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THE IMPACT OF LITERATURE CIRCLES ON READING COMPREHENSION  
IN A FOURTH GRADE CLASS

by  
Richard L. Kaufmann

A Thesis

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements of the  
Master of Science in Teaching Degree  
of  
The Graduate School  
at  
Rowan University  
(June 22, 2009)

Approved by \_\_\_\_\_  
Dr. Robin McBee

Date Approved June 22, 2009  
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## ABSTRACT

Richard L. Kaufmann  
THE IMPACT OF LITERATURE CIRCLES ON READING COMPREHENSION  
IN A FOURTH GRADE CLASS  
2008-09  
Dr. Robin McBee  
Master of Science in Teaching

In a fourth grade class where the majority of students were reading below grade level, literature circles were introduced and monitored for their ability to (a) raise student motivation to complete class work, (b) improve student interaction and behavior, and (c) raise Fountas and Pinnell reading comprehension levels. Students' class work in the literature circles was compared to similar work from whole group instruction. A rubric measured the attentiveness and behavior of the students in literature circle, whole group, and small group settings. The study was bookended by two Fountas and Pinnell benchmark reading assessments that were compared for signs of reading comprehension improvement. The results show that the students successfully completed literature circle activities with greater frequency and fewer mistakes than other observed class activities. The attentiveness and behavior of the students was improved in literature circle settings over whole group and small group settings. Reading comprehension levels rose at the end of the study, but can not be attributed solely to the introduction of literature circles.

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## CHAPTER I

### Introduction

The computer revolution of the past generation has brought increased access to information. One might reasonably assume that the children of the twenty-first century would possess an intellectual prowess of which previous generations could only dream. Indeed, those of us who remember a world before computers might find ourselves wondering how we managed to write term papers in the days of card catalogs and library stacks.

As the students of today show less inclination to read than previous generations (National Endowment for the Arts [NEA], 2007), one has to wonder if we are now reaping the dark side of the technology bargain. The goal of insuring that all students possess media literacy skills is laudable and necessary. However, as children become immersed in computer culture at younger ages, many seem to be bypassing or skimping on traditional literacy skills. Simply put: children are reading less and for shorter periods of time (NEA, 2007).

Whether computers are responsible for this trend did not concern me so much as finding ways to raise student motivation to read. Books give the reader new insights into the world around them. They require the reader to be a reflective and critical thinker.

It is only natural that a student, or an adult for that matter, would welcome the chance to interact with others who are reading or have read similar material. Book clubs are a way in which a group of adults come together to discuss their personal insights



about a book they have all read. Literature Circles (LCs) take the idea of book clubs and transpose them to the classroom. I was curious to see if students, who had shown little inclination to read, would be more inclined to do so in a LC setting. That was the original question guiding my research, but as I gathered and analyzed data, I found new questions pushing my study in new directions.

### *Statement of the Problem*

The motivation to read seems to be waning in the United States. Some of this could be attributable to the changing face of information retrieval. In the last twenty years, we have been witness to a historic shift in the way people receive information – from newspapers and encyclopedias to blogs, Google, and Wikipedia. This shift is drifting down to the younger members of our society. With information so readily available, and often presented in summarized form, the desire to read for the sake of enjoyment or personal fulfillment seems to be declining (NEA, 2007).

I strive to be objective towards this situation. Children of the new millennium have diversions that the previous generation could not imagine. I enjoyed television when I was a child, but the limited number of channels guaranteed that I would turn off the TV and find alternative forms of entertainment. Video games required money and a trip to the arcade. On a hot summer day, the air-conditioned public library was often the coolest place in town.

Regardless of who or what is to blame, children are not reading at the rate or level they were a generation ago. The fallout from this trend has implications beyond the classroom. Of 31 industrialized nations, the United States ranks 15<sup>th</sup> in reading proficiency. The students of today will be competing globally for the jobs of the future. It

is not just a problem about keeping pace with other developed nations. Socially speaking, literate citizens are also more likely to engage in positive civic activities (NEA, 2007).

*Story behind the research.* In my fourth grade class, many of the students were demonstrably resistant to reading. When they were given independent reading time, I found myself constantly having to break up conversations unrelated to the work at hand or the book they were reading. Most of the students did not enjoy reading challenging books, and several would select books well below their reading level to stare at during independent reading. I was not sure if they were unmotivated to look for challenging reading material, or simply felt that they did not know how to find material that could interest them.

I arrived on my first day of student teaching in late January with only vague ideas of what I wanted to do for my action research thesis. By the end of the day, I was able to narrow down my focus considerably due to a fortuitous meeting between my cooperating teacher and the school district's reading coach. They were discussing the lack of progression in most of the students' Fountas and Pinnell (F&P) benchmark scores from September to January. The F&P benchmarks assess a student's reading level. Eight out of 14 students had not improved their benchmark scores. Of the six who did improve, only two made an improvement of more than one step. Most importantly, only 1 of the 14 was reading on a fourth grade level.

The reading coach thought that getting the students to partner up and discuss reading material might help them with their comprehension. She offered some techniques to try, such as "Turn and Talk", which might allow the students to feel some connection to the material by giving them a voice within the classroom.

Upon examining the students F&P scores from September and January, it was clear that there was a literacy problem in the class. While the majority of the students had shown no improvement in reading comprehension between the fall and winter testing, most of those who did show improvement were still reading up to two grade levels below the fourth grade.

*Critical question.* The driving question during my action research was: How does the introduction of literature circles impact reading comprehension in a fourth grade class?

If LCs can generate greater student interest for reading, they might have a positive effect on behavior in the class. I wondered how student choice in the selection of material might make the students feel a greater investment in the process. This led to a secondary question: How does the introduction of student choice in the curriculum affect attentiveness and behavior in class?

### *Significance of Study*

The overriding goal of this study was to find ways to spur the students' interest in reading. As ten year-olds, they are entering a phase where group work and peer-mediation takes on greater importance. At the same time, they want to be noticed for individual accomplishments (Wood, 2007).

The introduction of standardized testing, New Jersey Assessment of Skills and Knowledge (NJ ASK), in the third grade means that students are supposed to be moving from the learning-to-read stage to the reading-to-learn stage (Wood, 2007). As students gain access to home computers and video games, the lure of reading for pleasure faces

stiff competition. Repetitive language arts instruction might not be enough of an enticement to bring a reluctant reader up to speed.

The guided and independent reading portions of the language arts instruction in our class called for students to read books that corresponded to their F&P benchmark levels. This was meant to keep students from reading books that could lead to frustration or a sense of failure. However, students who are reading on first and second grade levels are left to choose from books that do not speak to a fourth grader's sensibilities. Thus, the student who is already lukewarm or cold towards reading has even less of an incentive to read. I was hoping to find a balance between giving the students some autonomy in their choice of reading material and still requiring a level of accountability in their work.

#### *Purpose of Study*

The thrust of my project was twofold. First, I wanted to increase the students' motivation to read by giving them a choice in their guided reading selections. Guided reading referred to a small group of readers (four to five students) with similar comprehension levels who read a chapter book together. Giving the students a choice in their reading material would be a departure from classroom procedure for guided reading. Since I was limited by the availability of books for the whole group, I started the process by giving each group a selection of four to five books from which to choose. They consisted of chapter books and shorter stories, both fiction and non-fiction.

Secondly, I hoped to give them strategies to approach and understand text through the rotation of different group roles. Since this approach was new to them, I had to model the steps needed to complete the various roles. The first LC session took longer than subsequent sessions due to my need to stop the process and point out good examples for

each of the group's roles. As the sessions progressed, it was my hope that the students would become more responsible for the running of the literature circles, and I could function as an observer and commentator.

*Integrated Action*      The actual reading of the stories varied from group to group and situation to situation. There was roundtable reading where each of the students took a turn reading a page aloud while the others read along silently. If interest was waning, or I felt that the students might benefit from hearing a passage read with feeling, I would read passages myself. The whole group was also called on to read silently for a page or two. They could then enter any pertinent information onto their worksheets.

The guided reading groups were brought together during language arts work centers. These were hour-long sessions where groups of three and four students got fifteen minutes at each of four centers to complete worksheets and projects devoted to language arts instruction. Since the class did not have a period devoted to social studies, one of the centers embedded history and geography with language arts. The students were usually given a week to complete the work at each of the centers, but this time was often extended due to scheduling changes. The guided reading groups did not correspond to their work center groups. I called the guided reading groups together after they were dismissed to work on centers.

The previous guided reading arrangement brought four to five readers of similar abilities together. Students took turns reading a page aloud while their classmates followed along. After each student had a chance to read aloud, the students were told to read the next portion of the chapter silently. When all members had finished, the cooperating teacher posed comprehension questions aloud to the members.

Ideally, Literature Circle groups can be heterogeneous and include members with differing levels of reading ability (Schlick Noe & Johnson, 1999). The cooperating teacher was adamant that these kinds of groupings would not produce good results. So I adhered to the previous guided reading groups that were based on the F&P levels.

I wanted to maintain the oral and silent reading portions of the guided reading. The oral part let me gauge how the students were reading the text. The silent portion let me see if they could maintain their interest independently. What I removed was the question and answer portion. It would be replaced with specific roles for each student that would rotate from session to session.

The first requirement of the LCs was that students had a choice in the book they would be reading. Considering many of the students' inability to settle on independent reading material, I knew I would be giving the students guided choice in the selection of their books. I needed at least four books from which each group could choose. I needed enough copies for each member of the group, as well as myself. From observations and informal interviews, I knew that many of the students liked stories about pets. In addition, stories about kids their own age were appealing to them. Fantasy stories held some interest for the students, especially the girls. Judging from some of their independent reading books, I knew that humorous stories were also popular.

There would be three groups. Group 1 had the highest F&P scores with one member reading at grade level and the other three slightly below. Group 2 had five members reading at a second grade level. Group 3 had five members reading at first and second grade levels.

