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TALK WITHIN LITERATURE CIRCLES

Talk within Literature Circles in an 8th Grade ELA Classroom

By:

Samantha Brown

May 2014

A culminating project submitted to the Department of Education and Human Development of The College at Brockport, State University of New York in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Science in Education

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Statement of the Problem

A few months ago, back in December, prior to our winter break, I attempted to have a book-talk with my 8th grade students involving an article we had read as a class. The topic was about hearing loss in young adults and how people are going deaf at a younger age due to loud headphones and car speakers. The students were very interested in this short one page article, which led me to believe a small book talk in groups would be uncomplicated and effortless. Little did I know this would led to one of the most off-topic discussions in all but one of the groups!

Group one began discussing hearing loss and how it is “only in old people” and “[they] can’t believe this article is true”. Once that talk had commenced, they continued chatting about car speakers and the latest models. Group two was a bit more involved in their discussion and made comments such as, “I am never turning up my headphones loud again”, “I wonder if this is all head phones, like the kinds that are ear buds” and “I am pretty sure this is just made up”. Group three was the most tuned in to the article and had a deep discussion about some of the vocabulary presented in the reading; words such as “inner ear” and “cochlea” were mentioned and gone over in detail. Group four had basically refused to put in any other thinking for the article and chose to sit quietly, not really communicating on any level.

It is a common theme within my classroom that my eighth graders tend to chat about what is going on in their daily lives and who wore what to the school dance. During their English Language Arts (ELA) time in my classroom, I attempt to engage them with knowledge and ideas that they can expand upon-- usually encompassing a book or topic we are discussing. Since back in December, when I attempted to present this open discussion, I found that only one or two groups out of four will discuss the topics or points, while the other groups go off on tangents about their personal lives. I really want to help my eighth grade student to become comfortable in discussing a topic with their peers and allow them to have a deep,

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in-depth conversation regarding the assigned topic or book. Becoming successful at Literature Circles will most likely increase their self-esteem and provide them with the tools they need to be successful.

Many times within an English Language Arts classroom, student talk is vague and centered around their weekends and what is going on during the school day. When trying to get deep into a student's thought process surrounding a book, it can be challenging. Literature circles are set up to integrate both dialogue and a deep thinking process involving a book and other students reading the same book. While asking students to create dialogue around a book and central topic is demanding, it can be well worth the effort put in to see such favorable results. Day & Ainley (2008) describe Literature Circles as students sharing their own ideas, personal experiences, and opinions in a response to what they are reading. Day & Ainley (2008) also discuss that Literature Circles provide an opportunity for students who may be reluctant to read and participate with a chance to hear a variety of discussions in a non-threatening atmosphere, where students work together to "think collaboratively, think critically, and negotiate meaning" (p. 158).

Allowing for differentiation among reading levels and book choice plays a key role within classroom instruction. Providing students with opportunities to participate in Literature Circles allows for a way to teach all students within the classroom, regardless of their reading level. In any case, Literature Circles are a way to encourage students to "read with a focus and then report on what they have read, determining themselves what is significant in their reading and why" (Blum, Lipsett, & Yocom, 2002, p. 100). While students do have assigned roles, they will still be able to pick and choose what they find to be appropriate and meaningful based on their reading and interaction among their peers. Blum, Lipsett, & Yocom (2002) also found that Literature circles can boost problem-solving skills and decision making skills, which could easily carry over to their other classes and their own lives outside of school.

Significance of the Problem

I believe that providing rich discussion around a book or topic is vital to a student's English Language Arts experience. Literature Circles can create opportunities for this profound dialogue among the students. Having thoughtful talk about a common book can be one of the most helpful experiences for a student. This talk allows students to have meaningful conversations with their peers, without feeling the pressure of speaking out within the whole classroom. A teacher will step back during Literature Circles watching from the sidelines-as a spectator. Students will also take on roles, which allow for the organization aspect of the Literature Circle.

