

THE IMPACT OF LITERATURE CIRCLES ON THE COMPREHENSION AND
MOTIVATION TO READ OF SIXTH-GRADE STUDENTS IN A MIDDLE SCHOOL
READING CLASSROOM

A Thesis by

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The following faculty members have examined the final copy of this thesis for form and content, and recommend that it be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirement for the degree of Master of Education with a major in Curriculum and Instruction.

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DEDICATION

To my parents, who have always encouraged me to continue to further my education

Whatever the costs of our libraries, the price is cheap
compared to that of an ignorant nation.

-Walter Cronkite

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ABSTRACT

Comprehension is a vital requirement for every student as he or she progresses through school, and a student's motivation to read can directly affect comprehension skills. Many strategies are used to increase reading comprehension across grade levels. At a suburban middle school in the Midwest, 67 students in three sixth-grade reading classes participated in a study to determine if the use of literature circles would increase reading comprehension as well as student motivation to read. Students were taught how to operate and participate in literature circle discussions with various readings. They were then divided into groups, and each group was given a different novel to read and discuss within literature circles. Comprehension was assessed by studying student journal response entries while motivation was assessed by comparing survey results. Using the aforementioned assessments, a slight gain in comprehension was recorded, but results varied for the use of literature circles affecting motivation to read.

Keywords: comprehension, reading, motivation, middle school

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Reading comprehension is one of the most important aspects of learning. Even though comprehension is essential to understanding, it can be extremely difficult if comprehension skills have not been explicitly taught and practiced over time. The National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) has shown that students' reading comprehension scores since 1992 have indeed risen, but students have made minimal gains, especially in the upper elementary and middle school grades (Murphy, Wilkinson, Soter, Hennessey, & Alexander, 2009, p. 740; Vaughn et al., 2011, p. 939). As students move from elementary school to middle and high school, they face more challenging and diverse types of text where conceptual reading and understanding is required. In addition to comprehending narrative texts, students must also be able to read and demonstrate knowledge from expository texts in content classes such as social studies, math, and science (Berkeley, Marshak, Mastropieri, & Scruggs, 2011, pp. 105-106).

Despite the fact that comprehension is so important to the learning process, many students find the skill difficult. Comprehending text is a challenging goal for teenagers as they continually struggle with reading for understanding (Edmonds, et al., 2009; Williams, 1998, 2000, as cited in Vaughn et al., 2011, p. 940). Most high school students are not prepared to read complex college-level text. Students who comprehend at basic levels will be unable to keep up with the need for high-level literacy associated with the many technological advances of the 21st century (Bransford, Brown, & Cocking, 1999, as cited in Murphy et al., 2009, pp. 740-741). According to Vaught et al. (2011), good readers identify text structure, monitor understanding, make predictions, make personal

connections to ideas and concepts, and summarize through words or writing (p. 941).

Such strategies can and should be taught to improve and maintain comprehension skills.

The purpose of the following study is to monitor the effects that literature circles have on the comprehension and motivation to read of sixth grade students. The following research questions were studied: Does the use of literature circles increase the reading comprehension of 6th graders while reading fictional novels? Does the use of literature circles increase student motivation to read?

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

The ability to read is a basic component of receiving an education; society assumes that if someone has made it through the public school system and received a diploma through graduation, he or she must be able to read. However, it is not always so black and white. How well can that student read? What kinds of texts can that student read? Can that student truly understand what he or she has read? Can they explain it in their own words without simply regurgitating the information? How does motivation influence students' willingness to read? In order to understand concepts, one has to first be able to comprehend. Reading comprehension has been researched extensively as national studies report that comprehension scores are lagging behind those of students in other countries. Researchers have identified a variety of factors and strategies that can be beneficial in increasing students' abilities to comprehend.

Motivation to Read

Learning to read is very exciting to young children. They are showered with praise and encouragement and take pride in their accomplishments as they progress. The motivation to read is high in the beginning. For some students this motivation never diminishes. For other students, text styles, text structure, vocabulary, and the overall difficulty of passages can quickly get in the way of the pleasure of reading, and all motivation is lost. Brozo and Flynt (2008) propose that "the less time students spend engaged with content area text the more underdeveloped their reading skills will be for this type of material" (p. 172). A lack of motivation in reading should be a serious concern because comprehension is directly affected by the motivation to read (Melekoglu,

2011; Shaaban, 2006). A student's level of motivation might change over time. Factors such as working and reading in groups (Guthrie et al., 2007, p. 284; Wilfong, 2009, p. 170), teacher support (Brozo & Flynt, 2008, p. 173), and student interest (Guthrie et al., 2007, p. 284) can all make a difference in motivation to read. Student engagement can also be a factor in motivation. Guthrie et al. (1996) and Guthrie and Wigfield (2000) define engagement as "the level of cognitive involvement that a person invests in a process" (as cited in Kelley & Clausen-Grace, 2009, p. 313). Readers who are engaged choose to do more than just read. Engaged readers actively interact with the text to understand what they have read by using their imaginations in questioning, investigating, and interpreting texts (Kelley & Clausen-Grace, 2009, p. 313; Long & Gove, 2003, p. 351). As engagement increases, some students might find that motivation to read increases as well.

Psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi has studied what brings humans happiness, specifically a concept he has labeled *flow*, which is engaging in an activity to the point where nothing else matters (as cited in Smith & Wilhelm, 2002, p. 28). According to Smith and Wilhelm (2002), humans that experience flow and find happiness in a particular activity experience five commonalities. First, they have a sense of control and competence over the activity they enjoy (p. 30). Good readers know they are good at reading, enjoy it, and strive to continue reading. Next, people need to be challenged at the particular activity or skill they enjoy (p. 34). If students are stuck constantly reading books that are too easy, reading might no longer bring happiness. The third component of flow is to have clear goals and feedback. Without a goal to achieve, it is difficult to have a sense of competence. Receiving clear feedback from reading most often comes

with reading short informational texts, rather than novels (p. 38). The next component of flow is a clear focus on the immediate experience. Students who find happiness and experience flow in reading completely lose themselves to what they are reading (p. 41). The final aspect of flow is the social importance in an activity that brings happiness. Activities are more enjoyable when you have close friends with which to share them (p. 42). Motivation to read could potentially increase if these five aspects of engagement were evident in every student.

Additionally, motivation to read could increase when students are given the opportunity to choose what they read, how much they read, and how to discuss what they have read. Deci, Vallerand, Pelletier, and Ryan (1991) elaborate on the concept of intention and discuss the self-determination theory. They say that behaviors are either self-determined or controlled. With self-determined behaviors, students make choices; controlled behaviors involve compliance with another's agenda (p. 327). Within a classroom, students are more likely to have increase self-esteem and intrinsic motivation for a task when choices are given or implied (p. 337). The amount of choices involved in learning could positively or negatively affect motivation to read.

Writing to Comprehend

One way to address comprehension skills is to pair reading and writing together. According to Rosenblatt (1978, 1983) there is a "need for interactive reading and writing activities to promote comprehension" (as cited in Gauthier, Schorzman, & Hutchison, 2003, p. 23). Journaling and keeping notes while reading is a natural way to combine the two. Gauthier et al. (2003) studied how academic journals can impact comprehension. Journals can be kept individually and can aid in small group discussions about a reading

passage or as a way to review lessons taught in the classroom. Academic journals allow students to continue thinking about what they have learned in content classes and “provide a means to reexperience and reexamine the same concepts in an expressive (writing) rather than receptive (reading) mode” (p. 24). Findings of their study showed that keeping academic journals can increase content area comprehension.

Collaborative Strategic Reading

Identifying main ideas and important details is an important step in comprehension. Students who have trouble comprehending struggle with this particular task (Jitendra, Hoppes, & Xin, 2000, p. 136). In their study on the use of collaborative strategic reading (CSR), Vaughn et al. (2011) showed that learning how to monitor their own comprehension through identifying main ideas and developing questioning strategies was extremely valuable to students (p. 940). Students also learned how to preview passages, make predictions after the preview, and brainstorm what they already know about topics and apply that knowledge after reading a passage (p. 940, 947). The use of CSR can be an effective practice with reading instruction and improving the comprehension of middle school students (p. 958).