I wanted to choose stories that would be a stretch for the students, but not frustrate them. Finding interesting chapter book material for Group 3 would pose a challenge. Most of the books at their level were written for first grade sensibilities. Although there were no readers in the group reading independently above F&P level L, I included books with a level O rating as well as books at lower levels. I also included a shorter non-chapter book among the selections. My thinking was that the group could learn their LC roles on the shorter book, if they so chose, and move to a chapter book the following week.

I brought the groups together and laid out the books for them to peruse. Each member of the group would rate the books from most appealing (4 points) to least appealing (1 point). The book with the most points would be the group's selection. The group members who rated the chosen book the lowest were given first choice of LC roles for the initial week. The students were told that they had to perform all the roles once before they could repeat a role.

The role of discussion director would serve as a guiding force and would help replace the question and answer portion. The discussion director was to focus on the big ideas of the reading and generate questions that could get the group talking about the reading. The vocabulary enricher had to look for puzzling or unfamiliar words and find the definitions in a dictionary. The summarizer's job was to break the reading down to its key points and write a brief summary. The literary luminary located sections of the text that resonated with him or her, or caused some confusion. Lastly, the illustrator was in charge of creating an artistic rendering of the text for that session.

I started referring to LC roles during whole-group reading. I prefaced the lessons by stating that we would be starting LCs in the coming weeks, and each student would have a specific role in his or her group. As we read from our reading books, I would refer to how a specific role player might perform his or her role with the story at hand.

For example, during the reading of *Lou Gehrig*, I briefly modeled how the illustrator might do his or her job.

If I was the illustrator, I might draw a picture of a group of little boys playing baseball, while Lou's mom shoos them off to go to school. That would show how much Lou loved the game, while also showing how Lou's mom viewed baseball as not a fitting job for a young man. (Field notes, March 11, 2009)

I presented the idea of summarizing as looking for key moments where the story has to move forward and things must change.

If I was the summarizer, I would say that the part of the story where Lou quits school and signs with the Yankees is a key point. He knows his mother will be heartbroken, but the family needs the money. She thinks he is making a terrible mistake. (Field notes, March 11, 2009)

I modeled each of the roles in a similar manner during whole-group reading. This was intended as an introduction and would, hopefully, generate more enthusiasm for the LCs.

By the second week of March, we were ready to begin the LCs in earnest. I planned on bringing one group together per day. I was not sure how well the students would be able to learn their roles and complete the worksheets. Ideally, I wanted them to complete the reading and have time to work on their sheets, as well as discuss the chapter amongst themselves. I figured this would take up most of the period. For this reason, I



planned on each group completing a chapter per week. If a certain group had not been able to properly discuss a chapter or complete their worksheets, I would have the benefit of bringing them together later in the week for closure on the chapter.

For the first meeting, I had them try their hand at their roles. At the same time, I prepared role sheets as a model. For example, I helped the discussion directors navigate the group through the process by suggesting questions they could ask and making sure they gave each member a chance to present what they had done. I maintained a positive approach throughout. I pointed out areas where they performed well. If a student seemed to be missing the point, I would refer to my own sheets as examples of what a role player might do. I was focusing mostly on interaction and interest in the first meeting.

For the second week, I started each session by having the summarizer recount what happened in the previous chapter. This would also be helpful in bringing any students, who were absent the first week, up to speed with the book. I also pointed out each member's contribution to the previous session, in hopes I could maintain the momentum that was generated. The members chose their new roles, and we commenced with the read-alouds and silent reading. If I felt that a member of a group was grasping his or her role, I waited a little longer before prompting or assisting them. If someone was having difficulty, I would refer to a previous session and point out how that specific role had been successfully completed.

I was aware that we would not have time to complete sessions on each chapter before the class focused their full attention on the NJ ASK tests in late April. The idea was to see if each role gave the students a new angle to help them better understand the text. Each student would get a chance to try each role and show his or her work to the

group. Ideally, these different approaches would drive the discussions and lead to greater interest among the students. What I wanted to see from each session was a move towards greater group independence in the LCs.

### *Assumptions and Limitations*

I was using Guba's Criteria for Validity of Qualitative Research (1981, as cited by Mills, 2007) as a road map to ensure that the action research project was valid. This required me to take four key criteria into account: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability.

Credibility, or the researcher's ability to deal with complexities or unexpected variables that might arise in the study, was determined through persistent observation, collection of student work samples, and the practice of triangulation.

Transferability, or the specificity of the study to a particular context and its ability to be applied to other contexts, was achieved through detailed descriptions of each step of the process. All data was descriptively detailed to also take into account any unexpected external influences. These might include changes to the usual procedure such as: time of day, time of week, student relationships within groups, and interruptions.

Dependability refers to the stability of the research. I was looking to the benchmark assessments to give me an overview of the extent of reading comprehension improvement. I also examined student work to look for patterns and differences over the course of the study. My observations focused on student interaction and behavior, and were meant to further clarify my findings.

The confirmability of the data relates to the objectivity of the data being collected. I was able to achieve this by triangulating benchmark assessments with student work

samples, observations, and informal student feedback. By actively searching for and reflecting on weaknesses in the various approaches, I was able to offset any personal biases that might have been affecting data collection.

Because of the nature of literature circles, each member of each group was responsible for different aspects of reading comprehension during each session. This allowed me to gauge student understanding at any given time. Group observations have the potential for bias. Student interest is an example of an area that would be hard to accurately gauge. I might detect student interest where there is none, and the students might acknowledge an interest in the process to please the teacher or get the work over with. It is easy to look for behavior that will back up whatever assertions you are laying down. Furthermore, a struggling or normally disinterested student might earn a glowing report for behavior that is commonplace with another student. Ultimately, I was balancing those observations with F&P benchmarks assessments that would measure reading comprehension according to a strict set of guidelines.

The most significant limitation of this study was time. For students to fully get comfortable within the LC framework, I would prefer for it to be the main instrument driving their guided reading for at least four to five months. This would allow each group to cycle through a number of types of books.

Another major limitation had to do with interruptions to the routine. A number of students were pulled out for extra help with a literacy specialist. The timing of this resource help was never consistent. There was also the very obvious interruption of school suspensions and absences. Many of my students were called down to the office for disciplinary reasons throughout the day, and quite a few served in-school suspensions

from time to time. One of my focus students was suspended, and thus absent, during our third LC session.

The small number of quality books that would interest a fourth grader reading on a first or second grade level was another limitation. I needed five to six copies of a book to use in literature circles. Many of the books that we had in abundance were tied to the Fountas & Pinnell program and were, to put it mildly, boring. The library at the school was painfully small. In the case of the groups reading on first and second grade levels, it made gathering a collection from which each group could choose a tough task. In the end, I had to rely on the selection of books that were available in the classroom. On the good side, it pushed the group with lowest comprehension level to look above their reading levels to find interesting texts.

### *Definitions*

Action research (AR) is research performed by working teachers. Its focus directly relates to situations in the researcher's own classroom. While the research can be transferable to other situations, that is not the aim. It is in direct response to a specific need in a specific classroom (Mills, 2007).

There are four steps to the AR process. First, the researcher must find an area of focus. It might be an area in the classroom where the teacher would like to see a change. From there, the researcher moves to data collection. It is imperative that at least three different sources of data are collected to ensure dependability through triangulation. Thirdly, the data must be analyzed and interpreted. The final step is to develop an action plan that could be used in the classroom. This step might also lead to more research (Mills, 2007).

Literature circles (LCs) can mean different things to different teachers. In this context, LCs refer to a small group of students meeting to read and discuss reading passages. The goal is to have the students drive the direction of the discussion through the completion and explanation of different, pre-appointed roles.

To “complete a task” (CAT) means the student has completely filled out his or her worksheet. There may be mistakes, but the student is engaged with the process and following along. “Completing a task with comprehension” (CATWC) signifies that a student understood the reading and completed his or her work with no mistakes. It should be noted here that all LC tasks were completed during class time.

Motivation, or a motivated student, refers to one who takes an active role in the reading and discussion of the text. The motivated student offers his or her opinions and thoroughly completes his or her assigned work.

Fountas and Pinnell (F&P) benchmark assessments are used to gauge a student’s reading level. Using an A through Z system, books are given a letter that corresponds to their degree of difficulty. A student’s particular level is arrived at through an assessment that has the student read a passage and answer comprehension questions pertaining to the text. The teacher also has the student read aloud and makes note of errors and omissions. This will be known as the accuracy rate.

## CHAPTER II

### Literature Review

#### *What Are Literature Circles?*

Literature circles (LCs) are small groups of students that meet to discuss reading passages. They are meant to be student driven and student centered. Rather than focusing on specific question and answer formats, LCs are meant to engage students in critical thinking and reflection. Students are given specific roles to complete and use their work to help drive the group discussion (Schlick Noe & Johnson, 1999). I was aware that the time constraints of my study would not allow me to fully hand over the LCs to the students.

There seems to be some sensitivity amongst LC proponents that LCs are seen as small rap sessions with no real direction. While they are reader-response centered and give each student some say in their choice of reading material, they are not without structure or assessable goals. They are not meant to tie on to a particular unit of study, nor are they intended to be the place where grammar lessons are hammered out. They are meant to give students more avenues towards understanding what they are reading by encouraging them to use personal context and preferred modes of expression (Schlick Noe & Johnson, 1999).

