margins were also a place to code, or categorize the particular occurrences at a later date.

In further attempts to triangulate my data and maintain trustworthiness, I wanted to include student surveys as part of my data collection. MacLean & Mohr (1999) suggest collecting different types of data such as student work, observations, and interviews with students in order to examine data from various perspectives. I gave one survey to students prior to the onset of the data collection

period, and I administered one at the conclusion of my data collection period. Both surveys asked students to respond to various questions about reading likes and dislikes, as well as self-assessments of students' own reading abilities. Students used both a rating scale and open-ended responses when completing the surveys. The surveys were designed to identify any changes in attitude or perception of ability between the onset and conclusion of the study. Both surveys can be seen in Appendices C and G.

Arhar, Holly, and Kasten (2001) indicate that "...a group discussion addressing a particular topic or issue...encourages elaboration, it aids in recall, and it is stimulating to have multiple respondents interact" (p. 158). I conducted one focus group interview with a heterogeneous group of students in the middle of the data collection period. I chose a mixed ability level group in order to gain perspective on what different students may have experienced. I also chose students who were not all in the same literature circle group. I felt that a mixed cluster would give me a better sampling of what the entire class may have experienced.

The focus group interview was audio taped and later transcribed in a word processing program. I also included observer comments when I typed the interview. After the interview, I did a participant check with two of the students in the focus group. I asked clarifying questions and took notes on our informal conversation in attempts to maintain trustworthiness. I wanted to make sure I

captured the students' perspectives to the best of my ability. The interview questions can be seen in appendix I.

A vignette, as noted by Arhar, Holly, and Kasten (2001) can be used as a "representation of life on paper" (p. 242). These researchers point out that a vignette gives a teacher researcher a creative option to analyze patterns and themes over time. Hoping to incorporate student voice in my study, I created a vignette, or a short story from that student's perspective. I used actual quotes from the focus group interview, participant observations, and book passes, as well as my own interpretations of her thoughts and attitudes to write a short story about the student's overall experiences with literature circles. *One particular student's voice* was chosen because of some unexpected realizations I came to as a result of the data collection process.

I used data collected throughout the study to compose patatai poems, or collections of student phrases arranged in a manner to express a certain point of view. Ely, Vinz, Downing, and Anzul (1997) also suggest using a pastiche in order to express multiple perspectives by using various statements gathered throughout the study. The poems were based on data from interviews, shadow logs, and participant observations.

By combining several different students' phrases or quotes from interviews, shadow logs, and participant observations, I was able to compose a layered story. I configured three different stories next to one another on the same

page in order to compare and contrast various different points of view espoused during the implementation of literature circles in my classroom. I was hoping to gain perspective on any differences in the experiences of my students. I created the layered story based on the perspectives of three students with very diverse personalities.

Throughout the research process, I frequently collected samples of student work. Maintaining confidentiality through the use of pseudonyms, I collected samples of book pass charts, students' post it notes or other papers containing role information, and also student evaluation sheets. The discussion director in each group was responsible for gathering group work and giving it to me after the group concluded their literature circle discussion.

The aforementioned data collected was kept in a field log, or three-ring binder. The pages were numbered chronologically. Any additional research or graduate seminar class work was also kept in the field log. Field log pages contained the date, the data's topic, and line numbers for later reference. Large margins were included on the pages in order to comment on the data at a later point in time, or to write codes or categories for the data. A sample field log page can be seen in Appendix H.

As suggested by MacLean & Mohr (1999) I reviewed my data periodically with a teacher researcher support group. The group helped me come up with new ideas that I hadn't previously thought of due to my closeness with the study. The

group also helped reassure me that I was on the right track with data collection. By including outside perspective, I could reduce the possibility of channeling my data toward any biases or expectations I previously held. By questioning me along the way, the group helped me maintain trustworthiness in the study.

The data collection period continued for approximately three months. During this time, I also continued to review literature on data collection methods and other researchers' experiences with action research. I also continued to revisit the field log in efforts to continually gain perspective necessary for later sharing my research journey.

THIS YEAR'S JOURNEY

As the beginning of the school year approached, I became increasingly excited, and simultaneously nervous to begin my study. I had high hopes for utilizing literature circles to help motivate students of many different ability levels. While I did not yet know their personalities, I knew I would be teaching twenty-two students, four of whom would not be in my classroom for reading instruction. These students would be receiving pullout special education services with our special education teacher. I prepared for a year filled with new reading adventures with my students as we all learned about literature circles together.

Perhaps the most gratifying element of this research study lies in the fact that we truly did learn together.

September arrived. The majority of my students come from upper to middle class, two parent, supportive, families. Two males in my classroom, however, do not live with their parents. Tim is a foster child and Toby lives with his grandmother. Both Tim and Toby's families are extremely supportive as well. I feel blessed to have students who, for the most part, *want* to come to school. Many bright faces greeted me each morning including Susie's whenever she asked, "Is there anything I can help you with?" or "Did I do my homework correctly?" There is also Sarah, whose greetings included, "I found some great math websites last night! Can I show you?" Susie and Sarah were two motivated students, eager to please others.

As I rejoiced in their excitement, I was soon reminded of the difficulties other students face. Although most of my students were fortunate enough to have a supportive environment at home, as is the case in any classroom, some struggle with motivation, homework completion, and increasingly difficult concepts throughout the school day. Tim reads at a second grade reading level and is eligible for special education services. Sadly, we were unable to retrieve the appropriate legal signatures required on the Individualized Educational Plan.

Realizing that Tim would stay inside the classroom for reading instruction this year, I became even more motivated to find a way to help him feel safe and successful.

Don is the child of a single parent who has been through the Instructional Support Team referral process for the past two years. He is frequently tardy to school, and remains disorganized throughout the day. He can also be quite defiant when he doesn't get his way. Strangely enough, or perhaps not, I would receive more hugs this year from Don than any other student in my classroom. I became increasingly motivated to reach students like Don through an approach to reading that I had anticipated would draw in students lacking motivation and confidence due to previous failures with more traditional reading approaches.

I began to have conversations with the class about their previous experience with literature circles. I heard comments like, "That's when you read in groups." Students seemed to understand that they would be reading together, but they had little experience with any of the response roles I would be implementing. No one mentioned a questioner, discussion director, illustrator, or anything of the like. At this point, I realized that we would truly be taking a journey together. Here existed an exciting opportunity to provide students with a novel experience.

I explained to the class that I would be doing some homework, just as they do, for my graduate class. The smiles on their faces told me they enjoyed having

this obligation in common with their teacher. They already knew I attended graduate classes class once a week, so I began to explain what the classes entailed in a language they could understand. I told them that I was interested in different ways to teach reading, including the use of literature circles. I would be compiling anecdotal records on some of our experiences together during reading class. I assured them that I would not be discussing individual students with anyone else, but rather I would be writing down some of the things we do or learn together. I expressed my hopes to improve upon any experiences that may not help us understand literature better, and also to continue any experiences that students enjoy and those with which they feel success.

I assured students of their anonymity and of the fact that they didn't even need to participate in the study if they didn't want to. Their grades would not be affected in any way by my study. I handed out the consent form to students, read over it, and asked them to discuss the information we shared with their parents. I received consent from the parents or guardians of thirteen of my students. The documentation that follows is the story of those thirteen students.

It was my hope that engaging in literature circles would motivate previously uninterested, unmotivated, and struggling readers toward a new appreciation of literature and the value of discussion. Perhaps students matching this description would be willing to give reading a chance because of the success they, too, could experience. What I did not anticipate at the onset of the study,

was that a higher level reader with more motivation than most students, would also provide me with valuable lessons as I journeyed through the research process with her.

Before initiating an actual literature circle with students, I would need to find out what my students' attitudes toward reading were and what prior experiences they had with literature circles up to this point in their school careers. I knew their attitudes and experiences would shape the way I would introduce literature circles and also the way I would implement different aspects of the technique, such as literature selection and the various response roles used. In order to gather this background information, I presented my students with a survey in late September (Appendix A).

Students were asked to rate their "reading likes and dislikes" by responding to statements using a scale from one to four, four being the most favorable rating. I also included five open-ended questions where students could write their own original responses to questions about reading and understanding what they've read. Responses ranged from equating good reading to the length of a book, to identifying key strategies used when reading such as predicting and summarizing. Below is a sample of a survey completed by Susie.

Susie's Survey

D

Appendix A

Name

Reading Survey I
Literature Circles



Please answer the following questions using a scale of 1-4.

- 1= Not at all!
- 2= Sometimes
- 3= A lot
- 4= All the time!

C

- 1. I like to read chapter books. 2
- 2. I like to read short stories. 3
- 3. I like to read alone. 4
- 4. I like to read with other people. 1
- 5. I like to talk about what I read. 1
- 6. I like to be read to. 2
- 7. I understand what I read. 3
- 8. I choose to read when I have free time. 2

Please answer the following questions.

9. What makes a good reader?

A person who likes to
read and will enjoy it.

10. How do you feel about reading?

I like it some times.

9

-
-
-
11. During reading class, we read and do theme tests,
-
12. I like reading most when I read when it is cold out,
-
13. I understand what I've read best when I read very slow
-

Many students also referred to specific stories read in the past when asked to describe a typical reading class, for example, “We read *Wayside School*.” There seemed to be few responses about responding to literature in any way. There were mixed results for the question about how much students liked to read with other people. Half of the respondents chose a three (a lot) or a four (all the time) and the other half chose a one (not at all) or a two (sometimes). I was surprised that five out of thirteen students selected a two when asked whether or not they understood what they read. I was interested in how this data would correspond to our work in literature circle groups.

The following layered story condenses three different students’ responses, Pete, Jay, and Susie, to the survey questions. I have deliberately refrained from correcting any student errors in grammar in order to maintain each student’s voice.

