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THE EFFECT OF LITERATURE CIRCLES ON THE PERCEIVED WRITING

SELF-EFFICACY OF FOURTH GRADE STUDENTS

by
Shannon Taylor

A Thesis

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements of the
Master of Science in Teaching Degree
of
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ABSTRACT

Shannon Taylor, The Effect of Literature Circles on the Perceived Writing Self-Efficacy of Fourth Grade Students, 2001, Dr. Robinson, Master of Science in Teaching

This quasi-experimental research study purported to determine if fourth grade students who were exposed to the integration of literature circles in their classroom would have significantly different scores on a writing self-efficacy scale than students not exposed to this method of instruction. The sample was comprised of two heterogeneous classes of fourth grade students enrolled at an inner city elementary school in southern New Jersey for a total of 40 students. The nonequivalent control group design was the selected research method. The classes were randomly chosen for either the experimental or control conditions and pretested using the Writer Self-Perception Scale. The treatment was implemented for a period of five weeks, and students were then posttested using the same scale. Amount learned scores were calculated for five dimensions and the overall battery of perceived self-efficacy, and the resultant data was interpreted using the t-test for independent samples. At $\alpha = .05$, the research hypothesis could not be confirmed. Therefore, no significant difference was found between students exposed to the use of literature circles in the classroom and those who did not engage in this form of instruction. Due to the limitations of this study, this hypothesis should be reexamined in the future.

Mini-Abstract

Shannon Taylor, The Effect of Literature Circles on the Perceived Writing Self-Efficacy of Fourth Grade Students, 2001, Dr. Robinson, Master of Science in Teaching

This quasi-experimental research study purported to determine if there was a significant relationship between literature circles and student perceived self-efficacy towards writing. No significant difference was found on a rating scale measuring self-efficacy between fourth grade students who were exposed to the integration of literature circles in their classroom and fourth grade students not exposed to this method of literacy instruction.

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Chapter I

Scope of the Study

Introduction

Within recent years, there has been a call from many researchers and scholars in the literacy community for a balanced methodology of reading instruction that focuses on the reciprocal relationship between reading and writing (McMahon and Goatley, 1995; Spiegal, 1998). This reform movement is grounded in the notion of literature-based instruction, where small group, student led interactions with the use of real literature leads to students' literacy development (McMahon and Goatley). The ideology behind the use of real literature within group discussions is based in part on social constructivist theory and the notion that students should be actively involved in and take ownership of their own learning processes. Research has indicated the value of building instructional models that are reflective of authentic literacy experiences, and specifically the value of using real literature (Raphael and McMahon, 1994).

Literature circles are one form of literature-based instruction, where small groups of students gather to discuss a piece of literature in depth guided by their own personal responses (Schlick Noe and Johnson, 1999; Scott, 1994; Spiegal, 1998). Students prepare for group discussion by reading independently and completing a role sheet that summarizes one aspect of the reading process (Burns, 1998; see appendix A). This literacy method also involves students responding in response journals after the group discussions. (Spiegal). Both the role sheets and response journals are an essential part of the learning process, as students need to respond independently to prepare for literature

circles, share those responses effectively within group discussion, and then reflect upon the literature circle experience (Scott).

Within the group social context, students learn to collaboratively negotiate meaning for the reading by exposure to many diverse thinking modes and perspectives (Burns, 1998; Goatley, Brock, and Raphael, 1995). In effect, literature groups help writers become more adept at expressing their own ideas, as written response to reading reflects what is going on in the writer's mind and group discussion further clarifies these thoughts (Spiegal, 1998). After completing research on response journals and literature circles, Hancock (1993) suggests that "savoring the glory of a response captured during a moment of reading and shared later as a permanent record of one's own special thoughts may enhance the importance of one's own written response". In effect, literature circles may influence students' beliefs and attitudes concerning their own abilities to successfully engage in the writing process.

Rationale for the Study

According to research theorists, self-efficacy beliefs that students develop about their academic capabilities influences what they do with the knowledge and skills they possess (Bandura, 1989; Pajares and Valiante, 1997). Therefore, children's self-perceptions of their writing abilities may provide valuable information to an educator or researcher interested in examining the instructional effectiveness of a particular method of literacy instruction. Students who are confident of their writing capabilities experience less apprehension when faced with a writing assignment and find writing more useful than students who consider themselves poor writers (Pajares and Valiente). In this quasi-experimental study, the intent was to determine if the instructional method of literature

circles would significantly affect the perceived writing self-efficacy of fourth-grade students. The results of this study may lead to further consideration in future research of the effect of literature circles on writing achievement.

Statement of the Research Problem

This quasi-experimental study investigated the effect of literature circles on the perceived writing self-efficacy of fourth grade students. Specifically, the research addressed the following questions:

1. Is there a significant relationship between literature circles and student self-efficacy towards writing?

2. Will fourth grade students exposed to literature circles as a method of language arts instruction have significantly different scores on a writing self-efficacy rating scale than students not exposed to this method of instruction?

Statement of the Hypothesis

Fourth grade students who were exposed to the integration of literature circles in their classroom would have significantly different scores on a rating scale measuring self-efficacy than fourth grade students who were not exposed to the integration of literature circles in their classroom.

Limitations of the Study

This study had several limitations that must be considered to provide a framework for examination of the resultant data. The main limitation of this study was a time constraint. The experiment took place over a five-week period and should have been conducted for a longer period of time to receive more conclusive data. As a result, students may have lacked sufficient exposure to the treatment. There may also have been

a pretest-treatment interaction, as pretesting of the students using an attitude scale may have sensitized the students to the nature of the experiment and perhaps impacted their subsequent writing performance. In addition, as intact classes of students were used for the experimental and control groups, there may have been a selection treatment interaction such that the experimental group differed from the control group or larger population. This, in effect, somewhat limits the ability of the results of the research to be generalized to a larger population. Also, there was the possibility of a novelty effect exhibited in the classrooms, as both groups were exposed to a method of literacy instruction for a short period of time. Lastly, different teachers taught the control and experimental groups for the course of this study, and thus differential teacher personality, experience, and educational approach could have had an intervening effect upon the results.