Most writing on LCs stresses the terms “student choice” in relation to what students are reading and how the groups are constructed (Daniels, 1994; Schlick Noe & Johnson, 1999; Daniels & Steineke, 2004). This can cause some teachers to be wary of

implementing them in their classroom. The rosy scenario, where groups of students of mixed ability are discussing literature and filling different roles with little prompting from the teacher, does not happen right away. Hill, Schlick Noe, and Johnson (2001) propose a three-tier system that has students gradually take over responsibility in their groups. Each step from beginner to more experienced and, finally, to skilled group member takes 3 to 6 weeks. In the first step, scheduling, book choice, and grouping is still in the hands of the teacher. The first step is heavily dependent on modeling and scaffolding. Assessment can be at the discretion of the teacher and can simply take the form of anecdotal notes. The goal is greater student independence and self-assessment down the line (Hill et al, 2001).

### *Motivation*

As educators, it can be frustrating to try and understand how a child, or anyone for that matter, would not want to read. As adults, most of us wish we had more time to read for pleasure. Why don't our students use their free time engaged in reading for pleasure? Why do many students seem to do the bare minimum when called upon to read a story or book for class? If we want to produce students who read for the sheer love of reading, we need to tap into motivation. With standardized testing starting in third grade and a growing number of schools requiring standardized graduation exams, a student who falls behind in reading comprehension and proficiency in early middle school has a lot to overcome if he or she wishes to collect a high school diploma. Simply put, the more students read, the greater their chances of academic success (Rowe, 1991; Wigfield & Guthrie, 1997). Nothing spurs a student on like success, and many students are struggling to maintain proficiency in reading as they move up through middle school and beyond.

The Rand Corporation's Education Group put the problem in stark terms when it reported that there was not a state in the union that could report half of its students meeting the NAEP national literacy standard (McCombs, Kirby, Barney, Darilek, & Magee, 2005). These figures exist, despite a national focus on raising standards.

Mucherach and Yoder (2008) point to the lack of student motivation as a prime reason for low literacy scores. A motivated student will stay with a task longer, and will be more inclined to take on challenges more readily. While some of the motivations that had some success were extrinsic, these posed problems over the long haul. Many students came to expect these rewards whenever they had completed a piece of schoolwork. While the reward system might have a place in the early elementary grades, it is neither feasible nor desirable as the students reach third grade and beyond. Rewards have a social component, especially amongst young children. The dispensing of them can lead the student to associate ownership of an external honor with completion of a desired goal. Inversely, it tells the student that the absence of the reward connotes failure. Because this is played out in the arena of the classroom, the effect it might have on a student's self-concept is amplified. A classroom that runs on rewards will produce students who will exert themselves only in the areas where they are assured of success (Wigfield & Guthrie, 1995).

So what motivates a student to read? The Motivation for Reading Questionnaire breaks it down into three major categories (Wigfield & Guthrie, 1995): self-efficacy, intrinsic and extrinsic goals, and social aspects. Wigfield, Guthrie, Tonks, and Perencevich, (2004) point to what is a fundamental shift in the attitudes of middle school-aged students as compared to their elementary counterparts. Where the younger child



sees ability and effort as a cohesive force, with one driving the other, the older student sees the added effort as an admission of weakness. Thus, for every year a student is falling behind in reading proficiency, self-efficacy is taken away as a prime motivating tool.

The way a child sees a situation unfolding directly relates to his or her self-concept. While past success can contribute to the self-concept, it is not usually the prime force. In other words, perceived success or failure is in the eye of the beholder. A child will always try to avoid unpleasant or unsuccessful experiences (Wigfield & Karpathian, 1991). The confident child is a successful child and vice-versa.

Children are not as delusional about their abilities as this might make them sound. Harter and Pike (1984) found that in the early elementary years, students have the ability to self-identify areas of strength and weakness. Because they tie effort and ability together, the younger student does not see a weakness as an insurmountable obstacle. Conversely, they are less likely to see a subject of difficulty as something to be avoided. As students move into the middle-school years, the differentiation and segmentation of school subjects along with a child's self-efficacy becomes more defined.

If he or she views a school subject as affirming, that subject is given more 'value' in that child's eyes. If it has value, it is worth finishing. What gives it 'value'? If a student likes the task (interest value), they think it is important (attainment value), and/or they believe it is useful (utility value), they will attach importance to that exercise (Harter and Pike, 1984). Interest Value is much easier to gauge with a young student. Nothing succeeds like success, and students like to succeed. Thus, they will be drawn to activities they have successfully completed in the past. Attainment Value and Utility Value might

ask the child to look beyond the immediate situation and see broader implications with others around them. What makes it important could be the way it is viewed by a student's classmates (Wigfield & Guthrie, 1995). While some students will strive for "ego-involved" goals that display the areas of their strongest abilities, other students will be drawn to "task-involved" goals where they master a heretofore difficult task (Nicholls, Cheung, Lauer, & Patashnick, 1989). In an ideal world, we want all of our students to be the latter. In the real world, we have to prepare for the former.

### *Talking Through the Problem*

If a fourth grade student is struggling with reading comprehension and literacy, the odds of that student looking at reading as something in which he or she would willingly engage are greatly diminished. As social standing exerts a more powerful pull on the middle school student, the teacher can use language as a social medium to drive literacy education. The key is to remind the student that he or she already knows how to communicate (Fountas & Pinnell, 2006). When a student finds a part of the text enlightening or confusing, he or she can learn to look for clues and answers within the classroom circle. This initiates the act of problem solving, which is a skill they will need for the rest of their lives.

Since humans were speaking before they were reading, it makes sense that the way to greater reading comprehension would be through talk. Allington and Johnson (2002) refer to "purposeful talk" when they write about conversations among students that encourage more in-depth thinking. They found that children in high-achieving classrooms spent more time engaged in discussion about what they were reading.

There is a multitude of strategies designed around student interaction and discussion. “Turn and Talk”, “Paired Reading”, “Jigsaw Discussions” and “Small Group Shares” are all good examples of “purposeful talk.” For these techniques to be successful, they require students to become better listeners before they can hope to become better readers (Harvey & Goudvis, 2007). These will require some form of modeling to take root and succeed. The amount of scaffolding will depend on the culture of the classroom. Rather than look at one technique, I was interested in trying to incorporate a number of them into group work. This led me to literature circles (LCs).

#### *Literature Circles in a Inclusive Setting*

On paper, the idea of literature circles looks like a wonderful way to get students involved and talking about what they are reading. Commonly held wisdom might suggest that students are anxious to speak their minds in the classroom. Students in my class certainly have bold opinions, but can they be harnessed towards a common goal? Do the students put enough value in their opinions to feel comfortable speaking up about how they view something they have read? Can this approach work in a classroom with low comprehension scores and a general disinterest in reading?

While close to half of fifth grade general education teachers surveyed claimed to use a form of LCs in their class, the number of teachers with students who have learning disabilities that use the strategy is closer to a quarter (Anderson & Corbett, 2008). Even though there is far less evidence of LCs in inclusion classrooms, there have been reports of success especially in the area of student self-efficacy (Blum, Lipsett, & Yocum, 2002). While the students in the Blum study were eighth and ninth graders, it was an inclusion class with a wide range of reading abilities.

In this study, the groups were teacher chosen at first. The modeling process was introduced through the reading of short stories rather than books, the appeal being that the reading could be completed in one class period. Students were assigned their roles and given their task organizers to guide them through the process. The different roles introduced were: discussion leader, illustrator, connector, character captain, literary illuminary [sic], researcher, investigator, and conflict catcher (Blum et al, 2002).

The students were given a self-assessment at the beginning of the program relating to how they saw themselves as readers. When they responded to the same survey at the end of the semester, student self-efficacy had risen. There was a greater student confidence in ability, comprehension, and recall. In addition, the students felt they were better prepared to explain what they had read to others (Blum et al, 2002).

Giving the students more opportunities to express themselves is laudable and, ultimately, necessary. I still worry that, in a classroom environment that often descends into bickering, the model of LCs could break apart quickly. While focusing on gender issues, Clarke (2007) shows that strong personalities can hijack the process if there is not a strong hand guiding it along. In peer-led discussions, the boys were clearly controlling the discourse. The facilitator, who was a girl, would ask the group a prompt question, and the boys would take over. If the other girl in the group tried to raise her point, the boys were not paying attention and cut her off as if she was not there.

Could LCs simply perpetuate gender-roles? Clarke's focus is too narrow to offer a definitive answer. The teacher and the culture of the particular school in the study could have skewed the results he found. Nonetheless, it demands that a teacher who is implementing an LC be vigilant to the appearance of gender-role stereotyping and/or any

other kind of behavior that could make less-confident students afraid to speak their minds. These are considerations I needed to keep in mind as I implemented my study.

## CHAPTER III

### Methodology

I embarked on this study with the goal of improving reading comprehension. After researching various approaches, the literature circle (LC) stood out as an approach that could produce improvement in reading comprehension. Being an action researcher, I was not bound by a specific research method, but would be guided by the professional dictates of language arts instruction (McNiff, Lomax, & Whitehead, 2003).

The study was designed to note how LCs brought about changes in the students' comprehension skills, and in their approach to group interaction. Looking at completion rates and the percentage of correctly answered questions, I compared whole group reading instruction worksheets to LC role sheets. Behavioral improvement was reliant on my classroom observations and field notes. I compared student behavior in whole group and small group settings to student behavior in LCs by using a rubric to give me a measureable score for attentiveness and behavior. Tying the study together were Fountas and Pinnell benchmark assessments that could give me quantifiable data on the students' reading comprehension levels at the beginning and end of the study.

Although I was hoping to see clear-cut improvement in the students' reading levels, I was aware that my time constraints might make this difficult. I was also looking for other variables. How would the LCs affect student motivation to complete prescribed tasks? How would the added freedom of group interaction affect student behavior?

I collected my comparative data and organized it along a timeline. The data, which was from whole group and small group settings, was separated into three sections. The first was collected before the introduction of the LCs. The second was gathered during the second, third, and fourth weeks of the LCs. The final group of data was collected at the conclusion of the LCs. This included data from the final LC session, as well as any data from two weeks afterwards.

