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ROUNDING OUT THE CURRICULUM: FACILITATING LITERATURE CIRCLES WHILE EMBRACING CRITICAL THOUGHT

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Abstract

This qualitative action-research study recorded the experiences of sixth grade reading students who collaboratively engaged in reflective questioning techniques. The purpose of the study was to determine the effects of a cooperative learning environment on increasing higher order thinking skills and critical thought.

With the implementation of literature circle groups, higher order question stems, and project-based responses, participants in the study demonstrated an increased use of questioning strategies, analysis of literature, and a greater awareness of personal connections to literature. Additionally, participants gained time management and organization skills through the creation of timelines to ensure accountability amongst their peers.

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Researcher Stance

As a child, I began my educational career with a love of reading. I would read story after story, mostly within the genres of fantasy and fiction, getting lost in incredible worlds where anything could happen. It was some time in elementary school that the enthusiasm began to dissipate, and reading became a chore. Eventually I was doing everything I could to not even pick up a book, approaching school like I knew everything already, and there was nothing more I needed from my teachers.

This proved to make the rest of my educational career very difficult. It eventually got to the point that I was no longer able to keep up with the curriculum, and as a result, left school in the tenth grade. Deep inside there was still an ambition and desire to make something of myself. I earned my General Education Diploma (G.E.D.) and eventually found roots in the hospitality industry. With hard work, I was able to travel the country at a young age, exploring myself as well as what life had to offer.

I traveled for about four years, working in different locations that all aided to my soul searching, but I was becoming homesick. I decided to return home and reconnect with my family and friends. After returning home, I continued to work within the hospitality industry while I also became a soccer coach. It was during this time that I discovered the excitement of teaching children new skills.

Although I was not sure where this adventure would lead, I found a new level of achievement within myself.

I spent a lot of time searching for what I really wanted to do. I juggled several jobs, moving from apartment to apartment; I even traveled a little more before settling down in my hometown with a steady job. Eventually through my coaching, I realized that there was more that I could offer, more that I could share with young children trying to figure out their place in the world. Sharing what I had experienced in my travels, helping my players make sense of all that I could, while building a relationship that carries on to this day, was more rewarding than I could have ever imagined. These experiences led to me becoming a teacher. Even though I would never change the path I chose, I better understand the importance of an education and what it has to offer.

This is what I do now: explore the ways to help children understand that their education is the key to unlocking all they want in life. What has been a driving force for me in this profession is helping my students develop a passion to explore the world with open eyes and be ready to embrace all it has to offer with the skills necessary to achieve success. It is more rewarding than I could ever imagine.

The need for this study arose from a growing concern I found within my classroom. A lot of reading is done independently without guidance. Many times, students are assigned something to read while the teacher may use the time to

complete other tasks. Many teachers grew up on a scripted reading program where students are given small leveled readers they read in a small group with a teacher. The teacher may then ask a few scripted questions that are basic and straightforward about the character, the setting, or a variety of comprehension skills they have already introduced to the children, leaving the students with a false sense of understanding. Very seldom are students asked to work collaboratively with their peers to think beyond the text or about the implications of the characters' actions or change in setting throughout the story.

Just like any first year teacher, I went with the prescribed guided reading format. I leveled my students, rotated them through centers for 15 to 20 minutes at a time, and while they were spending time with me, I would run them through a small reader and ask them some scripted questions, and send them off with a strategy suggestion that I did not even have time to allow them to practice. My students could approach a book, grasp a basic understanding of the character, setting, and maybe some of the plot; but few children actually understood the author's intent or the conflict that characters faced throughout the stories they read.

I tried several things over the years to help provide more engagement for my students while they worked in this guided reading format. Using technology, I created a separate location on our school network server that the students could access. Here they found prompts and open ended questions that they could

respond to and save for me to read at a later time, similar to a reading response journal. I also created some web quests and projects for them to complete. This proved to create a level of engagement that was new for all the children involved. Unfortunately, just like many strategies or programs, children eventually found the monotony overwhelming and fell back into the same routines that make reading boring.

By my third year, I had discovered literature circles and felt there was a real place for them in my classroom. I began by applying them to my highest-level reading groups. The process took a little time to adjust to as I guided them in the beginning, but then gradually allowed them to conduct their own group discussions while I would just watch from a distance or help facilitate a discussion when I was needed. This was very scary! Giving up control over what my students were doing or learning was never covered in my undergraduate classes as I earned my degree. When I saw that the students were able to facilitate their own groups and manage their own time, I became very excited and I realized how literature circles could benefit more of my students.

I spent the rest of the year gradually working with each of my small groups, modeling literature circles while I facilitated their activities. As we finished the year, I saw from my students a slight increase in their overall grades, a new motivation towards guided reading time, an increased level of responsibility, and an increase in the book check out from the school library as

well as my classroom one. I was so excited that I thought I could take this style of reading groups to the next level.

I started the next academic year with this same excitement and immediately began using literature circles for every leveled group of my classroom. I found more success than I had in previous years with a scripted reading program. To assist the students in their literature circle roles, I introduced different types of question stems that were associated with various levels of higher order thinking skills as developed by Benjamin Bloom. As the students improved their abilities within the scope of the literature circles and questioning, they also improved the overall environment of the classroom. They were more collaborative, and I found many of them discussing literature from both fictional trade books as well as textbooks with more insight and deeper understanding.

Midway through the year I decided to allow my students the opportunity to be placed in reading groups based on interest levels and not on suggested standardized levels obtained from most diagnostic assessments. I made sure that each title offered was within the average instructional level of my students as I gave book talks to describe, explain, and entice the students prior to them selecting a title. They were then split into literature circle groups and began reading their new texts, following the same procedures with the literature circle roles and the question stems I had previously provided. The results were even better than the first literature circle cycle I used in the beginning of the year as

students of varied reading abilities were learning from each other and were excited about their experience.

These concepts of grouping students based on interest, self selecting texts, and transforming oneself from an instructor into a facilitator is scary for most teachers. It seems like there was a large amount of control that I felt that I had initially lost within the classroom. Many find it to be a little chaotic and unorganized, but I have found that as the groups progressed and I gained a stronger hold on how to facilitate, I was actually more in control than when I stood there in lecture as the giver of knowledge.

I feel that reading needs to be shared and expressed throughout the entire classroom. Yes, students should pick up a book and read for personal enjoyment, but I feel that they should also reach out and share their opinions with their peers. Our students make connections to stories they read all the time and those connections should be shared and respected by everyone.

Therefore the research question I have chosen to explore for this study is: What are the observed and recorded experiences when students participate in cooperative learning groups to apply higher order thinking skills to their reading?

Literature Review

Introduction

As each school year passes and another coalition enters the next stage of their educational careers or heads out into the real world, there is a wonder about their futures. Educators spend time year after year reflecting on and thinking about students' strengths and weaknesses. A lot of that time is spent thinking about their reading skills and how they will apply them in the rest of their lives. Reading is a skill that carries over into all aspects not only of education, but also of every facet of life. The ability to cognitively react, and assimilate to any piece of literature, environment, or situation they face, is something that we want all students to have strength in demonstrating.

It is said that self-discovery is a powerful tool that can lead to great things. When individuals realize their potential to be a part of something larger than themselves, they then begin to put aside their egos and truly become an active part of society. Learners must come to realize that as they transcend the self and become part of the whole, they will not lose their individuality, only their egocentricity (Costa, 2008). Providing a reading program that allows the students to guide themselves on a journey of inquiry

and self-efficacy based on their literature experiences is one of the greatest rewards of teaching.

Within the research question, "What are the observed and recorded experiences when students participate in cooperative learning groups to apply higher order thinking skills to their reading?" several key topics have been identified that will be essential in guiding the students to literacy growth and independence. As the backbone of the research, literature circles will be integrated into the regular classroom where students will interpret and respond to literature. To help balance the variety of interest levels amongst the students, cooperative/collaborative grouping will take place based on students' personal interests. The research will also rely on the ways students use multiple intelligences of learning to help motivate themselves as well as their peers. All of this will help create an atmosphere where students may feel comfortable to explore the world of higher order and critical thinking to explore literature for what it was intended, a connection to the imagination.

Literature Circles

Literature Circles are small, temporary discussion groups of students who have chosen to read the same piece of literature (Daniels, 1994). Each reader takes the time to complete different responsibilities that are valuable

to a discussion or group meeting that takes place each week until the completion of the book. The responsibilities rotate throughout the group weekly so that every individual has the opportunity to view the literature from different perspectives.

The instructor facilitates these groups as the students lead themselves in an inquiry that they have derived through any background knowledge they can apply to the text. As the facilitator, the teacher's main job is to help the discussion flow by suggesting whose turn it is, or by making sure the conversation sticks to the topic (Alwood, 2000). This can be particularly difficult, since most teachers want to guide the students into what it is they feel they should know. A facilitator needs to incorporate themselves into the group as an equal member who shares his/her own interpretations of the literature and models questions during the discussion.

Literature circles take their root in the theories of collaborative learning. Literature circles are a part – a quite sophisticated and highly evolved part – of the wider collaborative movement (Daniels, 1994). The premise is that students work in small, temporary discussion groups where they practice and employ student-initiated inquiry, participate in face-to-face interaction and demonstrate choice among their peers. It does give a chance for pupils to meet up with their personal learning styles and thus optimize

achievement and progress in literary activities (Ediger, 2002). Creating heterogeneous groups is an intricate part of literature circles and the collaborative movement. Students select a book based on personal interests, providing them a feeling of independence prior to reading the text. This allows each group to have varied levels of abilities among its members as well as a common interest among them. There is no ability grouping involved in the circles, which promotes acceptance of others abilities, strengths, and responses (Brown, 2002). The reasoning behind this is to diminish the competitiveness of groups that are based solely on reading levels that students are commonly faced with in the classroom. These only create social differences among the students. One belief is that a primary function of literature circles is to create a classroom community in which students and teachers can learn from and with each other (Lin, 2002)

The literature circle model is also partially comprised of Piaget's constructivist theory, and Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) (Briggs, 2010). Each of these theories allow for the student to be in control of their own learning. Piaget's constructivist theory describes how children and adolescents assimilate to their surroundings and experiences. He explains that learning is a process where the individual is actively engaged and motivated as he/she explores the world around each of them. On the one

hand, assimilation may involve an interaction of internal and external elements; on the other, it may involve only an interaction between internal elements – schemes or subsystems (Piaget, 1985). People, especially young people, are continually organizing schemas, similar thoughts or actions, when they encounter new things and expand their existing view of the subject matter as they move through life. Initially, children's schemas are largely behavioral in nature, but over time they become increasingly mental and, eventually, abstract (McDevitt & Ormrod, 2007). This applies not only to the real world but also their educational world as well.

The Zone of Proximal Development, theorized by Lev Vygotsky, allows for a student to assume the same responsibilities found in Piaget's theories, but in a slightly different way. Children act differently in every situation they face, and eventually face a level of frustration when their actions do not yield their desired results. At this point, a capable other (i.e., caregiver, sibling, teacher) steps in and provides the guidance to complete the task, while engaging in discourse about the experience. The theory goes on to describe how a child can learn very little from something they already know how to do, and it is the new encounter combined with the assistance they receive that provides a scaffold for them to develop the cognitive processes to complete the task. The child does not develop in uniform or gradual fashion,

through the accumulation of slight variations, but by fits and starts, harmonically, so that periods during which the child's growth is on the rise follow periods of stagnation and abatement (Vygotsky, 1997). This process will gradually help the students improve their skills and reach a greater understanding of the subject matter.

Independent roles. Each member of a literature group reads a predetermined selection of a text and completes an independent role that allows them to interpret what they have read and openly share with their group members. This allows students to informally debate the meaning behind a written body of work, and it can be executed not only in reading groups, but also throughout the curriculum and any subject matter. This structure, paired with an environment where the students feel they are safe and able to express themselves, will help create that feeling of security needed to implement literature circles.

There are many independent roles within literature circles, and they can be adapted to fit all different types of learning styles within a classroom (Gravois, 2007). They can also be rotated to fit specific genres of text that can allow for a more focused view of the literature. Several of the roles that can be used would be:

- Circle leader, who is responsible for maintaining the organization of the group, as well as leading the conversation for that day.
- Super summarizer, whose role it is to summarize the reading for the day.
- Word wizard who is an individual that determines what vocabulary is important to the story, defines it, and shares with the rest of the group.
- Connector is a role that allows the reader to make connections of things that happened in the story to events that happen within real life.
- Passage pro allows the reader to share passages they found well written or worth discussing.
- Travel tracker is a role where the participant tracks the movement and change of characters and/or settings found within the reading.

Each of these roles allows the students to practice multiple cognitive perspectives throughout a text, such as visualization, questioning, analyzing, synthesizing, and evaluation of happenings in the book. Along with these, readers who approach the text with their prior knowledge activated and with

some clear-cut, conscious purposes will comprehend more (Daniels, 1994). They also allow the students to demonstrate a variety of multiple intelligences as, described by Howard Gardner. The roles are recorded on structured worksheets or graphic organizers that allow the students to important ideas about reading.

Roles may change from time to time, and can be added or removed, based on either the teachers' objectives as to what he/she wants the student to ascertain from the text or the number of people within the group. The roles are rotated throughout the group members week by week, so that each student may have the opportunity to experience and develop varied perspectives of the literature. It is helpful for students to be familiar with a number of reading comprehension strategies in order to deal effectively with different situations, such as reading for a variety of purposes (Brown, 2002). The roles overlap each other, while providing a structure to the group that helps group members understand the process of conducting a dialogue for book discussion. The goal of the educator, which begins by implementing role sheets to foster the groups, is to eventually phase out the scaffolding offered by the sheets. When kids have internalized the perspectives of sophisticated, multipurposeful readers, they are ready to have natural

conversations about books without role sheets, using just their memories and notes jotted in a personal response log (Daniels, 1994).

The goal is for the students to interpret literature, make meaning of what they read, and challenge one another's thoughts to advance their cognitive thinking. Alwood (2000) states that students use their written response from their reading response logs in order to share their ideas and thoughts about the text. In this way the students create more personal and elaborate responses to share with their peers during the discussion process.

Project based responses. As the roles are phased out, there are a number of different types of responses to the literature, ranging from reading journals to project based responses, for the students to share what they have learned from the text as well as their discussion with their peers. Project based responses are any small projects that require the students to reflect on the act of reading while putting them on display (Gravois, 2007). Working together, students reflect on the act of reading to plan out and create projects of their own choosing. The goal of the projects is for the groups to share their reading experiences with the rest of their class and celebrate their reading achievements. They can be used as assessments, while at the same time allowing the students the opportunity to experience a hands-on approach to their reading.

Project based responses were originally introduced by a professor at Teachers College, Columbia University, named William Heard Kilpatrick. He believed that schools should be based on child chosen projects that originate intrinsically for a real purpose, and that school should not only prepare one for life, but also be life itself. As the purposeful act is thus the typical unit of the worthy life in a democratic society, so also should it be made the typical unit of school procedure (Kilpatrick, 1918 as cited by Wolk, 1994). Using this type of response in place of the independent literature circle roles allow the students to reach the upper levels of higher order thinking through evaluation and synthesis. Project based responses also allow the students to creatively celebrate the information they have comprehended from the text with the rest of their class (Daniels, 1994). This feature of literature circles is an example of best practices within the classroom.

These responses are also a way for the students to entice another reader to read their book. Many times, students think they would not like a book, but when they hear about it from a peer, they want to read it. This type of sharing helps students encourage and excite each other. There are many different ways to implement project based responses in the classroom. Each requires the students to work within many different disciplines and intelligences to solve problems presented in the text. Problem-based learning

is a mechanism for allowing students to come to grips with significant academic subject matter (Savoie & Hughes, 1994).

When students take the time to share their projects throughout their reading, they also have the opportunity to practice and implement presentation skills. Students can develop posters, create plays, discuss different endings they feel could enhance the story, or conduct author talks to explore a book and create a project. Students can also create short skits, or a readers' theatre to go along with the story, and record them to share with others in the classroom as well as at home. All of these projects allow the students to take ownership of the story and apply their comprehension skills to the literature circle roles, as well as make a contribution to the group in a learning style all their own.

Multiple Intelligences

It is said that nobody learns in the same way, or at the same time. Everybody learns differently, and everybody has his/her own attributes to bring to the classroom. This leads to the theory of multiple intelligences, introduced by Howard Gardner. He believed that each individual is born with a set of eight intelligences. As a species, human beings are better described as having a set of autonomous intelligences (Gardner, 2011). The intelligences he identifies are: Linguistic, Logical-Mathematical, Spatial, Musical, Body-

Kinesthetic, Interpersonal, Intrapersonal, and Naturalist. Gardner goes on to explain that the intelligences appear differently in different cultures, based on the nurturing children receive from their beliefs and environments.

Connecting multiple intelligences to the objectives of the curriculum helps create dynamic lessons that can engage and excite many students throughout a classroom. As students get older, teachers in middle and high schools begin to focus on specific subject matter while usually accepting only one way of performing an expected task, which can dampen a student's enthusiasm for reading. As you approach middle school and beyond the teaching style differs, and students disengage from wanting to read for enjoyment yet alone for their assignments (Buschick, Shipton, Winner , & Wise, 2007). Teachers' rely on lecture and individual paper/pencil type assessments that stifle many of the learners in their classrooms. Students of all levels need to be allowed to connect their personal strengths to the curriculum. Students should be learning their algebra, ancient history, government, chemistry, literature, and more through multiple intelligences (Armstrong, 1994). Doing so would help them make better connections to their personal lives and experiences, allowing them to gain so much more from the instruction.

Multiple intelligences also allow for students to determine a way of exploring and presenting information that is comfortable to them. This can only produce better results, since the students will be approaching a task with confidence and of their own design, but they have to know their limits. Students should become familiar with each intelligence, recognizing their strengths and weaknesses (Cluck & Hess , 2003). In this way a spatial learner might create a picture or painting for their project whereas a kinesthetic learner might create a play or skit to share their knowledge with the class. This can help a student begin to read with a purpose, knowing that he/she will have the ability to complete a project in a mode that is a strength of theirs. This would help the student want to put forth more effort and help him/her become both intrinsically and extrinsically motivated to do his/her best.

Motivation

Every year, students are found to be less responsive in the classroom. They also seem to fall further behind on the standardized tests used to measure their success and compare them to the rest of the world. Researchers have found that when rewards and sanctions are attached to performance on tests, students become less intrinsically motivated to learn and less likely to engage in critical thinking (Amrein & Berliner, 2003).

Motivation in a classroom is needed to sustain behavior, energize the students, and guide them on their learning.

There are two types of motivation, intrinsic and extrinsic. Intrinsic motivation comes from the inside and is ones desire to create a feeling of pride and self-worth. Extrinsic motivation is the exact opposite where an individual is completing a task, with reasonable competence, for a reward commonly not related to the task. Consider the example of having a child clean his room. An intrinsically motivated child would have it done before leaving the room to begin some other activity and would most likely keep it clean without any prompting. An extrinsically motivated child would ask for something of desire not necessity, in return after the request of completing the task.

Intrinsic motivation is what will drive the study to its highest level and provide the best results. While one would like to think that teachers could instill this in all of their students, one needs to understand that teachers are not the only factor in the students' lives that contributes to their decision-making. While all motivation comes from the inside, what happens on the outside has a lot to do with the choices made (Haywood, Kuespert, Madecky, & Nor, 2008). Students are a product of their environment, and they come to the classroom with more than we could ever know. Once they

get into the classroom, it becomes the job of the educator to try to motivate them to do their best and engage in the lessons provided. A structured reading program is meant to allow students enough of an opportunity to direct their own learning, so that they will find the motivation to put aside their fears and take full advantage of the opportunities they are faced with. Cooperative learning creates intrinsic motivation. In order to develop cooperative learning skills, specific lessons such as cooperative roles, team building, and finding consensus need to be taught (Cluck & Hess , 2003).

