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“We All Pitched In!”

Literature Circles in Action in a 7<sup>th</sup> Grade Literacy Classroom

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## **Abstract**

The purpose of this qualitative research study was to examine how implementing literature circles could engage students in collaborative learning through reading. Some elements examined were comprehension, engagement, and student cooperation. The participants were seventh graders in an advanced literacy class. The class met every day in the morning for approximately 45 minutes. During that time students were taught reading strategies through modeling as a guided approach to learning. This approach incorporated whole group instruction initially then melded into small group activities and eventually segueing into independent reading groups responsible for creating their own strategies and skills necessary for comprehension. During this independent time, the teacher conducted observations and interviews to check for comprehension, collaboration and on-task responsibilities. The teacher also collected student work to check for understanding of reading. Students worked well together in a variety of grouping arrangements and higher-level comprehension skills were evident in their work. Findings included high levels of student engagement and higher-level comprehension skills.

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## Table of Contents

Abstract.....	iii
Acknowledgements.....	iv
List of Tables.....	x
List of Figures.....	xi
Researcher Stance.....	1
Literature Review.....	7
Introduction.....	7
Collaborative Literacy: Purpose and Definition of Literature Circles.....	7
Collaborative Literacy: Implementation of Literature Circles.....	9
Collaborative Literacy: Comprehension and Vocabulary Instruction Within Literature Circles.....	17
Summary.....	23
Research Design and Methodology.....	25
Introduction.....	25
Setting.....	25
Participants.....	27
Procedures.....	28
Data Sources.....	37
Trustworthiness Statement.....	40
My Story.....	44

The Beginning Few Weeks.....	44
Pre-Study Survey.....	60
Hana’s Story.....	62
John’s Story.....	63
Larry’s Story.....	63
Sarah’s Story.....	64
Other Shorter Vignettes.....	64
Back To My Story.....	65
Next Step: Gradual Release of Responsibility.....	67
Vocabulary, Literary Devices, and Characterization.....	67
Literature Circle Discussions.....	71
Next Step: Guided to Independent Practice.....	72
Round One: Success?.....	75
Round Two: Here We Go Again.....	78
Round Three: Last Week of Novel Study.....	88
New Study Groups: Our Final Round.....	97
Next Assignment: Student Choice with New Groups.....	101
Learning Logs.....	103
Post Study Survey.....	110
Time To Use Metaphors!.....	112
Data Analysis.....	116

Observational Analysis.....	117
Baseline/Assessment Data Analysis.....	117
Student Survey Analysis.....	118
Student Interview Analysis.....	118
Literacy Activities and Student Work Analysis.....	119
Figurative Language Analysis.....	120
Codes, Bins, and Theme Statements.....	120
Research Findings.....	123
Teacher’s Role.....	124
Resistance and Obstacles.....	126
Comprehension and Literacy Strategies.....	129
Student Engagement.....	131
Classroom Culture.....	134
Next Steps.....	137
References.....	140
Resources.....	145
Appendixes.....	146
A. HSIRB Approval.....	146
B. Principal Consent Form.....	147
C. Participant Consent Form.....	148
D. Novel Study and List of Short Stories.....	149

E. Pre-Study Survey.....	150
F. Frayer Model Vocabulary.....	151
G. “What are Literature Circles?”.....	152
H.1 Literature Circle Packet: Assignment Sheet.....	153
H.2 Literature Circle Packet: Summary and Context Vocabulary.....	154
H.3 Literature Circle Packet: Questions and Answers.....	155
H.4 Literature Circle Packet: Character Map.....	156
H.5 Literature Circle Packet: Story Plot Map.....	157
H.6 Literature Circle Packet: Illustration.....	158
I. Individual Self-Assessment.....	159
J. Leader Cue Cards for Short Stories.....	160
K. Post-Study Survey.....	161
L. Metaphor Cloud.....	163

## **List of Tables**

Table 1. Baseline Data- PSSA and Study Island Results.....	46
Table 2. Baseline Data Collected.....	48
Table 3. Analysis of Pre-Study Survey.....	61
Table 4. Students' Self-Assessment Survey Results.....	98
Table 5. Analysis of Post-Study Survey.....	110

## **List of Figures**

Figure 1. Student Sample of “Hunger” Story Map .....	49
Figure 2. Compare/Contrast Small Group Work.....	51
Figure 3. Non-participant Observation on Think, Pair, Share Activity.....	55
Figure 4. Student Sample of Main Idea Hand.....	57
Figure 5. Student Sample of Talking to the Text Strategy.....	59
Figure 6. Frayer Model for Vocabulary Development.....	70
Figure 7. Participant Observation During the First Days of Literature Circles....	74
Figure 8a. Student Sample of Context Vocabulary.....	76
Figure 8b. Student Sample of Beginning Story Map.....	77
Figure 8c. Student-Generated Questions and Answers Demonstrating Prediction and Inference.....	78
Figure 9a. Resistance and Perceived Resistance Based on Group Interviews.....	80
Figure 9b. Cooperation Evident Based on Group Interviews.....	81
Figure 10a. Student Sample of Context Vocabulary.....	83
Figure 10b. Student Sample of Middle Story Map.....	84
Figure 10c. Student-Generated Questions and Answers Demonstrating Inference.....	85
Figure 10d. Character Traits Using Supporting Evidence.....	86
Figure 11. Vignette Based on Interview Conversations with Groups.....	91
Figure 12a. Student Sample of Context Vocabulary.....	92

Figure 12b. Student-Generated Question and Answer Demonstrating Inference.	93
Figure 12c. Student-Generated Question and Answer Demonstrating Inference.	93
Figure 12d. Student-Generated Question and Answer Using Text-Based Evidence.....	94
Figure 12e. Student-Generated Question and Answer Using Text-Based Evidence.....	94
Figure 12f. Student Generated Question and Answer Demonstrating Drawing Conclusions.....	95
Figure 12g. Student Sample of Climax and Conclusion of Story Map.....	95
Figure 12h. Student Illustration Demonstrating Visual Comprehension.....	96
Figure 13. Individual Assessment Analysis.....	100
Figure 14. Chart of Groups’ Responses and My Thoughts.....	105
Figure 15a. Student Samples of Learning Log Illustrations.....	107
Figure 15b. Predicting in Learning Logs.....	108
Figure 15c. During Reading Vocabulary; “Clicks and Clunks”.....	108
Figure 15d. After Reading Student-Generated Questions and Answers.....	109
Figure 15e. Lack of Complete Responses.....	109
Figure 16. Pastiche of Metaphor Analysis.....	114
Figure 17. Coding and Bins.....	121
Figure 18. Theme Statements.....	122

### **Researcher Stance**

*"When educating the minds of our youth, we must not forget to educate their hearts." ~Dalai Lama*

My childhood stories of playing "teacher" in the basement of my parent's home are still embarrassing to me as my mother, to this day, continues to share them with friends and family. As embarrassing as the stories are, I admit they are true; they are indicators of my youthful yearning to be a teacher and to make a difference. I had always wanted to be a teacher since I was very young and I never swayed from that career goal. I spent the first nine years of my schooling in a Catholic school where absolute order and obedience were rewarded and being different made you inadequate. I had been bullied by older students in the school who made fun of my shoes because they knew my parents did not have a lot of money; I was the youngest of four children. I learned quickly to ignore the bullies, and eventually they advanced into other schools, but the hurt I felt, and the failure of teachers to notice, made me angry and confused. I remember getting reprimanded by a nun, in front of the whole class, for forgetting to turn in an absence note at the right time in third-grade. I had to fight back the tears; I did not want to look like a baby in front of my peers. So, yes, I did go into the basement of my parent's home every day after school and play teacher. I was the kind of teacher who cared about her students, listened to their needs, and allowed for differences; this was the kind of teacher I desired to be. I did eventually forge

a few strong friendships and graduated with honors from this school, but not before knowing in the soul of my being, I would be a different kind of teacher than I experienced throughout most of my childhood; I would make a difference.

My high school years were filled with friends and fun and working, yet one teacher stands out as an influence to me, namely my economics teacher. His classroom was filled with jokes and, although he teased me, I thoroughly enjoyed his class. I knew I wanted to be a teacher who made a difference, but I also wanted to be able to make learning fun. That was something I really had not experienced before his class. So, building upon my schooling experiences, I came to realize the kind of teacher I wanted to be: trusting, caring, intuitive, and fun. I did not really know if this was possible, but it was my goal and I was determined to make it a reality. My goal did become a reality when I graduated from college, *summa cum laude*, with my teaching degree in hand, but also a young child to raise.

Today, as I look back over my teaching career, I realize I *have* made a difference in many students' lives. I also realize I have taken quite a long and arduous journey, both personally and professionally, to be where I am today, teaching seventh grade. I started out my career as a preschool teacher while my children were young and enjoyed those years, but I did not feel fully satisfied as a professional. Many professional decisions I made early in my career were based on my personal life. Some of these decisions I would probably change if I could;

however, I am not regretful. After a personal crisis and struggle, I started teaching full-time in a high school for at-risk youth. Those six years taught me more about students than any college textbook. I learned that the caring part about teaching is crucial for many students to learn. Once these students felt connected to me, they were willing to do anything in my classroom. I could actually teach them, but first I had to care for them. Trust was key and more importantly, needed, to enable the success of these students. Many still dropped out of school, or got into trouble with the law, but many graduated. The ones who graduated would always hug me at Commencement and thank me for caring. They did not necessarily care about the content they learned, but they learned because I cared about them. What a powerful lesson! I brought this experience with me to my next teaching assignment, seventh grade.

I love teaching seventh grade! I finally found my niche: I can be caring and fun! Seventh graders are unique because they are transitioning from elementary to secondary education. It is my job as their teacher to help them in this process. Seventh graders grow tremendously both emotionally and developmentally over the course of the year, and I am lucky enough to educate and transition them through this process. We have to be more than teachers; we sometimes have to be counselors and even quasi-parents as well. Creating an environment of trust and care is my first job, and then I can teach them reading. I am a seventh grade literacy teacher and it is my job to instill a love of reading and

to make my students want to read. I find this job challenging yet exciting. I try to choose novels I think would be interesting with powerful moral lessons. I want my students to ask questions, debate ideas, and really think about their own thinking and reading. I choose novels hoping to spark an interest and get all students involved in discussion. After teaching seventh grade for five years, I listened to feedback from former students. Many told me they liked my class the best or they loved creating a project for a certain novel or that they appreciated how nice and understanding I was. This was all music to my ears; however, I knew I could do better. I wanted to do better to be the best teacher I could be, and to do so, I would need to evaluate my teaching methods.

I realized I do a lot of whole group instruction, which can be effective, but I also believed that my instruction could be better with smaller group interactions. Through research and my own experiences, I realized that middle-school students need to socialize and move around and maybe I was stifling some creativity by not allowing enough for this type of activity. I realized that not all students get their opinions heard in such a large group setting and how could I ensure their voices were heard if I did not provide enough opportunity for them to speak? Upon thinking about my own practice and strategies, I recognized that literature circles could incorporate these ideals. Upon researching more about this strategy, I decided on my research question: *What are the observed and reported experiences when literature circles are introduced into a seventh grade literacy*

*classroom?* I had hoped to challenge my students to find out and possibly answer my lingering questions.

I had some reservations and concerns about implementing literature circle groups as well as some hopes. I was apprehensive about implementing literature circles at the start of the school year as I felt there was a certain level of independence needed for success and seventh graders tend to struggle with being independent learners. I was also concerned because the students would not have much of a choice in text since we had a specific curriculum, but I was hopeful we would work through it. I had very rich texts with thought-provoking plots that I had hoped would compensate for the lack of choice. I was also hoping to incorporate some choice in various short story readings. My goals for this study included meeting students’ needs at this stage in their development: the need for socialization, interactions with peers, and movement. I had hoped to give the quieter student a voice, the more gregarious student patience, and each group member a chance to be actively engaged in text. I had hoped to see improvement in comprehension skills and content vocabulary with more student interactions and sharing of background experiences and ideas. Finally, I had hoped to see a classroom of students engaged in and around text through their words, actions, and writing.

My hopes and anticipations for the outcomes of my study might not be what I expected, and I accepted that. I was open to what the research would tell

me through the data I collected. I realized that not every student would enjoy working in groups and that some students were more independent learners. Therefore, I considered multiple points of view as I gathered and analyzed data and conferred with colleagues and participants throughout the duration of the study. I was reflective in my practice to determine any changes that needed to be made and adjusted my study accordingly. I knew there would be obstacles and challenges along the way but I would work through them for the benefit of my students. I also accepted that my study would not be a straight and narrow path to student success, but I was a firm believer in the idea that all students can and will learn and I also believed students would want to read if the materials were interesting and engaging enough. More importantly, I was looking forward to educating their hearts as well as their minds.

## **Literature Review**

### **Introduction**

In today's world of high stakes testing, many middle school students have little, if any, time and opportunity to share their thoughts and feelings in a collaborative way with their peers as teachers focus on skill and drill practice and teaching to the state standardized test. Yet, research has shown this is not an effective way to teach middle school students (Musoleno & White, 2010). To juxtapose this scenario, imagine a middle-school classroom where students are actively engaged in reading, writing, and discussion with their peers, comprehending the text, and learning new and challenging vocabulary all at the same time. This seemingly implausible scenario can be possible with the proper implementation of literature circles. In literature circles, students are making connections, discussing plot, drawing conclusions, and sharing ideas; ultimately putting the best reading strategies into practice, yet still learning from each other. It is an effective strategy to engage middle school students in literature as well as an effective literacy strategy to increase comprehension and vocabulary skills, yet can still increase test scores in a more cooperative classroom environment.

### **Collaborative Literacy: Purpose and Definition of Literature Circles**

Across middle school classrooms today, educators struggle with motivating students to read and be engaged, especially in a world of high-stakes testing (Musoleno & White, 2010). However, pressure to increase test scores can

produce a classroom environment that is mostly teacher-directed and typically not developmentally appropriate for middle school students. Musoleno and White (2010) suggest that an adolescent’s developmental needs include the need to socialize, move around, and interact with their peers. As the need to socialize increases more in the middle school years, educators must harness this need and find creative ways to instruct these students for optimal learning, while still trying to balance the need for test preparation. They also suggest that, “Cooperative learning and other flexible grouping strategies are among the instructional practices that address the young adolescent’s need for physical movement and social interaction” (p. 3). One strategy that encompasses these needs is literature circles. Literature circles engage and motivate students through social interaction while increasing their comprehension skills through dialogue with their peers (Ketch, 2005). These conversational peer-led interactions also increase a deeper understanding of vocabulary and word analysis and may “boost the chance that students will own the new words that they are introduced to in class and will encounter in their reading” (Kelley, Lesaux, Kieffer, & Faller, 2010, p. 10). Since most children are naturally sociable (Dewey, 1938) and comprehension skills and broad vocabularies contribute to successful test takers (Gallagher, 2009), then literature circles blend social engagement with critical thinking; this symbiotic relationship can be a powerful teaching tool.

Literature circles are small groups of students reading and discussing literature together (Daniels, 2006). This strategy encourages students to read with a focus and then report on what they have read to a group of their peers, thus determining relevance and significance as well as empowering the readers through this sharing process (Blum, Lipsett, & Yocum, 2002). Literature circles provide a way for students to engage in social interactions with their peers, which encourage literacy skills and strategies, while also instilling life-long reading habits (Daniels, 2006). Students who interact with their peers are more engaged and have a more positive attitude toward reading (Daniels, 2006). As Matthew Knoester (2010) confirmed in his research, reading is a social practice. Students who are engaged in the reading of a relevant text want to discuss what they have read and share topics and ideas with others (Knoester, 2010). Literature circles allow for sharing of opinions and learning together. They can also be a tool for self-determination and goal-setting and provide a range of accommodations to meet all students' individual learning styles (Blum, et al., 2002). Literature circles can be tailored to meet the needs of any teacher's class size and student population; they can be beneficial for all students while still incorporating a social component to learning.

### **Collaborative Literacy: Implementation of Literature Circles**

There are several considerations for implementation that vary depending on a teacher's classroom dynamics and purpose in using literature circles. An

educator needs to make certain decisions in regard to implementing these book clubs such as: assigning roles within the group, allowing student choice in books and/or group members, and students’ levels of responsibility and independence within the group (Clarke & Holwadel, 2007). Also, a teacher needs to consider how to model effective literacy strategies for students to put into practice and follow (Clarke & Holwadel, 2007; Lloyd, 2004).

Roles and tasks vary depending on the dynamics of a teacher’s classroom. Initially, Harvey Daniels (2002) promoted the use of roles for each student within the group for accountability, however, according to Daniels’ (2006) later writing, divisional roles within the groups were meant for temporary use and may or may not be needed for a particular classroom. Daniels (2006) states, “only ...a few teachers around the country seem to use role sheets effectively on a regular basis” (p. 11) and many report problems with accountability or over-dependence on such roles creating mechanical discussions (Daniels, 2006). Susan Lloyd (2004) reported observing in her study, “...that the discussion became more genuine when the students departed from the roles” (p. 120). Even in her master’s thesis from 2011, Amanda Petko found that sometimes students’ responses seem scripted based on their role sheets. A teacher really needs to think about and determine his/her classroom needs based on student population and classroom dynamics to decide if and when to use roles in literature circles.

With or without roles, it is still important for each student to be responsible in some way for his/her part of the group and to be assessed. This can be accomplished through reading response logs, sticky notes, bookmarks, graphic organizers, drawings, or some other way deemed appropriate by the teacher (Daniels, 2006). Daniels (2006) also suggests a new method for students' accountability which can take the form of written conversation. This can be accomplished by writing notes back and forth between students, in letter form to each other, or other writing formats that fit within the reading context. These suggestions by Daniels give teachers more choices to create authentic literature circles and to connect reading and writing; these also promote higher-order thinking skills such as inferring, connecting to, and visualizing the literature (2006). According to Shosh and Zales, these higher-order thinking skills become even more important for students in today's global age (2005). Educators need to prepare their students to be future critical thinkers and life-long learners.

There are several considerations for formulating groups and maintaining the integrity of literature circles. Usually students are divided into groups of four to six (Blum, et al., 2002), but could be as large as seven or eight (Fountas & Pinnell, 2006) or even as small as two (Brabham & Villaume, 2000). As Blum's (2002) research states:

More important than the number of students is how the circle size affects student interactions. A literature circle needs to be configured so that the size of

the group does not interfere with the readers’ opportunities to become increasingly adept at expressing interpretations of texts and responding to the contributions of others in thoughtful, respectful, and probing ways (p. 100). Flexible grouping is also reported in Wood, Roser, and Martinez’s (2001) article: “We also advocate flexible grouping...(it) is a dynamic approach to learning that involves the formation of many group arrangements to coordinate with teacher and student needs and goals” (p. 103). Flexible grouping also applies to the placement of students. Reading groups can be formed on the basis of book choice, heterogeneous groups, or reading levels and/or abilities (Wood, et. al, 2001). There is research available to support or dispute allowing students to choose their own groups; therefore, it is important for the teacher to carefully decide on grouping and what would work best for all students to meet their needs and to provide them with an opportunity to be active participants, where they can get along, act responsibly, and accomplish their tasks (Ares, 2008). As Dewey (1938) asserts,

The educator is responsible for a knowledge of individuals and for a knowledge of subject-matter that will enable activities to be selected which lend themselves to social organization, an organization in which all individuals have an opportunity to contribute something... (p. 56).

Accordingly, the teacher really needs to know his/her class of students and has an important responsibility in creating literature circle groups and making it a successful literacy strategy.

Regardless of the size or type of grouping arrangements, most authors agree there are several key components to aide in student success during implementation of literature circles. Daniels (2006) maintains that engagement, choice, responsibility, and research are the four key elements to any good literature discussion group. Lohmiller (2010) links choice and engagement when she states that students will be more interested and have a personal vested interest when they can choose books or short stories. Books should have a variety of reading levels to accommodate all students in the classroom, as well as novels with good discussion topics (Brabham & Villaume, 2000). Teachers should also include books proven to be student favorites and books they love as well (Fountas & Pinnell, 2006). Sometimes, a curriculum may mandate certain reading materials or may be constrained due to budgets and/or availability (Brabham & Villaume, 2000; Lohmiller, 2010). In this scenario, it is imperative for teachers to use texts that are high quality, relate to critical issues and experiences in readers' lives, and can provoke deep discussion, reflection, and questioning among the student groups (Brabham & Villaurne, 2000). Ultimately, it is the teacher's responsibility to choose books that are age-appropriate, but will also engage their students with high-interest topics.

The teacher’s role is crucial in the initial implementation of literature circles. The teacher’s role initially should be one of modeling techniques to students (Lloyd, 2004). The teacher may use read-alouds and think-alouds that students will model in their groups; this is especially important because students do not usually know how to interact with the text (Lloyd, 2004). As Lloyd would suggest, interacting with text is often something that needs to be explicitly taught, requiring the teacher to ask questions to the group which are prompted by the reading. It is a gradual release of responsibility which requires more of the teacher initially, but gradually allows for more student responsibility as they progress from a guided to independent practice; it is an effective scaffolding technique (Brabham & Villaume, 2000). Once the foundation for literature circles is set, then, “the teacher can become a back seat driver and allow students to be responsible for their own learning . . . the teacher can step in and intervene at her discretion” (Brown, 2002, p. 5). Teachers may need to coach students along the way with positive words of encouragement if they notice the group is struggling (Clarke & Holwadel, 2007). For example, in her research, Ares’s (2008) observed the teacher in her study who decided to intervene only when the noise level reached an unacceptable level. Or, as Clarke and Holwadel (2007) report, they needed to intervene as the climate of collaboration disintegrated due to disparities in sociocultural forces within their classroom and they needed to use powerful mini-lessons to build that lost sense of community. A teacher can

decide when and if to intervene in the group depending on the needs of the class and to determine what role he/she will assume as needs arise. For example, a teacher may serve as a leader, facilitator, or even a participant, while still allowing for more student independence and less teacher dependence (Fountas & Pinnell, 2006) which is one goal of literature circles (Daniels, 2006).

Whatever role the teacher deems most appropriate for the book groups, one point is certain in the implementation of literature circles: the traditional role of the teacher in the classroom will ultimately change. This type of group learning forces the teacher to depart from his/her role as the great imparter of knowledge, a traditional school perspective, and to pass that role onto his/her students (Willis, 2007). This conversational independence creates a classroom environment that breaks away from the typical classroom discourse patterns (Brabham & Villaume, 2000). Usually, the discourse pattern in a classroom is IRE, or teacher-directed, with typically one right response (Cazden, 2001). This traditional type of classroom discourse has the potential to be inauthentic and not challenging enough for students (2001) and can also exclude the quieter students from the conversation (Lloyd, 2006). In contrast, literature circles encourage all students to contribute to the group. As Lohmiller (2010) observed, “Shy kids are more comfortable speaking, dominant kids are forced to listen to others, disengaged kids are connected to a group with similar interests, and everyone must contribute” (p. 40). And, according to Lloyd (2004), even reluctant readers

get a voice in small group discussion because they are more apt to respond in smaller groups versus a larger audience. By creating this role shift and allowing students the chance to construct their own meaning through interacting with each other, students are more actively engaged in the text, more eager to participate, and feel a greater sense of belonging (Willis, 2007); it is a recipe for success.

This sense of belonging and positive learning environment is the last key ingredient to the proper implementation of literature circles, or true collaborative literacy. If the teacher structures the groups appropriately, sets a good foundation of respect in the classroom, and scaffolds as needed, then the environment is set for independent book talks. It is a constructivist theory supported by both Dewey and Vygotsky. Vygotsky (1978) believed that children learn best from each other, through interaction with their peers, or social learning. He also suggests that students can help each other in areas where each, individually, may be weak; thus supporting his theory of zone of proximal development, or matching students' needs where they are developmentally (1978). This empowers students to feel more confident in their learning and builds a sense of belonging appropriate to all types of learners (Ares, 2008). Ares's (2008) found that, "...students valued working in groups for the sense of community it created..." (p. 109). Ann Ketch (2005) also concurs noting, "Conversation helps individuals make sense of their world. It helps to build empathy, understanding, respect for different opinions, and ownership of the learning process" (p. 8). How to interact socially and work

with peers are skills students need for the future. It forces students to work together for a common good or purpose and to learn how to effectively communicate their thoughts and needs (Wood, et. al, 2001). Smaller group sizes and a comfortable learning environment lower students’ affective filters and reduce anxiety (Krashen, 1982), which is especially crucial for English as a Second Language (ESL) students, but beneficial to all students. Research has shown these peer-led discussion groups build community and self-worth in a classroom, create a positive learning environment, and meet the various needs of any class; however, they are also powerful tools for cognitive growth by provoking thought and encouraging effective literacy strategies.

### **Collaborative Literacy: Comprehension and Vocabulary Instruction within Literature Circles**

Comprehension is the key to any literacy program (Fountas & Pinnell, 2006). It is the ultimate goal for fostering life-long reading habits (2006). The more students understand the text, the more they can expand their knowledge to include higher-level thinking skills. “Comprehension is the vital, central core of the broader and more complex ability to reason” (Fountas & Pinnell, 2006, p. 4). Literature circles foster more critical thinkers through conversation.