### *Context of the Study*

*School and Community* I conducted my research in a fourth grade class in an inner city middle school. The school is a third through eighth grade school that serves a city with a population of 5,857 and covering an area of 2.6 square miles. Attendance rates are 94% and below the statewide average of 95.9%. Student suspensions are 32% and much higher than the state average of 4.8%. The student/faculty ratio is 8.3 to 1 (New Jersey Department of Education, 2007).

25% of the households in this community are living below the poverty line, and 86% of the students are receiving free or reduced lunch. While the town is 37% white and 56% African-American (U.S. Census Bureau, 2000), the school is much more ethnically uniform with 86% of the students being African-American as compared to 8% Caucasian and 5% Hispanic. Asian/Pacific Islanders and Native Americans make up less than 1% (New Jersey Department of Education, 2007).

*Classroom* My class had 14 students consisting of nine girls and five boys, one being Caucasian, and the other 13 students being African-American. While there is considerable contentiousness between the students, I have not discerned racial tension.

One of the students began the year reading on-grade level. Nine of the 14 were reading two full grade levels below fourth grade. While none of the students were classified as special needs, five of the students displayed behaviors consistent with special needs. These included attention deficit disorder, hyperactivity, impulse control, and anger issues. There are regular disruptions during the day from several students.

More than half of the students regularly failed to hand in their homework or complete their class work. Students were responsible for getting their agendas signed by their parents every day. These were daily planners with each day's homework and other pertinent reminders. There was never a day when all of the students returned their signed agendas. On average, less than half of the students would return a signed agenda.

Most of the students did not take advantage of independent reading time when it was available to them. Whenever a new assignment or lesson was begun, there was usually, at least, one student who would make an audible groan and/or protest. Of the 14 students in the class, only two said they read for pleasure at home.

*Participants* I focused my study on three students. It was my hope to have one student from each different LC group. My choice of participants was limited by the response I received from the students' parents. Of the 14 students who took home release waivers for the research, three students returned signed consent forms agreeing to be part of the research. One student returned a consent form declining to take part.

Luckily, the three students agreeing to be part of the research represented three different levels of reading comprehension ability. All three were female and African-American.



Donna<sup>1</sup> read on a high third grade comprehension level. This placed her with the highest comprehension group in guided reading (group 1). She was one of the most diligent students in the class. Her grades in all classroom subjects placed her in the top quarter of the class. She had a diplomatic streak in her. More than once, she was observed pulling friends away from escalating arguments on the playground.

For the LCs, her group chose *Shiloh* by Phyllis Reynolds Naylor as their reading book. Three of the members had it as their first choice. The other member had it as her second choice. The book tells the story of a young boy in West Virginia trying to protect a dog from an abusive owner.

Michelle read on a mid-second grade level and was placed in the second reading comprehension group (group 2). Her performance in class varied from day to day. She could put in a focused effort on one activity and simply refuse to do another. She claimed that math was her favorite subject and reading her least favorite subject, but was often more than happy to read aloud when asked. Her level of interest during lessons did not seem to correspond to any particular subject, but rather to her mood for that particular day.

For the LCs, her group chose *Class President* by Johanna Hurwitz as their reading book. Three of the members had it as their first choice. One member had it as his second choice. The last member had it as her fourth choice. The book tells the story of a fifth grade boy trying to help his friend become elected class president. The boy has to wrestle with his desire to run for president himself, while not betraying his friend.

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<sup>1</sup> Pseudonyms are used for all students.

Linda read on a high first grade level and was placed in the third reading comprehension group (group 3). She was one of the most argumentative students in the class. She often had to be asked to stop talking. She carried on feuds with different students throughout the semester and was suspended for fighting once during my time at the school. She was highly social. Group work often found her in conversations unrelated to schoolwork.

Due to group 3's low Fountas and Pinnell (F&P) levels, it was difficult finding quality chapter books that were close to their level, but also interesting to them. I allowed them to choose a non-chapter book for the first LC, and the group chose *Rumpelstilzken*. I used the first LC as a modeling session. After the first LC session, I presented them with four chapter book selections to choose from. They disliked the four choices I presented and asked if they could choose *Amber Brown is not a Crayon* by Paula Danziger. It was an N level book, which made it 2 to 3 levels higher than their instructional reading levels. It was the story of a fourth grade girl and her best friend, a boy who is moving away. I decided that their interest in the book outweighed my concern about the book being too challenging.

### *Instrumentation*

I was interested in seeing if the introduction of literature circles had an impact on how the students performed in literacy exercises. If, through LCs, they could find new ways to approach reading, it might have a positive impact on their ability to complete work related to their language arts instruction.

I planned to compare the students' LC work with the work they did in their whole group reading (WG). I grouped the WG data according to when it was collected: Data

from a three week period before the beginning of LCs (Pre-LC), data from a three week period during the LCs (During LC), and data from a two week period following LCs (post-LC).

*Literature Circle (LC) Role Sheets/Whole Group (WG) Worksheets* For LCs to be effective, each member of the group had to complete his or her assigned task. Since all members had different tasks, they could not rely on other group members for answers. The point of each role was to contribute to the whole. When each role was complete, the members presented their work, and the whole group could have a clearer understanding of the assigned reading. The way in which I could be sure that each member was taking his or her role seriously was to have each one complete LC role sheets. The roles would be rotated, so each member had a chance to perform each task.

The summarizer was responsible for finding at least four key moments in the assigned chapter. The summarizer had to use these key points to write a six-line summary of the chapter. The discussion director was responsible for generating three questions that could prompt a group discussion about themes in the assigned reading. The vocabulary enricher had to find six words in the reading that might be puzzling or unfamiliar and find the proper definitions in the dictionary. The literary luminary had to locate six passages that were interesting, funny, powerful, puzzling, or important. This role had to choose who amongst the group would read the passage aloud. The illustrator had to produce a drawing related to the assigned reading.

To compare the effectiveness of LCs in motivating students to complete a task (CAT) and complete a task with comprehension (CATWC), I compared their LC role sheets with their WG worksheets for language arts. These were worksheets related to the

whole group reading for the week and included comprehension and vocabulary questions. These were handed out as class work. Worksheets and role sheets, completed in their entirety, were awarded 100 points. 10 points were subtracted for each mistake or unfinished portion. For example, a WG worksheet that was awarded 100 points signified that all of the questions had been answered correctly. A LC role sheet receiving 100 signified that all portions were completed correctly. This was the students CATWC score.

Since many students in the class failed to hand in worksheets, or handed in incomplete worksheets, I wanted to make a distinction between unfinished worksheets and worksheets that were complete and had mistakes or incorrect answers. This would be the student's CAT score. For example, a student who completed the whole worksheet, but had three mistakes would receive a score of 70 on their CATWC. This would be the same as a student who had handed in an unfinished worksheet with three questions left unanswered. However, the student who finished the worksheet received 100 points on their CAT score, while the student who left three unfinished questions would receive 70 points on their CAT score. This would allow me to gauge effort alongside comprehension.

*Field Notes-Observations* Much of my energy was devoted to observing how the students interacted in the LC setting. The contentious nature of many of the students had me comparing their behavior in the LCs to their behavior in other group settings. These settings included whole group (WG), pre-LC guided reading, and language arts work centers. The data from the WG reading sessions was collected in three groupings: pre-LC, during -LC, and post-LC. The data from the pre-LC guided reading and the

language arts work centers was averaged together under the heading of small group (SG) work.

I scored the students on a rubric. They were assessed on their respect for others, their willingness to participate, and how well they followed along with the lesson. They were given a score from one to four on each. A student, who received four points for *respects others*, listened quietly, did not interrupt when someone else was talking, and stayed in their assigned seat. A score of one meant the student made noise often, interrupted others, and left his or her seat or moved around in a distracting manner. A student receiving a score of four on *participates willingly* routinely raised his or her hand to volunteer answers and had answers ready when called upon. A score of one meant the student did not participate willingly. To receive a score of four for *follows along*, a student needed to be actively working on the task at hand. This could include reading along during a read-aloud, working on the assigned work, or assisting a classmate with the task. A score of one signified the student did not read along or work on the assigned work. I combined these scores to come up with an Attentiveness and Behavior (A&B) score. Thus, a student's A&B score could be as high as a twelve, signifying positive behavior, and as low as a three, signifying negative behavior.

*Fountas and Pinnell(F&P) Benchmark Assessments*                      The F&P benchmark assessments determine what level book, A through Z, a student should be reading. Students receive an independent level that signifies the level of book they can read with comprehension and without assistance. Their instructional level is the next letter up from their independent level. This is the level at which they can read with guided assistance from the teacher.