Cooperative/Collaborative Learning

As stated earlier, cooperative learning is at the heart of literature circles and many inquiry based learning systems throughout the world. In traditional methods of teaching, students are typically grouped on an independent basis or with students of their same intellectual classification, determined by standardized tests. Cooperative learning takes a different approach. The classroom is divided into small groups, typically three to five members, to work cooperatively on an academic task. Students who participate in these groups are responsible not only for their own learning, but they also tend to become accountable for the others they are participating with (Daniels, 1994). It also requires participating students to reflect on their own knowledge, and make generalizations and elaborations

that they can share with their peers. Students use a variety of social skills to constructively discuss, share, and analyze their task. In working together, students use a variety of social skills; these are explicitly taught in some cooperative models but not in others (Davidson & O'Leary, 1990). A group may take on a life of its own and provide the social structure students need to support each other when the teacher is not present as they find ways to work through the material they are presented with. Cooperative learning is directly related to social learning because students are communicating in a social environment in order to learn (Alwood, 2000). Cooperative learning can also provide the teacher with a more direct use of learning principles. Within a cooperative group, students may develop higher levels of trust amongst their peers, allowing them to take more risks. This helps any student develop motivation and a sense of pride they can take to the rest of the curriculum. The cooperative groups also allow a teacher to approach multiple learning styles in a comfortable atmosphere for the learner.

Digging deeper into cooperative learning one finds that it can become overused and thus greatly misunderstood. Student groups and even teachers can begin to create the same environment of competition based on individual abilities that cooperative learning took measures to eliminate. In this instance, teachers need to focus on what they are truly trying to do with

cooperative learning, and that is to create a community of collaboration among the students. Although, the terms cooperative learning and collaborative learning can be interchangeable, it is important that we understand the differences between them both. Collaborative learning defines the more open-ended and student-centered kinds of inquiry (Daniels, 1994). The purpose is to allow the students to follow the inquiry process and make conclusions on their own. Inquiry based learning allows students to include and expand upon their prior knowledge and apply it to what they are learning. They also get to research and identify relationships between new and old information. In small groups, collaboration helps to create more of a community and shared responsibility among its members. Whether it is called cooperative or collaborative learning, it must be structured in a way that allows the participants to take ownership of what it is they are doing, explore the literature together, and allow them to embark on the journey of inquiry.

Higher Order and Critical Thinking

To get started on this inquiry journey, it is imperative that students are familiar with higher order thinking skills. Higher order thinking skills include critical, logical, reflective, metacognitive, and creative thinking (King, Goodson , & Rohani, 2010). Skills are activated when students face a

disruption in their thought process by adding new information to their existing schema of what they feel they know and understand. In order to make sense of this new information and fit it into their existing knowledge of the subject matter, students need to synthesize, evaluate, and apply it to support their thinking. Every discipline uses higher order thinking to add to its store of knowledge (Lewis & Smith, 1993). We know to what end they have applied these higher order skills when students can come to a conclusion and explain what they have encountered, but it depends on how well they can apply or explain their understanding that determines what level of thinking they have obtained.

There are several layers of higher order thinking that were originally labeled Bloom's Taxonomy. Introduced by Benjamin Bloom in 1956, there were six levels of thinking that ranged from lower level skills such as knowledge, comprehension, and application, to higher-level skills of analysis, synthesis, and evaluation. This allows us to understand what level an individual had been able to cognitively understand the subject matter. These levels of taxonomy have been recently adapted and redefined in the year 2000. The revision emphasizes the use of taxonomy in planning curriculum, instruction, assessment, and the alignment of these three (Anderson & Krathwohl, 2001). The adaptations come from one of Benjamin Bloom's

original partners in his work, David Krathwohl, and one of his former students, Lorin Anderson, who call their model Anderson and Krathwohl's Taxonomy, 2000.

To achieve this new planning of curriculum, two significant differences between the taxonomies were made. First the change of the domain names from noun to verb form (i.e.: knowledge is now remembering, application is now applying) as well as a change in the order of the two highest levels of taxonomy, evaluating and synthesis. The major differences in the updated version is in the more useful and comprehensive additions of how the taxonomy intersects and acts upon different types and levels of knowledge -- factual, conceptual, procedural, and metacognitive (Wilson, 2006). The thought for the new framework is that an individual must be able to evaluate a topic or subject matter before they can create or produce something tangible about it.

A major debate in this field comes from the realm of critical thinking and is headed by a professor of Philosophy of Education from the University of Illinois, Robert Ennis. Critical thinking is reflective and reasonable thinking that is focused on deciding what to believe or do (Ennis, 1985). Commonly, the three highest levels of Bloom's taxonomy are thought to be critical thinking. The problem is that these levels of synthesis, evaluation, and

analysis are interdependent in critical thinking, not hierarchical as Bloom described in his taxonomy. In his definition of critical thinking, Ennis notes that there is a practical activity that allows for students to hypothesize, question, and experiment on the thoughts they might have. He presents several arguments to support his theory and defend his statements. First, is the thought is that critical thinking is a clearer concept than higher order thinking skills, which appear to be a vague term for the development of teaching and evaluation procedures. He explains that Bloom's level of analysis is just a label and can relate to the analysis of just about anything in the educational world. For example, if a student determines that the cause of the civil war was based on the South's increased use of slavery, then they might only analyze slavery and its role. On the other hand, if the student were to apply critical thinking to question the cause of the Civil War and the effects it had on the entire country, they would come to see that in addition to slavery, there were many other causes including a new constitution as well as economic differences between the North and South. Another argument that Ennis proposes is that the taxonomy does not provide a way to judge the results of what a student has produced as the result of their higher order thinking. With the criteria being so vague, he argues that a teacher could not

determine the actual accomplishments of the students or allow the taxonomy to be a framework for curriculum.

He goes on to describe critical thinking for purposes of curriculum in two different thoughts, dispositions and abilities. The dispositions he feels are essential to critical thinking include being open minded, paying attention to the situation, and seeking reasons behind one's thoughts. What he means by this is that a student should begin with a simple element and move it through the critical thinking process, helping to develop inference related abilities. He/She should then be able to transfer those to abilities related to establishing a sound basis for inference. He also suggests that students' abilities involved in decision-making should be organized in an orderly and useful way, which he refers to as problem solving. All of these dispositions and abilities put together, Ennis claims, is the process of deciding what we believe to do, which is his definition of critical thinking.

Conclusion

Allowing students to guide their own literature groups and find ways to build their comprehension independently is in itself different from most reading programs in traditional classrooms today. Personal interest plays a huge part in the selection of reading material outside of the regular classroom, which is why there is a need to allow it in the classroom as much

as possible. People make connections to what they are interested in and their personal background knowledge.

When these connections are made, the application of the knowledge becomes tangible and important to the learner. In the process of allowing groups to read based on their interests, they are immediately grouped with other individuals of like minds. When they all get to sit and discuss their opinions of the literature, they are provided with the opportunity for elaboration and expression of ideas in a safe environment. Intrinsic motivation, a progression from cooperative to collaborative learning, as well as a transition from higher order thinking to critical thought, can allow students to have a reading experience that is unsurpassed. With the inclusion of multiple intelligences to help students achieve success at all of these levels, reading can become the connection to the imagination.

Methodology

Introduction

When I first began my Master's Degree, I questioned the traditional guided reading program that I was introduced to and used in my classroom. After analyzing assessment data throughout the school year, I found that a majority of my students were scoring around or under the class average with the interventions I was able to incorporate into the small group guided reading instruction.

I created a reading program that allowed me to spend more time with each of my students to work on their comprehension skills within a piece of literature. Another advantage I found was that I could group children based on their literature interests. This helped to provide more motivation to read. Students were then able to work together to discuss and present the literature to their classmates, sharing their passion and excitement. This program has taken many different turns since it was first imagined. I have made many changes in search of ways to reach all of my students in the process. I was now ready to put it to the test.

The modeling of this program took approximately three full weeks. Within these three weeks, students were introduced to a schedule they would follow, the literature circle roles they would use, as well as higher order thinking question stems with key verbs they would master. Time was taken to explain and model procedures of writing, self-sustained reading, buddy reading, and library time. Journal writing was used either in reflection to their experiences or focused on a

writing strategy taught throughout the year. During self-sustained reading, students were allowed to independently read a small selection of books they selected, while during buddy-reading, students were allowed to sit closely together, whisper read, and discuss elements of their weekly reading anthology.

Once the program was modeled, students were allowed to work on their own for the remainder of the book in order to practice the procedures, roles, and questioning. I observed, facilitated, and modified behaviors, while remodeling skills where necessary.

Before beginning, The Human Subjects Internal Review Board (HSIRB) approved this study (see Appendix A) and all of its components. A consent letter describing the full description of this program and its outcomes (see Appendix B) was presented to the building principal, as well as the parents or guardians of the participants (see Appendix C). Upon initial response from the HSIRB, I was asked to ascertain a student assent (see Appendix D) for all participants in the study. All documents were signed and accounted for before any research was conducted.

Setting

This study was conducted in a sixth grade elementary classroom of a charter school operating in Northeastern Pennsylvania. The school services kindergarten through twelfth grade, with a multi-cultural student population. The campus contains three buildings that are separated into elementary, middle, and

high schools. The sixth grade is located at the far end of a fourth, fifth, and sixth grade elementary schoolhouse.

Even though the school resides in and is chartered by Bethlehem Area School District, it services a number of surrounding districts as a choice school. There is a mix of both suburban and inner city students from all three surrounding metropolises.

The school population has now reached 1,350 students. Each classroom contains a maximum of 25 students, while each grade level will eventually have a maximum of six classes per grade. Every grade in the elementary building does have a full-time teaching assistant. Also, within the elementary school, there are currently three reading specialists and two math specialists to help with student needs as well as the creation of curriculum.

In addition to following state standards, the school also incorporates the International Baccalaureate curriculum, which allows the students to work within six units of inquiry to explore science and social studies concepts. These units of inquiry allow the students to research topics of their choosing, as well as implement an action cycle based on any information obtained from the research.

Participants

The students participating in the study are a part of my sixth grade homeroom class. There is a mixture from the surrounding urban communities that the school services, with a majority of the population coming from the home

district where the school resides. The class had 25 students between the ages of 11 to 12 years old. There were 12 females and 13 males in the class, coming from various socio-economic conditions.

There was a mixture of reading abilities within the classroom. This lent itself to students choosing books based on personal interests and working with the literature circle structure. Student seating varied based on dynamics of the environment and was subject to change without notice. When they worked in their literature circle book clubs, students met in a regular area and had access to all materials needed to complete their objectives. Students were given one hour of guided reading time per day and used thirty minutes of that time to meet in groups to work with the literature. The other thirty minutes was used to complete various responsibilities relating to either reading or writing skills.

Procedures

To begin the study, students completed a survey (see Appendix E) about their personal reading habits as well as their attitudes and/or enjoyment towards reading (see Table 1). They also completed a post survey (see Appendix E), as well as an interview (see Appendix F) with me at the end of the study.

Students were split into cooperative learning groups that followed a schedule (see Appendix G). This schedule required them to read and respond, meet for discussion, and create a project for display or present a project in a daily thirty-minute time frame. The activities for the other thirty minutes varied from

day to day, but consisted of either library time, writing (reflection or practice of skills), self-sustained reading, or buddy reading as described above. Throughout the modeling of this program, students were arranged in temporary groups that rotated week by week. This allowed all of them to have the opportunity to work together in different capacities prior to being placed in permanent groups based on student interests.

Once permanent groups were created, each group received a weekly packet (see Appendices H1-H7) containing a planning guide and six literature circle roles, including Circle Leader, Super Summarizer, Connector, Travel Tracker, Word Wizard, and Passage Pro. They also received a poster containing higher order questions stems and key words (see Appendices I1-I6).

Once a week, usually the third day of their schedule, students hosted their own meeting to discuss questions and events of their story. I would spend approximately fifteen minutes with each group to facilitate and participate in each discussion. On the fourth day, the groups were responsible for completing a project to inform their classmates of the happenings in their stories, including but not limited to: character development, setting, main events, and an element of artwork. I again would spend about 15 minutes with each group to facilitate and observe their progress to ensure that each group member had participated in the project.

On the fifth day of the cycle, students presented their projects to the rest of the class to share their perspectives and generate interest about the story amongst the class.

Week 1 - Day 1.

- Distributed the parental consent letter (see Appendix C) and discussed the main attributes and permissions with the students in the class.
- Conducted survey (see Appendix E) to determine students reading habits and enjoyment of literature (see Table 1).
- Introduced and read quotable card to begin study (see Figure 1).
- Introduced schedule (see Appendix G) and responsibilities of students during the reading period.
- Created class rules to be used in the reading groups during all times (see Figure 2).
- Distributed class novel, *Crash* by J. Spinelli.
- Conducted a book talk while discussing any important features of the text.
- Read chapter one together as a class.
- Allowed students to create questions they had about the text, including but not limited to character(s), setting, problem, conflict, and so on, and recorded on board (see Table 3).

- Discussed questions and shared answers as a whole group.
- Distributed Higher Order Question Stems and keywords (see Appendices I1-I6).
- Rephrased any or all of the original questions to provoke deeper thought or inspire a personal stance about the topic.
- Compared original questions with higher order thinking questions to evaluate the effectiveness of the question stems (see Table 3).

Week 1 – Day 2.

- Reviewed day one and discussed questioning techniques as well as the higher order thinking questions stems and their benefits.
- Read chapter two of class novel *Crash*.
- Distributed literature circle packets (Appendix H1-H6) containing a planning guide as well as the six roles: Circle Leader, Super Summarizer, Connector, Travel Tracker, Word Wizard, and Passage Pro.
- Introduced Circle Leader role (see Appendix H2) to the class.

The role of the Circle Leader had two main functions. One was to facilitate the groups' discussion and allow each member the ability to contribute while keeping everyone on task. The other function of the Circle Leader was to guide the discussion with lines of questioning that keep the group interested in the text as well as guide the group's meeting and project for the week.

- Each student completed the role of Circle Leader, creating questions about events that had happened in the first two chapters of the text.
- Created small groups of four to five students to discuss their completed roles with each other, following the class created rules.
- Circulated among the groups and facilitated discussions throughout the room.

***An important part of this discussion is that as the conversation developed, the students were to not just give an answer to a question and then ask another question. They should have responded to the answers of their peers and turned to their questions when they feel the discussion is losing stamina.*

Week 1 – Day 3.

- Reviewed higher order thinking question stems and role of Circle Leader.
- Conducted mini-lesson about summarizing.
- Distributed graphic organizer (Appendix J) "Somebody – Wanted – But – So".

Somebody – Wanted – But – So (MacOn, Bewell, & Vogt, 1991) (Appendix J) is a graphic organizer that can be used to help students identify a character's motivation, problems they have faced and or resolved, as well as identify cause and effect and/or main ideas of a story. It works by having a

student fill in the character (somebody), what they wanted to do (wanted), whatever stopped them from doing it (but), and what did they did instead (so), to analyze the events that transpired in anything from a chapter to the complete story.

- Modeled how to use the organizer by completing it together as a class about events from Chapter Two that we read the previous day.
- Introduced the role of Super Summarizer (see Appendix H3) to the class.
- The class scanned through chapter two and completed a "somebody – wanted – but – so" graphic organizer (see Appendix J).
- Reviewed and shared examples to correct any misconceptions about using the graphic organizer.
- Students read chapter three and completed the Super Summarizer role using the graphic organizer.

The role of Word Wizard was also introduced on day three. This role was used to allow students to explore vocabulary that they had either struggled with in the text or they found interesting and want to share with their peers.

- Modeled the Word Wizard role (see Appendix H4) with words selected from the first two chapters.

- Students selected their own words from chapter three that they would like to learn about and share with their peers.
- Students each completed a higher-order thinking question about the story thus far.
- Created small groups of four to five students to discuss their completed roles of summarizer and Word Wizard as well as their questions with each other following the class created rules.
- Circulated among the groups and facilitated any discussions throughout the room.

Week 1 – Day 4.

- Reviewed the previous three days and the roles that have already been introduced.
- Introduced the role of Connector (see Appendix H5).

The role of Connector is responsible for identifying passages in the book that the individual students have a personal connection to and can find empathy in the situation or with the character.

- Modeled the role of connector with a pre-selected passage that I had a connection with myself.
- Shared and discussed the connection and/or personal experience of my own and how the text made me feel.
- Students read chapter five and completed the role of Connector.

- Introduced the role of Travel Tracker (see Appendix H6).

The responsibility of a Travel Tracker was to discuss the changes in the story. The changes could be about the character(s), or setting and either written out in paragraph form or drawn out with captions to share with the group during discussion.

- Modeled the role by discussing how the setting has changed from one chapter to the next and explained how that has enhanced the mood and plot of the story.
- Allowed the students time to complete the role of Travel Tracker.
- Each student completed two higher-order thinking questions about the story to that point in the story.
- Created small groups of four to five students to discuss their completed roles of Connector and Travel Tracker as well as their questions with each other following the class created rules.
- Circulated among the groups and facilitated any discussions throughout the room.

Week 1 – Day 5.

- Reviewed the first four days of the program and talked about each role and its importance to our reading any text we encounter.
- Introduced the role of Passage Pro (See Appendix H7).

The role is meant for the student to pick out and elaborate on different passages they have encountered in the text. It can be focused on but not limited to passages they found interesting, funny, well written, confusing, important, and thought provoking. The purpose is to highlight and share things from the text that someone else may have missed or just passed over due to confusion.

- The students read Chapter Six and were allowed to complete the role.
- Each student completed two higher-order thinking questions about the story thus far.
- Created small groups of four to five students to discuss their completed roles of passage pro as well as their questions with each other following the class created rules.
- Circulated among the groups and facilitated any discussions throughout the room.

The second part of this lesson included the introduction of Project Day in their schedule. Project day is when groups get together to complete a project about their reading and can include but not be limited to posters, diorama's, mobiles, skits, power points, brochures, and interactive games. The elements of their project had to be consistent and include the main characters, the setting, the problem and solution or main events of the chapter, an element of artwork, and a prediction for the next chapter (created a poster of these requirements and posted

it in the room for the children to reference when needed). Each group created a poster for the first week.

- Assigned poster project to the groups and allowed a half an hour to cooperatively complete all elements of the project.
- Circulated among the groups and facilitated any discussions throughout the room.
- Upon completion of the thirty-minute time limit, all groups were asked to stop, whether completed or not.

Some groups were not finished, but this was all right. I explained to the class that it is important for them to learn how to work together in a group and understand time constraints. This first project was not graded so not completing it on time will not cause any damage, just create a learning experience (the groups finished them at a later time).

- Allowed each group five minutes (and five minutes ONLY) to present whatever they have completed to the rest of the class.
- All of the completed posters were hung in the room for all the students to see (the others were hung after completion).

Before concluding for the day, we spent time as a class reviewing everything that was done throughout the week. The main focus was to discuss the ways in which they have looked at the text to see if it is any different than how they have looked at books before.

Week 2 – Day 1.

I began this week with creating cooperative learning groups to continue reading the story *Crash*. The students responded to the literature circle roles that were introduced the previous week. Groups were allowed the full hour to complete the tasks this week so they might find a rhythm in organizing themselves as the process continued.

Each group was supplied with a new planning guide (see Appendix H1) to record which individuals will be completing which roles for the week. This planning guide assisted the students in rotating roles so that every individual had the opportunity to practice each role within the cooperative learning group.

- Had students assign roles to each other and record them on the planning guide.
- Assigned the next chapter and had the students complete roles based on new events in the book (students worked in their groups to read together and respond to their literature circle roles).
- Circulated and facilitated any of the groups needs during this time.

Week 2 – Day 2.

- Assigned the next chapter and had the students complete three higher order thinking questions using the question stems and verbs based on new events in the book.
- Circulated and facilitated any of the groups needs during this time.

Week 2 – Day 3.

- Had students gather in their cooperative groups to share and discuss their literature circle roles and higher order thinking questions with each other.
- Spent about fifteen minutes with each group to sit in and join the discussions happening throughout the room.