Definition of Terms

The following terms have been operationally defined as they pertain to this study:

Literature circles – Groups of five to six students who gather to respond and discuss a selected work of literature. The literature may be selected by the teacher, or self-selected by the students. (Schlick Noe and Johnson, 1999).

Perceived writing self-efficacy – This term is derived from Bandura's theory of self-efficacy. The construct may be defined as "a child's self-perception of writing ability" (Bottomley, Henk, and Melnick, 1998) and measured through a self-perception rating scale.

Real literature – The actual whole text, published version of a particular piece of literature. This is in contrast to a Basal reader, which often includes excerpts of specific works of literature in an anthology form.

Response journals – After reading or a literature circle discussion, students respond independently in a journal reflecting on some aspect of the reading or discussion experience (Schlick Noe and Johnson; Scott, 40; Spiegal, 1998).

Role sheets – In preparation for discussion, each child may assume a different role and examine the reading for answers to specific questions. The role sheets detail the responsibilities for a particular role, and provide a means of response to the reading. The roles in this experiment are the discussion director, connector, illustrator, word whiz, and passage master (see appendix A).

Chapter II

Review of Related Literature

Introduction

Many researchers, scholars, and educational practitioners have focused on the theory of social constructivism, and examined how students may be actively engaged in and develop ownership of their own learning. In relationship to language arts instruction, this theory becomes paramount in the practice of literature-based instruction, where small groups of students interact and use real literature in small groups to promote their own literacy development (McMahon and Goatley, 1995). One specific form of literature-based instruction is literature circles. Here, small student-led groups gather to discuss their own personal responses to a piece of real, authentic literature (Burns, 1999; Handcock, 1993; Schlick Noe and Johnson, 1999; Scott, 1994; Speigal, 1998). The use of role sheets before discussion allows students to reflect upon and summarize one component of the reading process (Burns). Further, response journals may be used both before and after discussions in order to enhance written reflections upon the reading (Scott; Spiegal).

This particular quasi-experimental study chose to examine literature circles in depth, and the relationship between this form of language arts instruction and students perceived self-efficacy toward writing. Specifically, the research hypothesis stated that fourth grade students exposed to the integration of literature circles within their classroom would have significantly different scores on a rating scale measuring self-efficacy than students who were not exposed to the integration of literature circles in their

classroom. It appears valuable to consider the construct of self-efficacy towards writing, as students who maintain confidence in their writing abilities experience less apprehension towards writing assignments and find the writing process more useful (Pajares and Valiente, 1997). In effect, it is important to examine viable approaches to language arts instruction that may enhance student confidence in their writing abilities, as this study purports to do in the implementation of literature circles in a fourth grade classroom. The limitations to this study included time constraints, the possibility of a pretest-treatment interaction, a selection treatment interaction, or a novelty effect being observed in the classroom. These factors limit the generalizability of the results to a larger population.

<div align="center">Theoretical Basis of Research</div>

In order to gain a proper perspective concerning the role of literature circles in the development of reading and writing processes, it is first integral to consider the theories that form and shape this method of instruction. The first theory involves Louise Rosenblatt's work involving how readers interact with a particular piece of text while reading (1978). In this transactional theory of literacy, readers take both an afferent and efferent stance in reading (Rosenblatt). The afferent stance involves the aesthetic, personal reactions that a reader has with a text, and the efferent stance relates to what information is carried away after the reading (Rosenblatt).

Literature circles are based upon the significance of both afferent and efferent reading transactions in the formation of literacy. In fact, this transactional theory is also referred to as reader response theory, as readers actively construct meaning through responses to a particular text and subsequently reflect upon their responses (Dugan,

1997). During this process, students may adopt both afferent and efferent stances. Efferent reading to gather information or facts is necessary, yet students must also learn to connect afferently with a text in order to discover the aesthetic dimensions which lead to personal involvement and deeper understanding (McClure and Zitlow, 1991). In effect, the learners are actively involved in the reading process through making their own connections and responses. Literature circles as a methodology of instruction seeks to promote these varied modes of interacting with the text in a group context.

A second theory that influences both the ideology and formation of literature circles is Lev Vygotsky's work on social interaction and shared language (1986). Vygotsky professes that social dialogue enhances the development of literacy. Therefore, there seems to be an intrinsic connection between group negotiation of meaning and language development. Further, this interaction may be enhanced through the scaffolding processes of a more "knowledgeable other," who may have more advanced information (Vygotsky). Through this socialization process, the more knowledgeable individual helps others work within their "zones of proximal development" (Vygotsky).

Although educators or adults have often been viewed as the "knowledgeable" authority, children with different social and cultural backgrounds also serve this role in a learning situation (Goatley et al., 1995). Research on student led book clubs, another version of literature circles, found that students built upon one another's knowledge, scaffolded the learning process for one another, and challenged individual interpretations of literature in a small group environment (Goatley et al., 1995). In essence, it is clear that Vygotsky's work informs the belief in cooperative, collaborative groups that negotiate meaning in a social context. This social construction of meaning then leads to

individual development. In the language arts area of instruction, literature circles are one method of small group student interaction that are based on Vygotsky's premises (Dugan, 1997; Goatley et al.; McMahon and Goatley, 1995).

Value and Structure of Collaborative Interactions

Based upon the theories previously described, literature circles are a unique form of language arts instruction where student led groups read and discuss real or authentic literature (Schlick Noe and Johnson, 1999; Scott, 1994; Spiegal, 1998). This community allows students of all levels and abilities to become actively involved in the interpretations of a story (Dugan, 1997; Scott, 1994). Further, within this supportive environment, students appear to be more accepting of others from divergent backgrounds and able to monitor their own intellectual growth (Scott, 1994). Such research reveals the value in forming cooperative groups in which students have a voice and the opportunity to interact positively with peers. By granting students this notion of choice, educators give students a feeling of control over their learning (Burns, 1998).

As students become empowered with the ability to engage in their own group discussions, they move from the act of individual to social negotiation of meaning. Discursive practices in groups help shape interpretations of text and students begin to take upon the role of the more knowledgeable other in connection with particular texts (Goatley et al., 1995). The social community of the group is now using individual knowledge and voice to help shape an informed interpretation of a piece of literature. Research shows these social interactions facilitate success as students verbalize content, listen to various modes of thinking, and hear diverse perspectives (Burns, 1998). In turn,

all of these processes lead to enhanced comprehension of text (Burns). This social act of knowing promotes the use of strategies that support literacy development.