In order to run a meaningful Literature Circle, students must develop an appropriate way to communicate their thoughts and ideas around the book. They must deviate from their personal chatting to more of an educational and knowledge-filled response that correlates with their main topics and ideas. They must be responding with depth, beyond the text comments. This shift deviates from a teacher discussion to a student-led forum on text-based discussion, where students are responsible for their own learning. Literature Circles can be a great representation of critical-thinking skills shown by students. Teachers can also scaffold to fit the needs of the students within the classroom. Some students in a Literature Circle may need extra guidance and assistance to construct meaning, knowing that all students use a variety of reading strategies. Showing a deeper understanding of comprehension is expressed thoroughly through a well-developed Literature Circle. This is not only done independently, but also in the group atmosphere as the other students work together to fulfill their assigned roles and have a meaningful discussion.

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Purpose of the Study

The main purpose of this study is to examine student discussions during their Literature Circles and whole group instruction. Day & Ainley (2008) discuss Vygotsky's beliefs that "children learn language and literacy by participating in meaning-centered and culturally valuable literacy activities. In collaborative social atmospheres students, alongside with adults... reflect, listen, theorize, and create new knowledge" (p. 159). Research has shown that Literature Circles promote the use of higher level thinking skills and questioning (Cameron, Murray, Hull, & Cameron, 2012). Daniels (2004) finds that there are benefits to engaging in Literature Circles, such as a balance between student and teacher interaction, self-directed reading and teacher-guided reading, and wide and close readings of a particular text. Theoretical work completed by Vygotsky (1978) and Rosenblatt (Church, 1997) support the use of literature circles.

Through this research study, I intend to answer the following research questions:

- What kinds of talk do students engage in during a Literature Circle with assigned roles?
- What type of discussion do students prefer (Literature Circles or Whole Group)?
- Why do student prefer one type of discussion to the other?

I have aligned this study to coincide with research surrounding Literature Circles and talk within an ELA classroom. There is a large body of research that supports Literature Circles and develops a need for them within the classroom.

Cameron, et al. (2011) found that students engaged in Literature Circles were "able to problem solve their own issues" and the students commented that in the Literature Circle "you learn how to disagree with each other without hurting feelings, people stayed on task because their roles were interesting, and everyone got to share their ideas and opinions about the book" (p. v). While this was not true in every Literature Circle, it was apparent that the student discussions were meaningful and they found the Literature Circles to be engaging. Cameron's et al. (2011) study is similar to my study in that it

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accounts for student interpretation of the idea of Literature Circles through interviewing the students about their experiences.

Mills & Jennings (2012) study allowed students to explore the concept of Literature Circles through the use of videos and teacher instruction. The students were able to reflect upon the process of Literature Circles and even revise their own Literature Circles (Mills & Jennings, 2012, p. 591). Mills & Jennings (2012) discuss that their students' inquiry was "attentive, probing, and thoughtful" (p. 591). Their study was successful and adequately adapted the process of Literature Circles uniquely within the classroom. It is apparent that student talk was valued throughout this study and the students were engaged and interested during most of their Literature Circle discussions. The students roles in the Literature Circles expanded beyond just the classroom, they applied their knowledge to other real-world situations and "imagined new possibilities for themselves and their futures" (Mills & Jennings, 2012, p. 598).

Study Approach

This research study followed a practical action research design, with a qualitative and quantitative approach. As the teacher-researcher, I designed this study to provide evidence of talk within Literature Circles. The participants in this study are from a small rural school in Western New York. The participants are eighth grade students in my English Language Arts class. I taught three sections of eighth grade and worked on this study with my eighth grade honors students.

In order to begin Literature Circles, I needed to provide myself with the background and knowledge necessary to run a successful round of Literature Circles. Rather than continuing to have whole group and small group (with unassigned roles) discussions, I implemented a new routine. The students had Literature Circle groups twice a week for thirty minutes and whole group instruction three times a week. I began with an explanation as to what Literature Circles are and how they operate and then led into examples of some and an explanation of roles (discussion director, connector, vocabulary builder, etc.). Following this, we began Literature Circles in groups of four to five students for the

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remaining four weeks of my study. At the end of the study, we had a group presentation of the book that was read by each group during that time.