Pete, Jay, and Susie's Voice

A good reader reads chapter books like Harry Potter. During reading class we read Ali baba bernsatien, tales of a fourth grade nothing and I'm new here. I understand what I've read best when I read I a lot or when I think it's cool.
-Pete's voice

It makes a good reader if you read in free time and understand wate you read. I do not like to read. During reading class, we I read sort stories. I understand what I've read best when I just read it.
-Jay's voice

A good reader is a person who likes to read and will enjoy it. I lik it sometimes. During reading class we read and do theme tests. I understand what I've read best when I read very slow.
-Susie's voice

I began to reflect on (Burns, 1998; Day, 2002; Wood, 2001; Daniels, 1994) emphasis on student choice. It was also apparent in the students' surveys that choice and enjoyment were key components necessary toward motivating students. I wanted reading class to be more than reading stories, answering teacher-generated questions, and taking tests. I felt that the responses to student surveys reinforced the children's need for a richer experience as well. Not one student survey mentioned reading in groups, literature circles, or student-generated activities in response to the following prompt, "In reading class we..." I now realized the need to start from the beginning. I would introduce each role to the whole group through modeling, have students practice the response method, then move on to student-selected novels and group work. I wanted the

conversations students had in literature circles to be valuable and meaningful, and thus some experience with the response roles would need to be developed.

Based on the limited exposure my students had with literature circles in the past, I decided that modeling some various response roles would be necessary. Keeping in mind the success that Bond (2001) experienced by modeling and practicing each role during whole group instruction, I planned a similar course of action. I focused on what I called, the quizzical questioner first. I felt that developing quality discussion questions could be the most difficult job for students, thus created this response role specifically for the task. Students have become so accustomed to responding to teacher-generated questions, that they often appear reluctant to develop their own. Perhaps they feel it isn't their job to ask questions; it's the teacher's job. Believing that this mindset disengages them from the literature, I began to provide students with guidelines in order to develop different types of questions before asking them to generate their own.

I conducted the first of several minilessons on job or role expectations. In order to achieve the group atmosphere, students sat in a circle around me. I handed out a sheet with previously designed, teacher-generated questions pertaining to a short story in our reading series, "The Flying Train Committee". The story is an excerpt from *Tales of a Fourth Grade Nothing*. I had hoped to initiate some conversation about the questioner role and also cover a required

element of our curriculum by reading a selection from our series. Student selected pieces would be utilized later in the study.

I explained that teachers sometimes ask two types of questions to students about stories we've read, "right there" questions and "search and explain" questions. The first can be found right there on one of the pages. It is often a one or two word answer that recalls some small fact or detail about the story. For example, *who is the girl in the picture on page three?* I asked the students if they could read me any examples from our sheet. Rita found, "Where did they hide the project?" I agreed and showed the students the words that were right there in the book, "They hid the project under Peter's bed."

Next, I explained to students that "search and explain" questions helped us talk about the story in greater depth by asking us to predict, make inferences, and offer our own opinions during discussion. Some students, like Al, who were focused and attentive, began to look away from me. I used the board to write a few key words to use in "search and explain" questions like, *explain, describe, and compare.*

I passed out highlighters for each student to use during our question identification minilesson. I'm not sure if students enjoyed the novelty of using the highlighter, or if their excitement was due to the fact that my highlighters happen to be erasable. In any case, as two helpers passed out the highlighters, students knew we were doing more than just answering questions. Eyes opened wide and

students made comments like, “Cool, the highlighters!” They began to get comfortable on the floor, and looked anxious to get started, as many eyes focused on me and names were written on the papers immediately. We began to highlight questions matching our description on the worksheets. Susie found an example to highlight, as did Tia. Tim volunteered a non-example. I tried to reinforce the idea by repeating the key words to look for on the board.

After students were able to highlight all the examples of “search and explain questions” on the sheet, I asked them to respond to a few of these questions. I reminded them that the answers might not be found “right there” on a particular page in the story. I suggested that students might have to discuss their ideas when responding, as well as recalling important information from the story.

I then explained to students that we would not be using question and answer worksheets to respond during literature circles, but rather they would be coming up with the questions to present to the group. In addition, group members would be responsible for bringing other types of material to present at group meetings. For this reason, I wanted them to become comfortable with developing discussion questions to ask one another that would generate quality discussion as opposed to one-word responses. To practice the questioning technique, I gave students a homework assignment asking them to generate two questions to ask the group after they read our next selection in the series, “Koya Delaney and the Good Girl Blues.”

My next minilesson was on the role that asks students to make connections to the text. Ioga (1995) reminds us of the importance for multicultural students to connect to the literature they are reading. Mizokawa & Hansen-Krening (2000) also discuss the importance of making personal connections to text so students can evaluate the author's ideas and compare them to their own ideas. Discussion where group members agree or disagree can then follow. I thought the best way to help them share connections would be to present the role as an opportunity for students to share stories about themselves and events that happened in their lives. I wanted to tap in to students' natural desire to tell their own story.

I explained to students that they could use post it notes to jot down an anecdote or story from their own lives that reminded them of an event or character from our story, "Koya DeLaney and the Good Girl Blues". Since the story was about an athletic event and teamwork, I expected many students to have personal stories to share about their own sports teams. The story was also about friendships and trust, so I also expected stories pertaining to students' own relationships with one another. In order to review the lesson on questioning and also work on making connections, I asked the students to read "Koya DeLaney", write two search and explain questions to ask the group, and share a personal story or connection they discovered while reading. I reminded students that they could write the question or connection down as soon as they thought of it. They should not wait until they finished with the entire story. Students began reading

independently. Many asked me if they could take extra post it notes. I observed many students writing ideas almost immediately.

As was the case with using highlighters, a similar sense of excitement seemed to be elicited through the use of a mere post it note. Brabham and Villaume (2000) found that scaffolds like post it notes, journals, or other types of task sheets can help students become more comfortable with the literature circle process and sharing their information with group members. I liked the idea of being able to write down a thought or question and sticking it to a page in the story where appropriate. I handed out post it notes to the class as we began the lesson to introduce what I called, the cool connector. I made sure that post it notes and note cards were easily accessible to students in the classroom from that point on. Students made positive comments about being able to use the scaffolds.

The next day, we again met in a circle to discuss the questions and connections homework assignment. I was impressed with the students' ability to ask discussion questions as well as with their ability to share connections to the literature. The following anecdotes summarize some questions and connections made by students. I composed each piece by integrating student quotes and my own impressions taken from participant observations, participant checks, and notes in my field log. The first example illustrates what I perceived to be the point of view of the majority of students in my classroom. The two that follow encapsulate individual voices.

Anecdotes

We thought we could ask the group questions about how the characters were feeling. Mrs. Finnegan told us to try to ask feeling questions instead of questions like, what is the third word on the fifth page? We tried to ask questions about the characters' feelings like, why didn't the girl hug Dawn at the end of the story? A few of us thought of the same questions like, why couldn't Loritha be in the double-dutch competition? That sounds like one of those search and explain questions Mrs. Finnegan was talking about. You have to explain the whole plot of the story to discuss that answer.

One student, Randy was playing with his eraser while Mrs. Finnegan was asking us to share our questions. Maybe he didn't understand the assignment as well. One of Randy's questions was, why are the kids at the school? That answer was right there on the first page. Now Mrs. Finnegan wants us to try to talk about the answers to our questions. Not many people are raising their hands to answer, only Susie and Rita. Mrs. Finnegan has to help us a lot with answering the questions. Maybe we need more practice.

-Room 208

I wanted to share a story about my sports team since the people in the story we read are on a jump roping team together. I thought about my basketball team. One boy reminds me of Dawn in the story. He likes to dribble a lot and even if I'm open he doesn't even pass me the ball. He is always keeping the ball and like doesn't pass it to anyone. So he really isn't a team player like Dawn isn't a team player.

- Al

I remembered a part in the story where Loritha doesn't make it to the jump rope practice. That reminded me of a time when I was late to my basketball practice. That's all.

-Tim

I was pleased with students' identification and development of the "search and explain" questions. Burns (1998) reminded me that developing higher level thinking skills is not an easy task for students. I immediately felt hopeful that students could move toward quality literature discussions. However, after reviewing the homework assignment, I did sense some difficulty students were having in answering their own questions.

During the review of the homework assignment, I made sure students went back into the text to discover answers to each other's questions. Some students, like Susie, had very little difficulty, while others like Tim struggled. I also resolved to make sure students were held accountable during literature circle group meetings for responding to one another's questions.

I felt that the best way to do that was to participate in the group meetings as much as possible to guide the process. I decided to make sure I could meet with each discussion group for some length of time. That would probably mean only scheduling one or two literature circle group meetings during one reading period. Despite the advice of Kaufman, Kaser, Kahn, and Crawford, (1999) suggesting that teachers do not necessarily have to be present for group meetings, I felt that my students were not ready for complete independence yet. I did, however, want to get the process started.

After compiling a group of novels based on our curricular theme, "It's Cool It's School" I had students engage in a book pass (Allen, 2000). Brabham


and Villaume (2000) suggest organizing texts used during literature circles based upon theme or genre. They also recognize schemes of organization including author or particular topics of interest. My students used a chart (Appendix E) to comment on various books as they previewed each selection for a few minutes before passing it to their right. The novels used were: *Yang the Youngest and His Terrible Ear* by Lensey Namioka, *Tales of a Fourth Grade Nothing* by Judy Blume, *The Magnificent Mummy Maker* by Elvira Woodruff, *Freckle Juice* by Judy Blume, *Starting School with an Enemy* by Elisa Lynn Carbone, *Sideways Stories from Wayside School* by Louis Sachar, and *Word Eater* by Mary Amato. The class sat in a circle with charts in hand. I sat with them and discussed the chart by going over each section, explaining that the chart would help them later when they got to choose their literature circle novels. I could tell by the wide eyes around the circle that the students were surprised at the fact that they would be given the opportunity to choose their own novels. One student called out, “Can we read these?” holding up two or three books. I answered, “Yes, you will be able to read them. You can also choose them for future book reports.” Tim replied with excitement, “Yea!”






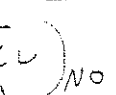



I asked volunteers to tell me what kinds of comments might help them decide whether or not they were interested in reading a particular novel. Susie read my suggestions from the book pass chart, including writing notes about the length of the book, the chapter titles, characters, whether or not humor might be

present, or any pictures appearing in the book. I also told students that they could draw a smile or a frown to show their initial impressions of the book. I have included a sample of Tia's book pass chart.