Students who are given the opportunity to work in small, student led literature groups demonstrate a tendency to assume leadership roles and take responsibility for the context of discussions (Goatley et al., 1995). Research clearly supports the notion of such groups, and even argues further for greater student involvement in the "context, direction, and flow of discussions" (McMahon and Goatley, 1995). It appears that granting students even more control over the discussion process while in literature groups may further enhance ownership and the active learning process. A study of second graders in literature discussions showed that when student led questioning reigned, the students became more excited and took more responsibility for their learning (Commeyras and Sumner, 1996). The students were able to generate questions, help one another clarify questions, listen carefully to peers, engage in critical thinking, and appreciate the opportunity to reflect upon their questions (Commeyras and Sumner). The groups clearly facilitated higher order thinking skills and positive interactions among students.

Although it seems valuable to allow students to maintain much of the control within their literature groups, it is also integral to consider how the classroom environment may be structured to maintain a positive atmosphere of learning. The classroom climate should focus upon collaboration, respect, independence, and responsibility (Schlick Noe and Johnson, 1999). That is, students should all feel valuable, be comfortable taking responsibility for preparations for group work, have respect for all voices in the classroom, and know how to use their own voice in a

collaborative group (Schlick Noe and Johnson). Without such a climate, there is a risk of literature circles being unconducive to learning and failing the aims or objectives they seek to attain.

In addition, the classroom atmosphere should also be structured in such a manner that involves the gradual release of control and responsibility from teacher to student. Teacher modeling, scaffolding, and monitoring are all essential for teaching students towards more responsibility for the direction and organization of group discussions (McMahon and Goatley, 1995; Schlick Noe and Johnson, 1999). Gradual adjustments will take place over time with negotiation and variations in roles, as students learn to hear all voices, share their responses, and assume more responsibility for leadership and guidance (McMahon and Goatley). Educators must always be willing to model and scaffold the discussion processes in an attempt to help shape the desired student behaviors. Eventually, the hope is that the classroom environment will be one supportive of risk taking, various constructions of meaning, collaborative learning, and student responsibility (Scott, 1994).

Impact of Literature Circles Upon Reading

Research studies have examined the relationship between literature circles and the reading achievement of students exposed to this method of instruction. According to data collected in a book club study, a method comparable to literature circles, students involved in book club classrooms had standardized test scores as high as those students in a more traditional reading program where the tested skills were taught directly (Raphael and McMahon, 1994). Further, when the book club students were interviewed after participating in the program for one year, they could remember and talk about nine out of

sixteen books read (Raphael and McMahon). This data suggests that students in these small cooperative literature groups have rates of skill attainment and retention comparable to students involved in other modes of reading instruction.

Several other studies have explored the dramatic impact that literature groups have on the reading skills and strategies of students, which in turn would also influence achievement (Tunkle, Anderson, and Evans, 1999). These groups enhance the overall meaning construction process for students when working with a particular text (Goatley et al., 1995). There is evidence that children in literature groups engage in clarification and the use of numerous information sources to facilitate meaning construction and comprehension (Goatley et al.). Thus, these students transcend mere summary and make intertextual connections to order and structure their interpretations as a group. Students demonstrate comprehension by drawing upon what they read to clarify confusion, and move beyond the text to offer explanations for story events or predict occurrences in later chapters (Goatley et al.; Scott, 1994). In essence, students are moving toward a social, interpretative community that draws upon a myriad of voices to aid in the meaning-making process.

Beyond the connection between literature circles and success within a reading program, these groups also appear to generate a more positive attitude towards reading in general. Research shows that students read more independently when involved in literature groups (Goatley et al., 1995; Scott, 1994). In turn, this independent reading motivates students to encourage one another, connect their experiences, critically explore the text, and draw upon various sources of information (Goatley et al.). Students seem to develop ownership in the reading process as they monitor their group's growth and draw

connections between the reading and real life experiences. All of these responses to literature are integral in the successful social negotiation of meaning (Burns, 1998; Dugan, 1997; Goatley et al.; Martinez-Roldan and Lopez-Robertson, 1999/2000; Raphael and McMahon, 1994; Scott; Spiegal, 1998). Further, responding to literature in such a manner helps learners become fully engaged in reading, which is important for developing the reading habit (Spiegal). This habit of reading on one's own independent time by personal choice is what truly indicates a positive view of and interest in the reading process.

<center>Impact of Literature Circles Upon Writing</center>

A complete language arts approach must be examined in light of both the reading and writing opportunities that arise within the program. For balanced literacy to exist in any mode of instruction, an emphasis must be placed upon the reciprocal relationship between reading and writing (Spiegal, 1998). Literature circles may be implemented as part of or supplementary to such a balanced approach and should not be conceived of as a replacement for an entire language arts curriculum (Schlick Noe and Johnson, 1999). As such, literature groups may be viewed in regards to how they held solidify such connections between reading and writing, and subsequently influence overall achievement and attitude towards the language arts. Reading in a balanced program should lead to learning about new forms of writing, ways of expressing ideas, new words, different syntactic structures, and knowledge of the world in general (Spiegal). Writing should further support the reading process and help clarify thoughts about what is being read (Spiegal).

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Literature circles integrate reading and writing reflections throughout the discussion process. Role sheets and reading logs are the two main methods used for reflecting upon, evaluating, connecting with, questioning, synthesizing, and illustrating events or experiences contained in a piece of literature (Schlick Noe and Johnson, 1999; Scott, 1994). Such approaches to personal response through writing should allow students to see the value of writing in the construction of meaning and clarification of issues (Spiegal, 1998).

Writing in connection with reading and literature discussion groups opens up a range of considerations that must be addressed to make the process most effective. First, thinking on paper through writing should be as authentic as possible for students if they are going to invest their time, effort, and selves into the writing (Dugan, 1997). That is, the possibilities for writing should contain elements with which the student may relate and inspire drawing connections with what is being read. Also, when using response journals or logs, it is important to consider the range of possibilities for student reflection. Students may respond in a manner including personal meaning making, character and plot involvement, and literary criticism (Hancock, 1993). The various approaches to response echo the processes a successful reader uses in comprehension and interpretation of literature. Overall, writing in literature discussions may focus student attention on important issues, encourage development of relevant stances for literary understanding, and illuminate ways to link ideas within and across texts (Raphael and McMahon, 1994).