“Conversation is a basis for critical thinking. It is the thread that ties together cognitive strategies and provides students with the practice that becomes the foundation for reading, writing, and thinking” (Ketch, 2005, p. 8). Within these

conversations, students learn from each other; it is one of the benefits of using literature circles. According to Ketch (2005), as readers read and discuss, they make connections, question the text, infer, retell, and self-monitor. This is also supported by Lloyd (2004) when her students reported that, “...having control of the discussion was more challenging and interesting. The process encouraged self-directed learning” (p. 121). Vygotsky also believed that learning is a social activity and viewed language as a mechanism for thinking and comprehension (1978). Ketch (2005) calls this social inquiry or conversations where learning takes place: “Hearing ideas discussed orally from another’s point of view increases understanding, memory, and monitoring of one’s own thinking. Ideas transfer on the basis of conversation” (Ketch, pp. 9-10). In these conversations, students will ask questions of the text and of each other ultimately creating a culture of literacy where intentional conversation and comprehension abound (Fountas & Pinnell, 2006). Literature circles can create an authentic, inquiry-based learning environment in which there are several ways to support and assess comprehension and to promote vocabulary development.

As mentioned briefly before, Daniels (2006) suggests several ways to assess and support comprehension as well as accountability. He suggests ways to connect reading and writing such as dialogue journals or notes in which students are responding to the literature in some way. These can be teacher-directed questions or prompts to get students thinking on a higher level and provoke

written conversation. Also, he suggests moving away from the projects and quizzes and assess all along the way by using teacher observations and forms to record students' preparation and participation within the group. In Blum's (2002) study, the teacher observed literature circles discussions and made notes on a rubric to assess evidence of understanding. Several studies used taped-recorded discussions and student interviews to assess the group's work. Some studies used student-driven questions to lead the discussion and/or written work. Lloyd (2004) reported observing positive results in student-derived questions leading to animated reactions and discussions. She noted that the students' questions cleared up confusing concepts, vocabulary and literary language. Another way to collect and analyze students' learning can be accomplished through a teacher's use of surveys, field notes, interviews, participant and non-participant observations, shadow logs, and other forms of data used in action research (Hendricks, 2012; McNiff & Whitehead, 2010). These methods allow the teacher to look for commonalities and make judgments about his/her methods and can be indicators of a student's success. Another tool used to promote comprehension and vocabulary, which can also be used for assessment, is graphic organizers.

Graphic organizers are visual displays of concepts used to promote meaning and understanding of a text (Dexter & Hughes, 2011). Graphic organizers can be essential tools for comprehension, especially when used with learning-disabled students, but are powerful comprehension tools for every type

of student-learner (Dexter & Hughes, 2011). Graphic organizers can take many forms and shapes depending on the text and purpose and can be easily adapted for use in literature circles. Graphic organizers enable students to demonstrate their comprehension by organizing their thoughts and reactions and then springboarding into discussion based on character, plot, setting, or some other literary element (Dexter & Hughes, 2011). Graphic organizers can be used at various intervals in literature circles and can also be collected for assessment. There are a variety of free graphic organizers for use with literature circles on the internet. One resource for teachers is Laura Candler. Her website has an extensive amount of free, downloadable resources for teachers including many graphic organizers to assess a variety of literary elements depending on content (<http://www.lauracandler.com/>). She has a literature circle packet that includes spaces for: written summaries, vocabulary words in context, questions and answers, character maps, plot diagrams, and illustrations. All sections are student-generated but can be tailored to include teacher-generated prompts as well. This whole packet could be collected and assessed for a grade intermittently or at the end of the group work. Candler provides the site with recommendations, but the teacher can use his/her discretion for how and when to use the resources. Graphic organizers can be great organizational tools for comprehension and vocabulary learning, but it is up to the teacher to know which ones will fit in best with his/her purpose, context, and curriculum.

Vocabulary or word learning is an important component to comprehension (Harmon, 1998). Students learn vocabulary best through exposure to a wide reading of literature and social interactions (1998); literature circles provide an outlet for social interactions through peer discussions of a text. Harmon’s (1998) study showed that as students engaged in book discussion groups, their learning behaviors and outcomes shifted. The results included increased word learning strategies, as well as shared meaning constructions. Students learned to make meaning of vocabulary through peer interactions, discussions, and making connections to background knowledge. Brabham and Villaume (2000) agree by noting students in literature circles monitored their own reading and were able to solve word and text level problems in creative ways. “We have seen students develop character webs, copy passages they find well written, and locate examples of specific literary techniques such as alliteration, simile, or metaphor in readings” (p. 280). In Ares’s (2008) study, the teacher incorporated comprehension, vocabulary, and identification of main ideas and supporting details as part of her literature circle groups’ assessments.

Vocabulary development in literature circles can take various forms. Teachers can select the words and allow students to find the meaning through context clues, a dictionary, or students can choose their own words to define. If roles are assigned, then one student may be responsible for defining vocabulary words and then sharing with the group. Either way is acceptable according to

Kelley, Lesaux, Kieffer, and Faller (2010). They purport that a balance of direct instruction and contextual cues is needed in the classroom for successful vocabulary instruction. However, they also maintain that vocabulary instruction should focus on a deep understanding of a relatively small number of words within engaging texts. They also suggest that, “To promote deep word understanding, instruction has to begin with good conversation about rich topics and ideas...the discussion must be anchored in text to promote literacy and encourage the use of academic vocabulary...” (p. 8). It is important for students to hear and practice the vocabulary words in different contexts and in their words and writing so that, “they can grapple with shades of meaning and better understand all the ways words can be used” (p. 9). Vocabulary instruction should include collaboration, but should also be based in context (Kelley, et al, 2010). According to Harmon (1998), vocabulary learning is a complex task that should be learned in context: “Learning from context plays a significant part in the student’s yearly acquisition of such a large volume of words” (518). Once a word is seen and heard in a variety of contexts, the student’s chance of making real meaning out of the word is increased (Harmon, 1998). In Harmon’s (1998) study, through discussion, students activated prior knowledge, connected to, and questioned vocabulary words and were able to generate word meanings and expand their own schemas. It is a more meaningful and authentic process of word formation and understanding. Some suggestions made by Harmon to assess

vocabulary use include: observations, definitions based on synonyms, antonyms, and illustrations (Frayer model), discussions, and written expression (1998). It is really up to the teacher to determine how to assess vocabulary instruction based on his/her objectives and needs of the class within the discussion groups.

Students want and need motivation to read in order to be engaged; this engagement leads to increased comprehension, which in turn leads to an increase in vocabulary (Kelley, et al, 2010); therefore, literature circles provide the parameters for increased vocabulary learning.

### **Summary**

A literature circle is a collaborative literacy strategy that engages all students in reading through peer discussion groups in a positive learning environment (Daniels, 2002, 2006; Lohmiller, 2010). Literature circles are appropriate for every teacher and every classroom because it is a tool that can be tailored to meet the needs of all students and give reluctant readers a voice in a smaller group setting (Blum, et al., 2002; Wood, et al., 2001; Krashen, 1982). Students are engaged with each other through the text which fosters critical thinking skills, increased comprehension, and academic vocabulary through interaction with their peers (Brabham & Villaume, 2000; Harmon, 1998; Knoester, 2010; Vygotsky, 1978). The proper implementation of literature circles is crucial to the success of this strategy. The teacher's role initially is focused on modeling strategies and guided practice; however with time and scaffolding

techniques, this guidance leads to independence practice where the students take control of their learning (Brabham & Villaume, 2000; Clarke & Holwadel, 2007). The teacher can then decide on what role he/she will play as the strategy takes its own shape and form within the classroom and how to assess the student work (Clarke & Holwadel, 2007; Daniels, 2006). Literature circles can also be a motivating strategy since middle school students needs include socialization and working with their peers (Kelley, et al., 2010; Ketch, 2005; Lloyd, 2004; Musoleno and White, 2010). With proper implementation and classroom climate, these book clubs will promote interpersonal skills, generate better test-takers, and build lifelong learning habits that will benefit students throughout their school years and well into adulthood (Kelley, et al., 2010; Ketch, 2005; Knoester, 2010; Lloyd, 2004; Musoleno and White, 2010; Willis, 2007; Wood, et al., 2001).

## **Research Design and Methodology**

*"You have to go wholeheartedly into anything in order to achieve anything worth having."* ~Frank Lloyd Wright

### **Introduction**

I delve into everything I do wholeheartedly, and so is the case with my research study...

I conducted my research with seventh graders who participated in literature circles in my classroom. Literature circles are groups of students engaged in conversations with their classmates centered on literature and student-driven (Daniels, 2002, 2006). In this study, my students had an opportunity to work with their peers in a collaborative environment initially with a novel and then with choices of short stories. Various types of assessment were completed along the way determining comprehension and vocabulary skills and levels of student engagement that will be described later in more detail.

### **Setting**

The setting of my study was an urban middle school with a population of approximately 900 students in grades sixth, seventh, and eighth, and almost equally divided between males and females. The school building was the oldest in the district and so technology was scarce and very limited in use. It was located in Eastern Pennsylvania and had a mix of inner city and suburban students. The population was mostly Caucasian students with about 22%

Hispanic, 9% African-American, and 6% Asian students. All school information was provided to me by my principal based on our district’s e-School Student Management System, 2012.

Most of the students I taught came from a middle-class background, but we did have varying degrees of socio-economic statuses. Students are tracked in my school based on PSSA scores, past grades, and teacher recommendations. I taught a total of five academic classes, three of which were considered “A” track learners and two of which were inclusion classes. My “A” track classes were considered to be the higher-level learners and my other two were taught in a team teaching block of Language Arts and Literacy. I also taught an academic intervention class which was for students who needed extra help and/or were failing classes. It was a way to give extra support for students who were in need. My research group was considered an “A” track class and I chose them simply because I had my prep period after this class and it gave me time to debrief and reflect immediately after my study interventions.

My classroom was a small room located in the old upper wing of the school where the heat was very temperamental and could not be readily adjusted. I had only chalkboards to use as visual aids; therefore, my one piece of technology, the Elmo, was my saving grace. It was a great tool for visual learners, actually all learners, because it projected images up on a large screen. Students were able to visualize what I was explaining and could easily follow

along, especially for modeling literacy strategies. My desks were already arranged in pods of three to four students where all students had a good view of the projector screen and would be able to communicate within their pods readily and easily. The setting was right for the introduction of my research study.

### **Participants**

As previously stated, my research study class became my first period group of 28 students who were labeled “A” track. This group was also my homeroom group and they started to filter in about 8:15 AM. All of these students were either proficient or advanced in their PSSA scores (see Table 1) and were recommended by their previous teachers to be grouped together or tracked. In this class I also had several seventh grade gifted support students who were in my class every day, but were pulled from their related arts classes for a special gifted program. Most of these students came into my classroom with good reading strategies and skills, but I was there to teach them to think critically and to think beyond just comprehension.

As a seventh grade literacy teacher, I had several goals for all students who walk through my classroom door every school year. One of these goals was to challenge my students to think more creatively and deeply to engage in those higher-order thinking skills (Bloom, 1956). Another goal was to encourage and eventually require my students to back up their responses to literature with evidence from the text, a difficult skill for many students. My last goal was for

them to enjoy my class and leave my room talking about what we had read.

These goals were incorporated into my research study.

My biggest challenge with this group, in terms of a collaborative study, was the early morning meeting time. Most of the students still seemed to be half asleep or not yet ready to focus on their schoolwork. This class met every day from 8:15 to 9:18 AM but also included about 15 minutes of morning homeroom. Even with the 8:30 AM start time, I still had about five extra minutes with this class than any other class of my day, so I was hoping that the extra time, coupled with a cooperative working environment, would arouse some interest and really wake them up.

### **Procedures**

My first step in the research process was to submit my application with all appropriate paperwork to Moravian College's Human Subjects Internal Review Board or HSIRB. The HSIRB reviewed my application to ensure that my study was ethically sound. My research proposal was accepted before I began my study (see Appendix A). The next step was to inform my principal and she eagerly and without hesitation signed the principal consent form (see Appendix B). Finally, I needed the parental consent form signed by each of my participants so I could use their data in my research (see Appendix C). Once these were in place, I started my research that would begin with a guided teaching approach incorporating a gradual release of responsibility. The first few weeks of my study would focus on

the classroom novel *The Boy in the Striped Pajamas* and then segue into a short story component based on choice (see Appendix D). The timeline of my research is listed below and laid out in chronological order.

#### Timeline of Data Collection:

##### Week One:

- I obtained principal consent form (Appendix B)
- I distributed parent consent forms (Appendix C)
- I reviewed PSSA and Study Island scores for baseline data (see Table 1).
- “Hunger” comprehension quizzes, story map illustrations, and Holocaust vocabulary quizzes were analyzed for baseline comprehension skills (see Table 2 and Figure 1).
- Reviewed group activity on inference for examples of students’ responses to higher-level thinking skills and group collaboration to be used later for placement of students into groups (see Figure 2)
- Reflected on data collection in field log

##### Week Two: (All assignments completed with whole group instruction)

- I collected most permission forms (26 out of 28).
- Non-participant observation completed based on students’ responses to a prompt with a “Think, Pair, Share” cooperative learning technique (see Figure 3)

- I modeled main idea with supporting details using students’ hands – a guided to independent practice using our novel, *The Boy in the Striped Pajamas* first and then student-driven with an excerpt from *Night*, by Elie Wiesel (see Figure 4)
- I modeled reading aloud with prosody and intonation with classroom novel
- I modeled note-taking strategies with Talking to the Text using sticky notes (see Figure 5).
- I modeled using text-based evidence to back up responses to a prompt about a nonfiction excerpt from Anne Frank’s diary.
- Reflected on data collection in field log

Week Three: (Whole class)

- I collected all permission forms; all students were on board!
- Pre-Study survey is administered and analyzed (see Appendix E and Table 3).
- Practiced response to literature with a free-write making personal connections to the text
- Practiced prosody with reading aloud
- Based on week one’s group response work and my observations, students’ seats were rearranged for optimal group learning

- I did a quick formative member check to clarify any confusion about my study based on results of the pre-study survey. I wanted to be sure that students were going into literature circle groups with open minds and not influenced by their prior experiences in sixth grade.
- I taught a mini-lesson on the importance of literature circles and behaviors/expectations for the next several weeks.
- I created and maintained a classroom of respect and trust for an environment conducive for literature circle work.
- Reflected on data collection in field log

Week Four: (Gradual release of responsibility; transition from whole group to small group)

- Students began to work in pods to complete assignments: guided to independent practice with reading and writing
- I reviewed previously taught literary devices: irony, simile, and metaphor
- Characterization and point of view were reviewed. Students then wrote a response to a prompt relating to the novel and used text-based evidence to support their responses.
- Participant observation was recorded as students worked on their response letters. The purpose was to consult with students about their writing and to check for comprehension and understanding.

- Non-participant observation was done to observe and listen to students reading aloud in their pods and sharing their ideas on symbolism.
- Another participant observation was done to observe and discuss vocabulary in context through a Frayer model (Appendix F). Students were discussing and determining synonyms, antonyms, an original sentence, and an illustration. All techniques demonstrated comprehension skills and vocabulary development (see Figure 6).
- Reflected on data collection in field log

Week Five: (Gradual release of responsibility; transition from whole group to small group)

- Conflict was addressed in literature through the character called “The Fury”. We addressed internal versus external conflict and how that can affect characters’ actions.
- I infused elements of non-fiction with our historical fiction novel to allow students to make connections across genres and to engage them in the historical period of WWII.
- Focused on characterization of Bruno and Shmuel in the novel with a Venn diagram to compare and contrast the characters.
- Reviewed the handout, “What are Literature Circles?” (Appendix G) and discussed the expectations and reasons for literature circles as a strategy.

- Students were released to their own independent learning through literature circles; my role as the “teacher” had significantly diminished.
- Reflected on data collection in field log

Week Six: (Gradual release of responsibility; group work)

- Officially, students were released to their own independence of literature circles.
- My role transitioned from a leader to a guide and/or resource depending on students’ needs.
- Participant observation completed to guide, discuss, and observe groups in action and look for evidence from the text (see Figure 7)
- Students are engaged in their groups to complete their comprehension packets – due for this week included: context vocabulary, student-generated questions and answers, beginning of a story map (see Appendixes H.1-H.6)
- Work was collected, assessed, and analyzed (see Figures 8a-8c).
- Reflected on data collection in field log

Week Seven: (Group work)

- Informal non-participant observation recorded. All groups were on-task and reading, some aloud, some silently.
- Informal interviews conducted of each pod to member check on collaboration and resistance (see Figures 9a-9b)

- Two groups were working too individually, so I gave each group a mini-lesson on the importance of working together in their pods to complete assignments and to use each other as resources
- Work was collected, assessed, and analyzed (see Figures 10a-10d).
- Reflected on data collection in field log

Week Eight:

- No data collection due to Hurricane Sandy
- Reflected on prior data collection in field log

Week Nine: (Group work)

- Non-participant observation recorded to observe round three of literature circle work
- Four individual students were interviewed for an individual take on their group work and how to improve their grades.
- As a whole group, we reviewed dynamic versus static characters and applied that knowledge to our main characters in the novel.
- Informal whole class non-participant observation with recorded conversations from various students to note collaboration and vocabulary development
- Each pod was formally and informally interviewed to share ideas with me about their group’s collaboration skills (see Figure 11).

- Students responded to a prompt about literature circles that they completed with their groups. I wanted them to share their ideas together.
- Work was collected, assessed, and analyzed (see Figures 12a-12h).  
Reflected on data collection in field log

Week Ten: (Group work)

- All students completed a self-assessment to rate themselves on a scale of 1-4 on how well they personally felt they participated in their group. (see Appendix I, Table 4 and Figure 13)
- Seats were randomly switched for the next round of literature circle group work.
- Each student created a learning log for the next group assignment on short story which was a free-response journal where students would record summaries, vocabulary, illustrations, and student generated questions and answers based on a Cue Card sheet (see Appendix J)
- Students had a choice of five short stories from which to select to read within their groups (see Appendix D).
- A new concern arose: one group did not seem to be communicating effectively and I made a note to monitor this situation.
- I interviewed a student who did not participate much in her last group to get her perspective on her new group.
- Reflected on data collection in field log

Week Eleven: (Group work)

- Round four of working in literature circles involved learning log responses. Students were writing in response to their short story.
- Each group had already assigned a leader to the various topics of response: pre-reading, during reading, and after reading (see Appendix J)
- Informal participant observations are recorded.
- Non-participant observation conducted focusing specifically on two groups that were reading aloud in their pods (see Figure 14).
- Learning logs were collected for assessment (Figures 15a-15e).
- Reflected on data collection in field log

Week Thirteen: (Transition back to whole group)

- Students completed a post-study survey analyzing their group work and reading skills. (see Appendix K)
- Post-study survey responses were analyzed and reflected upon (see Table 5).
- A metaphor analysis was completed for students to compare literature circles to something else. Some changed the metaphor into a simile, but still completed a worthy comparison (see Appendix L and Figure 16).
- Data collection analysis was reflected upon in field log and analyzed. Findings were put into bins and codes with prominent theme statements noted (see Figures 17-18).

## **Data Sources**

I utilized a variety of data sources during my study. I created all surveys and questionnaires based on Hendricks’ (2012) recommendations on inquiry data.

These included:

### Surveys/Questionnaires:

I conducted a pre-study survey (see Appendix E and Table 3) that asked six questions relating to reading self-assessment and knowledge of literature circles. I conducted an individual assessment survey (see Appendix I and Table 4) of students at the end of our novel study to determine their feelings on the level of effectiveness of their own individual participation and contribution to the group. Lastly, I conducted a post-study survey (see Appendix K) that asked seven questions relating to reading self-assessment for comparison to prior surveys and reflection questions based on students’ work in their literature circle group.

I also conducted several student interviews for periodic member checks and to document students’ thoughts and ideas. In addition, I conducted pod group interviews or study groups for comparison.

### Student Artifacts/Samples:

The baseline data I collected included: PSSA scores (see Table 1), Study Island scores (see Table 1), notebook quiz for organization and preparedness (see Table 2), literary vocabulary quiz (see Table 2), “Hunger” illustrations demonstrating comprehension (see Figure 1), “The Wembly

Kidnapping” group work with written response (see Figure 2), notebook samples of main idea with supporting details using students’ hands (see Figure 4), and sticky notes for Talking to the Text (see Figure 5). Data was collected to affirm students’ reading levels.

Fruyer model vocabulary was completed with examples that students completed in groups (see Appendix F and Figure 6) along with three weeks’ worth of comprehension and vocabulary assessments that were collected in response to the novel study with examples of summaries, story plot, student-generated questions and answers, context vocabulary, and illustrations (see Appendixes H.1-H.6 and Figures 8a-8c, 10a-10d, and 12a-12h).

Learning log examples were completed during students’ short story study based on leader cue cards. Examples included: illustrations, graphic organizers, and written response to literature (see Appendix J and Figures 15a-15e).

A metaphor analysis was completed at the end of my study for students to make comparisons to literature circles (see Appendix L and Figure 16).

Observational Data (Hendricks, 2011; McNiff & Whitehead, 2010; Wolcott, 2008)

I recorded participant and non-participant observations in a two-column chart with my observations on one side and my reflections/thoughts on the other. I walked around the room for approximately 10-15 minutes each class period

monitoring and observing students' behaviors and responses and recorded what I saw in my field log.

In my field log I documented all observations, conversations, and my own thoughts and feelings each day. I read my log many times and put brackets around my own thoughts and feelings to distinguish my interpretations from the facts. I coded my field log looking for emergent themes.

All these data served to inform my study and lead the direction of my study as it progressed.

### **Trustworthiness Statement**

In order to ensure the accuracy of my study and to be sure it was valid and trustworthy, I followed several ethical guidelines. Before my study began, I submitted my research proposal and obtained approval from Moravian College’s Human Subjects Internal Review Board (Appendix A). I then sought the approval of my principal who wholeheartedly supported this type of research in the classroom (Appendix B). Once those approvals were in place, I provided the parents with an informed consent letter explaining the purpose of my study and asked permission to use their child’s data in my study (Appendix C). My letter stated that students could withdraw from the study at any time but also that classroom instruction would not change based on participation in the study; all students would get the same instruction, but I would only use data from research study participants in this document. The letter also assured parents that personal information would be protected by pseudonyms and all material would be kept secure in my classroom for the duration of the study and then destroyed at the end of the study. Finally, my literature review served as the foundation of my study, based solely on scholarly research, ultimately justifying this whole process (McNiff & Whitehead, 2010).

I explained my study to my students and the importance and relevance of this study to my literacy classroom. I explained the benefits of the study and that I may use some of their quotes, grades, or samples in my research. I wanted the

students to know how much I care about their success. All students returned their permission forms and were participants. When I received all the forms, I began conducting action research in my classroom around the beginning of September. I remained open to any unexpected research findings and was careful to be aware of and put aside my own biases about the study so as not to affect the outcome (Hendricks, 2012). Some of the biases I discovered within myself included expecting seventh grade girls to be more mature than boys and thinking my seventh graders would appreciate the opportunity to work cooperatively in groups.

My first priority was to create an environment of caring and trust to build relationships and allow students to feel comfortable responding and participating in class (McNiff & Whitehead, 2010; Hendricks, 2012). Once the foundation for my research was set, I began collecting data. I used pre-study surveys, interviews, participant and non-participant observations, field log notes, salient student work, and post-study surveys (Hendricks, 2012; McNiff & Whitehead, 2010; Wolcott, 2008) to ensure multiple sources of data. These multiple sources allowed me to triangulate data to corroborate my findings and increase validity (Hendricks, 2012). I was able to base my results on the commonalities of the triangulated data and created appropriate graphic organizers to visually display my findings.

In order to consider multiple points of view, and to evaluate my data, I incorporated several strategies. First, I engaged in dialogue with my colleagues for peer (McNiff & Whitehead, 2010) and dialogic validation (Hendricks, 2012). In these conversations I shared my research findings and my interpretations of the data and my colleagues shared their ideas. I worked closely with another seventh grade teacher and she was able to give me her perspective on student data. I was able to reflect on her feedback to understand my study from different points of view. I also had the support of peer groups in our graduate courses at Moravian College for other various perspectives as well as my academic advisors. Continually, I engaged in persistent and prolonged observations and immersed myself in the data to increase credibility (Hendricks, 2012); my entire study lasted approximately three months. I recorded data in great detail in my field log; accurate records are critical in this process, and reflected upon my research and adjusted my study accordingly (Hendricks, 2012). For example, I realized I needed to guide and model strategies more than anticipated before releasing my students to independent reading groups. I used member checks to increase accuracy of student data and to check for truthfulness (Hendricks, 2012). I also employed negative case analysis to analyze the data that did not “fit in” with the majority of the other findings (Hendricks, 2012; Holly, Arhar, & Kasten, 2005). For example, some students did not respond as well in a group as I anticipated. All these steps were taken to ensure validity and reliability and aided in my final

analysis of my research study. All of my data and analyses were kept in a binder and secured in my classroom.

Finally, my action research was ready for a larger audience. My data binder served as an audit trail if needed and provided a thick description of setting and of the research study for stakeholders to review and share (Hendricks, 2012). As Hendricks points out, these details of the study such as setting, participants, and methods allow the audience, “to determine whether the study is generalizable, transferable, or useful in their settings” (p. 128), increasing applicability and consistency validity.

Throughout this action research study I reflected on my practice and planning; however, this process should not end just because the study has. As an effective educator, I plan to continue ongoing reflective planning to improve my strategies and hone my practice to always strive for personal, but more importantly, student success. Action research may end, but the research in action never should.

## **My Story**

*Do not train a child to learn by force or harshness; but direct them to it by what amuses their minds, so that you may be better able to discover with accuracy the peculiar bent of the genius of each. ~Plato*

What amuses the middle school student's mind? That is a burning question. What strategies would get my middle school students thinking beyond just comprehension, yet still using their peers as resources, and ultimately having some fun in the process? How can I ensure that each student's voice is heard? Upon researching some strategies, I realized literature circles could tap into my middle school students' needs for socialization but in a positive, collaborative way and allow for each student to be his or her own genius. And so, my story began.

