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USING LITERATURE CIRCLES IN THE MIDDLE SCHOOL SETTING

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Submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Education
Moravian College
Bethlehem, Pennsylvania
2011

Abstract

In this study, middle school students used literature circles after reading short stories. My question was, *How can literature circles be adapted for optimal success in the middle school setting? What are the students' attitudes, behaviors, experiences, and academic achievements like before and after literature circles are used?*

The purpose of this study was to share the experiences of a seventh grade class as they used literature circles to develop understanding and create connections to short stories. Additionally, I studied the strengths and weaknesses of the use of literature circles in the middle school setting.

Literature circles were facilitated by organizing students into groups of four to six after they had read a short story and completed a worksheet. This worksheet was based on specific aspects of the story. Observational data and student work were gathered and analyzed.

Findings included high student morale and engagement in literature discussions. Drawbacks included the time consuming nature

of literature circles, student over-dependence on worksheets, and difficulties switching from teacher-led settings to student-led settings.

Acknowledgments

Many individuals deserve a great deal of credit for helping me through this overwhelming process. My students have been the inspiration for this story and they continue to inspire new stories every day. Their diligence and honesty were pivotal in helping me understand the true middle school experience.

The Moravian College community has also gone above and beyond in their efforts to support me from my undergraduate work, all the way through to this stage in my learning process. I'd like to thank Dr. Dilendik for helping me through the writing process and being a source of calm support whenever it was needed. I'd also like to thank Dr. Unger for taking the time to add her insight on the subject of literature circles.

My most sincere thanks go to Thoedora Loupos for so many reasons. Her support throughout this experience kept me sane on the craziest of days, and some days were very crazy! She let me vent on numerous occasions and helped me put things into perspective, which made all the difference to me.

Finally, my greatest support came from the source of all my happiness, my family. My husband was more understanding than I ever could have imagined and supported me every step of the way. My mother stepped in and helped take the pressure off me by helping with my two boys and taking care of so many other time-consuming details. My two boys, Andrew and Rafferty, gave me the inspiration to keep working in order to be a role model and a better mom.

Thank you to all of you, I could not have done this without you!

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Researcher Stance

'Life can only be understood backwards but you have to live it forward. You can only do that by stepping into uncertainty and by trying, within this uncertainty, to create your own islands of security....The new security will be a belief that ...if this doesn't work out you could do something else'. You are your own security'.

-Charles Handy, Business Philosopher.

And so, I enter this study hoping to create my own security...

The educational environment today is high stakes and high pressure. Each school year is met with new tests to determine if a teacher's class is learning. An assumption is often made: if your students test well, you must be teaching well. Even scarier yet is the assumption that the opposite is also true. If your class tests poorly, you are not a good teacher! Given this pressure, it is very frightening to take on a new strategy that removes much of the control from the teacher and hands it over to the students, and this is a major premise of literature circles.

I began my research on this topic during the 500 level series of classes, and the results had piqued my interest. I had also investigated a few other topics in my classes, yet my questions always wandered back to literature circles. I want to learn more, but how would this impact the way my students performed on their district and state tests?

My initial research was conducted in a class where most of the students were highly motivated and successful. This felt safe; I knew I could rely on these dependable students to create excellent data and meaningful quotes for my study. As expected, they performed well when using literature circles, and I was pleased with the results. They continued to test well, as usual, so I was free to continue using literature circles.

Then my security was jeopardized. My principal approached me to share what I had learned with other English Language Arts teachers in the district. I was hesitant because I felt my research was too limited. I could speculate on what changes would need to be made in a lower functioning or less motivated class, but I would not have the experience to back it up. I was not confident in my knowledge; I had not yet created my own security.

This is the area that I am interested in focusing on in this phase of my research. I feel that my current teaching placement lends itself to this study. I will have five different classes and each class will have its own set of student abilities and motivational issues. With these diverse classes, I will be better able to observe what adaptations to literature circles are successful within varying classroom settings. I can use this experience to drive the strategies that I will use with the subjects in my study.

I am especially interested to see how my unmotivated and lower functioning students interact with literature circles. I hope to find that it engages them on a deeper level, while fooling them into thinking it is not “real work”. I will also be keeping an eye on what adaptations I will need to make to keep them on task. This will be especially important in sections with larger class size.

One aspect of this strategy that I hope will appeal to my students is that literature circles allow them to share their opinions, reactions, and personal connections to the text (Brabham, 2000). I have had some success in motivating my students with short stories where they could make personal connections, but this was typically during a whole group instruction setting. We only had time for a few students to share their reactions. I hope to see that more students will be able to share in the smaller groupings of literature circles. I also plan to assess whether quieter students feel less intimidated,

and therefore more free to speak their minds in small groups rather than in front of the whole class (Daniels, 2006).

This type of interaction with the text should help my students become truly engaged in the material, and gain a better understanding of it (Brabham, 2000). This can help their academic grades improve. If given the opportunity to undertake future studies, I would be curious to see if their usage of literature circles, and the personal connections it encourages, eventually affects how they perform in other academic subjects. Would they find themselves making connections to topics covered in math or science simply out of habit?

I am hopeful that this type of reading strategy will encourage my students to develop the ability to work within different social dynamics. Should the groups be chosen by the student or the teacher? Should they be same sex or heterogeneous? These are some of the questions that I will look into.

Additional questions about socialization also arise. How will students deal with an unprepared group member? Will the groups stay on task during discussion time? How will students deal with different opinions that are presented?

Then there are the questions of how I can adapt to make things go as smoothly as possible. How can I prevent students from being unprepared? How can I manage disagreements among group members? How can I prevent groups from going off task during discussion time?

As one can see, there are many questions to be answered about literature circles. I feel that literature circles would be a great resource to use in my classroom, but the imperfections need to be addressed before they can be truly successful. After conducting this action research study, I hope

to take this more complete assessment to my new principal so that I can share what I have learned with other teachers in my district. I hope that my research can stand on its own, without the need for a test score to validate it. I hope that many classes will benefit from this type of reading strategy. I hope to create my own security through action research.

Literature Review

One of the great joys of any teacher is to walk around her classroom and see students thoroughly engaged in their studies. To overhear students engrossed in meaningful discussion, in an environment that is supportive and challenging all at once. This may sound like a utopian dream, but still, teachers work every day to bring this dream to light. In an ideal world, this is what literature circles would look and feel like (Burns, 1998) . But how does a teacher take a class that has been typically educated in the “teacher as leader” model and transition these students to a point where they facilitate their own learning (Maloch, 2002) ? Combine this with other challenging factors, such as students with learning disabilities or students who simply don’t care to be in school, and it may seem that literature circles have too many challenges to be successful.

Yet Harvey Daniels (2006) traces the roots of literature circles back to the early 1980’s when teachers across the country found they were conducting similar lessons where students would meet in small, peer-led groups to discuss text. Over the years, these lessons have been studied, refined, and written about in various publications (Daniels, 2006). Instead of giving up, many teacher researchers have chosen to study the use of

literature circles to meet the demands of an ever-changing school environment. The benefits of a reading strategy where student insight and inquiries drive the learning is too good to give up on (Brabham, 2000).

While the basic concept of literature circles does not change much across the literature, the details and procedures of how to use them is varied (Daniels, 2006). Essentially, literature circles offer students the opportunity to meet in small groups to discuss common texts. These groups usually include four to six students who bring their own original thoughts and experiences to the discussion (Maloch, 2002). This sharing is meant to promote insightful discussions which allow students to gain insight into their own reading, writing, learning, and thinking skills (Brabham, 2000).

Daniels goes on to clarify that literature circles are successful due to three main components; engagement, choice, and responsibility (2006). In a small peer-led group, each student has more time to comment and feels a lessened sense of risk. This leads to more engaged students, having in-depth conversations. Allowing students to choose their own text promotes a sense of control over their learning. Finally, students engaged in literature circles are asked to take a level of responsibility in their education that was usually taken over by the teacher. Many literature circles require group members to

create their own schedules, establish ground rules, and even assess their own performance.

Assigning roles to group members is one way to promote student responsibility (Curriculum Review, 2005). Role sheets are assigned to each member of a group to keep them focused on a particular literary element. Roles usually include a “Discussion Director” who initiates discussions and keeps the group focused, the “Connector” who establishes connections amongst the text, the “Illustrator” who uses sketches to bring insight to the text, the “Word Wizard” who selects intriguing vocabulary from the text, and the “Literary Luminator” who selects passages that are of particular interest or demonstrate specific literary devices (Daniels, 2006).

These roles become the starting point for group discussions (Curriculum Review, 2005). In this way, each member can be sure to bring their own unique input to the group. Daniels (2006) warns that these roles should not be overly relied upon. They are meant to facilitate discussions when students are still learning how to engage appropriately in literature circles. If students are allowed to rely upon these roles for too long, answers often become scripted and short (Brabham, 2000). Daniels suggests that students may also find sticky notes, reading response logs, or graphic organizers to be of help, as well. Brabham (2000) points out that strategies

such as these must be fine-tuned for each individual class, based on students' needs.

The groups themselves should also be determined based on students' needs. Ideally, students would be given the choice of approximately six different texts revolving around a central theme (Burns, 1998). Students would choose their text based on their interests and groups would form naturally around those texts. Anyone who has taught in a middle school, however, knows that it is never that simple. Katz et al. (1997) reports that 41% of her students admitted to choosing their group based on who else had chosen that group, regardless of the text. Additionally, 50% admitted that they picked their group first, then worked together to pick a text. This still allows the students to enjoy a level of choice, but limits the chance that they will choose the best text for their interests.

Burns (1998) adds that a "book talk" conducted by the teacher can be a good first step. This ensures that students have an idea of what each book is about before choosing their favorite. Burns goes on to add that middle school students should be encouraged to choose quickly before they have had the chance to see what all of their friends have chosen.

Maloch (2002) suggests that groups should be created based on the principal of heterogeneous abilities. In fact, Burns (1998) reports that

students preferred mixed-ability groups. They believed they helped each other more, and learned more. When a section of text was particularly challenging, someone was always able to help.

Book selection is another key component to literature circles (Burns, 1998). Clarke and Holwadel (2007) found this aspect to be particularly important when working in an urban setting with students from crime-ridden neighborhoods. Short class lengths and high absenteeism made it necessary to capture their students' attention quickly. The teachers chose books that related to their students' lives and would, therefore, encourage greater personal connections. These book selections were offered to the students who could choose which one to read. This choice was a powerful tool in engaging these reluctant readers (Daniels, 2002).

Casey (2009) found that her struggling readers needed more guidance when selecting text. She found that she was limited in how many resources she could find that met her students' varied abilities. In fact, finding multiple copies of text in itself can be a challenge in many schools (Brabham, 2000). Casey had to utilize her knowledge of each student's abilities, interests, and personalities in order to come up with a good selection.

Using a variety of texts, such as poetry, textbooks, and even newspapers can also be utilized to supplement the typical fiction books used in literature circles (Brabham, 2000).

Class climate is another key component to successful literature circles. Lane W. Clarke and Jennifer Holwadel (2007) studied a class in the urban setting of Cincinnati, Ohio. The subjects in this study attended a sixth grade class in a neighborhood where drugs, abandoned buildings, and violence are considered the norm. In this highly challenging setting, the researchers found that groups had to be organized based on factors outside of the classroom, as well as, within. Often, problems that began in the streets would cause great conflict within the classroom.