Research studies that examine the connection between literature circles and writing development offer several noteworthy observations. The synthesized understanding achieved through writing appear to enhance literacy overall (Dugan, 1997;

Raphael and McMahon, 1994; Scott, 1994; Spiegal, 1998). Specifically, writers in literature circle groups appear to become better at expressing their ideas, as journal writing clarifies on paper what is going on in the writer's mind (Spiegal). Writing begins to transcend summary and explores other patterns of response if students are allowed to write continually while reading a text (Handcock, 1993). As literature circles are a method of instruction based on continuous reading and response, it appears that the fluidity and complexity of student writing would improve dramatically with their integration in the classroom. In one literature group study, reading logs analyzed for content, format, and range of ideas found that writing did in fact become more sophisticated over time (Raphael and McMahon).

Beyond the value of the reflective writing process, it is also important to explore how written response helps shape and inform literature group discussions. It appears that the sharing of an individual response in the context of a group is essential for understanding one's writing (Scott, 1994). Further, each individual student's thoughts and reflections lead to public shared experiences through oral discussion (Goatley et al., 1995). Both the individual student and literature group seem to benefit from the verbal articulation of experience, as personal ideas are discussed and explored by the group.

<center>Writing and Perceived Self-Efficacy</center>

The dramatic connection between literature circles or groups and improved reading and writing development has been explored in several research studies, as elaborated upon in previous sections. It also appears valuable to consider how students may feel during this process, and particularly if attitudes concerning writing ability may be influenced as a result of the integration of literature circles in the classroom. In order

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to assess students' feelings, the construct of "perceived self-efficacy" as developed by Bandura is useful for measuring "a child's self perception of writing ability" (Bottomley, Henk, and Melnick, 1998). In addition, the relationship between perceived self-efficacy and writing must be carefully explored in relationship to writing ability and achievement. Previous research has failed to directly explore the connection between literature circles and perceived self-efficacy towards writing, and therefore the elaboration of past studies will be of a more general nature.

Research has clearly concluded that attitudes and beliefs play a key role in writing (Pajares and Valiante, 1997; Zimmerman and Bandura, 1994). Students who are more confident in their writing abilities experience less apprehension and find writing more useful when confronted with an assignment than students who consider themselves poor writers (Pajares and Valiante). Clearly, the conception of one's writing ability, or writing self-efficacy, will affect the manner in which student's approach the writing process. It is significant for researchers and school practitioners to explore such beliefs about academic capabilities, as they are important predictors of other affective variables and performance, and components of motivation of behavior (Pajares and Valiante).

In directly examining the relationship between self-efficacy and overall achievement, it becomes evident that the two are connected. The stronger the perceived self-efficacy, the higher the goals people set for themselves (Bandura, 1989). In turn, these self-beliefs of efficacy influence people's decisions regarding what "challenges to undertake, how much effort to expend in the endeavor, and how long to perservere in the face of difficulties" (Bandura). Thus, individuals with strong perceived self-efficacy towards a particular subject will be more likely to perform in that area with dedication,

effort, and perserverence. It is valuable to consider student self-efficacy towards writing

to determine what methods of instruction may exert an influence on this important

measure of self-belief.

More specifically in regards to writing, research has confirmed that student's self-

efficacy beliefs influence writing skills, performance, and persistence towards

accomplishment of goals (Pajares and Valiante, 1997; Zimmerman and Bandura, 1994).

Elementary students' self-efficacy beliefs regarding their writing capabilities directly

influenced their "writing apprehension, perceived usefulness of writing, and essay writing

performance" (Pajares and Valiante). According to these studies, students with a higher

perceived self-efficacy generally approach writing with a positive attitude, feeling of

usefulness, and greater level of performance (Pajares and Valiante; Zimmerman and

Bandura). Self-efficacy theorists have maintained that those who are confident in their

capabilities will intensify their efforts if they do not achieve their goals, and continue to

persist until they succeed (Zimmerman and Bandura). Therefore, it is significant to

examine approaches to instruction that elevate student self-efficacy, and lead to

subsequent enhanced performance. Literature circles are one methodology or approach

which may be explored in light of its influence upon student perceived self-efficacy

towards writing.

Chapter III

Method

Introduction

Literature circles are a methodology of language arts instruction where students lead and participate in small group discussions involving real or authentic literature (Schlick Noe and Johnson, 1999; Scott, 1994; Spiegal, 1998). In this form of literature-based instruction, students gather to discuss their own personal responses to a particular text (Burns, 1999; Handcock, 1993; Schlick Noe and Johnson; Scott; Spiegal). The responses are facilitated by the use of role sheets and response journals, where students reflect on the reading both before and after group discussions in written form (Burns; Scott).

This quasi-experimental study purported to determine if a relationship existed between literature circles as a method of literacy instruction and students perceived self-efficacy towards writing. Students who are confident in their writing abilities find writing more useful and experience less apprehension than students who view their writing in a negative manner (Pajares and Valiente, 1997). Therefore, it is important to research which programs of reading and writing instruction enhance students' conceptions of their ability to participate in the writing process. This study examined if fourth grade students exposed to the integration of literature circles in their classroom would have significantly different scores on a rating scale measuring self-efficacy than students who were not exposed to the integration of literature circles in their classroom. Limitations to this study included time constraints, and the possibility of a pretest-

treatment interaction, a selection treatment interaction, or a novelty effect being evidenced in the classroom. All of these factors limit the ability of the results to be generalized to a larger population.

Population and Sample

Participants in this study were selected from a population of students who attend an inner city elementary school in southern New Jersey. The tri-cultural population was composed of African American, Caucasian, and Hispanic students. The majority of students were from a low socioeconomic background.

The sample for this study was composed of two heterogeneous classes of fourth grade students enrolled at this school for a total of 40 students. The students ranged in age from 9 to 11 years, and included 19 male and 21 female students. There was some diversity in the language arts ability level of students, although most were of a lower ability level as compared to other districts in New Jersey.