### **The Beginning Few Weeks...**

I knew I would choose my first period class as my research group because they were with me the longest period of the day, from 8:15 to 9:18AM, which would allow me more time to work with them. Also, I had my prep period right after that group. This would allow me the time to sit, debrief, jot notes, and reflect upon my practice immediately after the period ended. I felt this prep time would help me to remember everything accurately and begin immediately to write down all my thoughts, feelings, and observations in my field log. I also chose this group because I felt literature circles might benefit them the most since this was

my quietest class. I was not sure if it was the early morning start time or if they were just quieter students, but either way, I wanted to see them liven up.

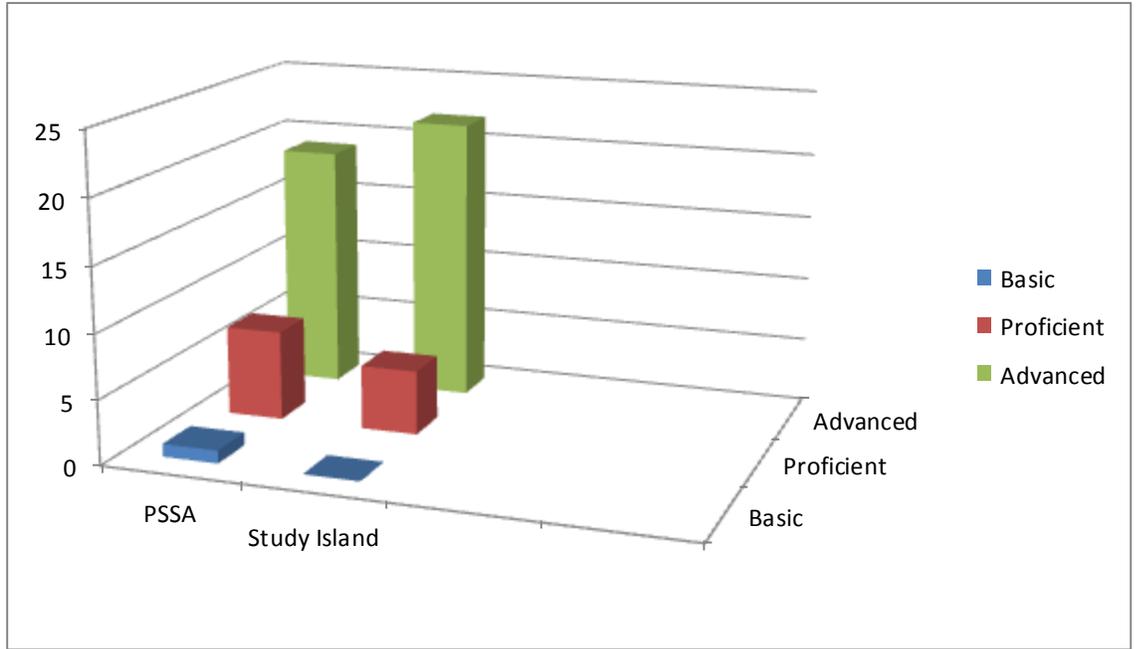
I had a total of 28 students, 16 girls and 12 boys; however, during the course of my study, one of my boys would move and leave our school. It was a quieter group, but because it was also my homeroom group and I had more time with them, I felt more connected to them than any of my other classes. In this group there were some dynamic students and some less dynamic ones. Some of their voices will appear later in my thesis, but in all, it was a very nice group of students to work with. I also had a few of these students’ older siblings over the years, so I already had an instant connection. I was feeling confident with this group.

We were only a few weeks into the new school year but I had already collected some baseline data. I knew going into the study that this class was what the district calls, “A” track. This means it was a class comprised of proficient or advanced students based on PSSA and Study Island testing results. Study Island was a district test that students took 3 times a year to show growth in math and reading skills (see Table 1 Below).

**Table 1**

*Baseline Data- PSSA and Study Island Results*

*Left Hand Column Represents Actual Number of Students*



**PSSA Reading (Based on 27 students):**

19-Advanced Students

7-Proficient Students

1-Basic Student

**Study Island Reading (Based on 27 students):**

22-Advanced Students

5-Proficient Students

0-Basic

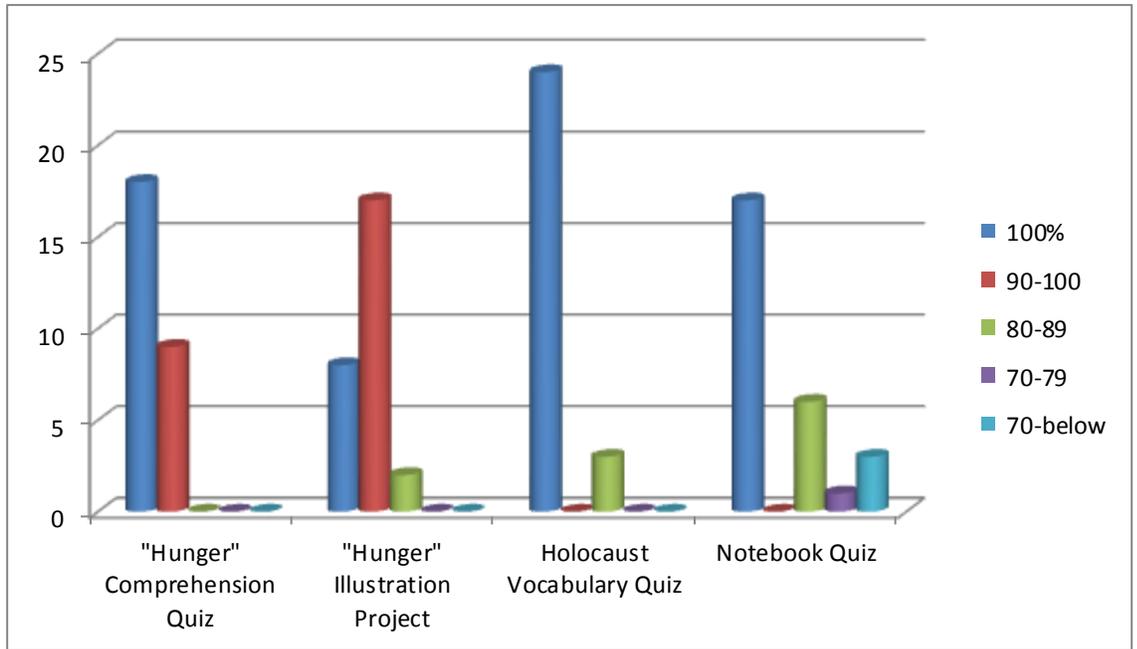
The results of this baseline testing confirmed what I already knew: **these students could read well and would not struggle too much with comprehension of text.**

Just to confirm these data, I also had some data of my own. I had collected and assessed “Hunger” **comprehension quizzes and illustrations** (see Table 2 and Figure 1). “Hunger” is an excerpt from Richard Wright’s novel, *Black Boy*. It is a powerful piece and I always start off the year reading it with my classes because it instantly captures their attention. It is an intriguing story about how a young black boy, whose momma teaches him to stand up and fight for himself, earns the rights to the streets of Memphis. I also had students render illustrations in response to this short story for another way to assess comprehension and a literary device, **personification**. Illustrations are just another tool and another way to show understanding of the text (Fountas & Pinnell, 2006). It is a strategy endorsed by the Reading Apprenticeship framework of teaching reading. I received this training several times over the course of my teaching career. In addition to that, I had **vocabulary quizzes** from our introduction to the Holocaust unit and a **notebook quiz** to assess organizational skills (see Table 2 Below). In this table, I analyzed the results as well as drew conclusions based on the data. Each is represented in bullets below the table.

**Table 2**

*Baseline Data Collected*

*Left Column Represents the Actual Number of Students*



Results...

- "Hunger" comprehension quiz – class average=29/30 points or 97%
- "Hunger" illustration project- class average=28.26/30 points or 94%
- Holocaust vocabulary quiz-class average=19.56/20 points or 98%
- Notebook quiz-class average=13.63/15 points or 91%

Anne

Use: max 9-10

Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: September 4 30

"Hunger" an excerpt from Black Boy  
By Richard Wright

Story Map

Directions: Draw and color a visual to explain the events in the story. Write a sentence to explain each.

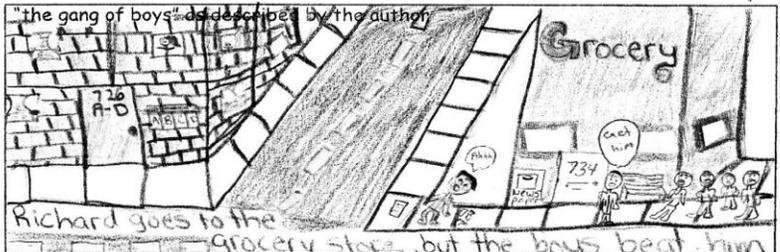
Assess  
Strategy:  
Illustration  
for  
comprehension

Personification  
~"hunger" as described by the author



I think hunger is a nightmare Richard has that replays everyday of his life.

"the gang of boys" as described by the author



Richard goes to the grocery store, but the boys beat him

The night Richard's mother taught him to stand up and fight for himself.

I think of his mom giving him the stick while she says dont come back till you got the food and have stand up for yourself

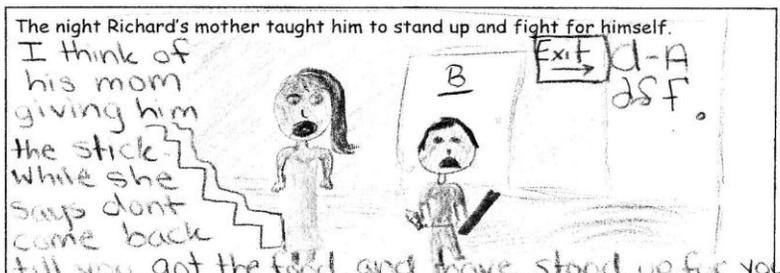
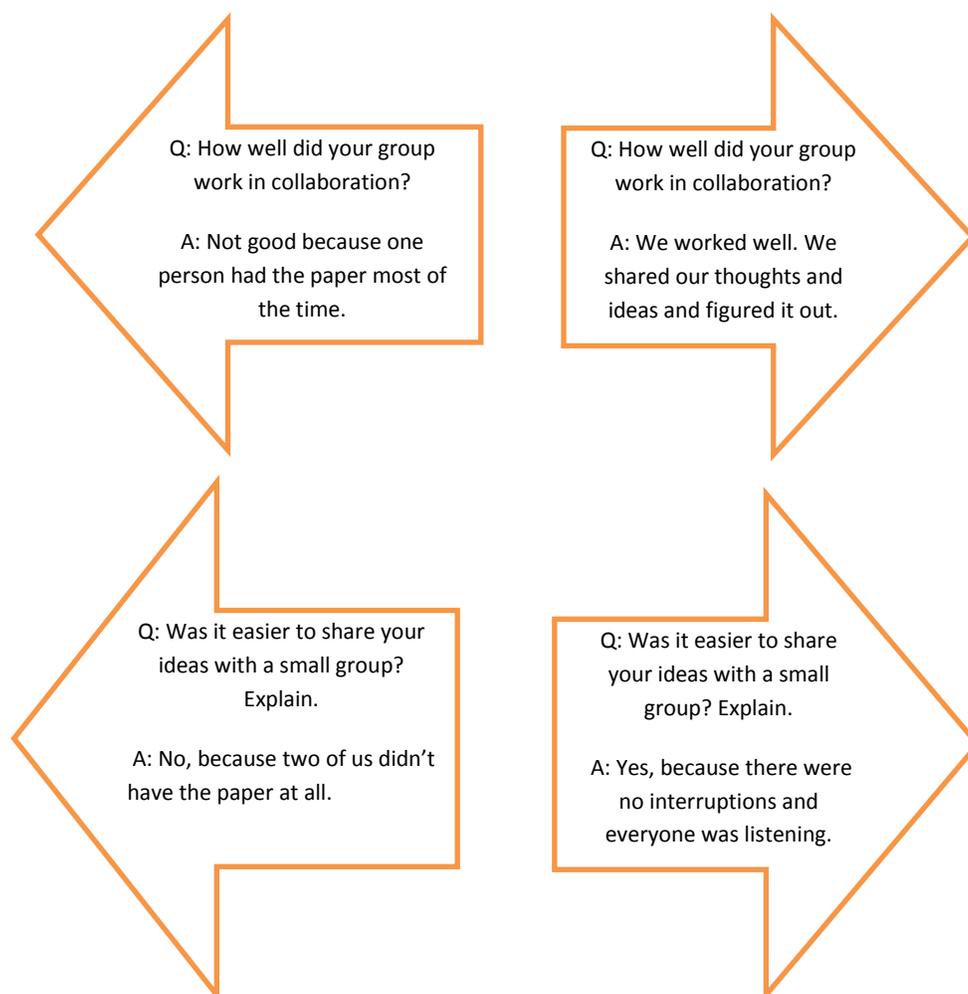


Figure 1. Student Sample of "Hunger" Story Map. This is a sample of a student's work illustrating comprehension of the short story.

All of these data confirmed to me the reading and comprehension levels of my students. Based on these data, I **felt confident and comfortable** with my idea for introducing literature circles so early in the school year. In addition, I would be able to release them to have ownership of their own learning sooner than I had anticipated.

One last piece of baseline data came in the form of a group activity on inference. The group activity informed my study based on the sample student responses recorded below (see Figure 2 Below). I created this figure to represent the way I felt about the two group's collaborative work and progress. One group was moving in the forward direction of the arrows, meaning working towards cooperation and the other group was moving away from cooperation represented by the backward arrows. I wanted to represent the opposing views of cooperative learning based on these two groups' responses.



*Figure 2.* Compare/Contrast Small Group Work. The directional arrows indicate the opposing directions of two cooperative groups completing the same assignment based on students' responses.

I felt there was a definite dichotomy existing in the classroom where some students felt their group worked well and some did not. I did not want this tension to exist in the literature circle groups, so based on these responses, I knew I would have to **change a few seats for optimal learning** even though I already

had students in pods. I also realized that there would be some struggles and resistance along the way to deal with and work through.

This baseline data helped me to determine students’ strengths and needs. For example, I was confident in their reading and comprehension abilities, but could they utilize those higher-level thinking skills (Bloom, 2001) that I would require? Also, I would require them to use evidence from the text to back up responses, yet PSSA and Study Island were mostly multiple-choice as were my baseline quizzes. Would students need more guidance from me in this area? I was confident **I had enough baseline data to inform my study**, now it was time to move on and find out the answers to my questions.

I had already obtained my principal’s permission (Appendix B) back in August and she was one of my biggest supporters. I knew I did not have any fears with my administration; they wholeheartedly supported action research. I was worried if the same could be said of my students’ parents/guardians. I was concerned that some parents would not understand the importance of my study and possibly question it, so I knew I wanted to explain to my students first. I passed out the permission forms (Appendix C), read through it with them, and then **began to explain my study**. I told them that I was working on my thesis for Moravian College and I needed to conduct a research study in my classroom. I explained that the study was on literature circles and asked them if they heard of this strategy before. Many students had raised their hands and shared some of

their ideas on what they thought literature circles were. For example, John said, “It’s when students work with other students in a group and read together.” I said yes, he was right, but I did not want to delve too deeply into the actual strategy yet. I had a pre-study survey with the same question to be taken later and I did not want to influence any of their own ideas. So I did not elaborate on a definition, but instead explained how working together with their peers can be challenging, yet beneficial. I also explained that this study was very important to me and I only had their best interests at heart. Their learning experiences were my top priority and my primary concern and I wanted them to trust me.

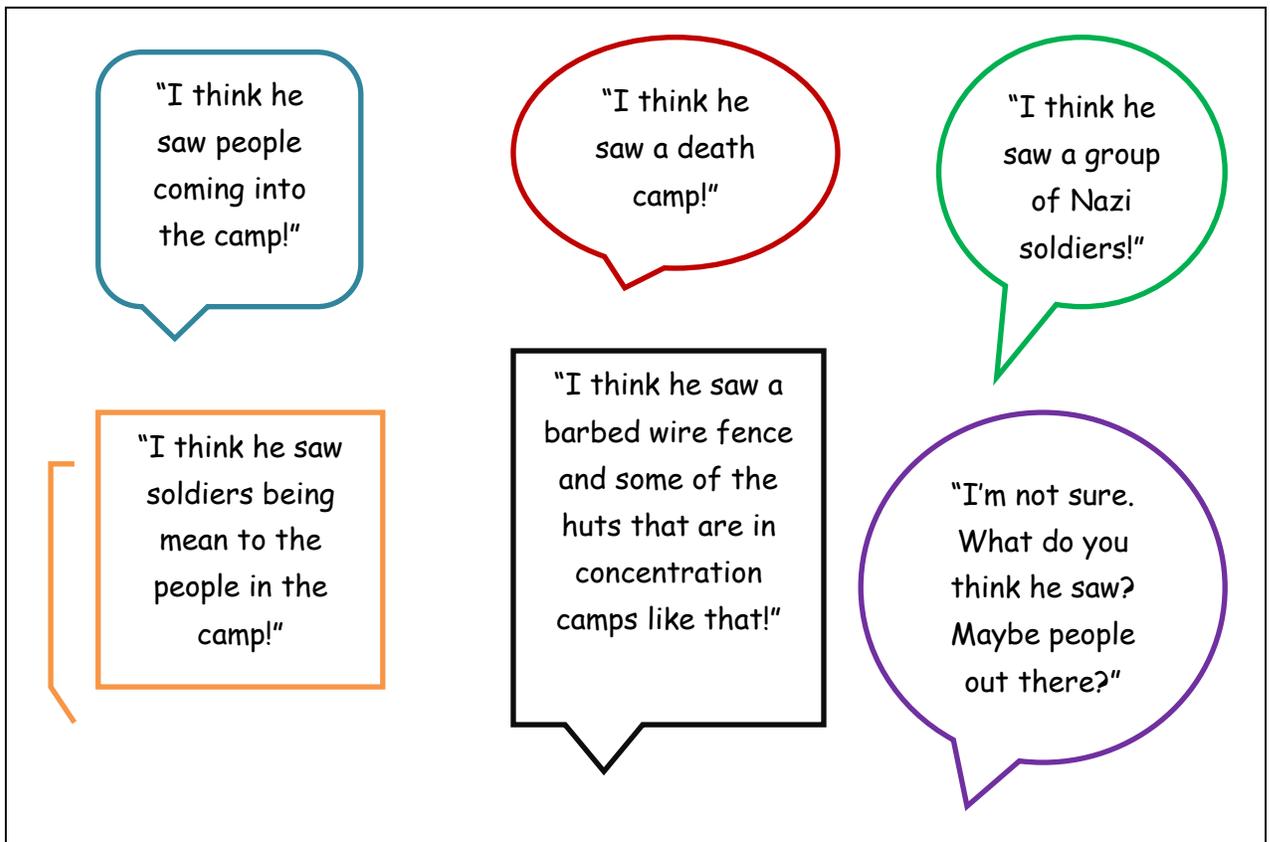
My study was now introduced to my students and I was going to **begin modeling** some literacy strategies for them to put in to practice when they began authentic literature circle work. All the research I had read stressed the importance of an environment of trust and a guided to independent approach to learning. I felt I had already established the **environment of trust** back in August. From day one, I established myself as someone who was there for them and to guide them to a successful year. I was very **respectful of my students** and demanded the same respect from them and for each other. We completed several **getting to know you activities** and were able to laugh and have some fun as well as creating a community culture. Students were not afraid to come to me for help. I felt the environment was set for my study, which began in September. Now I

wanted to be sure to give them the guidance they needed to be successful in literacy class.

By the second week, I had already collected 26 out of 28 permission forms, so I felt very comfortable and confident to move ahead with my study. We were now into the reading of our class novel, *The Boy in the Striped Pajamas*, by John Boyne. It is an historical fiction novel, based on the Holocaust, and told through the eyes of a German boy whose father is a Nazi commandant. We spent about a week building background knowledge on the Holocaust before even starting the novel and I infused non-fiction readings to enforce the historical component and to help students **make connections**. I also modeled prosody techniques with **read alouds** so students could hear fluency and intonation. Students are always intrigued and truly interested in this topic. It is high-interest, rich literature with deep topics and good moral lessons to teach.

One of the strategies practiced this week was “**Think, Pair, Share**”. It is a quick cooperative strategy to get students to share their thoughts with a peer next to them in a short period of time, usually a few minutes (Reutzler & Cooter, 2011) while lowering affective filters as students communicate with each other. I had students respond to their partner with a prompt about what Bruno, the main character in the novel, saw when he looked out the window. During this time, I walked around the room and completed a **non-participant observation** based on their responses (see Figure 3). I decided to record a sampling of my students’

responses with speech bubbles representing the way I felt as I heard and recorded their conversations as I meandered around the classroom. It was the way I envisioned this scene in my mind; I was capturing pieces of their conversations in action.



*Figure 3.* Non-Participant Observation on Think, Pair, Share Activity. I recorded various students' responses to a prompt of what Bruno, the main character from *The Boy in the Striped Pajamas*, saw when he looked out the window of his new house.

I was so excited to hear students **engaged in and responding to the text**. I also liked how some of their responses varied depending on their interpretation and evidence from the story. I knew they were interested in the novel, comprehending it, and were actively sharing their answers with their peers.

Another technique modeled was finding **main idea with supporting details** from the text. We practiced this strategy using our hands. We traced our hands on notebook paper and I modeled using a "**Think Aloud**" to find the main idea in chapter two of our novel. A Think Aloud is when you verbalize aloud your thoughts as you read (Klingner, Vaughn, & Boardman, 2007). Then, students read an excerpt of Elie Wiesel's *Night* and traced their hands again on a new page to apply the learned strategy (see Figure 4 Below). Figure 4 below represents a student sample depicting the student's hand with the main idea in the palm and the supporting text-based details in each of the fingers.

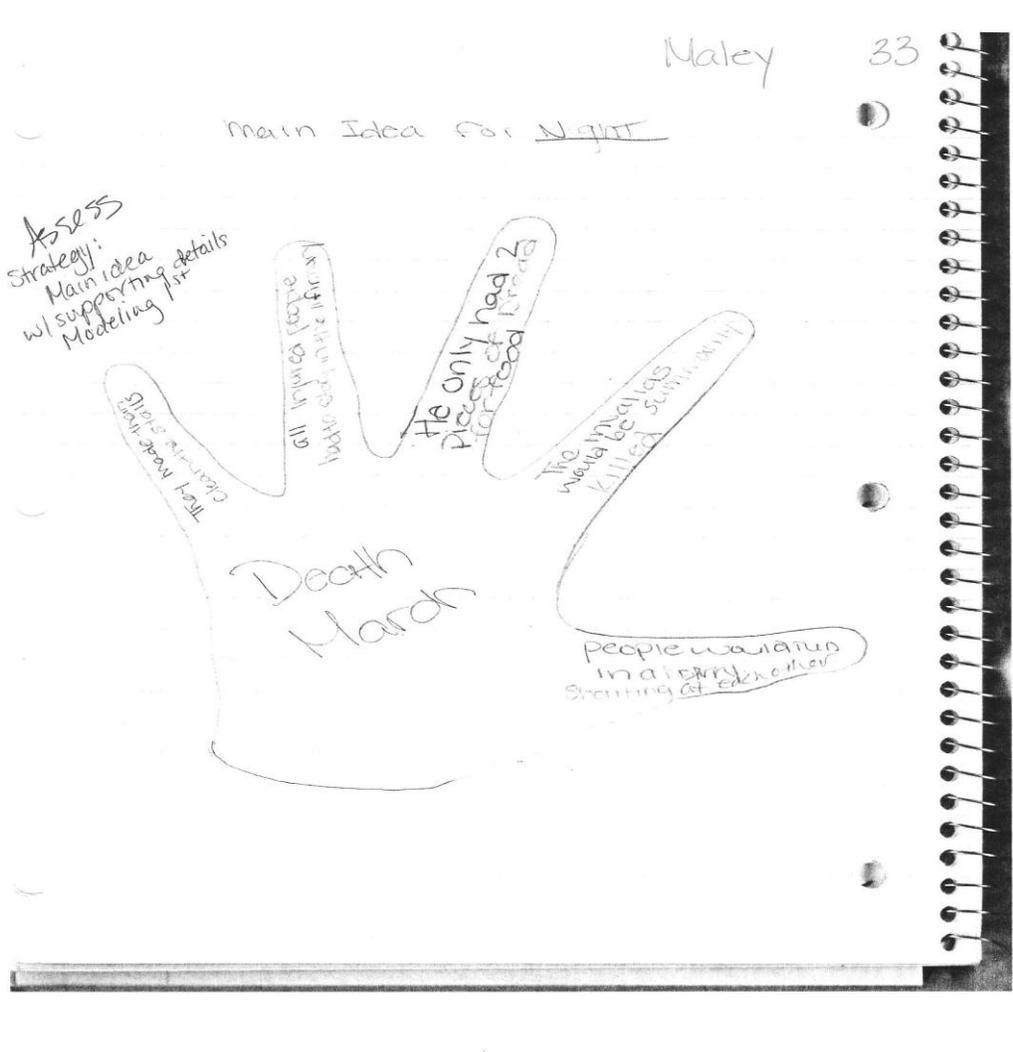


Figure 4. Student Sample of Main Idea Hand. This sample visually depicts the aforementioned activity as students traced their hands to use as graphic organizers for main idea.