Rationale

I plan to gather data on student talk that takes place during discussions and conversations in Literature Circles. Specifically, I intend to run one set of Literature Circles, investigating what type of talk students have during these Literature Circle sessions. I chose my eighth grade students for this study because found that my students tend to do very well with lower level thinking and meaning but struggle with higher level questioning and meaning making. This is especially apparent during our book/text discussions.

Definitions

ELA: English Language Arts

- Literature Circles: student-led book groups/clubs, usually with assigned roles for each student- such as: discussion director, vocabulary wizard, connector, summarizer, and illustrator.
- Whole Group Discussion- discussions in the ELA classroom with the entire class as a whole.

Summary

In an English Language Arts classroom, student talk is very important and can really attribute to a student's success. It can be challenging to promote higher-level thinking with student talk around a book or text. Literature circles are set up to integrate both dialogue and a deep thinking process with student-led discussion and student roles.

The main purpose of this study was to examine talk within Literature Circles, specifically in an 8th grade English Language Arts inclusive classroom. I focused on what kinds of talk students engage in during a Literature Circle with assigned roles over a six-week period. In this chapter, I describe the definition of Literature Circles throughout time and the shifts in Literature Circles that have taken place in the past few years. I describe the assigned roles within Literature Circles and how they contribute to the conversations that students have. Following that, I explain the theoretical bases for Literature Circles within the classroom, the Zone of Proximal Development, and the Intermental Development Zone. The role of talk within learning and the role of talk within Literature Circles will be examined, along with the effectiveness of different types of Literature Circles.

Definition of Literature Circles

Literature Circles, also known as Book Clubs, have been implemented in English Language Arts (ELA) classrooms for years. Daniels (2004) defines Literature Circles as “small, student-led discussions of student-selected texts” (p. 11) throughout his various books. Ferguson & Kern (2012) mention Literature Circles have been known to be called “grand conversations” (p. 24) and provide interpretations of a text’s meaning. Literature Circles offer a way for peers to discuss a text and still provide structure for their conversations. This type of learning gives students a way to practice reading, writing, listening, conversing and the ability to share their own ideas, personal experiences, and opinions with their peers (Ainley & Day, 2008).

The specific goals of Literature Circles vary depending on the classroom teacher’s expectations; however, the underlying goals remain- participating in a peer-led group discussion, language development, reading comprehension, engagement, and overall enjoyment of reading (Ferguson & Kern, 2012). Literature Circles promote genuine engagement and thoughtful conversations about books, along with

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analyzing text and personal reflection. The goal for students is to go beyond their typical comfort zones and begin to assess and analyze a particular reading. The concept of completing a task (note taking/role cards) prior to meeting for a Literature Circle in preparation for discussion with peers is an aspect that most Literature Circles encompass (Straits,2007).

While most Literature Circles are composed of small groups, Blum, Lipsett, & Yocom (2002) discuss that they can also take place with as little as two readers or even the class as a whole. The focus of Literature Circles should not just be on the size of the group, but on the conversations the students are having. Blum et al. (2002) mention that Literature Circles break away from the typical classroom discussion and allow students to take responsibility for “developing and discussing their own questions and interpretation of the texts and launch more complex levels of thought...” (p. 101). Student can also branch out with their topics of discussion and provide a new insight to the reading.

Literature Circles are designed to allow for students to talk within small groups about a particular text they have read. Through collaboration, students engage in meaningful discussion regarding the particular text read. O’Brien (2007) mentions some key elements of Literature Circles which include: variety, flexibility, a routine schedule, student led discussion, teacher as a facilitator, a focus on natural dialogue, a positive atmosphere, assessment through observation, and allowing for the use of notes within discussions. Keeping an open mind with students is important when determining where to begin and O’Brien (2007) mentions that Literature Circles are not a cut-and-dry method, but more differentiated and adaptable.

Student choice in regard to text variety and flexibility is crucial. Students should be able to pick between a few books or texts to read, rather than being assigned a specific one. This will allow for more engagement and student interest (Daniels, 1994). This could mean being flexible in terms of members in a Literature Circles or how many texts you supply within your classroom (Daniels, 2004). Setting up a routine for the Literature Circles to meet will keep a steady pace going and ample time to complete tasks.