Literature circles quickly degenerated into name-calling, and off task behavior. Occasionally, even fist-fights broke out. Clarke and Holwadel (2007) recognized that this class was failing due to negative social interaction. Economic disparities, revolving class schedules, high absentee rates, suspensions, frequent new students and poor social skills were just some of the problems that plagued this class.

As tensions within the classroom were identified as the biggest hurdle, Clarke and Holwadel chose to use mini-lessons developed by Daniels and Steineke (2004). First, an icebreaking activity was given to each group.

Group mates were asked to identify what each others' interests were. This allowed the students to focus on their similarities, instead of their differences. Next, each member of the group was given a number of chips. They were asked to throw in one chip each time they spoke to the group. This helped even out the participation so no one student could dominate the group.

Insults were an overwhelming deterrent to literature circles when this study began. Clarke and Holwadel attempted to shift the focus to compliments by using cutouts of hands. Each day, students were asked to write a compliment about someone in their class on a hand cutout, then deliver it to the student.

Videotaping was also used to show students what their participation looked like. Most students loved watching themselves on tape, which sparked many conversations about making positive changes

While many of the external problems could not be avoided, the researchers saw a great improvement in how these groups interacted. Support was still needed from the teachers throughout the school year, but literature discussions had become more productive and much less argumentative.

This challenging study demonstrates that determination and preparation are keys to successful literature circles (Burns 1998). In fact, students cannot be expected to participate effectively in literature circles without a great deal of preparation (Burns, 1998). Heather K. Casey (2009) proposes that preparation begins by simply creating a safe environment, especially when dealing with adolescents who struggle with literacy. Casey was feeling frustrated by her students' lack of interest in literacy and chose to utilize literature circles to counteract this complacency.

Casey recognized that her students' struggles with literacy were affecting them negatively. These students are often asked to engage in reading or writing activities that they find frustrating. Inappropriate outbursts or passive engagement were common responses (Long, MacBlain & MacBlain, 2007). Literature circles offered Casey a chance to create a community of small, less threatening groups where students could construct understanding. Initially, Casey found her students to be resistant to literature circles. She found that her students did not consider themselves to be readers and writers so this student-centered format made them uncomfortable. Casey supported her students by engaging them in whole class discussions where she stressed the importance of every opinion. This

respect for each students' opinion helped her class open up and speak more in their literature circles.

Casey also cites consistency as a vital part of her success with literature circles. She began every class with a class meeting, segued into literature circles, then returned to the whole group format to discuss what had been learned. During group time Casey moved from group to group and took special care to check in on struggling readers.

This emphasizes the importance of the teacher's role in the classroom. Literature circles naturally transfer much of the responsibilities of learning and teaching to the students (Daniels, 2006). We ask students to facilitate their own discussions instead of leading it ourselves. We encourage students to establish and abide by group rules, and some teachers even encourage their students to create their own schedules (Daniels, 2006). But this switch from a "teacher as leader" model must be done with a great deal of support from the teacher (Maloch, 2002).

Maloch (2002) found that students initially fell back into their old routine when engaging in literature circles for the first few times. They would raise their hands and ask for the teacher's help as soon as a question arose instead of attempting to discuss it within their groups. Some groups even came to a complete stop when the teacher stepped away.

One way to counteract this lack of productivity is for the teacher to create a schedule so she can be involved in each circle for the first few discussions (Burns, 1998). The teacher can keep everyone on track and encourage students to talk with each other rather than with her alone. As the students can demonstrate this pattern with less support, the teacher is able to disengage herself from the group.

The teacher must also address how this shift to student centered responsibility impacts basic communication and interaction skills (Maloch, 2002). Maloch observed that students would throw out comments one after the other. This led to a round-robin type of discussion, but most of the comments were unrelated. There was no sense of building upon each others' ideas. Another common problem was that the students would simply retell the story. This was usually followed by an awkward silence in which students were unsure of what to do next. The teacher was able to help these groups by reminding them that this was their group and that they were in charge. She also complimented students who seemed to be getting the hang of it and spoke specifically about what that student was doing right. Eventually, the students needed less and less support as they figured out their roles within the group.

The teacher must always be adjusting the level of support based on the groups' needs (Maloch, 2002). In Casey's study (2009), as groups became more comfortable having discussions, Casey reduced the use of role sheets. Students took on more ownership of their work and discussions. Casey continued to encourage this sense of ownership by offering students a selection of assessments to choose from. Students at every ability level could choose the assessment that fit their strengths. Casey also used student checklists where students report on their progress.

Checklists are one of many tools for assessment suggested by Daniels (2006). Other methods for assessment include teacher observations, readers theater, poetry and songs. A scoring rubric can help guide the student's final project and focus them on what they have learned about the text.

Many challenges still exist where literature circles are concerned. Racial, gender, and economic animosities can stand in the way of creating cooperative groupings (Clark, Holwadel, 2007). Absenteeism and high numbers of transient populations are present in many schools and disrupt the consistency necessary for productive literature circles. Student selection of text can be limited when schools are not equipped with multiple copies of various text (Brabham, 2000). Also, student groups can sometimes be

problematic when students do not become engaged in discussions (Maloch, 2002). This is especially true when literature circles are first beginning.

Despite these challenges, literature circles still offer a way of establishing a classroom climate where students take greater academic risks (Burns, 1998). Literature circles allow students more time to talk, and discussions promote insight and revelations that are student-centered (Brabham, 2000). This results in learning that is deeper and more meaningful to the text (Maloch, 2002). The opportunity to take on leadership roles is another benefit (Maloch, 2002). The support of the group allows struggling readers to feel a sense of success that they may have lacked in the past (Burns, 1998). Student choice leaves students with a sense of power and responsibility in their own education (Daniels, 2006). The classroom climate becomes cooperative, responsible, and pleasurable (Burns, 1998).

So where do literature circles go next? Daniels (2006) suggests that “written conversation,” where students have discussions through written exchanges, has great potential. In fact, new studies take this idea a step further by investigating the connection between technology and literature circles. Moreillon et al (2009) explores the benefits of online literature circles in, “Learning and Teaching in WANDA Wiki Wonderland:

Literature Circles in the Digital Commons.” This suggests that the use of literature circles will continue to change and develop as teachers work to keep students engaged.

Regardless of what new directions literature circles take, they will always require students to engage in the literature in a meaningful way. This student driven learning can allow each and every student to have a clear voice in creating meaning from text. The possibilities for student enrichment are endless.

Research Design and Methodology

Every school, regardless of its socio-economic status, has students who fall through the cracks. They hide behind their peers and hope to get by with a passing grade. This is true of the middle school where I conducted my research, as well.

Setting

I teach at a middle school serving sixth through eighth grade students in a mostly suburban community in Northeastern Pennsylvania. My school is one of four middle schools in the district. Over 1100 students attend this building, which makes it the largest middle school in our district. The population is mostly Caucasian, with 29% Hispanic, 10% African American, and about 1% Asian students, as well.

Most of my students come from families who would be considered middle to upper socio-economic class. Approximately 35% of our students come from families that are considered, “financially disadvantaged.”

I teach on a team with seven teachers. Five of us are considered core academic teachers who instruct Math, Science, English, Reading, or Social Studies. Two teachers are Special Education teachers who follow inclusion classes into our rooms for assistance. Inclusion classes are used in every

grade level to allow students who have been labeled as, “Learning Disabled,” to attend classes with regular education students, and which are taught by teachers who are considered highly qualified in their specific field. The inclusion teacher is meant to help support the class, as a whole. In fact, anyone witnessing the inclusion class in progress would not be able to discern the special education students from the regular education students.

My classroom is located in the seventh grade wing. Upon entering my room, you would see a chalkboard to your left and a whiteboard to your right. Straight ahead is a white wall covered with bulletin boards, which are decorated with colorful posters and examples of student work. Thirty-two desks are paired in sets of two and organized in rows.

Participants

*The kids in our classroom are infinitely more significant
than the subject matter we teach.*

-Meladee McCarty

One of the inclusion classes became the focus of my study due to the academic and motivational challenges of the students. Twenty-nine students make up this charismatic class; thirteen of them are labeled “Learning Disabled.” The class as a whole is friendly, and willing to participate in

conversations, but reluctant to complete homework or take their time on writing assignments.

The majority of these students have been in inclusion classes in sixth grade as well, therefore they are use to being in a classroom setting with extra support teachers. During the course of this study, instruction has been given by one academic teacher, one special education teacher, one student teacher, and one teaching paraprofessional. As the lead academic teacher, I have been in charge of the structure of the daily class period, which meets every day, right before lunch. Our scheduled time is 12:00 to 12:50p.m.

Procedures

I began this study by explaining the basic organization of literature circles to the students. I explained that our class would be using short stories instead of novels, in order to fit within our given time constraints. I used a series of role sheets (Appendix E - I) to help encourage student accountability. I used the following five role sheets and directions:

Discussion Director (Appendix E)

Your job is to develop a list of questions about this text that your group might want to discuss. Don't worry about the small details; your task is to help your group talk about the "big ideas" in the text and to share their reactions.

Examples: *What was going through your mind while you read?*
Did this part remind you of something that happened to you?

Connector (Appendix G)

Your job is to find connections between the text and your world. This means finding connections to your life, your school, and your community. Also make connections to events happening in the news, or to other writing or movies that seem to relate to this text.

Summarizer (Appendix I)

Your job is to prepare a brief summary about the text. Your group will start their discussion by listening to your summary.

Literary Luminary (Appendix F)

Your job is to locate a few sections of the text that are especially interesting, powerful, funny, confusing, or important. Note where you found these sections because you will read them aloud to your group. Also note why you chose them and begin a discussion by telling your group why you chose to select them.

Vocabulary Enricher (Appendix H)

Your job is to select a few words (or figurative phrases) that are powerful, confusing, or creative. You might also note words that are used repeatedly, in an unusual way, or are important to the overall understanding of the text.

I completed three rounds of literature circles during this study, slightly changing the logistics each time. For the first round, I asked for volunteers to be “Discussion Directors” or leaders of a group. Next, I allowed the

students to choose which leader and group they would like to work with. Finally, I allowed each group to determine who would fill each of the remaining roles. This resulted in five groups of five students, and one group of four students.

For the second round I randomly counted off around the room. I also randomly assigned the role sheets. Due to some student absences, this resulted in three groups of five and two groups of six.

For the third and final round of literature circles, I created groups that were based on gender. Roles were assigned to students based on where I believed their strengths and weaknesses to be. Due to a good deal of absences, I ended up with three groups of five girls, and two groups of five boys.

For each round of literature circles, I gave the class a short story, and read it aloud to them. I did not engage in any lengthy discussions on them, but I did answer questions that the students had. Next, I administered a pre-test which assessed comprehension through multiple choice questions, and critical thinking through a short essay question.

Each student was also given class time to complete his or her role sheet before groups met. All teachers rotated through the room to assist with any questions on how to complete the roles.

Finally, each group got together. The Discussion Director was instructed to take a leadership role and jump in with a question whenever a lengthy break in conversation occurred. The Summarizer was asked to begin the discussion with a review of the story.

Data Sources

A variety of data sources were utilized during this study.