Walking around the room, I was able to assess their main idea skills, which is essential for comprehension and finding supporting details. It also encourages higher-order thinking skills such as **inference** (Klingner, Vaughn, & Boardman, 2007). I observed, talked and engaged students to guide them in this

process. Upon completion, some students even shared their examples on the Elmo for all to see. **Student engagement and excitement was high**, based on my observations, and probably so because this excerpt from *Night* is about a death march. It is a rich piece of text. I even had a student (Kaylee) sign out my personal copy of *Night* to read; she was so interested and captivated by the excerpt. This was a high point in my study because I felt as if I was **creating an educational experience** (Dewey, 1938) for my students and it felt great! They were learning from each other and engaged in literature.

I also modeled note-taking strategies with **Talking to the Text**, a Reading Apprenticeship strategy. In talking to the text, students write out their thoughts, questions, and connections as they read. It is a form of functional writing to help the reader remember ideas, thoughts, and record facts (Fountas & Pinnell, 2006). Students then practiced Talking to the Text using sticky notes for chapter four of our novel and affixing them into their reader’s notebook (see Figure 5 Below). We practiced a few thoughts together and then students completed the remainder of the chapter on their own.

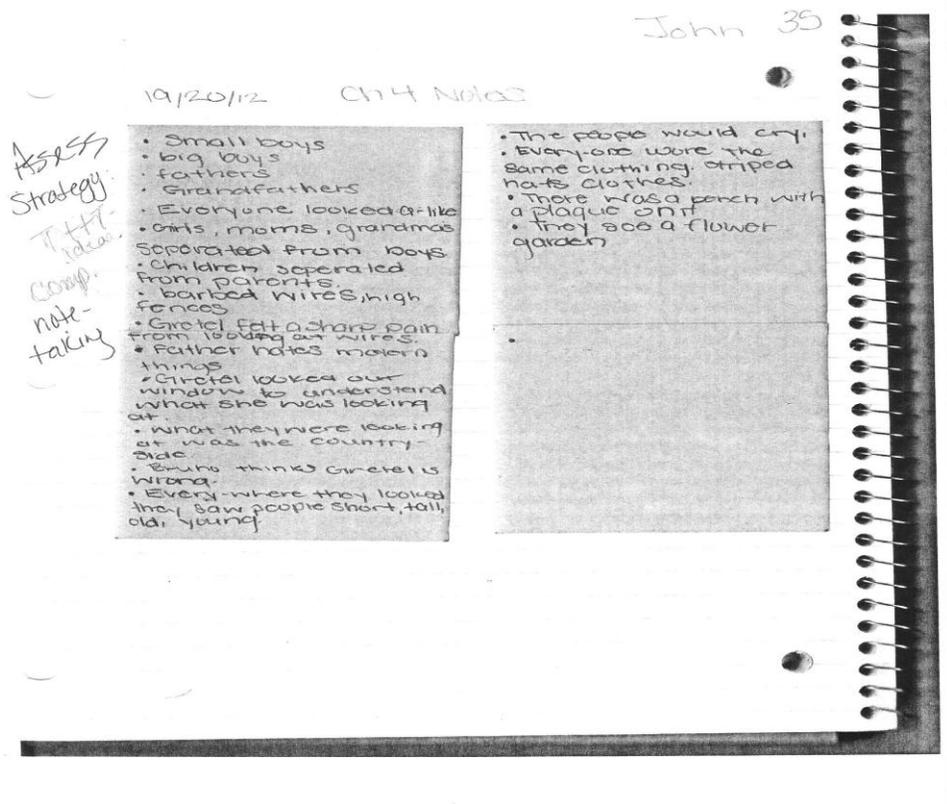


Figure 5. Student Sample of Talking to the Text Strategy. This student sample represents the note-taking strategy as mentioned.

We also read an excerpt from Anne Frank’s diary using an **interactive read aloud** to promote fluency and prosody (Fountas & Pinnell, 2006). Students then wrote a **short journal response** to a prompt based on this excerpt. The purpose of this strategy was for students to respond in writing quickly to capture their thoughts at that moment and could be used later in discussion. It was also a form of functional writing as it helped readers to formulate their own thoughts and opinions based on the text (Fountas & Pinnell, 2006). Every strategy

modeled, as well as my observations were recorded in my field log for later interpretation; however, at this point **I was comfortable and confident in my students' literacy strategies.**

### **Pre-Study Survey...**

By the following week, I had every permission form returned and was excited to have all students on board and ready to participate. The next step was to administer the pre-study survey (Appendix E). I was very anxious to read their responses to the questions since they were rating themselves as readers and writing what they knew about literature circles. I was surprised by some of the results (see Table 3 Below). Looking at Table 3, I was not surprised that the majority of students rated themselves a four out of five for good readers, but I was surprised by question two's responses. Most students, 17 out of 27, said they preferred reading alone! I was thinking they would all want to read with someone or in a group. I was surprised to find out that was not true. I was also shocked by some of the negative responses to question five and the misunderstanding of what literature circles really are in response to question four. In table 3 below, I chose some student samples to support the yes or no response questions on the survey to represent the variety of responses.

Table 3

*Analysis of Pre-Study Survey*

*Some sample students' responses are also included*

Analysis of Pre-Study Survey Results: <a href="#">Perspective/Context/Attitudes</a>	
1. On a scale of 1 to 5, 5 being the best, rate yourself as a reader.	
1 – 0 students	3.75 – 1 student
2 – 0 students	4 – 17 students
3 – 4 students	4.5 – 1 student
5 – 4 students	
2. Do you prefer reading alone or in a group?	
Alone – 15 students	
Group – 10 students (all rated 4's save one 3)	
Both – 2 student	
3. Is reading a novel easier to understand if you are able to discuss your thoughts with someone? Why or why not?	
Yes – 18	
Example: Maley: "Yes, because it gives me more ideas and ways to understand things."	
No – 8	
Example: Larry: "No, it isn't. I really haven't seen a difference when I've discussed the books."	
Sometimes – 1	
4. Have you ever heard of literature circles? If yes, what do you know about them?	
Yes – 25 students	
No – 2 students	
Example: Walter: "We get into a group of 4 or 5 people and then we read a book."	
Example: John: "I did them in 6 <sup>th</sup> grade. You have to read a novel and do a report on the book. My group wasn't good, but I still got an A."	
Example: Sarah: "I know that you read the book and take notes in the book with sticky notes and you write about what you read when you finish the chapter, and when your done with the book you do a project."	
5. Tell me any thoughts or ideas you have about forming literature circles in our literacy classroom. Do you think you will enjoy literature circles?	
Yes – 21 students	
Example: Kaylee: "I think I will enjoy them because then I get to tell my thoughts about the book to my small group and classmates."	
No – 4 students	
Example: Hana: "No, I won't. I really hate reading in groups because even though it's a good book we have to stop and do worksheets and talk about the chapter when I could just finish the book."	
I don't know – 2 students	

Due to my surprise by some of the pre-study survey results, I decided to write some vignettes (Ely, Vinz, Downing, & Anzul, 1997) in the point of view of

some of my students to express their thoughts and ideas. As suggested by Ely, et al. (1997), I put in bold some of my students' responses to highlight their true feelings about my study and their words in italics and a different font to highlight their points of view.

### **Hana's Story...**

*In Mrs. Wallach's survey, I rated myself a 4 out of 5 for good reader. I can read well enough, I was proficient on the PSSA, you know. **I am not excited about her study on literature circles.** I definitely prefer reading alone. Mrs. Wallach asked if we think we will enjoy literature circles and I had to be honest. I said no! I really hate reading in groups because we always have to stop and do worksheets and talk about the chapter and I would rather just read the book and finish it. Yeah, I heard of literature circles, but it was back in 4<sup>th</sup> grade. All I remember is sitting in a group and everyone takes turns reading. Wow, how exciting! I guess it could be easier to understand the novel if you discuss it with someone; if you are confused. I guess you could talk it out and try to figure it out. I guess. I don't know. **I am not looking forward to this study.** Just give me a book and leave me alone!*

**John's Story...**

*Well, I really care about my grade and try to do my best, so I am worried about Mrs. Wallach's study. I rated myself a 5 on the good reader scale because I am advanced on my PSSA. I actually prefer reading alone, but I don't mind reading in groups. What really worries me is that the last time I did literature circles, in 6<sup>th</sup> grade; I was in a bad group. They didn't do their share of the work, they insisted they were right, and then I got a bad grade! All because of my group members! I care too much about my grade to let somebody else pull it down. **I really don't know if I am going to like doing literature circles again** because of how bad my group was. But, this is a different year and this is a different teacher, so maybe I will like them this year and maybe I'll have a better group. I really don't know yet.*

**Larry's Story...**

*Hi, I'm Larry. I'm the quiet one who prefers reading alone. I've never really seen any difference when I've discussed books with anyone, so I don't think it's helpful. I've heard of literature circles before and I know that you read in a group with a set amount of pages or chapters and then you discuss what you read. I think I'll enjoy the discussion part of Mrs. Wallach's study but not the reading because I am a slow reader and I would have trouble*

*keeping up. I don't really like reading aloud though either, so I am not sure how I feel about this study. I don't know if I'll like it.*

### **Sarah's Story...**

*I am so excited about Mrs. Wallach's study! I love reading in groups and sharing ideas. Other people may have different views on the book that I may or may not agree with but it's good to discuss those ideas. I did participate in literature circles last year and I know that you read the book and take notes in the book with sticky notes and you write about what you read when you finish the chapter and when you're done with the book you do a project. Sounds good to me! I really enjoyed literature circles last year so I know I will enjoy them this year. Let's get started!*

### **Other Shorter Vignettes...**

Jackson: *Yes, I am going to like literature circles because I get to work with others and see other people's point of view.*

Riley: *I think literature circles will be fun because it will widen our friendship.*

Halla: *I think it would be interesting to work with other people.*

Shannon: *I do not enjoy literature circles because we read at a different level and I will read faster than everybody else.*

Anne: *Last year I did not like literature circles. It was like having more homework.*

Maley: *To me, literature circles sounds like a child thing.*

Walter: *I will like literature circles because I don't like following along while the teacher is reading.*

Zale: *I think I might like them but I'm not sure.*

Karol: *I will like them because I will get to know more kids in the class and I will get more ideas and perspectives.*

Kane: *I don't really care; I only care about sports. I never really heard of literature circles anyway.*

### **Back To My Story...**

What a myriad of responses and answers! I was confused, excited, and concerned all at the same time after analyzing and reviewing the pre-study survey. I created those **vignettes** because I felt my students were talking to me through their surveys and I wanted to give them a voice. I really felt **I had my hands full** trying to get all students on board for my study and to come into the study with an open mind and with no negative thoughts or ideas. This pre-study survey informed me of what I needed to do next. My next step was to **verbally clarify** what literatures circles are and are not and to complete a **whole group member check** to clarify some of their preconceived notions about this strategy.

I reviewed some of my students' responses from the survey with them as a whole group and asked them if their thoughts about literature circles, good or bad, were based on their elementary school experiences and/or what they had heard from their peers. Twenty of the 28 students raised their hands. This **confirmed my suspicions** that they really did not have much experience with the type of literature circle group I was going to introduce. I wanted to give them more responsibility, yet more freedom to complete work and hopefully make it more meaningful.

I verbally reviewed what literature circles are and are not (Appendix G) to hopefully clarify any confusion and then I **interviewed** John and Anne individually about their responses. I asked them to keep an open mind and not let past experiences influence them. I also spoke with Hana and Shannon individually and asked them to keep an open mind and not let their thoughts about working in groups influence this year's work. I also gave the class a brief talk or **mini-lesson** about the importance of working together for a common goal and how that is a skill they would need well into adulthood. I also rearranged some seats for upcoming group work as I transitioned them into responsible learners.

My survey really made me wonder why some students seemed so resistant to group work. I questioned our models of traditional education and how that may or may not have impacted them in their schooling. Whatever the case, the next few weeks were going to be challenging as I transitioned them from mostly

whole group instruction to more collaborative peer work but first I needed to address content vocabulary.

### **Next Step: Gradual Release of Responsibility...**

Since my prior modeling strategies were comprehension-based, I now needed to review some vocabulary lessons since part of my study with literature circles would focus on **context vocabulary and literary devices**. I also wanted to review **characterization** for character analysis. I did not want to assess something that I had not guided them through first; although, all assignments would now be completed through a more collaborative reading and writing approach as opposed to whole group.

### **Vocabulary, Literary Devices, and Characterization...**

We reviewed previously taught literary devices such as **irony, simile, and metaphor**. Students, in their groups, found examples of these devices from the text based on chapters previously read. We also reviewed **point of view** and how that affects our interpretation of text. I completed a **participant observation** as students were writing response letters to Bruno, the main character in our novel, from the point of view of Bruno’s grandmother. The purpose of this observation was to allow me the opportunity to work with students on their written responses but also to observe how they were helping each other and using other resources, e.g.: novels, peers, dictionaries, etc. for support. It was clear through this observation that my students wanted me to tell them exactly what to do and

looked to me to answer all their questions. I chose not to answer all their questions; in fact, I put it back on them to tell me; they were Bruno’s grandmother. They needed to think like her and make decisions on their own or with guidance from their peers. **I realized that working independently might be harder for my students than I had anticipated.**

I also completed two more observations this week since we were in a transition phase from whole group to independent groups. I completed a **non-participant observation** as students were reading aloud to each other in their pods and I observed and recorded their readings and sharing of ideas. One of their goals was to look for **symbolism** in chapter 9 and I recorded some responses. We had previously reviewed symbolism, so groups knew what to look for in the chapter. Most of the student groups decided on the plaque on the bench possibly symbolizing a death camp and worked well together for this goal. I completed one more participant observation this week to observe and discuss vocabulary in context using a **Fruyer model** (see Appendix F and Figure 6). A Fruyer model is a graphic organizer for students to record a vocabulary word, definition or synonym, antonym, sentence, and an illustration to represent that word (Harmon, 1998). Figure 6 is a sample of a student-produced Fruyer model example. I wanted to participate in this observation because I really like interacting with my students and enjoy conversing with them. I walked around the room, I asked students to share their ideas with me and we discussed

possibilities for illustrations for the word, sinister. I collected all the Frayer models to assess and check for understanding of context vocabulary and was pleased with the results. Students seemed to know what to do, especially when they had each other to use as resources. Each student brought his or her own ideas and background information to their group and that would make for great conversations and learning experiences. For example, Maley stated as she worked on her Frayer model that “Sinister” was a movie and then some students started to try to make connections between the movie and the vocabulary word. As Dewey (1938) would concur, students learn best from each other. The significance of this observation was that for the first time in my study, **I really felt like a guide in their learning process.** This **metaphor** was a very significant turning point in my study.

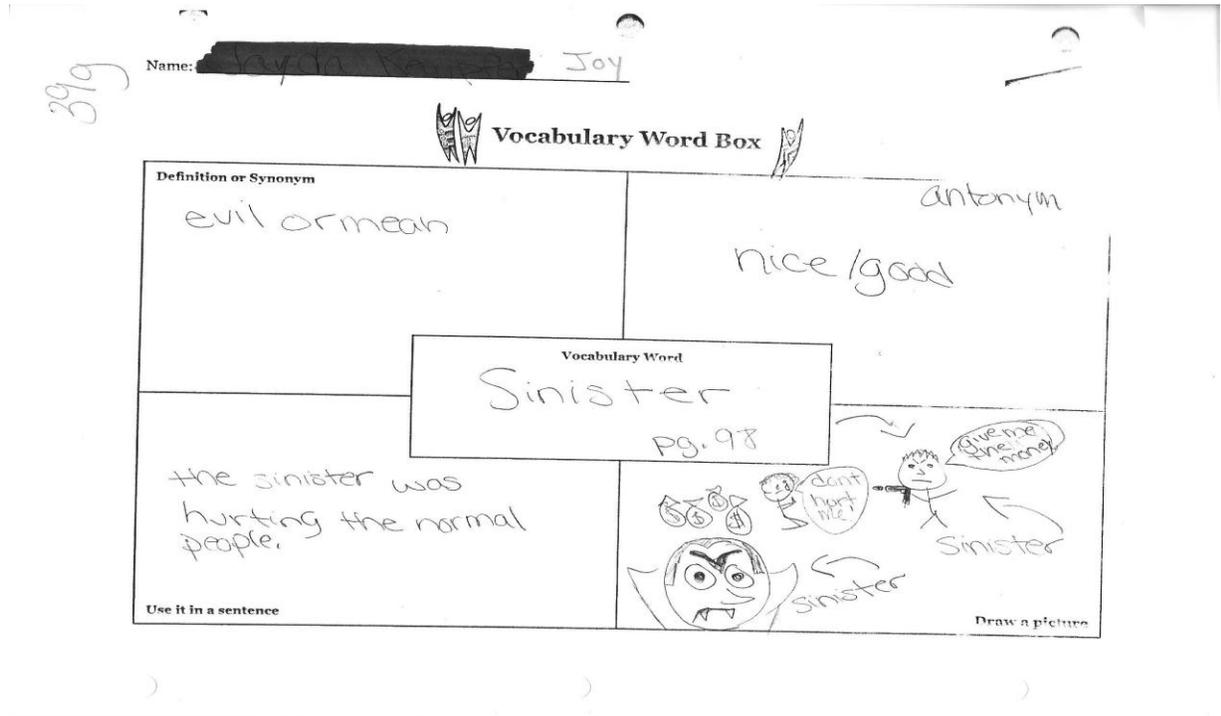


Figure 6- Frayer Model for Vocabulary Development. This is a sample of student work using the graphic organizer to develop vocabulary through words and pictures.

Students focused on **characterization** the following week. Each pod used a Venn diagram to compare and contrast the two main characters in our novel, Bruno and Shmuel. A Venn diagram is another graphic organizer to help students' record similarities and differences between two things. It requires them to analyze characters' actions, feelings, and personalities to complete. Students then worked on **conflict** in plot as well as internal versus external conflict and how that affects characters' feelings and actions. Students worked in their groups and found examples of internal and external conflict with our main character,

Bruno. We then reflected on how conflict affects our own lives and may influence decisions we make. Students shared their own personal connections in their pods. **Making connections** to students’ lives helped them to be engaged more in the reading, made the reading more authentic, and maintained an environment of trust (Ketch, 2005).

### **Literature Circle Discussions...**

I felt we had covered, both in whole group instruction and in cooperative groups, the main elements of comprehension, written response, vocabulary, and characterization that I would be looking for and assessing in their literature circle group work. I was **confident we were ready** to introduce the literature circle group assignment but first I wanted to review what literature circles are and are not based on the handout I provided to students (Appendix G). I also discussed expectations as well as reasons for incorporating this strategy into my curriculum. After reviewing, I asked students to respond to a question about their thoughts and impressions on literature circles. Jason responded with, “I think literature circles could be fun but if you have someone in your group who is not doing their work or pulling their weight, then it could be bad.” This was a great opportunity for us to **brainstorm and discuss** how this could possibly be managed and resolved by students without teacher intervention. Some sample responses were:

Dave: Someone should tell that person he needs to do his work.

Lana: We could tell them we care about our grade and want to do well or maybe help them with their work.

Jackson: **We just need to work together and figure it out. Everybody needs to do his or her share.**

I was happy to hear that students had some solutions to solving their problems on their own. Problem solving is such an important skill, but I was hoping it would carry over into our actual group work if conflict arose. I felt confident and ready to introduce their literature circle learning packets the next week. **My role as “teacher” had started to change from that of a direct instructor to a guide.**

### **Next Step: Guided to Independent Practice**

We were ready to go! Today was the official start of independent literature circle group work. Even though students had worked in groups numerous times, this was still a transitional phase because I was removing myself as the official “knower” of all knowledge to more of a guide in their learning. I was excited but scared all at the same time. I was worried for my students’ sake and curious if they would be able to cooperate and work together for a common goal. The goal or challenge for round one of group work was to read two more chapters in the novel, create two questions and answers, define one vocabulary word in context, and write the beginning of a story map plot line (Appendixes

H.1-H.6). It was now the students’ job to determine how and when to get all work completed; they needed to devise a plan of action for completion by the end of the week. I completed a participant observation the first two days to clarify any questions, but also to note students sharing ideas, thoughts, and plans (see Figure 7). Figure 7 is a visual representation of what some students’ questions were and my responses to them. It seemed like a lot of chaos, questions, and concerns during the first few days and I wanted to clarify, but I also wanted to allow my students the opportunity to think on their own, make decisions based on their groups’ needs, and use each other as resources. Figure 7 below represents the whirlwind of ideas and questions.

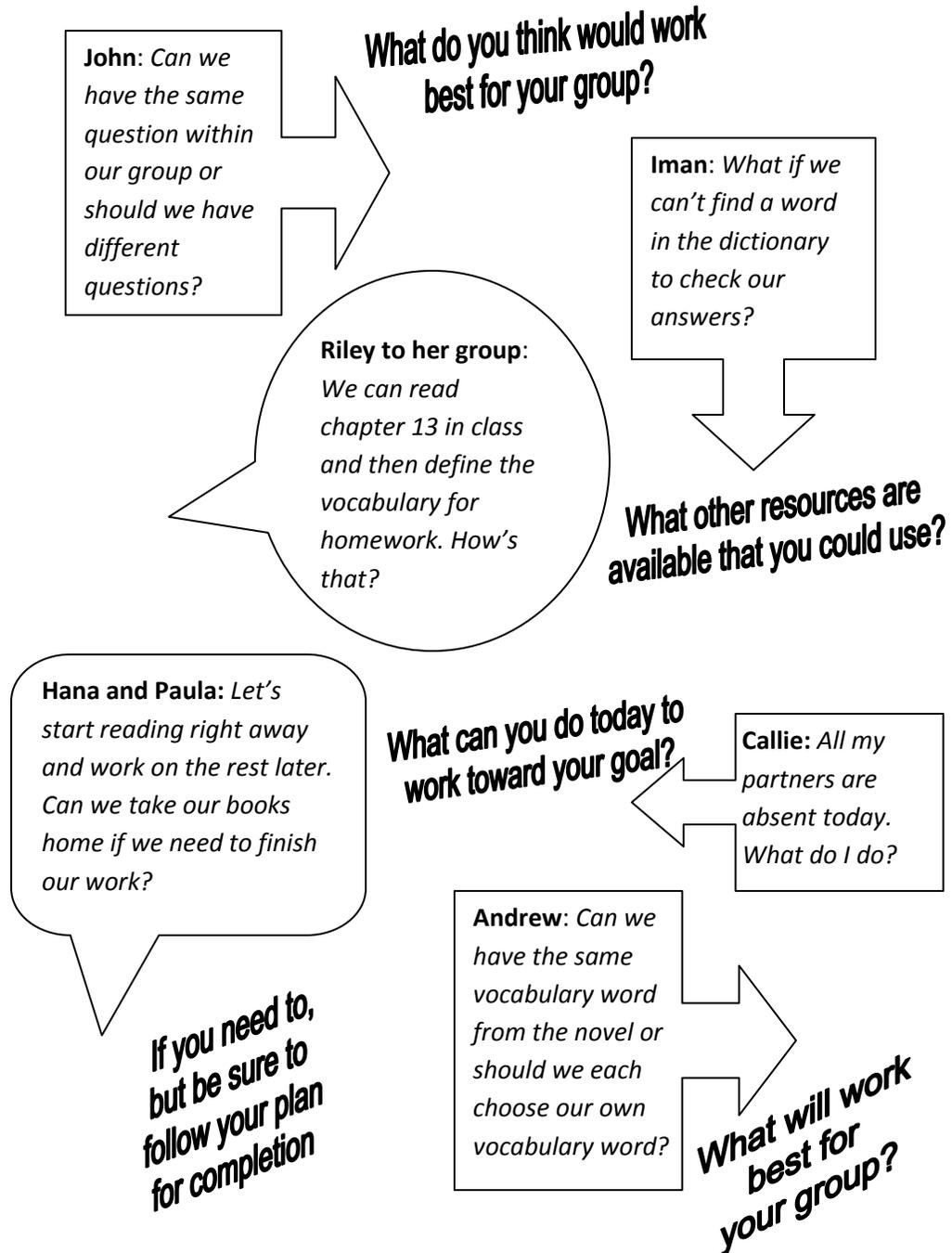


Figure 7. Participant Observation During the First Few Days of Literature Circles. Students' questions and responses are in speech blocks. My responses are in bold and slanted.

This observation was significant because I tried hard not to answer their questions. I really wanted them to think for themselves and figure out the answers to their own questions. As a teacher, this was really hard to do; I wanted to clarify, help, aid, and assist, but I knew if I wanted them to rely on each other, **I had to take a step back and allow them to make those decisions themselves.**

### **Round One: Success?**

Round one of literature circles was completed by the end of the week and I collected students' work that I assessed and graded. Based on week one's grades, I concluded that students were well on their way to some good literacy work (student samples shown in Figures 8a-8c). The class average on this week's work was a 94%. Some students needed more evidence to support their questions and answers but most had very good responses demonstrating inference and prediction. Inference and prediction are higher-level comprehension skills. In all, I felt confident to move forward with my study but I wanted to address the whole class on the importance of backing up responses with evidence from the text before beginning round two. We were gearing up for round two.

Context Vocabulary

Vocabulary Word	Page #	My Best Guess	Dictionary Definition
Flounced	159	Stormed Quickly	to go with sudden Determination

Figure 8a. Student Sample of Context Vocabulary. This is a sample showing a student-selected vocabulary word from the novel and the use of context clues to define this word during round one of literature circles.