Questioning to Comprehend

Questioning is something that everyone does daily; one thinks about what to wear, eat, and do with free time. These questions almost always involve rationalizing decisions. The same process can and should be applied to reading. Developing questioning skills as a way to comprehend is discussed by many educational researchers. Asking questions both during and after reading has proven to be a successful comprehension strategy (Berkeley et al., 2011; Mills, 2009; Richardson, 2010; Vaughn et al., 2011). When it

comes to reviewing and recalling information from a text, several types of questions can be appropriate. Right-there questions focus on facts. Think-and-search questions require students to piece together facts from various parts of the reading. Author-and-you questions have students make inferences based on facts from the passage (Vaughn et al, 2011). Other types of self-generated questions help students apply information from reading passages directly to their own learning. Mills (2009) specifically states that “highly effective readers ask questions such as ‘What is the most important information here for my purpose?’ ‘What have I missed?’ and ‘What is my opinion of that issue?’” (p. 327). Another way to gauge levels of comprehension is to use Bloom’s taxonomy when generating questions. Bloom’s levels of Knowledge, Comprehension, Application, Analysis, Synthesis, and Evaluation provide a framework requiring students to use critical thinking skills as they move up the hierarchy. The higher the level, the more in depth a student must go to show his or her understanding (Lord & Baviskar, 2007, pp. 41-43). Students who ask and can answer higher-level thinking questions will get more out of reading both narrative and expository texts.

Working in Groups to Comprehend

While it was mentioned earlier that group work can have an impact on student motivation to read, it can also affect comprehension. Multiple studies have found that working and collaborating with other students can increase comprehension and result in higher reading achievement (Fall, Webb, & Chudowsky, 2000; Galton, Hargreaves, & Pell, 2009; Gauthier et al., 2003). When students are explicitly taught how to collaborate appropriately and effectively, they can learn from one another. “Students are actively involved and have multiple opportunities to contribute to the group’s understanding of

text” (Vaughn et al, 2011, p. 948). Discussions that no educator could plan take off and turn into real-life applications. Other unintended, yet positive, outcomes can result from group work. More reserved students have a greater opportunity to participate when groups are kept small. New friendships develop where they might not have before, all because of a shared interest in literature.

The Importance of Conversation

If a group runs itself efficiently while working on an assignment or project, the collaboration lends itself to stimulating conversation. Recent studies indicate that discussion plays an important role in comprehension of text (Fall et al., 2000; Ketch, 2005; Murphy et al., 2009; Vaughn et al., 2011; Young, 2007). An article in *The Reading Teacher* by Ann Ketch (2005) specifically addresses how conversation is critical to comprehension:

Conversation helps individuals make sense of their world. It helps to build empathy, understanding, respect for different opinions, and ownership of the learning process. It helps students sort out their ideas of the world and begin to understand how they fit into it. Used as a connection to cognitive strategies, conversation fosters comprehension acquisition. (p. 8)

Listening to someone else’s point of view can increase understanding, memory, and monitoring one’s own thinking; conversation allows students to develop their own thoughts instead of remaining limited to their own insights. Students rarely get the chance to participate in conversations that support critical thinking. If they are regularly engaged in the conversation process, students can become proficient reflective and critical thinkers. When different points of view are discussed, the conversation and

thinking become more complex (Ketch, 2005, pp. 8-10).

Literature Circles

With independent reading being such a significant part of the learning process in middle and high school, students must be able to comprehend what they are taking in. As students progress through school, the difficulty of text increases greatly. The expectation is no longer learning to read but reading to learn. However, many students have not yet made that transition and are frequently frustrated by the fast pace and are being left behind. Journaling, identifying main ideas and details, asking questions, working in groups, and discussion can positively affect those who struggle with comprehension. Another way to increase comprehension for all students is to use literature circles in class. Literature circles are similar to book clubs where small groups get together to discuss a text that has been read (Clark, 2009; Richardson, 2010; Whittaker, 2012; Wilfong, 2009). Literature circles put students in charge of content and conversation instead of teachers. Members bring their own insights and inquiries to the group and discuss these items together (Brabham & Villaume, 2000, p. 278). While using literature circles is most commonly used with fiction, they can also be applied to picture books with young children, poems, textbooks, newspaper articles, and other types of non-fiction (Brabham & Villaume, 2000, p. 279; Wilfong, 2009, p. 165). However, Daniels (2002) states that in order for the strategy to work with expository texts, the text must keep students' interest and have some elements of plot woven in to allow students to question and develop opinions. Typical expository texts found in textbooks are too fact-driven to promote active discussions (p. 12).

Using literature circles can be extremely powerful and do more than just allow

students to talk about texts. They promote trust and respect for the opinions of others and give students ownership of their own thinking (Clarke & Holwadel, 2007, p. 21; Whittaker, 2012, p. 221). Brabham and Villaume (2000) make a case for the incorporating literature circles into any classroom:

Literature circles are important because they promote active and thoughtful stances toward reading, including making predictions, constructing visual images, creating connections to personal experiences and other texts, monitoring reading and whether it makes sense, solving word- and text-level problems in flexible ways, summarizing as they go, arguing with the author, and evaluating content and writing style. (p. 278)

Literature circles can be effective for improving reading comprehension and the enjoyment of reading which could boost motivation (Whittaker, 2012, p. 221).

The design of literature circles has changed as they have been researched more and more over time. Many circles are set up with students each having their own role to prepare for discussion. According to Burns (1998) and Daniels (1994), the most common roles include someone who summarizes the text that was read, a student who creates questions over the text and generally leads discussion, another person to find and discuss new vocabulary words, someone to make connections from the text to the real world, and a student that illustrates an important or meaningful part of the text (as cited in Brabham & Villaume, 2000, p. 279; Wilfong, 2009, p. 166). However, roles in literature circles should be designed to promote literary discussion; discussion should not rely on the role sheets. In one of his many articles on literature circles, Daniels (2006) states that using role sheets can be great tools to guide students through the literature circle process when

first introduced, but using them should be temporary (p. 11).

Can the use of literature circles increase the reading comprehension of 6th graders while reading fictional novels? Does the use of literature circles increase student motivation to read? It was expected that comprehension, as well as motivation, would increase throughout the course of the study.

CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

Participants

This research study was conducted at a suburban middle school in the Midwest with an enrollment of approximately 800 students. The school had a predominately Caucasian population (79%). Hispanic students composed 11% of the population, African American students made up 4% of the population, and students who identified as Other made up the remaining 6%. Approximately 22% of the school population was classified as economically disadvantaged according to state statistics. Three separate sixth grade reading classes, a total of 67 students, participated in this study. Table 1 further describes the participants.

Table 1

Descriptive Statistics for Participants

Class	Total Students	Gender		Race				SPED
		Male	Female	Caucasian	Hispanic	African-American	Other	
1	22	11	11	21	0	1	0	2
2	21	10	11	17	2	1	1	1
3	24	12	12	24	0	0	0	4

Ninety-five percent of participants in Class 1 were Caucasian, and 5% were African-American. Two male special-education students with individual educational plans (IEP) were part of Class 1. For reading class, both IEPs stated that the boys should be tested in a separate and quiet environment with tests read aloud to them by a para, but neither student received content modifications. In Class 2 80% were Caucasian, 10% were Hispanic, and 5% were African-American, and other races made up the remaining 5%.

Class 2 also contained one male special-education student with an IEP. He was to be tested in a separate and quiet environment with tests read aloud to him by a para, but he required no content modifications. All students in Class 3 were Caucasian. Four students with IEPs were a part of this class, three male and one female. Each of these four students was to be tested in separate and quiet environments with tests read aloud to them by a para. Additionally, one of the boys required a reduced workload on all assignments as well as extra time to complete homework. The other three students did not receive content modifications. Each of the classes included in the study met in the afternoon after lunch.