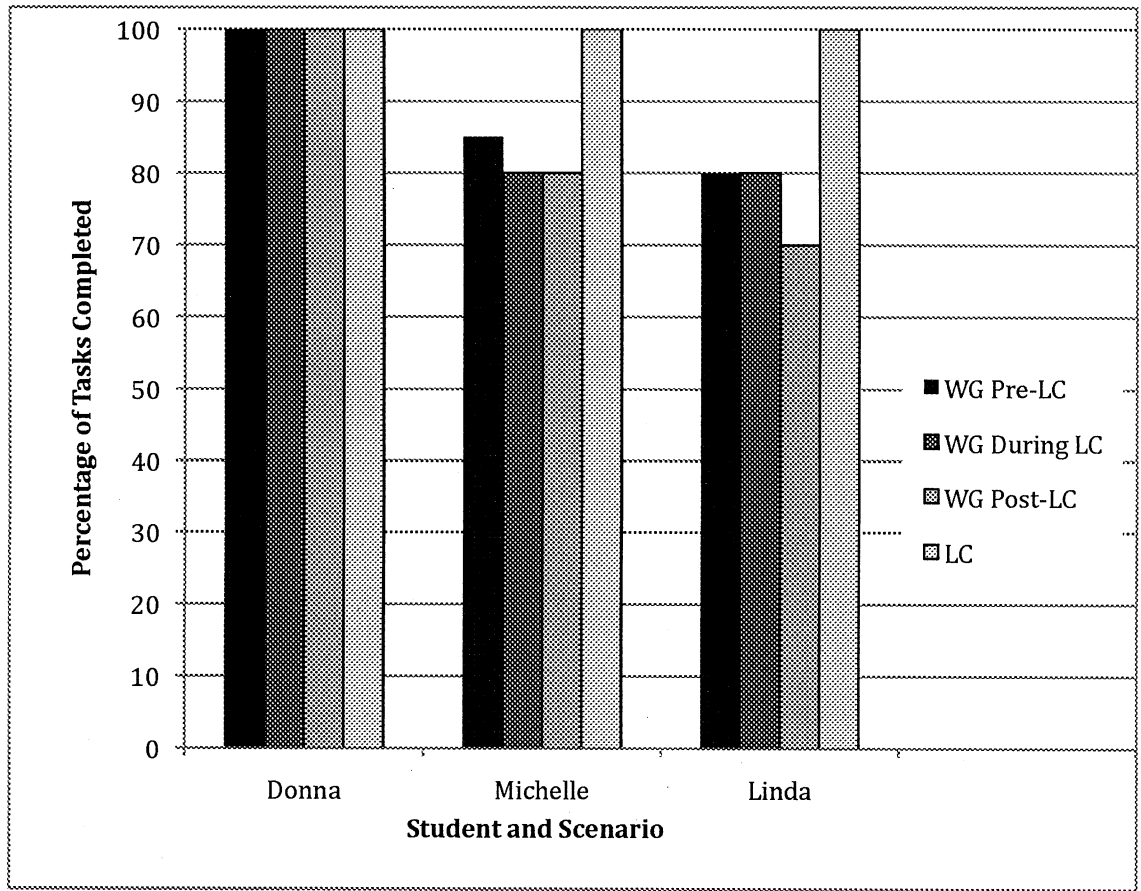
The F&P assessments were administered in late January 2009 as I arrived in the class. There was little to no improvement in most of the class' F&P levels from the assessments at the beginning of the year (September 2008) to the assessments in January 2009. Since the introduction of the LCs was the only change to their reading instruction routine, I would take any significant leaps in F&P levels on the assessment given at the end of the year (May 2009) to be a possible sign of positive LC influence. A significant leap would be an improvement of two or more levels.

## CHAPTER IV

### Findings

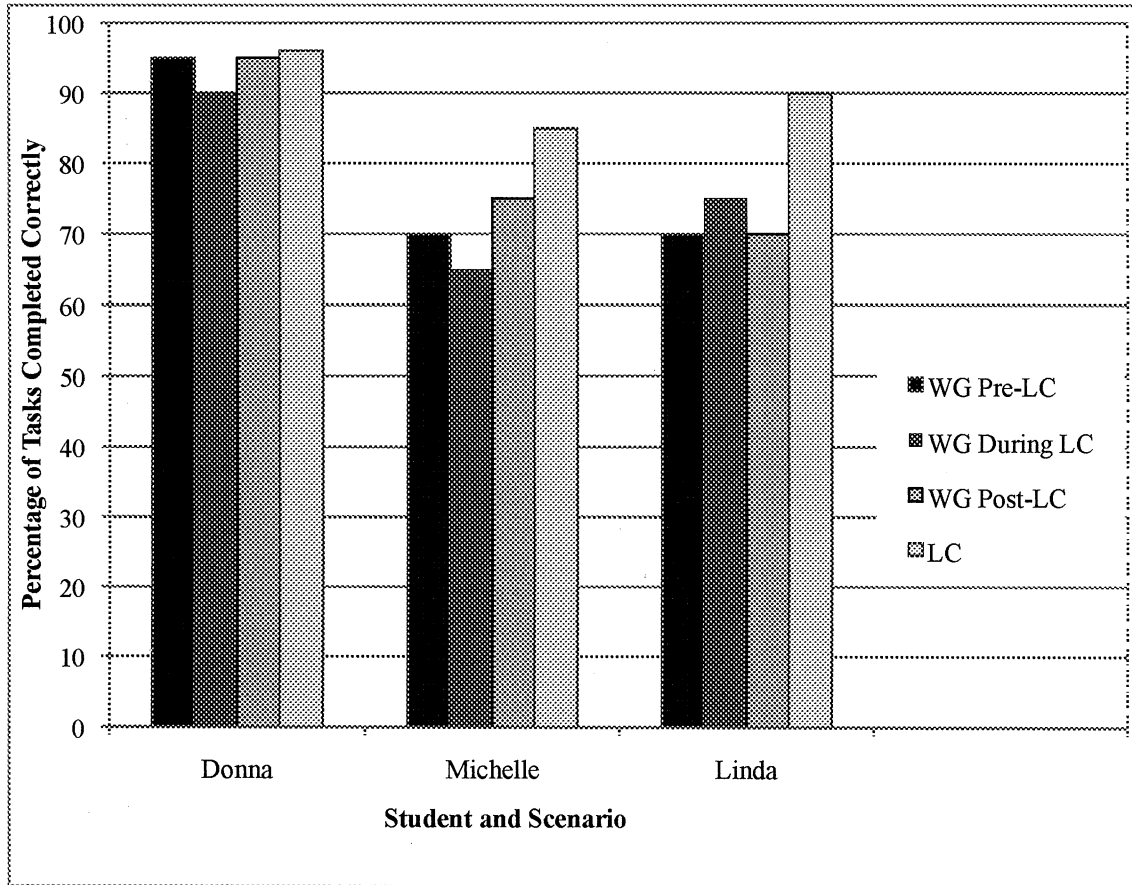
*Completing a task (CAT)* Donna was very consistent in her ability to hand in all of her class work. Her CAT scores for whole group reading (WG) reflected that. She scored 100 for WG Pre-LC, WG During-LC, and WG Post-LC. Michelle received an 85 for her WG Pre-LC CAT score and 80 for both her WG During-LC CAT and WG Post-LC CAT scores. Linda scored 80, 80, and 70 for her WG Pre-LC, WG During LC, and WG Post-LC CAT scores, respectively. In the literature circles (LCs), all three students received CAT scores of 100 points for handing in all of their LC role sheets (see Figure 1).

*Completing a Task with Comprehension (CATWC)* Donna's whole group (WG) CATWC scores were 95, 90, and 95 for Pre-LC, During LC, and Post-LC, respectively (see Figure 2). Since Donna handed in fully completed WG worksheets and LC role sheets, any variation from the CAT to the CATWC was the result of incorrect answers. Her main problem was with open-ended questions that asked for details from the reading. Her answers were sometimes incomplete or slightly off-topic. Her LC role sheet CATWC score was 96. She had a little difficulty with the role of discussion director. She managed the group well, but posed questions that tended to be off-topic at times, such as, "What do you want to be when you grow up?" (Field notes, March 24, 2009)



**Figure 1. Completing a Task (CAT)** Three students' ability to complete class work in four scenarios. WG Pre-LC represents whole group worksheet completion in the three weeks before the introduction of literature circles (LC). WG During LC represents whole group worksheet completion during three weeks concurrent with LCs. WG Post-LC represents whole group worksheet completion in the two weeks following LCs. LC represents literature circle role sheet completion over a period of five weeks.





**Figure 2. Completing a Task with Comprehension (CATWC)** Three students' ability to correctly complete class work in four scenarios. WG Pre-LC represents the percentage of correctly completed whole group worksheets in the three weeks before the introduction of literature circles (LC). WG During LC represents the percentage of correctly completed whole group worksheets during the three weeks concurrent with LCs. WG Post-LC represents the percentage of correctly completed whole group worksheets in the two weeks following LCs. LC represents the percentage of correctly completed literature circle role sheets over a period of five weeks.

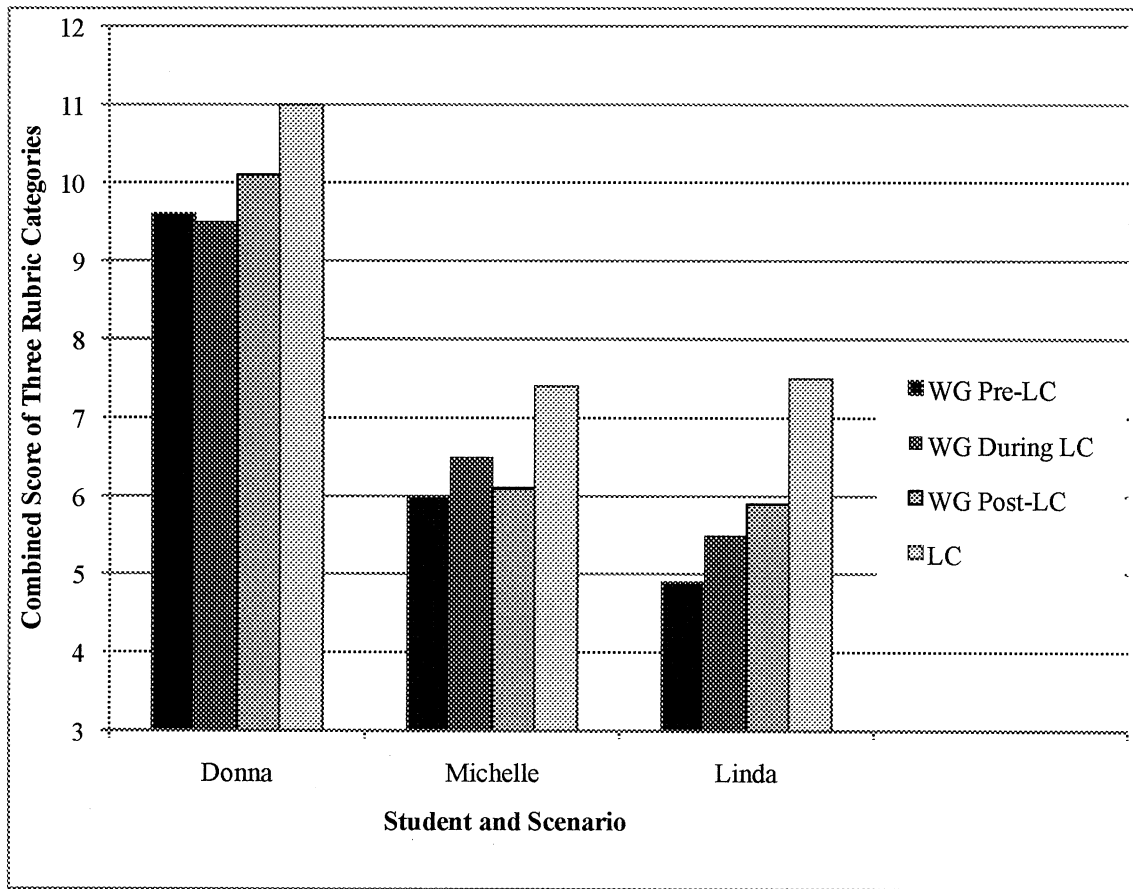
Michelle's WG CATWC scores were 70 for Pre-LC, 65 for During-LC, and 75 for Post-LC (see Figure 2). Her main difficulty was finishing the worksheets during class time. She often left open-ended questions unanswered or incomplete. Questions that asked for character motivation or demanded more than repeating what was in the text gave her difficulty. She usually answered questions relating to vocabulary words correctly. Her LC CATWC score was 85. As a summarizer, she had trouble locating some key points of the chapter. She chose a couple random events as key moments, and had trouble understanding the meaning of a recurring phrase in the chapter. As illustrator, she waited too long to get started on her work and produced a hastily thrown together picture that did not display a deep understanding of the text.