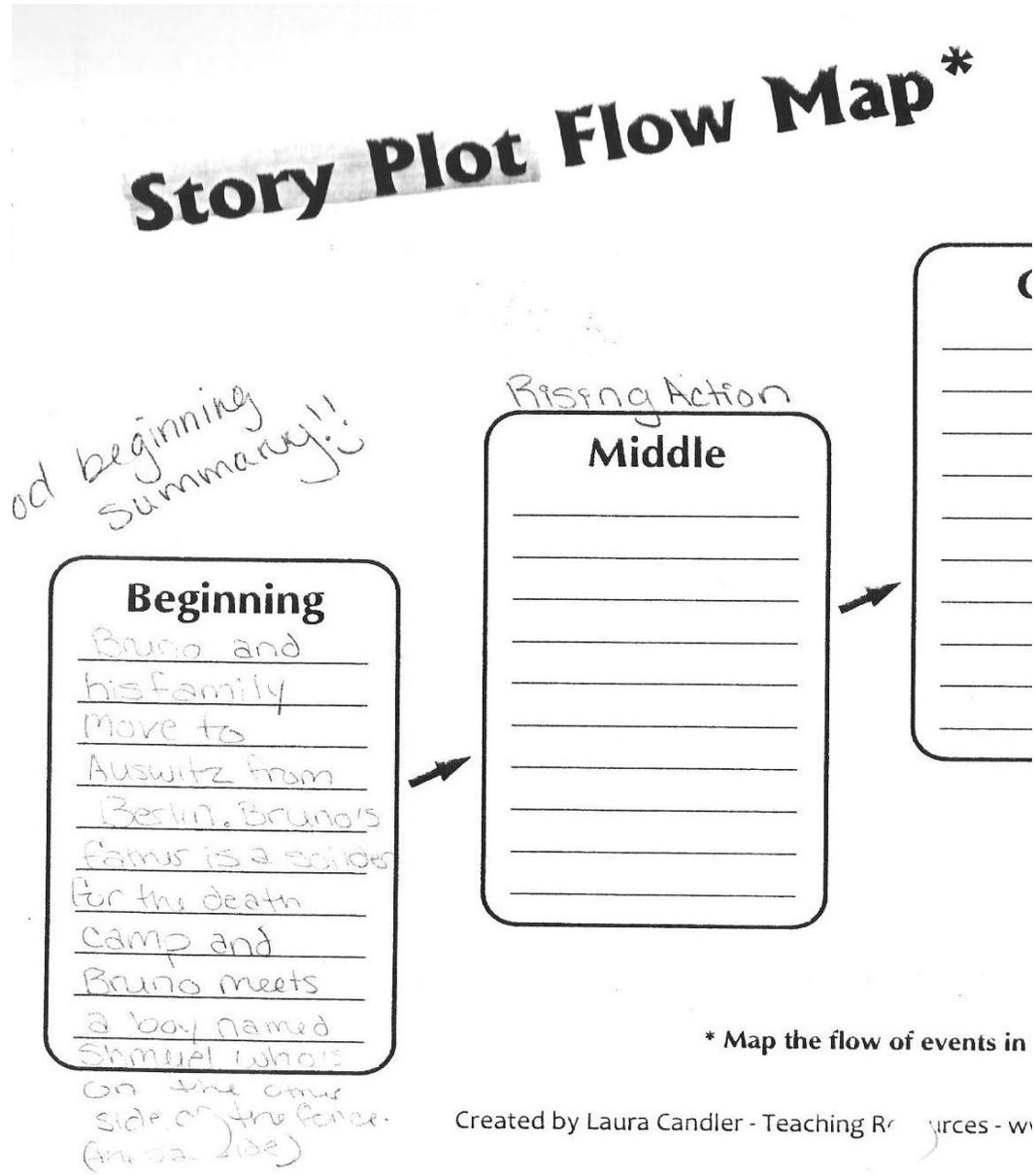


Figure 8b. Student Sample of Beginning Story Map. This student sample demonstrates comprehension of the beginning plot line during round one of literature circles.

Riley

40

good word choice...!

Questions:

- Question** What can you predict that Lieutenant Kotler did to Pavel after he spilled wine on him?

**Answer** I can predict that Lieutenant Kotler killed Pavel. I can predict this because in the text after what Lieutenant Kotler does Gretel's face goes pale while Bruno starts to cry.
- Question** Why did Bruno not tell Gretel about Shmuel?

**Answer** Bruno did not tell Gretel about Shmuel because he did not want Gretel to take his only friend at out with. He also knew since Gretel is a hopeless case she would tell someone.

*Handwritten notes:*  
 - "citing evidence!!" with an arrow pointing to the answer of the first question.  
 - "Predict" written vertically next to the first question.  
 - "infer" written vertically next to the second question.

Figure 8c. Student-Generated Questions and Answers Demonstrating Prediction and Inference. This example demonstrates higher-order comprehension skills during round one of literature circles.

**Round Two: Here We Go Again...**

I began the week with a whole class reminder to be sure to use **text-based evidence** in their responses. This week's goals for the student groups was to read three more chapters of the novel, find two more vocabulary words, develop one more question and answer, complete the middle story map on the plot diagram, and complete character traits for any character in the novel (Appendix H.4).

Students again needed to decide how to divide the work and complete it by the end of the week and assign any homework if necessary. After students were assigned their goals, I observed them engaged in discussions and then all groups began reading. Three out of eight pods read aloud and the other five groups read silently; that was also their choice. I was impressed. **It was nice to see my study developing right in front of my eyes!**

I also decided to **interview each group** just to get an idea of how well they were working together and provide any insights for my study. Another reason I decided to informally interview groups was because I observed two groups that appeared to be working too independently and not cooperatively; I needed to find out why. I also wanted to hear the voices of the other groups that appeared to be working well together. This is a narrative of what I found out based on my informal interviews with four significant findings (Figures 9a-9b). My findings are represented in bold in the narrative text for each group.

## Resistance...

**Kane, Sarah, and Callie:** They were working very independently and not discussing at all. When I asked them why, they shrugged their shoulders. Sarah did say she didn't really know why they were so quiet; that they did talk about splitting up the work together. I then spent four minutes on a **mini-lesson** explaining to them the benefits of using each other as resources. They seemed almost shocked and **slightly resistant** when I told them they needed to communicate more. Kane, based on his pre-study survey, did not really care about the strategy, Callie is a quiet student, but Sarah talks more in class, so I was surprised that she seemed resistant. I was confused by this **group's dynamics**. I guess I expected more from them, but I was hoping my pep talk would work.

## Perceived Resistance...

**Zale, Jada, and Joy:** This group was also working very independently and when asked, they said they just decided to read silently. I questioned not the reading, but the conversations surrounding the reading. I gave a two-minute **mini-lesson** verbally explaining the importance of sharing ideas to help each other and learning from each other to complete their literacy tasks. When I was finished, Zale and Jada both agreed that they are working together when discussing vocabulary and had also discussed the middle of their story maps on the plot diagram. I was relieved to hear this and I hoped my pep talk would prompt them to share more.

*Figure 9a.* Resistance and Perceived Resistance Based on Group Interviews

## Cooperation...

**Riley, Suzie, Dave, and Anne:** This group really took charge immediately and set to task. When I asked them why, Riley stated she stepped up and took charge as the leader. She was telling me what her group would accomplish as well as what they would do for homework. I asked the others if they were OK with Riley taking charge, and all nodded eagerly in assent. Suzie explained that even though **Riley was the "leader"** they were all sharing ideas on vocabulary words and meanings. Riley asked if they could use the words, "medicinal sheries", as a context vocabulary term and I told her to ask her group members. The others agreed to use the word since none really knew it and Dave suggested they try to come up with their best definition, then go home and research the term, and talk about it tomorrow. This was a perfect example of **collaboration in action- students helping each other and making decisions** for a common goal, and learning vocabulary in the process!

**Kaylee, Andrew, Larry, and Shannon:** I was initially concerned about this group just because Larry's response, in the pre-study survey, expressed his concerns about working in groups. Shannon also expressed a dislike of working in groups, but overall, this group was working well together. When I interviewed them, Shannon told me they read the chapter first and then went back and discussed vocabulary words that they were unsure of. Kaylee asked if this was OK. I advised her to do whatever works best for her group and whatever they had

agreed upon. They agreed to read first and then come back as a group to discuss words they read that were unfamiliar to them. It was nice to see them working together; I was happy with their **progress towards a common goal**.

*Figure 9b.* Cooperation Evident Based on Group Interviews

These interviews were powerful for me because they highlighted:

- what I wanted to watch - resistance in one group
- that I did not need to be so concerned about the group I perceived to be resistant because they were doing what worked best for them
- display the power of true cooperative learning with the other groups

The week ended with the collection of round two's literature circle work.

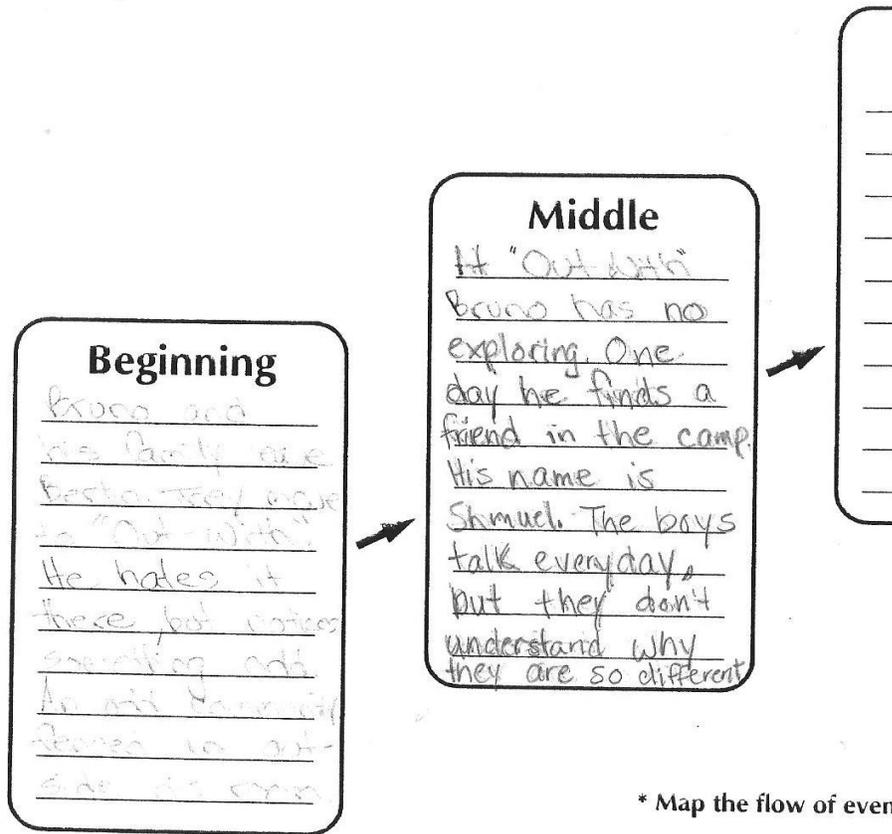
Based on my evaluation and assessment of the week's work, students again scored well. Out of 30 points, the class average was 28.4. This is equivalent to a 94.6% - very similar results compared to week one's average grades. Week two's examples of vocabulary using context clues, sample of plot diagram, student-generated questions and answers displaying inference, and an example of text-based evidence to back up character traits are all exhibited in the figures 10a-10d shown below. This week's work **informed me that students comprehended, thought deeper, and were progressing well in my study and learning more from each other**.

Context Vocabulary:

Vocabulary Word	Page #	My Best Guess	Dictionary Definition
Incumbent	146	Demanding/under pressure	Given as a duty
medicinal Sherris	167	a pill a sleeping pill	a wine with a nutty flavor
Senile	187	crazy	a characteristic of old age

Figure 10a. Student Sample of Context Vocabulary. This is a sample showing a student-selected vocabulary word from the novel and the use of context clues to define this word during round two of literature circles.

# Story Plot Flow Map\*



Created by Laura Candler - Teaching Resources

Figure 10b. Student Sample of Middle Story Map. This student sample demonstrates comprehension of the middle story map plot line during round two of literature circles.

Question Why did Shmuel have a black eye?

Answer I think Lieutenant Kotler beat him up or someone on the other side of the fence was a bully and started getting into a fight with him.

Question Why did Bruno say he didn't know Shmuel and he wasn't his friend?

Answer I think Bruno said that because he was scared of Lieutenant Kotler and he didn't want to say Shmuel was his friend because he didn't want to get in trouble for talking and leaving the house to go see him at the camp.

*Figure 10c.* Student-Generated Questions and Answers Demonstrating Inference. This example demonstrates higher-order comprehension skills during round two of literature circles.

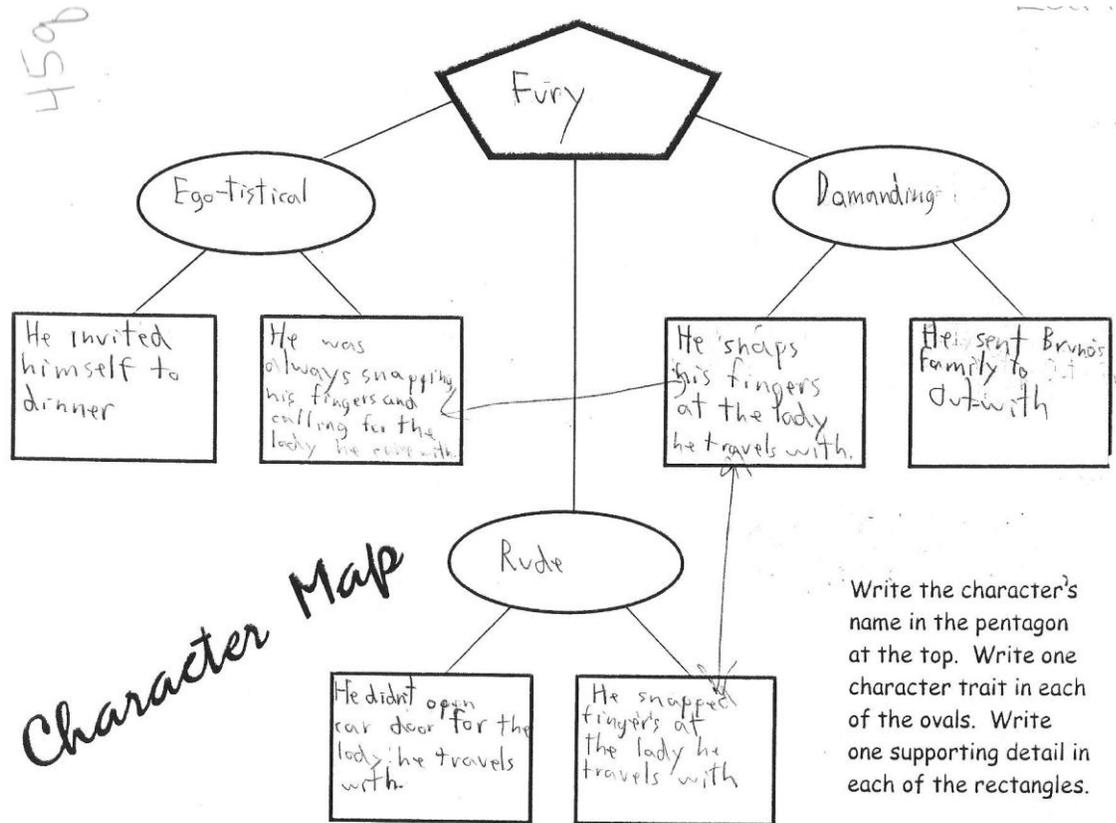


Figure 10d. Character Traits Using Supporting Evidence. This is a student sample of using text-based evidence to back up responses during round two of literature circles.

There were a few students who were not meshing with the class average, or, as Hendricks' (2012) would say, a negative case analysis, so I knew I wanted to informally interview them to see if they could tell me how to improve their grades. For example, I noticed over the past two weeks, that Jackson's grade was declining due to not citing any evidence from the text or using details to support his responses, yet his group members were doing well. So, I thought I would

conduct a **private interview** with him to help him recognize the errors but also to improve his own grade. The conversation went:

**Mrs. Wallach:** “Jackson, tell me why you lost points on your questions?”

**Jackson:** “I didn’t have enough of the story written.”

**Mrs. Wallach:** “Well, you needed more details from the text. That tells the story.”

**Jackson:** “I know.”

**Mrs. Wallach:** “What can you do to improve your score on the next question?”

**Jackson:** “I can give more details, but I included all I could about that question.”

**Mrs. Wallach:** “Let’s look at it. You only gave a one-sentence answer concerning what Gretel found in her hair. Look at what I wrote on your paper. You need to rephrase questions in a way that requires a better, more detailed answer. For example, your question asks what did Gretel find in her hair. This only requires a short answer, but who cares? What’s the bigger picture? What happens after she finds the lice in her hair?”

**Jackson:** “Her mom freaks out and demands they leave Out-With.”

**Mrs. Wallach:** “Good. So maybe a better way to word the question would be, what did Gretel find in her hair and what happened as a result of that? Or, what did Gretel find in her hair and how does her mom react to this? You want to reword it in a way that requires more details and gives the bigger picture. Why was this event important in the novel?”

**Jackson:** “OK. I can do that.”

**Mrs. Wallach:** “Also, how can you use your group to help you?”

**Jackson:** “I can ask them for help.”

**Mrs. Wallach:** “Yes. You can ask them to read your question and answer and see if they have suggestions for improvement or any ideas they can share with you. Even though you are getting individual grades, you are still here, working together, to help each other learn.”

**Jackson** nodded his head.

This interview served as a private conversation between Jackson and me but also served as a mini-lesson to **guide him to understanding** what he needed to do to improve his grade. I felt confident and ready to move into the last round of novel study with literature circles.

### **Round Three: Last Week of Novel Study...**

This week began round three of literature circle group work based on our novel. The work for this week included: summary of the novel, two more context vocabulary words, one more question and answer, climax and conclusion of the story map, and an illustration. This was a lofty goal for the groups to accomplish in a week, but I knew they could do it. The first day of round three I decided to complete a **non-participant observation** to record students’ levels of engagement. During observing, I noticed all students began reading first and then two pods decided to stop and work on vocabulary. Some words they were discussing were: “flat-out rejection” and “stubble”. They were **discussing and**

**then writing down definitions.** I overheard John share his question and answer with his group and they responded somewhat critically to his question. He then began to defend his answer to them and then his group members agreed with his response. I thought this was a great example of **collaborative learning**. This was an exciting moment to see my research study supported by students’ actions in the classroom!

With all the great things happening in my study and in my classroom, there was still that resistant group, the same group as before (Kane, Callie, and Sarah). Since this was the last week of novel study circle groups, I decided to **change my role** as facilitator and guide to one of a leader for this group’s benefit and success. This was very significant because I really did not need to assist the other groups, and my role as teacher had truly changed, but I needed to revert to my old role to get these students to be successful in collaboration. I joined their group for a day and became a member of their pod. I encouraged conversation by asking them about the climax of the story and reviewed their questions and answers. We discussed ideas and wrote some responses. I then exited their group with the advice of using each other as resources.

Checking in with the other groups this week proved interesting. Jala and Zane both stated on their pre-study surveys they preferred working alone. When I checked in with them (they both were in the same group) and I questioned them about their initial responses, they both laughed and stated they still feel they work

better alone, but did enjoy sharing ideas with each other. Dave’s group told me they read their written summaries to each other and had **given each other feedback**. I thought that was awesome! Then Dave stated to me that he was checking to be sure all the summaries had the important details and that each had a beginning, middle, and end. We all started to laugh at this and then Dave clarified and said he wanted to be sure everyone mentioned Bruno’s haircut in his or her summary because that was what made him look like Shmuel. I thought that was a great response because it was a key factor in the novel’s plot. Based on my observations and conversations during this last week of novel study, I completed a table to chart my students’ group’s responses (see Figure 11). I wanted to give my students a collective voice in the form of a vignette (Ely, et al., 2007) and then recorded my thoughts and reflections. My thoughts are in red and my findings including evidence of positive collaboration, or lack thereof, is in bold. I wanted to complete this before we finished our novel study and segued into the next segment of my research.

Student Literature Circle Groups	Interview Vignette
<p>Lana, Iman, John, and Maley  <i>Group seems to be working well with sharing ideas and giving feedback.</i></p>	<p>We decided to read aloud all the chapters and <b>shared</b> vocabulary words and questions. We provided <b>feedback</b> to each on our questions.</p>
<p>Jackson, Mary, and Walter  <i>I would like to see this group share more, but they were on-task and responsible.</i></p>	<p>We read mostly aloud, but the last chapter we read silently. We decided what work to complete in class and <b>assigned homework</b>, too.</p>
<p>Andrew, Kaylee, Larry, and Shannon  <i>This group was sharing the most and really collaborated for success.</i></p>	<p>We read all chapters aloud, except the last. We shared a lot! We <b>shared</b> questions and answers and gave each other <b>advice</b>.</p>
<p>Dave, Jason, Karol, and Hana  <i>This group worked well on providing feedback. They helped each other to be successful.</i></p>	<p>We read all chapters aloud. Everyone <b>shared</b> their summaries and gave each other ideas. We also <b>shared</b> our vocabulary words, but we had <b>different opinions</b> on our definitions.</p>
<p>Zale, Jala, and Joy  <i>I was concerned for this group, but after interviewing them, realized they cooperated with what works best for them.</i></p>	<p>We read all chapters silently because we read at different paces, but we did <b>share</b> vocabulary words and definitions.</p>
<p>Anne, Davis, Riley, and Susie  <i>The group balanced out working together and being independent. They were task-oriented and determined.</i></p>	<p>We read silently and aloud. We all had the same vocabulary words because we <b>shared</b> our vocabulary words and decided on which to use. We also <b>discussed</b> the ending of the novel to determine climax and conclusion.</p>
<p>Kane, Sarah, and Callie  <i>This group still concerns me. I really wanted to see them working together and sharing more, but at least there was some progress and common goals.</i></p>	<p>We read silently and <b>didn't share too much</b>. We <b>did share</b> the climax and conclusions. Sarah found the vocabulary words for us and we talked about them.</p>
<p>Halla, Conrad, and Paula  <i>This group was very task-oriented with division of labor but could use to participate and collaborate more.</i></p>	<p>We read aloud and silently. We <b>discussed</b> vocabulary words and the summary. We also <b>divided the work</b> into class work and homework.</p>

Figure 11. Vignette Based on Interview Conversations with Individual Groups. My thoughts are in red and significant findings are in bold text.

The common words in this interview that students kept stating were **shared and discussed**. I was thrilled to hear these words used in each group because that was a goal of mine for this study: **to have students engaged with each other discussing the text**.

This final round of literature circles novel study ended with the collection and assessment of student work (Figures 12a-12h). Out of the 40 points possible, the class average was 37.78 or a 94.5%. Again, this was consistent with the two prior weeks' worth of grades and also supported my research that **students can do well working on their own independently, yet cooperatively, and responsibly**. Examples of higher-order thinking skills using text-based evidence are represented in the figures shown below.

Context Vocabulary:

Vocabulary Word	Page #	My Best Guess	Dictionary Definition
Catastrophe	142	It means disaster or trouble	a sudden disaster or complete failure
inconsolable	178	It means very upset or disappointed	incapable of being comforted
Consulting	188	looking at something or examining it	to seek the opinion or advice. Or to seek information
muster	195	Come up with or conclude	An active assembling
mercilessly	215	To be cruel and not care	having no mercy

*Figure 12a.* Student Sample of Context Vocabulary. This is a sample showing a student-selected vocabulary word from the novel and the use of context clues to define this word during round three of literature circles.

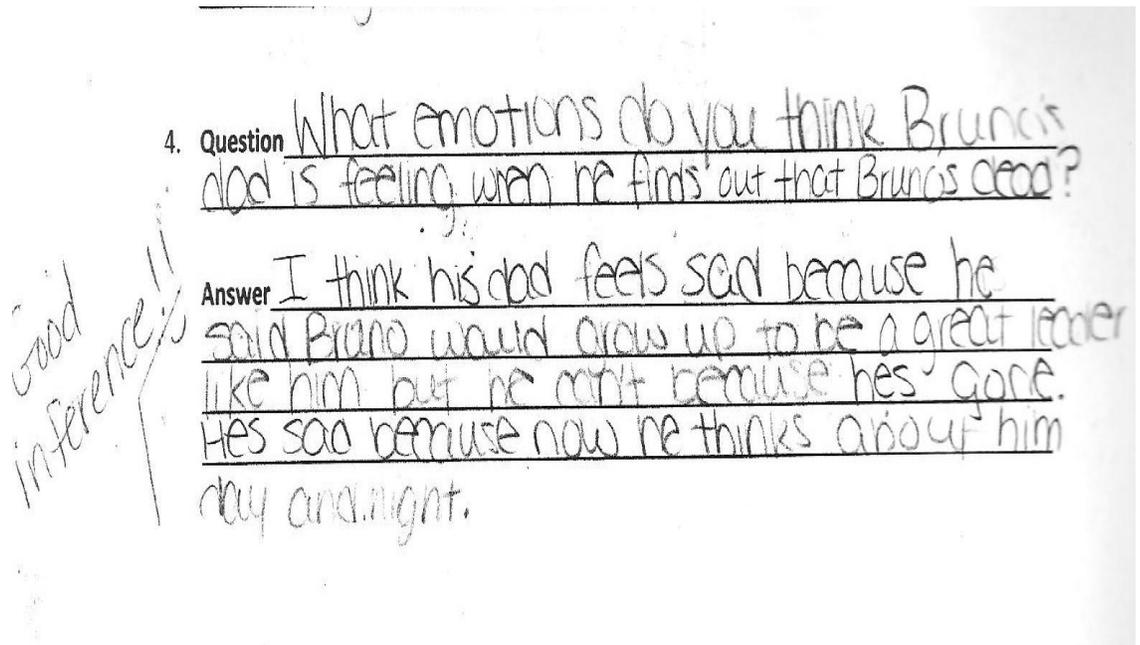


Figure 12b. Student-Generated Question and Answer Demonstrating Inference. This example demonstrates higher-order comprehension skills during round three of literature circles.