Name _____

Whooo's Got Something Good to Read? *The*



Title 3	Author	Comments <ul style="list-style-type: none"> o Does it look exciting or boring? o What kinds of pictures are there? o How many chapters? o Who might some characters be? o Is it about something true, made-up, science, or history? o Does it look funny?
The magnificent mummy		exciting ^{awesome} Good  Halloween Nice Great  cool scary  social studies 
The word eater		boring chapter school NO  funny weird pictures 
Yang the Yungel		boring case balls  NO
Tassofa		I don't know nice O.K. 
Staring School with		?? don't know 

I was especially interested in the behaviors of one struggling reader during the book pass, Tim. He seemed interested in the process when we began the book pass, so I shadowed his behaviors throughout. I observed him frequently writing

on his chart. He was also looking next to him at what others were writing, and he began to laugh at some of the pictures he came across in *Yang the Youngest and his Terrible Ear*. The following patai poem illustrates my observation of Tim's experiences with the book pass. I constructed the poem from comments written or said aloud by Tim during the book pass. I have included his original spellings and have not edited his phrases.

A Poem: "Can We Read These?"

Can we read these?
 Tales of a Fourth Grade Nothing does not look funny.
 Magnificent Mummy looks exsiting
 Can we read these?
 I'm putting a frown for The Word Eater
 And for starting school with a enemy
 Oh no, I got word eater again.
 I'm putting five frowns!
 Can we read these?
 Yang the youngest makes me cry, it looks so funny!
 I'll draw tears on my happy, smiley face!
 Can we read these?

Tim's questions, comments, and reactions prompted me to reflect upon the power of student choice. After sensing excitement from Tim as well as the other students during the book pass concerning their ability to select their own literature, I remained further committed to providing the students with choices during literature circles. In the past, my students had been placed in literature groups based on ability, and then required to read appropriately leveled books. I maintain the ideas expressed by Daniels (1994) and Bond (2000) that providing

students with choices for reading can help motivate readers thus encouraging them to read challenging material. I had hoped that the future literature circle group could serve as a support system in helping students like Tim understand the literature through the various contributions made during discussion and sharing of individual response roles.

Next, I asked students to choose their three favorite books. I then formulated heterogeneous groups based on interest. After collecting all the book pass charts, I began to write students' names under headings matching the book titles. I started the lists by placing each student's name below his or her first choice. Remembering Brabham and Villaume's (2000) advice to keep group size appropriate so as not to interfere with students' ability to thoughtfully respond to the text and to the contributions of other group members, I placed some students under headings signifying their second choice. I also had to consider the compatibility of students and the number of texts I had available.

I announced the literature circle groups by calling students by name and handing them the corresponding novel. Even though Susie's second choice was *The Word Eater*, she seemed disappointed in not receiving her first choice, which was *Starting School with an Enemy*. She was the only student who selected that book, so I felt it best to place her in her second choice group, which did contain many of her friends. This fact seemed to alleviate the disappointment. I explained

to the class that students had received either their first or second choice based on the factors such as number of students and texts.

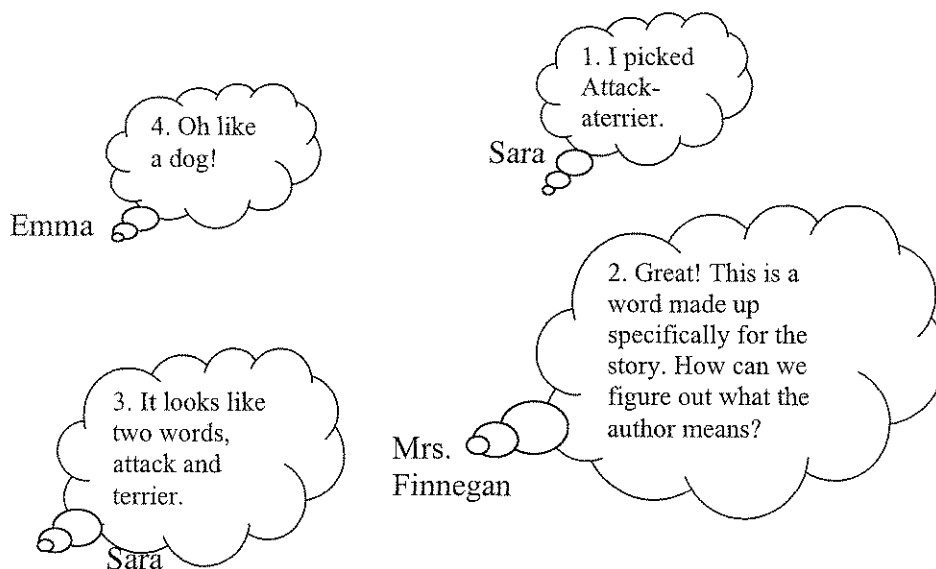
Susie's concerns seemed to be rooted in the difficulty level of the book. She asked, "What if the book is too hard for *someone*? What if *I* don't understand it?" I tried to explain that it was ok not to know all the words in a book before reading it. In fact, I explained that our literature circle groups could help us understand the books better. I was hoping this would be a good opportunity to watch how students would begin to help each one another through role discussion. After my reassurance, Susie asked, "Can we ever read ahead in our book?" I became slightly relieved that she might still be interested in the novel after all.

I gave each student a note card and gave the groups their first task. I asked each group to work together to divide its book into five sections, corresponding to the five group meetings for which they would have to prepare. After reflecting upon previous modeling activities and Brabham and Villaume's advice (2000), I decided to start the process slowly and assign the whole class the same job for the first assignment. That way, we could also discuss the role as a class before the groups met to share. I created bookmarks with the various job descriptions on them to serve as reminders for students as they prepared to share their jobs at the next group meeting. I assigned the word wizard role to the class, and we discussed reasons for choosing various words to share with the group. It might be a new

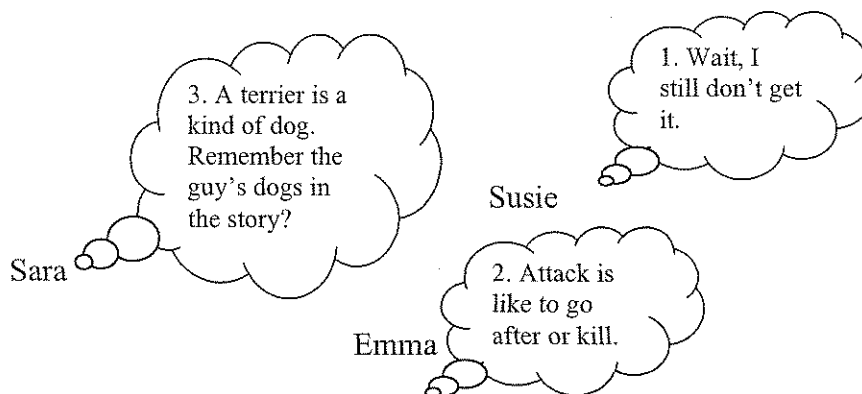
word, funny, interesting, or weird. Students were also responsible for finding the meaning of the word via the dictionary and sharing with the group.

I was impressed at the ways students helped each other with the meanings. An example follows illustrating a group discussion pertaining to the word “Attackaterrier”. The word appears in *The Word Eater* and was a fictitious word describing Mr. Mack’s invention of a breed of attack dogs.

Word Eater Literature Circle



The group continued discussing the word when Susie entered the conversation.



Another student in a different group found a German word and was unable to find its meaning. I worked with the group to use context clues and they were able to translate the German into English. We took turns reading the passage where the word was located aloud. I then asked the group to look for context clues, any hints surrounding the German word that might help us decipher the meaning. As we continued to read aloud, Sam and Jay said, "Oh! Is that English next to it? Oh there it is!" Commas next to the German word set off the English equivalent. I discussed this technique by explaining that commas next to a word can sometimes give us clues about the meaning.

Sam also chose the word "familiar" to share with the group. He said, "It looks like the word family. It means people who you know. I checked the dictionary, too." I was pleased to see various strategies at work such as using the dictionary, using context clues, and using one another's expertise within group discussions.

The next job I assigned to the whole class was the fact finder. I asked students to read their next assignment in each novel. In addition, they needed to find two facts from an outside source about any topic discussed in the book. I had hoped this job would allow students to tap into outside interests and make connections to the literature. As Manning and Manning (1995) suggest, using informational pieces in literature circles may promote interest in various subjects.

Mizokawa and Hansen-Krening (2000) also believe that through questions posed by students or teachers, literature circles promote connections between students and the text, thus leading to the development of critical thinking skills.

Pete got right to work and looked in an encyclopedia and a map to find facts about Egypt, the country central to his book, *The Magnificent Mummy Maker*. After Pete found Egypt on a map and located its capital for the group, he showed me where Poland was, since he was born and continued to live there before coming to the United States. I was pleased that he was able to share both his personal connection and also his enthusiasm for finding new facts about Egypt and mummies.

Pete's group, comprised of Pete, Randy, and Sam, began to participate in Pete's efforts.

Pete: How do you spell sphinx?

Randy: Where's Egypt?

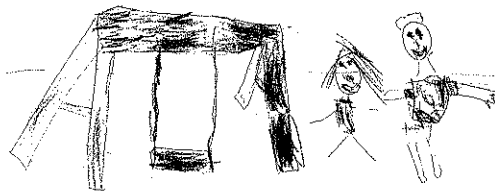
Sam: Oh, can I tell him?

Sam wanted to write the capital as one of his facts. I was pleased at the new exchange of information beginning to occur between students.

The awesome artist job was the next role I introduced. I reviewed the description on the bookmarks by having a volunteer read it to the class. At this point in the study, students were still completing the same job for homework each night. Students seemed the most excited for this job, as evidenced by the cheers I

received. In fact, many of them didn't seem to view it as actual work, or even as a legitimate response technique. Several students commented, "You mean we just have to draw a picture tonight for homework?" I feel that students' choice of color, symbol, and structure can be indicative of his or her understanding of the literature, as long as they are reminded to focus on those various aspects of their illustrations. Whitin (2002) had students make sketches based on their personal interpretations of literature circle pieces read in her classroom. Through sketching, she felt that students could begin to move beyond literal retellings of the stories and move toward the extension of ideas, themes, and values within a story.

