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IMPLEMENTING LITERATURE CIRCLES IN A FOURTH GRADE CLASSROOM

by
Melinda B. Egan

An Action Research Thesis

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements of the
Master of Science in Teaching Degree
of
The Graduate School
at
Rowan University
June 19, 2008

Approved by _____
Dr. Beth A. Wassell

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ABSTRACT

Melinda B. Egan
IMPLEMENTING LITERATURE CIRCLES IN A FOURTH GRADE CLASSROOM
2008
Dr. Beth A. Wassell
Master of Science in Teaching

This action research project looked at the effects on twenty-one fourth grade students' levels of comprehension, engagement, and writing when literature circles were implemented while reading the novel Jacob's Rescue, by Malka Drucker and Michael Halperin. The participants, twelve female and nine male, live in a lower-middle class suburban community. While reading this novel about a Jewish boy growing up during the Holocaust, students performed literature circles in combination with a balanced literacy program.

The effects on students were examined through student work samples, including role sheets, comprehension questions, subject integration and writer's workshop worksheets, self-evaluations and observational notes taken during instruction. The data was analyzed using codes that examined the degree of difficulty a student had completing the task, the effort he/she showed, and the level of accuracy he/she demonstrated, and then counting the occurrences of each code.

My findings support the research on literature circles, that implementation does positively impact the level of student comprehension. I did determine that the most difficult to determine effect was student engagement, so I would not consider my results conclusive. In the area of least research, as it relates to literature circles, I found that the students' writing had the most significant and apparent positive growth.)

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There is no way that I could have survived the past fourteen months without the love, guidance, and support from my family and friends. My fiancé, Kyle Gerkens, listened to my stories and problems endlessly, and gave me a much-needed outsider's viewpoint and the encouragement I needed to continue working hard. My parents have always been my greatest source of strength and are my biggest cheerleaders, and I definitely would not be where I was today without their direction and assistance. I offer a great deal of appreciation to the rest of my family, as well, for always showing an interest in what I was doing and listening to me babble on about my project, without fully understanding it. To my friends in the MST program, my sincerest gratitude for our monthly meetings at "our table," lending ears to listen to the latest problems I experienced, and for being truly amazing people to spend this time with. Thank you also to all of my professors and advisors throughout this program. In the beginning I questioned whether or not I would ever feel like a successful, creative and real teacher and now I am proud to say that I do. Thank you all.

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SECTION I

Introduction

Story and Problem Behind Research

In my clinical practicum placement, in the Fall of 2007, I was in a third grade classroom at a suburban school of a wealthier district than the one I was in during my student teaching experience. With my practicum students, I was constantly amazed with the creativity and effort put forth by them each day. With some basic instruction and modeling techniques, a writer's conference to make some improvements, and a final copy rewritten in their best handwriting, my cooperating teacher, the students and I were all proud to display their compositions for all to see. What a surprise it was to enter into this new school, excited to see both the developmental and critical increases in students and their work, only to be shocked that the fourth graders in my new classroom were performing at a level or two below the previous semester's third graders. After consulting with my cooperating teacher at my new placement, it quickly became apparent that one of the main causes of seemingly the entire school body's lower level of literacy was due to the reading series they had all been taught from for the last five or six years. With lack-luster whole-class stories, unrelated guided reading books, spelling words that were not challenging students' potential, and comprehension review journals that provided little support, it was no wonder these students appeared to be so far behind.

I believe that students must be given the correct tools to succeed from day one, and without them, they will struggle throughout their lifetime. It was hard getting used to accepting students work and settling for basic sentences, being pleased if they

remembered to capitalize the first word in the sentence, along with proper nouns, and praising them for end punctuating. In my opinion, students in the fourth grade should be working on improving their writing by using figurative language, making connections between what they read and the world they live in, and enhancing their imagination and creativity with each assignment. So much of the time spent teaching during a school day was being spent on reteaching previous lessons, that the opportunity to expand and develop ideas was most often times lost.

Reading is such an enjoyable and crucial part of my life, and it breaks my heart that today most children in school would rather play video games and watch television than read a good book. My outlook is that there is nothing better than getting lost in a book's setting, experiencing the characters' emotions, and rejoicing with every happy ending. I also feel that reading helps one's imagination grow and flourish because your mind gets filled with mental pictures of the scenes and the people involved as you read the words on the page. Additionally, it is such a vital life skill to be able to read and understand what you read, that if you cannot, you are already at a huge disadvantage from the rest of the people in the world.

As a student teacher, one of my main goals is to learn as much as I possibly can about being in and running a "real" classroom. In this Masters program I am enrolled in, one of the areas I feel I have received the least knowledge and insight about is reading. With this in mind, I wanted to undertake as many learning experiences that I could during the short three-month period I was a student teacher. With my own interest in learning about literacy, the desire to help my students be as successful as possible, and the literature that supports the benefits of implementing literature circles, I hoped to increase

the students' comprehension, engagement levels, and writing skills. According to Lin (2004):

in literature circles, students have opportunities to create connections between texts and personal experiences, ... and take ownership of their learning through discussion and sharing with each other, thereby deepening their understanding and heightening their enjoyment of the texts (p. 24).

After consulting with my cooperating teacher, a twenty-two-year veteran in the teaching community, we both discovered that literature circles were an area we could both benefit from learning about. Literature circles are a literacy instruction method where students read books and then meet in small groups to talk about them. Also, I felt that using this strategy would allow me more of an opportunity to show students how to expand their thinking, to increase their engagement and to positively impact their writing. The basis for my action research project stemmed from the apparently low literacy level of the fourth graders whose class I student taught in.

Critical Question and Subquestions

Research on literature circles, when executed in a classroom, have led to conclusions of increased comprehension and engagement levels, and have also helped foster a student's ownership in their learning (Clarke, 2007). After conducting my own research on literature circles and the effects they can have on a student's learning, I decided to focus on three main concepts.

What happens when I implement literature circles while reading Jacob's Rescue, by Malka Drucker and Michael Halperin, in a fourth grade classroom?

- What are the effects on the students' comprehension of the text?
- What are the effects on the apparent level of students' engagement?
- What are the effects on the students' writing?

SECTION II

Integrated Action

One of my primary goals in implementing literature circles was to keep things as simple as possible for the students, so that they had every opportunity to succeed and excel in reading this novel. In true literature circles, students are responsible to read a portion of the text independently, complete an assigned role worksheet and then report back to their reading group the next day for a well-rounded discussion (Daniels, 1994). To introduce the concept of literature circles, and the designated roles that go along with them, I read Play Ball, Amelia Bedelia to the whole class. I picked this story because it is on a second-grade reading level, and I wanted the students to be able to easily understand the book after hearing it only once so that we could review the next steps. Over the next three days, the roles of literature circles, along with the corresponding role sheets were explored (Lopez, n.d.). As I would explain and model the types of appropriate responses for each role, students were given laminated copies of the role sheets to look at and write responses in dry-erase marker for practice.