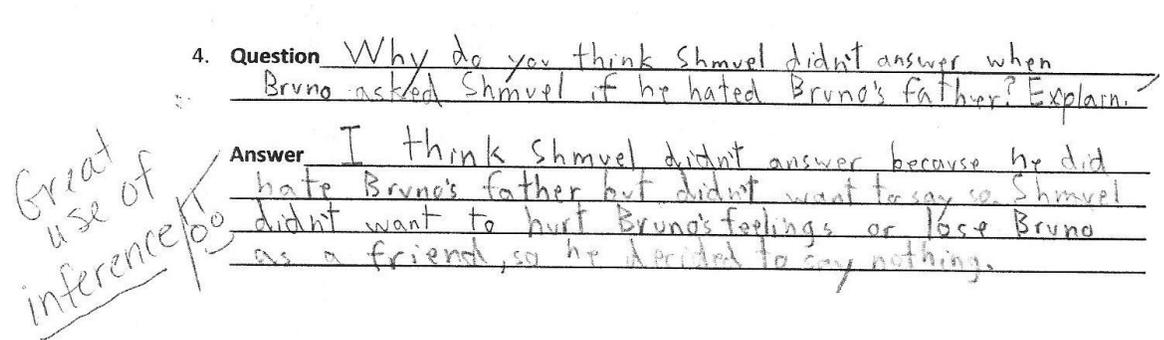


Figure 12c. Student-Generated Question and Answer Demonstrating Inference. This example demonstrates higher-order comprehension skills during round three of literature circles.

4. **Question** Why did Shmuel not show up to the fence for two days?

*Good! Text-based quote!!*

**Answer** He did not show up to the fence for two days because he was looking for his father. Shmuel said that his father "went on work duty with some other men and none of them have come back".

Figure 12d. Student-Generated Question and Answer Using Text-Based Evidence. This example demonstrates higher-order comprehension skills during round three of literature circles.

4. **Question** why would Bruno put the concentration camps clothes on?

*Good! Text-based evidence*

**Answer** Because it was his last day at out with and he really wanted to play with Shmuel, so Shmuel got the camp clothes for him and they went to go look for his father on Shmuel's side of the fence. Also it was Bruno's chance to play with him.

Figure 12e. Student-Generated Question and Answer Using Text-Based Evidence. This example demonstrates higher-order comprehension skills during round three of literature circles.

4. **Question** Do you think that Bruno was dead or missing at the end?

**Answer** I think that Bruno is dead. The reason is because when the room was dark, maybe the soldiers caught him sneaking out and shot him to death when he was caught.

*Drawing Conclusions! Good!*

Figure 12f. Student-Generated Question and Answer Demonstrating Drawing Conclusions. This example demonstrates higher-order comprehension skills during round three of literature circles.

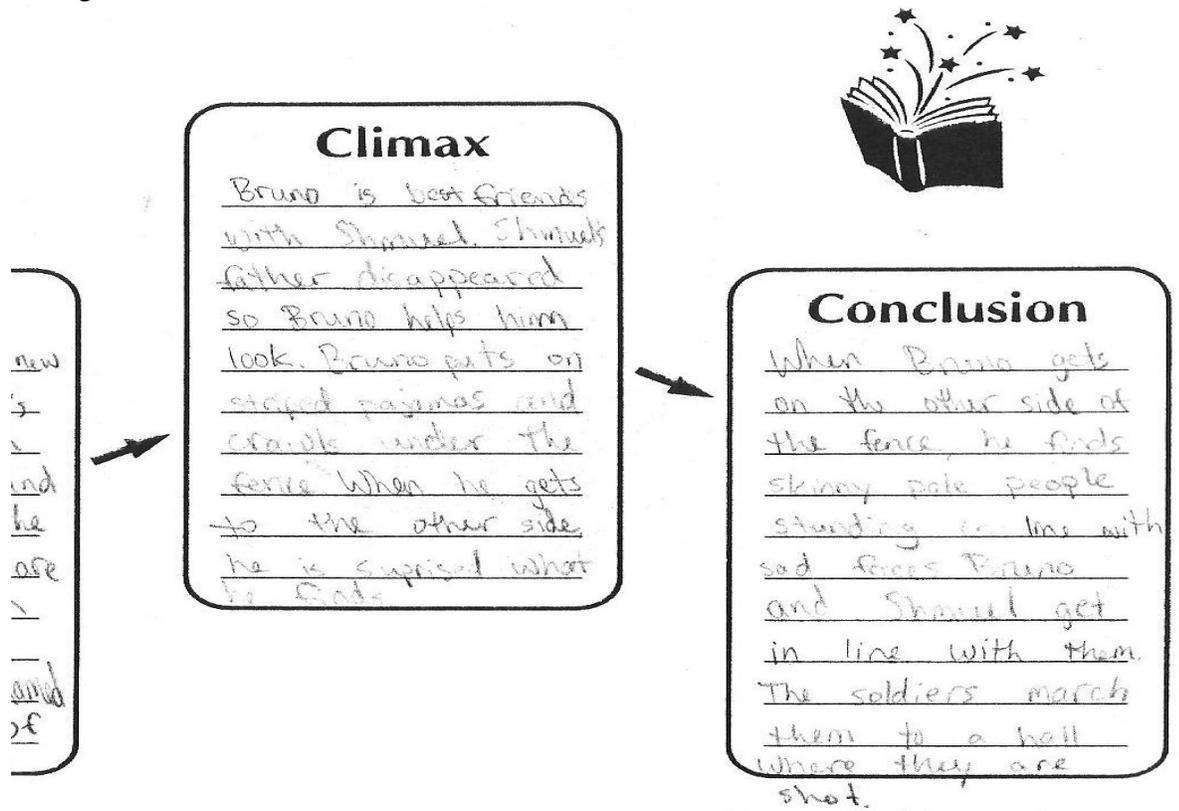


Figure 12g. Student Sample of Climax and Conclusion of Story Map. This student sample demonstrates comprehension of the novel's plot during round three of literature circles.



*Figure 12h.* Student Illustration Demonstrating Visual Comprehension. This student sample depicts a scene from the novel, *The Boy in the Striped Pajamas* during round three of literature circles. Illustrations are another way to assess comprehension.

I was very pleased with the results of my students' work over the last three weeks of collaboration. I noticed an increase in positive collaboration as well as more evidence of higher level comprehension. My plan for the final three weeks of my study would include an individual self-assessment survey for students, new literature circle group members, group choice for the next short story reading

assignment, creation of learning logs, a post-study survey, and a metaphor analysis. There was much more to accomplish in the short amount of time left.

### **New Study Groups: Our Final Round**

The last few weeks proved quite challenging as I tried to accomplish most of my goals despite losing some time due to Hurricane Sandy. I knew I wanted another round of literature circles based on choice of reading. But before even transitioning into my last round of research, I gave the students a self-assessment survey to complete (Appendix I). The point to this survey was to give me insight into their thoughts, perspectives, and ideas on how well they viewed their collaborative skills. It was only a four-question survey but important for me to assess their responses and either confirm or disprove my observations but also to inform me about the selection for the next grouping of students. After reading the surveys, I analyzed their responses and was happy, surprised, and even intrigued by the way they rated themselves and their responses (see Table 4).

**Table 4**

*Students' Self-Assessment Survey Results*

| Self-Assessment/Individual Students' Perspectives |

11/12/12: Individual Assessment Analyzed

1-Excellent 2-Good 3-Fair 4-Poor

Question #1: Listening to other points of view.

12- scored themselves as ones

15 – scored themselves as twos

| Self-Assessment/Individual Students' Perspectives |

Question #2: Sharing your ideas with the group.

11 – scored themselves as ones

9 – scored themselves as twos

7 – scored themselves as threes

Question #3: Making choices from the possible solutions to the dilemma. (Devising a plan to get the work done on time)

12 – scored themselves as ones

10 – scored themselves as twos

| 5 – scored themselves as threes

| Self-Assessment/Individual Students' Perspectives |

Question #4: Identifying reasons for your decisions.

15 – scored themselves as ones

10 – scored themselves as twos

1 – scored himself as a three

1 – no rating

Most students felt they did either a good job or an excellent job at working in groups which was refreshing to read. As part of this survey, students were also allowed to write in comments next to their ratings. Overall, most students responded to the questions, not individually, but holistically, from a group

perspective. This really surprised me. **The power of social interaction can be profound and invasive!** Leaders surfaced despite no assigned roles. I was most intrigued by the responses from two students who were in different groups and even responding to different questions, yet both responded in a collaborative context. Both Susie and Iman responded with the exact same **idiom, “we all pitched in”** to get our work done. The significance was that both students used the exact same idiom even though they were in different groups and completed this assessment individually. This was important to me because it told me that these groups worked well together, were engaged, and each student was held accountable for their participation. It was also significant because both of these students rated their groups’ participation instead of themselves as individuals. It was an example of **true collaboration and thinking as a whole, rather than individually**. These quotes are what inspired the title to my thesis.

I used students’ responses from the survey and formulated three categories: power in engagement through collaboration, leadership, and reluctance or resistance. Students’ feedback is so powerful and telling that I created Figure 13 (see below) to represent some of the more significant findings concerning student engagement, leadership, and reluctance based on students’ quotes to the self-assessment survey.



### **Power in Engagement through Collaboration:**

- ~"I listened to other people's POV (point of view) in my group and helped them." (Paula)
- ~"We shared our ideas with each other a lot to try to come up with answers for questions." (Joy)
- ~"I made smart decisions and didn't goof off a lot." (Jason)
- ~"We all listened well to each other's opinions. Most times we would argue and give reasons why we might be right or wrong." (Davis)
- ~"I listened to my friend's point of view. We made a schedule of what we were doing during the week." (Dave)
- ~"I listened to the things my group had to say and their opinions on certain things." (Susie)
- ~"We listened to each other and discussed it. We also didn't rely (*sic*) on what each other said for the answers." (Lana)
- ~"We all discussed our point of views together." (John)
- ~"We had a good mix of independence and working together" (Conrad)
- ~"We all shared our point of views and I listened so I could gather good information." (Maley)
- ~"We went back in the text to find our answers." (Kane)



### **Leadership:**

- ~"I was the one who usually assigned homework and what to do for that day. (Jala)
- ~"I made sure everyone understood our work and was able to get it done." (Mary)

### **Reluctance or Resistance?**

- ~"I shared ideas when I had them...which wasn't very often." (Sarah)
- ~"We did mostly independent work" (Kane)
- ~"I like working alone." (Shannon)
- ~"I didn't often share my ideas." (Larry)



*Figure 13.* Individual Assessment Analysis. These were students' quotes based on the self-assessment survey written responses.

Although there was an element of resistance with various students along the way, their grades did not reflect any interference with learning. I could not understand the resistance element; I still wondered if it had to do with traditional schooling over the years, personalities, or a combination of both. It was something I had hoped would change with the next grouping.

### **Next Assignment: Student Choice with New Groups**

New groups were assigned based on my prior observations and with students’ needs, behaviors, and survey responses in mind. I arranged seats for what I had hoped would be optimal student success. Once students were in their new pods, I assigned them leader cue cards – four in total (Appendix J). Most groups had four students, so each would take a leader role. If the pods had three students, one needed to be a leader twice. I gave them time to figure this out and they seemed to be **instantly engaged** and quickly assigned roles. I noticed they were reading their roles aloud to determine which they wanted to do. The next decision they had to make was from a choice of nonfiction short stories. I gave them five choices of various topics to read: one was about Eleanor Roosevelt; one was about Jackie Robinson; one was about Roald Dahl, another about the Iditarod, and the last about the Titanic (Appendix D). Six groups chose an excerpt from *Tales of the Titanic* and two chose an excerpt from *Boy* by Roald Dahl.

Once the choice was made, students set off assigning tasks and working on the leader one cue card, pre-reading activities. For this activity, students had to brainstorm ideas for their reading by predicting what the story would be about. As students were working, I observed a new concern. One of the newly formed groups, Andrew, Maley, and Jason, appeared to be **somewhat resistant** and not sharing like the other groups. I touched base with them and they seemed on-task, but I knew it was a group to keep an eye on as the days continued.

Also significant this week was the personal interview I conducted with Sarah, who was in the resistant group last time. What she told me was very important in my research. I knew Sarah to be outgoing and social, yet in her last group she was so quiet. In her new group, I noticed the old Sarah returning. When I questioned her about the change, she stated to me she is more comfortable in her new group and in her last group “**no one talked**”. This hyperbole was a **great metaphor** to analyze. Although her group literally did not ever utter a word, she was using an exaggeration to prove her point that her other group members were just not good communicators or collaborators; therefore, she did not have a chance to really experience the true meaning of literature circles. Even though Sarah’s statement was an exaggeration she was expressing her frustration and the way she felt about her last group’s lack of productive interactions. This reinforced to me the importance of **providing multiple grouping opportunities** for any type of cooperative learning experience. I also tried to place Kane and

Callie in more social groups to get them to open up more and be more willing to share based on my prior observations and their survey responses. I was hoping for positive results in these new groups both collaboratively and academically.

### **Learning Logs**

We were now in the crux of our next assignment, learning logs. Learning logs are paper booklets in which students record information they are learning through and from the text (Tompkins, 2009). Learning logs can take various forms; my students created a learning log from a sheet of lined paper folded in quarters to create a small booklet. Our learning logs included: pre-reading predictions and brainstorming, during reading "clicks and clunks", and after reading student-generated questions and response to literature. Clicks and clunks, along with the guided cue cards, are collaborative reading strategies that encourage students to share and discuss the text with guided prompts (Bremer, Vaughn, Clapper, & Kim, 2002; Appendix J). I decided to have students complete these learning logs for this grouping assignment because they incorporated more writing and response to literature and also required each student to take on a more specific "leader" role. It was very different from our last three weeks of literature circle work. The last few weeks had a set amount of time (usually a week) to complete various comprehension skills in a packet that was turned in for a grade. Although this assignment was also graded, it was more

of an open response to literature in which there was really no “right” answer as long as students backed up their responses with evidence from the text.

Six out of eight groups read aloud and two groups silently. One of the silent groups was Walter, Halla, and Karol, which was a group I wanted to see share more, but not the group that concerned me the most. The other silent group, Maley, Jason, and Andrew, was the group I was now most concerned about because they did not seem to share as much as I felt was appropriate. I wondered if the culture of our classrooms is so centered on individual work in our typical traditional education that resistance is a given. I wanted to help them but I knew I had done all I could to ensure the proper implementation and classroom environment necessary to share ideas. I continued to monitor this group as the week progressed.

I completed a **non-participant observation** this week and focused on two groups. In Jackson, Mary, Dave, and Joy’s group (Group 1), I focused my observation on **student engagement and true collaborative group work**. I then focused on Maley, Jason, and Andrew’s group (group 2) as the **non-communicative, resistant group**. I created a double column entry to chart the differences between the two groups (Figure 14) and to display my reflections and thoughts. My findings were very significant and in bold type shown below.

Observations	My Reflections/Thoughts
<p style="text-align: center;">~ Group 1:</p> <p><b>Jackson:</b> "OK. Let's start reading. Where did we stop?"</p> <p><b>Maria:</b> "No. We are doing the GIST for pages 578-583. We are only supposed to do the part we read."</p> <p><b>Dave:</b> "So, the GIST is about the passengers on the Titanic?"</p> <p><b>Maria:</b> "Yes. The stuff that we read about already."</p> <p><b>Dave:</b> "OK. I'll start writing my GIST. Then we need to finish reading to see what happens." Dave starts to write and looks back over the text.</p> <p><b>Maria:</b> "Do you need help?"</p> <p><b>Dave:</b> "No, I'm good."</p> <p><b>Jackson:</b> "Let's all write our GISTs now."</p> <p><b>Joy:</b> "OK."</p> <p>They continue to discuss and ask questions for the remainder of the class period.</p>	<p>~ The recorded snippet of a conversation between these group members reflected a <b>high level of engagement</b> through communication and discussion among this literature circle group.</p> <p>~I was using them as a model example of good group work because each day they had been conversing, asking questions, and addressing each other's questions and concerns.</p> <p>~This was what literature circle group work should look like. It was <b>learning together</b> and <b>helping each other</b> and <b>being successful</b>.</p> <p>~<b>Comprehension</b> was evident as they discussed.</p>
<p style="text-align: center;">~Group 2:</p> <p><b>Jason:</b> "So, the GIST is what we need to work on and it's the main idea of the story."</p> <p><b>Andrew:</b> "OK. Well, it's up to the point we read- about the captain and radio dude."</p> <p><b>Maley:</b> (laughs)... "radio dude?"</p> <p><b>Andrew:</b> "Yeah, I forget his name." He goes <b>into the text</b> to look for his name.</p> <p><b>Andrew:</b> "Harold Bride. So, we should write about the people on board the Titanic and the background to the story."</p> <p><b>Maley:</b> "OK."</p> <p>All three begin to write in their learning logs.</p>	<p>~This was the group I was most concerned about due to lack of discussions.</p> <p>~Based on this observation, I felt confident they were making strides and <b>improving their group discussions and work</b>.</p> <p>~I felt this was a <b>turning point</b> in their group. They were really <b>discussing ideas</b>, especially Andrew, who previously was off-task and not really participating.</p> <p>~<b>Success – even if on a small scale</b></p> <p>~<b>Comprehension</b> was evident as they discussed. I realized they knew what they had read.</p>

Figure 14. Chart of Groups' Responses and My Thoughts. This tabled information is based on a non-participant observation.

This observation was significant to me because it highlighted the high points of collaborative work in my study, but it also highlighted a misinterpretation of mine. What I **perceived to be resistance** in the second group turned out to be a **small success in collaboration and sharing of ideas**.

Another high point of my study came in true **Vygotskian form**. One of my students, Riley, asked me a question about the short story reading, but before I had a chance to even respond, Larry, who was in her group, responded. He restated the piece of text that confused her and Riley said, “Oh. OK. Now I get it!” As Vygotsky (1978) would concur, **Larry became the more capable other!** They helped each other to understand the text and answered their own questions. It was a great moment in my research study. This was especially significant because Larry, according to his pre-study survey, was the quiet one; the one who preferred to work alone and on his self-assessment survey stated he did not often share his ideas! What a dramatic change and proof that there was **power in collaboration**.

I collected the learning logs, assessed, and analyzed them based on written responses, illustrations, and vocabulary. In analyzing, I noticed scores had gone down from the prior weeks’ worth of literature circle data. The total score possible for the learning logs was 50 points and the class average was 41.04 or an 82%. This was a drop from the “A” grades over the past few weeks but I felt the grades went down more that week because students had to complete more written

responses. Looking individually at the grades, there were only a handful of students that did not do well and it was based on their lack of text-based evidence in their written responses. Some examples of student illustrations, higher-level thinking, and lack of complete responses are shown in figures 15a-15e below.

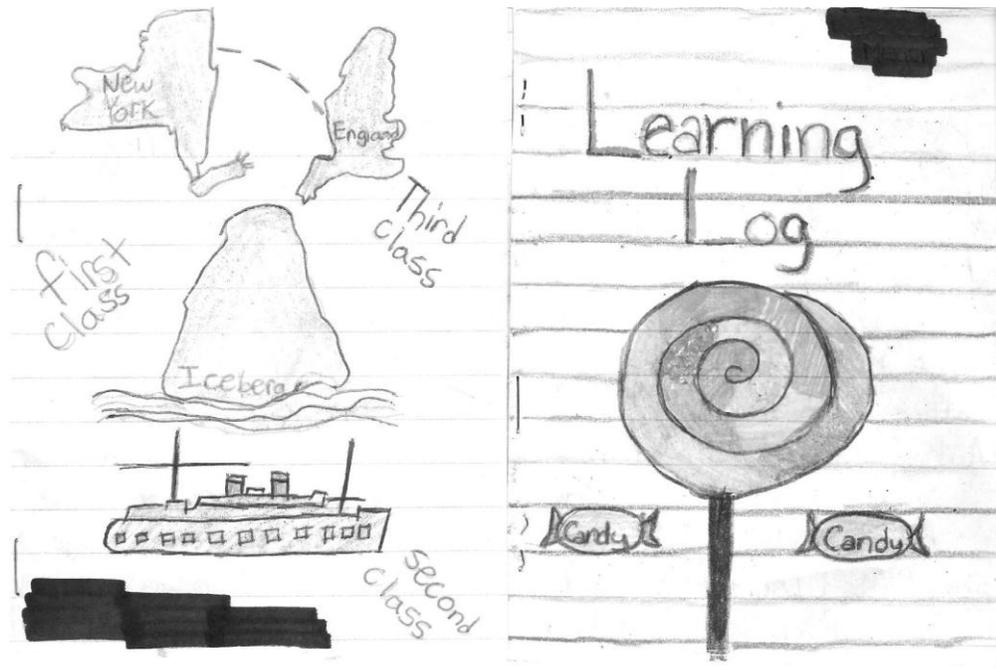


Figure 15a. Student Samples of Learning Log Illustrations. The illustrations are based on comprehension of the short story.

Before Reading!

2.)

1.) I predict that the story Titanic is going to be about, how they hit the iceberg and how they managed to save so many people. I also think its going to be about why they couldnt save the other people, and what happened to them after that.

Figure 15b. Predicting in Learning Logs. This student sample represents predicting using words and a graphic organizer.

To get back at a mean store owner, by pulling a prank on her. Mr. Coombes beats him up and Roald's friends.

(2) One vocab word I didn't understand was Black Murrain. I have never heard of anything like that. But now I know it means police car. Another vocab word I didn't know was malignant. I thought it meant really big eyes, but it means filled with evil. I also don't understand what cathedral means. I think it means catholic school.

Good!;

During reading parts

(1) In our second half of reading I found another clunk, malignant.

(3) I was told malignant means bad.

(4) 5 boys go and buy candy with the money they have at the sweet shop, but torment an old lady who is very rude.

Figure 15c. During Reading Vocabulary; "Clicks and Clunks". This student sample represents vocabulary development during reading.

the sweets shop every day. He likes to play pranks and he gets into trouble.	② Why did Roald write <u>Charlie and the Chocolate factory</u> ? • He wrote it, because growing up he was around candy, and candy shops and loved it.
<u>After Reading</u> • 3 questions	
① How did his childhood make him become a good writer? • Maybe because he could take his childhood experiences, put them behind a character, and make a good story.	③ Why did Mr. Coombes beat Roald and his friends? • He beat them for putting a mouse in one of the candy jars to play a prank on Mrs. Pratchett.

Figure 15d. After Reading Student-Generated Questions and Answers. This student sample represents drawing conclusions.

Friday During Reading	During # 2
2. Why did the rich get to leave with half full life boats while other died because they couldn't get on? (circled)	4. The titanic was the largest ship ever made and while carrying rich and famous passengers, the ship is about to set sail GIST Summary? More needed...
4. One day someone built a ship called the Titanic. It was the biggest ship ever made, now it sails for the first time (circled)	29. Why did they call the 'titanic "she"?' (circled)
GIST Summary needs more...	b. Why did <sup>who?</sup> they make the titanic was unsinkable? (circled)

Figure 15e. Lack of Complete Responses. These student samples demonstrate a lack of text-based evidence in responses.

## Post-Study Survey

The final week focused on reflecting upon the last five weeks of literature circle groups with a post-study survey (Appendix K). The purpose of the survey was to see if any of my participants' thoughts, ideas, opinions, or perceptions changed in regard to this strategy. I analyzed the results in table 5 shown below with a sampling of students' responses.

Table 5

### *Analysis of Post-Study Survey*

#### *Sample Students' Responses Included*

<p>1. On a scale of 1 to 5, 5 being the best, rate you as a reader.</p> <table> <tr> <td>1 – 0 students</td> <td>3.75 – 1 student</td> </tr> <tr> <td>2 – 0 students</td> <td>4 – 14 students</td> </tr> <tr> <td>3 – 1 student</td> <td>4.5 – 1 student</td> </tr> <tr> <td>5 – 11 students</td> <td></td> </tr> </table> <p>**Improvement from pre-study**</p> <p>2. Do you feel you are a better reader now than you were before literature groups? Explain.</p> <p>Yes – 17 No- 10 – but all said same; none worse</p> <p>Conrad his answer is really a yes – “No, because I think literature circles helped me to understand what I’m reading instead of making me better at it.” Anne is a no, but improving slowly Jala (who before had a negative opinion of working in groups now says, “I think I am still the same but a few things that other people in my group do that are good habits I might take up.” Example: Callie: “Yes, because while working in literature circles I came across a few vocab words I didn’t know and in literature circles you were able to talk about those words and their meanings.”</p> <p>3. Would you recommend literature circles in the future? Explain.</p> <p>Yes - 23 No - 3</p> <p>Dave: “Yes. Because it would allow future kids to discuss, share ideas, and find new vocab in a book.” Walter: only if we could pick our partners Kane who was so negative about literature circles says yes because it helps people meet and talk to new people. Zale (also negative) states yes because they are fun?? And might help kids understand more...???</p>	1 – 0 students	3.75 – 1 student	2 – 0 students	4 – 14 students	3 – 1 student	4.5 – 1 student	5 – 11 students	
1 – 0 students	3.75 – 1 student							
2 – 0 students	4 – 14 students							
3 – 1 student	4.5 – 1 student							
5 – 11 students								

4. Was reading a novel easier to understand if you are able to discuss your thoughts with someone? Why or why not?

Yes – 24  
No – 2

1 – “It was not harder but it was not easier.” Shannon

Example:  
Anne: “Yes, because lit circles are a way to communicate and ask for help.”  
Kaylee: “Yes, because I had one of my group members helping me understand than it always being a teacher helping me.” (Vygotsky; more capable other)  
Mary: “Yes, because when I didn’t understand something we all discussed it together.”  
Iman: “It was easier to understand because your partners were there to listen and help give you their ideas on the topic.”