  **Note to self: Remember to be a part of the discussion, not to take the lead! Allow the children the opportunity to run the group(s).

Week 2 – Day 4.

- Introduced mobile project.

The mobile project consisted of completing the same requirements from the poster project, but hanging them from a hanger with string.

- Had students gather in their temporary groups to complete their own mobiles, based on the events in the chapters they had read that week.
- Circulated and facilitated any of the groups' needs.

Week 2 – Day 5.

- Allowed groups five minutes each to share their mobile projects with the rest of the class.
- Hung mobiles around the room for all the students to see.

- Collected and evaluated roles and higher order thinking questions, and gave feedback where necessary.

Week 3.

Week three followed the same structure of a five-day schedule just as the previous two weeks. Day three was their meeting day and day four was their project day. The project for this week was to have the students create a skit to share the events of the book thus far.

- Assigned new cooperative reading groups for this week, assigning them group numbers one through four.
- Had students pull out and review their guided reading schedules.

The guided reading schedule split the hour into two half hour sessions. Each day, for one of the half hour blocks, the groups were scheduled to read a chapter of the book and respond to the literature by completing either their literature circle role or creating three higher order thinking questions to prepare for discussion day.

The other half hour had the students involved in, but not limited to: Library time (library), Read to Self (R-T-S), Read with Buddy (R-W-B), or Writer's Block (Writer's Block). These sessions were planned so that each group had the opportunity to participate in each activity sometime throughout the week.

- Allowed the students to assemble themselves in their groups and begin following their schedule.

- Circulated and facilitated any of the groups needs.
- Had groups rotate to their other activity after a half hour passed.
- Circulated and facilitated any of the groups needs.
- Followed schedule for the rest of the week, allowing for five-minute presentations on day five.

Weeks 4-6.

- Followed the five-day schedule to complete the rest of the book.
    - Changed the groups each week so that all the students had the opportunity to work together in different capacities.
    - Allowed students to self-select projects to complete and share each week.
- Once the book was complete, the students were asked to complete one last project to summarize the entire story and share with the rest of the class.
- Each group was allowed ten minutes for this presentation, since it was longer due to being a whole story summary.
- During week six, I introduced four new books and provided book talks to introduce them to the class.
    - Titles that were introduced:
        - Windcatcher by Avi
        - Replay by Sharon Creech

- A Year Down Yonder by Richard Peck
- White Star: A Dog on the Titanic by Marty Crisp

- Students submitted their top three choices for the next cycle of literature circles.

Weeks 7 – 14.

- Assigning books created new permanent groups for the next cycle of literature circles. Groups were created from the student selections made the week before.
- Distributed new guided reading schedules (see Appendix G) to each student.
- As permanent groups students repeated the five-day schedule described in week three for the first half of their books.
- After every project day literature circle roles and higher order thinking questions were collected for evaluation and instruction or reflection was provided.
- For the second half of the book, while the students were still in their cooperative book clubs, they rotated responsibilities of literature circle roles and higher order thinking questions weekly. One week they completed literature circle roles and the next week they completed five to six higher order thinking questions.

- Once the book was complete, I met with each student and conducted a post-study interview (see Appendix E).

Data Gathering Methods

Observations and field log.

Each day of the research process was recorded in detail through the use of a descriptive and reflective field log. Every stage of the reading process was captured as accurately as possible with as much detail as could be observed. Aspects of the observed moments were also analyzed and reflected upon to determine both effectiveness as well as a future course of action for the participants. The successful outcome of a participant observation study in particular, but other forms of qualitative research as well, relies on detailed, accurate and extensive field notes (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003).

As I facilitated group activities throughout the room, I attempted to observe and record the behaviors and actions of participants throughout the room as both an individual as well as a member the collaborative group. Notes taken throughout this process were later word processed and coded to determine common themes found amongst the participants and the collaborative learning environment. The codes and themes of the field log allowed me to effectively interpret the actions of the students in comparison to my own assumed biases of the research.

Student work.

Throughout the research study, participants worked in cooperative literature circle groups. Individual roles sheets were provided, modeled, and practiced throughout the study. The roles provided a structure for groups to share and discuss personal interpretations of events found within their reading text. Once a level of mastery was achieved, roles were phased out to allow the participants the autonomy to structure and facilitate their own progress.

Students also summarized and shared different aspects of their reading with the rest of the class. Components that were required for analysis included character development, changes and effects of the story setting, events that were pertinent to the story's plot, and a prediction of what direction the story was heading. Any information above and beyond the requirements was the determination of the group during the process. Projects were then presented and displayed throughout the classroom.

Surveys.

In order to determine the initial climate of my students self-perceived reading habits and feelings of collaborative learning, I conducted a five-question response survey (see Appendix E) utilizing a Likert scale of yes, no, or maybe. This information was used to determine baseline data that would be compared to the results of the same survey

given at the conclusion of the study. By comparing the responses from the beginning and the end of the study, I was able to validate if the interventions provided had a positive or negative effect of the participants involved.

Interviews.

Student interviews were conducted periodically throughout the study. The atmosphere created by literature circles provided many opportunities for both group and peer interviews. I would meet with several students a week and be able to have the one-to-one time to ask their thoughts and suggestions about collaborative learning.

A final interview (see Appendix F) was also conducted upon completion of the study. The premise was to determine an attitudinal climate of the entire experience, as well as their perspective about how connecting to literature may have created a new experience for them.

Project Based Responses

Students would work collaboratively to design, develop and present ongoing character development, events, effects of setting, and predictions that arose from weekly meetings, and questions they developed in response to the reading.

Groups would be given constructive criticisms by their peers to help develop presentation skills as well as an opportunity to clarify any

misunderstandings their audience may have had throughout the presentation. Presentations were then evaluated and displayed around the room, allowing the class to acknowledge their achievements throughout their reading.

Summary

Throughout the action research process, I collected various data I felt would best represent the environment and measurement of the study's purpose on its participants.

Throughout this qualitative action research study, data were collected in several formats. Observations recorded through a field log provided personal insight to events that occurred for the duration of the study. Both student work and interviews were used to confirm and/or refute interpretations found within the field log, providing deeper analysis of the study's effectiveness.

Trustworthiness Statement

In order for the findings of a research study to be considered valid and conducted responsibly, one must first prove to be trustworthy by following ethical guidelines set by fellow researchers. During the design of my study, I acquired approval from Moravian College's Human Subjects Internal Review Board (HSIRB) (Appendix A). I also corresponded with my building principal and obtained a signed consent that described my research and its goals in detail (Appendix B).

After receiving approval of the HSIRB, I set out to obtain the assent of my students (see Appendix D) and their parents or guardians (see Appendix C). I supplied each of the parents or legal guardians with a written description of the research study and its purpose, explaining that each of the students would receive the same instruction in the classroom, regardless of their participation in the study. The letter also informed them that they could withdraw students at any time without penalty if they felt they would not like to have the child's data used within the published results upon completion of the research. Also included in the letter was the assurance that the participants' personal information would be protected through the use of pseudonyms and that all data collected would be stored in a secure location

within the classroom for the duration of the study, and destroyed at the end of the project.

Before I began collecting any observable data, I took the time to describe the study and the reasons I was implementing it to the students. I discussed the ways in which they had previously participated in the reading process, and what experiences they would have, whether or not their data was used. I expressed to my students the importance of conducting this research as I work hard to improve my practice and make my instruction the best that it can be for their continued success. Each of the students signed their assents as willing participants, and promptly returned the signed forms from their guardians.

In the initial stages of modeling the primary expectations of the study, each student completed a pre-study survey, which they also completed as a post-study survey at the conclusion of the study, asking them to rate their attitude and behaviors during reading. I began each daily session with an introduction to the objectives, as well as a review of the material from the previous day. Each daily session concluded with a peer debriefing that occurred in their collaborative group, and was then turned into a whole class discussion to ensure the accuracy of my observations, as well as allowing me to include any student feedback. The reasons for focusing discussion around

students' ideas rather than the teachers' is that students bring a broad range of ideas to the discussion, they scaffold each others' learning, and they develop their ability to resolve sociocognitive conflict (Alwood, 2000.) Considering the students perspective about the structure and implication of the study allowed me to significantly reduce any bias I may have had within the study.

I added daily observations to a field log, including the information from the peer debriefing findings and continued to do so until the completion of the study. Prolonged observation will help you determine whether the intervention is effective after the newness wears off (Hendricks, 2009). I also included salient student work and interview responses as I continued the process. These multiple forms of data allowed me to triangulate the data collected and help ensure validity. Triangulating the data made it possible for me to see the results of my study through multiple lenses and compare the factors that have led to increased student averages, critical thought, and collaborative work within the classroom.

This process continued throughout the semester, allowing for a total of approximately 18 weeks, which means that I was able to conduct persistent and prolonged observations creating another level of validity. As the study continued I used several other strategies to ensure that the findings

of my study are valid and reflective of the reading program the students were incorporating into their daily routine.

Accurately recording data was imperative in every level of my research. Being able to capture as much information as possible was the key. I incorporated a time for me to be able to facilitate and move around the room during each day the students met. During this time, I was able to observe in a more personal setting as I incorporated myself into the groups. Also, when I was working with either a particular group or an individual and not able to move around the room and observe, I utilized a central location that provided me visual access to all and auditory access to most.

Presenting results to participants as well as fellow researchers throughout the study is a staple of the process that I am learning about. Moving into research support groups with my peers already allowed me to make some minor adjustments as I began. I also had several dates on the calendar where I scheduled a meeting with my building principal to discuss my reading program and share any results and observations I had made. The idea was that as we build a new English and Language Arts curriculum, we all share what we are doing within our classrooms so we may be reflective of best practices within the school.

The strategy of continuous, ongoing reflective planning was already a daily practice of mine. I approached each day with the mind-frame of: "What do my students need today?" so that I approached their needs with accuracy and diligence. I know I have a curriculum to follow and I know where to go with it each day, but I also need to know how I can get my students to find success within that curriculum. Therefore, I am always planning based on my reflection and have already done so within this study. As the study continued and I was observing many more interactions among the students, it was imperative to not only plan reflectively, but to be reflective in the moment and make changes as they were needed during the day as well as for the next day.

All of these strategies as well as my daily practice, commitment to my students, and commitment to my study helped make this experience a meaningful one for myself and my students.

My Story

I recall looking over my next set of guided reading groups as the class had just made their book choices on Friday. It had been a few weeks since the students had been in reading groups. We had presented the last projects of our previous books on the half-day before winter break. As a class, we have talked about new books since returning to school, but we had been plagued with so many reviews and snow days that we had not been able to catch up. I finally gave up on catching up and selected four new books to integrate back into our daily routine.

I had made the announcement earlier in the morning about everyone making their book choices by the end of the day, and went into a brief description of the next few calendar days, talking about what tasks students needed to complete before we began reading.

The descriptions rattled off my tongue as I spoke in general terms, using acronyms and abbreviations for items to be used and procedures to be followed. I demanded that each group set expectations for themselves, and that they work together to prepare for their new books. When I had finished and scanned the room for general acknowledgements, I noticed something else, *antícipation!* My students were ready to get back to work and try their hand at another round of book clubs! I thought to myself, how did I actually

get here? My mind raced back to the beginning of the school year, and I remembered sitting at this very desk, planning the first cycle of guided reading I was going to do this year. That seemed so long ago!

From The Beginning

Since the first week of school, I had been telling my students that I was involved in my graduate classes and coming close to my own graduation. They were intrigued to hear about some of the things I had done and were very excited about the research project I kept talking about.

The first few weeks are always hard. We were just getting to know each other, still trying to find a system that worked for us. Time management and organizational issues seemed to be never-ending at first, but now that was done. The routines were established, we had our groove, and there I was standing in front of the class, ready to plunge head first into the icy cold regions of action research. I began by reading a card I had bought a few days earlier (see Figure 1).

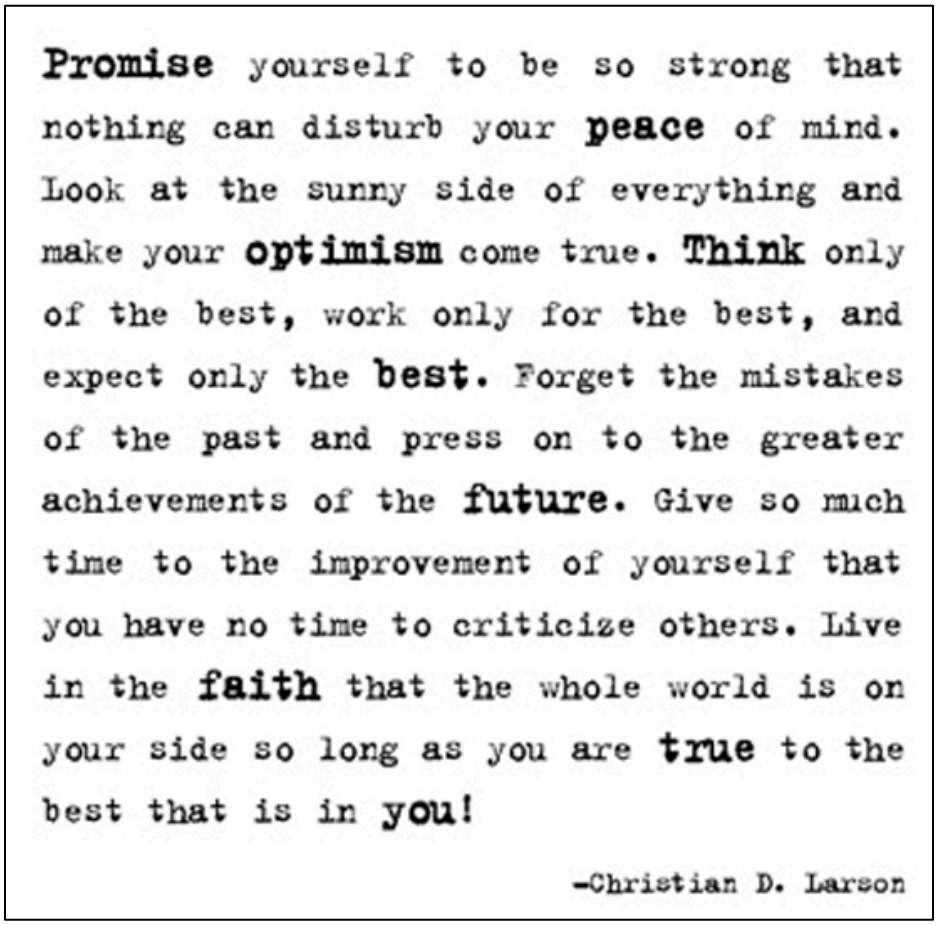


Figure 1. Quotable card read to students to begin study.

I started telling my story: I have this really great friend. Awhile back, we began a tradition of exchanging cards with each other I began. Our cards ranged anywhere from humorous to celebratory to everywhere in-between, and for a while now we have sprinkled in motivational and inspirational cards. When I saw this one, I grabbed two! I have not given one to my friend yet, I am waiting for the right moment, but I am giving this one to all of you because this is our moment.

Our moment. When I think about a "moment," I am forced to visualize several personal references, which bring about the overwhelming emotions that create a connection to experiences that will live with me forever. I hope that throughout this study and this academic year, I will be able to create this for each of my students. A piece of time that becomes timeless, and no matter what anyone may do, it cannot be taken away. It is not enough to insist upon the necessity of experience, not even of activity in experience. Everything depends upon the *quality* of the experience which is had (Dewey, 1938.).

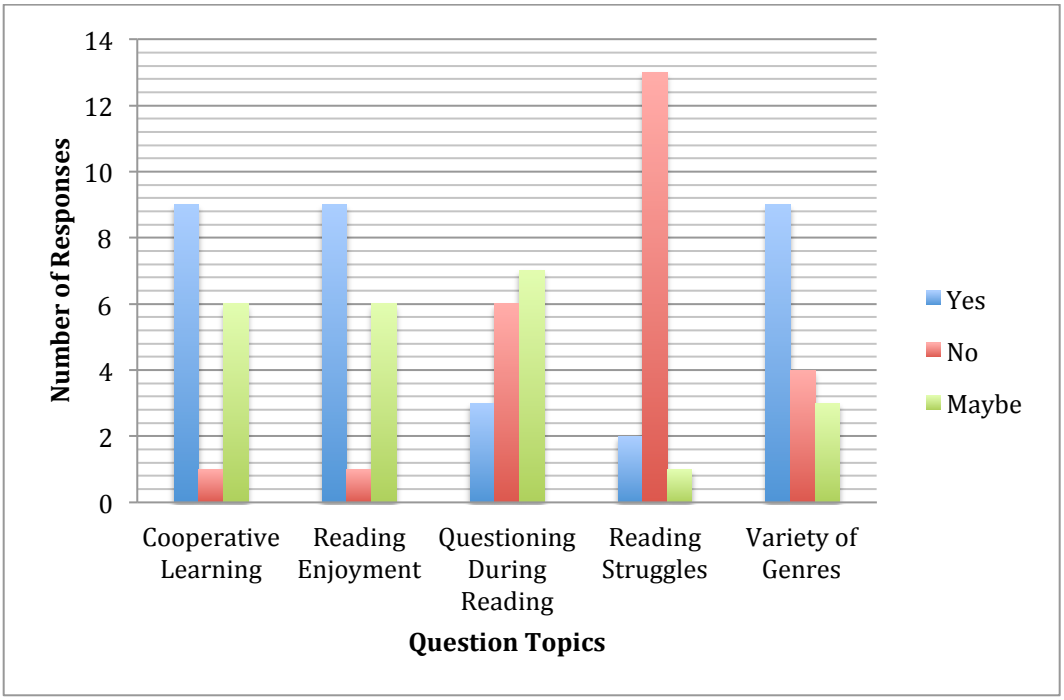
I know that normally students just do what a teacher tells them, either with or without resistance, because it is the teacher's way when it comes to the classroom. They have been trained this way. The most significant thing I need to help the students understand is that it is not only my way, this project demands that they are the driving force and I become a facilitator, which is what makes it, "our moment."

Before we began, I collected some preliminary data to see if the direction I wanted to take would be beneficial to my students. I had them complete a five-question survey using a Likert scale so I could

determine their current feelings and habits used during the reading process (see Appendix E). The results (see Table 1) were somewhat common as, at this point in their educational careers, they were gravitating toward doing so much on their own without the support of others.

Table 1

Pre Study Survey Results



There were many students undecided about the first three questions having to do with the classroom environment, their likes, and their personal reading strategies. The majority of the students felt that they do not face any reading struggles and were pretty well read across a variety of genres.

When we began, I explained that they would eventually be working in groups while using literature circles, to read and better understand a text together as opposed to having to do it as an individual. I shared with them that my hope and desire from this study is to help create more insightful readers that can connect text to their own lives in some way. With that in mind, we had to create some ground rules for working in these groups so that each individual could expect the same safe environment when they worked with their peers. As a class, we came up with a list of reading rules (see Figure 2).

I love the fact that the rules were made by the students, but I was truly impressed with the last thought they had. I always try to create a sense of safety in my room that may allow the students to enjoy what they are doing without fear of judgment. Too often, children are stifled by rules of an educational system that offers limited time for expression. This may also be coupled with a stigma created by the social structure in schools that could contribute to a lack of risk taking. These students wanted to look past all of that; they wanted to create their own environment where they felt comfortable.