Surveys

“Attitudes About Reading” Survey (Appendix J)

Twenty-one questions were posed in order to gain insight into my students’ perceptions about themselves as readers

Pre-Activity Survey (Appendix K)

These surveys allowed me to gain insight into what expectations students entered literature circles with. Students were asked to describe their feelings about working with other students in this setting.

Post Activity Surveys (Appendix L - M)

Students were asked to fill out a survey after each round of literature circles. These surveys asked the students about their experiences in the group and what recommendations they would give for future literature circles.

Student Artifacts

“Charles” Pre-Test

This test was made up of five multiple choice comprehension questions and one “critical thinking / making connections” question. The students were assured that this test did not count as a grade and was only being used to determine a baseline.

“Charles” Post-Test

This quiz was identical to the pre-test and was given after the completion of literature circles in order to compare results.

Role Sheets

Each student was required to complete a role sheet prior to engaging in any of the three literature circles.

Ticket In – Similes

Each student was given a warm up in the form of a “ticket in.” The following four sentence structures were listed and students were encouraged to complete them as honestly as possible.

1. Literature circles are like _____

_____.

2. Reading is as _____ as _____

_____.

3. My group was like _____.

4. My group was as _____ as _____
_____.

Observational Data

Shadow Logs

As the students worked on their role sheets or interacted in their literature circles, I walked around the classroom and wrote down everything I observed.

Field Log

Many external factors help to place the shadow logs into proper perspective. As these factors occurred, I documented them in my field log to form a more well rounded picture of what was happening.

Trustworthiness Statement

Begin challenging your own assumptions. Your assumptions are your windows on the world. Scrub them off every once in while, or the light won't come in. -Alan Alda

In order to develop credible findings, a researcher must assess the biases they bring to the study. It is naïve to think they do not exist and dishonest to allow them to influence a study significantly. Instead, a trustworthy researcher must identify them and be aware of what impact they have on the observations which become the data.

I recognize that I, too, have biases about the use of literature circles in a challenging setting. I entered this study anticipating that I would need to

be as structured as possible in my implementation of literature circles. I expected that by doing this, I could hold my students accountable, which would encourage greater participation. As an open-minded researcher, I knew I needed to be open to the possibility that handing more control over to the students may motivate them better than any level of structure that I may provide.

I recognized that my researcher stance also holds some biases within it. This means that my entire basis for this study was affected by the experiences I've had in this area. I needed to be open-minded about the power of personal connections to text. Is it as powerful as I believe? Would personal connections allow students to better understand the text? Or would these connections simply allow the class time to pass in a more enjoyable way without any real impact on comprehension? What is the REAL impact of literature circles?

Additionally, I needed to focus my observations on the interactions within the group. I anticipated that small groups would allow students to feel more comfortable in sharing their opinions and connections. As a credible researcher, I had to be sure that I was observing group interactions without allowing my assumptions to color my shadow logs or observations.

As I prepared for my research, I first applied for the approval of the Human Subject Internal Review Board of Moravian College (Appendix A). This ensured that a third party had reviewed my safeguards and deemed them acceptable. As I began my research, I obtained consent from the parents of each of my subjects. I communicated the intent of my study, as well as, the safeguards. Each of the subjects and their guardians were informed that participation in this study was voluntary and that there would be no penalty for students who chose not to participate. All data was stored

in a locked location and destroyed at the conclusion of this study.

Anonymity was maintained through the use of pseudonyms in place of student names.

Any good example of action research should leave the reader to decide what they agree and disagree with about the conclusions of the author, based on the given evidence. It should not leave the reader feeling like they are unsure of how the author came to these conclusions.

Maintaining credibility is crucial.

In my study, the research was conducted over a large period of time, specifically three months. In this time I allowed my students to have a number of experiences with literature circles. This helped validate my observations by showing that they are not based on a single incident or occasion (Hendricks, 2009). Patterns that developed help prove this point.

My results are also based on a diverse set of methods, which allows for triangulation in my research (Hendricks, 2009). Student input, test results, and my own detailed observations are some examples of the diverse sources of data, which I used. Direct quotes from my students and observations that co-teachers have made also help to validate the authenticity of my research. Surveys have allowed me to assess how my entire class reacted to certain aspects of literature circles.

Together, these measures ensure that the reader will feel that they have enough valid information to form their own opinion. The diverse measures, extended time period, and triangulation should make the reader comfortable trusting that the data is reliable.

Cast of Characters

Twenty-nine students will be involved in the study, each and every one of them bringing their own insight. Nine of these students stood out as strong characters in the class setting, through their personalities, interactions, or behaviors. The following introductions attempt to convey their personalities in order to better understand the interactions that became our experience with literature circles in the middle school setting.

“I’m not looking forward to talking in a group.”

-Anna

Anna is painfully shy. Every day she walks by my room three times to get to her classes, and every time she passes me she shrinks up like a turtle retreating into her shell just to wave hello to me. She smiles when she waves, but the act still looks painful and uncomfortable for her. She has one friend in class whom she has known for years. This girl, Val, is almost as shy as Anna.

Anna is labeled as “Learning Disabled” and comprehension does not come easy to her. She always tries, but sometimes becomes frustrated. She has NEVER raised her hand in class so I expect that literature circles will be difficult for her.

I’m very worried about these literature circles. I wish I was a better reader, but I’m not. It just seems to take me longer when I read things and I always worry that my teacher might call on me to read out loud. That would be the WORST! I’m not sure if I’ll ever be a good reader, I just never seem to get any better. I can’t even explain anything about what I read. No matter what, I won’t say anything in my group. I can’t, it would be too embarrassing!

“I’m not looking forward to the possibility of other members arguing with me / another group member.”

-Chrissy

Chrissy is a very unique student. She is extremely creative; some might even call her odd. She does not make friends easily and tends to keep to herself. She spends all of her spare time reading and admiring anime. She draws these characters any chance she gets and generally prefers to share her work with her teachers rather than her peers. Chrissy felt some anxiety about literature circles...

I love reading, I really do, but I hate doing book reports, and even worse, I hate having to tell the whole class about a book.. I just love getting lost in the book, not worrying about what anyone else thinks about it, or me. Reading out loud is the WORST! But why should I have to read out loud anyway? And don't even get me started about discussing a story. I've done literature circles before, and it wasn't good. It always turned out to be reading a book with a group of kids who I don't even like. No discussions. I use to be afraid to speak my mind out of fear of what the other kids would say.

So that's my biggest fear. I don't like arguing. But I am kind of excited; I want to see what will go on exactly. A real discussion would be nice, as long as there is no arguing.

***“I liked literature circles because we got to share our opinions.”
-Connor***

Connor is a high energy, high personality, fully enthusiastic ball of seventh grade fire! Connor loves school, he loves his teachers, and he loves to talk. He will talk to anyone, at any time. He will call out and he will whisper. He will always have a smile and a joke ready for you. He is very enthusiastic about everything except being a diligent student. He was VERY excited to begin literature circles.

AWESOME! We get to work in groups? We get to TALK? What could be better? I think I’m a pretty good reader, especially when I get to read short stories. I can summarize, too, so it won’t be very hard to do literature circles. I’ve done them before and I liked them because I could share my opinions. I hope we get to read fiction stories because I hate those boring non-fiction books!

I wonder who will be in my group. It would be great if my friends would be working with me. Maybe I should just whisper quick to my friend while the teacher is talking about how we should run our groups...

“I am afraid people will get off topic, won’t do their job, or just sit there and don’t do anything.”

-Janet

Janet is a sweet, hard-working young lady who takes pride in her work. She stays focused when she has a task to complete, and does her best to use her time wisely. Janet prefers to sit alone to avoid any distraction, but is friendly and social during down time. Overall, she is a mature seventh grade girl who is socially and academically well-adjusted.

Janet is a special education student who is labeled “Learning Disabled.” This has led to her determined academic nature. She has used all of the extra help she has been given and learned how she works best. Her metacognition is excellent, and she advocates for herself well.

I don’t like to waste my time or get distracted by other kids. I like to get my work done right away. I’m a good reader and I can usually answer questions about the story pretty well, so I don’t think literature circles will be hard for me, but I’m worried about working in a group.

I’m looking forward to completing my “role,” but I’m really worried that my group members won’t do theirs. I hope I get a good group. I’ll make sure we get the work done!

“I’m looking forward to being able to work in groups.”
-Jerry

This was a surprising statement for Jerry to make. I didn’t hear Jerry’s voice for the first month of school. I have barely heard him speak all year. Jerry also wears a constant scowl. He appears to be perpetually angry and ready to blow. He does not speak with his peers much and appears to want to be left alone. This is why it was so shocking that he is most looking forward to working in groups.

Jerry is a mystery to me.

These literature circles look pretty cool. I like reading, especially The Lord of the Rings series. I can’t wait to work in groups!

***“I am looking forward to the other kids faces when I find something they don’t.”
-John***

John is a very unique student. He has been diagnosed as having Autism, which notably affects his social interactions. John is limited in his interactions with other students and when interactions do occur, he tends to dominate the conversation with off-task comments.

Academically, he is very intelligent, but finds it difficult to follow the directions he is given. Very often, he decides that he will not follow all of the directions, but will choose to focus on his own interests instead. These interests may stray very far from the topic at hand.

John is convinced that his insights go above and beyond those of a normal seventh grade student. He will often attempt to engage in a class discussion with off task stories that he believes are insightful, but are actually odd ramblings.

I am going to be the spark to my group’s discussions. I am going to boggle the minds of my classmates. I can’t wait to see their expressions when I find something they have missed! I just hope the stories hold my interest. I hope my classmates can keep up, too!

“I am looking forward to seeing what other people think.”
-Juan

Juan is a popular boy, who enjoys socializing and playing football. His peers embrace him as a friend, but not as much of a student. Juan often hides his academic abilities by not completing his work and not participating in class. When I call on Juan to answer a question, a slow, wide smile spreads across his face. He appears amused, not worried. He usually knows the answer but prefers not to share it.

There is one trick to motivating Juan; his mother. One word of an email being sent to his mother will have him handing in late papers in mere moments. He is still careful to do just enough to get by, not so much that he might raise the bar for himself.

I suspect that literature circles will appeal to his social side and I fear they will also appeal to his unmotivated side, as well. It will be interesting to see if he puts any real effort into his academic discussion, or simply skates by on his group's heels.

I know what to do, I just don't want to. Toss me a football or even make me run suicides and I'd be happier than sitting in a class! I have some good friends in this class, but the teacher has moved my seat away from them so I hope they end up in my group. A few cute girls wouldn't hurt, either.

I know my stuff so I'm not too worried about these literature circles. I plan on hangin' out with my friends, talking about the recent games, and pretending to be on task when the teacher checks on me. Literature circles should be a lot of fun.

***“I kind of hate it, because I don’t talk to people.”
-Steven***

Steve made his anxiety quite clear from day one. This concise statement was taken before the first literature circle had even begun and already, Steven was letting me know he was not interested. I continued to focus my attention on Steven, and he gave me many good reasons to do so! By the end of all these extensive observations and surveys, I felt like I could read his mind...

I don’t want to do this! Its not like I want to be a teacher or anything, so why should I have to do all this reading anyway? I don’t really like any of the books my teachers pick for me. I guess some books aren’t so bad though. Diary of a Wimpy kid was pretty funny. And its not like I CAN’T read, I’m actually OK at it, but I’m not as good as the REALLY good readers. Sometimes it just gets too hard for me and I just want to give up! I don’t like reading out loud and I’m kind of nervous about talking about a story. What if I get the role of Summarizer? I’m not too good at summarizing a story. I’m really not sure about these literature circles. In fact, I kind of hate it, because I don’t want to talk to people!