Procedures

Roles in the literature circle. In order to determine if the use of literature circles would increase comprehension, students first had to be taught how to participate in a circle. After reviewing the literature on literature circles, four roles were chosen for the study: discussion director, summarizer, vocabulary enricher, and connector. The discussion director kept the conversation moving by asking questions that encouraged discussion (see Appendix A). The summarizer prepared a quick summary to share the week's reading with the group as a review before discussion began (see Appendix B). The vocabulary enricher kept track of words important to the text as well as any new or confusing words (see Appendix C). The connector made connections from the book to the everyday world (see Appendix D).

During the fall semester, roles were practiced together in whole-group and small-group settings once a week while reading *The Sign of the Beaver* by Elizabeth George Speare. The first four weeks, the class would practice one role in particular, going

through each of the four roles. In the remaining four weeks, students were assigned to small groups to discuss the novel. Every student had the opportunity to rotate through each of the four roles. Every time the roles were practiced, the classes came back together to discuss what had been created; whether or not they were proper representations of what should be in a literature circle; and if they were not, how things could be altered to promote better discussion within a circle.

Model literature circle. At the beginning of the second semester, students were refreshed on literature circles using short stories that accompany the basal text of the sixth grade reading program. Each class was divided into small groups and given a short story to read. Together they completed the work of each literature circle role.

Over the next week, a group of students from each class was hand-selected by the instructor to model a literature circle discussion for the rest of the class. Before modeling the circle, the selected students were given time to read a short story, prepare for the four roles including their lead role, and meet with the instructor outside of class to run through the actual literature circle. Feedback was given and adjustments were made so an accurate literature circle portrayal would be modeled to the rest of the students. The students modeling the literature circle sat in the middle of the classroom while the rest of the students sat around the model group in a circle taking notes individually and writing down questions. Once the model was complete, the notes and questions from the outside students were addressed in a whole-group discussion led by the teacher-researcher, and a list containing qualities of a proper literature circle was made by each of the three classes. All three classes mentioned that every person participated, group members made eye-contact with one another, they asked follow-up questions, they elaborated on answers,

and if any member disagreed with another during the discussion, they respectfully addressed each other's side.

After the modeled literature circle, a different short story was read by the small groups; this time, however, each member of the group was responsible for a different role. After receiving one full class period to prepare, they held a miniature literature circle the following day with teacher supervision. Again, feedback was given to ensure that students would know how to properly run a circle. The teacher-researcher monitored the types of questions asked, gave tips on how to get and keep everyone involved in discussion, gave examples of how to keep a discussion from faltering, and praised and encouraged the groups when certain aspects of discussion went well.

Book selection. After it was determined that students could accurately run and participate in a literature circle, students were given book talks by the instructor about five possible fiction novels to read as part of the research study on literature circles. The teacher-researcher was limited in the novels available for the literature circle study. Each book had to be part of a large class set from the school library in order to ensure that enough copies were available for all three classes. Additionally, all class novel sets in the library were labeled by grade; each grade level was only allowed to teach from the novels assigned to that grade. Therefore, all five of the novel sets used in the study had to be labeled either as sixth-grade or not labeled at all. Students were asked to rank the novels from 1-5: 1 being the one they would like to read the most, and 5 being the one they would like to read the least. The five books fall in a Lexile® range of 500L to 900L which roughly compares to grades two through eight on the Lexile® Grade Band Scale (MetaMetrics, 2013). However, the content for all five novels is more mature and

suitable for upper elementary and lower middle school grades. Table 2 shows the title and author(s) of each book, the theme, the Lexile® Score, and the number of pages.

Table 2

Literature Circle Book Selection

Title and Author	Theme	Lexile® Score	Pages
<i>The Revealers</i> , by Doug Wilhelm	Issues arising from cyber-bullying	580L	224
<i>Cracker!/: The Best Dog in Vietnam</i> , by Cynthia Kadohata	Follows bond between young soldier and dog in Vietnam War	730L	320
<i>Double Eagle</i> , by Sneed B. Collard	Friendship of boys searching for hidden treasure	790L	256
<i>Summer of the Monkeys</i> , by Wilson Rawls	A boy tries to capture monkeys in order to get reward money	810L	304
<i>Caddie Woodlawn</i> , by Carol Ryrie Brink	A young girl grows up on the western frontier	890L	276

Implementation. The literature circle study was conducted over four weeks. Students were assigned one of the five novels in groups of three to five. Care was taken to give every student one of their top two novels. Individual groups decided both how much they would read each week and who would be in charge of leading the discussion for each of the four roles by using the Literature Circle Assignment Sheet (see Appendix E). The standard structure for literature circles requires each individual to assume leadership of and prepare for only one role, such as director, connector, or vocabulary finder. In previous experiences with literature circles, the teacher-researcher found that such a limited role allowed for too much down time and circle discussions did not run very smoothly if not everyone prepared thoroughly for discussion. In this research project, students were required to prepare for all four roles instead of the typical one role mentioned by Brabham and Villaume (2000, p. 279) and Whittaker (2012, p. 217). This

ensured that everybody had the chance to participate, and that everyone was prepared to actively participate in the discussion instead of simply listen. Before each week's literature circle meeting, every student completed a graphic organizer that included all four roles. From these four roles, each student was given a lead role for which they prepared with a greater emphasis than the other three roles. One student led the summarizer role by providing his or her summary of that week's section and encouraging others to add their input into the overall section summary. Another group member led the discussion director role, taking charge of asking questions and encouraging others to participate by answering such questions and then asking some of their own questions. A third student led the vocabulary role by discussing both the words he or she did not recognize and words important to the story. The vocabulary leader then encouraged discussion on words that other group members located. The final group member led the connector role, discussing his or her own personal connections and then asking for connections the others might have made.

Literature circle meetings were held on Wednesdays with the instructor monitoring group discussions and occasionally sitting in to help direct conversation if necessary.

Assessments

Multiple measures were used to find out if literature circles positively influenced comprehension. Prior to meeting together on literature circle days, students were asked to write short journal entries about their reading for the week in order to assess comprehension (see Appendix F). The journal entries were then graded using an instructor-created rubric based on Bloom's Taxonomy of Cognitive Learning Domains

(see Appendix G). Prior to the literature circle unit, students were introduced to the six levels of Bloom's Taxonomy of Learning Domains and given examples of what each of the learning levels would look like in a journal entry: Knowledge, Comprehension, Application, Analysis, Synthesis, and Evaluation. Then the teacher-researcher walked each class through the various levels on the comprehension rubric, and how they directly related to Bloom's Taxonomy. It was also explained how the level of students' cognitive skills ought to increase over time; if all group members stayed at the Knowledge level, it could be detrimental to literature circle conversation. After the initial journal response at the beginning of the meeting, groups were then allowed to participate in their literature circle discussions for the remainder of the class period. At the end of the hour, after completing the literature circle, students were asked to write a second journal response. Results of the two responses were compared to see if students moved up on the rubric to a higher level of thinking after having time in discussion over the novel. When the study was complete, the results of the second responses from each week were compared to see if students gradually used higher levels of thinking as they read through the book. Additionally, the teacher-researcher used a checklist to monitor student conversations within the literature circles: questions asked, responses made, and overall engagement. Attitudes, both positive and negative, were recorded as well (see Appendix H).

In order to assess if students' reading motivation increased with the use of literature circles, students were given the *Motivation to Read Profile* (MRP) online through Google Docs (see Appendix I). The MRP (Gambrell, Palmer, Codling, & Mazzoni, 1996) contained 20 multiple-choice questions that measured students' self-concept of themselves as readers and how they value reading. Results were documented

after the survey was given at the beginning of the semester. The survey was given a second time at the end of the literature circle unit, and results were compared to the initial survey. Finally, students were asked to complete a questionnaire at the end of the unit to gather their opinions on literature circles (see Appendix J).