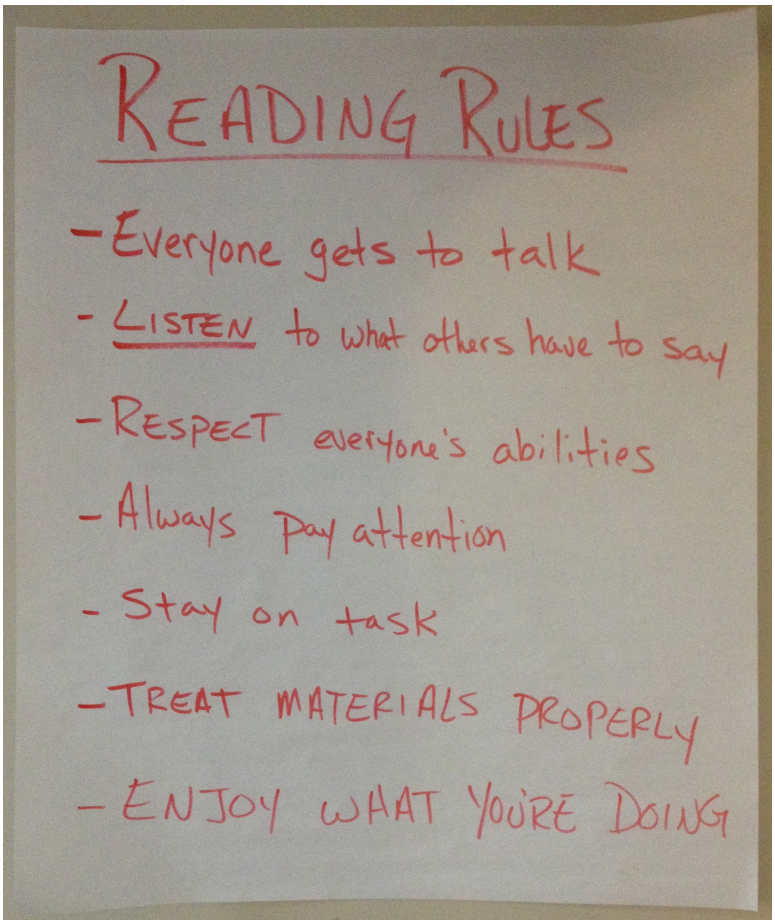


Figure 2. The set of reading rules created by the students.

We made a poster of these rules and displayed them for everyone to refer to when they would need. I also made the point that they were there for people to point out to each other, so they would be able to help hold each other accountable for their actions while working in groups. During this reading program, the students were given a lot of freedom, which they needed in order to self organize and develop a drive for themselves to complete tasks. The problem I faced was students taking advantage of the

time they are given, and not putting forth the effort needed to complete their work with their peers. It was a huge aspect of what I was expecting - for students to hold each other accountable by supporting each other, not bossing them around. Students who participated in these groups were responsible not only for their own learning, but they also tended to become accountable for the others they were participating with (Daniels, 1994).

My book selection to model this process was easy. I wanted the children to all find something they could connect to, so what better way than to read a book about kids in school. Our next discussion began with the topic of bullies. I asked the class if they had ever encountered a bully. It could have been as an observer, a victim, or if they were ever the bully themselves. Had they ever faced a situation that made them uncomfortable? Many of the children replied, "Yes," and I saw many more of them nodding their heads. I explained that the book we were going to use, so we could learn the basic routines of our reading program, was about that same scenario.

Each student was prepared with a book in his/her hands, and a stack of papers with each literature circle role on their desks. We were going to model and practice each one, so the students would all understand how they worked. First, I needed to help the students understand how to develop

questions that were dynamic and responsive, not only to their thoughts, but also that would intrigue their peers as well.

We were about to read when I told them that every time we read, we needed to practice reading with fluency. I was tired of students being judged and leveled based on their reading speed, which so many think is fluency, but it is not. It also is not a sole determination of what a child can do. I do agree that it needs to be a focus, but in conjunction with many other aspects.

I made the point that we need to read with fluency, so I discussed some different skills that I then modeled. We need to read from punctuation to punctuation, I told them. They needed to try to read with prosody. Prosody is that rhythmic tone that we have when we know the words we want to say, and they flow freely and with expression when we speak. This did need to be explained in greater detail, but it was very prevalent in my class that day, and throughout the curriculum. I told them that I wanted to hear expression and fluctuation in their voices as they felt the author in their own minds trying to tell the story. They all looked at me a little strangely after that one, but they settled down when they heard me read. I was just feeling so "in the moment," I was trying to capture their imagination and inspire them to think they were capable of so much more, and as they tried to read after me, with their efforts

focused on matching my example, I knew they were gaining interest in what I was offering.

We also talked about good reading strategies that we should use while we read. I allowed the class to share different strategies they were aware of. While we were discussing these strategies, we talked about how important it is to not only use strategies you are comfortable using, but to also try to break out of our comfort zones and try new ones once in awhile.

After reading the first chapter, I asked the students to turn and talk with a neighbor or two, to come up with questions they had about the first chapter, and to record the responses (see Table 2). I then handed out to each group a large laminated construction paper that contained higher order thinking verbs and question stems, based on Bloom's Taxonomy of educational objectives (see Appendices H1-H7). With this in front of them, their task was simply to find other ways to ask those same questions, and after several minutes, we had a new list of questions (see Table 2).

Table 2

Chart of Questions Created With and Without Higher Order Question Stems

Original Questions (Without question stems)	Revised Questions (With question stems)
1. Will the setting (time) change? *2. Why was "Crash" being so mean to Penn Webb?* *3. Why did Penn Webb's actions/personality upset Crash?* *4. Why did Crash bury the button?* *5. Why is Penn always so happy?*	*1. What would happen if the setting changed?* *2. What ideas justify whether or not the setting will change?* *3. Can you predict the setting of the next chapter?* *4. What did Penn do to upset Crash?* *5. Why do you think Penn's actions upset Crash?* *6. Can you elaborate on the reasons Crash was upset by Penn's actions?*

The response was overwhelmingly different. The revised questions were rich, and seemed like they would be able to draw more in-depth responses. We compared and discussed the differences as a whole group. As I asked the first question, *"Will the setting (time) change?"* several hands shot up in an instant, I received a "yes" answer, and the conversation was done, just what I had expected.

I then asked a revised version of the same question, "*What ideas justify whether or not the setting will change?"* A few moments passed and a few hands went up, followed by a few more, and I saw a variety of puzzled looks

around the room. *Schema was changing.* I was witnessing the proverbial light bulb faintly flicker.

I called on a few students, and they gave varying answers that were all valid, but not as in depth as the question, and then I called on Katie. Katie is a young lady that has a lot of leadership qualities and has gained the respect of many of her peers. Katie responded by saying, "Well, since this was a flashback, I would predict that it would change to present day since the main character is the one telling the story." Now what is even better than the response is that we never even talked about the fact that the entire chapter was a flashback. Occasions which are not foreseen are bound to arise wherever there is intellectual freedom (Dewey, 1938).

Katie was so in tune with what was going on, she was able to make the connection to what was happening in the story, and was in complete control of the situation. Her statement made a lot of other "light bulbs" flicker around the room. Thanks to Katie's response, other students around the room were mumbling, "Oh, I get it!" and "Now it makes sense." I simply could not have scripted things to go this way.

This was my first day, and I was on such a high. The students really worked hard and seemed to have enjoyed what it was they had

accomplished. We ended here, with me congratulating and thanking them for their efforts.

A large module of the reading methods I am introducing to my students is to look back at our practices in reflection. Throughout the study, I had the students reflect in several ways, including journal entries, whole group discussions, and small group discussion to help the students express their positions on collaborative learning as they went through the process. I would try to turn each of these reflection opportunities into the lesson or the moral of the day, as I was trying to foster the trust in one another that is needed to work in collaborative groups.

Beyond Our Comfort Zones

Developmental changes occurred within my classroom. Students participated in helping create an environment where they were able to collaboratively experience varying stages of cognitive equilibration. A process that leads from a state of near equilibrium to a qualitatively different state at equilibrium by way of multiple disequilibria and reequilibrations (Piaget, 1985).

I began the next day by reviewing the steps we took to develop the questions we had after reading the first chapter. Both lists of the previous day's questions were on the board for our review. We talked about how we

can use our original question, then apply the higher order thinking verbs and questioning stems to illicit more in-depth, genuine responses to discuss in our groups.

We then discussed and I modeled the role of circle leader, the main role that is essential in making the first few experiences with literature circles successful. I explained that the circle leader role was nothing more than what we did yesterday. We need to take our questions and rephrase them so that we could solicit more responses and connections from our groups as we talked about different aspects of our books. From there, they would learn the rest of the group roles, but I have found that over time, no one role weighs more heavily than another when all the students have experienced and mastered each one.

As a class, we began Chapter Two with the same parameters we began with the day before. I asked about fluency, why was it important, how do we do it, and not only modeled it for them, but also allowed them time to practice by reading aloud to the class while I provided the feedback necessary to understand what it was they were trying to do and what they already knew how to do.

After we read the chapter, I had counted the students off in groups of five and directed them to different sections of the room. Once everyone was

where they were supposed to be and settled, we took a minute to review the reading rules we had come up with the day before. I then asked them to take five minutes to create questions using the higher order thinking question stems and verbs to develop questions about the chapter. I left the directions a little generic because I wanted to see what it was they were going to do: would the students try to be the giver of information, or would they be looking to gain knowledge from their peers' responses?

Off they went! They were excited! They made their questions, and I could tell they were ready to share what they had prepared with their friends. Some were even ready to show off! They knew they had a hold on some of the topics they were asking about, and they were ready to show others that they knew it. In one group, Michael made a great connection to something he found exciting in his life. He is a big comic book fan, and related the two main characters of our book to the underlying theme of every great comic adventure. He referred to it as "frenemies"--the aspect of superhero and super-villain who need each other to exist in the story-- trying to say that these characters needed each other in that same way. I thought it was very insightful and although not completely accurate, but either way it was a great text-to-text connection with another source of literature.

I took time to weave in and out of every group, making sure nobody got severely off task and that they were sharing opinions and thoughts in reaction to questions and responses that were being given within the group. Some groups really ran away with the idea, some did not.

Fear. It is a driving force in the evolution of man. Over the centuries we have been afraid of things; other animal species, our environment, other men, but combined with our fear has been desire. Desire for truth, wealth, creation, ***and acceptance.***

These students were facing fear. I witnessed them be complacent with some of the feedback they received from their peers when they wanted so much more. They knew the type of discourse they were looking for, and just because of fear, they did not demand it.

This realization came to me as I was positioned on the edge of one group with my attention focused on another group next to us. They were all sharing their roles and connections to the story, and Sarah talked about how she felt when the main character picked on his little sister. She talked about her older sister and how she is picked on sometimes, when Shane jumped in and talked about his older brother. As the conversation went on, Sarah kept getting neglected in the conversation, and her peers talked over her so much that she finally just gave up. She was not willing to "put her foot down" and

make her point. She was scared. Scared that she would not be heard. I watched her become passive about her own perspective; she was even polite about it in her journal response (see Figure 3).

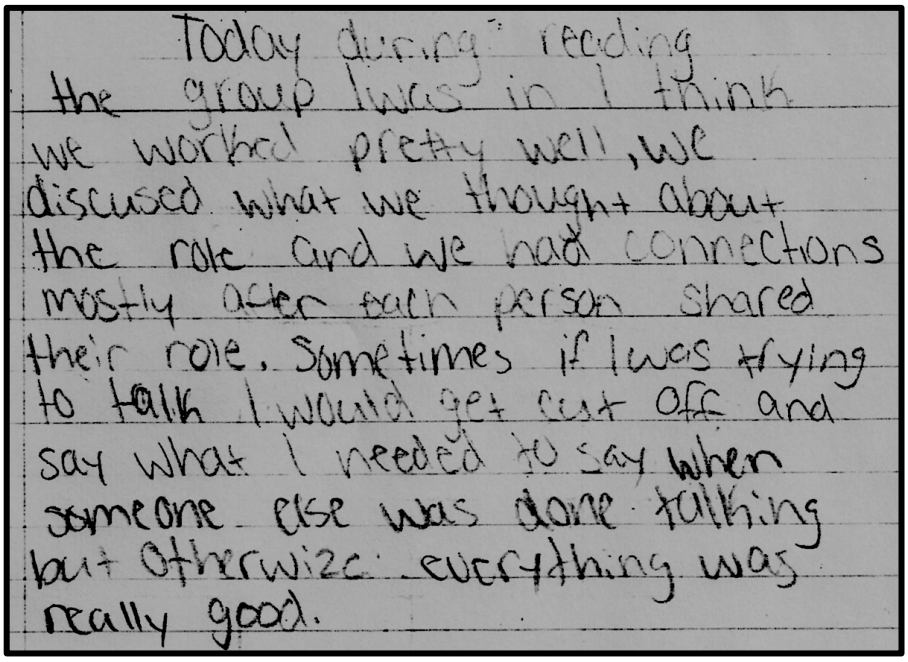

Today during reading the group I was in I think we worked pretty well, we discused what we thought about the role and we had connections mostly after each person shared their role. Sometimes if I was trying to talk I would get cut off and say what I needed to say when someone else was done talking but otherwize everything was really good.

Figure 3. *A student response to their first group meeting*

Across the room another scenario took place moments later. I was able to record it in my field log:

> Joey was sharing his questions during the meeting and he asked a very shallow question about how someone felt in the story. Krystal responded with a short answer and I could tell

that he was deflated for a moment; he slumped over and put his head down... I felt that he was going to just withdraw himself and let the rest of the time go by without much participation. All of a sudden, he picked his head up and said "well you say he feels sad, why does he feel sad? What happened to make him feel that?"

Two things about this: 1. He got the responder (Krystal) to elaborate on her response and analyze the reasons from experiences in the book. 2. He followed through on his question. He realized that his question was shallow and he himself had to elaborate on what information he was trying to elicit. He adapted his actions and question... followed up and made it stronger to elaborate deeper, higher level thoughts.

Joey followed through and made sure he didn't give up on the conversation. He adapted to the scenario, pushed through a feeling of

possible despair to help facilitate a response that would add more to the group discussion.

When each group was finished, I hosted another reflection session to see how each group felt they worked together today. I asked: "Does every group in here feel they followed the reading rules we created?" Most of the students were nodding "yes," but in the back corner, I heard a "no." I even think I cracked a little smile because it takes guts to speak up and mention that you and or your group were the only ones not following the rules set by the class.

We went on to reflect about our group experiences, and I made a big two-column table on the board (see Table 3). I labeled one side "good" and one "bad," and asked for what they thought went well and what went badly.

Table 3

Comparison Chart of Student Responses to Group Actions

Good	Bad
-Everyone had different questions -People shared ideas -Got into good discussions about both the questions and the answers -Followed rules -Some people had the same questions which made others comfortable about their own questions – which created easier conversations -Better understood the book ***	-Talking at the same time -Different answers being given at the same time

This session led to a barrage of daily introductions to literature circle roles and the reading of chapters, all while practicing fluency, meeting in small groups, coming back together, and reflecting. This was done daily until we had completed all of the role sheets twice, so they all had a firm grip on the tasks and expectations as they moved to independent work.

Pushing the Limits

The students needed a little incentive. They had been working hard and repeating a lot of the same tasks over and over again. In my initial methodology, I could not determine how quickly my students would master certain aspects of my instruction, so to ensure an understanding of how I expected our reading methods were to be implemented, I needed to repetitively model and practice with the entire class. From this point on, I learned to adapt to the needs of my students at different places throughout the study to help keep things moving.

Over time, individuals are likely to become more comfortable with the way in which they process information from literature; changing their approach to comprehension and developing multiple perspectives may lead both to new success as well as frustration. Anytime I try to do something different, I know I am bound to face challenges. What I always ask my students is, “What are you going to do when you struggle? Are you going to

give up and walk away, or are you going to face the challenge head on and try your best?"

This question was asked of my students many times throughout this study. Many of them had never had to put so much trust in their peers before. Now, here I was, asking them to trust in their peers with a subject matter that has created many stigmas and feelings of rejection.

Reading is a fundamental skill. In most school settings, students are classified immediately based on reading level, and everyone is well aware of it. Students are always trying to find ways in which to hide their struggles from their peers, and they try to hide it from their teachers as well. I seldom notice a struggling reader volunteer to openly read to the rest of the class. These students have now been thrust into the epicenter of their fear and may struggle to get out.

To help my struggling readers as well as the rest of my students that may have been in limbo with any aspect of the reading program thus far, I pulled out another card from my collection (see Figure 4).

Figure 4. *A quotable card read throughout the research study*

We create this "comfort zone" so we do not have to be afraid of failure, or embarrassment. People still manage to get by, with our friends and family being none the wiser, while we try to take care of everything on our own. It is not until we fall flat on our faces, and have to be reactive towards the consequences, that we tend to see things in a different light.

After I read this card, our discussion created many mixed emotions and opinions that the students wanted to share. Some shared their fears, some shared their experiences, but all agreed that pushing your comfort zone is a hard thing to do. I refer to a student, Emily, who has had the opportunity

to attend multiple elementary schools; her father's job has moved the family across the country. Her contribution to the conversation follows:

Emily: We have moved all over the country and I have had to make new friends every time.

Me: How easy or hard has that been for you?

Emily: Sometimes it was easy, but most times it was hard because they all had friends and I was the new person.

Me: Was there anything you did to try and make friends?

Emily: I would just try to be myself and be nice when I met people.

Me: Did you ever notice that some people were hesitant to become friends or even talk to you? Were you ever hesitant to talk to other people when you first got to a new school?

Emily: Sometimes.

Me: How did it make you feel?

Emily: Horrible! I wanted to make friends but it's not easy when you're the new kid.

Me: What did you do to overcome some of those feelings?

Emily: I would kind of just do my own thing and try to talk about things I thought I had in common with people.

Me: Have you ever just approached people as the outsider and tried to start a conversation?

Emily: Yes.

Me: How did it go?

Emily: A few times it was a disaster! I just stood there one time and couldn't say anything because they all just stopped and stared at me!

Me: What did you do?

Emily: I just turned and walked away; I was really embarrassed.

Me: Did you ever become friends with any of those kids?

Emily: One of the girls was on my bus and on the way home that day, she asked me if I was okay. I told her I was fine and I got nervous and didn't know what to say.

Me: Did anything change after talking to her?

Emily: We became friends and I sat with her every day at lunch after that. We're even still friends today!

Me: What advice would you give to anybody in the room that may be having trouble with being open and honest with people they might not really know that well?

Emily: I would tell them that you're right, try to push themselves to be honest with each other and try new things. If I didn't try to talk to that group of kids, I never would have met my best friend!

This conversation with Emily was a bit of support in the overall message I was trying to portray to the class. When they sit down to discuss books, students limit themselves as to what they want to say. I related it directly to the way Emily said she felt when she approached that table of students, nervous. From this point on students seemed to still have hesitations, but I saw more and more the efforts of breaking down that fear and putting themselves into the spotlight instead of hiding from it.

As the study progressed, I observed that my students were gaining confidence in themselves throughout multiple facets of the classroom. Through repeated readings, oral reading samples, and fluency instruction, many students in the room gained stamina in their reading. This, in turn, helped all of them keep pace with each other in their group. An observation from my field log follows:

> Groups did very well with their tasks today and were able to manage their time correctly, to complete the reading and the role within the half hour time frame provided. Now they only did one

> chapter and the role, as they continue with the process I will expect more reading to be done per day so they can plan out what they will read and when. [The hope is that they will be able to set up a calendar at the beginning of every book and as a group decide what the duration of the reading will be.] Each of the groups read in popcorn fashion and each of them stayed on task doing very well today.