**\*\*All are referring to what Vygotsky (1978) would call the more capable other**

5. Do you feel you have increased your vocabulary knowledge and have a better understanding of how to find meaning in context?

Yes – 23  
No – 4

Example:  
Callie: “Yes, because you were able to discuss meanings of new words.”  
Sarah: “Yes, because we would work together to figure out a reasonable definition for the word.”  
Jala: “Yes; seeing good habits that other people have influenced me a little.”  
Riley: “I do feel I have increased because when I saw a word that I did not understand, I would look at context clues.”  
Hana: “No, not really. I come to realize I learn a lot more reading independently.”

6. Did your group work well together? What were some of the strengths and weaknesses of your two different literature circle groups? Explain.

Overall strengths:

- Reading together
- Independence
- Working well together
- Discussions
- Completing tasks
- Helping each other
- Discussing vocabulary

Overall weaknesses:

- Not sharing enough
- Staying on task/topic
- Talked too much/losing focus

7. Do you have any comments for me that you feel I should know or be aware?

Answers vary – some examples:  
Larry: “I enjoyed it.” (His is a change from pre-study)  
Davis: “I think its more fun when you laugh and talk with the group because you learn about your group too so it isn’t awkward to read.”  
Halla: “I get a lot more work done independently, but I understand it more with lit circles.”  
Shannon: “I hope that we do not get to do them again.”

Walter: “We should get to pick our groups.”  
Susie: “I hope we do literature circles again because they improve my reading.”  
Jala: “I kind of liked LCs but I prefer to work alone.”  
Mary: “Having literature circles made me share more so it might make others share.” (She is typically a very quiet student.)

Some significant findings of the post-study survey were:

- Students rated themselves **better readers now** than before on the pre-study survey.
- No one felt literature circles were detrimental to his/her reading skills; if anything, they felt their **reading skills stayed the same or improved**.
- Twenty-three out of 27 students **would recommend** literature circles in the future.
- Twenty-four out of 27 students stated **reading was easier to comprehend in groups**.
- Twenty-three out of 27 students felt they had **increased their vocabulary skills**.
- There were several examples of the more capable other theory of Vygotsky (1978) based on Anne, Kaylee, and Iman’s written responses (Refer to Table 5).

### **Time to Use Metaphors!**

The final phase of my study culminated with the completion of a metaphor analysis. Students were given the prompt, “Literature circles are...” (Appendix L) and they needed to fill in the blank with a comparison. Before completing this

activity, we reviewed as a whole class metaphors and their purpose. I asked the students to be honest and compare literature circles to something that really made sense to them. Figure 16 is a pastiche with student samples as well as a collage of what students' wrote. Even though I asked for a metaphor, some students wrote similes. It did not matter as long as they were making a comparison and the results were still quite informative. As Ely et al. (2007) would suggest, metaphors can be the most telling part of a thesis study and upon examining my students' responses, I would have to agree! My thoughts and findings are represented in the speech bubbles and bolded.

**Literature Circles Are...**

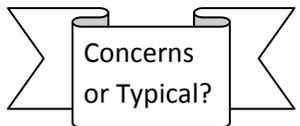
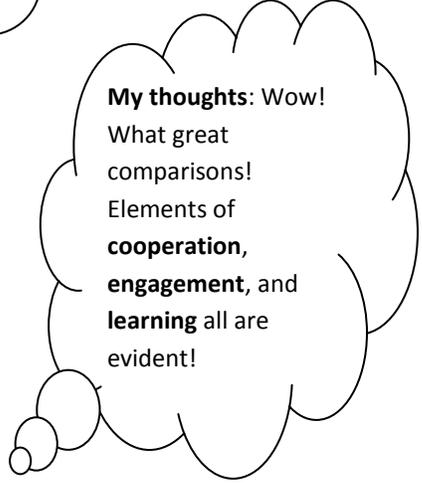
**I said:** a rollercoaster of twists and turns and ups and downs. It was filled with highs and lows, many successes, but still some concerns. As a teacher researcher, I would compare literature circles to a rollercoaster because the strategy was fun, exciting, yet vacillating and uncertain all at the same time.

**My Students Said:**



**Literature Circles Are...**

- ~like the army. They work together to solve problems. (Davis)
- ~like jobs, because everyone needs to work together to get the job done. (Callie)
- ~like chimpanzees, meaning we need to work together to survive. (Conrad)
- ~like friends getting together and discussing a topic together. (Dave)
- ~a group of people reading and sharing their ideas. They share opinions and talk about what was read. (Mary)
- ~like think tanks. A group looks at some information and then discusses the information they were given. (Larry)



**Literature Circles Are...**

- ~like learning things from Leapfrog. It was annoying but educational. (Hana)
- ~like broccoli. You don't want to do it, but you do it anyway. (Zale)
- ~like Brussels sprouts, nobody likes them. (Zane)
- ~like OK T.V. shows; they are not good until you get used to them. (Jala)

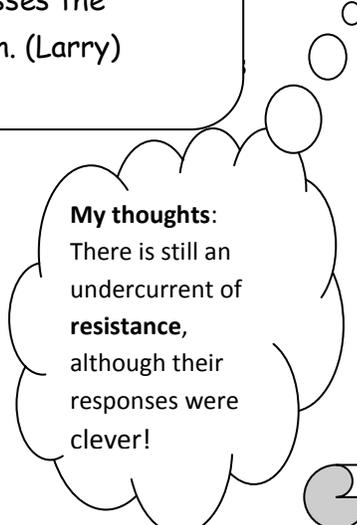


Figure 16 Pastiche

My research study was now completed and we transitioned back to whole group for our next unit on drama. It was an exciting and arduous journey from beginning to end, but well worth it considering my findings. I realized that action research is all about looking at what is existing, thinking about our current practice, reflecting upon it, and then taking action. It is also about observing and collecting data, but then really reflecting on that data to determine relevance and significance. Then we form judgments about our practice and what we need to change, revise, or keep the same for future applications. It is all about doing what is best for our students, based on their needs, to enable them to have a personal and yet profound educational experience (Dewey, 1938). Even though my research study has ended, my researching, experimenting, and learning will never end; I always want to strive for excellence because my students deserve it!

### **Data Analysis**

As Ely, et al. (1997) described, “There is no way that as thinking beings we can *not* analyze” (p. 161). I feel this is especially true of teachers. We have that instinct to analyze all of our students’ work to inform our practice and to ensure student learning. And so, for my study, I analyzed various forms of data. Using various forms of data helps to be sure that triangulation, or looking at data through various perspectives, is evident in your research (McNiff & Whitehead, 2010).

My objectives for my study were to tap into middle school students’ needs to socialize in a positive, collaborative way with literature circles. I was also looking for evidence of comprehension, vocabulary, and higher-order thinking skills in my students’ work. In order to do this, I used various assessments along the way and recorded all my thoughts and feelings in my field log. To gain meaning from my data collection, I reviewed my research data approximately five times to look for emergent codes and themes (Ely, et al., 1997). As Ely, et al. suggests, “In analysis for qualitative research, we try to discern the smallest elements into which something can be reduced and still retain meaning if lifted out of immediate context, and then discover the relationships between those elements” (p. 161).

With this information as a reference, I coded my field log by making margin notes about the context, which organized my thoughts, feelings,

perceptions, and observations. In addition to my observational analysis, my data also included: baseline and assessment data, three student surveys, ten student interviews and three group interviews, four mini-lessons with several groups, literacy activities and student work samples, and a figurative language analysis.

### **Observational Analysis**

During the course of my study, all observational data was recorded in my field log. I would monitor students and jot down observational notes on sticky pads. These pads served as my memory until I was able to sit down and type all my reflective journals in my log. I would add more than what was jotted down on my sticky pads to include all I observed. My field log was where I housed all my recorded participant and non-participant observations and student interviews. Everything I saw that was significant to my research was written and reflected upon in my log such as examples of students collaborative techniques that I heard or specifically quoted. I would go back and read these journals many times to code information and to inform my study.

### **Baseline/Assessment Data Analysis**

Baseline data was analyzed at the start of my study to inform me of how to begin my study. The baseline data I analyzed was from PSSA and Study Island testing scores. Based on this analysis, I knew how to proceed with my goals and objectives for my research.

As I collected each week's work, I assessed it and then analyzed it looking for elements of comprehension, vocabulary and higher-order thinking skills. I used grade analysis as a whole group as well as individually to drive my next steps and confirm my observations.

### **Student Survey Analysis**

A pre-study survey was conducted to gain insight into my students' thoughts and perceptions on literature circles and reading (Appendix E). This informed my study because I knew I needed to complete a member check for accuracy and to be clear with what literature circles would look like in my classroom based on their responses. I also had students complete a self-assessment survey based on how well they thought they worked individually in groups after the novel study (Appendix I). I used this to inform my practice for the next round of literature circles with short stories. Finally, I had students complete a post study survey with very similar questions to the first survey to be able to compare and contrast both surveys looking for commonalities and to look for changes in their opinions and attitudes, either positively or negatively once my research was complete (Appendix K).

### **Student Interview Analysis**

The student and group interviews I conducted were used to give me a better understanding of some individual students' opinions as well as give me a chance to talk more intimately with them. I interviewed ten students throughout

the course of my study. The interviews were conducted at various times throughout my study and were based on my observations and need. The purpose of the group interviews was to get an idea of how individual groups were collaborating. I was trying to determine resistance and cooperation based on each group's responses.

Also included in my interview analysis were several mini-lessons given to two groups to work through some resistance issues. The mini-lessons were teacher directed, but were based on my observations and then interviews with the groups. I wanted the resistant group to work more collaboratively.

### **Literacy Activities and Student Work Analysis**

During the course of my study, I utilized various literacy activities. Initially, this served as guided practice for students and to inform me of how to proceed. I utilized a modeling technique to review important literary components essential to understanding and interpreting text. From this, I analyzed various student samples tied to specific literacy strategies. After the modeling period, I provided guided practice until students were working in their groups independently. From this, I extracted student samples in the form of various graphic organizers to look for evidence of strategy use as well as comprehension, vocabulary, and higher level thinking processes as based on my objectives for this study.

### **Figurative Language Analysis**

At the end of my study, I had students complete a metaphor analysis. This consisted of the statement, “Literature circles are...” and students had to fill in the rest (Appendix L). I told them to compare literature circles to something based on our knowledge of metaphors. I wanted them to synthesize the whole study on literature circles and make a comparison. After I collected the students’ examples for evaluation, I noticed some students chose to make this statement into a simile. This worked out fine because it was the comparison I was interested in. The students’ samples were very insightful and useful to bring closure to my study.

### **Codes, Bins, and Theme Statements**

I started to realize some prominent themes and codes upon completion of a methodological memo about halfway into my study. I had been coding my field log each time I read it, but certain elements emanated the more closely I examined and re-examined my log. Once I had completed the coding process, I then started to put these codes into bins based on commonality of the data (Figure 17). Figure 17 shows the graphic organizer I used to represent my findings. From there, I was able to determine themes in my study (Figure 18). These themes are based on the “sorting and lifting” (Ely, et al., 2007) that I completed with my data. My findings were based on these theme statements.

### Coding Graphic Organizer

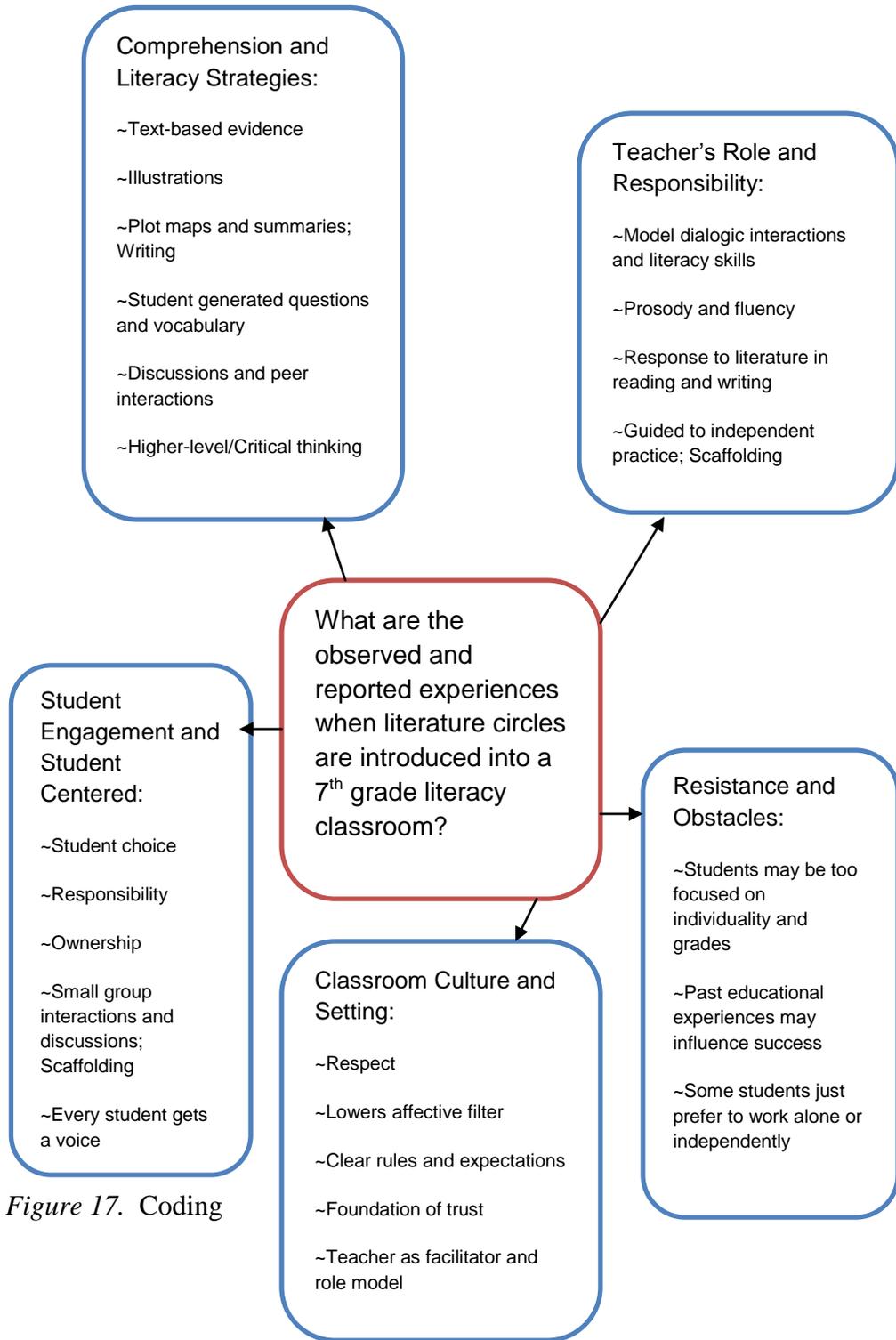


Figure 17. Coding

## Theme Statements

### Research Question:

*What are the observed and reported experiences when literature circles are introduced into a 7<sup>th</sup> grade literacy curriculum?*

1. **Teacher's Role:** The teacher's role and responsibility in literature circles is crucial to implementation. It includes the modeling of dialogue and key literacy strategies. A gradual release of responsibility, heavily focused direct instruction, yields to student-centered discourse within the literature circles.
2. **Resistance and Obstacles:** Given the school environment or students' past educational experiences; students may resist collaboration, or just prefer to work alone. Therefore, the teacher needs to instruct with mini-lessons, to carefully choose student groups, and take a more active role in groups as needed to ensure student success.
3. **Comprehension and Literacy Strategies:** Literature circles can aid in comprehension through the use of various literacy strategies including illustrations, plot maps, student generated questions, vocabulary, and text-based evidence. Comprehension increases over time as students employ higher-level thinking skills, peer interactions, discussions, and critiques.
4. **Student Engagement:** Literature circles are a student-centered approach that provides for choice, more responsibility, and a sense of ownership in achievement. Each student brings his/her background knowledge, thoughts, and ideas to each discussion which encourages socialization but in a positive, collaborative environment.
5. **Classroom Culture:** An environment of respect and trust must be created as the teacher's role begins to change. The teacher can take any role she deems appropriate, based on class needs, from facilitator to observer or back to instructor.

*Figure 18.* Theme Statements

### **Research Findings**

The purpose of my study was to tap into my middle school students' needs to socialize by incorporating the strategy of literature circles. So often in today's classrooms, we are focused on test prep and skill and drill practice that we do not allow enough time for students to work together in a cooperative environment but instead focus on whole group instruction just to "get through" the content. As Dewey (1938) stated, the educator is responsible to create activities which lend themselves to a social organization in which all students have an opportunity to contribute something. I wanted my students all to contribute something; I wanted to make a change in this type of traditional education that I noticed is often prevalent in my own classroom and allow for more social structure.

I wanted my students to be actively engaged in text through collaboration. I was looking for evidence of student engagement through cooperation in a small group setting. I was also interested in students' comprehension skills within literature circles; therefore I looked for evidence of comprehension through various pieces of student-generated work. The examples included: context vocabulary, questions and answers, written response to literature, illustrations, and plot diagramming. Although I knew my students had good reading comprehension skills based on my baseline data, I still wanted to engage my students in a form of collaborative literacy that was different from our traditional mode of education and a diversion from whole group instruction.

All throughout my data collection, I read and reread my field log coding and making margin notes. As I wrote my thesis, I put the significant features of my study in bold face text which I felt was pertinent to my study. Taking all this data into account, I came to my findings. I put all coded information from my field log into bins; these bins eventually translated into theme statements. As Ely, et al. (1997) suggested, themes are statements of meanings that run through most of your data. I generated four themes based on that premise. As Ely, et al. also suggested, themes can be formed based on one in a minority that carries a heavy impact in the research. From this, I generated a theme based on the undercurrent of resistance that was prevalent in my study. I felt the resistance was not the crux of my study nor did it affect the goals of my research, but it was always present in some form; therefore, it became a theme. These theme statements enabled me to see the big picture of my research study.

**Teacher's Role: The teacher's role and responsibility in literature circles is crucial to implementation.**

Before even thinking about implementing literature circles, I knew I had **to model the skills and strategies my students would need to be successful in independent group** work. I based this on my research and on Dewey's (1938) either-or philosophy. Students learn best in a social context (Dewey, 1938; Vygotsky, 1978), but they needed the guidance and skills to get there. Since this was the start of the school year, I needed to know exactly where my students'

reading levels were and how to stretch those levels to include higher order thinking. I used my baseline assessment data to determine that comprehension should not be an issue; however, comprehension is the basis upon which the higher level operations could build. Some of the strategies I focused on included: think alouds with read alouds to build connections within the text, reading prosody, and fluency. I felt this stress on thinking while reading as well as focusing on intonation would help my students read better together. I also focused on higher level thinking skills using text-based evidence to support written responses. Some examples included: main idea with supporting details, talking to the text reading strategy, illustrations, and using evidence to support written responses to a prompt based on Anne Frank’s diary and Elie Wiesel’s *Night* (see Figures 1, 4, and 5).

This process was a **gradual release of responsibility**. By the fourth week, I was transitioning them to group activities but still with some guidance. We focused on literary devices, vocabulary, and characterization. For literary devices, students found evidence of simile, metaphor, and irony in the novel. We also worked on vocabulary using a Frayer model graphic organizer in which students discussed and determined synonyms, antonyms, an original sentence, and an illustration for the word (see Appendix F and Figure 6). I infused non-fiction with our historical read of *The Boy in the Striped Pajamas* so students could make connections across texts. For characterization, we worked on comparing and

contrasting the two main characters from the novel as well as focused on internal versus external conflict and how that could affect characters’ actions. These strategies were modeled first, and then students had an opportunity to discuss, debate, and complete assignments in their groups by applying that knowledge. They were shown how to use the text to find evidence to support their work and how to rely on each other as resources as I started to diminish my role as “teacher”.

This gradual release of responsibility from **guided to independent practice** was heavily focused on direct instruction initially, but then yielded to student-centered discourse within the literature circles.

**Resistance and Obstacles: Given the school environment or students’ past educational experiences, students may resist collaboration.**

This was one theme, which although was not the focus of my study, quickly became a concern as soon as we started literature circles. As soon as round two of our literature circle groups began, I noticed some resistance among certain groups. There were just one or two groups that always seemed **reluctant to share** and appeared to be working too independently of each other. I was afraid this reluctance might become an obstacle to student success, so I immediately tried to intervene where I saw fit. For example, I noticed two groups that fit this category, so I **changed my role** from facilitator to teacher again to give a mini-lesson to the groups about the importance of teamwork and

collaboration. I also conducted **informal interviews** of the groups to **member check** on collaboration and resistance to either confirm or refute my observations. One key piece of data collected during these interviews was a group that I **perceived to be resistant**, actually was not. In fact, they had figured out a way to work together that worked for each of them. Another telling piece of information came during round three when I actually changed my role from guide to student and joined the resistant group to help them in their sharing of responses. When I joined the group, the students seemed to communicate better which proved they could do it but just needed that push from me. My role as teacher had definitely changed, but had to be in flux depending on my students' needs.

This undercurrent of resistance coupled with students' responses on their surveys and my observations, necessitated **seat changes**. My last round of literature circles incorporated new seats with new group members. The most telling piece of data from this change came in the form of Sarah's **personal interview**. Sarah was now a great collaborator and engaged in discussion in her new group; however, prior to this change, Sarah was in the resistant group and she was very quiet. When asked about the change, she responded with a piece of figurative language. She stated to me that in her last group, “no one talked”. This statement, although an exaggeration, did enforce the need to move seats during literature circles to ensure all students were getting their voices heard and experiencing true cooperation. Even though Sarah's story changed for the better,

I found a new group within this next round that seemed to be resistant and it was comprised of students that were not resistant before. I had purposefully placed Kane, Sarah, and Callie (the resistant group from the previous rounds) in more gregarious groups to help them. They seemed to be working well in their new groups; however, now I had the new resistant group, Andrew, Maley, and Jason, to deal with. I **intervened** by completing a member check to see if they were on-task and working together and it appeared as though they were, so I left them alone. Just to be sure, I conducted a **non-participant observation** to record what they were sharing. My findings were very significant (see Figure 14). Based on this observation and their discussions, I determined they were making strides and improving their communication and group work. I felt this was a turning point in their group. They were talking, laughing, and discussing the text and it was a great feeling for me and for them. I realized that my observations and judgment of this group may have been initially correct, but now the students were working through the challenges of cooperative learning to be successful. I was thankful that I completed this observation to find this new evidence.

I never had a definite answer to my question of resistance. Was it the students' personalities that clashed or did not get along? Was it our traditional school environment or past experiences that held them back? Were they afraid to take risks in a group of their peers that they were not comfortable with? Although I never really did find out, I believe the significance of all of this either perceived

or realized resistance was that it was imperative for me to change my role as needed and **to use various pieces of data to** make the determinations and changes necessary to help my students be successful.

**Comprehension and Literacy Strategies: Literature circles can aid in comprehension through the use of various literacy strategies.**

Literature circles can aid in comprehension over time with the proper use of literacy strategies, peer interactions, graphic organizers, and discussions. I wanted to engage my students in the text with each other and then have them complete various literacy activities related to comprehension and higher level thinking skills such as text-based evidence. For the first three rounds of literature circles with our novel, I had students focus on **vocabulary through context clues definitions, student generated questions and answers, plot map summaries, character traits maps, and illustrations.**

- Students were responsible to pick vocabulary words they did not know and work together to figure out definitions based on **context clues**. Some examples of words from the text were: tubercular, grimaced, inconsolable, flounced, sidetracked, and catastrophe. I felt students picked great words and had good “best guess” definitions (see Figures 8a, 10a, and 12a).
- Students had to create their own questions and answers based on information from the text. In these questions and answers, I found

evidence of **text-based quotes, inference, drawing conclusions, prediction, and supporting details** (see Figures 8c, 10c, and 12b-12f).

- Students wrote **plot map summaries** including details from the beginning, middle, climax, and conclusion of the text (see Figures 8b, 10b, and 12g).
- Students filled in **character traits** for a character from the novel of their choosing. They had to list three character traits and use **evidence from the text** to back up their answers. Some sample responses were: The Fury (Hitler), demanding, egotistical, and rude. Each of these had a piece of evidence to back the given trait (see Figure 10d).
- Students created **illustrations** depicting a scene from the novel that was most interesting to them incorporating elements of **setting, plot, and/or characters** (see Figure 12h).

The class average for all three rounds of novel study was an “A” so I knew students were comprehending and thinking beyond the text.

The last round of literature circles focused on **group choice** from a given selection of short stories (Appendix D). This time, students had to create learning logs based on a set of reading cue cards (Appendix J). From this, students generated:

- **Illustrations** depicting something from their short story as a front cover design to their learning log (see Figure 15a).

- Before reading, students needed to make **predictions** about the story based on the title (see Figure 15b).
- During reading, students had to complete a section on **vocabulary words** they did not know and what they found out, “clicks and clunks” (see Figure 15c).
- After reading, students needed to **generate their own questions and answers** based on the story and using evidence from the text in their responses (see Figure 15d).