Analysis of Data

After completing the research study on literature circles, the reading comprehension of sixth-grade students in a reading class was expected to increase. It was assumed that students would transition from using lower levels of thinking to higher levels of thinking when answering open-ended questions about the novels. The reading motivation of sixth-grade students was also expected to increase after using literature circles in a reading class.

Journal response rubric. To determine the level of comprehension of the students, a rubric was generated based on the Bloom's taxonomy. Each participant received two scored rubrics per literature circle meeting date: one prior to circle discussion and a second after the circle discussion. Students were scored on each element of the rubric (character, main characters, etc.) and then results of the two rubrics per session were compared to see if the level of comprehension increased. Additionally, all of the posttest scores for each category (character, setting, problem, resolution) were compared to see if the level of comprehension increased throughout the life of the literature circle. The mean for the posttest was calculated for each category and compared across categories.

Teacher checklist. To monitor student engagement throughout the literature circle meetings each week, an observation checklist was generated. The teacher-

researcher moved around the room monitoring conversations. No more than five minutes was spent listening in to each group's conversation. In the appropriate checklist columns, each participant received a score of 1 if he or she asked questions in conversation, answered questions in conversation, was actively engaged in the conversation, and if he or she had a positive attitude. If students did not ask questions, answer questions, or were not actively engaged in the literature circle, they received a score of 0 in the corresponding checklist column. A score of 0 was also given if negative attitude was shown by the student choosing not to participate. To examine the results of both individuals and each literature circle group, each student's scores were tallied and then combined with the scores of other students in their groups.

Motivation to read survey. To determine if literature circles positively affected students' motivation to read, the *Motivation to Read Profile* was twice given in the form of a survey on Google Docs. After the questionnaire was given at the beginning of the literature circle unit, percentage scores for each student's self-concept as a reader and how he or she valued reading were recorded and combined for a total motivation percentage score. Results were then compared to scores recorded when the same questionnaire was given at the end of the unit. Additionally, pretest and posttest scores were grouped and compared by class.

Student questionnaire. To gain participants' insights and opinions on literature circles, a questionnaire was generated and given at the end of the unit. The questionnaire consisted of two Yes or No questions, one multiple choice question, and five open-ended, short-answer questions. The responses from the open-ended questions were coded and grouped together by commonalities. Results were grouped together and examined in the

form of pie charts to inform future implementation of literature circles in a middle school language arts classroom.

CHAPTER 4

RESULTS

Results on the effects literature circles on the comprehension and motivation to read of sixth grade students presented below are reported by data point. The student questionnaire regarding literature circles is quantitatively discussed while qualitative data appears in the appendix.

Comprehension

Students wrote journal entries before and after each literature circle meeting to determine what they comprehended from that week's reading and their level of thinking while writing. In order to look at how student comprehension progressed over time during the literature circle study, the pre and posttest scores for each category (character, setting, problem, and resolution) were recorded. Each student's mean score in all four categories was then calculated to determine the level of comprehension and thinking for the length of the study.

Comprehension was tracked by having students write journal responses both before and after circle meetings. Figure 1 shows the comprehension mean scores of the three sixth-grade classes that participated in the literature circles.

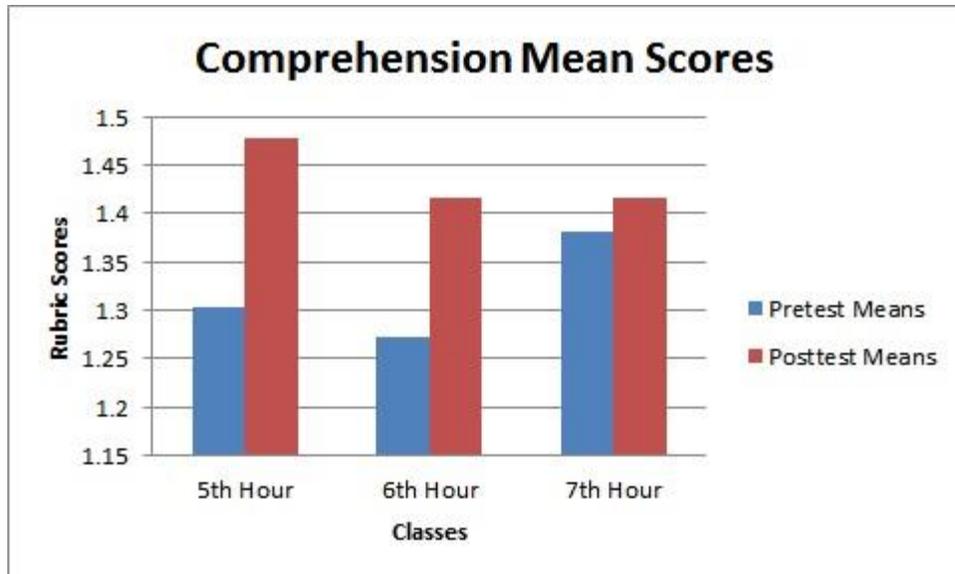


Figure 1. Comprehension mean scores from the journal responses of three sixth-grade reading classes.

When combining means from journal responses across all four literature circle sessions, 5th hour had a pretest mean of 1.302 and a posttest mean of 1.477. Sixth hour had a pretest mean of 1.271 and a posttest mean of 1.415. Seventh hour had a pretest mean of 1.380 and a posttest mean of 1.415. Even though the gains were small, each of the three reading classes did increase in reading comprehension scores.

Figure 2 shows the comprehension mean change scores of the three sixth-grade reading classes that participated in literature circles.

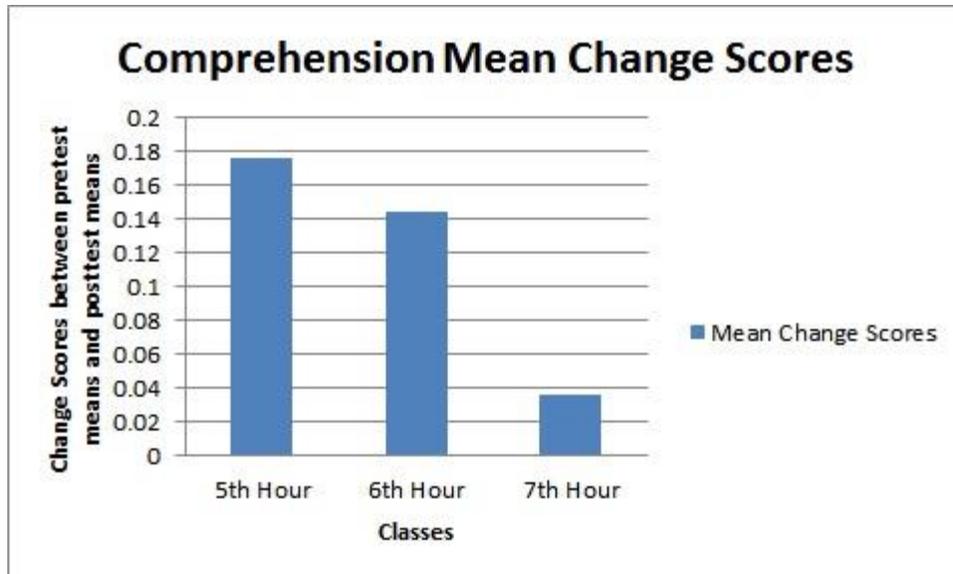


Figure 2. Comprehension mean gain scores from the journal responses of three sixth-grade reading classes.

The 5th hour class had the largest change score from pretest to posttest means, increasing by 0.175 points. 6th hour registered an increase of 0.143 points from pretest to posttest means, and 7th hour had the smallest change, increasing by only 0.035 points.

To statistically examine the gains made in comprehension, a composite pretest comprehension score was computed (mean score across all four traits summed) and a composite posttest comprehension score was computed. A one sample t test revealed that the gains made in comprehension were statistically significant $t(66) = 5.476, p < .001$ with the mean gain being .112 (SD- .167).