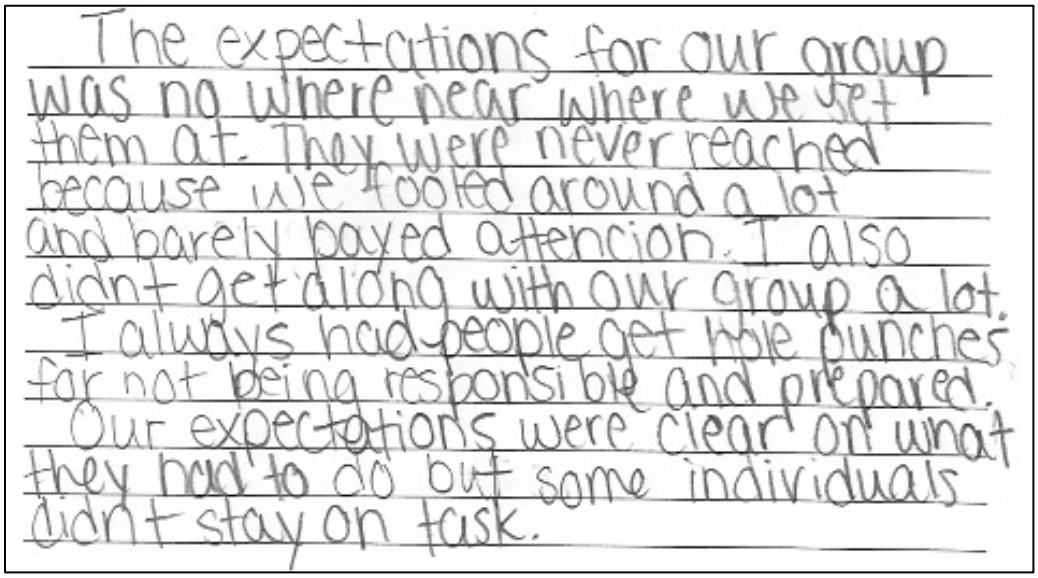
Even though things like this were happening among some of the groups, others were still facing hard times with understanding multiple perspectives within their groups. No matter how hard I tried, I knew I would always face a level of contradiction among students. Everyone wants his/her voice to be heard, and everyone thinks that he/she is the only one with an opinion that matters.

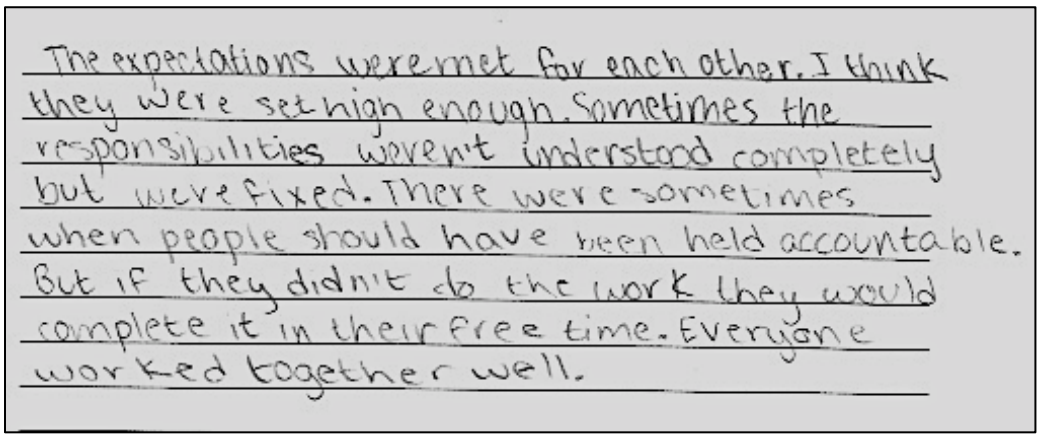
Making It Work

When provided with a system to help manage an increased level of independence and collaboration, students began to accept responsibility and create their own set of rules to govern themselves within the group.

The students had gotten into a very smooth routine when it had come to guided reading time. They would come into the classroom with their snacks, find their seats, pull out their schedules, and begin with very few redirections. They found a sense of pride and independence for themselves, and those that lacked some of it found support from their peers.

There were a few scenarios where individuals had taken advantage of their peers by not showing up prepared for what their calendars suggested they should be ready for. When this happened, members of their group were responsible as well as compassionate about it. They determined what the consequences should be, and the time frame in which the work needed to be completed so the group could continue working and not fall behind. These outcomes would then be presented to me so I could implement any further disciplinary action that may have been needed. Several journal entries I collected throughout the study help explain students' personal feelings towards group created expectations (see Figures 5 and 6).





Figures 5 and 6. Student reflections to collaborative group expectations.

This demonstrated to me that students were not only able to enforce not only the reading rules, but also to facilitate their own group meetings and work sessions, fulfilling responsibilities the group deemed completed within specific time frames. Genuine collaborative learning brings to our

classrooms the long-neglected values of democracy, community, and shared responsibility (Daniels, 1994).

As the students shared their perspectives with me through reflection, I noticed how prevalent it truly was when I went back and read my field log:

> The groups got together and decided the roles of each of the members and talked about the layout of their books. Each group organized themselves quickly and got right to work. I had started to do some IRI reading samples and was at my table when I overheard Carolina once again take a leadership role in her group. As her group got started, they began to face some issues about who was doing what, someone wanted to do something different and an argument began.
>
> Carolina spoke up and stood up for what was right. She flat out stopped the argument and looked at one person and said, "But someone else wants to do that and you don't care what you do, so why don't you help them and then you could

help someone else with another part?!" She was very diplomatic and level headed when it came to this scenario.

I also heard a member of her group actually say that they were struggling to get done with what they were doing and that they might not be done in time. Carolina, without even looking up from her task, asked the rest of the group if anyone had time to help, saying she was close to done but needed to finish a few things first, and someone did jump in and helped out.

This was a tremendous response. These students were in fact taking things into their own hands and collaboratively working together to solve problems.

What I tried to do was bring forth that insightful reader that can operate on many levels of higher order thinking, allowing them to think critically. The kinds of skills that Carolina had demonstrated fell right into the levels of synthesis, application, and evaluation. What I realized here is that I

was looking for these things not only in their responses or discussion, but I was also looking for these things in their actions and character as well.

Analyzing Literature

As students began to create more intense connections to literature, they were able to better understand underlying themes, while developing an awareness of self as they related to characters and events they read about.

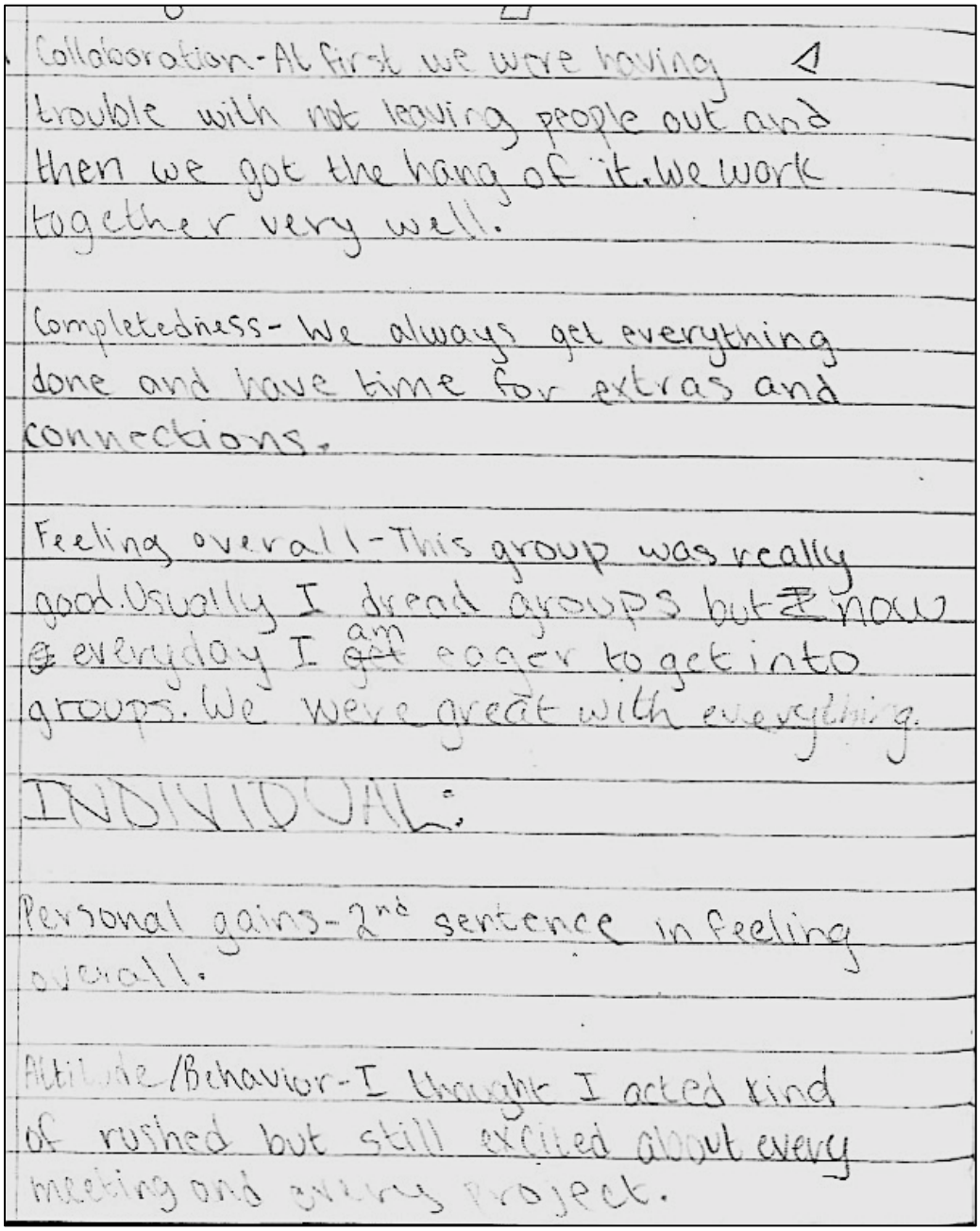
All throughout the study, I asked the students to put aside their preconceived notions about reading, to take the time to look into the text and see what it is an author is trying to share with the reader. We all have ways of expressing ourselves, and usually we feel awkward when we do, so we find alternative ways to share what we feel. Some people write, others sing, some cry, and some laugh, but overall, a message is conveyed. Those that understand the message or theme can empathize with it. This helps them connect on a level that allows them to find a way to interpret their own thoughts for a deeper understanding of themselves.

Literature is a great way to not only express those thoughts for a larger audience, but also allow a variety of readers to see it from their own unique perspectives. Sharing those perspectives and accepting each point of view is what becomes the difficult part. Many students believe that sharing an emotional aspect of themselves makes them weak and vulnerable when in

fact, it strengthens them. It allows them to understand that they are not alone in this quest for knowledge and truth. This is the main reason I chose to have students in groups that would be responsible for more than just reading a book.

When people analyze and connect to literature, they put it through a systematic cycle that helps them make logical sense of what they read. Literature is taken from its initial context, separated into its individual pieces, reconstructed through readers' own understandings or experiences, and placed back into context for it to be rationalized. Piaget would refer to this as the equilibratory process. We believe that the functioning of knowledge cycles involves two fundamental processes that are components of every cognitive equilibrium, assimilation, and accommodation (1995).

Asking students to do this with literature, among their peers, has proven to be not only an incredible experience for myself, but also throughout journal responses and interviews, for the students feeling more empowered and having a different perspective of the literature they read as well as their group dynamics. Their habits have changed, and the expectations they set for themselves and their peers continued to reach new levels each passing week (see Figure 7).



Collaboration - At first we were having trouble with not leaving people out and then we got the hang of it. We work together very well.

Completedness - We always get everything done and have time for extras and connections.

Feeling overall - This group was really good. Usually I dread groups but now everyday I am eager to get into groups. We were great with everything.

INDIVIDUAL:

Personal gains - 2nd sentence in feeling overall.

Attitude/Behavior - I thought I acted kind of rushed but still excited about every meeting and every project.

Figure 7. *A student's journal response to personal and group potential.*

The following are responses to the interview question, "If you were trying to simplify our reading process, and tell someone else how to create connections to literature, what would you tell them?"

Emily: *I would tell them to simply think about what they had read in the story, think about it having any connection to you, and see if you can form a question out of that.*

Rachel: *I would tell them to try to connect the events in the book with events in your life or someone else's life that you know. Or try to connect to the feelings of the character.*

Katie: *I would tell them to think of something that happened in the book and try to think of something similar that happened to them.*

Carolina: *I would tell them to infer and ask questions while they are reading. Also, they should discuss the book with someone.*

Andrew: *I would tell them to look down deep and think of personal things and try to relate them to the story or character.*

Other ways that the students learned to analyze literature was through the development of higher order thinking questions that they completed, in addition to their literature circle roles throughout the study. When the study first began, there were quite a few students that either felt that they either did not ask themselves questions during reading or were not really sure if they did (see pre-study survey results, table 1).

Every week, I collected and reviewed the students' literature circle role sheets and their higher order thinking questions (see Figures 8, 9, & 10).

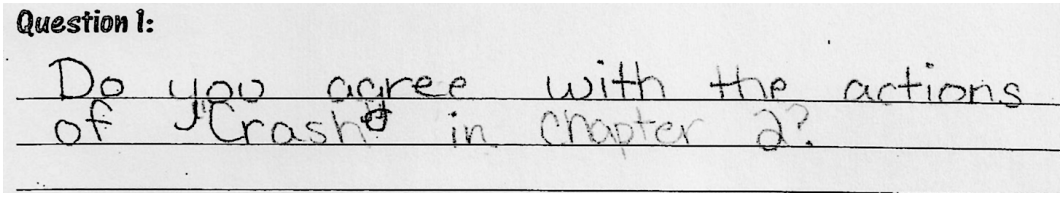


Figure 8. *A student generated question within the first month of the study.*

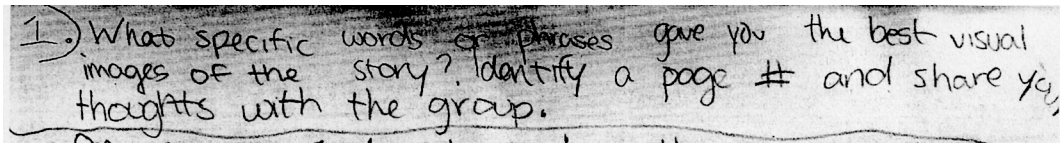


Figure 9. *A student generated question during the second month of the study.*

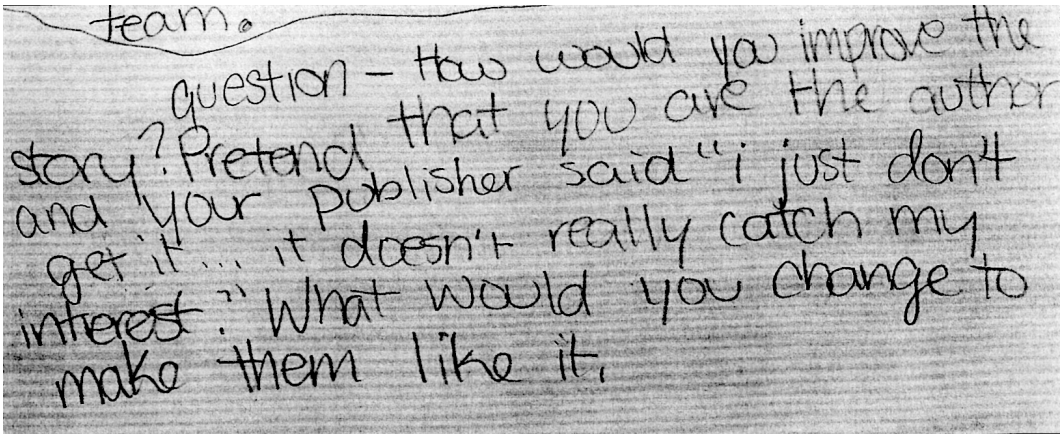


Figure 10. *A student generated question near the end of the first round of literature circles.*

From these pieces of data I was able to monitor and evaluate the growth of how students did actually question the text, as well as how they were contributing to the nature of discussions within the group, including how to help make personal connections (see Figures 11 & 12).

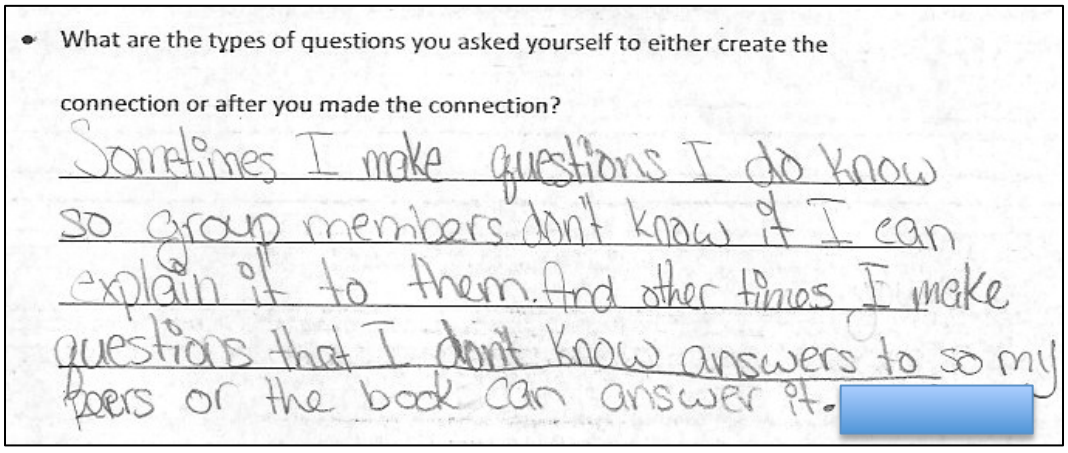


Figure 11. A prompted response about making connections to the text.

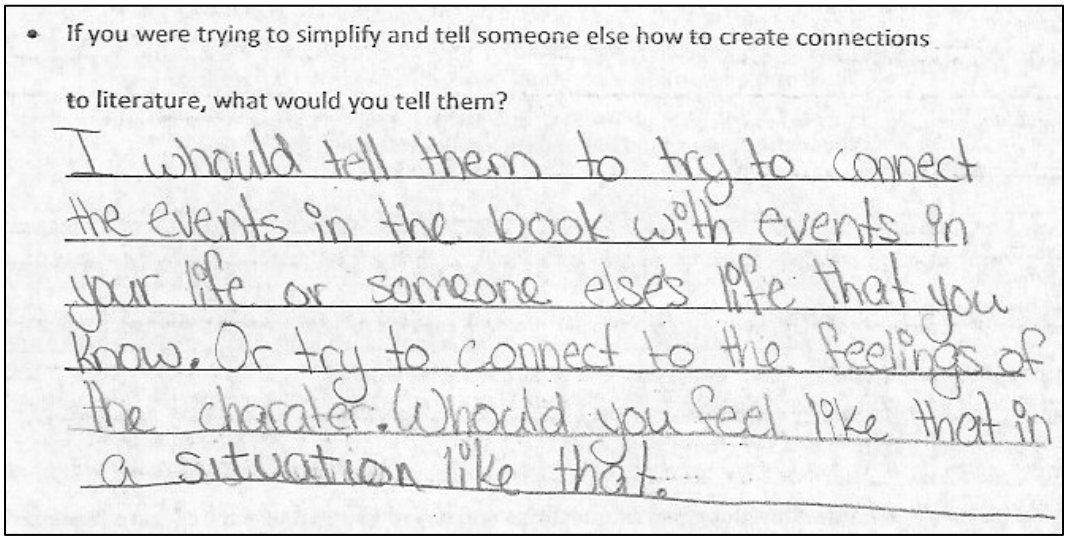


Figure 12. A description of how a student would help others make a connection to literature.

Wrapping it up

With a great deal of information and new insights provided by their peers, students are able to use reflection and peer–to–peer discourse as a way to internalize and develop tolerance for multiple perspectives of a topic.

As group members became more comfortable with each other, they became more comfortable in sharing their perspectives. They begin to break down that proverbial wall that we all put up, just in case someone may see how we truly feel in response to other people's opinions. The boundaries began to change and the level of response increased. One such scenario was found in my field log. I was fortunate enough to be in close proximity when

this occurred, and even though I was observing something else during this time, this was too good to let pass by.

Krystal didn't agree with the actions of one of the characters. Michael must have agreed in some way or presented a different point of view [my guess was he agreed with one of the main characters – they are similar in personalities and I feel that he would connect to their actions and feelings], which sparked a small debate between them. Naturally, I was becoming curious since it was going back and forth, and getting louder, but what happened next was great!