I circulated from group to group to preview students' drawings. Kyle, who has many motor difficulties, focused on discussing the color choices he made in his drawing. Unable to draw accurate representations of objects because of his difficulties, he interpreted a portion of the story where the main character "used to feel sad and gray, but now felt as happy as all the colors in the rainbow." Kyle selected several different colors in his drawing to depict this symbolic idea. I have included Kyle's drawing and his written description of the reason he selected the swing set. His original drawing was full of color along the perimeter of the swing set in order to illustrate the symbolic idea of happiness as expressed by the main character in the story.



This is a swing set with Andy and his stepsister. I made this because when An was painting the swing set he realized that if his mother never died he would not have his little sister, who he lit a lot.

Don drew a parallel from the story to his own life when he sketched two boys fighting. When asked to explain his sketch, he commented that the story, *Tales of a Fourth Grade Nothing*, reminded him of fighting with his own brother. He shared a story about the two of them fighting on the stairs at home. Ali chose to draw their group fighting because, "...their committee in the story is like our committee. We are sort of a committee and we have been arguing a lot and we fight over who goes first."

Another student, Katie chose to draw an actual event from the story. I used that opportunity, as I did whenever I discussed the roles with groups, to ask questions about the selection.

MRS. FINNEGAN: I like how Toby included a bed and markers in his drawing.

Why do you think he did this?

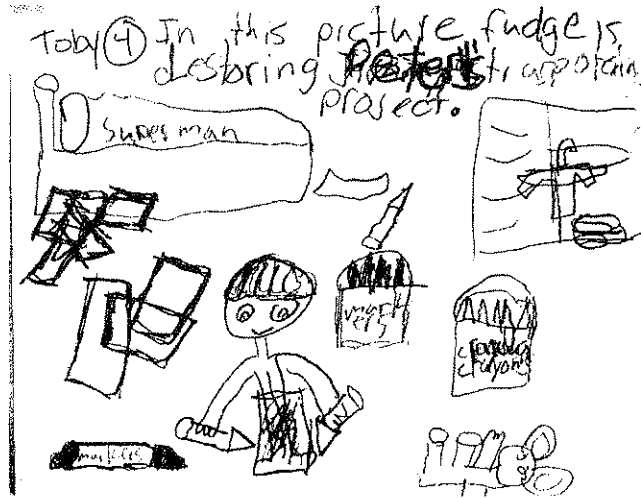
ALI: Because Fudge scribbled on it.

RITA: And, that's where the group hid their poster.

MRS. FINNEGAN: What else has Fudge done to upset his brother Peter?

TOBY: He ate Dribble! (Their turtle)

Toby's drawing is included below.



Some groups responded well to my questions, as seen in the above example, and some had to look back in the story for answers. In some cases, students remembered details from the stories that I didn't recall! Al drew an illustration of a boy jumping on the bed because he thought that part was humorous. I feel that this is reinforcement for the benefits of working as a group. Some students, and people in general, pick up ideas that others miss. Pulling that information into a group setting can be a valuable learning experience for all. The awesome artist job can allow students to share different interpretations of text instead of focusing on just one. Below is Rita's interpretation of her illustration as the awesome artist in the *Tales of a Fourth Grade Nothing* group. She was able to make a meaningful connection to something she had experienced in the past.

I chose to make the poster they were working on together

*Because last year I had a committee
And we made a poster of Africa and it reminded me of this story.
Our group fought over everything,
But I didn't write my name on the poster like Sheila did.
My group chose me because I had the best handwriting
Like Sheila in the story,
But it wasn't fun because I had more work then.*

In early November, I gathered five students from various different literature circle groups together. I wanted to conduct a focus group interview with students ranging in abilities and experiences. Arhar, Holly, and Kasten (2001) suggest using focus group interviews because some children may be reluctant to voice opinions during an individual interview. Focus group interviews can be held and treated like a group discussion rather than a formal process. I explained that I wanted to talk to the students about their experiences with literature circles so far. I did use an audiotape to record the interview, and later transcribed the conversation into my field log. I assured students that the tapes would only be heard by me, and that they could also listen to them at any time. I simply would use the tape to help me recall what we discussed.

As we sat together on the floor, the five students gathered in close proximity to the tape recorder and responded to my questions, seen in Appendix I in the form of a conversation. Children responded whenever they had something to add to the conversation, in no particular order.

Susie is a highly motivated student who often strives for perfection and seeks to please during many different aspects of her school day. I discovered that

the student centered, less traditional approach to reading instruction often left her frustrated. When the focus group was asked about any problems the group may have faced, Susie commented, “Sometimes people want to be the boss and everyone wants to get the best things, so it’s kind of complicated in a group.”

When asked what the teacher’s role should be in a literature circle, Susie responded, “You can tell us who should go first. Everybody tries to be the boss and be the best person and tries to get the best grade.” I hadn’t even mentioned grades to the group, but Susie seemed to be putting pressure on herself to “get it right.” She told me subsequently in the interview that the teacher could also tell her if she was doing everything right in her group work. She seemed to place little trust in her peers helping her to figure out parts of the text and didn’t feel that working in a group helped her understand the story.

Conversely, Kara noted that other group members could “...add some things if you’re missing stuff. Like let’s say you forgot a whole part, they would come in and say it. You always forget something and a couple of people come in and add.” Many of the students interviewed appreciated and enjoyed the opportunity to choose their novels during the book pass. Susie said, “I like when we get to choose the book because sometimes I read books and they are really boring and I just want to stop but I can’t.” Others discussed the fact that parents or teachers made them complete books they didn’t enjoy.

Students mentioned appreciating the choices, but never mentioned wanting to be in a group solely because their friends were in that group. Many of my fears were alleviated about students making poor choices based on friendships rather than true interest. The students' comments made me feel as though the book passes were really enabling students to sample the literature and make informed choices, as intended.

After taking a break from literature circles by focusing on some specific skill instruction during our reading period, students engaged in another book pass in early November. It was again time to select novels for new literature circle groups containing different students and utilizing different novels. We engaged in the book pass in a similar manner as the first. Students used the charts to record their impressions about the following literature selections, *Shiloh*, *Misty of Chincoteague*, *Journey to a Strange New Land*, and *A River Ran Wild*. I explained that we would be repeating the literature circle process, and this time we would be adding an additional piece to our experience. The following pastiche illustrates some collective opinions expressed during the second book pass.

A Pastiche: What Students Said During a Book Pass

Oh this one says Mayflower, our spelling word on it!
 I'm counting the pages.
 Look at this Emma!

I like Shiloh.
 Why does it say Dear Imp here?
 I think this one is dumb, you can't pronounce the title!

This sounds like a fifth grade book.

This looks kind of boring, but a little cool.

This one's short.

There are no pictures.

This looks like a diary, I like it.

I want to read Dear America!

I can't decide!

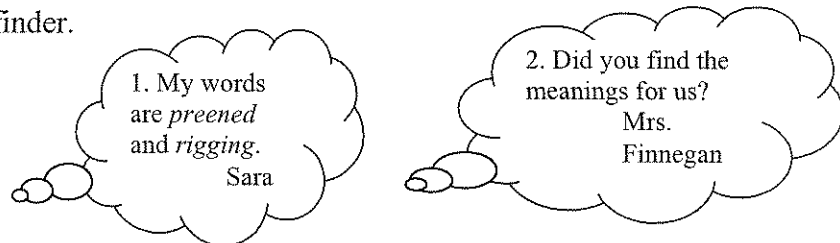
At this point in the study, students had attempted each role except for the discussion director. I decided to introduce this role last because I felt it entailed the least amount of student preparation. The discussion director was in charge of choosing an order for students to share their roles, writing down the names of any unprepared students, and collecting group work and evaluation sheets, which I hadn't yet introduced to students. I wanted them to become familiar with the roles before they began to evaluate one another on the quality of the shared information.

I introduced the discussion director's role by reviewing its description from the bookmarks I created. Then I read over and discussed the evaluation sheets (Appendix F) with the class. I gave students their own copy and they began to ask questions like, "Should we evaluate ourselves?" I enthusiastically told students that they should. I was excited to be creating both personal and group accountability. In order to conduct this round of literature circles, each group member took on a *different role* as opposed to the whole class completing the

same role, and filled out the evaluation sheets after each group member shared his or her job.

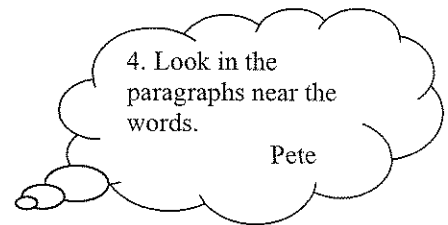
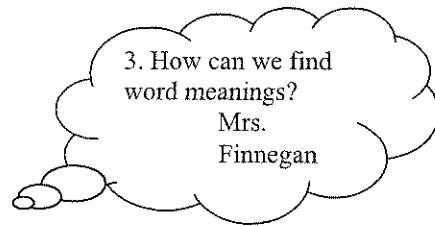
I continued to conduct participant observations as the groups completed their assignments. One day was reserved for reading the pages the group decided upon and completing their jobs. I gave students the option of reading together or alone. The next day during reading class, students were responsible for sharing the job they completed and filling out evaluation sheets on each group member. The discussion director chose the order in which group members would share, thus eliminating confusion and arguments over who went first. The discussion director also collected the evaluation sheets for me and the post-its or pieces of paper students used to complete their job-related tasks. I then used the students' work and the evaluation sheets to determine if I needed to give any minilessons on roles or to determine which groups may have needed additional teacher help.

For example, Sara, a member of the *Journey to a Strange New Land* group was the word finder.



Sara found excellent examples of words that were probably new to group members, but she did not find the meanings to share, as required in the job description. I took the opportunity to review the description of that particular role.

Students reminded me of the requirements by reading the bookmark. The conversation continued.



Sara read aloud the paragraphs in which the words were located to the group. Pete used context clues to suggest that rigging was “sails and other parts of the boat.” I shared the group interaction with the class as both a reminder of job requirements and also a lesson in using context clues to discover word meanings before reaching for the dictionary.