Teacher Checklist

A teacher-generated observation checklist was used to monitor student engagement throughout the literature circle meetings each week (see Appendix H). Students received one point each for questioning, for answering, for being engaged in the conversation (actively talking *and* listening), and for having a positive attitude in the

discussion. A zero was given if students were observed not doing these things, or if they had a negative attitude and simply chose not to participate. Overall, students received either a score of four and were fully engaged in participation, or they received a score of zero for not participating at all which the teacher-researcher did not anticipate prior to beginning the study. No student received a score of anything in between zero and four; they were either fully engaged or fully disengaged.

In the 5th hour class, every single student received the maximum score of four for all four literature circle meetings, although one student was absent for the third meeting and another for the fourth meeting. In the 6th hour class, all students received the maximum score of four for all four literature circle meetings, but one student was absent for the second meeting and another for the fourth meeting. Additionally, one student from 6th hour moved away to another school district after the first meeting. In the 7th hour class, every student but one received the maximum score of four. One of the 24 students had read the book but completely refused to participate in any way during the first and fourth meetings and received a score of zero for both of those circle meetings. She did receive the maximum score of four during the second and third meetings. One student was absent for the first and second meetings. Another student was absent for the third meeting, and yet another was gone for the fourth meeting.

Motivation to Read Profile Survey

The *Motivation to Read Profile* was given to students twice, at the beginning and at the end of the study, to determine if literature circles positively affected students' motivation to read. Percentage scores for each student's self-concept as a reader and how he or she values reading were recorded and combined for a final motivation percentage

score. The overall motivation percentages scores from the pretest and posttest were compared to determine how literature circles affected motivation to read. Figure 3 shows the mean change in reading motivation from pretest to posttest for the three sixth-grade reading classes.

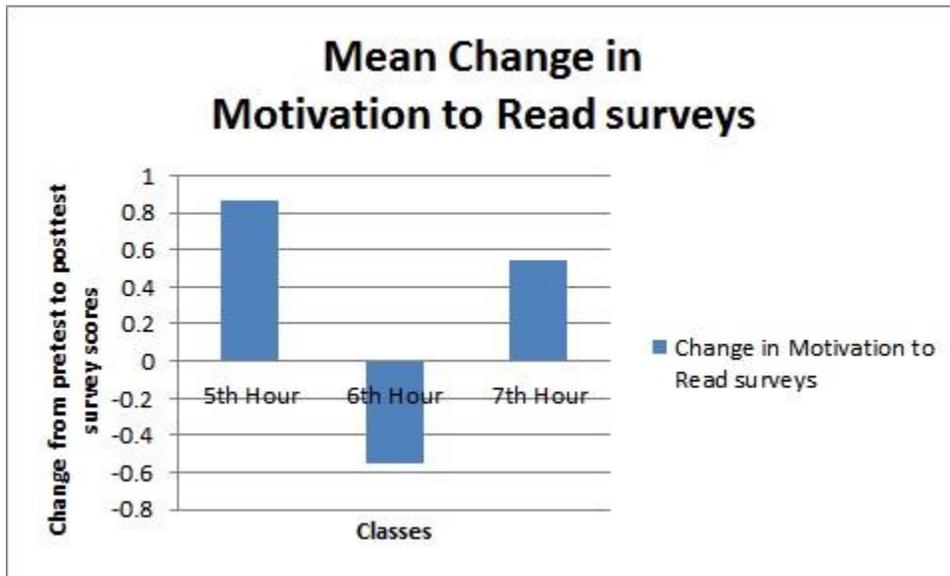


Figure 3. The mean change in reading motivation for three sixth-grade reading classes.

When looking at all of the data combined, 5th hour increased by a mean score of 0.86, and 7th hour increased by a mean score of 0.54. Sixth hour, however, decreased by a mean score of 0.55. Scores in each class varied widely among students making the overall class changes seem insignificant.

Figure 4 shows the change in reading motivation from pretest to posttest for all 67 students.

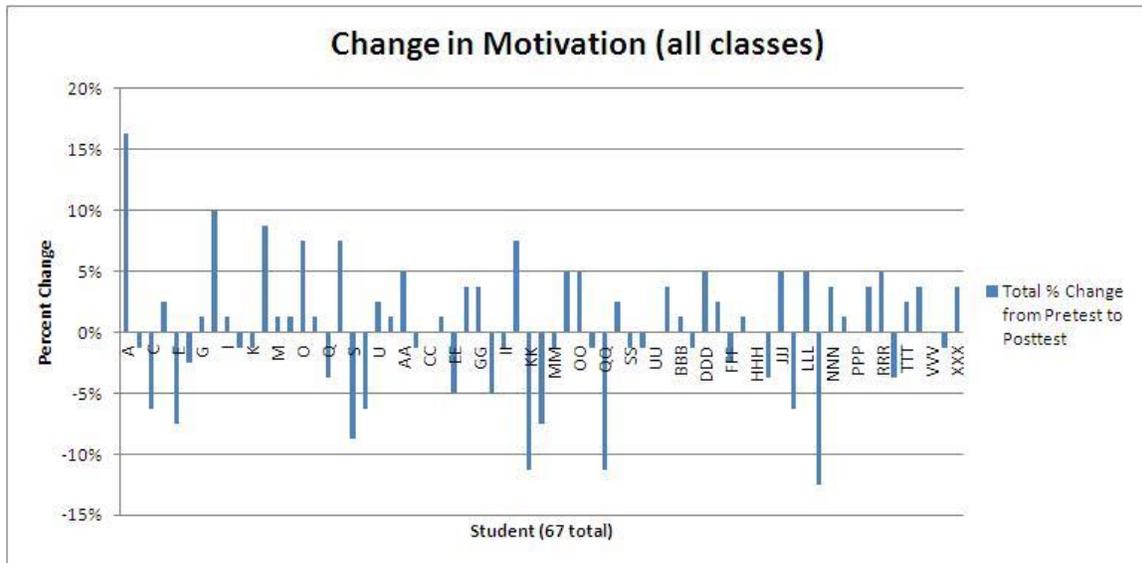


Figure 4. Change in reading motivation for all 67 sixth-grade students.

Overall, 35 students had a positive change in motivation from pretest to posttest. The largest percentage change was 16% for Student A. Twenty-seven students had a negative change in motivation from pretest to posttest. The largest percentage lost was 13% for Student MMM. Two other students also showed an 11% loss in motivation. Four students had a 0% change in motivation from pretest to posttest. Student CC moved away to another school district in the middle of the study; her results were omitted, but she still shows up in the graph.

To examine if changes in motivation were statistically significant, a one sample t test was computed. Results indicated that gains from pre to post test on the MRP were not statistically significant $t(66) = 0.022, p < .54$.

Student Questionnaire

At the end of the literature circle study, a teacher-generated questionnaire was given to students through a Google Docs survey. Survey questions one and two were Yes or No questions. Questions three and four were multiple choice with each question

having two possible answers. Questions five through eight were short answer. The short answer responses were coded into similar categories. Questions five through eight were specifically designed to help the teacher-researcher with future implementation of literature circles and do not provide evidence for either of the two research questions (see Appendix K). Figure 5 shows the results from the first four questions on the survey answered by all 67 sixth-graders that participated in the study.

Student Survey Responses Regarding Literature Circles.