They both **respectfully** debated with each other! They allowed each other to share a point of view and backed up their ideas with factual evidence from the book that supported their opinions.

Observer Comment: This is truly what I am looking for. Students need to understand that when they discuss something from different points of view they do not need to make it an argument where they

end up angry at one another. They can discuss things with an open mind and a strong point of view.

The students were able to elaborate on their connections to the text by interpreting the characters perspective. They discussed their opinions and were able to understand different points of view. I made sure to then sit with this group and discuss what had brought on the conversation and how they felt about what had happened. Both of them were at first worried about what my possible reaction would be when I made my way over to the group. I reassured them that what they had done was the basis of collaborating and that they did nothing wrong. I also took time at the end of this class time to discuss with the entire class what had happened. We talked about how we can appreciate different perspectives, without being rude to each other. This helped everyone understand that they can take steps to further make their point during their weekly meetings.

As the time went on and we were nearing the end of this particular book, students looked to summarize their experience. Each group held one last meeting where they discussed what they felt worked well, how they may have changed in the process, and what they would look to change as they moved into another round of literature circles. We then came together as a whole class and shared all of the general thoughts that each group had.

What I learned from this discussion was that each participant had felt they made deeper connections and had a much better understanding of the text. Students also shared the frustrations they faced when they felt some group members were overpowering in trying to lead a group. This was a great part of the discussion because it gave me the opportunity to talk about the individual pride each of us has when it comes to our work. I recorded the following in my field log:

I had a big discussion about pride today. Pride is one of those things that I find to be slightly overrated at times and get in the way of the things we try to accomplish on a regular basis.

There are two forms of pride... The one form of pride is what we normally see in our society: I am too good for this, or I don't need to pay attention because I already know this. This hinders our education system almost as much as the system itself.

The other form of pride, the one that allows us to break down our own barriers, and be a leader and follower at the same time is what I would like students

to get from this project, this research. Letting go of the fear that we have when we get into a group, and based on our comfort level determine, what it is we're going to say.

I think this is a big part of this project, breaking ourselves down and building up new habits so we can express ourselves, our concerns, our emotions, and put aside our pride and gain more from everything we do.

I feel this talk went a long way as we ended this first cycle of literature cycles, completing our books and preparing for our final project.

Sharing the Experience

As students develop multiple layers of success within understanding their true potential of connecting to and comprehending literature, they are compelled to share their experiences in informative and diverse ways.

Throughout the process, students followed a prescribed way to collaboratively work in groups, master the literature circle roles, engage in discourse and reflection, summarize their experience, and share their perspectives. Students then created project based responses to the literature to share their interpretations of the text. Each week they looked at character development, implications of the setting on the events in the story, main

events that added to the plot, and predictions of what they inferred could happen as the story continued. These projects allowed for multiple aspects of intelligence to shine through as they took on many different forms.

In the beginning, I asked for simple projects to be completed so they could find success and build stamina for working in a suggested time frame. This also allowed them to practice how to organize themselves and delegate responsibilities throughout the group.

When we finished the first book that every group worked in to model and master the reading process, I asked the students to create an alternate ending to the story that had just read. This seemed to be a pretty common project that many of them had admitted they had done at some other point in their classes over the years. They looked confused as I chuckled and I heard Krystal say, “Uh-oh! He has that smirk again!” She was right; I had something up my sleeve.

Instead of the traditional alternate ending, I wanted them to create a different ending using a fictional character of their choosing, as the main character. This went better than I expected! Students did embrace the project and I was able to watch characters such as Harry Potter and Batman appear in a new context. Each group did an excellent job including new character behaviors to an existing story line.

As time went on and we worked in other books throughout the semester, students created more elaborate projects to share their reading experiences with their peers (see Figures 13, 14, 15, and 16).

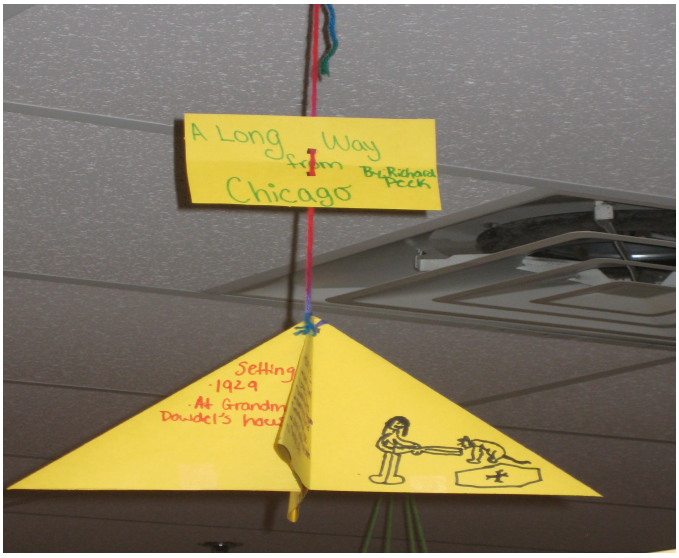
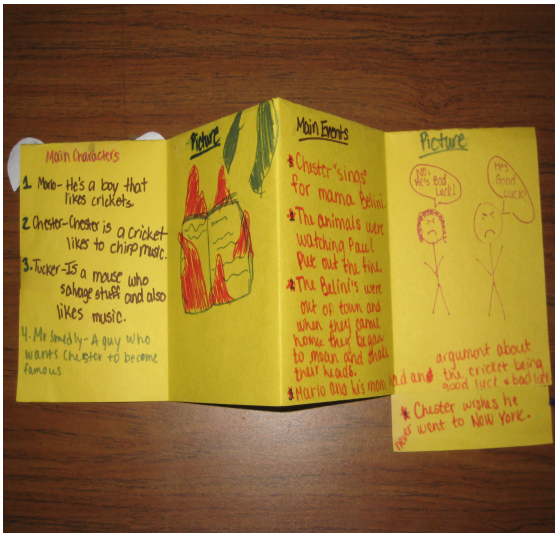


Figure 13. A creative mobile used to depict story elements.



Figures 14 and 15. An accordion book created to share story elements.

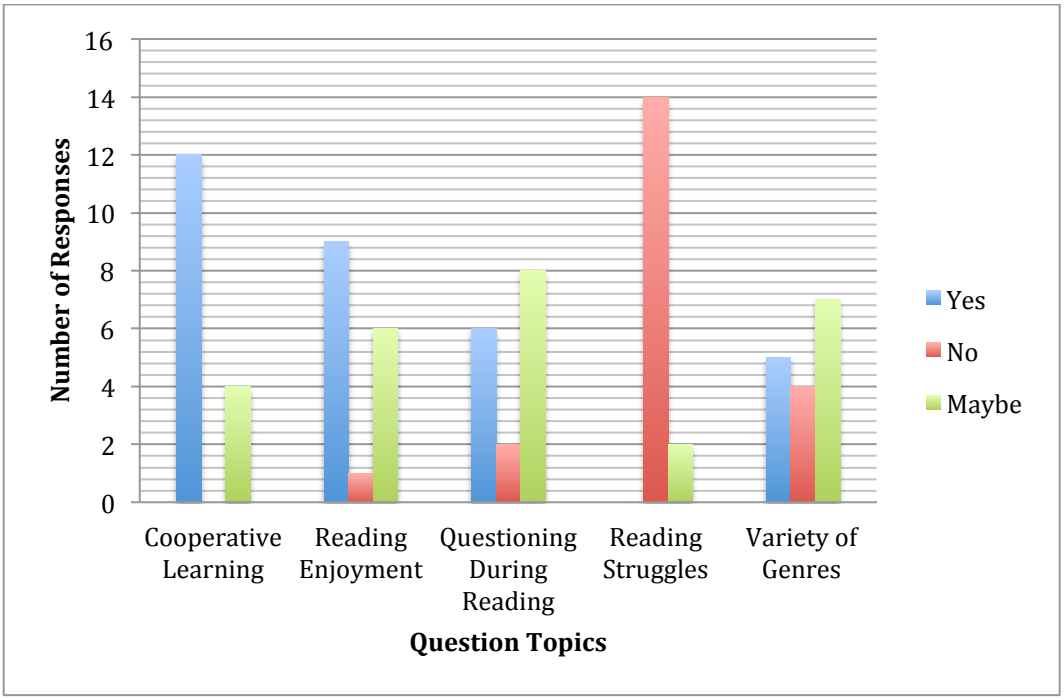
Figure 16. A puppet show stage used to act out story elements.

Post-Study Survey

One final step before calling my research complete was to determine if my students actually adopted any new reading habits as a result of the interventions provided throughout the study (see Table 4).

Table 4

Post Study Survey Results



I was delighted to see a variety of changes in the minds of my students as to how they now viewed their reading practices and the results speak for themselves. Students gained a new appreciation for working together in cooperative/collaborative learning groups, and there was an increased number of students that now felt they ask more questions of themselves as they read. What struck me as the best result was that not one of my students personally felt that they had struggles when they read! If nothing else, I improved the confidence of my students in a subject area that divides our students, in one word, SUCCESS!

Coming Full Circle

As I stated earlier, students participated in helping create an environment where they were able to collaboratively experience varying stages of cognitive equilibration. My students came to me with a preconceived notion of how to read. Most of it was independent, and they all progressed at their own levels without much regard for others in the classroom. I feel I changed that. My students went through a process where they found out more about their peers, the reading process, and themselves. They faced challenges head on, adapted to situations, and as a whole, facilitated each other's efforts in the process, coming full circle and creating a new working schema of the reading process.

It is a tremendous feeling to have completed a research project of this magnitude. I have found new ways in which I reflect on my practices, and approaches to situations as they arise in my classroom, and have become the beneficiary of my student's efforts to overcome what once seemed impossible.

Data Analysis

Introduction

When the study first began, I saw little bits of data coming in and thought to myself, this might not work. Is my plan going to work and get me enough data to objectively report on? Well, YES, it did! The amount of data that came pouring in once the study was in full swing was almost daunting.

The difficulty was putting aside my original plans, analyzing the results quickly enough, and adapting my approach to meet the needs of my students as they grew. I noticed that students were adapting to the literature circle process and role sheets quicker than I anticipated. In order to accommodate for this, I included reflection pieces to help the students analyze what they were experiencing. I also took time to work on presentation skills for the project-based responses students presented. Throughout the process, I was able to review my data and use them as a means to determine common threads that students had experienced.

Observations and Field Log

Apart from reflective written responses in student's journals, the field log contained my daily observations throughout the study. The field log contained my personal thoughts, biases, reflections, and memos about daily group, as well as individual student actions. To keep with the validity of the

study, I made sure that my personal reaction and experiences were kept separate from my observations of student behaviors.

Student Work

In the beginning of the study, students used a teacher created schedule to guide them in determining appropriate number of chapters/pages to read and discuss, while helping them manage their time to take care of all their responsibilities. Literature circle response sheets were distributed each week to help guide their thoughts and discussions in their meeting and project requirements. These sheets were collected, and allowed me to monitor the progress of the student's ability to connect to and question the text.

As the study continued and students reached a mastery of the perspectives provided by the role sheets, they were gradually phased out, and students were responsible for recording their questions and connections to the text in a written format, which included a weekly reflection on how the groups performed in that particular week. The students also took on the responsibility of creating and maintaining their own schedules for reading assignments, meetings, creation, and presentation of projects. This allowed me to closely monitor the gradual release of teacher responsibility and helped me to move into a facilitator role for my students' benefits.

Surveys

A baseline pre and post-study survey (see Appendix E) were given to the students to determine potential changes in behavior towards the reading experience and their personal reading habits. It presented me with a broad range of reading behaviors and attitudes the class brought with them to the study.

One limitation I faced when reviewing the data was that the information was very broad, and as students simply answered with a yes, no, or maybe, I was not able to determine their ability to perform the particular process I had asked about. I had to then adapt my interview questions to solicit more of a response on the grey areas presented in the results of the survey data.

Interviews

I had relied on three different types of interviews throughout the research study. The literature circle atmosphere allowed me to have multiple informal interviews, as I would facilitate each group throughout the sessions. These responses were recorded as a part of reflective and direct responses in my field log.

Students were also able to conduct peer interviews. These were not a planned part of the methodology, but as the study progressed, I found it as a

great way for students to understand each other's perspective as they worked together in the collaborative process.

The last form of interviews was on an individual basis with me near the conclusion of the study (see Appendix F). Students were asked to reflect on the collaborative environment and explain any challenges they faced throughout the study.

A review of the interviews provided many insights about the students' reactions and tolerance to a collaborative work environment. I was able to use the results from these interviews to help me in determining the next steps of facilitating my classroom environment as we moved out of the study and onto the next stages of our academic year.

Project Based Responses

Each week, students were asked to collaboratively create a project to visually, orally, and esthetically display several key aspects of literature analyzed in each specific book. These came in many forms, including, but not limited to: mobiles, book arts, posters, skits, news reports, graphic organizers, and dioramas.

In the beginning of the study, I was specific about the project I wanted completed each week. As the study moved on and I gradually released responsibilities to the students and became the facilitator, they took the

projects to new heights together. They became aptly unique and representational of the group participants. I was able to see students adapt to new and creative ideas while sharing perspectives and overcoming adversity to work towards a common goal. This helped show that the collaborative process, although painstaking at times, is a valuable asset in any setting.

Reflective Memos

As I conducted my study, at appropriate times, I completed reflective and analytical memos. This gave me the opportunity to evaluate the progression and direction of my own work through the lens of several renowned educational theorists and practitioners.

One such memo was written in response to a quote from John Dewey, (1938). “Experience does not go on simply inside a person. It does go on there, for it influences the formation, of attitudes, of desire, and purpose” (p. 39). This quote allowed me to further understand the power of experience. In the classroom, an experience is or can be limited to the parameters of a topic or assessment meant to analyze student comprehension. Throughout my research, the experience was created by the students, leaving them with the ability to create their own goals for expressing themselves and their knowledge base gained from the literature they were reading. It is something that I feel will truly live with them throughout their educational careers.

At about the midpoint of my study, I had conducted an analytical mid-study reflection that allowed me to focus in on some of the more pertinent aspects of my research. I found that making real life text–to–text, text–to-world, and/or text–to–self connections to literature was assisting the students with not only with the comprehension of the literature, but also was enabling them to use the knowledge to develop higher order thinking skills. This, in turn, related to the application of critical thought, when students were entrusted to develop their own parameters of the next cycle of books, and where they determined their own reading requirements, meeting schedule, and project based responses.

Codes, Bins, and Themes

At a certain point in the study, I began the coding of my field log in search of reoccurring actions, student expressed thoughts and ideas, and trends that occurred throughout the reading process. In order to do this, I read and re-read my field log, student reflections, and interview responses. Each of the related terms were identified, indexed, and referenced for inclusion into organized bins (see Figure 17), which allowed me to acknowledge larger overarching themes (see Table 5) produced by the action research.

Figure 17. Graphic Organizer identifying related terms of research study.

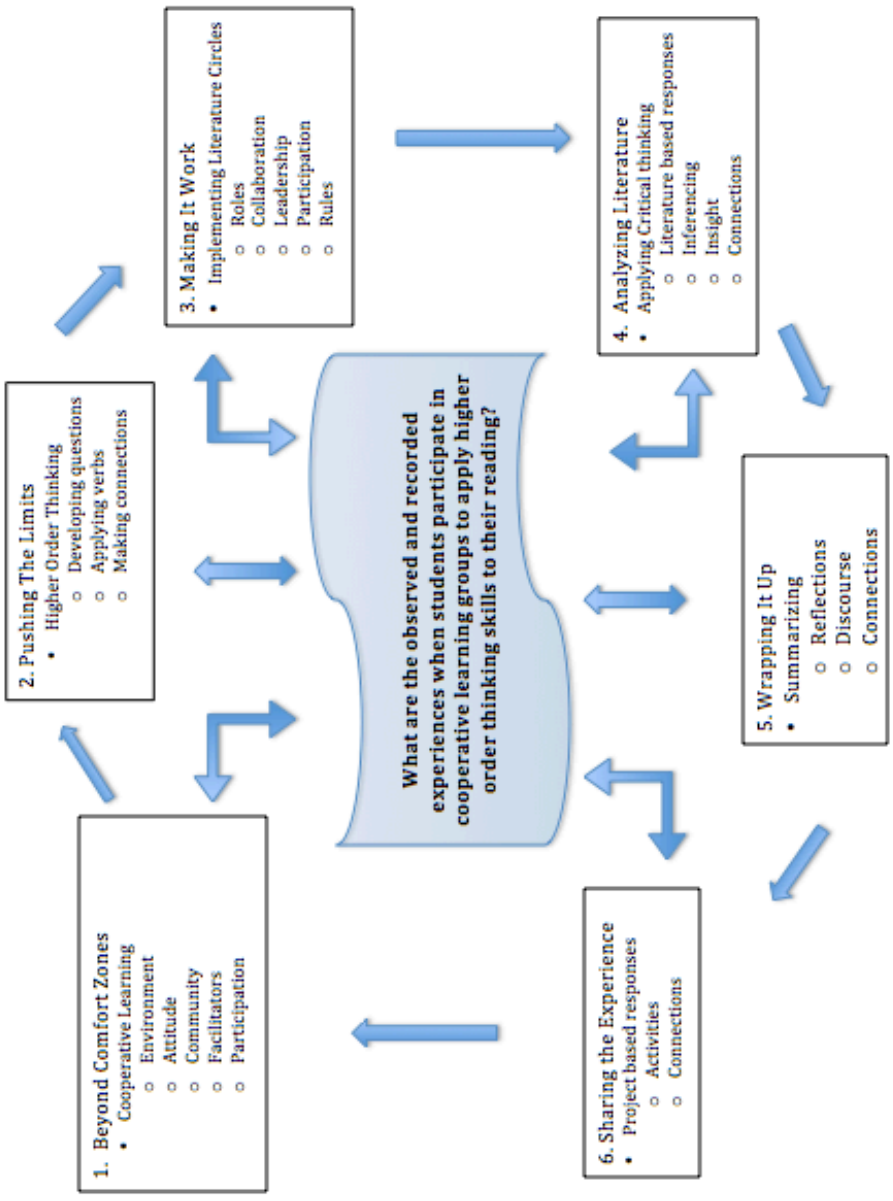


Table 5

Thematic Statements

1. Beyond Our Comfort Zones

As students begin the process of creating a heterogeneous cooperative/collaborative environment, where they discuss, share, and analyze literature, they are often timid and shy due to perceived stigmas created throughout their educational careers.

2. Pushing The Limits

Individuals become very comfortable with the way in which they process information from literature; asking them to change their approach to comprehension and develop multiple perspectives can sometimes lead to great success as well as frustrations.

3. Making It Work

When provided with a system to help manage an increased level of independence and collaboration, students begin to accept responsibility and create their own set of rules to govern themselves within the group.

4. Analyzing Literature

As students begin to create more intense connections to literature they are able to better understand underlying themes while developing an awareness of self and as they relate to characters and events they read about.

5. Wrapping It Up

With an overwhelming amount of information and new insights provided by their peers, students are able to use reflection and discourse as a way to internalize and make sense of the entire experience.

6. Sharing The Experience

As students develop multiple layers of success within understanding their true potential of connecting to and comprehending literature they are compelled to share their experiences in informative and diverse ways.

Research Findings

Introduction

The purpose of my study was to determine the effects of having students apply higher order thinking skills to respond to literature in a collaborative environment. Too often in their educational careers, students are being separated into leveled groups of reading abilities, determined by assessments that misuse the skill of fluency to determine a reading level. Children are then categorized and grouped among their peers, which stifles the imagination and creates a stigma amongst them. Over the years I have recited the same saying to all of my students: We all learn, not at the same time, or in the same way, but we all learn.