Because of previous experience with literature circles, as well as reading about Bond’s (2001) experiences, I knew it would be a challenge to devote my time to several different groups per reading class. Bond often felt pulled in many directions and subsequently advises teachers to participate in only a few meetings per day rather than trying to attend many. I decided from the onset of the study that I would not try to spread myself too thin. I met with one or two groups per day in order to conduct quality discussions with each instead of rushing from one group to the next. This worked well most of the time; however, there were still days when groups that were not meeting with me were not fully on task.

One of my struggling readers, Tim, chose *Shiloh* by Phyllis Renolds Naylor, a book that was above his reading level. I was concerned that he would miss key parts of the story, but also eager to see how his literature circle group might help him bridge any gaps in understanding. I was disappointed when I met with his group in late November and he couldn't tell me the main character's name. My hopes were raised later, though, when Kara, the word wizard, asked the group what *mistreated* meant. This word comes up continuously in the story as a boy finds a dog that is mistreated by his owner and then struggles to keep the dog. Tim announced the answer by giving a specific example from the book, "Say you have a pet and you say no, I'm not giving you any food!" I praised him for remembering the detail and also for helping the group with the answer to Kara's question.

When it was Don's turn to be quizzical questioner, he even wrote up a test for each group member with questions and multiple choice answers for them to pick. While I hadn't considered presenting the quizzical questioner role in that way, I was pleased with Don's novel approach. Instead of refusing to complete assignments and appearing disinterested, as he had earlier in the year, Don was enthusiastically handing out "test papers" to group members and sharing his answer keys with me. His fellow group members responded by eagerly sitting down and completing the tests. They often brought results over to me to share. I tried to call attention to his efforts by suggesting the idea to the rest of the class.

Don continued to make these sample tests for his group even when he was not the quizzical questioner anymore. Below is one example of Don's "quiz" for another group member, along with the "answer sheet" he created for her.

5090

Name where shiloh lives?

✓ A. West B. Mississippi
virginia
✗ C. Ohio D. Texas

Name one of the people
that was eating dinner?

✗ answer: Dana

answers

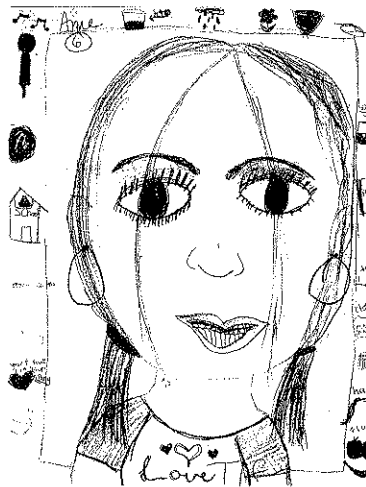
1. A

2. Dana, Becky, Ma, Marty

By early December, I noticed that not all students were working to their full potential. Many were completing significantly less work than earlier in the year. One student completing the fact finder job while reading *A River Ran Wild*, presented the following fact during a group meeting, "There is a mill on page 16 and we still use mills today." I reminded the group that they needed to use outside

sources for the facts. I suggested that one option might be to give an example of a working mill in our area and find out what it produces. Another student in the group, Tia, brought up the fact that the mill in the story made paper, which then ended up polluting the river nearby. The group was still able to engage in a productive dialogue about that aspect of the story. Through Darren's illustration of the polluted river, we discussed how color could be symbolic to the different stages of pollution throughout the story.

Anne constructed an illustration for the group based on an idea presented in the story. The author and illustrator included several objects around the perimeter of one particular page that described the life of a Native American tribe. Anne decided to display objects around the perimeter of a self-portrait that expressed her own interests.



During a meeting with the *Journey to a Strange New Land* group, Kyle provided a great example of the fact finder's responsibilities. The story was about a young girl and her family as they experienced hardships on board the Mayflower. With a proud grin on his face Kyle explained, "The Mayflower sailed with the Pilgrims in 1620. It took them 66 days to complete the journey." I praised his use of outside sources. Below is the notecard he used to record his facts.

Fact Finder Kyle ①
 ① The Mayflower was the ship that carried the Pilgrims to America in 1620
 ② It took 66 days for the voyage

Source:
Encyclopedia Britannica

Nearing the conclusion of my data collection period, I began to wrap up the second literature circle experience. Students were finished reading their novels and it was time for me to begin to analyze the data I compiled. We returned to our reading series and began again to focus on specific skills. I was not able to initiate a third round of data collection using another set of novels as I originally planned,

however, I was able to gain valuable insights from the rich data I did compile.

ANALYSIS

As is often the case with action research, new questions have emerged for me. I do feel that my decision to allow students choice in reading material is essential. Students generally responded well to book passes, and continue to ask me when their next literature circle opportunity is coming. I feel good about the increased motivation I have seen. I also feel good about seeing struggling readers like Tim understand difficult text better after group discussions. I've also enjoyed seeing struggling readers proudly contribute artwork, new vocabulary questions, connecting stories, or new facts as vital participants in a group.

The unexpected questions still in my mind can perhaps be illustrated in the vignette I wrote for Susie. Using her responses over time to interviews, surveys, and general conversations, I composed a story in her voice in attempts to discover what the literature circle experience was like for her, and perhaps other students with a similar personality.

Whenever my teacher tells me what to do, I work really hard. I volunteer a lot to show my teacher that I am doing well. I even came up with really great questions for our story, "The Flying Train Committee". We had to practice being the quizzical questioner.

Reading is OK. Sometimes I get confused when I read certain things, like really hard or weird words. Words like I saw in that book, *Misty of Chincoteague*. I don't understand books like that. I'd like to read books where I know all the words. My teacher tells me some different ways to figure out new words, but I would still rather read books where I just know all the words.

Sometimes my teacher lets us pick out our own books during lit circles. I like to fill out my chart during our book passes and show it to Mrs. Finnegan. I like to look at what my friends are writing about the books too. I try not to just pick the shortest one like some people in my class. I wanted to read *Shiloh* or *Dear America*. I just couldn't decide between those two, I kept changing my mind! I like it when we get to pick our own books because if a book gets boring, I just want to quit. Or, if the book looks too hard, I don't want to try it because I might mess up. I wish I would have picked a different book during our first lit circle. Look at some of these words, I don't really understand them.

When we do lit circles, I want to be the best. Sometimes people in my group try to be the boss and try to get the best grade. Sometimes they don't help me. I just have to read the book by myself and that helps me understand better. There were times when I would wait to start my lit circle job until Mrs. Finnegan could tell me if I was doing it right. I like it when she works with our group because then no one can be the boss. She can tell us the right things to do.

I like the fact finder job. You get to look up new facts like about the characters or other stuff, and read the facts to your group. I'm not really sure how I feel about lit circles though. I do like choosing my own book and sharing some jobs, but it's just kind of complicated to work in a group. It's just that everyone wants to be the best and get good grades.

Ely, Vinz, Downing, and Anzul (1997) discuss the cyclic nature of the qualitative research process. As teacher researchers gather data, we must go back into the study on a consistent basis in order to effectively reflect and respond to what is occurring in the classroom as well as in our own minds. I used analytic memos throughout my research as suggested by Arhar, Holly, and Kasten (2001) in order to record those reflections periodically, thus making my own realizations and questions a systematic part of the research process. The memos were based on particular topics of importance to my study as I progressed throughout the semester. Each memo noted emerging discoveries, questions, and reflections pertaining to my students and literature circles. I wanted to maintain an awareness

of how literature circles and their components affected reading instruction and how my students reacted as they used the various roles when responding to literature.

Another aspect of analysis that significantly helped my research was the observer comments and coding process that I began in early October, soon after starting the field log (Ely et. al., 1997). After rereading notes in my field log I would write a short description of the events in the margins. For example, if a paragraph was written in the field log highlighting a student's connection between the literature and an event that occurred at home, I wrote *connection* in the margin. As the field log grew, at times I needed to go back and make my codes more specific. For example, *connection* eventually became *connection to home and connection to school*.

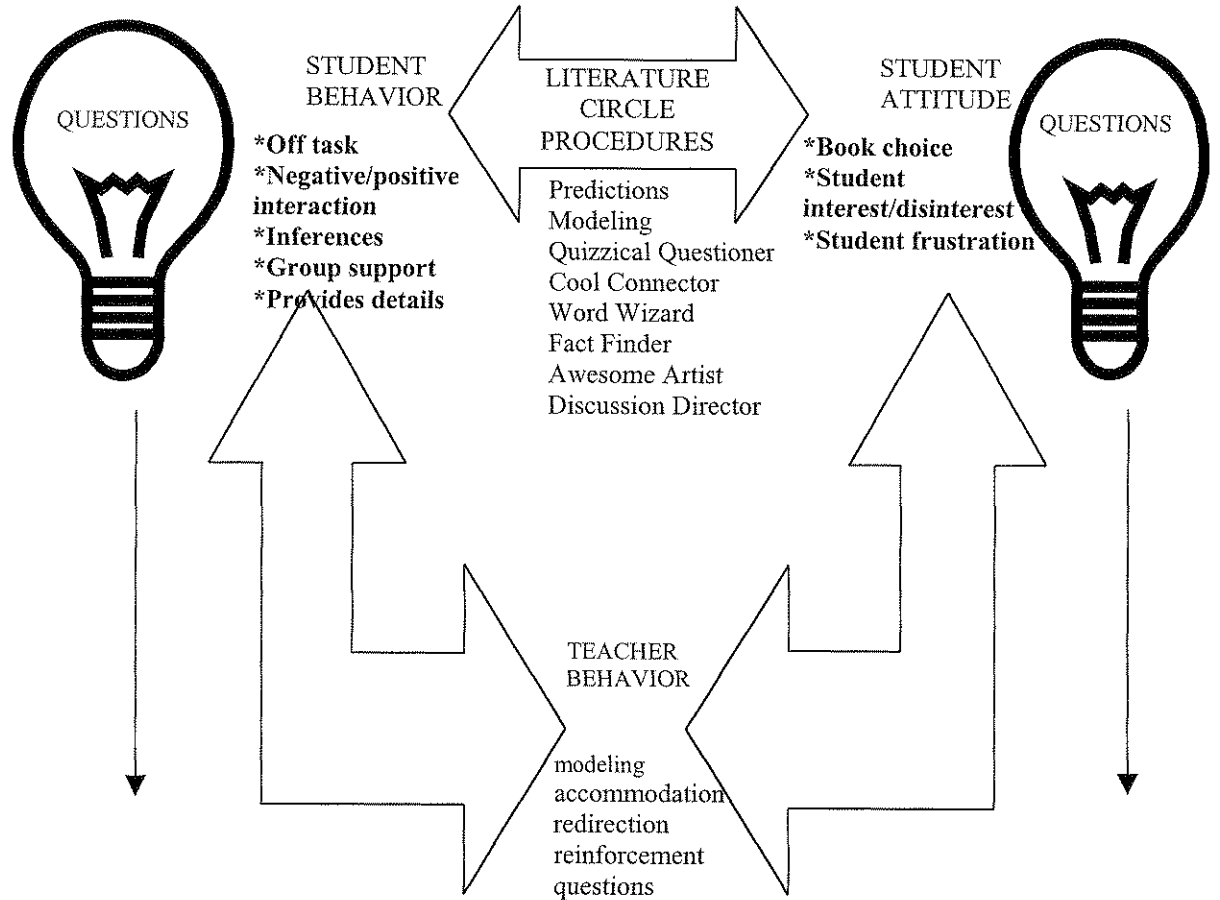
Next, creating a list of codes appearing in the field log allowed me to organize the data more clearly. The list helped me to create a list of categories in which I could place each code. Ely (1997) refers to the categories as bins. Creating a visual representation of my bins and codes in a graphic organizer allowed me to view a summary of my data in a useful manner. I identified the following bins in which to place my codes, *LITERATURE CIRCLE PROCEDURES, STUDENT BEHAVIOR, TEACHER BEHAVIOR, and STUDENT ATTITUDE*