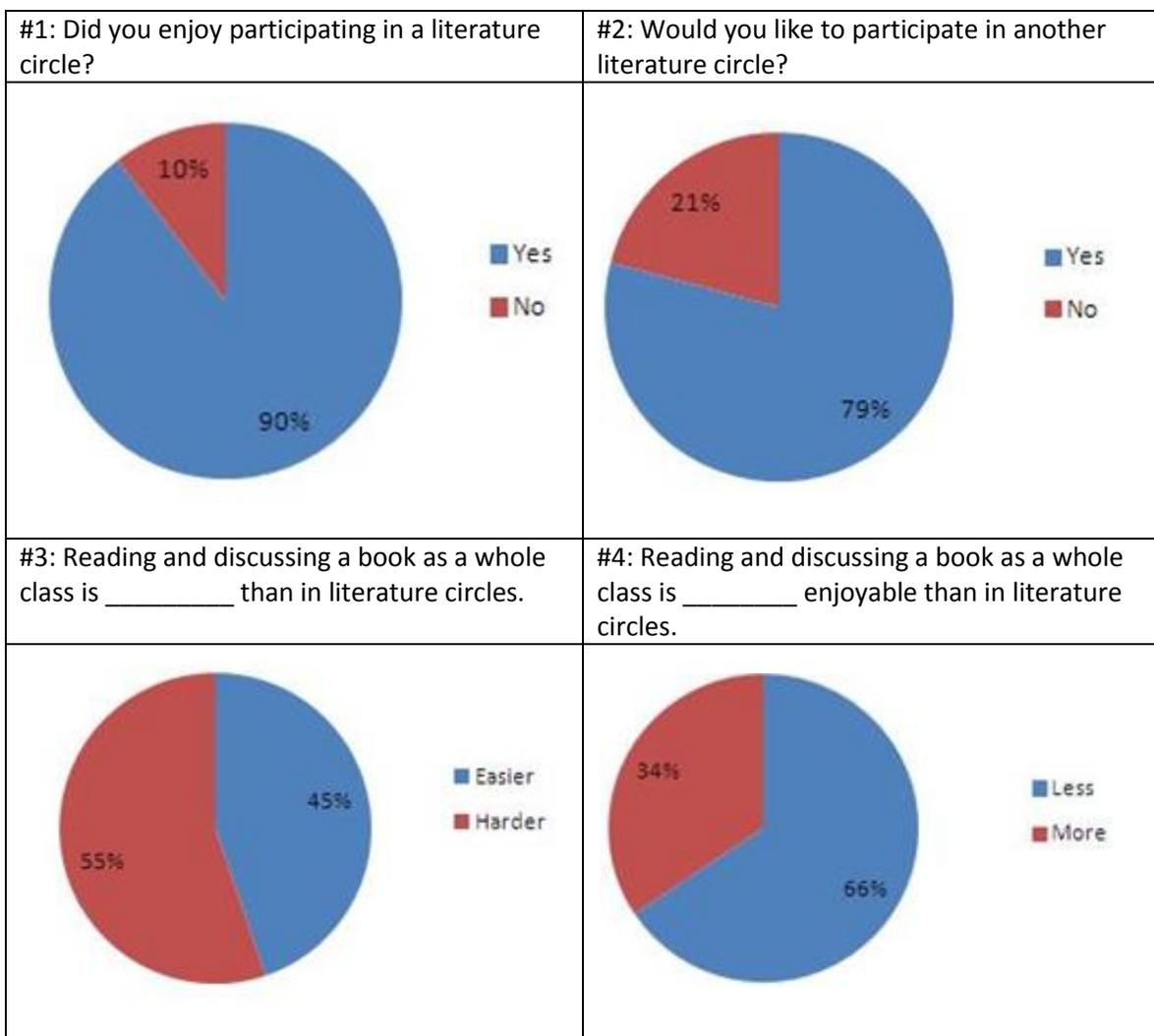


Figure 5. Student responses on literature circles and suggestions for the future.

Questions one and two gave the teacher researcher an insight into whether

students enjoyed literature circles and would like to participate in them again. They were both multiple choice questions with two possible answers: yes or no. Ninety percent of all students enjoyed the circles, and 79% said they would like to continue the circles.

Questions three and four were designed to compare students' thoughts on literature circles to their thoughts on reading one entire novel together as a class. Fifty-five percent of all students said that reading a novel together is harder than participating in literature circles and only 34% said reading as a class is more enjoyable than literature circles.

CHAPTER 5

DISCUSSION

Findings from the current study are mixed regarding the increase of student comprehension. The data collected does show slight gains in the use of higher-level comprehension skills for each of the three sixth-grade classes that participated in the study. Additionally, the use of literature circles had a mixed impact on student motivation to read.

Comprehension and Writing

While nearly all students in the study showed the ability to comprehend and recall what they read each week, results from student journal entries show that the majority of students did not increase the level of their comprehension to include higher-level thinking skills. The teacher-research found that even though the journal entries asked for specifics about characters, setting, problems, and resolutions, students wrote summaries of their reading instead of asking and answering questions they might have had while reading. On the posttest journal entry for each week, many students simply wrote more detailed summaries than they did for the pretest entry. Such responses could be considered examples of “good enough” comprehension, where the student does just enough work to get by and complete an assignment or project well, but the student does not go above and beyond to truly learn or grasp the concepts or ideals (Ferreira & Patson, 2007). Research shows that pairing reading and writing together can benefit comprehension (Rosenblatt, 1978, 1983, as cited in Gauthier, Schorzman, & Hutchison, 2003, p. 23). Gauthier et al. (2003) explains how academic journals can be kept individually and help with group discussions (p. 24). However, the use of writing to comprehend came after the students

had finished reading. If students had been asked to take notes while they read instead of after, there might have been more evidence of the higher-level thinking comprehension skills such as application, analysis, and evaluation. Students also might have reached higher-level thinking comprehension skills with more direct instruction on what was expected of them: set the bar high enough that they must do more than just what is “good enough.”

Comprehension and Identifying Main Idea

In preparing for each literature circle meeting, students were asked to write a brief summary of the week’s reading. In writing a summary, students needed to identify the main idea, which Vaughn et al. (2011) labels as an important step in comprehension. The student-generated summaries for discussion did include main ideas which should indicate that students were comprehending. In addition to writing a summary, students were also asked to create questions to ask of their group members. During the first literature circle meeting, the teacher-researcher observed students asking knowledge level questions, but as groups continued through their novels, more open-ended questions were discussed with stems such as, “What did you think when...”, “How did you feel about...”, and “What would you have done...” These types of questions allowed for students to take what they had read and apply it to themselves and their surroundings, resulting in higher-level thinking and comprehending. Even though data about asking and answering questions comes from observations rather than physical evidence, the findings of the literature circle study would seem to agree with other research indicating that asking questions during and after reading is a successful comprehension strategy (Berkeley et al., 2011; Mills, 2009; Richardson, 2010; and Vaughn et al., 2011).

Comprehension with Conversation and Group Work

Literature circles are designed around conversation and group work. While journal entry data did not necessarily show an increase in comprehension, the teacher-researcher observed many different levels of comprehension within the circle conversations each week. For example, one student asked her group if a character made a wrong decision and another student was overheard saying, “That’s a really hard question to answer. On one hand, she wants to please her dad and not make him upset or lonely. On the other hand, she has an obligation to her group and their school project. No matter what she chooses, she’s letting somebody down.” Frequently, group members judged the actions of characters: “I wanted him to defend her. She’s just being herself and bullies have no right to pick on her. He’s not a very good friend if he chose not to come help her. Bad life choice on his part.”

When students would evaluate characters, not all group members would come to an agreement. Ketch (2005) states that conversations become more complex with different points of view are discussed. In one instance, a group reading *The Revealers* got into a major argument over the intentions of certain characters. The teacher-researcher overheard the following exchange: “I disagree. I think she lied to get attention. She always wants to be in the middle of stuff. How is this any different? How do you *know* she’s not just looking for attention and popularity like before? Do you have proof?” Another student responded, “No, the book didn’t give us true proof. We don’t need to know her thoughts to know she’s different now. You should be able to see it in her actions. She started to ditch her other bully friends. The way she acts has gotten nicer over the ending chapters.”

No group had higher-level thinking and conversation 100% of the time. Sixth-graders have short attention spans and can be fairly silly for a good chunk of time. However, each group did display higher-level comprehension skills at least once during each literature circle meeting. Observations from the literature circle study fall in line with findings from other studies that state the importance of conversation, and in turn, literature circles, on aiding comprehension (Fall et al., 2000; Ketch, 2005; Murphy et al., 2009; Vaughn et al., 2011; Whittaker, 2012; Young, 2007).