Experimental Design and Procedure

All intact classes at the fourth grade level in this school were chosen to participate, for a total of two classrooms. One classroom was selected for the experimental group and the other group was chosen as the control group. The selection of control and experimental conditions was made by a flip of a coin, in which heads revealed the experimental group and tails revealed the control group. Different teachers taught the control and experimental groups for the duration of this study.

The design used for this quasi-experimental study was be the nonequivalent control group design. At the beginning of the study, both groups were pretested with the Writer Self-Perception scale. The treatment lasted for a period of five weeks. All

students in the experimental group were given 40 minutes two times per week to participate in literature circle group discussions and to respond in a personal journal. Students were also given 40 minutes two times per week for reading of specified chapters in the literature and for preparing a role sheet in response to the reading. The control group participated in language arts instruction for the same intervals of time, but without the use of literature groups in the classroom.

The experimental procedure was conducted according to a specifically organized framework. Students were placed in groups of five students. The students were then given real or authentic literature to use within the context of their literature discussion group. During the first week of the experiment, the researcher modeled the literature circle process and different roles with students by using a short story from the reading anthology. The first book used for a two-week discussion, <u>Cam Jansen and the Mystery of the Television Dog</u>, was selected exclusively by the researcher. Upon completion of this book, the researcher gave a brief preview of two upcoming books with a book-talk, and students had a choice in the selection of their reading book for the next two weeks. The two choices were the <u>Mystery of the Plumed Serpent</u> and <u>Who Stole the Wizard of Oz</u>.

The literature circle sessions included independent reading by the students, personal written response on a role sheet, discussion in the literature circle group, and subsequent written reflection in response journals. After independent reading was completed, students filled out role sheets that coincided with the roles they assumed in the literature discussion. The roles included the following: directing the discussion, locating enriching vocabulary words, describing an interesting scene or paragraph in the

text, connecting the reading with events in real life, and illustrating an event from the chapter. Roles alternated among students during each literature discussion session. The student led discussion sessions took place on the day after the students completed their reading and role sheets and students assumed the roles that they prepared for in advance. Discussions took place for 30 minutes, in which the researcher monitored all groups during this process. Upon conclusion of the specified time period, students responded in their personal journals. Response topics were formulated by the researcher. These topics involved reflection upon different elements, characters, or incidents in the story. If more than one topic was offered, students chose a topic on which to respond independently in their personal journals.

The control group participated in language arts instruction for 40 minutes five days per week without the use of literature circles. This program was based on the Harcourt reading program and text, and involved a mixture of whole language, skills, small group, and whole class activities. Students worked primarily from a theme based reading anthology, small trade books, and a workbook for skill work. Writing, spelling, and grammar exercises were also included in the program.

At the end of the five-week period, students were posttested using the Writer Self-Perception Scale (WSPS) (See appendix B). This instrument measured the psychological construct of writer self-efficacy by providing data on students' attitudes towards writing (Bottomley et al., 1998). This test was designed to be administered to groups of fourth, fifth, and sixth grade children and consisted of 38 items that assessed self-perception along five dimensions of self-efficacy. The WSPS demonstrated high psychometric properties of reliability and validity. The Cronbach Alpha reliability estimates ranged

from .87 to .91 along the five dimensions. Additionally, correlations among the five dimensions were relatively high, ranging from .51 to .76. The scale was given to both groups of fourth grade students as both a pretest and posttest. The amount learned by each student was interpreted based upon score changes on the WSPS from pretest to posttest, and the resultant data was analyzed using the t-test for independent samples.

Chapter IV

Analysis of Findings

Introduction

Literature circles are a form of literature-based instruction where small groups of students meet to discuss their own responses to selections of real or authentic literature (Schlick Noe and Johnson, 1999; Scott, 1994; Spiegal, 1998). Students prepare for these group discussions by reading and completing a role sheet that summarizes one aspect of the reading process (Burns, 1998; see appendix A). Further, students use response journals to reflect upon both the reading and discussion in literature circles (Scott; Spiegal).

This study attempted to examine the implementation of literature circles in a fourth grade classroom, and specifically the relationship between this form of literacy instruction and student perceived self-efficacy towards writing. The research hypothesis stated that fourth grade students exposed to the integration of literature circles in their classroom would have significantly different scores on a rating scale measuring self-efficacy than students who were not exposed to the integration of literature circles in their classroom. Participants for this study consisted of two heterogeneous classrooms of 20 fourth grade students who attend an inner city elementary school in southern New Jersey. The groups were chosen randomly for either the experimental or control conditions, and the treatment lasted for a period of five weeks. Both groups were pretested and posttested using the Writer Self-Perception Scale (see appendix B), and the amount learned over the experimental period was calculated. The resultant data was analyzed

using the t-test for independent samples. Possible limitations to this study included time constraints, a pretest-treatment interaction, a selection treatment interaction, or a novelty effect being evidenced in the classroom. Such limitations influence the generalizability of the research results.

<center>Tabulation of Raw Scores</center>

Pretest and posttest scores on the Writer Self-Perception Scale for both the control and experimental groups were used for the calculation of raw scores. Scores were examined for the total battery along all five dimensions of perceived writing self-efficacy, as well each of the dimensions separately. The dimensions included General Progress, Specific Progress, Observational Comparison, Social Feedback, and Physiological States. General Progress and Specific Progress both dealt with how one's perception of present writing performance compares with previous performance (Bottomley et al., 1998). Further, General Progress assessed more general categories of performance, while Specific Progress focused more specifically on dimensions of writing such as focus, clarity, organization, style, and coherence (Bottomley et al.). Observational Comparison measured how a child interpreted his or her writing performance in relation to fellow classmates (Bottomley et al.). Social Feedback referred to both direct and indirect input regarding a child's writing performance from teachers, parents, and peers (Bottomley et al.). Lastly, Physiological States assessed the internal feelings that a child experienced during the writing process (Bottomley et al.).

The Writer Self-Perception Scale categorized different questions from the test under the appropriate dimension, and the points were added and interpreted according to this framework. Each question was assigned a numeric value from 1-5, and all questions

<center>24</center>

were added together to achieve a score for each dimension. Scores from all five dimensions were added together to achieve a total battery score for each individual. The total battery score for each group was calculated by adding all of the scores of the individuals in each group together.