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Prior to implementing Literature Circles, teachers should go over what Literature Circles look like and discuss the elements of a positive atmosphere (Blum et al., 2002). Students should know that teachers will be monitoring their participation and keeping track of conversations and developing themes (Blum et al., 2002). Eventually the goal of all Literature Circles that begin with roles is to move away from the role cards and see authentic discussions among classmates (Mills & Jennings, 2011).

Assigned Roles Within Literature Circles

The roles that are designated in Literature Circles can play a large role in the Literature Circle discussions that take place. However, not all teachers who use Literature Circles use assigned roles within their discussions (Day & Kroon, 2010; Clark & Holwadel, 2007). O'Brien (2007) defines popular roles involved in Literature Circles that are associated with analyzing literature. The roles in his study include: the questioner, the summarizer, the clarifier, the predictor, and the artist (O'Brien, 2007). It is customary that each role is explained prior to implementing it into the discussion and a role card is issued for student use (O'Brien, 2007; Wilfong, 2009; Daniels, 2004; Ferguson & Kern, 2012). Roles can vary however, and teachers can use whichever ones they see necessary. Literature Circles are extremely easy to differentiate and can be adaptable to most classrooms.

Explanations of the Roles

The students must fully understand their role and how to explain/discuss their findings from the assigned reading. The "questioner" writes down some questions that they had during or after their reading. Once the Literature Circle meets, the "questioner" presents his or her questions to the group and the group discusses possible outcomes (O'Brien, 2007). The "passage master" picks a few small sections from the assigned reading to share with the group. These sections could be funny, interesting, or confusing to the reader and when shared within the group, the passages are discussed and clarified if needed (O'Brien, 2007). The "vocabulary enricher's" role is to share challenging or unfamiliar words from the reading and then find the definitions to those words to share with the group (O'Brien, 2007). The "connector" will

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make connections between the text and the outside world. The “connector” will then present these connections to the group (O’Brien, 2007). The “illustrator” will draw a picture or a representation of what was read. This role is really left up to the reader to decide how he or she wants to portray their assigned part of the reading (O’Brien, 2007).

The idea of implementing roles within Literature Circles comes from a variety of research (O’Brien, 2007; Ferguson & Kern, 2012). O’Brien’s (2007) research discusses that a great strength of Literature Circles is maintaining individual accountability that contributes to the whole group. Roles give students a chance to work on one small part of the discussion and moving away from roles may pose a challenge to some students who do not feel they have much to contribute (O’Brien, 2007).

The roles assigned in Literature Circles are very flexible among different classrooms and do not only have to be applied within an ELA setting. Straits (2007) determined that Daniels (1994) generic Literature Circle roles have “become mainstays... and are appropriate for use with texts of nearly any topic” (p.35). Ferguson & Kern (2012) found that by assigning roles to students there was less of a chance of students skipping the reading or fake reading the text – there was a promotion of accountability. Without doing the reading, a student would be unable to complete their assigned task for that Literature Circle meeting. Each role during a Literature Circle connects, allowing for the conversation to take off and elaborate effectively.

Theoretical Base for Literature Circles

There is a theoretical base for Literature Circles that has been shown throughout time in various research studies (Raphael & McMahon, 1994; Daniels, 1994, 2002; Latendresse, 2004; Long & Gove, 2003; Sandmann & Gruhler, 2007). Wilfong’s (2009) study indicates the need for Literature Circles in the classrooms and states “literature circles and book clubs bring together powerful research-based theories of literacy education... researchers have examined the discourse that takes place during literature circle

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meetings and found that discussion is often purposeful and critically minded” (p.165). Sann (2006)

mentions Raphael and McMahon’s (1994) study that indicated how reading and writing is developed with peer and adult interactions; making a point to say that isolation is not beneficial and students should interact orally to construct meaning of what they are reading. Research has found that higher levels of critical thinking are involved when students are engaging in meaningful conversation and Sann (2006) states that “recent research supports the idea of students’ having a voice in their literacy learning because it is not only empowering, but also holds student accountable for their success” (p.40).