Another form of data came from students’ responses on the post-study survey.

Significant findings from this survey were:

- Students rated themselves as **better readers now** than before on the pre-study survey.
- Twenty-four out of 27 students thought **reading was easier to comprehend in groups.**
- Twenty-three out of 27 students felt they had **increased their vocabulary skills.**

**Student Engagement: Literature circles are a student-centered approach that provides for choice, more responsibility, and a sense of ownership in achievement.**

I evaluated levels of engagement during my research through observations and survey responses. The premise for literature circles was to engage students in the text through peer interactions. My goal in using this strategy was to allow my middle school students an opportunity to utilize their social skills in a positive way, for student achievement. I used a guided to independent approach to teach students how to function independently and use each other as resources as I slowly changed my role in the classroom.

When students are excited about reading in a rich piece of literature, they are more engaged (Brabham & Villaume, 2000). I found this to be the case as we were transitioning from whole group to small group activities. For example, I completed a **non-participant observation** when I asked students to **think, pair, share** with their partners about what Bruno, the main character, saw when he looked out his window. Students loved this novel, *The Boy in the Striped Pajamas*, and were eager to share and participate. Some students’ **responses** were: “I think he saw a death camp!” and “I think he saw a group of Nazi soldiers!” (see Figure 3). **The level of excitement and engagement was clearly evident.** Another example of engagement came in the form of my **observations just circulating the room** during a guided practice on main idea. Students were sharing ideas about an excerpt from Elie Wiesel’s *Night*. Students were sharing ideas with each other and even shared their responses to the whole class via the Elmo projector.

As we began literature circle groups, I documented levels of student engagement in my **participant and non-participant observations**. For example, when their work was assigned, I observed students getting right to task discussing, dividing work, and then reading chapters together. Students were **discussing vocabulary words** in context, **debating their questions and answers, and discussing plot summaries**.

Another way I recorded student engagement was in the form of surveys. The first survey to assess engagement came from a **self-assessment survey**. This survey was completed after the first three rounds of literature circles novel study. I had students assess themselves in terms of participation and cooperation in their respective groups. Upon analyzing the responses, I realized my students really were thinking holistically instead of individually (see Figure 13). Some students' **responses** were: “I listened to other people’s POV (point of view) in my group and helped them” (Paula) and “We all listened well to each other’s opinions” (Davis). Most students’ responses were very similar and all expressed how students worked together for a common goal. Another survey that documented student engagement based on students’ responses was my **post-study survey**. In this survey, I asked students to respond to a question about whether reading a novel was easier to understand if you are able to discuss your thoughts with someone. Some of these responses are examples of what Vygotsky (1978) would call the more capable other. It is based on the idea that each student brings to the

group their own background knowledge and ideas and can help each other learn. It can be empowering for students to be successful in a cooperative context without the stress and pressures of working alone without peer resources.

**Classroom Culture: An environment of respect and trust must be created as the teacher’s role begins to change.**

There is no way for a teacher to transition into literature circles groups without the creation of a proper classroom environment. The teacher must transition from that of an “organ of transport” (Dewey, 1938, p. 18) to that of a facilitator or guide during literature circles. The only way this transition can be successful is if the teacher has created an environment based on trust and openness. This was the only way students would be willing to share their thoughts and ideas openly and freely with no fear of “wrong” answers. It is the opposite of our traditional mode of education where the students are just the “obedient receptors” (Dewey, 1938, p. 18) of knowledge. Students now became their own instructors, responsible for their own knowledge.

For me, this environment was so important to establish on day one of school. Creating an environment of trust is a key element for classroom culture and it is something I strive to create every year for the benefit of my students. This year; however, it was especially important since it was a part of my research. I created a classroom environment of trust very early on in my study, in fact, from day one. The first week of school we completed getting to know you activities to

lower affective filters and to create a community feeling. We worked on cooperative learning strategies so students felt comfortable sharing with each other. I also established clear rules and expectations, but not in any way that was intimidating. I told my students I am there for them and to help them be successful, so they know I care about them. I demanded respect from them and for each other but also modeled what that respect looks like in action. For example, using please and thank you, listening while others speak, and being mature during discussions. I worked hard the first few weeks to establish this classroom climate. I know that it worked because students came to me with their thoughts, questions, and concerns throughout the course of my study. They often shared personal information with me, letting me know they trusted me and were comfortable.

Once the foundation was set, I could take any role I deemed appropriate, based on class needs. My role was constantly vacillating based on my observations. I guided students to independent practice and thought my role as teacher would diminish. This was the case for the most part; however, there were times when this changed. Some examples of changes were:

- I had to give mini-lessons to groups in the form of the “teacher”.
- I joined a group as a “student member” to aid in collaboration.
- I was a “participant observer” and interacted with my students.

- I was a “non-participant observer” and only observed my students from afar recording and documenting data.
- I was a resource, when needed.
- I was an interviewer. I conducted interviews in group formats, individually, and even as a whole group.
- I was a cheerleader, cheering them on with support and encouragement.

I wore many hats during this research study. I did whatever was needed based on my data and knowledge of my students. My teacher’s role fluctuated, but my goals did not. I was willing to change my roles for the benefit of my students to create a climate of trust to enable student success.

### Next Steps

Now that my research study was concluded and I had time to really reflect on my practice through the writing process of this thesis, I realized there were many successes, challenges, and significant findings. I am ready for the next steps in challenging myself to be a better teacher and continuing the research process.

One skill I realized was so important for students' to truly be independent learners is the proper modeling of literacy skills. Students have the capability of being there to support, help, and learn from each other, but they need the tools to do so. It is the **teacher's responsibility to know her students and to guide students** through this process. I believe the successes of my study came about due to modeling and practicing good reading strategies. Although most middle school students like to socialize, they still need their teacher to "teach" before they can make that step toward collaborative literacy. This lesson is one that I will always employ in my teaching.

I also realized that not all students wanted to collaborate; some just preferred working alone. That is why it was **so important to vary teaching techniques**. We need to know our students and what works best for them. I think throughout the duration of my study I wanted all my students to talk gregariously about the text and it did not always happen. I tried to intervene and engage students as suggested by the research but maybe some students are just not

talkative. I would like to delve deeper into this phenomenon to see if what I perceived to be resistance is just a part of human behavior and/or human personalities, maybe there is no prescriptive remedy for this; it just is. Therefore, if we alter our teaching strategies, we will engage all learners in a way that suits them. This is an important lesson for my future practice.

Lastly, I realized how important **flexibility** is in implementing literature circles. I needed to alter, change, and accommodate my study based on students’ needs and my role in the classroom. Flexibility was a must in maintaining the integrity of the strategy as well as utilizing its full potential for students’ collaborative success. Along with flexibility, we must always look at our study through **various pieces of data or different lenses** to know when to make those changes, how often, and to meet our students’ needs. I was constantly changing my role as needed in the classroom.

In addition to all my realizations, I still had some lingering questions that arose:

- What if I had more time for my research...would I have seen a difference in higher level thinking skills? Would their comprehension levels stagnate, get better, or decline over time? Would this strategy become boring and disengaging over time? Did I model too much?
- What if students had more choices in reading or in the determination of groups? Would it make a difference in their learning capabilities and/or

behaviors? Would those resistant learners break through their own barriers of solitude?

My students and I had some great experiences throughout my study and I am ready for the new adventures of a new group of seventh graders as I embark on a constant journey of research and reflection to improve my practice!

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## **Appendix A: HSIRB Approval Letter**

### **\*Via Email**

Dear Michelle,

The Moravian College Human Subjects Internal Review Board has accepted your proposal, "Literature Circles in Action in a Seventh Grade Literacy Classroom." Thank you for addressing all of our questions and concerns in the revised proposal. A copy of your proposal will remain with the HSIRB Co-Chair, Dr. Adams O'Connell, for the duration of the time of your study and for up to one year from the approval date indicated by the date of this email.

Please note that if you intend on venturing into topics other than the ones indicated in your proposal, you must inform the HSIRB about what those topics will be. Should any other aspect of your research change or extend past one year of the date of this email notification, you must file those changes or extensions with the HSIRB before implementation, awaiting HSIRB approval of the changes.

We do still need to collect your electronic signature, so please respond to this email with your name and project title in the subject line. Your reply will serve as your signature. Dr. Zales also needs to reply to this email with her name in the subject line. Her response will serve as her electronic signature.

Please do not hesitate to contact me if you have any questions. Good luck with your research.

Sincerely,

Dr. Virginia Adams O'Connell  
Co-Chair, Human Subjects Internal Review Board  
Moravian College  
(610) 625-7756  
[hsirb@moravian.edu](mailto:hsirb@moravian.edu)  
[voconnel@moravian.edu](mailto:voconnel@moravian.edu)

## Appendix B: Principal Consent Form

August 13, 2012

Dear [REDACTED]

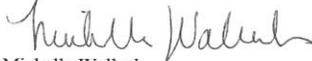
I am currently working on my Master's Thesis at Moravian College and will be conducting a teacher research study in my classroom on literature circles and studying comprehension and vocabulary acquisition within the literature circle group. I am writing to ask permission to conduct this research.

The purpose of this study is to examine best practices in literacy instruction incorporated within literature circles. The study will take place during one of my literacy classes throughout the fall semester of 2012. During this study, I will collect various forms of data to determine whether this instructional strategy was successful. Possible types of data I will collect include, but are not limited to, surveys, interviews, observations, test scores, and projects.

Benefits of participating in this study include better comprehension skills, positive peer collaboration, and life-long learning practices. All students' names will be confidential and the data will be kept secure in a locked cabinet and shredded at the end of the study.

Students' participation in this study is completely voluntary, and they may withdraw at any time without penalty. Regardless of participation, all students will receive the same instruction in the classroom and participate in all classroom activities.

Respectfully,



Michelle Wallach

I give my permission for this research project.

[REDACTED]  
Signature of principal [REDACTED]

August 14, 2012  
Date

### Appendix C: Parent Consent Form

September 14, 2012

Dear Parent/Guardian,

I am currently working on my Master's Thesis at Moravian College and will be conducting a teacher research study in my classroom on literature circles. I am writing to ask permission to use the data I collect from your child during this process. Participation in this study involves only regular classroom activities and [redacted] has approved this study.

The purpose of this study is to examine how students comprehend literature and how best to retain this knowledge for future learning. The study will take place during my literacy classes from September to December of 2012. I will be implementing literature circles within my classroom and collecting various forms of data to determine whether this instructional strategy was successful. Possible types of data I will collect include, but are not limited to, surveys, interviews, observations, test scores, and projects. There is no anticipated risk to this study.

Benefits of participating in this study include better comprehension skills, positive peer collaboration, and life-long learning practices. Your child's participation in this project is strictly confidential and no names will be used. All the data will be kept secure in my classroom and shredded at the end of the study.

Your child's participation in this study is completely voluntary, and he or she may withdraw at any time without penalty. Regardless of participation, all students will receive the same instruction in the classroom and participate in all classroom activities.

If you have any questions for me throughout this process, please contact me at mwallach [redacted] or you may contact my advisor [redacted]. Also, you may contact the school principal [redacted] in guidance or [redacted].

Thank you so much for your support!

Respectfully,



Michelle Wallach

I give my permission for my child's data to be used in this study. I understand that I will receive a signed copy of this consent form for my own records. I have read this form and understand it.

I do NOT give permission for my child's data to be included in this project.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Student's name (please print)

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of Parent/Guardian

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

### **Appendix D: Novel Study and List of Short Stories**

Novel Study:

Boyne, J. (2007). *The boy in the striped pyjamas*. London: Random House.

List of Short Stories taken from *The Language of Literature* 7<sup>th</sup> grade text:

Ballard, R. D. (1988). "from, *Exploring the Titanic*". pp. 577-589.

Dahl, R. (1984). "from, *Boy: Tales of Childhood*". pp. 475-485.

Dolan, E. M. (1993). "from, *Susan Butcher and the Iditarod Trail*". pp. 303-311.

Jacobs, W. J. (1990). "Eleanor Roosevelt". pp. 205-213.

Robinson, J. as told to Alfred Duckett. (1972). "The Noble Experiment, from *I Never Had it Made*. pp. 274-282.

### Appendix E: Pre-Study Survey

Name \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_ Period \_\_\_\_\_

Pre-Study Survey

1. On a scale of 1 to 5, 5 being the best, rate yourself as a reader. \_\_\_\_\_
2. Do you prefer reading alone or in a group? \_\_\_\_\_
3. Is reading a novel easier to understand if you are able to discuss your thoughts with someone? Why or why not? \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_
4. Have you ever heard of literature circles? \_\_\_\_\_
5. If you answered yes to number 4, what do you know about them? \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_
6. Tell me any thoughts or ideas you have about forming literature circles in our literacy classroom. Do you think you will enjoy literature circles? Why or why not?  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

**Appendix F: Frayer Model for Vocabulary**

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

 **Vocabulary Word Box** 

Definition or Synonym	
Use it in a sentence	Draw a picture

Vocabulary Word

### Appendix G: What Are Literature Circles-Handout

Name \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

**What Are Literature Circles?**

In literature circles, small groups of students gather together to discuss a piece of literature in depth. The discussion is guided by students' response to what they have read. You may hear talk about events and characters in the book, the author's craft, or personal experiences related to the story. Literature circles provide a way for students to engage in critical thinking and reflection as they read, discuss, and respond to books. Collaboration is at the heart of this approach. Students reshape and add onto their understanding as they construct meaning with other readers. Finally, literature circles guide students to deeper understanding of what they read through structured discussion and extended written and artistic response.

Perhaps the easiest way to understand what literature circles *are* is to examine what they *are not*.

Literature Circles are . . .	Literature Circles are not . . .
Reader response centered	Teacher and text centered
Part of a balanced literacy program	The entire reading curriculum
Groups formed by book choice	Teacher-assigned groups formed solely by ability
Structured for student independence, responsibility, and ownership	Unstructured, uncontrolled "talk time" without accountability
Guided primarily by student insights and questions	Guided primarily by teacher- or curriculum-based questions
Intended as a context in which to <i>apply</i> reading and writing skills	Intended as a place to do skills work
Flexible and fluid; never look the same twice	Tied to a prescriptive "recipe"

From *Getting Started with Literature Circles*  
 by Katherine L. Schlick Noe & Nancy J. Johnson  
 © 1999 Christopher-Gordon Publishers, Inc.

What are your thoughts/impressions of literature circles? Explain.

**Appendix H.1: Literature Circle Packet: Assignment Sheet**

Name \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

Title of Novel \_\_\_\_\_

Author \_\_\_\_\_

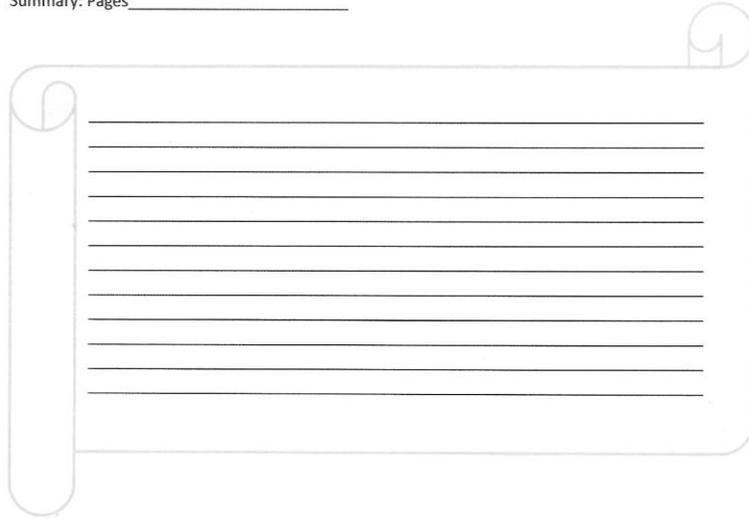
Week	Chapters/Page #s	What Will Be Completed?	Due Date	Grade/Comments

1. Read – the selected chapters
2. Summarize – the section of the text assigned
3. Context Vocabulary – select 5 words you don't know and write the page of your novel where you found each word. Based on context clues, try to guess the meaning of that word. Then, look up that word in the dictionary and write only the definition which seems to fit the way the word is used. Check your responses for accuracy.
4. Original Questions and Answers – Think about important points in the chapter and base your questions around that. Demonstrate your understanding and interpretation of the text with your questions and answers.
5. Character Map Graphic Organizer – complete based on a character from the novel
6. Story Map/Plot Line Graphic Organizer – complete based on your understanding of the plot
7. Illustration – draw an important scene from the novel using text based evidence

\*\*Adapted from, Laura Candler's Literature Circle Activities

### Appendix H.2: Literature Circle Packet: Summary and Context Vocabulary

Summary: Pages \_\_\_\_\_



A large, scroll-shaped writing area with a decorative border. The scroll is unrolled in the center, revealing ten horizontal lines for writing. The top and bottom edges of the scroll are curved, and the left and right sides are also curved, giving it the appearance of a rolled-up document.

Context Vocabulary:

Vocabulary Word	Page #	My Best Guess	Dictionary Definition

|

### Appendix H.3: Literature Circle Packet: Questions and Answers

Questions:

1. Question \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

Answer \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

2. Question \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

Answer \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

3. Question \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

Answer \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

4. Question \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

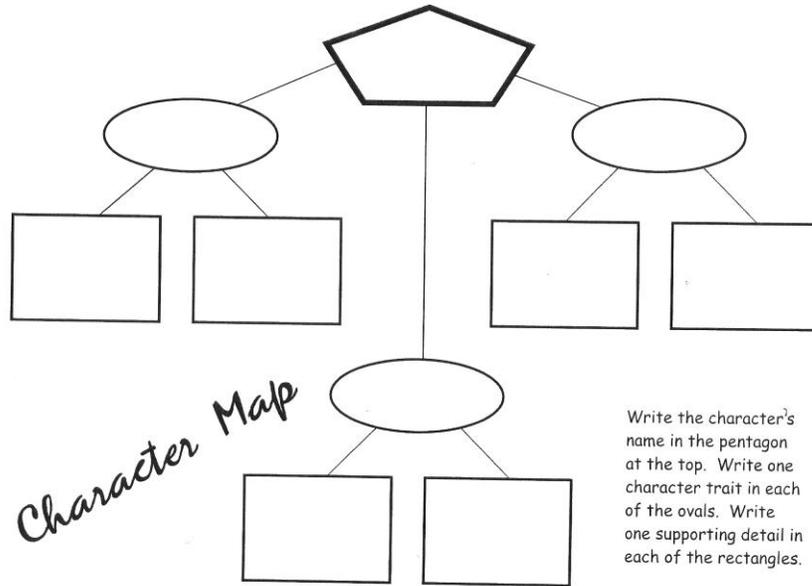
Answer \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

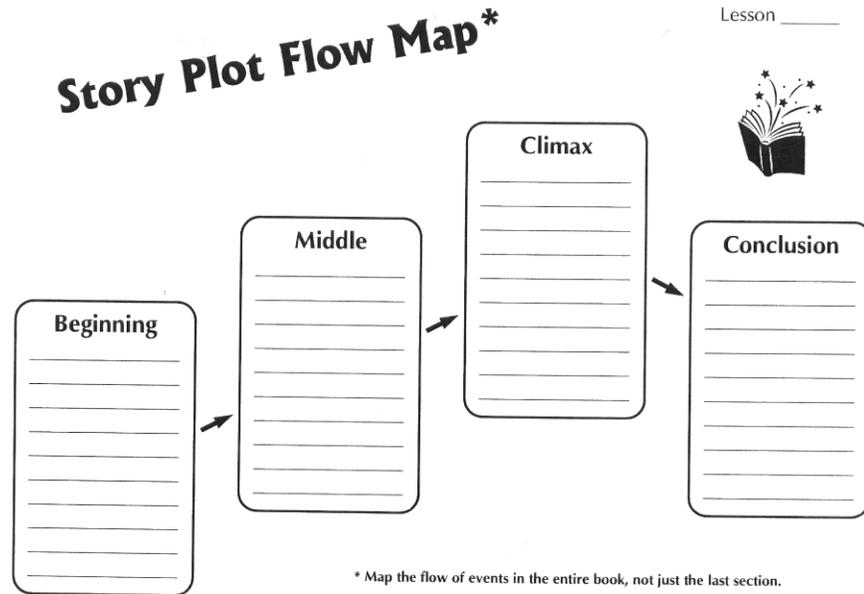
\_\_\_\_\_

### Appendix H.4: Literature Circle Packet: Character Map

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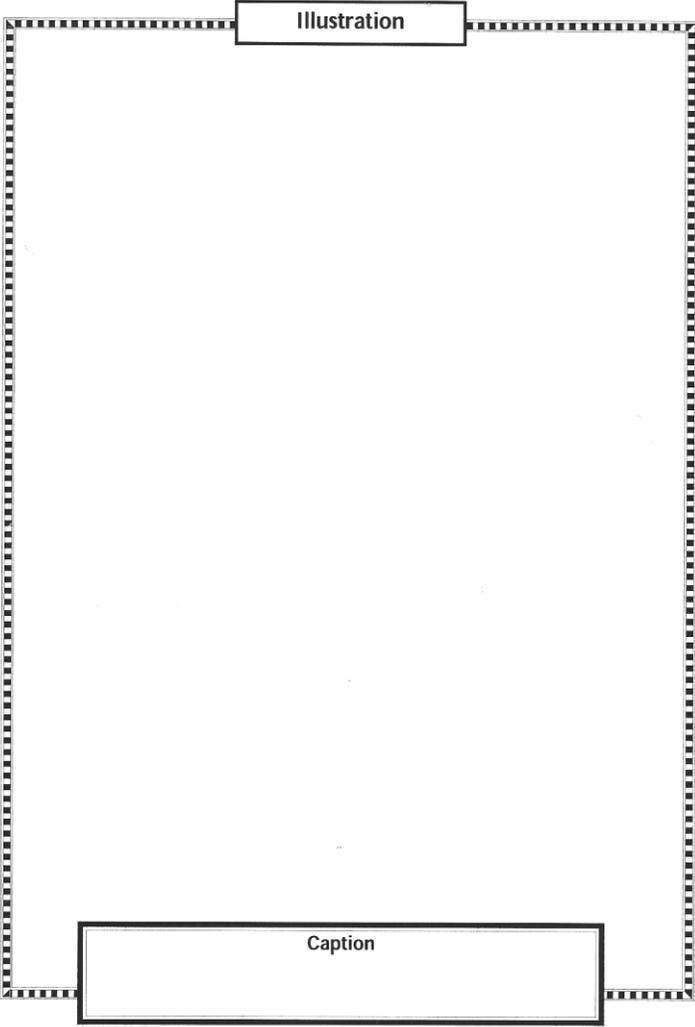
### Appendix H.5: Literature Circle Packet: Story Plot Map



\* Map the flow of events in the entire book, not just the last section.

Created by Laura Candler - Teaching Resources - [www.lauracandler.com](http://www.lauracandler.com)

**Appendix H.6: Literature Circle Packets: Illustration**



## Appendix I: Individual Self-Assessment Survey

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### Individual Assessment

Rate yourself on a scale of 1-4 regarding the level and the effectiveness of your participation in the decision-making activity and briefly explain why.

1- Excellent    2- Good    3- Fair    4- Poor

1. Listing to other points of view.

2. Sharing your ideas with the group.

3. Making choices from the possible solutions to the dilemma.

4. Identifying reasons for your decisions.

### Appendix J: Leader Cue Cards for Learning Logs

Front

#### Leader Cue Card #1

*Before Reading*

1. "We know that today's topic is \_\_\_\_\_."
2. "Let's brainstorm and write in our learning logs everything we already know about the topic."
3. "Who would like to share their best ideas?"
4. "Now let's predict. Look at the title, pictures, and headings and think about what we might learn today. Write your ideas in your learning logs."

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#### Leader Cue Card #2

*During Reading*

1. "Who would like to read the section?"
2. Click and Clunk – "Did everyone understand what we read? If you did not, write your clunks in your learning log."
3. If someone has a clunk – "Clunk Expert, please help us out."
4. Get the Gist – "It's time to Get the Gist. Gist Expert, please help us out."
5. Repeat the steps on this card again for each section read.

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#### Leader Cue Card #3

*After Reading*

1. "Now let's think of some questions to check if we really understood what we read."  
"Remember to start your questions with **who, when, what, where, why, or how**. Everyone write your questions in your learning log."
2. "Who would like to share their best question?"
3. "In our learning logs, let's write down as much as we can about what we learned."
4. "Let's go around the group and each share something we learned."

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#### Leader Cue Card #4

*After Reading*

##### Compliments and Suggestions

1. "The Encourager has been watching carefully and will now tell us two things we did really well as a group today."
2. "Is there anything that would help us do even better next time?"

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### Appendix K: Post Study Survey

Name \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

Post-Study Survey

1. On a scale of 1 to 5, 5 being the best, rate yourself as a reader. \_\_\_\_\_

2. Do you feel you are a better reader now than you were before literature circle groups? Explain why/why not.

\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

3. Would you recommend literature circles in the future? Why/Why not?

\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

4. Was reading our novel or your short story easier to understand in your literature circle group? Why/Why not?

\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

5. Do you feel you have increased your vocabulary knowledge and have a better understanding of how to find meaning in context? \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

### Appendix K continued: Post Study Survey

6. Did your group work well together? What were some of the strengths and weaknesses of your two different literature circle groups? Explain.

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7. Do you have any comments for me that you feel I should know or be aware?

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**Appendix L: Metaphor Cloud**

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Metaphor Analysis

Literature circles are...

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Metaphor Analysis

Literature circles are...

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