Discussion Director, the first role explored, soon came to be a student favorite because it meant they were in charge of leading the group's discussion for that day. Along with this responsibility, the Discussion Director would have to come up with four questions about the reading that could not be answered with a yes or no. The purpose of this role is to orchestrate the group's meeting, making sure everyone is prepared and initiates discussion. Passage Picker is the next role that is examined, and when a student is in this role, he/she picks out four short passages from the reading section to read aloud to the group. These passages could be funny or scary parts, have good descriptive writing, or just interest the student. The purpose of the Passage Picker role is to focus on the author's writing and the effect it has on the story. The third role I chose to utilize in my execution of literature circles was Word Finder. This role focuses on vocabulary building and picks words from the reading section that could be considered new, important, different, strange, interesting, funny, figurative or hard. In picking these words, students attempt to figure them out, pose the words to the group for clarification and then consult a resource to confirm the correct definition.

Another favorite role of students was the Artful Artist. This entailed students drawing a picture about anything that happened in the reading, including characters, setting, the problem, an exiting part, or a prediction and then members of the group would have to guess what the picture is. After the sharing and guessing period, the Artist will then explain to the group what the picture is and why it was drawn. Another important concept that I wanted students to experience was developing connections with the text, so I had another role be the Connector. The students' duty in this role was to connect what was happening in the reading section to something in their own life. These

connections could be an event in the story that reminded the student of something they had seen or done, connecting the historical elements to another subject or lesson, or to other books they have read. The final role I chose for my literature circles was the Summarizer, because I wanted the students to be able to put the text into their own words to help them find the meaning. Students in this role were responsible for creating a one to two-minute summary of the events, main ideas, and important highlights of the assigned reading.

After all of the role were explained, explored and practiced, students were introduced to the Holocaust through a clip-art book from the *Eyewitness Book Series* on World War II. I discussed the historical time period with students, explained that this book would have some very sad parts in it, but that it was necessary for them to know about this period in the world's history. A question and answer session ensued, and throughout reading this book, students were encouraged to go back into the World War II book to see pictures of what they had just read about.

Once this first week of introductions was completed, students were given their own copies of Jacob's Rescue and assigned one or two chapter a night to read and complete role sheets. Jacob's Rescue is a nonfiction story of a nine-year old Jewish boy growing up during the Holocaust, and the events he had to endure while hiding with a Polish family for seven years. When the previously assigned, leveled reading groups met during the week, each student was given five plastic chips at the start of the meeting. Each time a student shared a comment, asked a question, or otherwise contributed to the conversation, he/she was required to put a chip in a cup in the center of the table. Once all of a student's chips were used up, they could no longer contribute to the discussion for

that day. I established this as a guideline to help students manage their own behavior and have something visual to look at to judge their own participation, as well as force them to think whether their comment was critical to add to the conversation, or if they would rather save their turn for something more significant.

The reading of this novel took five weeks, not including the first introduction week, and I alternated having them read the story independently, with role sheets, and as a whole group. During this five-week period, I also carried out writer's workshops, where I had students focus on topic, descriptive, and concluding sentences in order to enhance their writing skills. This was necessary, I felt, because when I gave the class a writing prompt about what they would do if they were stuck inside of their house for one month, nineteen out of twenty-one students started with the same sentence "If I was stuck inside my house for one month, I would..." To help students realize how monotonous their writing was, I gave back their responses and had everyone stand up, they read their opening sentence aloud and if anyone else matched their sentence, both would sit down. I went through the whole class, and only two students were standing at the end of this activity.

Additionally, I wanted students to be able to use what they were learning about in this book and apply it to other subjects besides language arts. While students were learning about area in their Math lessons, I created problems for them to figure out the area of an apartment the characters in the book lived in, and how much square space each person could call their own. In Social Studies, students were studying the Revolutionary War, and I would frequently ask students to relate World War II to the Revolutionary War. Students also completed a timeline of some important events during the Holocaust.

As one of the culminating activities, students heard the mythological story about carob trees being planted because they had just finished a unit on land and water in

Science:

One day, I was walking down the road when I saw a man planting a carob tree. I asked him how long it would take for this tree to bear fruit. He replied, "Seventy years." I then asked the man, "Do you think you will live another seventy years and eat the fruit of this tree?" The man answered, "Perhaps not. However, when I was born into this world, I found many carob trees planted by my father and grandfather. Just as they planted trees for me, I am planting trees for my children so they will be able to eat the fruit of these trees (Schram, n.d, ¶2-5).

Students discussed the significance of planting these trees, in order for people who were not alive during the Holocaust to be able to see these trees along the Avenue of the Righteous, in Israel, and remember what happened. Students created their own carob trees out of natural materials in their own backyards and presented them to the class for our own Avenue of the Righteous.

The final activity associated with this book was a poster the whole class created on the ABC's of the Holocaust. I had students pick out a die-cut letter out of a hat and they had to write a sentence that began with that letter, and was something they learned about the Holocaust.

I assessed the students in many different ways, including their behavior, participation and completion of assigned role sheets during reading groups; multiple choice and main idea comprehension questions, completion of writer's workshop and subject integration activities.

SECTION III

Context for Research

School and Community

This action research project took place in a fourth grade classroom of a school that is approximately fifty years old. The school contains about three hundred and seventy students and serves the surrounding suburban community. There is a relatively low-level of racial and ethnic diversity, with a majority of students reported as being White, Non-Hispanic (GreatSchools, 2008). The school community is one where the most support a teacher receives is primarily from his/her grade partners. The basic skills instruction includes an after school computer program, called Study Island, and one-on-one tutoring is available after a long period of waiting due to necessary school board approval. There is a reading coach who comes into the school a few weeks each month, and teachers can “sign up” for the class to receive additional instruction.

Classroom

The classroom where I conducted my research consisted of twenty-one students, twelve females and nine males, ages nine to ten years old. Even though most of the students scored at or above the proficiency level in the previous grade level (GreatSchools, 2008), if one were to observe the class for a day, it would seem as though a majority of them are below level. This difference is especially apparent in their literacy levels, which is why I chose to focus on implementing literature circles, with the hopes of increasing students’ comprehension, engagement levels, writing, and higher-level thinking in all areas. I am

also very interested in cooperative learning strategies and I love to read, which piqued my interest in this area.

Participants

This action research project was not limited to the participants. I did not want to limit myself to only watching a few students, so instead I observed the class as a whole. In doing so, I hope to have obtained information based on the “real-life” classroom, instead of focusing on a few selected and isolated students. My goal was to have every student at least gain some knowledge, information and increase in his or her skill level throughout this project.

SECTION IV

Review of Relevant Literature

Literacy is a vital part of everyday life. It is essential in every aspect of a fully functioning individual. The students in the fourth grade classroom at the elementary school seemed to struggle daily with literacy concepts such as comprehension, vocabulary, fluency, interest level, and writing. It has been reported that the implementation of literature circles can “increase comprehension, improve higher-level thinking, and foster quality responses to text,” (Clarke & Holwadel, 2007).