Zone of Proximal Development and the Intermental Development Zone

Vygotsky (1978) developed the concept of the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), which can be defined as “the distance between the actual developmental level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance, or in collaboration with more capable peers” (p. 86). Vygotsky believed that children learn language and literacy by participating in meaningful and valuable activities (Vygotsky, 1978; Ainley & Day, 2008). Ainley & Day (2008) reiterate Vygotsky’s beliefs by explaining, “in collaborative social atmospheres students, alongside adults or more competent peers, reflect, listen, theorize, and create new knowledge” (p.159). Vygotsky’s theories are similar to Rosenblatt’s (Ainley & Day, 2008) idea that collaborative discussions and making meaning about literature involve teachers and students taking an active role within the classroom. This concept mirrors the concept of Literature Circles in regard to students taking an active role within the classroom-learning environment. Ainley and Day (2008) explain Rosenblatt’s idea that each reader should bring “his or her emotions, concerns, life experiences, and knowledge to a text” (p.159).

Vygotsky’s (1978) concept of the “zone of proximal development” is shown as a catalyst for Mercer’s (2000) “intermental developmental zone (IDZ)” which places an emphasis on “inter- thinking”. The IDZ is a continuing event of contextualized activity where learners and the teacher contribute to the

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construction of meaning (Pearson, 2010). Mercer (2000) believes that Literature Circles “aim to enable” the IDZ; therefore, if the discussion taking place in the Literature Circle is going well, it can open up possibilities for enriched individual interpretations, along with joint interpretations of the text being discussed. In Pearson’s (2010) study pertaining to student talk, she does mention the limitations and possible outcomes of Literature Circle discussions not always being on-task and states “children may not know the kinds of talk they can engage in and may need introducing to ways of responding to texts” (p.4).

Role of Talk In Learning In Literature Circles

Literature Circles promote discussion among classmates that may not always be prevalent in whole group discussion. Meaningful and deep discussion among students within the classroom is not only valuable for students; it is valuable for the teacher as well. Talk has a large role in the concept of learning and succeeding. Mills & Jennings (2011) state that, “a culture of inquiry is fostered across the content areas, in the talk of teachers and students who engage in “grand conversations” (p. 590).

Kinds of Talk

Talk can be categorized in various forms within the classroom. In regard to Literature Circles, talk is extremely beneficial to student success and learning. Pearson (2010) discusses the importance of group talk in order for learning to take place. Pearson (2010) mentions Mercer’s (2000) three forms of talk and explains if discussion is going well within the Literature Circle, “it can lead to the building of enriched individual and joint interpretations of the stories children read; and aid in development of children’s understanding of themselves as readers” (p. 3).

Mercer (2000) identified three forms of talk, “exploratory”, “cumulative”, and “disputational”. In exploratory talk, students engage in co-reasoning and joint construction of meaning of the text; there is critical, but constructive conversation (Pearson, 2010). If students disagree, they may give reasons for

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their thinking and alternatives can be offered. Mercer (2000) notes that if the words ‘because’, ‘if’, and ‘why’ are being said, then this could be a signal that exploratory talk is taking place.

Cumulative talk exhibits no desire for control and is primarily social instead of cognitive. In this talk of talk, language is used to build shared perspective and joint identity during the conversation (Mercer, 2000). Mercer (2000) explains that cumulative talk involves a mutual acceptance and the end point of the conversation is complete agreement.

Disputational talk is lacking cooperation and there is an unwillingness to take on others’ points of view (Pearson, 2010). Disputational talk lacks a cooperative character. Mercer (2000) explains that this type of talk indicates an unwillingness to see another person’s point of view. There is also a very consistent need to keep inserting your own point of view in the conversation.

Throughout research (Mercer & Littleton, 2007), it has been evident that student talk within the classroom is imperative for student success. Pearson (2010) also looks at Maybin’s (2002) approach to talk within the classroom. The concept of ‘unofficial discourse’ is explained and it’s emphasized that children are capable of switching fairly easily between speech genres (Pearson, 2007). Unofficial discourse, which can be explained as unofficial literacy, is elaborated throughout Maybin’s (2007) book. Maybin (2007) discusses that little aspects of a conversation, sometimes overlooked, are the unofficial parts of the conversation. The unofficial pieces of the conversation could be explained as comments to another student, passing a note, or acknowledging a part of the conversation that was not scaffolded by the teacher.