Linda's WG CATWC scores were 70 for pre-LC, 75 for during-LC, and 70 for post-LC (see Figure 2). Her inability to stay out of the affairs of others often led to her work being unfinished when it was time to hand it in. She often did not attempt to answer open-ended questions. She had trouble with questions that could not be answered straight out of the text. For example, in a story about New York Yankee star, Lou Gehrig, the first page sets up the story by letting the reader see how baseball was quickly growing in popularity at the turn of the century as more Americans had money and time to go see professional baseball. Gehrig's mother is a German immigrant who thinks playing baseball is not a proper profession and a young man should go to college. The question asked for reasons why Mrs. Gehrig was disappointed with Lou's choice to play baseball professionally. Linda could not find the answer spelled out for her so she scrawled a one-sentence answer, "She don't like baseball [sic]." (Field notes, March 12, 2009)

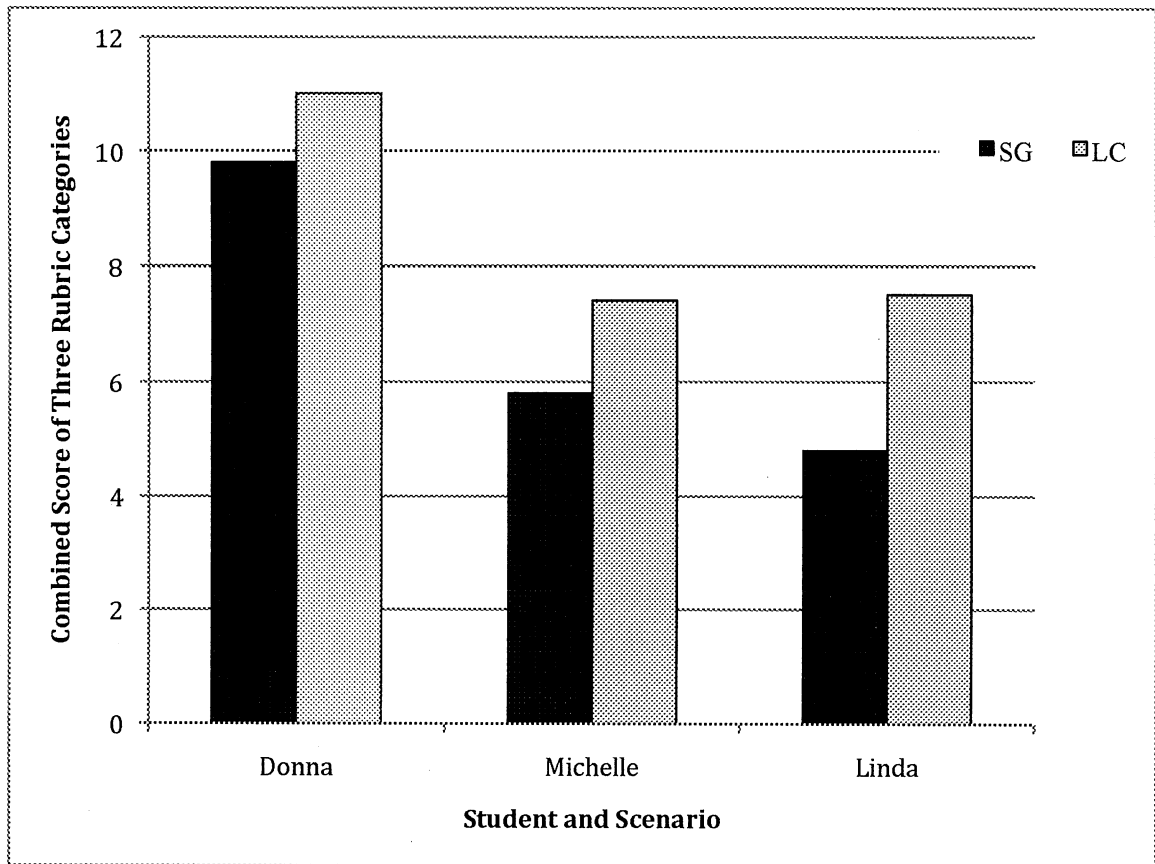
Linda's LC CATWC score was 90. She had some difficulty differentiating between key points and peripheral points. As literary luminary, she could not explain the importance of some of the passages she had chosen. Her reasoning was based on random words from the passage in question and was not indicative of the meaning of the text. She chose a passage concerning an absent parent that confused her. One of her classmates was able to say what she thought the passage meant, and this got the group to engage in a discussion on why the parent was not living at home.

*Attentiveness and behavior (A&B)* As for how the students interacted during the study, Donna's whole group (WG) A&B score was 9.6 for pre-LC, 9.5 during-LC, and 10.1 for post-LC (see Figure 3) with 12 being a perfect score. Her main problems tended to be whispering to friends during the lesson. Her LC A&B score was 11 out of the possible 12. She occasionally read too far ahead and lost her place as a result. The area she seemed to enjoy most was reading aloud to the group. She often would offer to take the turn of an apprehensive reader from the group. Looking at her behavior in the small group settings (SG), her SG A&B score was 9.8 (see Figure 4).

Michelle's WG A&B score was 6 for pre-LC, 6.5 for during-LC, and 6.1 for post-LC (see Figure 3). She was respectful of her classmates, but lost points on her unwillingness to participate (she often put her head down) and her inability to keep track of where the class was in the reading. Her LC A&B score was 7.4. The main difference was in her participation. She asked to read often, and maintained a respectful attitude towards her classmates. Michelle's SG A&B score was 5.8 (see Figure 4).



**Figure 3. Attentiveness and Behavior (A&B) in Whole Group (WG) and Literature Circle (LC) Settings.** A&B is measured in three rubric categories with a value of 1 (negative behavior) to 4 (positive behavior) for each.



**Figure 4. Attentiveness and Behavior (A&B) in Small Group (SG) and Literature Circle (LC) Settings.** A&B is measured in three rubric categories with a value of 1 (negative behavior) to 4 (positive behavior) for each.

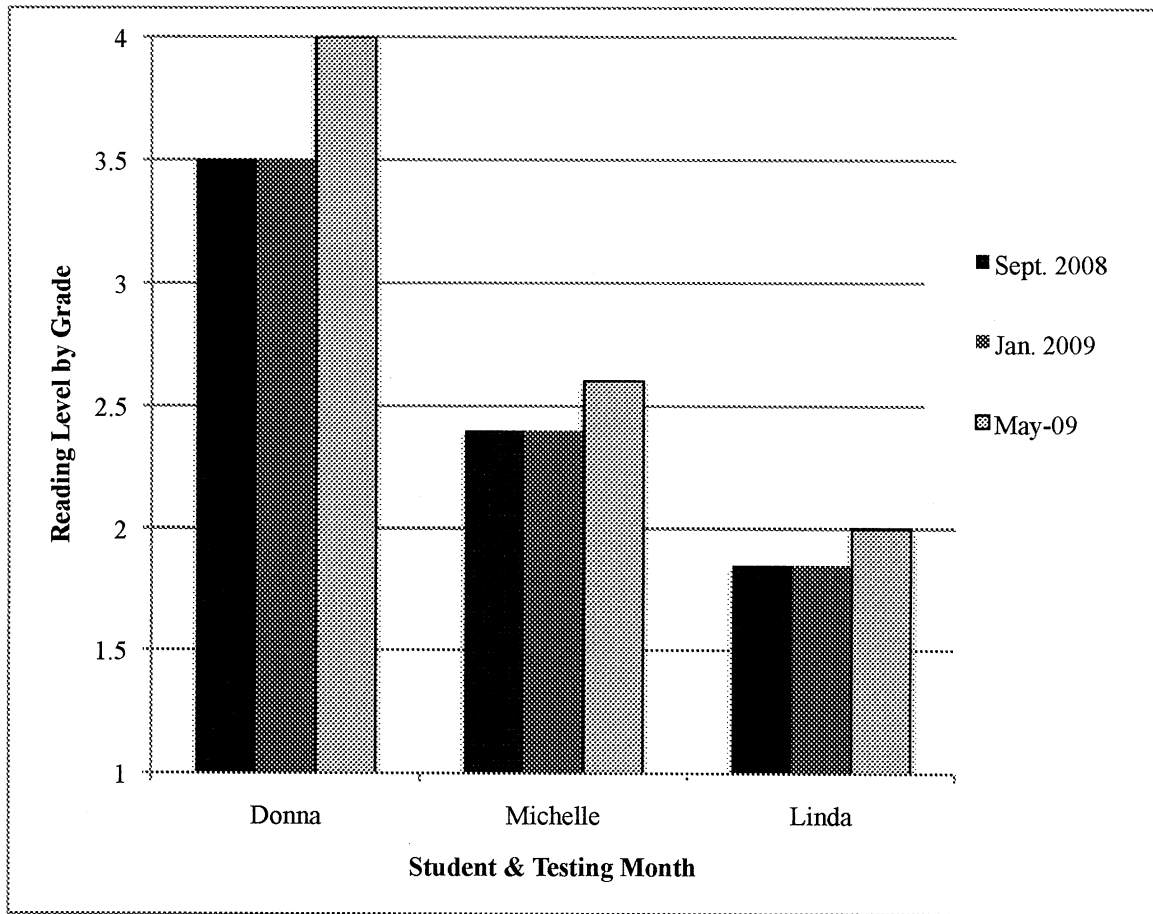
Linda's WG A&B score was 4.9 pre- LC, 5.5 during-LC, and 5.9 post-LC (see Figure 3). She routinely received the lowest score (1 point) for the *respects others* part of the rubric. Because she was trying to carry on conversations during class time, she was often unable to follow along with what the class was doing. Her LC A&B score was 7.5. She still had trouble respecting her classmates (occasional insults were directed at certain students) but was a more willing participant and followed along with greater ease. Linda's SG A&B score was 4.8 points (see Figure 4).