In the beginning of my field log I used many procedural codes like, *modeling, book pass, and procedures*. I also used the actual job titles, or the names of the different roles as codes. I was able to look back at the amount of time I spent introducing the procedures, vocabulary, and technical aspects of conducting literature circles. As I conducted subsequent participant observations of students conducting literature circles, I found myself looking back at the amount of time I had spent introducing and modeling. Was it enough, or not enough? I used this information to guide future minilessons in class.

The codes in the category of teacher behavior certainly helped me analyze my role in the literature circle meetings. I have tried to be conscious of this question throughout the process. It was helpful to read my responses to students after the fact. I have tried to reflect on alternate ways to respond to students. Many codes like *teacher redirection* and *teacher reinforcement* have helped me determine when and why I have had to intervene in a group meeting. Was it due to lack of comprehension, off task behavior, or my own control issues? Those questions have helped guide my responses in future meetings.

The last category in which I placed my codes involved student attitudes. The topic has been a driving force in my study, so I wasn't surprised to use it often as a code. *Student interest, disinterest, possible interest, and student frustration* helped me determine how my students were feeling throughout different points in the study.

Through the coding process, creating bins in which to place the codes, composing analytic memos, and constructing graphic organizers, I was able to view portions of my data in a more manageable way. Coding has allowed me to reflect on the research in efforts to take it in new directions. I used the codes in order to guide future group meetings with students as well as my behavior in those meetings. While I found it relatively easy to place my codes into larger categories, I also noticed that many new questions were generated. Below is a graphic organizer illustrating the bins I created as well as new questions that emerged.



1. How does group interaction affect story comprehension?
2. How does group interaction affect group success?
3. Will students with negative group interaction affect the comprehension of others within the same group?

1. How does interest related to comprehension?
2. Does the freedom to choose increase interest?
3. Can students in groups still comprehend material as the level of difficulty increases through engaging in the literature circle process?

FINDINGS

In addition to organizing a few of my predominant codes into the graphic organizer, I began to attempt to answer, or at least ponder the questions I had formulated. As I looked back through my field log, I tried to focus on various sections in order to assess data. I began to view my participant observations along with students work as two separate entities that could both provide me with valuable data to analyze.

I constructed a reflective memo outlining events, codes, or ideas that seemed to reappear frequently, or merely grabbed my attention in some way. As I continued the list, I realized that some of the key points emerging from the data were expected at the onset of the study, but many points were unexpected realizations. In addition to an itemized list, I also used brackets to set off notations referring to my own beliefs and reflections prior to the onset of the study. I was able to learn a great deal about my preconceptions and biases while reflecting on this data. I was also able to view the process of conducting literature circles in my classroom as more of a whole entity rather than a study occurring in several fragmented pieces. Following is a summary of the expected and unexpected outcomes of the study, data relating to those outcomes, and my own general impressions along the way.

I knew the benefits of modeling prior to conducting the study, but I truly believe it is a necessity for conducting effective literature circles. Vygotsky (1978) asks, “Indeed, can it be doubted that children learn speech from adults; or that, through asking questions and giving answers, children acquire a variety of information; or that, through imitating adults and through being instructed about how to act, children develop an entire repository of skills?” (p. 84). Prior to giving the students freedom to conduct their own literature circles, I provided them with opportunities to learn from examples and non-examples of various role responses. The activity where students highlighted insightful questions gave them an opportunity to learn from a more experienced individual, a teacher. They were also given the opportunity to try the role themselves after the modeling exercise, which proved beneficial judging from questions most of the class developed themselves for a homework assignment. When conducting her study on student book groups, Bond (2001) also modeled various roles for months before giving students what she termed, “free reign”.

Concerning roles where I did not spend as much time modeling such as the cool connector role, students’ responses were more vague. The most common type of connection made was to home or family. For example, Don mentioned, “My brother and I fight just like the characters in the story.” Some students made brief, indirectly related connections to events in the literature, while some found specific themes in the literature to address and build upon. For example, Rita was

able to connect her own group's interaction to the group interaction discussed in *Tales of a Fourth Grade Nothing*. There were several parallels to the negative interaction between the two groups, and Rachel was able to identify those similarities and differences, such as a "boss" in each group and group members who did either most of the work, or little of it. Vague connections included statements like, "that happened to me once." This student was referring to a project he had worked on in third grade, but did not fully discuss it or how the project related to the literature.

Groups were able to use the literature to discuss positive and negative attributes of group interaction. Wood, Roser, and Martinez (2001) support the need for collaborative literacy. Not only should students be reading about people working together, but utilizing discussion groups can help students learn about collaboration which is necessary for students to make positive contributions at school, home, and in society as a whole.

The student behavior codes present in my field log like *off task*, *negative or positive group interaction*, and *group support* helped me locate instances in my study when I needed to take a more or less active role in the group meetings. If I observed a group with several negative interaction codes, I tried to spend more time with that group next class. Also, if a group seemed to have positive codes, I may have selected other groups to work with during future classes.

I have come to realize that I now need to spend a bit more time on group interaction. When analyzing these codes, I came up with an additional question: How does group interaction during literature circles affect comprehension of the story? During future participant observations, I'd like to focus on the group members' responses instead of the student presenting his or her job. I feel as though I have seen the jobs help student comprehension, but is that the case only for the child that has taken that particular role? How much do the other students benefit from what that group member has shared? I feel that I may have neglected this question up until this point.

One unexpected finding as a result of the study was that a few students would have difficulty answering each other's questions, sometimes resulting in a counter-productive discussion. For example, during one group meeting, I found myself asking most of the questions while students remained unsure of the answers and relatively silent. While it seems most students had ample practice developing quality questions, some students needed additional practice answering the questions.

On a positive note, one student, Don really came alive when responding with the quizzical questioner role. This finding was certainly unexpected, yet extremely satisfying. Below is an example of a quiz Don made for his group members. Many questions were literal, but he still identified main features of the novel like character and setting. The literal, core questions actually helped a

lower-level member of his group, Tim, follow along with key events in the story. This student seemed to enjoy the quizzes, and became excited to respond to Don.

An expected outcome at the onset of the study was that students would help each other learn, even when choosing difficult material. Vygotsky (1978) criticizes other theorists who, "...never entertained the notion that what children can do with the assistance of others might be in some sense even more indicative of their mental development than what they do alone" (p. 85). In addition to the example with Don, I found other examples of students supporting each other's learning. Group members helped each other by sharing new ideas, clarifying content or details from the story, and providing word meanings.

The following poem summarizes the conversation of one literature circle group as students helped each other make a difficult inference about a character's magical powers in the story, *The Magnificent Mummy Maker*. The responses are all made from students including, Kyle, Pete, Jay, Randy, and Sam. I asked the group if they thought the main character really had magical powers to do well in school, or if he was just working harder now.

Was it really magic?

Andy did well on a math test
and a project without the mummy powers.

But Andy touched the mummy in the museum
and he got magic powers after that.

I think it was a spirit because

you can't see spirits.

He was not good at things and now he was.

It was not a spirit, just hard work.
Let's take a vote to see who thinks
It was really magic.

Simply by engaging in a dialogue concerning two possibilities in the story, students were able to not only voice their own opinions, but to defend them as well. Students' eyes were also opened to an additional point of view as they listened to each other. Reading independently would have eliminated the chance for this opportunity. In the next example, students share their thoughts during an interview. The poem illustrates the differing viewpoints of Susie, Emma, and Kara about the effectiveness of group assistance. I asked the students if talking about their books with the group helped them in any way.

Talking together

The group helped me explain what happened
because my head was swirling around with things.

The group didn't really help me
because I didn't really understand
but if I read more I could understand.

There were a couple of words that no one understood.

It was fun to talk to the group
because then you actually learned new words.

The group added missing stuff.
Like let's say you forgot a whole part,
the group would come in and say it.
You always forget something,

and a couple of people came in and added it.

The girls in this group were higher-level readers. One might have thought that they had little to learn from other students, however this did not seem to be the case. The girls gained confidence and were able to reassure one another when concepts may have been questionable.