Giving students this empowerment to understand that a preconceived notion of abilities is not what education is all about turned out to be my greatest achievement. They all bring something special to the classroom, and sharing their abilities in an environment that recognizes and celebrates every effort towards a common goal is what collaboration is all about. It also provided an experience where all learners got to hear, see, and understand different perspectives, while questioning how and why other people think about things the way they do. It also helped them to develop important life skills, such as empathy and tolerance for their fellow student.

I also wanted my students to understand that they had the ability to perform far beyond what instructional skill assessments tell them they can. When students take skill based weekly assessments, they are asked about a concept and are given a piece of text to locate and identify an answer. They do not learn to apply these skills beyond that single assessment. If they did, it likely would not have to be re-taught year after year, it would be a part of their working schema. Any experience is mis-educative that has the effect of arresting or distorting the growth of further experience (Dewey, 1938). By applying higher order thinking skills to real life connections found within portions of the text, students were able to see how these skills are used to create deeper meaning of what the author was trying to convey through the literature.

Upon completion of the study and analysis of the data, I was able to identify several key aspects that the students faced, struggled with, adapted to, and overcame, to find their own success within the reading process. It brought to light the notion that we all need to come face–to–face with adversity before we can conquer our fears and move forward with a feeling of self worth.

Analytical findings

Over the course of this study, I witnessed several academic changes occur within my students. The introduction of linking real life connections to higher order questioning techniques proved to be beneficial to a majority of my students.

When we first began, students questioning of the text was generic in its form and predictable in their response. Basic question structures of who, what, when and where were abundant in each of my students whether they had come to me as high or low academic achievers. Before, during, and after reading strategies were also vague and often misused in the reading process.

Although it took time, each participant was able to demonstrate an improved level of questioning. Questions became deeper and provoked more thought and creativity in response as the study progressed (see Figures 8, 9, and 10). Students were also able to demonstrate an increase of personal connections, which they noted throughout their responses in role sheets, reflection journals, and project based responses.

Other academic results, which I feel were a direct result of the interventions and techniques modeled throughout the study can be found in several students overall grade point average. Of my lower level learners, three of them improved their overall average in the classroom and now score

higher on open-ended responses to literature on a weekly basis. One of these lower level learners also achieved an 80% comprehension score when recently assessed on a grade level Diagnostic Reading Assessment (DRA). The initial DRA conducted in the beginning of the academic year placed him on a fourth grade reading level.

Students in my class not only demonstrated improvement in their ability to question text within the reading environment, but they have also carried these skills over into the rest of the curriculum. There are more meaningful questions and discussions happening on a daily basis, leading them to ask more questions of themselves, while assisting each other in ways to find answers and develop more questions in a quest for knowledge.

Stigmas

I spoke briefly of stigmas in the introduction to my findings. We all face stigmas in our everyday life, and unfortunately many people can say they are active participants of projecting them on a daily basis. Our society categorizes things for ease of classification. We do it in every facet of life, including education, and by doing so we create a spectrum of labels for our students. Labels are obtained at a very early age, and students have a hard time getting away from them.

Two classic categories creating the extremes of the spectrum are thought to be high achievers and troublemakers, leaving a broad range for everyone else to generally fall into and be classified later. Depending on a student's classification, which is determined by general aptitude assessments upon admittance to school, behaviors begin to develop that nurture the classification and foster the stigmas in both directions of the spectrum.

Once children are labeled and placed in these categories, they develop a comfort level that inadvertently keeps them from making progress in either direction. They are among peers of all the same level, they become comfortable with the effort levels needed to maintain their preconceived ability level, and therefore never try to push themselves beyond where they are. A problem arises because the stigmas then follow them to the societal aspect of education and continue to create rifts in the student population.

Throughout my research study, I spent countless hours trying to help my students overcome these stigmas and break down the barriers they face within the classroom. Placing the students in cooperative groups and allowing them all to work within the same level of literature helped demonstrate that they all could comprehend and work together in the same text. Basing the book choices on interest levels and not reading levels allowed participants to begin working together with an understanding that

they all had something in common. This commonality helped break down the barriers that many children face within a collaborative group, where they commonly feel like they are forced to work with people they think they do not like simply because of the social structure of their classes.

Through the cooperative learning process, and working toward mastery of the literature circle roles (see Appendices H1-H7), students gradually gravitated towards a collaborative learning process where each of the group members began to rely on each other for continued success. I found this transition to be very smooth after I had begun to phase out the literature circle roles from the program. Once kids have used a variety of roles and had plenty of successful group meetings, then the structured roles are less necessary (Daniels, 1994). Once the collaboration became evident to the students themselves, they found a new level of respect for one another, and if it was only for the short times they spent in reading groups each day, they at least spent that time ignoring the stigmas they faced outside the classroom.

Frustrations

I was either foolish enough or privileged enough to take on a new grade level this academic year. I conducted this study with students in a 6th grade classroom, which in itself proved to be a challenge, as my grade level

team and I took on the aspect of creating a brand new curriculum for the academic year. Creating and implementing the curriculum itself was not that bad. Conducting the study and implementing the reading program was, in itself, an enlightening process, as I found new methods and modes of reflection for myself as an educator. The changes that occur in a student in their 6th grade year are, in a single term, dramatic.

The changes that they struggle with and the range of emotions they went through were a challenge when contained in the classroom. To make matters worse, I placed them in groups that traditionally in the past they never would have chosen on their own. Even though they were based on interest levels, there were, of course, participants that were less then cooperative when this all began.

By the end of the study, each member of the class had proven they could rise to the occasion and be a functional part of their group as they worked towards common goals, but the learning curve they had to take to get there proved to be rough. There were many moments throughout the first few stages of the reading program that were difficult for some class members. Some people had breakdowns, some cried because they felt overwhelmed, and alone in their groups, and some people got angry because of the lack of support they felt in the beginning of the study.

Each time these frustrations arose, I would stop and reflect with the entire class, asking what are things we can do to express ourselves and make sure our voice is heard without creating frustrations and fears. I told them many times, "You will struggle! I still struggle each and every day, but the question you need to ask yourself is, what are you going to do when you struggle? Are you going to just back away and not do anything about it, or are you going to rise to the challenge and face your adversities head on?" It took some time to catch on and for students to overcome a majority of their problems, but it did happen.

Students can now work within any group arrangement I select, and as they embark on new books, new groups are created each time. Frustration still does tend to be an issue from time to time, but the growth that each of them showed in the face of adversity is more than I could have hoped for.

Responsibility and Facilitation

In the beginning of every school year, a student's level of responsibility increases to match the expectations of the grade level standards as well as the teacher expectations. At the beginning of every year, I take the time to introduce my expectations and routines by modeling, and practicing them every day. As classes demonstrate proficiency in these routines, I begin to gradually stop modeling while asking the students to

monitor each other. I also begin to discuss levels of accountability within the classroom and have many class meetings; discussing how to be honest, respectful, and empathetic while holding classmates and themselves accountable for their actions.

Incorporating this study into the beginning of my year, allowed me to extend a regimented routine into all of my subject areas. It helped create longer schedules and demanded a quicker adaptation to the classroom routines. When the study got underway students were able to indulge in self-efficacy as they maintained their own schedules, prepared themselves in advance for tasks they decided upon, searched for ways to express themselves in both small and whole groups situations, taking turns to help facilitate and guide their peers.

Each student gained more and more responsibility as they progressed into the study and were able to help each other be accountable for what they brought to the group. I found that students would go as far as to assign themselves recess and lunch detentions when they didn't come prepared. They would use their personal time to catch up and make sure they were able to participate in the next class session. Each member of the class raised their personal level of responsibility while being able to encourage others to do the same.

In many ways students took turns facilitating projects and meetings, assigning tasks, assisting in their completion, prompting conversations, and when appropriate, allowing other members of the group take the lead. As students would do so, they would not only gain more confidence in themselves, but they would also gain confidence in their peers throughout the collaborative process.

Reflection

The reflection process is one of the toughest things for students to ascertain. Very few ever take the time to think about their actions and ask themselves how they can do better. Being able to reflect on our practices, both students and teachers, allows us to understand where we might have a weakness or lack of comprehension, and develop a plan to move forward and overcome obstacles we face in the classroom.

To assist in the notion of students being reflective in the classroom, I posed a question to the class, “Have you ever done something and some time afterwards, thought to yourself, OH! I should’ve done this, or I should have said that?” all of them knew exactly what I was talking about and offered some of their own personal examples of such a time in their lives. When the discussion slowed we talked about how reflection could help us approach a

similar situation in different ways that can help create less of that self – questioning and more confidence.

As the study went on I included a weekly reflection for each member of the class to complete when they had finished their weekly meetings. These reflections were then shared with their groups before being handed in for my review. I found that students would be more than honest when they completed these and I was able to see how student behaviors changed based on opinions offered by their peers each week.

This also translated throughout the rest of the curriculum. Students were more reflective and focused throughout inquiry unit projects as well as their reading projects. The dynamics of the classroom also changed creating an atmosphere of respect and commitment to their peers, following things through to fruition, as opposed accepting defeat when adversity came their way.

Sharing

Built into the reading process I introduced to the students was an aspect of sharing their experiences with their peers. As I discussed before, student stigmas can create a sense of inability and fear that they may be as good as their peers in the classroom environment. This is also true of presenting and sharing their reactions to literature with their peers.

Students began the sharing process with very simple repetitive projects designed to help them isolate and identify particular aspects of their books, build stamina in expressing ideas in a creative manner, and enhancing their presentation skills. After each presentation, peers were allowed to offer constructive criticism as feedback for their continued efforts throughout the readings.

The feedback they received in conjunction with the reflection process that was developed throughout the study worked out better than I could have ever imagined. Students became entranced with creating bigger and better projects, adapting from their original form that I offered, to elaborate interactive presentations that included both hand – made materials and technology to convey their thoughts and reactions to the literature.

Students took pride in their own work and respectfully understood the limitations and expertise of their fellow classmates. The sharing of their projects became a highlight of their week. I had only ever provided a 30 – minute session for groups to work together in whatever capacity they scheduled for themselves on a given day. I found that they were so dedicated to their work that they would even give up their own study hall and recess time to complete things they wanted to share with their class.

What turned out to be more impressive was the atmosphere the students created. They would not ever try to make it a competition between the groups, but as one group would push the limits, and create a larger project, it inspired others in the class to elaborate on their ideas and help provide the determination to create projects that were elaborate, detailed and creative.

Affect

I include this topic into my findings for one specific reason, my students. Affect is a word that carries a deeper meaning than a reaction to a situation. It is more than just a word; it is a feeling, a change in behavior and perspective. As a result of this study I witnessed my students influence each other in ways that even my colleagues cannot believe. The classroom works in a regimented routine where each student is aware of his or her responsibilities and embarks on their tasks without prompting. They are always eager to get started and mildly disappointed when their time has expired for the day.

They have reached out to each other showing sides of themselves they never would have considered doing in other circumstances. They broke down barriers, built up trust and guided each other through both their successes and failures. Within the room there is a sense of pride,

understanding and an openness that allows them to conquer every challenge they face in their day. This was proven to me one day not long ago.

Within this age range, students are faced daily with the ridicules and delusion that the fore – mentioned stigmas create about popularity among children. This leads to social groups either accepting or rejecting others based on their social status. The result of these segregated social groups leads to bullying and distress in many young adults today. Acknowledging this among their peers, my classroom decided to take action.

Through a group meeting had within the classroom one day, my students came up with an idea that made me shiver with excitement. They decided to collectively and anonymously, observe the behaviors and reactions of other students around the school. When they felt it tangible, they provided notes of encouragement or words of wisdom to their peers in the form of sticky notes placed on their desks, lockers, notebooks, and doorways; anyplace a student would least expect to find them. They also took to creating posters negating rude behaviors and bullying, hanging them around the school for all to see. As I mentioned, this is anonymous and they take their own time and resources to do it as well as, they take no credit. The results of their actions have now begun to embody the other students in the

school. Now other students, not from our class or even grade level, have taken to the same actions, supporting each other in the face of adversity.

Is this solely based on the efforts of this study; humbly I admit, no. It takes an individual to create change and a collaborative effort to embrace it beyond a conceptual thought. It is the collective motivation of my students that created these actions and results, but if for a brief moment I can credit their efforts in my study as a factor in creating change, then the results speak for themselves.

My students still struggle. They will always struggle, but the experience has allowed them to understand that they are not alone when they do. They understand that they are a part of something much bigger than they ever conceived possible.

Next Steps

Upon conclusion of my research study, I took time to reflect on what it was that actually happened in the classroom last semester. There were many days of excitement, disappointment, seclusion, and comradery that paved the way for a memorable experience. Even though the research study proved to be beneficial in many ways, writing this thesis left me feeling as if this was just the tip of the iceberg and that there was so much work left to do.

I understood through my research of the literature prior to beginning the study, that even though cooperative and collaborative learning share many similar themes, they are unmistakably different. Cooperative learning happens when students work together in groups and complete a project, most commonly with a few members contributing most of the effort. Collaborative learning occurs when all students are involved and working towards a common goal with everyone contributing and communicating. This change in group work doesn't happen by chance. It needs to be modeled, facilitated, improvised, adapted and nurtured in a way that allows the students to realize the importance of other people's contributions.

In order to make the transition, students need the proper tools to overcome the challenges of incorporating different perspectives and react to

different situations as they arise. This was my responsibility, and I realized that I had to stop myself from the immediate response of intervention, and embrace the role of facilitator that helped assist my students in understanding their frustrations and developing a sense of empathy and tolerance towards their peers. This was one of the hardest, but most rewarding things for me to do.

As the study began and I introduced the development of higher order questioning skills, there was a mystique of excitement that appeared in the classroom. The creation of posters that displayed both higher order thinking verbs and question stems (see Appendices I1-I6) allowed the students to work across many of the taxonomy levels of comprehension, described by Benjamin Bloom. As students applied varying degrees of questioning skills, I began to understand that they have always had deeper understandings of materials they read, but a limited way of expressing their knowledge. Through the incorporation of the project-based responses, students were able to be more creative in their expression of their comprehension and interpretations of the literature.

Another topic that I find will need to be incorporated into further research conducted is the amount of time allotted for the experience. I found that students did not want to stop the experience. They tried to extend their

time in groups as well as used some of the same techniques used in reading groups in other aspects of the curriculum. As I move forward in my educational career, I plan on trying to apply variations of the program used within my research throughout the curriculum, allowing the students the ability to collaborate across disciplines. My hope is that they can eventually view education as a whole, where every aspect relies on connections between subject areas.

Even through all of this realization, and self – reflection, I believe that there are questions that still need some clarification:

- How can my students apply critical thought throughout a curriculum that is departmentalized and not taught in relation to each other?
- Would their ability to comprehend, collaborate, and question their learning show greater results if conducted over a longer time frame?
- Would the behaviors of individuals be any different if they were to be taught the same skills on an individual basis? Would there be so much frustration if they learned to develop connections and questioning techniques prior to working in collaborative groups?

I cannot begin to explain the difference this study has made to both my students and myself this academic year. We faced some incredible

challenges, and together in an environment based on trust and the sentiment of family, we overcame them.

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Appendix A

HSIRB Approval

(Electronically signed via Email)

Appendix B

Monday, April 08, 2013

Dear Mrs. Walter,

I am completing a Master's Degree of Education at Moravian College. My courses have allowed me to learn about and implement the most effective teaching methods. One of the requirements of the program is that I conduct a systematic action research study of my own teaching practices. This semester I am focusing my research on cooperative learning and the use higher order thinking questions. The title of my research is The Effectiveness of Cooperative Learning and the use of Higher Order Thinking Questions During the Reading Process. By participation in this study, my students will become more insightful readers. There are no anticipated risks to any participant.

As a part of this study, students will be working in small cooperative reading groups determined by their personal interest in the reading material. They will meet several times throughout the week to discuss happenings in the book as well as share personal responses with their peers. Students will also complete reading process surveys and a one-on-one reading process interview with me. This study will take place from August 19, 2013 until December 20, 2013.

The collected data will be coded and held in the strictest confidence. All materials of the study will be stored in a locked file cabinet and destroyed at the end of the time period stated above. My results will be presented with the use of pseudonyms – no one's identity will be used and in no way will participation, non-participation, or withdrawal during this study have any influence on any aspect of the class.

Questions about this research are welcome at any time. If you have any questions or concerns about the proposed study or the participation of your child, please feel free to contact me either by phone: (610) 866-9660 extension 120, or by e-mail: D.Beaman@lvacademy.org. If you would like any further information as to the purpose and procedures, or rationale behind implementing a study of this nature you may contact, Dr. Joseph Shosh, Education Department, Moravian College by phone: (610) 861-1482 or by e-mail: jshosh@moravian.edu. Any questions about your rights as a research participant may be directed to Dr. Virginia Adams O'Connell, Co-Chair HSIRB, Moravian College by phone: (610) 625-7756 or by e-mail: voconne1@moravian.edu.

Sincerely,

Damian S. Beaman

I have read, understand and approve of the research that will be conducted in Mr. Beaman's sixth grade classroom. I verify that I am the teachers' principal and he has my permission to conduct this study at Lehigh Valley Academy.

_____ _____

Principal's Signature Date

Appendix C

Monday, April 08, 2013

Dear Parent/Guardian,

I am completing a Master's Degree of Education at Moravian College. My courses have allowed me to learn about and implement the most effective teaching methods. One of the requirements of the program is that I conduct a systematic action research study of my own teaching practices. This semester I am focusing my research on cooperative learning and the use higher order thinking questions. The title of my research is The Effectiveness of Cooperative Learning and the use of Higher Order Thinking Questions During the Reading Process. By participation in this study, my students will become more insightful readers. There are no anticipated risks to any participant.

As a part of this study, students will be working in small cooperative reading groups determined by their personal interest in the reading material. They will meet several times throughout the week to discuss happenings in the book as well as share personal responses with their peers. Students will also complete reading process surveys and a one-on-one reading process interview with me. This study will take place from, August 19, 2013 until December 20, 2013.

The collected data will be coded and held in the strictest confidence. All materials of the study will be stored in a locked file cabinet and destroyed at the end of the time period stated above. My results will be presented with the use of pseudonyms – no one's identity will be used.

A student may choose at any time not to participate in this study. However, students must participate in all regular classroom activities such as the cooperative reading groups and discussion activities. In no way will participation, non-participation, or withdrawal during this study have any influence on any aspect of the class.

Questions about this research are welcome at any time. Your child's participation is voluntary and refusal to participate will involve no penalty or consequence. If you have any questions or concerns about the proposed study or the participation of your child, please feel free to contact me either by phone: (610) 866-9660 extension 120, or by e-mail: D.Beaman@lvacademy.org, or you may also contact my building principal, Mrs. Terry Walter by phone: (610) 866-9660 extension 101, or by e-mail: T.Walter@lvacademy.org. If you would like any further information as to the purpose and procedures, or rationale behind implementing a study of this nature you may contact, Dr. Joseph Shosh, Education Department, Moravian College by phone: (610) 861-1482 or by e-mail: jshosh@moravian.edu. Any questions about your rights as a research participant may be directed to Dr. Virginia Adams O'Connell, Co-Chair HSIRB, Moravian College by phone: (610) 625-7756 or by e-mail: voconne1@moravian.edu.

Consent of Participation

Please select, sign and date the form below indicating your participation status in the study.

☐ I have read and understand this document. I give permission for my child's data to be used in this teacher action research study. I understand that I will receive a signed copy of this from for my records and that I may withdraw my child at any time.

☐ I have read and understand this document. At this time I would not like my child to participate in this study.

_____ _____ _____

Student's Name (Please Print) Parent/Guardian Signature Date

I would like to thank you for any and all consideration you have given this matter and ask that you sign and return this form at your earliest convenience.

Sincerely,

Damian S. Beaman

6th grade teacher

Lehigh Valley Academy RCS

Appendix D

Dear Student,

I am a graduate student at Moravian College, and I am going to do a research study in our classroom. My research study will help me determine if it is effective for students to work collaboratively in the reading process. This study will benefit you the student because it will help you to become more insightful readers.