The posttest figures were interpreted by calculating an amount gained figure based upon the difference between the pretest and posttest scores for each individual. This procedure served to statistically equate the experimental and control groups by accounting for any major differences that existed between the two groups on the pretest. To account for any negative amount gained figures, a constant was added to all scores in order to make all data positive. Amount learned scores were calculated for the overall battery of perceived self-efficacy, as well as separately for each of the five dimensions.

The amount gained figures for the total battery of perceived self-efficacy showed slight differences for both the control and experimental groups. The sum of scores for the experimental condition was 707, while the control group had a sum of scores equaling 764. The mean of the experimental group was 35.35, and the control group had a mean of 38.20. Table 1 illustrates these figures:

table 1

Raw Scores – Amount Learned Overall Battery

Group	Number of Scores	Sum of Scores	Mean
Experimental	20	707	35.35
Control	20	764	38.20

Additionally, amount learned figures were calculated separately along all five dimensions of perceived self-efficacy for both the control and experimental conditions. The control group scored higher on both the sum of scores and mean along the four dimensions of General Progress, Specific Progress, Observational Comparison, and Specific Feedback, while the experimental group had higher scores on Physiological States. Table 2, as follows, provides specific scoring information for each dimension:

table 2

Raw Scores – Amount Learned Across All Five Dimensions

Group	Dimension	Sum of Scores	Mean
Experimental	General Progress	223	11.15
	Specific Progress	185	9.25
	Observational Comparison	198	9.90
	Social Feedback	209	10.45
	Physiological States	189	9.45
Control	General Progress	259	12.95
	Specific Progress	206	10.30
	Observational Comparison	213	10.65
	Social Feedback	229	11.45
	Physiological States	151	7.55

Tests of Significance

The t-test for independent samples at $\alpha = .05$ was used to determine whether or not the null hypothesis should be rejected and the research hypothesis could be confirmed. This test appeared most appropriate to use to interpret if there was a significant different between the means of two independent samples that were randomly chosen without matching. Again, the t-test was calculated for the overall battery of

perceived writing self-efficacy scores, as well as separately for each of the five specific dimensions that compose writing self-efficacy. For the overall battery, the t-value was – 0.58 at 38 degrees of freedom and $\alpha = .05$, and therefore the null hypothesis could not be rejected. In turn, the research hypothesis could not be confirmed. The following table summarizes this information:

table 3

t-Test – Overall Battery

t-Value	Degrees of Freedom	Reject null hypothesis
-0.58	38	No

In addition, the t-test for independent samples was again used to analyze each of the five separate dimensions that comprise perceived writing self-efficacy on the Writer Self-Perception Scale. Each test was calculated at $\alpha = .05$ and 38 degrees of freedom. The t-test for each of the five dimensions revealed no significant difference between the control and experimental groups. At $t = 1.67$, the category of Physiological States came closest to approaching a significant difference for those students exposed to literature circles in the classroom. Table 4 illustrates the results of the t-test for independent samples along all five dimensions:

table 4

t-Test – Five Dimensions

Dimension	t-Value	Degrees of Freedom	Reject null hypothesis
General Progress	-1.05	38	No
Specific Progress	-0.78	38	No
Observational Comparison	-0.46	38	No
Social Feedback	-0.99	38	No
Physiological States	1.67	38	No

Analysis of Data

The research hypothesis stated that students exposed to the integration of

literature circles in their classroom would have significantly different scores on a rating

scale measuring self-efficacy than fourth grade students who were not exposed to the

integration of literature circles in their classroom. According to the data generated in this

study, the null hypothesis could not be rejected and the research hypothesis could not be

confirmed at $\alpha = .05$. Although the experimental group did show some improvement in

perceived writing self-efficacy posttest scores on the overall battery, the control group

showed more improvement. Yet, no significant difference was apparent.

Further, no significant difference could be confirmed along any of the five

separate dimensions of perceived writing self-efficacy. The control group showed

slightly higher scores along the dimensions of General Progress, Specific Progress,

Observational Comparison, and Social Feedback, but not enough to warrant a

confirmation of significant difference. The experimental group had higher scores along

the Physiological States dimension, and came closest to approaching a significant

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difference out of all the dimensions. This dimension relates to the internal feelings that a student experiences during the writing process, and is something that should be examined more closely in relationship to the implementation of literature circles in future studies.

Chapter V

Summary, Conclusions, and Recommendations

Introduction

Scholars and practitioners in the literacy community have focused their research in recent years on the formation of balanced approaches to reading instruction that integrate both the reading and writing processes (McMahon and Goatley, 1995; Spiegal, 1998). This emphasis stems from the ideology of social constructivism, as students are actively involved in meaningful activities that lead to ownership of learning. Literature-based instruction, where students interact and use real literature in small groups, is closely aligned with the ideal of a balanced literacy experience (McMahon and Goatley).

Literature circles are one specific form of literature-based instruction that focuses upon involving the students in all components of a reading program. Here, students gather in small groups to analyze and discuss a selection of literature guided by their own personal interpretations (Burns, 1999; Handcock, 1993; Schlick Noe and Johnson, 1999; Scott, 1994; Spiegal, 1998). Role sheets are used before discussion to assist students in the formation of their thoughts and for summarizing different components of the reading process (see appendix A; Burns). Response journals may also be used before and after discussions in order to preserve and enhance individual written reflections upon the reading (Scott; Spiegal).

According to previous research, it appears that literature circle groups help writers become more proficient in expressing their own ideas, as group discussion helps individuals clarify and refine what is going on in their own minds (Spiegal, 1998). In

conjunction with this improvement in writing performance, it seems important to consider if literature circles may also influence students' beliefs and attitudes concerning their own writing capabilities. Students who are confident in their writing abilities experience less apprehension when given a writing assignment and find writing more useful than students who consider themselves poor writers (Pajares and Valiente, 1997). Therefore, it is important to examine viable approaches to reading instruction that may enhance students' perceived self-efficacy towards writing performance. Such approaches should have a dynamic impact upon student involvement, performance, and attitudes towards writing in general.

Summary of the Problem

This quasi-experimental study chose to examine the impact of literature circles on the perceived writing self-efficacy of fourth grade students. The research focused on the following questions:

1. Is there a significant relationship between literature circles and student self-efficacy towards writing?

2. Will fourth grade students exposed to literature circles as a method of language arts instruction have significantly different scores on a writing self-efficacy rating scale than students not exposed to this method of instruction?