Motivation

Results from this study show that participating in literature circles has a mixed impact on motivation to read. Some students had higher motivation scores on the survey posttest while others had lower motivation scores on the posttest. Research has shown that students engaged in questioning, investigating, and interpreting texts can have higher levels of motivation than students who are not engaged with a text (Kelly & Clausen-Grace, 2009; Long & Gove, 2003). All students in the present study were engaged during the circle conversation, and did exhibit some of Csikszentmihalyi's flow concepts of engagement (Smith & Wilhelm, 2002). However, this does not necessarily mean they were engaged with the texts as they read. Motivation to read might not have been significantly affected, but motivation to converse within groups might have increased. Students did have some choice when it came to the novels they wanted to read. However, the decision was ultimately left up to the teacher-researcher. Students also set up their own reading schedules and role assignments, but all of this still involved compliance and not true choices. This could have negatively affected motivation to read based on the self-determination theory (Deci, et al., 1991). Motivation might have increased if

students were allowed to truly choose the books to read for literature circles and take ownership of their learning.

Limitations

Because of conducting this study with three entire classes and the need for students to be able to take books home with them to read and prepare, the teacher-researcher was limited in the book selections. The five novels chosen for the study were class sets kept in the library in order to ensure every student had a copy to take home. While other class sets were technically available for use, they had already been earmarked as a 7th grade or 8th grade novel, making them off-limits for 6th grade use. Because of this, there was not a lot of variation on Lexile® levels with these novels. Ideally, a wide range of Lexile®-leveled books would be available for students.

After two weeks of training the students for literature circles and getting started, a snow storm interrupted the study when the second circle meeting should have taken place. School was canceled for four days surrounding a weekend which resulted in a full week off for students. The second circle meeting took place on the day school resumed, an entire week later than planned. After this meeting, the teacher-researcher took time to review literature circle rolls and how to behave during circle meetings.

Recommendations

Trying to measure levels of comprehension proved to be extremely difficult. Using journal entries did not provide the type of data the teacher-researcher thought it would. Instead, comprehension should have been measured by listening in or recording group conversations; that is where the higher-level thinking and comprehension skills were noticed, not in the journal writing. Researchers could still use a comprehension

rubric to score the writing and to score conversations. The journal used as a part of the study showed little information of value, and could be deleted.

If students have previously been taught how to participate in a literature circle, it would be recommended that a wider range of books be available for groups to read. Allowing students to choose their own groups and books might increase the motivation to read and participate in the literature circle. Additionally, once students have been introduced to the process of literature circles, the four roles should gradually diminish until students are eventually preparing for circles individually in their own way while still being able to fully participate in the circle through meaningful conversations.

Despite the fact that no incredible gains were noted linking literature circles to increased comprehension and motivation to read, the teacher researcher feels literature circles can still be very beneficial in any literature classroom. New friendships were formed. Students who did not interact with one another before have been seen inseparable at lunch or during passing periods; middle school students thrive off of the peer interaction. Since the study ended, students are asking when the next round of literature circles will begin. Student growth most definitely did occur, but not necessarily in the predicted areas.

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APPENDIXES

APPENDIX A

LITERATURE CIRCLE ROLE: DISCUSSION DIRECTOR

Discussion

Book Title: _____

Author: _____

Name: _____ Hour: _____ Meeting # 1 2 3 4 (circle one)

Write down a list of questions about this section of the book for your group to discuss. Don't worry about the small details; you want your group to discuss the big ideas and their reactions to this section. The best questions come from your own thoughts, ideas, feelings, and concerns about this part of the book. Don't forget to write down your own answers to your questions!

Sample Questions:

**What was going through your mind when you read ...?*

**How did you feel when ...?*

**What surprised you about this section?*

**What do you think will happen ...?*

**What questions did you have when you finished reading this section?*

My Questions:

1.

2.

3.

4.

APPENDIX B

LITERATURE CIRCLE ROLE: SUMMARIZER

Summarizer

Book Title: _____

Author: _____

Name: _____ Hour: _____ Meeting # 1 2 3 4 (circle one)

Prepare a summary the week's reading. Don't tell the whole story; focus on the main and important events. Writing down key points will also help you participate in the discussion. Please write in complete sentences!

Summary:

Key points to discuss with your group:

1.

2.

3.

APPENDIX C

LITERATURE CIRCLE ROLE: VOCABULARY ENRICHER

Vocabulary Enricher

Book Title: _____

Author: _____

Name: _____ Hour: _____ Meeting # 1 2 3 4 (circle one)

Look for a few important words in your reading that describe or fit this section really well. How do these words fit the section? Also record words that might be confusing or unfamiliar. Find the definitions of these words in a dictionary. Be ready to share these words during your literature circle meeting and help group members locate them in the book.

Page # and Paragraph	Word	How the word relates to the section / Definition

APPENDIX D

LITERATURE CIRCLE ROLE: CONNECTOR

Connector

Book Title: _____

Author: _____

Name: _____ Hour: _____ Meeting # 1 2 3 4 (circle one)

Find connections between this book and the outside world. Connect what you have read to your own life (home, school, community), to similar events that happened at other times in your life, or to other people or problems. Other members of your group will also share their connections with you.

Describe the part of the book and then explain your connection:

1.

2.

3.

APPENDIX E

LITERATURE CIRCLE ASSIGNMENT SHEET

Name: _____ Hour: _____

Book Title:

Author: _____

Group Members: _____

Section #	Chapters/Pages	Meeting Date	Discussion Director
1			
2			
3			
4			

APPENDIX G

JOURNAL RESPONSE RUBRIC

Literature Circle Journal Response #1

Name _____ Book: _____

	Knowledge	Comprehension	Application	Analysis	Evaluation
Characters	1: Lists or identifies the main/minor characters.	2: Describes the main/minor characters.	3: Relates one of the characters to someone he/she knows.	4: Compares & contrasts characters.	5: Judges and defends the actions of characters.
Setting	1: Identifies the setting by time and place.	2: Describes the setting in detail (time & place).	3: Relates how setting is similar to a place that is known to student in real life.	4: Analyzes how the setting affects events in the plot.	5: Evaluates the author's use of setting and whether or not it adds to or takes away from the plot.
Problem	1: Identifies the problem.	2: Describes the problem with details.	3: Relates the problem to something similar in the student's life.	4: Makes inferences as to how the problem affects the characters.	5: Defends the character's actions while handling the problem or argues the character should have taken a different action.
Resolution	1: Identifies the resolution to the above problem.	2: Explains the resolution with details.	3: Compares the resolution to something similar in the student's life.	4: Analyzes how the resolution will impact the next part of the story.	5: Justifies why the resolution is or is not appropriate for the plot line of the story.

Created by Ashley J. Ulbrich

APPENDIX H

TEACHER-RESEARCHER OBSERVATION CHECKLIST

1 – Actively questioning, answering, engaged and positive attitude.

0 – Not questioning, answering, engaged, and negative attitude.

Student	Questioning?	Answering?	Engaged?	Attitude (P/N)
A				
B				
C				
D				
E				
F				
G				
H				
I				
J				
K				
L				
M				
N				
O				
P				
Q				
R				
S				
T				
U				
V				
W				
X				

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APPENDIX I

MOTIVATION TO READ PROFILE SURVEY

MOTIVATION TO READ PROFILE: READING SURVEY



Name _____ Date _____

Sample 1: I am in _____.

- Second grade
- Third grade
- Fourth grade
- Fifth grade
- Sixth grade

Sample 2: I am a _____.