I would like your permission (grown-ups call this assent) to include information from you. This would include your classwork, surveys, and interviews. Everyone in the class will be doing all the activities that I have planned, whether or not they give assent.

When we are done, I will write a report about our study. I will make up a name for you (this is called a pseudonym) when I write about you.

If you would like to participate in this study, please sign your name.

I (write your name) _____want to participate in this research study.

Sincerely,

Damian S. Beaman

Appendix E

Name: _____#: _____ Date: _____

Reading Attitude Survey
(Pre and Post)

Questions	Yes	No	Maybe or Sometimes
1. Do you enjoy working in groups with your peers?			
2. Do you enjoy reading?			
3. Do you ask yourself questions while you are reading?			
4. Is reading a challenge for you?			
5. Do you challenge yourself to read books from different genres?			

Appendix F

Name: _____#: _____Date: _____

Post Study Interview

1. **How do you think working in cooperative groups has effected your reading?**

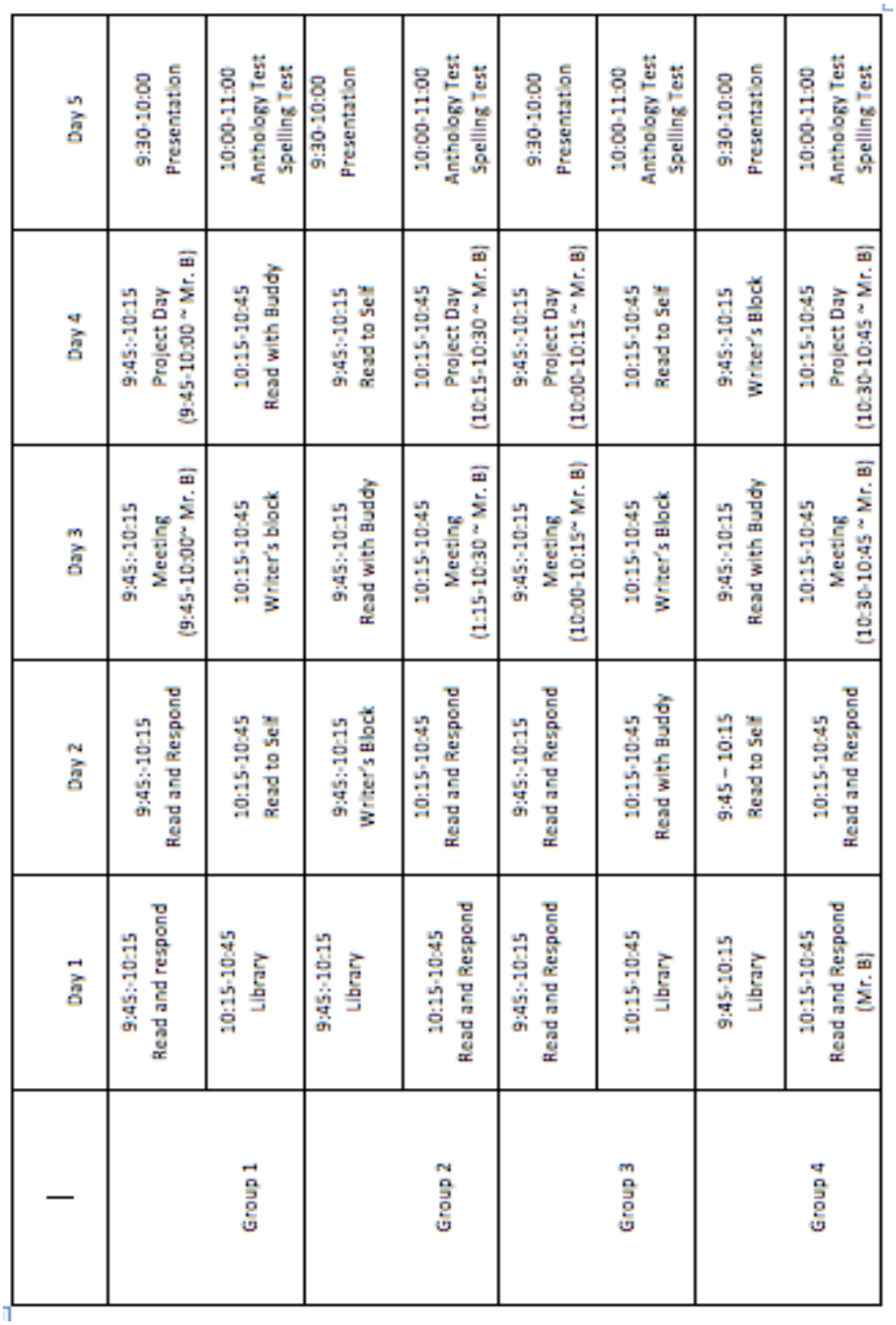
2. **Did you enjoy working with your peers and discussing your opinions? Why or why not?**

3. **What did you learn from your reading group?**

4. **Do you view reading differently than you did before you began this program?**

5. **What changes would you make to the reading program based on your experience?**

Appendix G



	Day 1	Day 2	Day 3	Day 4	Day 5
Group 1	9:45-10:15 Read and respond	9:45-10:15 Read and Respond	9:45-10:15 Meeting (9:45-10:00~ Mr. B)	9:45-10:15 Project Day (9:45-10:00 ~ Mr. B)	9:30-10:00 Presentation
	10:15-10:45 Library	10:15-10:45 Read to Self	10:15-10:45 Writer's block	10:15-10:45 Read with Buddy	10:00-11:00 Anthology Test Spelling Test
Group 2	9:45-10:15 Library	9:45-10:15 Writer's Block	9:45-10:15 Read with Buddy	9:45-10:15 Read to Self	9:30-10:00 Presentation
	10:15-10:45 Read and Respond	10:15-10:45 Read and Respond	10:15-10:45 Meeting (1:15-10:30 ~ Mr. B)	10:15-10:45 Project Day (10:15-10:30 ~ Mr. B)	10:00-11:00 Anthology Test Spelling Test
Group 3	9:45-10:15 Read and Respond	9:45-10:15 Read and Respond	9:45-10:15 Meeting (10:00-10:15~ Mr. B)	9:45-10:15 Project Day (10:00-10:15 ~ Mr. B)	9:30-10:00 Presentation
	10:15-10:45 Library	10:15-10:45 Read with Buddy	10:15-10:45 Writer's Block	10:15-10:45 Read to Self	10:00-11:00 Anthology Test Spelling Test
Group 4	9:45-10:15 Library	9:45 – 10:15 Read to Self	9:45-10:15 Read with Buddy	9:45-10:15 Writer's Block	9:30-10:00 Presentation
	10:15-10:45 Read and Respond (Mr. B)	10:15-10:45 Read and Respond	10:15-10:45 Meeting (10:30-10:45 ~ Mr. B)	10:15-10:45 Project Day (10:30-10:45 ~ Mr. B)	10:00-11:00 Anthology Test Spelling Test

Appendix H1

Literature Circle Planning Guide

Fill out this planning guide for each literature circle to help you keep track of group members and assigned roles.

_____
(Title of Book)

_____
(Author)

Literature Circle Members	Role
1.	
2.	
3.	
4.	
5.	
6.	
7.	
8.	

Take notes of things you want this group to accomplish for the next session.

Session 1: _____

Session 2: _____

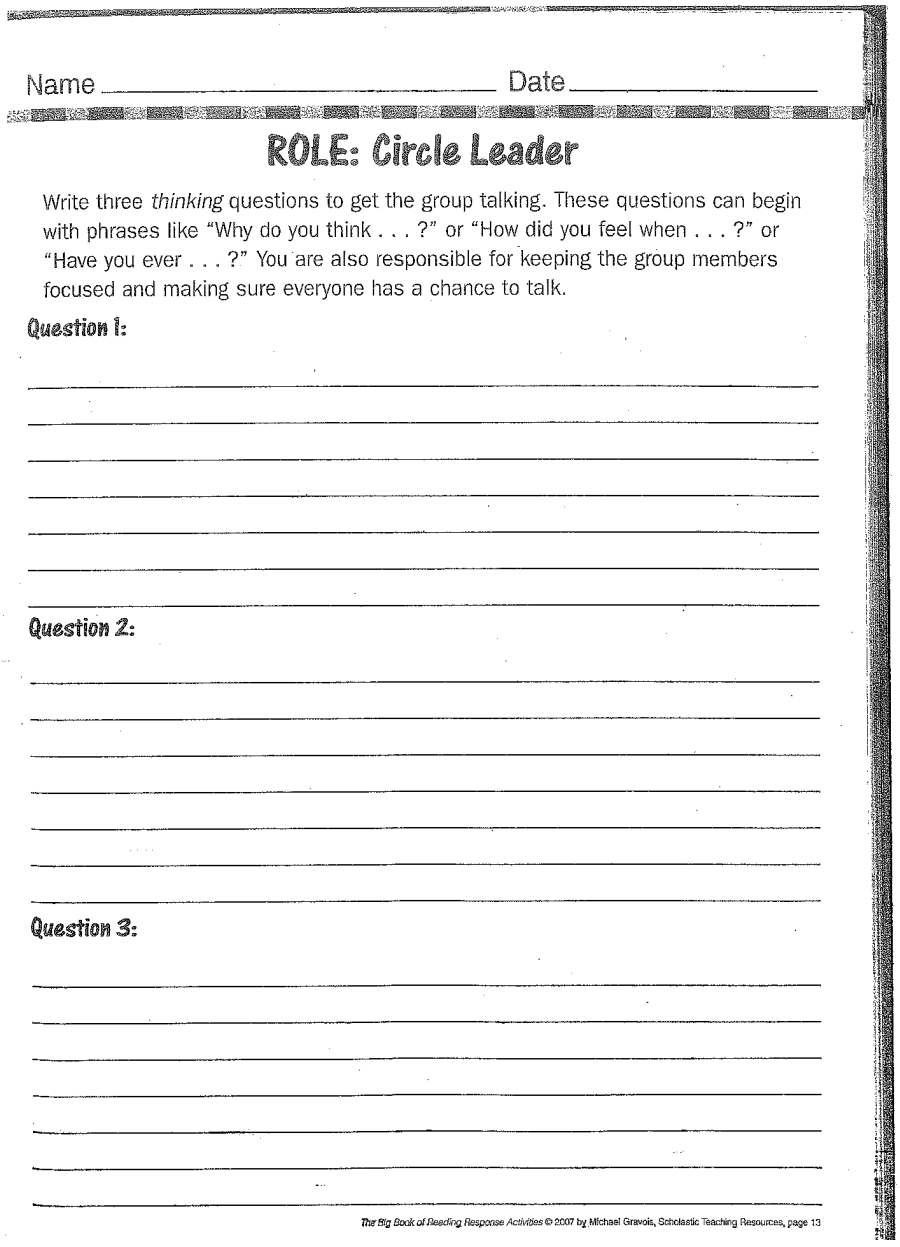
Session 3: _____

Session 4: _____

Session 5: _____

Session 6: _____

Appendix H2



Name _____ Date _____

ROLE: Circle Leader

Write three *thinking* questions to get the group talking. These questions can begin with phrases like "Why do you think . . . ?" or "How did you feel when . . . ?" or "Have you ever . . . ?" You are also responsible for keeping the group members focused and making sure everyone has a chance to talk.

Question 1:

Question 2:

Question 3:

Appendix H3

Name _____ Date _____

ROLE: Super Summarizer

Write a brief summary of the selection your group read. Include important characters and events. Be prepared to read the summary when your group meets. Write one *thinking* question about something that happened in the selection that you would like to discuss with your group.

Summary:

Question:

Appendix H4

Name _____ Date _____

ROLE: Word Wizard

Find three words that are unfamiliar to you or are used in an interesting way. Write the word, its page number, the sentence in which it can be found, the part of speech (as it is used in the passage), and its definition. Lead a discussion about why you think the author chose these words instead of others.

Word: **Page number:**

Sentence:

Part of speech:

Definition:

Word: **Page number:**

Sentence:

Part of speech:

Definition:

Word: **Page number:**

Sentence:

Part of speech:

Definition:

Appendix H5

Name _____ Date _____

ROLE: Connector

Find connections between things that happened in the story and things in real life. Is an event from the book similar to one that happened in real life? At school or home? Does it remind you of a current or historical event? How does the story's setting remind you of the area in which you live? Do any of the characters remind you of someone you know? Be prepared to discuss these things with your group.

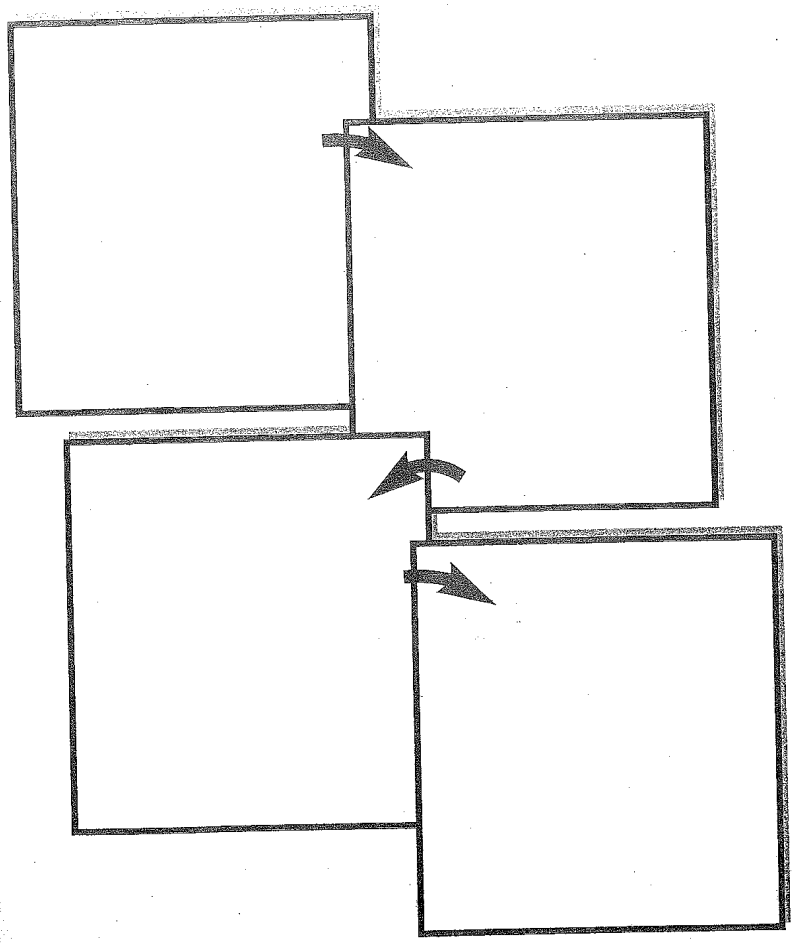
Event in Story	Real Life

Appendix H6

Name _____ Date _____

ROLE: Travel Tracker

Use the graphic organizer below to trace the movement of and change in the characters. If the characters move around a lot, draw a series of pictures or maps that shows where the characters were and where they are. If a character grows or changes, write a series of paragraphs that describe this growth.



Appendix H7

Name _____ Date _____

ROLE: Passage Pro

Locate three sentences or short sections of the text that you think are particularly well written, interesting, funny, scary, beautiful, important, confusing, or otherwise worth discussing. Write the passage below, the page number on which it can be found, and the reason why you chose it.

Passage and Page Number	Why You Chose It

Appendix I1

The Six Levels of Questioning

Level 1 - Knowledge

Exhibit memory of previously-learned materials by recalling facts, terms, basic concepts, and answers.

Key Words

who	what	why	when	where	which	omit
choose	find	how	define	label	show	spell
list	match	name	relate	tell	recall	select

Sample Questions

What is...?
Who was...?
How is...?
Where is...?
How did _____ happen?
When did _____ happen?
Why did...?
When did...?
How would you show...?
Who were the main...?
Which one...?
How would you describe...?
Can you recall...?
Can you select...?
Can you list the three...?

NOTE: Discussion Directors should not use questions from this level of questioning. These kinds of questions don't make for good discussion because they typically have only one or two "correct" answers.

Appendix I2

Level 2 – Comprehension

Demonstrate understand of facts and ideas by organizing, comparing, translating, interpreting, giving descriptions, and stating main ideas.

Key Words

compare	contrast	demonstrate	interpret	explain
extend	illustrate	infer	outline	relate
rephrase	translate	summarize	show	classify

Sample Questions

What is the main idea of…?
What facts or ideas show…?
Can you explain what is happening…?
What does _____ mean?
How would you classify the type of…?
How would you compare…?
How would you contrast…?
Put in your own words…
How would you rephrase the meaning of…?
What statements support…?
What can you say about…?
Which is the best answer?
How would you summarize…?

NOTE: Discussion Directors should not use questions from this level of questioning. These kinds of questions don't make for good discussion because they typically have only one or two "correct" answers.

Appendix I3

Level 3 – Application

Solve problems to new situations by applying acquired knowledge, facts, techniques, and rules in a different way.

Key Words

apply	build	choose	construct	develop
interview	make use of	organize	plan	select
solve	utilize	model	identify	experiment

Sample Questions

How would you use…?
What examples can you find to…?
What would happen if…?
What parts would you choose to change…?
How would you solve _____ using what you've learned?
How would you organize _____ to show…?
How would you show your understanding of…?
What approach would you use to…?
How would you apply what you learned to…?
What other way would you plan to…?
What facts would you select to show…?
What questions would you ask in an interview with…?

Appendix I4

Level 4 – Analysis

Examine and break information into parts by identifying motives or causes. Make inferences and find evidence to support generalizations.

Key Words

analyze	categorize	classify	compare	contrast
discover	dissect	divide	examine	inspect
simplify	survey	take part in	test for	distinguish
list	distinction	theme	relationships	function
motive	inference	assumption	conclusion	

Sample Questions

Why do you think…?
What are the parts or features of…?
How is _____ related to…?
What motive is there…?
Can you list the parts…?
What inference can you make…?
What conclusions can you draw…?
How would you classify…?
How would you categorize…?
What evidence can you find…?
What is the relationship between…?
Can you make a distinction between…?
What is the function of…?
What ideas justify…?

Appendix I5

Level 5 – Synthesis

Compile information together in a different way by combining elements in a new pattern or proposing alternative solutions.

Key Words

build	choose	combine	compile	compose
construct	create	design	develop	estimate
formulate	imagine	invent	make up	originate
plan	predict	propose	solve	solution
suppose	discuss	modify	change	original
improve	adapt	minimize	maximize	delete
theorize	elaborate	test	happen	change

Sample Questions

What change would you make to solve…?
How would you improve…?
What would happen if…?
Can you elaborate on the reason…?
Can you propose an alternative…?
Can you invent…?
How would you adapt _____ to create a different…?
How would you change or modify the plot…?
What could be done to minimize or maximize…?
What way would you design…?
What could be combined to improve…?
Suppose you could _____. What would you do…?
How would you test…?
Can you formulate a theory for…?
Can you think or an original way for the…?
Can you predict the outcome if…?

Appendix I6

Level 6 – Evaluation

Present and defend opinions by making judgments about information, validity of ideas, or quality of work based on a set of criteria.

Key Words

award	choose	conclude	criticize	decide
defend	determine	dispute	evaluate	judge
justify	measure	compare	mark	rate
recommend	rule on	select	agree	appraise
prioritize	opinion	interpret	explain	support
importance	criteria	prove	disprove	assess
influence	perceive	value	deduct	

Sample Questions

Do you agree with the actions…? Why or why not?
What is your opinion of…?
Who would you prove or disprove…?
What is the value of…?
Would it be better if…?
Why did the character choose…?
What would you recommend…?
How would you rate…?
What would you cite to defend the actions…?
How would you evaluate…?
What choice would you have made…?
What would you select…?
How would you prioritize…?
What judgment would you make about…?
How would you justify…?
Why is it better…?

Appendix J

Name: _____ #: _____ Date: _____

Somebody	Wanted	But	So
Identify the character	Describe the characters goal or motivation	Describe a conflict that impedes the character	Describe the resolution of the conflict