In this literature review, the effects of implementing literature circles is examined with respect to noticeable results or changes in the students’ comprehension levels, their level of engagement, and the effects on their writing. All of these topics seem to be

assisted by the execution of literature circles and this paper will attempt to further cement these ideas in current reading research.

Literature circles are becoming more and more popular in today's classrooms (McIntyre, 2007). The idea of cooperative learning, rather than competitive learning, is also making its comeback in the education world. With this being said, the use of literature circles as small, heterogeneous groups that meet on a regular basis to discuss the same piece of literature, with pre-assigned roles (Daniels, 1994) is strongly encouraged from primary grades through secondary grade levels. The main goal of literature circles, according to Clarke and Holwadel (2007) is to "promote trust and respect for multiple voices and opinions (and) one of its significant foundations are providing a supportive and safe environment." Stien and Beed (2004), however, stated that the two goals in their classroom are "for every student to feel ownership and to take responsibility for his or her own learning. (They) have found literature circles to be one of the best practices to help students meet these goals," (p. 510). The discrepancy between the apparent central objectives in using literature circles might, perhaps, come from the different purposes for introducing them to the individuals' classrooms.

The first main area of study in this action research project is the presence or lack or influence on student comprehension. The current theory is based on the importance of helping students to consider familiarity or expertise on a topic, author, or subject, to establish a reason for reading, to constantly guess what will happen next, and to persistently question the text to ensure understanding and significance (Daniels, 1994). Numerous studies have argued the positive effects on student comprehension from the use of literature circles (Clarke, 2007; Long & Gove, 2004; Stien & Beed, 2004). The

apparent peer-to-peer connections and use of familiar language seem to have the most influence on student comprehension.

The most prominent research on the utilization of literature circles, however, is on the effect of student engagement. Almasi (1995) defended that “students who talk about what they read are more likely to engage in reading. Furthermore, students in peer-led groups were more substantively engaged during these episodes (literature circles) than their teacher-led counterparts,” (Clarke & Holwadel, 2007, p. 21). Maintaining students’ level of engagement is an uphill battle each day, and effort needs to be made to keep students motivated and eager to learn. When students are presented with aged, dull stories and then they are expected to read, understand, interpret and report on such ill-suited material, it is no wonder why they are anything but enthusiastic to do so. The goal of teaching literacy should be to connect with students in the types of conversations that make them want to read more, talk more and write more to further themselves as individuals, as a group, and as a member of their community (McIntyre, 2007).

Of the ever-growing list of resources on literature circles and discussion groups, there appeared to be little to none on the effects they have on students’ writing. With the apparent increase in student comprehension and engagement level upon employing literature circles, it would be an assumption to consider the positive effects on students’ writing as well. If students are thinking and becoming more interesting with reading and participating, than how can this not have an encouraging impact on their levels of writing? It will be interesting to see if there is an impact at all on writing, and simply no researcher has examined this aspect prior to now, or if there is no research merely for the fact that there is no substantial effect.

Literature circles, though, are only one possible starting point to implement in a balanced literacy program. To ensure that all students are given every opportunity to succeed in the educational system, a multitude of approaches must be executed. According to Freppon and Dahl (1998), when students become literate their “ownership (the value children place on and feelings they have for reading and writing), reading comprehension, the writing process, and skills are critical,” (p. 242). In examining students and their literacy learning, it is impossible to limit their strengths or areas of improvement to a single cause or factor. Instead of blaming a student’s low-level of reading on a particular reading series or lack of skills, one must look at the student as a whole, including their phonetic awareness, decoding skills, comprehension level and writing ability. As Archer (2008) supports, “There are many different teaching methods that are effective ways for teaching reading, but alone they do not always deliver for every student (§ 1).”

As a whole, literature circles appear to be a clear solution to the problems some students experience in learning literacy. Various researchers and authors have supported that the use of literature circles enable students to become thoughtful, insightful and critical readers in their own lives (Clarke, 2007; Daniels, 1994; McIntyre, 2007; Stien & Beed, 2004). All of the research and previously completed studies have interesting points, with a majority of them agreeing on the usefulness and effectiveness of literature circles in any classroom. It is surprising that more text has not been written on this topic, however, because they seem to be such a beneficial tool in the classroom in the areas of student comprehension and level of engagement. Especially for students who struggle in

literacy, it is exciting to think about how they will react and what they will get out of the application of literature circles in their own fourth grade classroom.

In conducting my action research plan, I soon discovered that what I was incorporating into the classroom was not specifically literature circles. Instead, without full consciousness, I was, in fact, implementing a balanced literacy program, because I had such high expectations for my students and I did not want them to simply learn what a literature circle was, but instead I wanted them to be enriched in all areas of literacy. When I incorporated the writer's workshops into my literacy time and integrated different subjects during the reading of Jacob's Rescue, I was attempting to give students multiple avenues of insight, where they truly could take responsibility and individually increase their comprehension, engagement, and writing ability levels.

SECTION V

Research Methods

Overview of Action Research

Action research, as defined by Phillips and Carr (2006) is "a form of research that is practitioner based ... with the goal of improving simultaneously pedagogy and student learning," (p. 10). In becoming first a student teacher action researcher, and then a teacher action researcher, one critically reviews his or her teaching style, methods, management strategies, or any other component of teaching in order to better his or her own character. Action research involves identifying an area of focus, forming critical questions in order to narrow focus, carrying out the designed action, and then reflecting on and analyzing what occurred. It is not a process that intends to prove or disprove a

theory or idea, but rather, it is a continuous progression throughout one's teaching journey wherein a teacher can refine his or her identity.

Data Collected

The data that I collected throughout this action research project consists primarily of student work samples. Seeing as how my main focus was on students and their levels of comprehension, engagement, and writing, it was important to me to see the effects of my teaching through students' independent activities.

A majority of the students' work samples I collected were the literature circle role sheets, where students were given a worksheet that required responses that depended on their "job" for the reading selection. I chose the first three role sheets from the beginning of the story that were assigned, one from the middle of the story, and one from the end of the story so that I could have a baseline of students' progression.

Along with the role sheets, I also collected comprehension questions that I created for the students, both multiple-choice questions and main idea questions, so that I could have a formal way of analyzing student comprehension levels. These formal assessments were given three times throughout the month-long unit, first halfway through the book and then twice at the end of the story. Throughout reading the novel, I also integrated worksheets from different subject matter, of which I collected a Math problem worksheet, Social Studies timeline, and concluding activity. My rationale for implementing these activities were to see if they aided in the students' comprehension of the story and could help them connect the text to other areas of study.

At the conclusion of this project, I created a self-evaluation for students to complete as well, so that I could try to gain some insight from them as to their thoughts on the successes and areas of improvement. I feel that feedback from the students is vital to a teacher's job in the classroom, because if students are not engaged in what they are learning, the chances of them actually building and retaining that knowledge is limited.