Another unexpected find was that most groups seemed to need little direction to conduct group meetings independently. Once the modeling period was over and students had a chance to try each role as a whole group, we began to conduct meetings by having each student share his or her role. Students would then evaluate one another after the discussion. As I observed the class, most groups were on task. I did come to notice that certain combinations of students were perhaps not as productive as others. I made students aware before each book pass that I had the ultimate decision as to who worked together and who did not, even though their personal choices were the main factor contributing to the group selection process. Dewey (1938) asks, "What does freedom mean and what are the conditions under which it is capable of realization?" He criticized the traditional school methodology for providing learners with too little freedom. I agree that providing conditions where options are presented to students can enhance their educational growth.

Short, Kaufman, Kaser, Kahn, and Crawford (1999) discuss the different roles teachers may take on during a literature circle meeting. Teachers can

facilitate by steering the group in certain directions, *participate* by sharing their own personal connections or thoughts, *mediate* by encouraging dialogue about students' lives, and *listen actively* by moving away from a teacher-initiated discussion toward a student-driven one. After reading through my participant observations, I noticed each role present at one point or another throughout the study.

The role I employed changed depending on the group dynamics and needs. When the group seemed off task, I became a facilitator by asking probing questions to get at certain key points. I also used this role in discussions where I became concerned with the groups' comprehension of the story or their recollection of detail. The following example illustrates dialogue where I facilitated discussion in order to highlight key aspects of the story.

MRS. FINNEGAN: Anne, as the fact finder, what were you able to share with the group today?

ANNE: They still have mills today like the ones in the story.

MRS. FINNEGAN: What are mills used for today, and what was the one in the story used for?

TIA: They made paper. Then it turned the water colors and made the river murky.

DARREN (awesome artist): I drew the river because it looks polluted.

MRS. FINNEGAN: Good! What made you decide to draw it that way?

DARREN: The book is mainly about the river.

MRS. FINNEGAN: Yes, but what changes occurred in the story because of that river?

DARREN: First the animals died. Maybe they could set up some kind of a net to catch all the trash.

MRS. FINNEGAN: That's a good prediction. What colors would you all use if you were going to draw the river?

EMMA: Brown

TIA: Clear because first you could see the pebbles at the bottom. Then all the colors of our construction paper because the paper mill polluted the water and changed the lives of the Indians and settlers.

If the group was basically on task engaging in discussion about how their roles related to the novel, I became more of a participator in that discussion by sharing my own ideas as well. I rarely took on the role of mediator, however, because I was concerned about getting off topic without ascertaining the group's ability to comprehend main aspects of the novels. Students often engaged in discussions about their personal lives in reference to the cool connector job regardless of whether or not I initiated the discussion. I did try the active listener role if a group was engaged in a discussion about the novel, and seemed to be on a clear path toward understanding one another as well as the story.

The literature selection process was also a telling experience. As evident from student behavior during the book passes I conducted, students were pleasantly surprised at being given the opportunity to select the literature from a variety of choices. Students seemed to select novels based on personal interest, discussion with peers, and length of the novel. One student, Jay, picked the shortest novel after each book pass. Some students, like Tim, continued to pick challenging novels based on topics interesting to him, like mummies or dogs. Another student, Susie carefully selected books based on topics interesting to her, but was also very cautious to pay attention to the difficulty level she perceived. The following pastiche highlights her struggle to choose while grasping onto her persistent desire to do well. The comments were taken from a focus group interview, Susie's book pass chart, as well as a participant check I conducted after the interview.

Oh, I like Dear America!

Why does it say *Dear Imp*?

Oh, this one has a spelling word on it!

I want to read it!

I think this one is dumb.

I can't pronounce the title.

It sounds like a fifth grade book.

What if the book is too hard for someone?

I like when we get to choose the book because sometimes I read boring books but then I'm not allowed to stop and I just want to quit.

I want to read Shiloh.

Can I switch to Dear America?

Students actively completed book pass charts and seemed to take the opportunity to choose literature seriously. Comments on the charts included information that helped them make appropriate decisions. Few, if any students consistently chose the shortest book, which was one of my key fears leading into the study. If a student changed his or her mind after reading the first assignment in the selection, I allowed him or her to switch novels. This happened once during each implementation session. The first instance was Don, and the second Susie. Both Don and Susie caught up quickly to the rest of the group after the switch, and enjoyed their second choice. I couldn't help but assume that negative consequences may have ensued if I had forced them to finish the first novel after it clearly was not of interest.

As expected, students' learning styles and personalities affect their choices of literature as well as the manner in which they complete the assigned role. As noted earlier, connections varied from student to student. Some were vague and broad, and some were closely connected to themes or important details from the story. A similar situation occurred with the awesome artist job. Students seemed the most eager to take on this role during literature circles. However, during the focus group interview, only one student chose the awesome artist as her favorite. Interviewees chose the fact finder, word wizard, cool connector, and word finder as his or her favorite role.

Even though many cheers rang out as a student became the awesome artist, some of those same students became reluctant to share their illustrations at group meetings. Darren, for example, claimed, "I have a bad picture, I don't want to show it." Often, students would share their work if group members and I provided a bit of encouragement. Perhaps they are not used to responding in this way to literature and are therefore somewhat apprehensive. Conversely, many students came to group meeting excitedly each day wanting to share their roles first.

I implemented the discussion director role a bit differently than Daniels in order to help maintain some order within the group structure. The discussion director chose the order in which students presented roles and also kept track of any students who had neglected assignments. Students seemed to enjoy the responsibility and leadership associated with this role and took it seriously. After each group meeting discussion directors would proudly hand in evaluation sheets completed by the group and discuss any problems encountered by the group that day.

Perhaps the most profound finding resulting from the study was an unexpected one. I had suspected that providing students with choices and alternative means by which to respond to literature might increase motivation, particularly for struggling readers who have experience little success in reading programs where they are forced to respond to teacher generated questions only. I

had suspected that readers who have traditionally experienced success with comprehension would be able to extend concepts and enhance previously existing skills. Additionally, I suspected that all types of readers would benefit from the experiences and ideas of their peers as they discussed literature together.

I certainly noticed evidence to support the aforementioned suspicions, but I also became aware of some difficulties when using literature circles with one particular student. Susie's desire to be correct and her efforts to please me interfered with the sometimes ambiguous, student driven approach. She seemed to want me to ask the questions so she could give the right answer. She also mentioned in an interview disliking the fact that I wasn't always present at group meetings. She felt I should be there to "tell us what's right or not." She also seemed frustrated with other group members taking on leadership roles and "bossing" others around. I was immediately reminded of Spiegel's (1998) cautionary advice to use a balanced approach to literacy. Although many aspects of literature circles are of great value, they may not be appropriate for every student in every situation.

ACTION RESEARCH-THE NEXT CHAPTER

Although I have arrived at the conclusion of my study, I realize my work is far from over. Arhar, Holly, and Kasten (2001) remind me that the action

research process is cyclic. It requires teachers to act, observe, and reflect on their practice. Consequently, new questions emerge, taking us on a new cycle of research. My observations, reflections, and analysis have led me to both modify my practice and set new goals for my classroom.

Often times during literature circle meetings, I felt pulled in many directions, trying to get as much information from each group as possible. Trying to meet with five separate groups during one reading period is an unrealistic goal for me. As I continue to utilize literature circles in my classroom, I will reduce the number of group meetings held during one class period in order to conduct quality discussions with those groups. Kaufman, Kaser, Hahn, and Crawford (1999) remind me that teachers may not necessarily have to be present for students to have quality discussions about literature. I agree, however, I would like to make sure students are comfortable with the process before I give them complete independence. Implementing the literature circles in September will help me reach that goal.

In addition to gradually providing a scaffold toward independence, as Vygotsky (1978) would suggest, I would also like to integrate other scheduled activities into literature circle time. If a few groups worked on computers or another developed activity, I could meet with the remaining groups on a rotating schedule.

Assessing students' prior knowledge of the literature circle process again next year will be a valuable tool for determining the modeling activities I use. Students seemed to respond well after literature circle roles were clearly modeled, and not as well where roles were simply explained to them. I would like to develop more scaffolds as Brabham and Villaume (2000) suggest. The post it notes and notecards worked well, and students seemed to enjoy using them to jot down notes. Perhaps I could use more ideas like this in the future as I find additional research on materials used for literature circles.

Another idea I'd like to develop further is an end-of-the-book assessment. My classroom is somewhat project oriented, and I'd like to provide an opportunity for groups to construct a culminating activity to display their knowledge of the book and their journey toward understanding together. I'd like to showcase the project to parents in some way as well.

As Susie helped me realize, literature circles may not be the best method for every student. In order to reach students with different learning styles, I will continue to utilize literature circles. I will also continue to utilize other means of literature instruction as well, including some more teacher-directed, skill-based activities.

I do want to help learners like Susie adapt to different methods of literature instruction. In order to support her, and others like her, in the future, I will continue to conduct literature circles in various ways. Perhaps I will need to

create grade rubrics in accordance with our report card standards. The rubrics could be used for students to gain even more feedback after their role has been completed. I would continue to have students evaluate one another, but I could also provide students with my own evaluation after each group meeting I attend. Doing so may help provide immediate feedback to students in need of more structure and teacher guidance. Continuing the student evaluations may help groups collaborate when I am not present in the meeting.

I want to help students like Susie feel comfortable sharing in a group setting as well. Additional modeling or role-playing of actual literature circle conversations may help students like Susie feel more confident in her own abilities when conducting literature circles. Continued role-playing may also give students an opportunity to address difficulties in group collaboration that may arise as students conduct their own literature circles.

Literature circles are not meant to be the one and only method we use for reading instruction. A balanced approach to literacy in my classroom will help reach all types of learners and help my students in their journey toward understanding literature.

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Appendix A

Dear _____

DATE: _____

I am currently completing a Master of Education degree at Moravian College. My coursework has helped me to learn about the most effective teaching methods so that I can provide students with the best education possible. One of the requirements of the program is that I conduct a systematic study of my own teaching practices. This semester, with your permission, I will be focusing my research on literature circles as a means of responding to various novels within our language arts program. The title of my study is Implementing Student-Centered Literature Circles.