*Fountas and Pinnell benchmark assessments (F&P)* The week after I left the class in May 2009, the cooperating teacher administered the final Fountas and Pinnell (F&P) benchmark assessments of the year to the students.

Donna's F&P benchmark level had remained at letter R from May of 2008 to January 2009. This placed her at a mid-third grade reading level. Her level in May of 2009 moved two steps to a level T. This placed her at a beginning fourth grade level (see Figure 5).

Michelle's F&P level in May of 2008 was N. It had dropped to M in September and had stayed there through January of 2009. Her level in May of 2009 moved one step to a level N. This placed her at a high second grade level (see Figure 5).

Linda's F&P level in May of 2008 was K. It dropped to a J in September and stayed there through January of 2009. Her level in May of 2009 moved one step to a level K. This placed her at a beginning second grade level (see Figure 5).



**Figure 5. Reading Comprehension Levels** as determined by Fountas and Pinnell (F&P) benchmark assessments.

*Analysis*

Each of the focus students handed in completed LC role sheets after each LC session. This clearly set the LCs apart from the whole group (WG) reading. Since Donna always handed in her work, there was no improvement in this area. For Michelle and Linda, the improvement in their ability to complete a task was significant. There was an 18% difference between whole group and literature circle task completion for Michelle, and a 23% improvement for Linda.

In terms of the students' ability to complete a task with comprehension (CATWC), each of the three students saw improvement in the LCs as compared to the whole group (WG) reading. Donna's already high scores prevented her from climbing much higher, but she did move from an average of 93 for the WG to 96 for the LCs. Michelle climbed from an average of 70 for the WG to 85 for the LCs, and Linda moved from an average of 72 in the WG to 90 in the LC (see Figure 2).

While I could not find evidence that points to an improvement in whole group behavior during this study, there was clearly better attentiveness and behavior (A&B) in the LCs when compared to the whole group (WG) (see Figure 3) and the small group (SG) settings (see figure 4).

Donna averaged a 9.7 A&B score for WG, a 9.8 for SG A&B, and an 11 on the A&B for the LCs. This represented a 12% improvement over whole group (WG) and a 10% improvement over small group (SG).

Michelle averaged a 6.2 A&B score for WG, a 5.8 for SG A&B, and a 7.4 on the A&B for the LCs. This represented a 10% improvement over whole group (WG) and a 13% improvement over small group (SG).

Linda averaged a 5.4 A&B score for WG, a 4.8 for SG A&B, and a 7.5 on the A&B for the LCs. This represented an 18% improvement over whole group (WG) and a 22% improvement over small group (SG).

All three of the focus students improved on their F&P benchmark levels between January 2009 and May 2009. Donna jumped two levels, and Michelle and Linda moved one level (see Figure 5). Looking at the class as a whole, I could see similar improvement compared to the earlier portion of the year. Three students from the beginning of the



semester had left before the end of the year, so I was comparing the results of 11 students in May 2009 to the results of those 11 students in January 2009.

During the January 2009 assessment, four of the 11 students improved a total of 5 combined levels from September 2008. During the May 2009 assessment, eight of the 11 students improved a total of 14 combined levels.

As for significant changes of two or more levels, the January assessment had one student with a change of 2 levels. The May assessment had three students with changes of two levels, and one student with a jump of 4 levels.

### *Interpretation*

Looking at the data, some questions arise. Why did students complete LC role sheets more consistently than WG worksheets? Both activities were tied to reading material. The majority of the WG worksheet questions asked the students to find short and multiple-choice answers directly in the text. The questions were simple enough that these posed little challenge to the students. If they were paying attention during the lesson, they could find the answers fairly easily. The problem was often in keeping the class' attention during whole group reading.

In the LCs, students seemed to have an ownership over their specific role. They were the only one doing their specific task, and that seemed to focus them to complete the role sheets. They often wanted to complete their role sheets without the other members' input. In one such example, Michelle was very proprietary over her role as the vocabulary enricher. Another group member told her to fill out her sheet a certain way. As she returned to her work, Michelle replied, "You do your job, and I'll do mine." When she finished her sheet, she asked me to look at it before presenting it to the group. It was

well done, and she shot a superior look at the group member who had doubted her. (Field notes, April 9, 2009)

Since they had to present what they found in their specific roles, they did not want to be unprepared when they presented to the group. The fact that they could explain themselves and have a different opinion about the reading than the others made them looser. Even if they did not quite understand the reading, they could present what they had and see what others had to say.

This loosening up of the small groups and the open dialogue it produced seemed to lead to greater comprehension of the text. Linda had the greatest improvement in CATWC. This owed to the fact that she had the greatest room for improvement. I believe it also owed to the fact that she and the others had chosen the book and found that it spoke to them more than the stories they read for whole group instruction.

This greater engagement with the LC books was apparent during an independent reading session in early April. Four different students chose to read ahead in their LC books rather than choose a new independent reading book from the class bookshelf. When the LCs began, I offered this option to the students as a way to complete the guided reading books from before the LCs. None of the students took the opportunity to finish those books. The LC books had several of them engaged enough to read ahead. (Field notes, April 8, 2009)

Some of the classroom's comprehension difficulties stemmed from the behavioral problems that occurred throughout whole group instruction. Teaching the whole class and keeping disruptive students in line takes its toll on a lesson's effectiveness. While the smaller group setting allowed me to better monitor student behavior, it does not explain

why the students were less disruptive in LCs than other non-LC small group settings (see Figure 4). The way we brought the LCs together at each session might give a clue.

The previous LC session was quickly summarized to bring the group up to speed before the next chapter. Each member's contribution was quickly described and praised. This reminded the students that they had done good work and had been successful in the past. From there, the group moved into the next chapter. Each student had a role and a clear objective: complete the role sheet and present it to the group.

In the small group (SG) settings there was not a contribution to a group effort. The student read, and the student answered the questions. If the student did not know the answer, someone else would. Filling out the answers on the worksheet did not push the students to give any more than was necessary. The students also seemed to suffer from the flexible nature of the deadline. The literature circles, on the other hand, had immediacy to them because the reading, the work, and the discussion were taking place in one sitting.

## CHAPTER V

### Summary, Conclusions, and Recommendations

#### *Summary*

I entered a fourth grade class in the middle of the school year and had to identify a pressing issue that could drive my action research. Looking back, there were a number of possible areas of focus. Most of the students were underperforming in all areas of the curriculum. In reading comprehension, every student except one was reading below grade level.

A deficiency in reading comprehension becomes magnified as students reach third grade and beyond. The New Jersey Assessment of Skills and Knowledge (NJ ASK), which is first administered in the third grade, requires the students to be able to decipher open-ended test questions. Students that fall behind in reading comprehension will struggle to keep up in every subject if they can not understand what is being asked of them.

By introducing literature circles (LCs), I gave the students a choice in the books they read in their guided reading groups. The LCs also gave them the chance to approach reading from different angles and taught them to apply these approaches to their everyday reading. The small group setting of the LCs allowed me to give the students some autonomy in their groups, while also monitoring their work. The students were engaged with the stories they chose and completed the work associated with the LCs with a higher

level of frequency than other language arts exercises. In addition, I encountered less behavioral problems with the students while they were engaged in LC activities.