Additionally, writer's workshops were conducted once a week for four weeks throughout this project. The data from these sessions included a writing response prior to any workshop activity, topic sentences for the same response after the first session, a worksheet on triangle sentences, and a worksheet on concluding sentences. Triangle sentences have students begin with a given noun, and then they expand on that noun by asking what the noun does, what kind of noun is it, how the noun carries out the action, and where the noun does the action. Concluding sentences were broken into three main categories: circular, where the author returns to the introduction to restate its importance, quotation, where the author writes a quotation to cement the main idea, or summary, where the author reaffirms their viewpoint.

The final piece of this data collection puzzle was my field and observational notes. Observations were conducted during activities from the unit on Jacob's Rescue. I observed the students during times while I was teaching; to assess their responses and motivation, as well as areas of difficulty they were experiencing. I attempted to formally observe them a few times a week, while I was sitting at my desk on the side of the classroom. Observations were taken during the day and then analyzed at home in order to process the information. A running record of my thoughts and opinions, combined

with students' responses and questions, this notebook of notes will hopefully tie all the loose ends together and make some sense of my action research project.

Analysis

During my analysis of the data, I tried to focus on what information I had truly gotten from the implementation of my question and sub-questions. The first code I came up with was when I observed students appearing to not understand the directions completely, or if they experienced confusion with expectations. This code would be given if, for instance, a student gave a response that did not answer the question completely, or if their response showed that they did not understand what the question was asking. I used the students' answers and responses to various material and questions asked in order to make this judgment on the level of their replies. For formal assessments that received a numerical grade, I included in this code grades of zero to seventy-five, on a scale of one hundred.

With the completion of each assignment, task or question asked, I also wanted to see how many students were only experiencing a minor difficulty, either in their actual completion, or with minor errors in accuracy. For formal assessments that received a numerical grade, I included in this code grades of seventy-six to eighty-four, on a scale of one hundred.

For those students who received a numerical grade of eighty-five to one hundred, on a scale of one hundred on formal assessments, I coded them with an accurate/adequate level of completion and comprehension. The reason why I chose to include those students who technically would receive a "B" in a grade book in this category is because

I do not believe nor expect every student to get a perfect score on every assignment. In a perfect world, I believe teachers would love to have a class that received a one-hundred on all of their work, however I also believe that some students' best is an 85, and I wanted to include that reality in my analysis.

The second category I chose to focus coding on was on level of engagement. This was the most difficult and challenging topic to code because in order to feel that my codes were accurate and valid, students would have had to come right out and tell me how excited and motivated they actually were. With this in mind, I created two simplistic codes, one for positive engagement, enthusiasm and/or effort exhibited; and the second code for negative engagement, enthusiasm and/or effort exhibited. In formal assessments, I gauged this primarily on the apparent amount of time and thought a student put into his/her work or responses. Since I was with the students for an extended period of time, I came to realize when a student was doing his/her best work for the most part. For example, when students rushed through their work, it was often sloppy (or more sloppy than normal), with little or no punctuation, sentences that were incomplete, responses that included only one answer of the multiple-part question, or simply rewriting sentences from the book instead of thinking about them and writing them in their own words. When a student remembered to capitalize the first word in a sentence, punctuate accordingly, wrote in complete, original, and knowledgeable sentences and wrote neatly, it was a sign I took as them putting a positive effort towards the task.

Additionally, I wanted to see if there was a noticeable improvement in the students after receiving instruction or modeling techniques from myself, so this became

one of my codes as well. Finally, I wanted to try to consciously make an attempt to note when there was no apparent or significant change evident, so that was my last code.

During the analysis of my data, I also broke up the artifacts I had into various categories so that I could attempt to view pieces of a similar nature similarly. I created five different data tables, see the appendix for actual numbers, with the headings: role sheets, writing samples, subject integration material, level of engagement, and comprehension levels. For the role sheets, writing, and comprehension artifacts, I was able to separate them further into groups by the time period in which they were given. The first section is April 1-April 10, the second is April 11-April 24, and the last is April 25-May 8. My reasoning behind separating the data this way as well was so that hopefully I would see an improvement in accuracy and engagement or effort as the month progressed. I did not put the engagement or subject integration into time periods, because the engagement data was not something I physically handed out and could judge in a set time scale and the subject integration artifacts were given over the course of the last two weeks of the unit, so there was not enough time to break into groups.

Validity of the research

The validity of this action research project will be analyzed using Anderson, Herr, and Nihlen's Criteria for Action Research, which supports that quality of action research should have a specifically-designed system in place in order to accurately assess a project's validity (Mills, 2000). More precisely, I will be using their views on outcome validity, or how accurately the data can support my actions and conclusions, which "requires that the action emerging from a particular study leads to the successful

resolution of the problem that was being studied, that is, your study can be considered valid if you learn something that can be applied to the subsequent research cycle,” (Mills, 2000, p. 21). In other words, it focuses on the significance of taking what I learn from implementing this action research project to increase student comprehension, engagement and writing levels with students in the future, whether it is for the remainder of the year or in my future classroom. In using this approach, even though I will not encounter these students in the following school year, I can adjust my teaching for the remainder of the school year and for students in the future.

Potential for bias

As with any project that is not scientifically based and not performed in a controlled setting, there are many avenues for possible bias. The main area of a potential bias is within myself, because I am the one who created, executed, analyzed and am now reporting on this action research project. I bring to the table a “conquer the world in one short day” attitude, a positive outlook on life, and an inherent desire to learn and teach. Also, my only formal educational teaching experience can be summed up in a twelve-month masters program, and the real-life classrooms I have been a part of for eight short months. Finally, this is my first of many action research reports, so therein lies room for substantial error or oversight due to lack of knowledge and familiarity.

Limitations of study

This action research project was conducted in one fourth-grade classroom during a one month time period in a suburban school district. With that being said, the limitations of this study include the fact that these students, the teachers, and the community all play a role in the results of this study. If another teacher were to execute

the lessons that I did, even with the same language and technique, he or she would not see the same results as I did because of the difference in students, classroom, etc. Also, when I examined the data for evidence of change in students' comprehension, engagement, and writing levels, I only looked at their work samples from and for this unit of study. This action research project report cannot make assumptions on the direct cause and effect relationships, but only an educated guess supported by the evidence collected.

SECTION VI

Findings

Analysis of Student Work

When reviewing the student work artifacts, I looked first at the literature circle role sheets. I wanted to see if there were any noticeable differences with the students' level of accuracy and effort. For the first two role sheets I assigned the students, about half of them either experienced problems understanding the directions or a few problems completing the assignment. But as the month passed on, the students that did not understand the directions or had some confusion about the expectations dwindled completely. Also, those who had experienced a few problems completing the assignment were cut in half. Accordingly, there were only a third of students, who completed the first role sheets on an adequate and accurate level the first time, but by the end of the month, about seventy-percent of them completed the role sheets with this level of accuracy. Strangely enough, when I looked at the level of engagement, enthusiasm, and effort with the role sheets, it remained constant throughout the one-month unit, with anywhere from eighty to ninety percent showing a positive effort.