- boy
- girl

1. My friends think I am _____.
 - a very good reader
 - a good reader
 - an OK reader
 - a poor reader
2. Reading a book is something I like to do.
 - Never
 - Not very often
 - Sometimes
 - Often
3. I read _____.
 - not as well as my friends
 - about the same as my friends
 - a little better than my friends
 - a lot better than my friends
4. My best friends think reading is _____.
 - really fun
 - fun
 - OK to do
 - no fun at all
5. When I come to a word I don't know, I can _____.
 - almost always figure it out
 - sometimes figure it out
 - almost never figure it out
 - never figure it out
6. I tell my friends about good books I read.
 - I never do this.
 - I almost never do this.
 - I do this some of the time.
 - I do this a lot.

(continued)

Gambrell, L.B., Palmer, B.M., Codling, R.M., & Mazzone, S.A. (1996). Assessing reading motivation. *The Reading Teacher*, 49, 518-533.

MOTIVATION TO READ PROFILE: READING SURVEY *(continued)*

7. When I am reading by myself, I understand _____.
- almost everything I read
 - some of what I read
 - almost none of what I read
 - none of what I read
8. People who read a lot are _____.
- very interesting
 - interesting
 - not very interesting
 - boring
9. I am _____.
- a poor reader
 - an OK reader
 - a good reader
 - a very good reader
10. I think libraries are _____.
- a great place to spend time
 - an interesting place to spend time
 - an OK place to spend time
 - a boring place to spend time
11. I worry about what other kids think about my reading _____.
- every day
 - almost every day
 - once in a while
 - never
12. Knowing how to read well is _____.
- not very important
 - sort of important
 - important
 - very important
13. When my teacher asks me a question about what I have read, I _____.
- can never think of an answer
 - have trouble thinking of an answer
 - sometimes think of an answer
 - always think of an answer

(continued)

MOTIVATION TO READ PROFILE: READING SURVEY *(continued)*

14. I think reading is _____.
- a boring way to spend time
 - an OK way to spend time
 - an interesting way to spend time
 - a great way to spend time
15. Reading is _____.
- very easy for me
 - kind of easy for me
 - kind of hard for me
 - very hard for me
16. When I grow up I will spend _____.
- none of my time reading
 - very little of my time reading
 - some of my time reading
 - a lot of my time reading
17. When I am in a group talking about stories, I _____.
- almost never talk about my ideas
 - sometimes talk about my ideas
 - almost always talk about my ideas
 - always talk about my ideas
18. I would like for my teacher to read books out loud to the class _____.
- every day
 - almost every day
 - once in a while
 - never
19. When I read out loud I am a _____.
- poor reader
 - fair reader
 - good reader
 - very good reader
20. When someone gives me a book for a present, I feel _____.
- very happy
 - sort of happy
 - sort of unhappy
 - unhappy

M²RP READING SURVEY SCORING SHEET



Student's Name _____

Grade _____ Teacher _____

Administration Date _____

Recoding Scale

1 = 4

2 = 3

3 = 2

4 = 1

Self-Concept as a Reader

*recode 1. _____

3. _____

*recode 5. _____

*recode 7. _____

9. _____

*recode 11. _____

13. _____

*recode 15. _____

17. _____

19. _____

Value of Reading

2. _____

*recode 4. _____

6. _____

*recode 8. _____

*recode 10. _____

12. _____

14. _____

16. _____

*recode 18. _____

*recode 20. _____

SC raw score: _____ /40

V raw score: _____ /40

Full survey raw score (Self-Concept & Value): _____ /80

Percentage scores Self-Concept

 Value

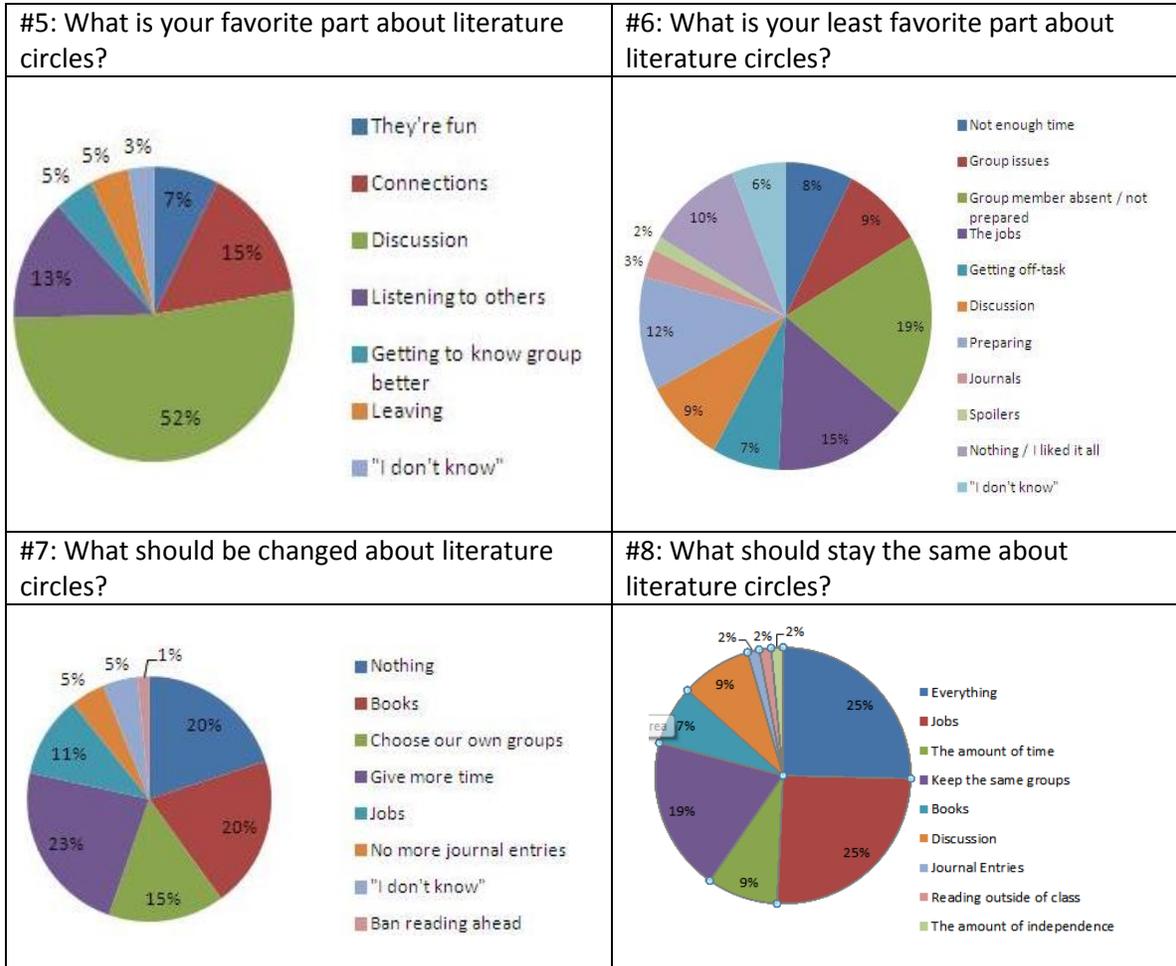
 Full Survey

Comments: _____

Gambrell, L.B., Palmer, B.M., Codling, R.M., & Mazzoni, S.A. (1996). Assessing reading motivation. *The Reading Teacher*, 49, 518-523.

APPENDIX K

STUDENT QUESTIONNAIRE #5 - #8 RESULTS



Questions five through eight were free response, designed to aid future implementation of literature circles by the teacher researcher. More than half of all students mentioned their favorite part about literature circles was having discussions. Just over one-quarter of students (28%) wrote that their least favorite part about literature had to do with group issues: either unrest and disruption within the group or group members being absent or not being ready for discussion.

When asked about how to change literature circles on what should stay the same, responses varied greatly. Twenty percent of students said nothing should be changed

while 25% of students said everything should stay the same. The amount of time given to prepare and to participate in the circle discussion seemed to be an issue: 23% of students wrote that more time needed to be allowed, and only 9% wrote that the amount of time provided was sufficient.