Essentially, the intent was to determine if the instructional method of literature circles would significantly affect the perceived writing self-efficacy of fourth grade students.

The limitations to the study included time constraints, the possibility of a pretest-treatment interaction, a selection-treatment interaction, or a novelty effect being evidenced in the classroom. Such factors limit the generalizability of the results of this research.

Summary of the Hypothesis

The hypothesis stated that fourth grade students who were exposed to the integration of literature circles would have significantly different scores on a rating scale measuring self-efficacy than fourth grade students who were not exposed to the integration of literature circles in their classroom.

Summary of Procedure

The sample for this quasi-experimental study was comprised of two heterogeneous classes of fourth grade students enrolled at an inner city elementary school in southern New Jersey, for a total of 40 students. Students had a lower language arts ability level compared to other districts in New Jersey. One classroom was selected as the experimental group and the other as the control group on a random basis.

The design used was the nonequivalent control group design. Both groups were pretested at the beginning of the study with the Writer Self-Perception scale, and the adding of a constant procedure was used to statistically equate the groups on initial differences. The treatment lasted for a period of five weeks. Students in the experimental groups were given 40 minutes two times per week to engage in literature circle discussions and to respond in a personal journal. Students in this group were also given 40 minutes two times per week for reading specific chapters in the literature and for preparation of a role sheet in response to the reading. The control group participated in language arts instruction for the same periods of time, but did use literature groups in their classroom. At the conclusion of the five-week period, students were posttested using the Writer Self-Perception scale (WSPS). The amount learned by each student was calculated based upon score changes on the WSPS from pretest to posttest, and the resultant data was analyzed using the t-test for independent samples.

Summary of Findings

According to the data generated in this study, the null hypothesis could not be rejected and the research hypothesis could not be accepted at $\alpha = .05$. Therefore, there was no significant difference between fourth grade students who were exposed to the integration of literature circles in their classroom on a rating scale measuring self-efficacy and fourth grade students who were not exposed to the integration of literature circles in their classroom. Findings on the overall battery of perceived self-efficacy, as well as data interpreted for all five specific dimensions, revealed that no significant difference could be confirmed. The Physiological States dimension had the score closest to significance. This dimension relates to the internal feelings that a student experiences during the writing process (Bottomley et al., 1998).

Conclusions

Although the research hypothesis could not confirmed in this study, it appears that the examination of literature circles as a method of literacy instruction warrants further investigation. The short duration of the experimental study may have limited the results, as students may have not received sufficient exposure to the treatment. Additionally, history may have had some impact upon the validity of the experimental results, as the control group received an intensive seminar to improve writing performance during the course of the study. This seminar was not a normal part of the language arts curriculum for the fourth grade group, but rather served as a supplementary effort to enhance performance on state-mandated examinations. The researcher did not have control over the group's participation in this week long program, and the introduction of this program may have influenced the control group's higher posttest scores on writing self-efficacy measures.

Another limitation to analyzing the results of this study stems from the nature of the instrument used with this population of students. Although the researchers who developed this instrument suggest it may be used with fourth to sixth grade students, it appears that the Writer Self-Perception scale was difficult for many lower ability fourth grade students to interpret. Therefore, this instrument may not be the most appropriate choice for use with lower ability students. The fact that several students had difficult understanding particular terminology may have impacted the validity of survey results.

Beyond consideration of such limitations, the results of this study do lead one to consider future research in the area of literature circles and language arts instruction. Although a statistically significant difference could not be confirmed between the control and experimental groups involving perceived writing self-efficacy, there are still many questions that are left unresolved. In particular, it appears valuable to consider an integrated approach to language arts instruction in which literature circles are an important component. An emphasis should be placed upon the internal feelings that a child experiences during the writing process, as this appears to be the area with greatest positive change over the course of the experiment.

Implications and Recommendations

The results of this study do not confirm a significant difference between students exposed to the integration of literature circles in the classroom and those without this method of literacy instruction. The fact that this difference could not be confirmed may be due to the limitations of the study previously discussed. History, time constraints, a pretest treatment interaction, a selection treatment interaction, and a novelty effect being exhibited are all possibilities that may have influenced validity. In addition, the Writer Self-Perception scale should be examined closely for its validity and reliability for use with fourth grade students of a lower ability level.

Based upon researcher observation during the experimental process, many students had difficulty interpreting and answering questions on the instrument. It is highly suggested that this study be replicated with either simplification of the instrument or the use of another instrument that measures student attitude or self-efficacy towards the writing process.

This study may also allude to other valuable approaches to literacy instruction that engage students in literacy instruction and facilitate the development of positive attitudes towards the writing process. The control group's program was comprised of an integrated approach that balanced small group activities, whole class exercises, and skill work. Therefore, although the program did not specifically implement literature circles, it actively sought to involve all students the language arts. Such an approach is also reflective of a more holistic approach to instruction that seeks to engage the students. As such, it is important not to conceive of literature circles a methodology opposed to such instruction, but rather a complementary technique for assuring the active involvement of students. Perhaps a combination of those instructional techniques embodied within both the control and experimental groups' programs may prove most valuable. That is, literature circles should be a part of, rather than a substitution for, an integrated language arts program. By providing a diversity of activities that generate student interest in the writing process, one appears most likely to have a significant impact on the perceived writing self-efficacy of the students.

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Appendix A – Literature Circle Role Sheets

DISCUSSION DIRECTOR

Name _____

Group _____

Book _____

Assignment – page _____ to page _____

The role you will be playing today is the discussion director. Your job is to think of and write down some good questions for your group to discuss. Sample questions may include:

What might happen if . . .?
How did you feel when . . .?
What surprised or puzzled you in the story?
What would you do if . . .?
If you could be friends with one character in the story, who would it be and why?
Do you agree with . . . and why?
What do you think might happen next in the story?