“I don’t know.”
-Val

If you ask Val to give you any kind of feedback, the answer will almost always be, “I don’t know.” This was true of the majority of the survey questions I asked Val during my study. But this response is not selective to my study either. If you ask Val what she doesn’t understand about a task, she will reply, “I don’t know.” If you ask her about her opinion on any given topic she will answer, “I don’t know.” It is her stand by answer for most everything.

Val is, academically, below most of her peers and has an Individualized Educational Plan (IEP) in place as a labeled Learning Disabled student. Her teachers make accommodations for her, but she frequently makes excuses and is sporadic about how much effort she puts into her studies.

I don’t think I want to try literature circles. They seem scary to me. I don’t want to work in a group and I don’t want to talk with other kids. I hate reading things out loud and sometimes I need help answering questions about the story. So I don’t want to try literature circles.

***Into the Mind of a Seventh Grade Student...
Pre-Activity Surveys***

This seventh grade class had many interesting perspectives on what literature circles would be like, including the following quotes:

What are you looking forward to?

- I am excited to see what will go on exactly!*
- I'm looking forward to writing summaries.*
- It sounds like I will learn.*
- Being able to work in groups.*
- Watching the other kids' faces when I find something they don't!*
- I think it would be good to meet new people.*
- Working with my friends and reading new books. I LOVE READING!*

What are you NOT looking forward to?

- I am not looking forward to the possibility of other members arguing with me / another group member.*
- I am not looking forward to making connections.*
- I am afraid people will get off topic, won't do their job, or just sit there and don't do anything.*
- I kind of hate it because I don't talk to people.*
- Maybe having to do a role that I don't like.*
- I'm not looking forward to talking in a group.*
- I'm not looking forward to working with people who don't work.*
- I don't want to have people in my group that think they are the leaders.*
- I might not get the story.*

Explain your past experiences with literature circles.

-Seeing as my old literary circles used to just be reading a book in a group of kids I didn't like; no discussion. I am / used to be afraid to speak my mind out of fear of comment.

-I liked it because we got to share our opinions!

-I didn't like it sometimes when we got into arguments.

-I liked it because we did some cool projects and we also got some food for what we were doing.

-I liked it because I understood the book more!

-I did like the literature circles because I liked the stories that have been told.

-They are ok because you don't have to stand in front of the class.

The Beginning of Our Journey – Literature Circles: Round One

Day one of literature circles began well enough. Each group was filled with students who appeared eager and prepared to engage in lengthy, meaningful discussions about the text; or so I thought.

Janet seemed to validate my first impression. She showed great leadership qualities as she directed her group through lulls in their conversations. I decided to stay and listen.

Indeed, Janet was very good at prompting her group with questions about the text, but she was not waiting for answers! She had been given the role of “Discussion Director” which required her to come to her group prepared with good questions. She understood that she needed to “Direct” her group by posing these questions when it was appropriate.

To her credit, Janet was all business with these questions. She read every one. She was also great at directing her group. She directed each member to read his or her work. The problem was that she was driven by a great work ethic and determination to get the work DONE. Literature circles are all about engaging conversations where one is never DONE. Obviously, this point was lost on Janet.

I complimented her on her excellent leadership skills, but suggested that perhaps she could pause from time to time to allow other group

members to add their thoughts. She pointed out that each group member had read everything on his or her paper. Therefore, she declared proudly, “We’re done!”

“Us, too! We’re done, too!” exclaimed Connor loudly. His group members snickered quietly behind him. I had noticed Corey working in his group earlier and I hated to admit it, but he had appeared equally scripted in his group interactions. Where as Janet wanted to be responsible and get it DONE, Connor just wanted to get it done with!

Each time I began walking toward his group, he would immediately begin reading his questions, or directing a group member to read his or her role. To make matters worse, this group also included Juan who was more than willing to play along. I did not catch any authentic talk except when they thought I wasn’t listening. The problem was that the authentic talk was all about social issues inherent to the life of a middle schooler.

I turned my attention to another group where there was some debate about who should be doing what. “You’re not the Connector!” exclaimed Jerry. Other members of his group nodded in agreement. They seemed to think Jerry was just keeping the order. I thought Jerry was missing the point of literature circles!

But nothing could top the scene created by one group. To sum it up John said, “ My group was like a powder keg, where someone had to light it but then it really went off!” John typically has a difficult time relating to his peers because his frame of reference is not typical in a 7th grade setting. His interest is in Germany and the era of World War II. His Asperger diagnosis causes him to focus on this relentlessly. Despite this, John became the leader in his group and told personal stories appropriate to the text.

This leadership role stemmed out of necessity as his group was falling apart rapidly. Steven was a big part of the problem. Steven made it clear that he wanted nothing to do with literature circles from the beginning. As soon as his group gathered, he began working to disrupt any productive conversation. The Discussion Director in his group, Derrick, tends to get his work done but does not go out of his way to hand in above average work. Derrick made a few attempts to keep his group talking, but was thwarted each time by belligerent comments made by Steven. He tried to spark conversations, but ran out of prompts and gave control over to Jesse when he willingly jumped in.

Initially, I thought the group dynamic was the culprit. Derrick, John, and Steven were accompanied by Val and Anna. This was a perfect storm of anti-social group members! John’s Asperger’s fueled his inability to

socially interact with other seventh graders. Steven's poor attitude regarding literature circles, and school in general, made him an argumentative group member. Derrick's general lack of drive made him a passive leader. And then there was Val and Anna, best friends, united in their fear of speaking out loud.

As I stepped in to assess the situation, I was met with continued awkward silence. I tried asking a few questions but no one was willing to tell me what was happening. Derrick just smiled, Val and Anna looked tense and uncomfortable, and Steven kept his head planted firmly on his desk. Finally, John spoke up. John stated that Steven was making mean comments and bossing Val around. Derrick said nothing, but nodded in agreement. I asked Steven about this, but he refused to pick his head up and respond.

After a few warnings, Steven reluctantly picked his head up and agreed not to make any further problems in his group. I initiated a conversation within the group and slowly backed away making a mental note to keep a close eye on this group.

Steven continued to be a negative force within the group, yet John was able to ignore him and continue talking about personal connections to the text. Due to Steven's aggressive disruptions, Anna and Val appeared to

have shut down. Val attempted to comment on John's story and even add some insight of her own, but Steven undercut her with more negative comments. Anna simply sat with her head down and even refused to read the work she had completed on her role sheet. Anna is not a defiant student and appeared to be truly uncomfortable.

I continued to check in with this group, as did my student teacher. Our discussions with Steven were usually met with resistance. At one point, Steven had placed his enormous backpack in the middle of his group as a sort of wall to shield him from the other group members. My student teacher stepped in to talk to him again.

Student Teacher: Why aren't you working with your group?

Steven: I'm not a talker.

Student Teacher: But you talk to me. You answer questions when I ask you.

Steven: Yeah, but that's because I have to.

Student Teacher: Well, you have to do this, too.

Steven: But I don't want to.

Student Teacher: Sometimes we all have to do things we don't want to.

Steven did not respond to this, but placed his head on the desk to show that he was done talking to the student teacher.

Frequent prompting of this nature did not help the situation. At one point, Steven began interrupting John's stories with one word outbursts. He did this ten to twelve times during one story and interrupted an average of two times per sentence. The discussion I had hoped for had become a monologue. This group was highly ineffective and was unable to have any in depth conversations regarding the text.

As the class was dismissing, John stopped by my desk and stated, "Steven is making negative progress for our group!" I agreed with him and assured him that I would speak to Steven about this.

I called Steven up to my desk.

Mrs.Landino: So what happened today?

Steven: Nothin' I just read my script.

Mrs.Landino: What were you doing when Jesse was telling his stories?

Steven: Nothin'. I didn't care.

I reminded Steven that he is expected to be respectful of his peers regardless of the task, or his opinion of the task. I also warned him that this type of disruptive behavior would not be tolerated and that he would be removed if it continued. I assured Steven that I would call home and discuss this matter with his mother. Steven's mother was unavailable and was never able to be reached regarding this matter.

***Into the Mind of a Seventh Grade Student...
Post-Activity Surveys***

My students gave me great feedback after they had attempted the first round of literature circles.

What did you like the most?

- I liked that we got through it fast!*
- Having some friends in my group.*
- I loved working with my friends because we got a lot done.*
- Where the conversations took us and how open it felt.*
- I felt comfortable and we always had something to talk about so we didn't get off topic.*
- Talking about connections.*
- That we got to work in groups.*

What did your group do well?

- My group and I did very well with getting done what we needed to.*
- Everyone was prepared.*
- We connected with the story.*
- When we got off topic we got back on.*
- Communicating with all of our group members.*
- I think we did well with our connections.*

***Into the Mind of a Seventh Grade Student...
Post-Activity Surveys (Continued)***

What did you dislike?

- Stopping so early.*
- Not knowing what the teacher was writing on the paper. (Referring to observations being noted by the teacher.)*
- I didn't like being a Literary Luminary.*
- When we sometimes got off topic.*

What does your group need to improve?

- Steven is really the only one not participating, but almost everybody had some trouble in the beginning.*
- We need to stay on the same topic.*
- To be more open minded about everything.*
- I think the Discussion Director needed to have better questions than yes or no quiz questions.*
- We needed to improve our conversations.*
- Our group needed to improve talking more clearly.*
- Feeling more comfortable.*
- Keeping on track.*

***Into the Mind of a Seventh Grade Student...
Post-Activity Surveys (Continued)***

What advice would you give for future use of literature circles?

- Make sure you have a plan B!*
- Don't be afraid to talk.*
- That they're fun and if you're shy there's nothing to be afraid of. We're all human; we all make mistakes.*
- Don't be scared to talk and ask questions. And have fun!*
- Work hard!*
- Just smile and do your thing.*
- They are really fun especially if you don't like talking in a big group.*
- Think of more to say and really interact with it.*
- It is fun and you should try it because you will have fun.*
- Make sure you stay on task and everything will work out.*

Continuing Our Journey: Round Two

Round one had taught me that when my students have a choice, they will choose to work with peers they like over peers they can actually stay focused with. This was no shocker. For round two, I took away this student choice. I created random groups by counting off by five around the room. I also randomly assigned the role sheets.

This second round began with many student complaints. The class was given time to complete their role sheets while I circulated the room to answer questions. I felt like a pinball, bouncing from one student to the next, trying to keep the class on task.

Mrs.Landino: Connor, please get back to work!

Connor: (Holds up his pencil) But it doesn't have an eraser!

Mrs.Landino: That should not stop you from working. Stop making excuses!

Mrs.Landino: (Circulates to another part of the room) How are you doing Anna?

Anna: I don't get it.

Mrs.Landino: You don't understand how to complete the "Connector" role? Let's take a look at the directions again... (Mrs.Landino instructs

Anna in detail and gives her some examples to consider then circulates further around the room.)

Mrs.Landino: Val, I've noticed you are not working. Why not?

Val: I don't celebrate Halloween.

Mrs.Landino: I realize the story involves a Halloween prank, but you don't need to celebrate Halloween to make connections. Have you ever pulled a prank?

Val: I don't know.