In reviewing my observations and notes from the actual literature circle discussions, I found that in the beginning, and even towards the middle of the month, students experienced some problems with knowing what questions or comments were adequate responses. Sometime students became too absorbed with how many counting chips they had left, or what the students around the table were doing. Also, it was difficult to determine whether or not all of the students in the group were achieving the same level of success or difficulty, as the time constraints were strict and there was a necessary amount of material to cover in each period. I would have like to set aside one afternoon, where there was no time limit to see where the students' conversation would really go, and I feel this would have helped me to better understand their conceptions and enthusiasm.

My next focus was centered on the students' comprehension levels, as I analyzed their formal assessments that included multiple choice and open-ended questions from the novel we studied. Only twenty-percent of the students, or four, scored an eighty-four or lower, which I considered to be a pretty good start for them. By the second set of comprehension questions, no student scored below a seventy-six, and only three of them scored between a seventy-six and an eighty-four, which I considered to be a slight increase in their level of accuracy. However, when I got to the last set of data, the number of students that scored between a zero (no one actually received that as a score) and a seventy-five, there were six students in this category. When I looked back at my data to see what had happened, I noticed that this data set included four main idea questions that students were graded with each question being worth twenty-five points, so if they got one question wrong, it was automatically a seventy-five. In the previous

comprehension questions, I had only given students one or two open-ended questions at the end of their multiple-choice questions, and then they were only worth ten points each. I did not code for engagement, enthusiasm, or effort with these artifacts, because I felt the formal assessments were not a good indicator of these levels.

When I predominantly looked for the level of students' engagement, enthusiasm, and effort, I found that this was something very difficult to objectively assess. Aside from students frequently asking me whether or not we were going to be reading the book that day, which occurred almost every day, it was hard to distinguish a noticeable effect of their actual engagement level. When I informally asked them what they thought of the book, the majority said it was a good book and they liked it, but I did not feel that was concrete evidence that supported their engagement level. I analyzed the end-of-unit survey I gave them, which included questions such as "Which part of the book did you enjoy the most and why?" and "What would you do differently next time during literature circles?" I attempted to determine their overall enthusiasm and effort they felt they contributed. The majority of students expressed a positive response overall to the survey, with only four conveying an overall negative experience reading the book.

To address my third sub-question, I concentrated on the students' writing. The students' writing samples I collected and analyzed consisted of a written response to the questions: "If you were stuck inside your house for one month and you weren't allowed outside: How would you feel? What are some things you could do to keep busy? What is one thing you would miss the most?" I reminded the students to include a topic and concluding sentence as well as supporting details, and then I used these writing pieces for my lesson on topic sentences. With coding this data set, only eight students experienced

difficulty understanding the directions or a few problems completing their responses. However, what the coded data do not show is that nineteen out of the twenty-one students all started their first paragraph with “If I were stuck inside my house for one whole month, ...” I had students stand up and individually read their topic sentences aloud, and when someone else’s topic sentence sounded like theirs, both students had to sit down. When the students saw that there were only two of them left standing, they were amazed as well. This cemented my thoughts that the students needed help to expand their writing skills.

After the first session of the writer’s workshop, as I named it, which introduced four new ways to start a writing composition, ten of the students showed a noticeable improvement in their topic sentences. Some students experienced difficulty understanding the directions and expectations, and a few experienced some problems writing new topic sentences. The second writer’s workshop, which was adding detail to boring sentences, showed that eighteen students experienced a few problems completing the task, which I attribute to the fact that when I gave them a noun to independently expand on, I gave them the word “ghetto.” This was the name for fenced in areas where the Jewish people were forced to live during the Holocaust, and was from the novel. After I received the worksheets back from the students, I soon realized that they struggled to figure out accurate expanding words for this noun. I modeled the technique with the word bus, which they all are familiar with and can come up with many things about, however, I feel I should have given them another noun with the same familiarity so that they could be successful. The third writer’s workshop session dealt with concluding sentences, and I gave students three different options to end a story with. Only six

students experienced difficulty with the directions or a few problems completing the task, which leaves fifteen students that showed adequate accuracy levels. By the end of this three-session workshop, I could clearly see improvement in all twenty-one students. Even though they all were not on the same level of writing, I could see noticeable development for all of them.

Lastly, with the data I collected from integrating activities in other subjects to our work while reading the book, I analyzed three artifacts: a historical timeline, a Math problem dealing with area, and a Social Studies writing piece. Sixty-three percent of the students displayed an accurate and adequate level of understanding during these activities, while twenty-eight percent showed a few problems, and eight percent demonstrated they had difficulty understanding the directions or expectations. Overall, I would say these were good results, especially with my first attempt at integrating different subjects into a literacy unit.

SECTION VII

Conclusions

This is the part where there are supposed to be fireworks going off in the distance, the choir singing praises in the background, and the momentous all-encompassing conclusions should be reached. However, coming to terms with the realistic side of this action research project, I have come to determine several things. First, I attempted to move mountains when I designed my research plan, and since it was only my first, I probably should have undertaken something a little less broad so that I could more clearly focus on the techniques of researching. Second, it was a constant effort to focus on what

the students were showing and telling me, and then revisit this information in order to make sense out of it and do something about it. At the start of this project, I did not fully realize what a ton of information one can gain from simply observing them without interrupting. Third, I did not reach one final, absolute, all-inclusive conclusion, but rather a series of small, interrelated ones that when put together, will hopefully make me a better teacher in my own future classroom.

Primarily, I think that I learned how to give and say directions in a multitude of ways, because students, and children in general, do not think the way we do as adults. Breaking things down into manageable language and tasks, and then having students tell you back what you want them to do can greatly help in their understanding of the expectations you have. When I was reviewing and analyzing my data all together, I realized just how many students could have been successful if they had understood more clearly what I wanted from them. When I originally received the students' work from them, it did not seem like that many of them did not understand the directions or experienced confusion, it was only when I put it all together did I see quite how many students this affected. This is definitely something that I will keep in mind from this point forward, because if a student does not understand what they are supposed to do, then they will never get the answers correct or learn what they should.

Another understanding I have come to acknowledge is the fact that students should be given personal responsibility for their own learning. I believe that by implementing the literature circles while reading Jacob's Rescue, which was a somewhat difficult book to read, since it was about the Holocaust and had many sad events, I held students responsible for completing a small job while they were reading. This task

helped students comprehend what was happening while they were reading because they were forced to focus on the reading from one particular viewpoint. Also, the students knew they would be responsible for sharing this material with their group in the next meeting. This sense of duty to fulfill an obligation to your peers is a strong one, and with each meeting with the small groups, I could see the students wanting to contribute more and more, because they were leading the discussion. Also, I think it was helpful that I brought in a different approach to literacy that the students had never seen before, and once I explained what we were going to be doing, their excitement was astounding. Once the students became excited about doing the different roles and reading a new book, it was a great start to the new unit.