Students will benefit from participating in this study because they will be exposed to quality literature, and they will be given choices in how they will respond to that literature. Students will also be given more choices in what they will read. Using literature circles is a way for students to make meaning out of text by finding connections to their own lives. Students also benefit from working together and discussing their connections to or questions about literature.

The study will take place from September through the end of December. As part of the study, students will be asked to complete reading interest surveys before we break into various groups. Students will be presented various choices for reading. After reading, students will form discussion groups and respond to what they've read in many different ways. I will be modeling the process prior to the first discussion group meeting. Groups will meet regularly, and I will be taking notes, conducting group and individual interviews, and asking students to submit various assignments throughout the study in order to monitor understanding of the books' themes as well as students' interest levels.

The surveys, group discussions, and submitting literature group assignments are all regular, fourth grade curricular activities. Informal observation and note taking are also part of the regular curriculum. Only participants in my study will be asked to submit samples as specific data for my study. While all students will have an opportunity to participate in activities such as interviews, only participants will be part of audio taped individual or group interviews used for data interpretation. Participants in the study who would like to hear any of the audio tapes they have participated in are free to do so, and can also ask me not to use the tapes at any time.

Data will be collected and coded. I will maintain the strictest confidence. No one except me will have access to the data, and I will use pseudonyms to protect all students. The data will be kept in a locked cabinet, and at the conclusion of the study, will all be destroyed. There will be a write-up of my study as required for my thesis. Again, I will maintain the students' anonymity in the write-up as well.

Parents may choose at any time to withdrawal their child from the study. Participation or non-participation in the study will in no way influence any aspect of the child's progress or grade. Students may also withdrawal at any time.

Participation in the study is voluntary; refusal to participate will involve no penalty or consequence. We welcome any questions about this research at any time. Any questions about the research can be directed to me, Anne Finnegan, or my advisor, Education Department, Moravian College,

I would appreciate your consent to conduct this research. Thank you for your support.

Sincerely,

Anne E. Finnegan

I agree to allow Anne Finnegan to conduct the research as mentioned above.

Principal's Signature

Date

Appendix B

Dear Parent/Guardian,

DATE:

I am currently completing a Master of Education degree at Moravian College. My coursework has helped me to learn about the most effective teaching methods so that I can provide your children with the best education possible. One of the requirements of the program is that I conduct a systematic study of my own teaching practices. This semester, I will be focusing my research on literature circles as a means of responding to various novels within our language arts program. The title of my study is Implementing Student-Centered Literature Circles.

Students will benefit from participating in this study because they will be exposed to quality literature, and they will be given choices in how they will respond to that literature. Students will also be given more choices in what they will read. Using literature circles is a way for students to make meaning out of text by finding connections to their own lives. Students also benefit from working together and discussing their connections to or questions about literature.

The study will take place from October through the end of December. As part of the study, students will be asked to complete reading interest surveys before we break into various groups. Students will be presented various choices for reading. After reading, students will form discussion groups and respond to what they've read in many different ways. I will be modeling the various techniques students will use to respond prior to the first discussion group meeting. Groups will meet regularly, and I will be taking notes, conducting group and individual interviews, and asking students to submit various assignments throughout the study in order to monitor understanding of the books' themes as well as interest levels.

The surveys, group discussions, and submitting literature group assignments are all regular, fourth grade curricular activities. Informal observation and note taking are also part of the regular curriculum. Only participants in my study will be asked to submit samples to be used as specific data for my study. While all students will have an opportunity to participate in activities such as interviews, only participants will be part of audio taped individual or group interviews used for data interpretation. Participants and their parents are free to hear the tapes at any time, and can also ask me not to use the tapes at any time.

Data will be collected and coded. I will maintain the strictest confidence. No one except me will have access to the data, and I will use pseudonyms to protect all students. The data will be kept in a locked cabinet, and at the conclusion of the study, will all be destroyed. There will be a write-up of my study as required for my thesis. Again, I will maintain students anonymity in the write-up as well.

You or your child may choose at any time not to participate in the study. Participation or non-participation in the study will in no way influence any aspect of your child's progress or grade. Students may also withdrawal at any time.

I would greatly appreciate your child's participation in my study. Participation in the study is voluntary; refusal to participate will involve no penalty or consequence. We welcome any questions about this research at any time. Any questions about the research can be directed to me, Anne Finnegan, _____, or _____, or my advisor, _____, Education Department, Moravian College, _____, Any questions about your rights as a research participant may be directed to _____ as well.

Thank you for your support!

Sincerely,

Anne E. Finnegan

I agree to allow my son/daughter to take part in this project. I understand that my son/daughter can choose not to participate at any time.

Student Name

Parent/Guardian Signature

Date

Student's Signature

Date

Reading Survey 1
Literature Circles



Please answer the following questions using a scale of 1-4.

- 1= Not at all !
- 2= Sometimes
- 3= A lot
- 4= All the time!

1. I like to read chapter books. _____
2. I like to read short stories. _____
3. I like to read alone. _____
4. I like to read with other people. _____
5. I like to talk about what I read. _____
6. I like to be read to. _____
7. I understand what I read. _____
8. I choose to read when I have free time. _____

Please answer the following questions.

9. What makes a good reader?

10. How do you feel about reading?

11. During reading class, we _____

12. I like reading most when I _____

13. I understand what I've read best when I _____

Appendix D
Literature Circle
Role Descriptions

Name _____

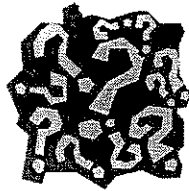


Discussion Director: Your job is to gather any materials your group might need from the teacher. You are also in charge of preparing the order in which your group members will share during your group meeting. You should also mark at least one passage from the text that you would like to read aloud and discuss.

Word Wizard: You should use a post-it note to mark any new or interesting words in your book. You may choose words that might be new to anyone in the group. The words may also be funny or difficult, or they might remind you of another word. Be prepared to share at least two words with your group and add them to our chart along with their meaning.



Cool Connector: Your job is to find something about the book that reminds you of something else. You could be comparing characters, events, or words from the text. Think about making connections to your own life, school experiences, or the world around us. Mark at least two passages to read to the group and share your connections.



Quizzical Questioner: You are in charge of writing at least two questions to ask other group member. Please write your questions on a note card along with your own answer. Try to ask questions that get the group members to think about feelings or big ideas instead of "right-there" questions.



Awesome Artist: You should prepare a sketch or use model magic to create something to discuss about the book. Try to use symbols, lines, colors, and/or objects that represent people or things from the story. Use a note card to explain why you chose each object and color in your sketch or clay creation.

Fact Finder: Your job is to locate any interesting facts you can find about any topics discussed in your book. You may use the library, encyclopedias, or the computer to find your information. Write the two facts and the source you used on a note card to share with the group.



Appendix E

Name _____

Whooo's Got Something Good to Read?



Title	Author	Comments <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Does it look exciting or boring? ○ What kinds of pictures are there? ○ How many chapters? ○ Who might some characters be? ○ Is it about something true, made-up, science, or history? ○ Does it look funny?

Appendix F
Literature Circle
Evaluation Sheet

Name _____

Date: _____

You should complete the evaluation sheet after each person shares his or her job. Be sure to give yourself a score, too! When you are scoring each other, try to remember our examples from class. Try to be honest when you score each other. Our goal is to get better at discussing what was important to us in the books we've read.

4 = Excellent 3 = OK 2 = Needs Improvement 1 = Put little effort into meeting today

Discussion Director: _____

- Prepared for group meeting 4 3 2 1
- Information shared 4 3 2 1
- Listened as other group members shared 4 3 2 1
- Participated in discussion 4 3 2 1

Word Wizard: _____

- Prepared for group meeting 4 3 2 1
- Information shared 4 3 2 1
- Listened as other group members shared 4 3 2 1
- Participated in discussion 4 3 2 1

Cool Connector: _____

- Prepared for group meeting 4 3 2 1
- Information shared 4 3 2 1
- Listened as other group members shared 4 3 2 1
- Participated in discussion 4 3 2 1

Quizzical Questioner: _____

- Prepared for group meeting 4 3 2 1
- Information shared 4 3 2 1
- Listened as other group members shared 4 3 2 1
- Participated in discussion 4 3 2 1

Awesome Artist: _____

- Prepared for group meeting 4 3 2 1
- Information shared 4 3 2 1
- Listened as other group members shared 4 3 2 1
- Participated in discussion 4 3 2 1

Fact Finder: _____

- Prepared for group meeting 4 3 2 1
- Information shared 4 3 2 1
- Listened as other group members shared 4 3 2 1
- Participated in discussion 4 3 2 1

Appendix G
Reading Survey 2
Literature Circles

Name _____



Please answer the following questions using a scale of 1-4.
1= Not at all ! 2= Sometimes 3= A lot 4= All the

1. I like to read chapter books. _____
2. I like to read short stories. _____
3. I like to read alone. _____
4. I like to read with other people. _____
5. I like to talk about what I read. _____
6. I like to be read to. _____
7. I understand what I read. _____
8. I choose to read when I have free time. _____

Please answer the following questions.

9. What makes a good reader?

10. How do you feel about reading?

11. During reading class, we _____

12. I like reading most when I _____

13. I understand what I've read best when I _____

14. Which role did you use most often when we worked with literature circles? _____

15. Which role did you enjoy the most and why? _____

16. Which role helped you understand the book better? _____

Why do you think it helped you? _____

17. Which role was your least favorite and why? _____

18. What advice would you give next year's students about working with literature circles? _____

1	Appendix H
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Appendix I

Student Interview Questions

1. What kind of a reader do you think you are?
2. Describe a typical reading class period.
3. What kinds of things help you remember information from books you've read?
4. What should your teacher be doing during reading class to help you?
5. Describe what you think literature circles are.
6. How can you tell if you have understood what you have read?

Focus Group Interview Questions

1. Does talking about the text with a group help you or not? If yes, in what ways? If no, why not?
2. What roles help you understand what you've read most? Least?
3. What problems, if any, did your group have during literature circle discussions?
4. What was your favorite part about meeting as a group? Least favorite?
5. What kinds of things should your teacher be doing when you meet with your literature circle groups?
6. What should other group members do while you are sharing your role information?

*Questions are a general guideline, and should be modified or added to, based on student response.