Mrs.Landino: Try and think about it.

Mrs.Landino: Connor, what should you be doing right now? Your paper is not done yet!

Connor: I got this! Trust me!

Mrs.Landino: You can't fill in the page numbers if you don't open the story. Get to work or this will become your homework.

Connor: Don't worry, I got this!

Mrs.Landino: Steven, why aren't you workin?. We have been on this for 10 minutes and you have not written anything!

Steven: I don't know.

Mrs.Landino: Do you understand what you are supposed to do?

Steven: I'm not sure.

Mrs.Landino: Lets review the directions again. (Mrs.Landino reviews the role and gives some examples for Steven to consider.)

Mrs.Landino: John, I notice you are reading your book, are you done?

John: Oh...uh.

Mrs.Landino: Your work is not done. Put your book away and get back to your role sheet.

John: Gotcha.

Mrs.Landino: Steven, why are you still not working?

Steven: I don't know. (A co-teacher steps in to work one on one with Steven.)

Mrs.Landino: All right class, the bell is going to ring. Pack up your things and place this role sheet in your ELA folder for tomorrow.

I spent the next few minutes debating the wisdom of becoming a teacher in the first place. I reflected on the chaotic nature of the day and prepared myself for more chaos to come.

On the next day, I asked the students to review what they had written on their role sheets before we assembled into our groups. The students followed my directions and were soon collected into their new literature circles. I began my usual routine of circulating around the room to make observations.

Connor's group grabbed my attention first. The students in this group looked frustrated and no one was speaking. I asked what was happening and a young lady named Sara volunteered that Connor was not prepared. The group was waiting for him to complete his role. They were not happy about the delay and they told him so. Connor completed his sheet in a rushed fashion while the rest of the group began discussions without him. He joined back in when he was done.

Unfortunately, his group could not stay productive for long. Connor began behaving off task and distracting others in his group. I stopped by his group frequently and was usually met with complaints from his peers. I redirected him repeatedly, but eventually his behavior became so disruptive that I had to remove him from the room and contact his mother about it. The remaining four group members worked well together and discussed what they could in the time remaining.

Steven, who had caused a great deal of problems in round one, was in a new group with very responsible students but I stopped by frequently to check on their progress just to be safe. Each time I checked in on this group, I found them discussing a relevant topic or reviewing a part in the story. I even caught Steven smiling and participating once or twice.

I continued to circulate around the room and found that Anna was having some problems within her group. Her group members were very sweet and supportive, but no matter how kind they were, Anna could not get over her overwhelming sense of shyness. Anna had physically placed herself outside of the circle. Her group mates were trying to keep her involved, but she was extremely reluctant. When she was asked to share the work she had done for her role, she was unable to utter even one word.

Anna is not rebellious and her reluctance stemmed from true fear. The other young ladies in her group tried to help her by reading her work for her and simply asking her yes or no questions to keep her involved. Her best friend, Val, who also suffers from extreme shyness had witnessed this situation from across the room. Her reaction nearly brought tears to my eyes.

On a prior occasion, I had asked Val to read a piece of her writing out loud to the class. This was a class presentation, so she could not avoid it. When she was having difficulty, I stood next to her and placed my hand on her back for reassurance. With my support, Val was able to softly read her work. Everyone roared with applause when she was finished and you could see the guarded pride on her face.

Val remembered this and was doing the same for Anna. Val left her group, crossed the room and stood with her hand on Anna's back, whispering words of encouragement. Anna simply shook her head indicating she would not speak. At this point, I stepped in and, with great support and prompting, was able to elicit one sentence from her. Her group reacted by cheering and congratulating her. It was a small victory for Anna. She later commented on her post-activity survey that her favorite part of literature circles was when the teacher tried to help her talk. It was a small victory for me.

The highs and lows of the classroom behavior did not disguise the fact that the conversations were superficial. Each personal story that was told could connect to the story, but was told as an entity of its own, without any further discussions of the parallels with the story. Questions used by the discussion directors required recall by group members, but not analysis or interpretation. Once again, the groups appeared to think their goal was to get done with the work rather than to investigate the connections and deeper levels of the story.

***Into the Mind of a Seventh Grade Student...
Post-Activity Surveys: Round Two***

My students gave me great feedback after they had attempted the second round of literature circles.

What did you like the most?

- When it was over.*
- Talking about the story.*
- Being a connector.*
- We had a fun time even though we had some people who didn't really know each other.*
- I liked when the teacher helped me to say something.*
- We were able to talk about the story and how it led on to other things.*
- We all got a chance to talk about what we did as our role.*
- Talking and telling how we relate to the text.*
- My group did well on their role sheets.*
- I like that its easy, and I have had good people in my group, and we get done fast.*
- The roles of people and how we even have roles. I think its neat.*
- The story because it made something to talk about.*

What did your group do well?

- Staying on topic.*
- Making evidence.*
- We did well in saying what was on our paper.*
- My group was good at getting done what needs to be done.*
- Expressing our feelings on the story.*

***Into the Mind of a Seventh Grade Student...
Post-Activity Surveys: Round Two (Continued)***

What did you dislike?

- That my group kept saying my connections were off task.*
- Being in a noisy group.*
- Not picking your role.*
- I didn't get the job I like.*
- That we did not choose the parts we played. (Roles)*
- Talking to people even if I am in a small group.*
- I disliked my part (role) in the literature groups.*
- We did not get to pick the group or what (role) we wanted to do.*
- When two or more people have an argument about something irrelevant to the story.*
- My group kept talking about other things.*
- I dislike when the group fights.*

What does your group need to improve?

- We never let anyone talk and pretty much crushed any connections by playing the "off task" card and we really needed to loosen up a bit.*
- Topics to talk about.*
- Staying on topic.*
- Nothing! I think that was the best group I was in yet.*
- Feeling comfortable.*
- Talking to each other of what they had on their papers.*
- We need to concentrate more.*
- Everything. They did absolutely nothing to keep anything going.*

***Into the Mind of a Seventh Grade Student...
Post-Activity Surveys: Round Two (Continued)***

What advice would you give for future use of literature circles?

- As long as you're not being ridiculous, no connection is too off task.*
- Be active in the group.*
- Focus on your work.*
- They are fun if you do them right.*
- To not be afraid. Just go with the flow.*
- Literature circles are fun but you also have to focus and not get off topic.*
- It is very fun and you get to talk. You take a break from other class work.*
- Don't be afraid to talk. At least just try to say something to your group.*
- Stay on task and listen to the person who is talking.*
- If you don't like the kids in your group, don't talk, but if you do like them, talk a lot.*
- I would just say to try and get along and try to get done fast!*
- Stay on task or you will get in trouble. Believe me, I know!*
- Actual conversation makes for a happy and non-uncomfortable group.*
- "No" and "I don't know" is the most irritating answer in the English language.*

***Into the Mind of a Seventh Grade Student...
Similes and Metaphors***

During one warm-up, I asked my students to practice their similes and metaphors by giving them sentence structures to fill in. Their responses were very telling.

Blank Warm-Up:

Name _____ Date _____

Ticket In - Literature Circles / Similes

Finish the following sentences:

1. Literature circles are like _____
_____.

2. Reading is as _____ as _____
_____.

3. My group was like _____
_____.

4. My group was as _____ as _____
_____.

Positive Statements:

-My group was as smart as Albert Einstein. (Juan)

-My group was as interesting as an Ebola culture. (John)

-My group was as funny as Jeff Dunham. (Connor)

-Literature circles are like book clubs. (Connor)

-Literature circles are like a circle of authors thinking together. (Kate)

-Literature circles are like a day without school. (Jerry)

-Literature circles are like getting new clothes. (Aurora)

Positive Statements (Continued):

- My group was like hanging out with my buddies. (Aurora)*
- Reading is as natural as the human will to survive. (Chrissy)*
- My group was as inviting as the meneki neko to the Japanese shops. (Chrissy)*
- Literature Circles are like a piece of cake. (Mark)*
- My group was as fast as a cheetah when we got to work. (Cheryl)*
- My group was as calm as a lake on a slow summer day. (Jake)*
- Literature circles are like a perfect day. (Joe)*
- My group was as friendly as a baby puppy. (Anita)*

Negative Statements:

- Reading is as boring as talking to a wall. (Juan)*
- Reading is as boring as a brick wall. (Steven)*
- My group was like a sack of potatoes. (Steven)*
- My group was like a bunch of comedians not knowing what to do. (Brian)*
- My group was like a powder keg, where someone had to light it, but then it really went off. (John)*
- Literature circles are like a scary castle. (Anna)*
- Literature circles are like a loud bus of kids going by. (Mary)*
- My group was as quiet as a mouse. (Janet)*
- Reading is as boring as snails. (Terry)*
- Reading is as painful as a hard piece of candy. (Derrick)*

Continuing Our Journey: Round Three

Round three began as a bit of a rush. The holiday break was fast approaching, and there were many assemblies and distractions. For this third and final round, I decided to break the class into random groups based on gender. We broke into three groups of girls and two groups of boys. Each group was left to decide which role each member would complete.

As I circulated around the room, I first noticed Chrissy. Chrissy is normally very sullen and quiet but here she was smiling and interacting in an animated fashion with her group! Her feedback from the second round of literature circles had told me that it was one of the most “Uncomfortable and awkward times” in her life. This third round appeared to be the opposite.

Happy with the progress in Chrissy’s group, I went on to observe some other groups. One of the all boy groups was doing a great job summarizing the story and clarifying who the characters were. I stayed to listen further to their conversation. It became clear that their conversation was scripted by the role sheets they had completed and rarely went on to become in-depth discussions. I made a few suggestions and attempted to spark a conversation when I noticed another group was having some trouble.

My attention was drawn to Anna who was still having trouble communicating with her group. Anna had been asked to read a question she

had written on her role sheet. Once again, she had very supportive group members who were saying things like, “Its OK!” And “You can do it! Try just one sentence.” Val sat next to her and tried to give her the moral support to speak. Anna was still not speaking. I stepped in and tried to encourage Anna in the most supportive way possible.

Mrs.Landino: Hey Anna, are you having a tough time sharing?

Alice: She’s nervous, but we’re trying to help her, right Anna? (Anna nods in agreement.)

Mrs.Landino: Its all right, Anna. I understand. May I see what questions you’ve written on your role sheet? (Anna nods in agreement.)

Mrs.Landino: This question looks great. It would be a great one for your group to discuss. Would you read this one sentence?

Anna: Umm.

Alice: You can do it!

Mary: Don’t worry, Anna!

Mrs.Landino: I’m right here and I’ll help you with anything you need. Go ahead, give it a try. (Mrs.Landino pauses for about 20 seconds as Anna gathers her courage.)

Anna: (Barely audible) Why does the other people think Les is strange?

Mrs.Landino: Good!

Anna's group mates all jumped in and congratulated her for reading her question. This question required the group to clarify by making inferences and they did so very well. Anna did not participate any further, but listened carefully to the discussion.

I noticed that my teacher's aid has been spending most of his time with one group. This group included Connor, who had to be removed from the last round of literature circles for disruptive behavior. Steven, Juan, Brian, and John are also in this group. Steven had been very disruptive in the first round, but had done better the second time around. Juan and Brian are known for getting off task whenever possible and John's social awkwardness rounded out this perfect storm of personalities.