One of the most surprising things came about when I was presenting my action research project to a group of professors from my college, because one of the women I presented to called to attention something I had not realized. She explained to me that not only did I implement literature circles in this fourth grade classroom, but also it was much more than that. She went on to clarify that I had, in fact, instituted a balanced literacy program, since I had done small group and whole group instruction, assigned independent reading, integrated different subjects into the unit, and carried out the writer's workshop. She asked me where I got the ideas for all of these items, and I simply stated that I was just doing for the students what I thought would give them the best opportunity to learn and succeed. This revelation, of doing these things by intuition, boosted my self-image as a prospective teacher ten fold. I can remember sitting in my first education class, as a Master's student, wondering if I will ever know enough to be a

great teacher, and while I think that one's pathway of knowledge never ends, this was the first time I truly felt like I was going to be successful and had "made it" as a teacher.

After analyzing all of my data and re-reading the conclusions I came to reach, I realized that I agree with my research on literature circles. In carrying out this month-long unit, I am convinced that literature circles are an effective way of increasing students' comprehension and engagement levels. I now believe, also, that integrating different subjects and teaching students to connect to what they are reading helps them in all areas of literacy, including writing. The students' writing, for me, was the area of their most noticeable improvement.

SECTION VIII

Implications and New Directions

I would like to continue to use literature circles in my classroom, because I think the students really enjoyed doing them and there is so much more that they can get out of it if we had more time to explore them. Also, I will continue to implement balanced literacy, because I feel that students get more out of learning if they can connect with it and apply it to different settings and problems. The questions that remain in my mind for my future classrooms include: Can elementary students achieve the level of independence that literature circles are designed to create? What happens when students are given a choice of what to read for literature circles? And can student comprehension levels be increased in other subjects?

After all is said and done, it really isn't. As Phillips and Carr (2006) support, "Becoming a teacher who thinks and acts using action research principles early in your career can help you maintain the energy and enthusiasm necessary to happily remain in

the teaching field,” (p. 165). This experience, although concluded for now, will start up again and continue to grow when I get my first classroom. I will come back to this report countless times to remind myself of what I have and have not learned about myself as a teacher and about my students. I will strive to better my instructional techniques by using the information I gathered during my student teaching. I will always do my best to provide my students with every opportunity to learn everything they possibly can and succeed to their highest potential.

SECTION IX

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SECTION X

APPENDIX A

Parent Consent and Student Assent Forms



Ms. Lindy Egan
Student Teacher

February 4, 2008

Dear Parent/Guardian,

I am a graduate student in the Master of Science in Teaching program at Rowan University. I will be student teaching in your child's classroom from now until May 9, 2008. During my time at Oak Valley, I will be gradually assuming the teaching responsibilities under the supervision of Mrs. Horneff. Also during this time I will be conducting a research project under her supervision as a part of my program's requirements. As a part of this project, I will be looking to see how implementing literature circles during language arts will make a difference in your child's comprehension, interest and engagement level, among other factors. I am requesting your permission for your child to participate in this research. The goal of this study is to evaluate my own teaching ability, as well as see what students can gain from this implementation.

Each child will be asked to participate in group discussions and activities pertaining to selected reading material. During these periods, students will be asked questions, observed while interacting with the material and other peers, and could be photographed or audio-recorded. I will retain all observed materials at the conclusion of this study. To preserve each child's confidentiality, no child's name or identifying factors will be used. The report as a whole may be presented to other researchers if it is deemed worthy of being published. All data will be reported in terms of group results, as individual results will not be reported.

Your decision whether or not to allow your child to participate in this study, as well as their participation, will have absolutely no effect on your child's academic standing in the class. At the conclusion of this study, a summary of the group results will be made available to all interested parents/guardians. If you have any questions or concerns, please do not hesitate to contact myself or Mrs. Horneff at 856-415-9218 x 211, or via email at eganm34@rowan.edu.

Thank you in advance for your consideration, and I look forward to getting to know your child and yourself in the upcoming months.

Sincerely,

Lindy Egan

ROWAN UNIVERSITY
College of EDUCATION

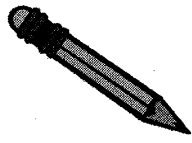
Please retain the top part of this letter for your records and return this portion with your child by Friday, February 8, 2008.

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/Guardian Signature

Date



A Note from Ms. Egan

Boys and Girls-

As you all know I will be slowly taking over for Mrs. Horneff to learn all I can about teaching and your classroom. Right now, I go to college at Rowan University and have homework just like you! As a part of my homework, I have to try out new things in the class to see if they work or not, for me, as a teacher, and for you, as students. One thing I know I want to try out in language arts is literature circles. We would all read a story or book together, then get into small groups to talk about what we have read, answer any questions we might have, and do some other activities along the way. I want you to enjoy what we do in class, and have some input on how we do things. Also, I need your permission to be in these groups and do the activities with me, so that I can write about how smart you all are in my assignments for school. Sometimes I might need to take pictures or record you while you are working, but I will keep all of this confidential. Keep in mind that I will not use your name or anything personal about you in any way. If you would ever like to see my homework or have any questions about what I am doing and why, feel free to ask me at any time. I can't wait to get to know you all better and teach you as many shortcuts as I can so that you will be successful in the remainder of your fourth grade year.

From,

Ms. Egan

Please check the box below, letting me know whether or not you would like to participate in my literature circles; as well as if I can let my teacher, classmates and any other people interested, know how well you all did during my lessons.

YES, I agree to participate in everything listed above

NO, I would not like to participate.

Print your full name

Sign your full name

Date

APPENDIX B

Literature Circle Role Sheets

#: _____ Name: _____ Date: _____



Discussion Director

Group: _____

Book: _____

Assignment: page _____ - page _____

You are the **discussion director**. Your job is to write down some good (fat) questions that you think your group would want to talk about.

1. _____

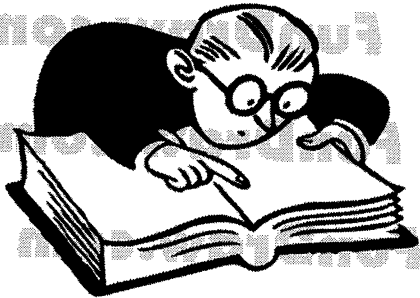
2. _____

3. **Why** _____

4. **How** _____

#: _____ Name: _____

Date: _____



Passage Picker

Group: _____

Book: _____

Assignment: page _____ - page _____

You are the **passage picker**. Your job is to pick parts of the story that you want to read aloud to your group. These can be:

- A good part - A scary part - An interesting part
- A funny part - Good writing - Good descriptions

**** Be sure to mark the parts you want to share with a Post-It note or bookmark and write them below.**

Page: Paragraph: Why I liked it:

_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____

#: _____ Name: _____

Date: _____



Artful Artist

Group: _____

Book: _____

Assignment: page _____ - page _____

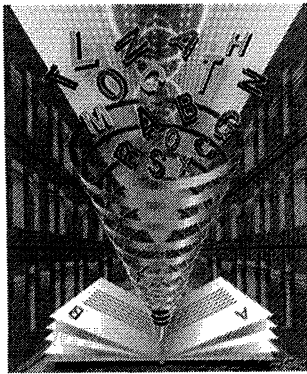
You are the **artful artist**. Your job is to draw anything about the story that you liked and why you chose to draw this picture. You may draw about:

- a character
- a problem
- a surprise
- the setting
- an exciting part
- a prediction

Draw your picture on the back of this page, but write your explanation below so that when you share your drawing with your group, they can try to guess what your picture is about.