Questions For Today:

1. _____

   _____

2. _____

   _____

3. _____

   _____

4. _____

   _____

CONNECTOR

Name _____

Group _____

Book _____

Assignment – page _____ to page _____

The role you will be playing today is the connector. Your job is to find connections between the book you are reading and the larger world. You may connect the reading to:

•Your own life
•Things happening in school or your neighborhood
•Your friends, family, or other people you know
•Other books and stories
•Other experiences or problems you may have had

The connections I made today between this book and the world outside are:

1. _____

   _____

2. _____

   _____

3. _____

   _____

4. _____

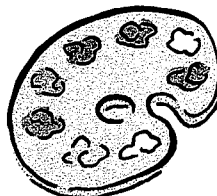   _____

ILLUSTRATOR

Name _____

Group _____

Book _____

Assignment – page _____ to page _____

The role you will be playing today is the illustrator. Your job is to draw something about the book that you found interesting. The picture may be about:

- A character
- The setting
- A problem
- A prediction

- Your favorite part
- An exciting or surprise part
- The ending
- Anything else you found interesting!

You may draw your illustration on the back of this paper, or on a larger piece of paper if you would like. When you are in your literature group, show your illustration to the others in your group and have them guess what it is about. After they are finished guessing, tell them about your picture. Make sure to write a few sentences describing your illustration here:

WORD WIZARD

Name _____

Group _____

Book _____

Assignment – page _____ to page _____

The role you will be playing today is the word wizard. Your job is to find special words in the story and discuss them with your group. The words may be:

•New   •Funny   •Important   •Different
•Interesting   •Strange   •Difficult

When you find words in the reading, make sure to write them down here. You will need to write down the word, the page where you found the word, the sentence the word is in, and the meaning of the word:

WORD	PAGE	SENTENCE WORD IS IN	MEANING
1.			
2.			
3.			
4.			
5.			
6.			

PASSAGE MASTER

Name _____

Group _____

Book _____

Assignment – page _____ to page _____

The role you will be playing today is the passage master. Your job is to find a short passage or part of the story that you find interesting and would like to share with the rest of your group. The passage may be:

•Funny sentences   •Something that makes you think
•A nice description   •Something you learned
•A scary or exciting part   •Good writing or use of language

Make sure to record the passage, the page number, and your thoughts or reasons for the selection:

<u>Passage</u>	<u>Page</u>	<u>Your Thoughts</u>
1.		
2.		
3.		

Appendix B – The Writer Self-Perception Scale

The Writer Self-Perception Scale

Listed below are statements about writing. Please read each statement carefully. Then circle the letters that show how much you agree or disagree with the statement. Use the following scale:

SA = Strongly Agree
A = Agree
U = Undecided
D = Disagree
SD = Strongly Disagree

Example: **I think Batman is the greatest super hero.**　　　SA　A　U　D　SD

If you are *really positive* that Batman is the greatest, circle SA (Strongly Agree).
If you *think* that Batman is good but maybe not great, circle A (Agree).
If you *can't decide* whether or not Batman is the greatest, circle U (Undecided).
If you *think* that Batman is not all that great, circle D (Disagree).
If you are *really positive* that Batman is not the greatest, circle SD (Strongly Disagree).

(OC)	1. I write better than other kids in my class.	SA	A	U	D	SD
(PS)	2. I like how writing makes me feel inside.	SA	A	U	D	SD
(GPR)	3. Writing is easier for me than it used to be.	SA	A	U	D	SD
(OC)	4. When I write, my organization is better than the other kids in my class.	SA	A	U	D	SD
(SF)	5. People in my family think I am a good writer.	SA	A	U	D	SD
(GPR)	6. I am getting better at writing.	SA	A	U	D	SD
(PS)	7. When I write, I feel calm.	SA	A	U	D	SD
(OC)	8. My writing is more interesting than my classmates' writing.	SA	A	U	D	SD
(SF)	9. My teacher thinks my writing is fine.	SA	A	U	D	SD
(SF)	10. Other kids think I am a good writer.	SA	A	U	D	SD
(OC)	11. My sentences and paragraphs fit together as well as my classmates' sentences and paragraphs.	SA	A	U	D	SD
(GPR)	12. I need less help to write well than I used to.	SA	A	U	D	SD
(SF)	13. People in my family think I write pretty well.	SA	A	U	D	SD
(GPR)	14. I write better now than I could before.	SA	A	U	D	SD
(GEN)	15. I think I am a good writer.	SA	A	U	D	SD
(OC)	16. I put my sentences in a better order than the other kids.	SA	A	U	D	SD
(GPR)	17. My writing has improved.	SA	A	U	D	SD
(GPR)	18. My writing is better than before.	SA	A	U	D	SD
(GPR)	19. It's easier to write well now than it used to be.	SA	A	U	D	SD
(GPR)	20. The organization of my writing has really improved.	SA	A	U	D	SD
(OC)	21. The sentences I use in my writing stick to the topic more than the ones the other kids use.	SA	A	U	D	SD
(SPR)	22. The words I use in my writing are better than the ones I used before.	SA	A	U	D	SD
(OC)	23. I write more often than other kids.	SA	A	U	D	SD

The Writer Self-Perception Scale

(PS)	24. I am relaxed when I write.	SA	A	U	D	SD
(SPR)	25. My descriptions are more interesting than before.	SA	A	U	D	SD
(OC)	26. The words I use in my writing are better than the ones other kids use.	SA	A	U	D	SD
(PS)	27. I feel comfortable when I write.	SA	A	U	D	SD
(SF)	28. My teacher thinks I am a good writer.	SA	A	U	D	SD
(SPR)	29. My sentences stick to the topic better now.	SA	A	U	D	SD
(OC)	30. My writing seems to be more clear than my classmates' writing.	SA	A	U	D	SD
(SPR)	31. When I write, the sentences and paragraphs fit together better than they used to.	SA	A	U	D	SD
(PS)	32. Writing makes me feel good.	SA	A	U	D	SD
(SF)	33. I can tell that my teacher thinks my writing is fine.	SA	A	U	D	SD
(SPR)	34. The order of my sentences makes better sense now.	SA	A	U	D	SD
(PS)	35. I enjoy writing.	SA	A	U	D	SD
(SPR)	36. My writing is more clear than it used to be.	SA	A	U	D	SD
(SF)	37. My classmates would say I write well.	SA	A	U	D	SD
(SPR)	38. I choose the words I use in my writing more carefully now.	SA	A	U	D	SD

VITA

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Elementary School: Clayton J. Davenport School
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High School: Egg Harbor Township High School
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