My aid walked away from this group and I quickly intervened to see what had been happening. "They were lost." He told me. He had noticed this and jumped in to get a conversation going. Now the group was discussing the summary that one student wrote.

I continued to circulate and noticed that the conversations were still superficial and based mainly on the role sheets. Many groups were announcing that they were done because all of the members had read their roles. One by one, I continued to explain that they were not done and attempted to stimulate conversations.

Eventually, my attention returned to Chrissy's group who was having so much laughter and fun that I was concerned their conversation may have become off task.

Mrs.Landino: Are you at a place where you feel you are done?

Cheryl: No, we made a good connection!

Mrs.Landino: Oh yeah, what was it?

Cheryl: The movie Men In Black. Did you see it?

We went on and discussed some of the similarities between the movie and our short story. It was amusing to see how excited they were when they actually made a connection that was not based on the role sheet.

The volume of the class was steadily getting louder and the conversations, at first glance appeared to be off task. I reminded the class that literature circles were still going on so discussions should still involve the story.

I noticed that one of the groups of girls was still laughing and highly animated, making odd hand gestures. I went over to investigate their discussion.

Mrs.Landino: What was this motion? (Imitates student) What's the connection?

Mary: We had a question about the story. We wondered how the aliens could control the cars.

Janet: Yeah, and we decided they had some kind of remote control.

That explained the hand gestures. They were imitating an alien using a remote control. Once again, I felt this group was making some progress into conversations that were not directly from their role sheets.

Finally, time had run out and I asked the class to return to their seats for dismissal. I asked Val how she was doing in literature circles after a few tries. She replied, "I'm still scared to speak." Anna walked by and I asked her, "Now that you've done this for a while, are you getting more comfortable speaking to your group?" She simply shook her head in the negative.

Feeling a bit frustrated at this news, I reached for a class opinion that I hoped would prove more encouraging. I asked the whole class the following questions.

Mrs.Landino: How many of you made a modern day connection to this story?

Class: Sixteen of Twenty-five hand went up.

Mrs.Landino: How many of you feel you are better at making connections to the text now, than when we first began literature circles?

Class: Twenty-three of Twenty-five hands went up.

Small victories are still victories, none the less!

***Into the Mind of a Seventh Grade Student...
Post-Activity Surveys: Round Three***

My students gave me great feedback after they had attempted the third round of literature circles, where groups were gender based.

Do you think all boy or all girl groups had an impact on your group?

-I think it was easier to connect with others.

-I think it was a better idea.

-We don't fight when I'm with all girls.

-Yes, because then boys / girls won't be shy to do something.

-Yes, because we all got along and it was more fun because we could make more connections.

-It doesn't bother me who I'm with.

-No, because I can work well with anyone.

-YES! How many ways can I say yes? Unless I'm friendly with one, males are demanding and rude. I'd rather be somewhere where I feel comfortable.

-Yes, because I feel comfortable to talk to them.

-No, because my group talked about hanging out since they were best friends.

-Yes, because we got along better.

-No, because it doesn't matter what group you are in.

-Yes, because we all felt comfortable talking to each other.

-No, I think you can work as a group no matter what gender.

***Into the Mind of a Seventh Grade Student...
Post-Activity Surveys: Round Three (Continued)***

What advice would you give TEACHERS for future literature circles?

- If the participants share common interests, things tend to go smoother.*
- Make sure your students are staying on topic.*
- I like them because we don't have to do too much work.*
- When you look at a group you may think they're on task, but when you walk away they probably will talk about something totally different.*
- Put students in groups with their friends because you can make more connections.*
- It is a great way to express yourself, and a good way to talk, but in a mature way, and helps the reader. And also makes coming to school fun.*
- Make sure you give many reasons why we should stay on task. It's a bit of a problem for some students. Why not use a story by popular vote rather than teacher selected as a given topic?*
- Don't put all the same genders in the same group.*
- Don't pair the same people up every time so the students get to talk to people they usually don't.*
- Have all boys in groups and girls in different groups.*
- It is OK to be afraid to talk.*
- They are very helpful.*
- My advice is to check the kids often to see if they are on track.*
- It's a great tool to use to see what the kids in your class are thinking and every one will have fun.*

***Into the Mind of a Seventh Grade Student...
Post-Activity Surveys: Round Three (Continued)***

What did you like the most?

- That it was just boys.*
- I had some of my friends in my group.*
- That we talked about what we had to talk about but had fun while doing so.*
- We were all mostly friends.*
- That there were no girls in it.*
- I liked how if I said something, some wouldn't stare at me. Others would add to what I was saying.*

What did your group do well?

- Talking about the story.*
- Staying on topic.*
- Talk about our connections with the story.*
- Filling out the role right.*
- They helped me feel better.*

What did you dislike?

- I think the group was quicker to put down ideas that were different.*
- That we were done early.*
- People were shy, but I understand.*
- I disliked that none of my close, close friends were with me.*

***Into the Mind of a Seventh Grade Student...
Post-Activity Surveys: Round Three (Continued)***

What does your group need to improve?

-Accepting new or different ideas.

-Listening.

-Staying on complete, full-time task.

-Staying on topic.

-Not talking while someone else is talking.

Data Analysis

Data Sources

A variety of data sources were utilized during this study. Each one gave me a new perspective on my students' experiences with literature circles. By reviewing all of these sources, I was able to gain an overall picture of how literature circles impacted my students.

Surveys

“Attitudes About Reading” Survey

Twenty-one questions were posed in order to gain insight into my students' perceptions about themselves as readers. This gave me insight into my students' confidence regarding their reading abilities, which may impact their interactions in literature circles. Seventy-two percent of my students felt they were good at answering questions about a story. Seventy-two percent also reported that they believed they were perceived by peers to be a good reader.

Pre-Activity Survey

These surveys allowed me to gain insight into what expectations students entered literature circles with. Students were asked to describe their feelings about working with other students in this setting.

I coded many of these surveys as having descriptions of anxiety and excitement. Many surveys expressed both! My students were really excited to try literature circles because they thought the idea of working with friends would be fun. They were also worried about other students bossing them around, not coming prepared, or getting into arguments.

Post Activity Survey

Students were asked to fill out a survey after each round of literature circles. This survey asked the students about their experiences in the group and what recommendations they would give for future literature circles.

Twenty-five students responded that they found literature circles to be a positive experience. Twenty-six would recommend using literature circles in the future.

Student Artifacts

“Charles” Pre-Test

This test was made up of five multiple choice comprehension questions and one “critical thinking / making connections” question. The students were assured that this test did not count as a grade and was only being used to determine a baseline. Seventy-six percent of my students scored 80% or better.

“Charles” Post-Test

This quiz was identical to the pre-test and was given after the completion of literature circles in order to compare results. Surprisingly, only 55% of my students scored 80% or higher on this assessment, therefore no significant gains were shown.

Role Sheets

Each student was required to complete a role sheet prior to engaging in any of the three literature circles. Most students were able to complete their role sheet with appropriate answers and questions. Not all responses would be helpful in starting a discussion. For example, some questions required simple yes or no answers. A few students also chose to neglect their role sheets. This caused some tension as the groups met.

Ticket In – Similes

Each student was given a warm up in the form of a “ticket in.” Four sentence structures were listed and students were encouraged to complete them as honestly as possible. Many responses implied that students found reading to be boring, but literature circles to be fun and engaging.

Observational Data

Shadow Logs

As the students worked on their role sheets or interacted in their literature circles, I walked around the classroom and wrote down everything

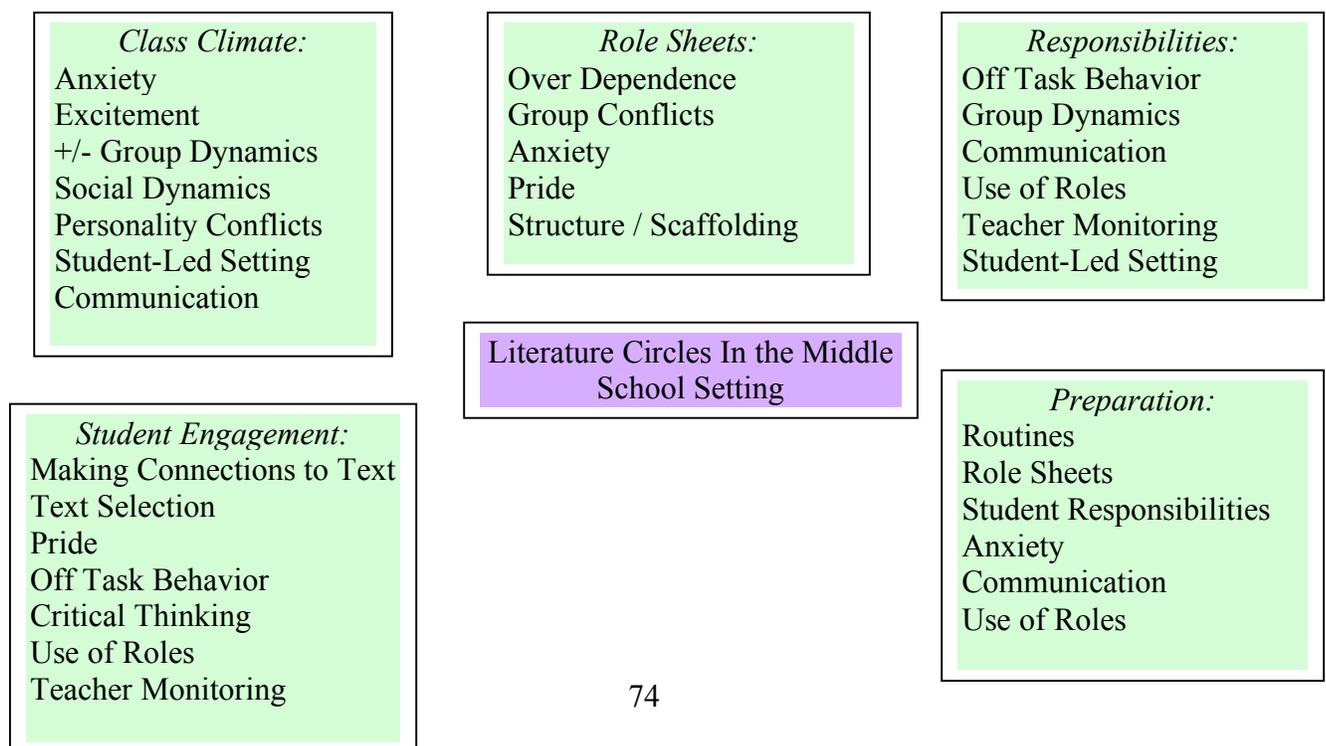
I observed. This allowed me to reflect on interactions that I might have otherwise overlooked. These shadow logs also allowed me to go back and piece together more complete stories of group interactions that were observed over the course of the whole class period.

Field Log

Many external factors help to place the shadow logs into proper perspective. As these factors occurred, I documented them in my field log to form a more well rounded picture of what was happening. This again, allowed me to piece together a more complete story.

Bins

After I had gathered my data, I looked through my materials and began organizing them into bins. The following diagram represents the organization I created.



Themes

As these bins were developed, specific themes became apparent.