#: _____ Name: _____

Date: _____



Word Finder

Group: _____

Book: _____

Assignment: page _____ - page _____

You are the **word finder**. Your job is to pick special words in the story that are:

- new - different - interesting - figurative
- important - strange - funny - hard

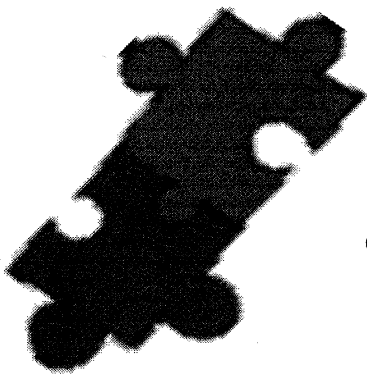
**** Be sure to mark the word you want to share with a Post-It note or bookmark and write them below.**

Page:	Word:	Why I picked it:
_____	_____	_____.
_____	_____	_____.
_____	_____	_____.
_____	_____	_____.

1. How does this word fit into the passage?
2. Does anyone know what this word means/can we figure it out?

#: _____ Name: _____

Date: _____



Connector

Group: _____

Book: _____

Assignment: page _____ - page _____

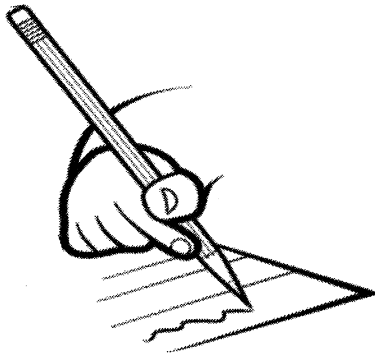
You are the **connector**. Your job is to find connections between the book and the world outside. This means you can connect the reading to:

- your own life
- happenings at school or in your neighborhood
- similar events at other times/places
- other people/problems in other books

Write what today's reading reminded you of below.

#: _____ Name: _____

Date: _____



Summarizer

Group: _____

Book: _____

Assignment: page _____ - page _____

You are the **summarizer**. Your job is to write a brief summary of today's reading. You should give a one to two-minute summary of the events, main ideas and important highlights of the day's reading.

Summary: _____

Key Points:

1. _____

2. _____

3. _____

APPENDIX C

Subject Integration Worksheets

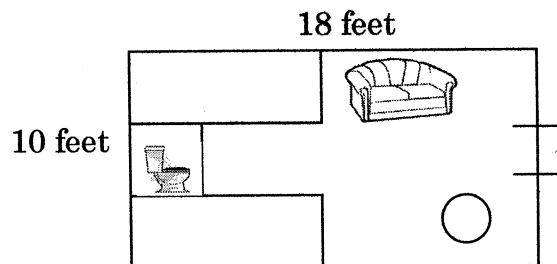
Name: _____

Date: _____

Jacob's Rescue, in Numbers

As we read, the apartment where Jacob and the Roslan's lived was extremely small. Using the measurements below,

1. Find the total area of the apartment in square feet



Formula for Area = _____ * _____

Area of Apartment = _____ * _____

Area = _____

2. If there are 6 people living in this apartment (Alex, Mela, Yurek, Marishka, Jacob, and David), how many square feet can each person call their own?