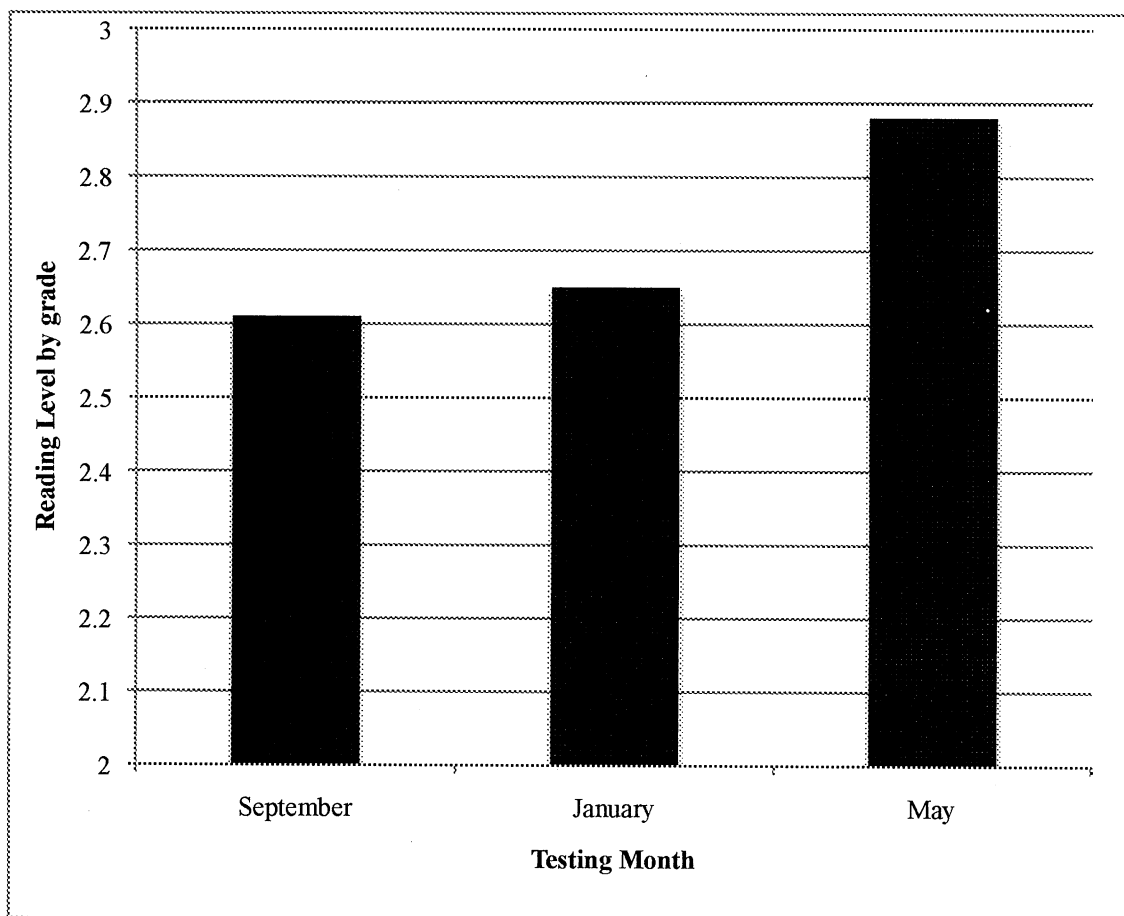
Fountas and Pinnell (F&P) reading comprehension levels for the class in May of 2009 had increased at more than twice the rate they had increased before the LCs in January of 2009 (see Figure 6).

### *Conclusions*

While I can clearly show that reading levels rose at a greater rate after I introduced LCs (see Figures 5 & 6), I do not think I can clearly state that LCs were the sole reason for this rise. The cumulative effect of some literacy exercises can take a while to sink in. It is possible that the students slowly began to absorb the lessons of the past year and put them to use by the end of the year.

I can say, however, that I did not imagine the improvement in behavior during the LCs. If students are better behaved, they will be more receptive to learning. Any activity that can engage the students and improve their behavior should produce positive results in classroom assessments. Teacher driven instruction is necessary, but should be balanced with student interactivity. This allows students who are grasping the material to explain what they have learned to their classmates. A successful student's approach to a concept can also become another student's road to understanding.

When dealing with an underperforming class, the teacher should look at where behavior and comprehension intersect. No educational theory or learning program can succeed if the students are tuning out or are engaged in conversation unrelated to the



**Figure 6. Average Classwide Reading Levels** determined by correlating numerical grade levels (2= 2<sup>nd</sup> grade, 3=3<sup>rd</sup> grade) to Fountas and Pinnell (F&P) alphabetical benchmark levels (K= 2, L=2.2, M= 2.4, N=2.6, O=2.8, P=3).

lesson. Since most students want a chance to speak in class, it is imperative to tailor instruction around student interaction.

LCs provide a good model and framework for classroom instruction across the curriculum. There are expectations for student achievement, but the students can arrive at the same knowledge through different routes. The students are responsible for explaining to their fellow group members how they arrived at their conclusions. By combining each process, the students will have a more complete understanding of the objectives and how they were achieved.

### *Recommendations*

This research would have benefitted from a longer time frame. LCs should be part of the literacy program from the beginning of the year. This would have allowed me more time to model the roles involved. It would also have, hopefully, given me the chance to turn the LCs over to the students once they had displayed a mastery of the process.

While these LCs were based around student ability, I want to take this model into other subjects and bring together groups of varying abilities. I am interested to see if using a “jigsaw” approach, where each student has a different task they must learn and explain to their classmates, will result in a more efficient classroom. With other subjects, there could be several groups working on a similar theme. Each group would have certain roles filled by different students. Students filling the same roles in different groups could come together to brainstorm and discuss what they are finding. This approach might allow certain students to slack off, knowing that someone else will give them useful information. I want to look into imaginative ways to reward the proactive student who arrives at an understanding before his or her classmates.

With students of varying ability in each class, I am interested in using the higher comprehension groups to spark interest in reading for the other comprehension groups. If the advanced readers are excitedly and actively talking about a book, can it spur readers in the lower comprehension groups to take a greater interest in their guided reading?

While I think the F&P levels are a helpful aid in determining a reader’s comfort zone, I don’t want to hold back the student from pushing him or herself. Interest in a subject gives a student a comprehension bump. We should not discourage students from reading above their levels if they show a high interest in the material.

My son, who is in the first grade, is in the throes of a Harry Potter obsession. It started with the movies. He read the first book and has moved on through the next five. The latter books in the series are increasingly more mature and advanced than the previous ones. He is reading above his level because he has discovered that there is more to the books than the movies. He wants to let his other Potter-obsessed classmates know about these differences, and this gets a conversation started that generates excitement in reading. This kind of willingness to push beyond comfort zones into exciting new territory will serve any student well, and will have positive effects later in life.



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## APPENDICES

APPENDIX A

Consent Letter

Richard Kaufmann  
T 267-254-2559  
[richardkaufmann@earthlink.net](mailto:richardkaufmann@earthlink.net)

February 24, 2009

Dear Parent or Guardian,

I am currently a student-teacher in your child's 4th grade class at Salem Middle School. I am also a graduate student in the Education Department at Rowan University. I will be conducting a research project under the supervision of Dr. Beth Wassell as part of my master's thesis concerning the effect of Literature Circles in raising student comprehension in reading. I am requesting permission for your child to take part in this research. The goal is to see if the introduction of this new technique can raise the benchmark reading scores of students in the class.

The extent of my data gathering will include samples of student writing, observational notes, student feedback, and comprehension testing. The students will work as groups to read and respond to literature. All work will be done in the classroom with Mrs. Weinert's and Principal Mulhorn's approval. I will gather my data in the next 8 weeks. In the writing of my thesis, I will not refer to students by their real names.

Your decision whether to allow your child to participate in this study will have absolutely no effect on your child's standing in the class. If you have any questions, or want more information about finding the right book for your child, please call or email me. I would welcome the opportunity to work with you. If you need to contact my advisor, Dr. Beth Wassell, her number is 856-256-4500 ext. 3802.

Sincerely,

Richard Kaufmann

Please indicate whether or not you wish to have your child participate in this study by checking the appropriate box and returning this letter to your child's teacher by Monday, March 2.

I grant permission for my child \_\_\_\_\_ to participate in this study.

I do not grant permission for my child \_\_\_\_\_ to participate in this study.

\_\_\_\_\_  
(Parent or Guardian signature)

\_\_\_\_\_  
(Date)

## APPENDIX B

### Group Work Rubric

| Category                                 | 4  | 3  | 2  | 1   |
|--|--|--|--|---|
| <b>Respects Others</b>                   | Student listens quietly, does not interrupt, and stays in assigned place without distracting fidgeting.  | Student listens quietly and does not interrupt. Moves a couple of times, but does not distract others.   | Student interrupts once or twice, but comments are relevant. Stays in assigned place without distracting movements.                                      | Student interrupts often. Whispers, makes comments, noises that distract others OR moves around in ways that distract others. |
| <b>Comprehension</b>                     | Student seems to understand entire story and accurately answers all questions related to the story.  | Student seems to understand most of the story and accurately answers most questions related to the story.  | Student understands some parts of the story and accurately answers 1 or 2 questions related to the story.  | Student has trouble understanding or remembering most parts of the story.   |
| <b>Participates Willingly</b>            | Student routinely volunteers answers to questions and willingly tries to answer questions s/he is asked.   | Student volunteers once or twice and willingly tries to all questions s/he is asked.   | Student does not volunteer answers, but willing tries to answer questions s/he is asked.   | Student does not willingly participate.   |
| <b>Thinks about characters, setting,</b> | Student describes how a character might have felt at some point in the story, and points out some pictures or words to support his/her interpretation without being asked. | Student describes how a character might have felt at some point in the story, and points out some pictures or words to support his/her interpretation when asked.                | Student describes how a character might have felt at some point in the story, but does NOT provide good support for the interpretation, even when asked. | Student cannot describe how a character might have felt at a certain point in the story.                                      |
| <b>Follows along</b>                     | Student is on the correct page and is actively reading along (eyes move along the lines) or finger is following words being read aloud by others.                          | Student is on the correct page and usually appears to be actively reading, but looks at the reader or the pictures occasionally. Can find place easily when called upon to read. | Student is on the correct page and seems to read along occasionally. May have a little trouble finding place when called upon to read.                   | Student is on the wrong page OR is clearly reading ahead or behind the person who is reading aloud.                           |