- *Literature circles are extremely time consuming and must be prepared for extensively. A safe environment and consistency must be established over a long period of time for success to be met.*
- *Students engaged in literature circles benefit by bringing their own thoughts and experiences that connect to the text. This encourages students to be engaged and genuinely interested in their literature discussions.*
- *Class climate has a huge impact on the outcome of literature circles. Social dynamics such as friendships and arguments impact the quality of the student interaction during group discussions.*
- *Student role sheets benefit students because they give them a sense of structure, especially when they are new to literature circles. Role sheets are also a drawback as students become overly dependant upon them, which leads to discussions that rarely stray from the information written on their role sheets.*
- *The transition from a teacher-led classroom to a student-led setting is difficult and requires students to take on a new level of responsibility.*

The teacher must be especially aware of how responsible, and on task, the groups are when he / she is not monitoring them directly.

Research Findings

- *Literature circles are extremely time consuming and must be prepared for extensively. A safe environment and consistency must be established over a long period of time for success to be met.*

Students cannot be expected to participate effectively in literature circles without a great deal of preparation (Burns, 1998). Many students are unsure of what they should be doing as they enter their literature circles for the first few times. Add the typical middle school anxiety of feeling the need to look “cool” to the mix and you find a class full of uncomfortable groups as literature circles struggle to get off the ground.

One of the drawbacks of my study was the limited time frame. My field log allowed me to document the various barriers that kept me from dedicating as much time I would have liked to literature circles. First, my teaching position was switched from reading to writing. Also, a new curriculum was established which allowed me much less time to dedicate to the connection between reading and writing. Additionally, I was assigned a student teacher who was required to have full time duties for a minimum of three weeks during the time frame of this study. Finally, typical school-wide disruptions, such as assemblies and required testing interfered with my

ability to meet consistently with my study group. This led to limited time to prepare my students to use literature circles. When I began, I explained the role sheets in detail and gave many examples of what literature circles might sound like, but I did not have enough time to dedicate to a true “fishbowl” demonstration.

In order to expedite the use of literature circles, we read the short story selection together as a read aloud. Ideally, students would be given the choice between a number of texts in order to encourage student interest (Burns, 1998). My schedule during this study limited my ability to do this. I was unable to offer this choice or take the time necessary to complete a book talk on each of these books before getting right into the role sheets. Burns (1998) found that these book talks, while time consuming, allowed students to get a better idea of which book they wanted to read. Next, I asked the students to complete their role sheets while I circulated around the room to answer any questions.

This limited timetable would be fine for many types of reading strategies, but in the case of literature circles, it was lacking. My students entered their groups clutching their role sheets with the hopes that they might help guide them through the unknown world of literature discussions. They were ill prepared.

Initial engagement in literature circles was extremely flat and based solely upon the work written in role sheets. Student conversations sounded more like retells or lists and were very scripted. As students finished reading the work they had prepared on their role sheets, they determined that they were done. Maloch (2002) found this same result when conducting a similar study of literature circles. Maloch reported that student conversations did not build upon each other. Student comments were often unrelated.

By the second round of literature circles, some small progress was being made. Steven, who had been extremely difficult in round one, started to add some comments and participate in his group. This was a huge leap for the boy who claimed he hated to talk.

Conversely, Connor, who had participated decently in round one, became very disruptive and had to be removed from his group. Maloch (2002) found a similar result when students involved in his study became disruptive, especially in the early stages of literature circles, due to the fact that they were not really engaged.

By round three I saw groups interacting with less tension. If I stood in my doorway and watched, I would have believed that things were going

well. As I listened more carefully to the conversations, though, I found that the discussions were still being scripted by what was on the role sheets.

In one case, I overheard the “Connector” in the group list all of the connections he was able to make to the story. His group congratulated him on completing his work well and went on to listen to the “Literary Luminary” describe what she liked in the text. No discussion followed either students’ information.

These students needed more preparation, such as “fishbowl” demonstrations to help them understand the goal of literature circles. My students also needed more consistency in literature circle schedules. I was only able to schedule one round of literature circles every six weeks or so. The large gaps between each round of literature circles caused my students to forget some of the instructions I had given them on previous occasions. The gaps also limited their ability to develop a sense of comfort and familiarity regarding literature circles.

Without enough practice, preparation, and consistency literature circles came to take on the role of small groups where students reviewed worksheets. No new insight was being shared and students did not feel their learning was in their own hands. They still wanted me to approve their discussions and evaluate their learning.

Daniels (2006) points out that literature circles are successful due to three main components; engagement, choice, and responsibility. My students were engaged, but not on a meaningful level. Student choice, especially in the area of text selection, was limited due to time constraints. Finally, responsibility took on the form of simply completing a role sheet to be read aloud in a group. More time and preparation was badly needed.

- *Students engaged in literature circles benefit by bringing their own thoughts and experiences that connect to the text. This encourages students to be engaged and genuinely interested in their literature discussions.*

Morale within literature circles was one of the bright points of my findings. Sharing within groups is meant to promote insightful discussions, which allow students to gain insight into their own reading, writing, learning, and thinking skills (Brabham, 2000). As this sharing occurred, students appeared genuinely engrossed in their group discussions. In small peer-led groups, each student had more time to comment and felt a lessened sense of risk. This led to more engaged students.

Some student responses alluded to this in their post-activity surveys:

-We were able to talk about the story and how it led on to other things.

-We all got a chance to talk about what we did as our role.

-I liked talking and telling how we relate to the text.

-I liked where the conversation took us and how open it felt.

These types of quotes clearly showed that students felt engaged and involved in their literature circles. Twenty-five of twenty-six students surveyed responded that they found literature circles to be a positive experience. Twenty-five students also responded that they would recommend using literature circles in the future. The class was really enjoying this, flaws and all!

Juan was a great example of just how motivating literature circles can be. Juan was rarely interested in his school work. He would much rather be on the football field, or socializing with his friends. Yet Juan responded on one survey that he was frustrated that his group was off task at times! The fact that Juan wanted to stay on task was a huge step for him. He rated literature circles favorably and recommended using them in the future.

Despite a reluctant start, even Steven eventually became a supporter of literature circles. Surveys given to Steven after the first and second round of literature circles showed that he was unhappy using them and would not

recommend using them in the future. For the third round, I assigned groups by gender. Steven responded, *What I like most about my group is that its just boys*. He went on to clarify that he enjoyed talking about the story and he rated this literature circle experience favorably. For the first time, he checked off the box indicating that he would recommend using literature circles in the future. For Steven, this was a huge step!

While I was still concerned about the quality of discussions within the groups, I was pleased that the students were enjoying the work they were completing during group time. I considered this another baby step toward effective literature circles.

- *Class climate has a huge impact on the outcome of literature circles. Social dynamics such as friendships and arguments impact the quality of the student interaction during group discussions.*

Heather K. Casey (2009) proposes that preparation begins by simply creating a safe environment, especially when dealing with adolescents who struggle with literacy. This was apparent in my study, especially in regards to Steven.

Steven did not rate himself as a good reader. He had conflicts with a number of the students in his class and wanted no part of being in literature circles. His first round of literature circles was a disaster. He was argumentative and disruptive. Long, MacBlain, and MacBlain (2007) reported outbursts and inappropriate comments similar to Steven's when they began their study. They believed this to be the by-product of frustration and insecurity regarding reading. This may have been true in Steven's case, as well.

One of Steven's group members, John, forged ahead and talked all about personal connections he had made to the text. By the second round of literature circles, Steven seemed to have figured out that he would not look foolish and he would not be required to read out loud to his group. This made all the difference and he began to respond to his group in positive ways. He even added his own personal connection to the text! He still gave a negative rating to literature circles on his post-activity survey, but I was happy with his progress, nonetheless.

By the third and final round of literature circles, Steven had finally warmed up to the idea of speaking in his group. This time, his group was made up of all boys and Steven reported that this factor made a huge

difference to him. For the first time, he rated literature circles positively on his post-activity review.

Val and Anna did not fare as well, however. They were in Steven's group for round one and they had shut down as a result. When the second round of literature circles began, they were not in a group with Steven, but were still apprehensive about saying anything in their group.

Val was eventually coaxed to read the work on her role sheet, but Anna was steadfast in her refusal. By the end of round three, Anna would only read one sentence off of her role sheet after a great deal of support from myself, Val, and her whole group. I asked her if she felt she had made any progress in her ability to talk to her group. She simply shook her head indicating that she did not. Her first negative experience with literature circles, combined with her naturally shy tendencies had seriously impacted her feelings toward literature circles. On one survey, she wrote *Literature circles are like a scary castle*. Her reaction demonstrated how important class climate is to success in this area.

Lane W. Clark and Jennifer Holwadel (2007) experienced some of the same tendencies when they began using literature circles in an urban setting in Ohio. In their class, problems that had arisen in the communities caused conflicts in groups. This led some of their students to fear speaking in their

groups due to their fear of further confrontations. Negative social interactions forced Clark and Holwadel to start from scratch by using mini-lessons developed by Daniels and Steineke (2004). These mini-lessons focused on ice breaking activities that allowed students to identify similarities they had with other students.

Eventually, with the use of many different strategies, Clark and Holwadel were able to return to literature circles and see productive results, but support was necessary throughout the remainder of the year. Class climate needed to be monitored closely and disputes needed to be addressed quickly.

More time for icebreakers and team building activities could have helped to improve situations in my study, as well. If Steven, Val, or Anna had felt they had a friendship with the students in their groups, they probably would have been more receptive to sharing their insights. If Steven had begun literature circles with a stronger sense of safety, he might not have behaved so poorly in his group

- *Student role sheets benefit students because they give them a sense of structure, especially when they are new to literature circles. Role sheets are also a drawback as students become overly dependent upon*

them, which leads to discussions that rarely stray from the information written on their role sheets.

As I began my use of literature circles, I started the students out by using a form of scaffolding called role sheets. These roles became the starting point for group discussions. In this way, each member could be sure to bring their own unique input to the group. Daniels (2006) warns that these roles should not be overly relied upon. They are meant to facilitate discussions when students are still learning how to engage appropriately in literature circles. If students are allowed to rely upon these roles for too long, answers often become scripted and short (Brabham, 2000). I found overwhelming evidence of this in my study.

Initially, most students were worried they would not get the role they wanted or that a group member would come unprepared with an incomplete role sheet. As the third round of literature circles began, students were no longer worried about these factors. They were just happy to have them at all. Many student comments related to role sheets as being one of the components they liked most about literature circles.

-I liked that we all got a chance to talk about what we did as our role.

-My group did well on their role sheets.

-We did well in saying what was on our paper.

-I liked the roles of people and how we even have roles. I think its neat.

So how could I break their hearts and tell them their role sheets should not be the focus of their literature circles? I needed to explain that literature circles should be based upon student engagement and interaction. The benefit of this reading strategy is that student insight and inquiries drive the learning (Brabham, 2000). No matter how many times I reminded students to respond to the material their group mates had written on role sheets, they still took the role sheets at face value and rarely strayed from them.

Each personal connection should have been explained and studied in reference to the text, to form a deeper understanding of the circumstances and emotions that are inferred by the text. By depending on role sheets, my students were telling their stories as if they were just talking at lunch. No connections to the text were being made beyond the initial reasoning to validate how the personal story related to the text in the first place.

By the end of my study, my students had gotten better at communicating within a group. They took turns better, and most students were eager to share their work. But literature circles are meant to be more than just good group manners. My students were simply taking turns

reviewing the information on their sheets. The good news was that their role sheets required them to make personal connections to the text, so they were thinking along those lines. The bad news was that no further discussion was initiated which meant the potential of literature circles was not being met. In future literature circles, I will have to slowly wean my students off of their role sheets, perhaps by using post its or talking to the text. More “fishbowl” demonstrations will also be necessary.