Name: _____

Date: _____

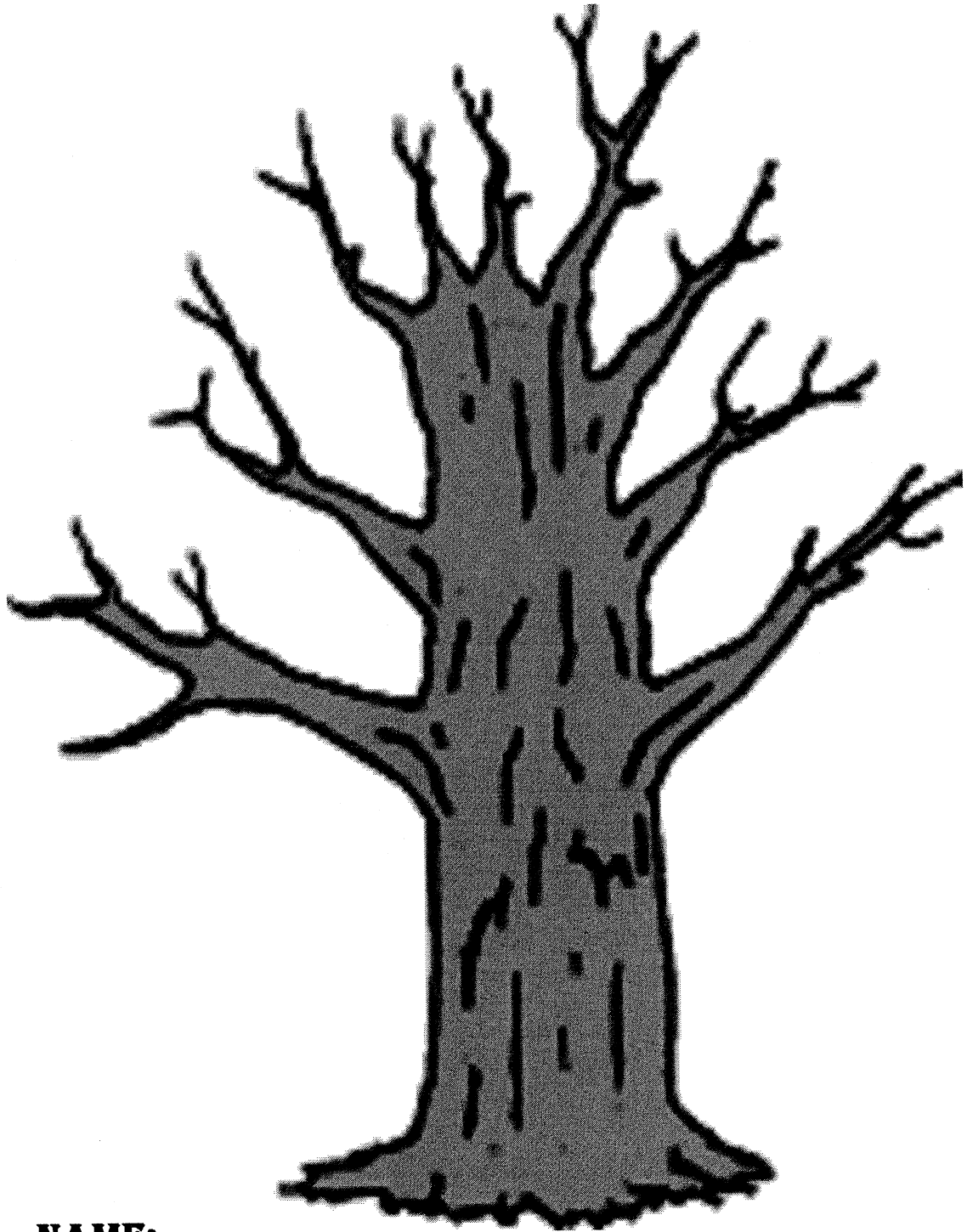
Jacob's Rescue and the Carob Tree

Years after the Holocaust, many trees were planted along a street called "The Avenue of the Righteous" because trees are seen as very important to Jewish people. Each one is planted for a non-Jewish person that helped the Jewish people during this horrible time. The trees that were planted were Carob Trees, which have a mythical story behind their importance:

One day, I was walking down the road when I saw a man planting a carob tree. I asked him how long it would take for this tree to bear fruit. He replied, "Seventy years." I then asked the man, "Do you think you will live another seventy years and eat the fruit of this tree?" The man answered, "Perhaps not. However, when I was born into this world, I found many carob trees planted by my father and grandfather. Just as they planted trees for me, I am planting trees for my children so they will be able to eat the fruit of these trees."

Using leaves from outside, make your own Carob Tree to remember the Roslan family's sacrifice to save a couple Jewish boys.

MY CAROB TREE



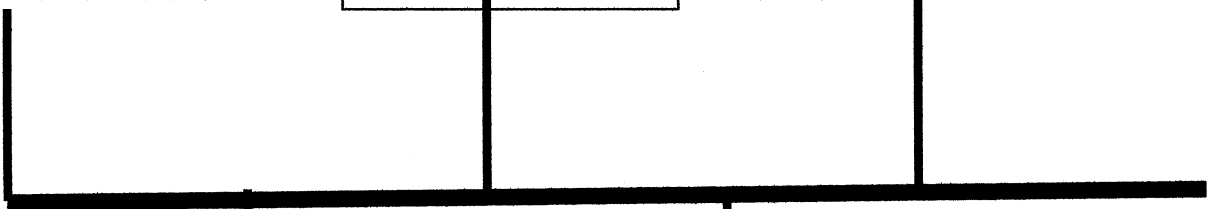
NAME:

JACOB'S RESCUE TIMELINE

1941: _____

1943: _____

1945: _____



1942: _____

1944: _____

THE HOLOCAUST:

A Timeline

1941:

March – Hitler declares anyone thought to be Jewish should be killed.

June – Hitler has concentration camps built to hold 100,000 Jews.

September – Nearly 34,000 Jewish people are killed by Germans Nazis

October – The first group of Jewish people are sent to ghettos.

1942:

January – Jewish people begin to get killed in the concentration camps

March – Over 60,000 Jews were sent to different concentration camps.

June – By this point, more than 1,000,000 Jewish people died.

1943:

January – The first resistance efforts by the Warsaw ghetto occurred.

June – Germany declares all ghettos in Poland were to be destroyed.

October – 300 Jews run out of a death camp, run away and tell others.

1944:

January – The Russian army arrives at Poland's border to help out.

July – Russian troops help to free Jews at the first concentration camp.

November – Nazis make 25,000 Jews go 100 mi. in rain to death camps

1945:

January – The Russians help drive out German soldiers from Poland.

August – Hitler dies.

May – Germany surrenders the war and admits their defeat.

APPENDIX D

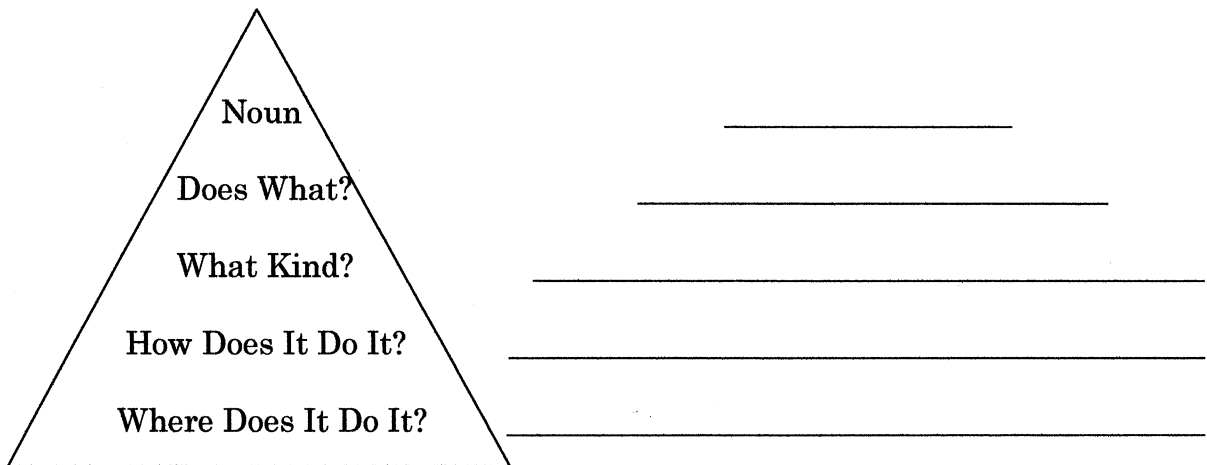
Writer's Workshop Worksheets

Name: _____

Date: _____

Jacob's Rescue Triangle Sentences

Remember what we learned about building detailed sentences. Complete a juicy, detailed sentence for the given word, using the triangle:



Make the sentence: _____

Name: _____

Date: _____

Concluding Sentences

Topic: _____

Opening Sentence: _____

Concluding Sentence: _____

Circle which type of opening and concluding sentence you used:

Queens Always Square Dance Circular Quote Summary

APPENDIX E

Self Evaluations

Name: _____

Date: _____

Self-Evaluation for Literature Circles

Circle one number for each statement below on how you *honestly* felt you did while reading Jacob's Rescue:

	<u>Poor</u>	<u>Okay</u>	<u>Great</u>
Reading the book	1	3	5
Literature Circle discussions	1	3	5
Role Sheet responses	1	3	5
Writing Prompts	1	3	5

Answer the following in **two** complete sentences.

Which part of the book did you enjoy the most and why? _____

What part of the book was the most difficult or challenging and why? _____

What do you think was the reason for reading this book? _____

What would you do differently next time during literature circles? _____

Any additional comments about this book or literature circles? _____