- *The transition from a teacher-led classroom to a student-led setting is difficult and requires students to take on a new level of responsibility. The teacher must be especially aware of how responsible, and on task, the groups are when he / she is not monitoring them directly.*

My seventh grade students came to me having experienced the typical teacher-led classroom dynamics that are common throughout elementary and middle school. Because they are good kids, they were worried about what the correct answer was and how they were supposed to report it. They wanted lots of details about requirements and many reassurances that they were on the right track.

Literature circles naturally transfer much of the responsibilities of learning and teaching to the students (Daniels, 2006). But this switch from a

“teacher as leader” model must be done with a great deal of support from the teacher (Maloch, 2002). My students were very nervous about taking control of their own learning. Role sheets helped them greatly, because they resembled their normal reference of teacher generated learning situations. But these role sheets were only intended to be used as scaffolding, not as a permanent feature. Additionally, students were expected to use these role sheets as a starting point to their learning, not as the end product. Many students wanted me to look over their role sheets to be sure they were correct. They also expected me to collect and grade them, which would be common in a teacher-led setting. I repeatedly reminded my students about how they should use these role sheets, but my students usually fell back into their old habits of reading their work off the page.

Maloch (2002) found that students initially fell back into their old routines when engaging in literature circles for the first few times. This is exactly what I was seeing with my students, as well. They would raise their hands and ask for my help as soon as a question arose instead of attempting to discuss it within their groups. Some groups even came to a complete stop when I stepped away. In fact, one student even wrote this piece of advice:

-When you look at a group you may think they're on task, but when you walk away they probably will talk about something totally different.

Another student advised:

-My advice is to check the kids often to see if they are on track.

Many other students also reported that one main weakness in their group was staying on task. For future literature circles, I will need to create some sort of self-assessment. I will need to emphasize student responsibility. As I did in this study, I will need to circulate frequently in order to help maintain accountability, in the hopes that my students will eventually take on these responsibilities themselves and create a student-led classroom environment.

The Next Step

So where do literature circles go next? Daniels (2006) suggests that “written conversation,” where students have discussions through written exchanges, has great potential. In fact, new studies take this idea a step further by investigating the connection between technology and literature circles. Moreillon et al (2009) explores the benefits of online literature circles in, “Learning and Teaching in WANDA Wiki Wonderland: Literature Circles in the Digital Commons.” This suggests that the use of literature circles will continue to change and develop as teachers work to keep students engaged.

Personally, I feel my study was extremely limited due to time constraints. Eventually, I would like to find myself in a position where I can continue my work with literature circles in a more consistent manner. I have many questions that have been left unanswered.

How can I more effectively guide my students as they begin their literature circles?

What kind of activities can I use to help improve the social climate of the class before entering into literature circles?

How can I be sure my students are accountable as they work in literature circles?

On a long-term scale, what impact do literature circles have on comprehension?

How can I be more effective in offering students' choice in their reading selections?

These nuances of literature circles are difficult to answer and can vary based on the needs of each class. One thing is certain, literature circles are fluid and must be flexible in order to meet their full potential as a classroom tool. New innovations in on-line communication and time-tested techniques of team building must meet to move literature circles into the future. The potential is there. But just like we frequently tell our students, it is up to us to put forth the effort to utilize this potential.

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Appendix A



February 17, 2011

Amanda A. Petko
2703 W. Scenic Drive
Danielsville, PA 18038

Re: HSTRB proposal by Amanda A. Petko for Joseph Shosh

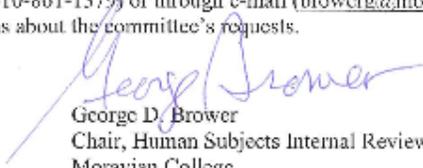
Dear Amanda A. Petko:

The Moravian College Human Subjects Internal Review Board has reviewed your proposal: "Using Literature Circles in the Middle School Setting." Given the materials submitted, your proposal received an expedited review. A copy of your proposal will remain with the HSTRB Chair.

Please note that if you intend on venturing into other topics than the ones indicated in your proposal, you must inform the HSTRB about what those topics will be.

Should any other aspect of your research change or extend past one year of the date of this letter, you must file those changes or extensions with the HSTRB before implementation.

This letter has been sent to you through U.S. Mail and e-mail. Please do not hesitate to contact me by telephone (610-861-1379) or through e-mail (browerg@moravian.edu) should you have any questions about the committee's requests.


George D. Brower
Chair, Human Subjects Internal Review Board
Moravian College
610-861-1379

Appendix B

August 25, 2010

To whom it may concern,

I give my consent for Amanda A. Petko to conduct a research study in her classroom during the 2010 - 2011 school year. I am aware that Ms. Petko will be completing courses toward a Master's Degree in Curriculum and Instruction at Moravian College and that Moravian's program requires that she conduct a systematic study of her own teaching practices.

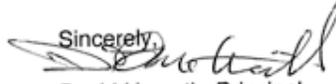
The focus of the research next semester (September 1 - December 10) is the impact of literature circles in a middle school classroom. Students in Ms. Petko's class will engage in literature circles during their regularly scheduled language arts class.

I understand that consent for the study will be obtained from all participants and their parent or guardian. Additionally, participants have the right to withdraw from the study at any time. All children in Ms. Petko's classroom will be involved in the literature circles as a part of her regular language arts program. However, participation in this study is entirely voluntary and will not affect any child's grade. If a child is withdrawn, Ms. Petko will not use any information pertaining to that child in her study.

As a part of Ms. Petko's study on literature circles, she will be observing and reflecting on how the discussions are progressing in the classroom. She will be collecting student samples of work and analyzing test scores to assess progress. She will also be interviewing volunteers to find out about their opinions on literature circles and completing surveys that ask students to reflect on how well they feel literature circles are working.

All of the children's names will be kept confidential. The names of faculty members and the cooperating institution will not appear in any written report or publication of the study or its findings. Minor details of the student's writing may be altered to ensure confidentiality. All research materials will be secured in a protected location and destroyed when the study is over.

Finally, I am aware the Ms. Petko's faculty sponsor is Dr. Joseph Shosh. He can be contacted at Moravian College by phone at (610) 861-1482 or e-mail at jshosh@moravian.edu.

Sincerely,

David Horvath, Principal

Appendix C

September 1, 2010

Dear Parent / Guardian,

During the 2010 - 2011 school year I will be completing courses toward a Master's degree in Curriculum and Instruction at Moravian College. These courses will help me stay in touch with the most effective methods of teaching in order to provide the best learning experience for your child.

Moravian's program requires that I conduct a systematic study of my own teaching practices. The focus of my research this semester (September 1 - December 10) is the impact of literature circles in a middle school classroom. Literature circles give the students a chance to discuss readings in small, organized groups. This allows them to better understand the text and make personal connections to the material. It is my hope that this will help develop their reading abilities in comprehension and analysis.

As a part of my study on literature circles, I will be observing and reflecting on how the discussions are progressing in our classroom. I will be collecting student samples of work and analyzing test scores to check our progress. I will also be interviewing volunteers to find out about their opinions on literature circles. Additionally, the class will be completing surveys that ask students to reflect on how well they feel literature circles are working.

All children in my classroom will be involved in the literature circles as a part of my regular language arts program. However, participation in this study is entirely voluntary and will not affect your child's grade in any way. Your child may withdraw from the study at any time. If your child is withdrawn, I will not use any information pertaining to your child in my study.

All of the children's names will be kept confidential. Neither your child's name, nor the name of any student, faculty member, or cooperating institution will appear in any written report or publication of the study or its findings. Minor details of the student's writing may be altered to ensure confidentiality. All research materials will be secured in a protected location and destroyed when the study is over.

My faculty sponsor is Dr. Joseph Shosh. He can be contacted at Moravian College by phone at (610) 867-0541 or e-mail at jshosh@moravian.edu.

If you have any questions or concerns about my in-class project, please feel free to contact me at school by calling (610) 868-8581 or e-mailing me at alandino@bethsd.org. If not, please sign and return the bottom portion of this letter. Thank you for your help.

Sincerely,

Ms. Amanda A. Landino
Language Arts

Teacher

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

Parent / Guardian Signature

Date

Student's Signature

Date

Appendix D
Stories Utilized for Literature Circles

Round One : “Charles” by Shirley Jackson

Round Two: “Cemetery Hill” by J.B. Stamper

Round Three: “The Monsters are Due on Maple Street” by Rod Serling

Appendix E

Discussion Director

Group Members: _____

Short Story / Text: _____

Your job is to develop a list of questions about this text that your group might want to discuss. Don't worry about the small details; your task is to help your group talk about the "big ideas" in the text and to share their reactions.

Examples: *What was going through your mind while you read?*
Did this part remind you of something that happened to you?

Possible Discussion Starters (Questions):

1. _____

2. _____

3. _____

4. _____

5. _____

What did this text remind you of?

Appendix F
Summarizer

Group Members: _____

Short Story / Text: _____

Your job is to prepare a brief summary about the text.
Your group will start their discussion by listening to your summary.

Main Characters: _____

Setting: _____

Summary: _____

Conclusion: _____

What did this text remind you of?

Appendix G

Connector

Group Members: _____

Short Story / Text: _____

Your job is to find connections between the text and your world. This means finding connections to your life, your school, and your community. Also make connections to events happening in the news, or to other writing or movies that seem to relate to this text.

Some connections I found:

1. _____

2. _____

3. _____

4. _____

5. _____

What did this text remind you of?

Appendix H

Literary Luminary

Group Members: _____

Short Story / Text: _____

Your job is to locate a few sections of the text that are especially interesting, powerful, funny, confusing, or important. Note where you found these sections because you will read them aloud to your group. Also note why you chose them and begin a discussion by telling your group why you chose to select them.

1. Page #/Paragraph _____ Reason for Selection: _____

2. Page #/Paragraph _____ Reason for Selection: _____

3. Page #/Paragraph _____ Reason for Selection: _____

4. Page #/Paragraph _____ Reason for Selection: _____

5. Page #/Paragraph _____ Reason for Selection: _____

What did this text remind you of?

Appendix I

Vocabulary Enricher

Group Members: _____

Short Story / Text: _____

Your job is to select a few words (or figurative phrases) that are powerful, confusing, or creative. You might also note words that are used repeatedly, in an unusual way, or are important to the overall understanding of the text.

1. Vocabulary: _____ Reason for Selection/Def'n: _____

2. Vocabulary: _____ Reason for Selection/Def'n: _____

3. Vocabulary: _____ Reason for Selection/Def'n: _____

4. Vocabulary: _____ Reason for Selection/Def'n: _____

5. Vocabulary: _____ Reason for Selection/Def'n: _____

What did this text remind you of?

Appendix K

Post-Activity Survey

1. How successful were you at using literature circles?

Not Successful

1

2

3

4

Very Successful

5

2. Would you recommend using literature circles in the future?

_____ Yes

_____ No

3. What did you like most?

4. What did you dislike?

5. What advice would you give to students or teachers who will use literature circles in the future?

6. How willing would you be to continue using literature circles?

Not Willing

1

2

3

4

Very Willing

5

7. What did your group do well?

8. What did your group need to improve?