It is noted in Pearson’s (2007) study that children use a variety of voices when they speak, such as echoing their parents, peers, teachers, and idols on television and singers. The ‘unofficial discourse’ that takes place within Literature Circles can also work its way into a whole group discussion surrounding the same topics discussed within the Circle.

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Discussions

Majors et al. (2010) found that literary discussion in an English classroom gave students the chance to build discussions around various points of view. Majors et al. (2010) state that “when students are socialized into the discourses of classroom interactions by teachers - to engage in content specific, reasoned discussions – the quality of group activity and its learning outcomes are greatly improved” (p. 4). Mills & Jennings (2011) believe that encouraging teachers and students to reflect upon their discussions about texts can enhance the power of Literature Circles.

Mills & Jennings (2011) created the Center for Inquiry (CFI) and studied student discussions in Literature Circles, specifically focusing on inquiry-based learning. Their findings indicated six aspects of inquiry: (1) personal and interpersonal; (2) multidisciplinary perspectives; (3) attentive, probing, and thoughtful; (4) relational and compassionate; (5) agentive and socially responsible; and (6) reflection and reflexivity (Mills & Jennings, 2011).

Personal and interpersonal, also known as dynamic and dialogue, was the dialogue where students shared personal experiences and questions, along with understandings and strategies (Mills & Jennings, 2011). The students’ multidisciplinary perspectives were valued and apparent as they learned to see the world as readers and writers (Mills & Jennings, 2011). Mills and Jennings (2001) found conversations to be attentive, probing, and thoughtful when they were seeking deeper understanding of the literature, interpreting the literature, and observing not only the literature, but also their communities. Students would critically build academic knowledge and had the expectation of observing and supporting each other as learners (Mills & Jennings, 2011).

Students also learned to contribute their own learning and pay attention to the learning community, which was marked as relational and compassionate (Mills & Jennings, 2011). The central role that students played in negotiating rules structures, boundaries, and rituals was considered agentive and socially responsible (Mills & Jennings, 2011). Students would frequently negotiate the curriculum or

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social norms. Lastly, the reflection and reflexivity were significant among the students. While students looked at themselves and their classmates, they experienced self-growth and also growth as a group (Mills & Jennings, 2011).

The students applied each of these six aspects to their Literature Circles discussions throughout Mills' and Jennings' (2011) observations. If implemented correctly it is believed that Literature Circles should bring a reading curriculum to life, which was shown throughout Mills and Jennings (2011) findings.

Various Forms of Literature Circles

There is not only one form of Literature Circles. There are many ways to incorporate deep discussions and meaningful talk that have been researched and implemented. Various forms of Literature Circles are possible, depending on the classroom and age group of the students. The students within a teacher's classroom will determine which type of Literature Circle will be best. There are online Literature Circles, small group-in class Literature Circles, and Literature Circles that are cross-curricular and content based.

Online literature circles

It is possible to supplement in-class face-to-face Literature Circles with online Literature Circles. Kroon and Day (2010) suggest through their study that online Literature Circles motivate students and promote higher level thinking skills within an ELA classroom. The belief that students are "understanding a text more deeply and responding to books in different ways" (p. 19) is exemplified through Kroon and Day's (2010) study. The idea that scaffolding and teacher-led instruction (at the beginning) is important is stated clearly throughout Kroon and Day's (2010) "laying the foundation for online literature circles" section (p. 20). Kroon and Day (2010) explain that online Literature Circles are very similar to face-to-face Literature Circles, however they are in virtual groups, rather than in person groups. The online

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programs used for this type of Literature Circles can be “Moodle, Blackboard, Angel, or Nicenet” (Kroon and Day, 2010, p. 19).

Content-Based or Cross-Curricular Literature Circles.

Wilfong (2009) applies Literature Circles to textbook reading and non-fiction pieces, rather than strictly fiction or novels. Many teachers are now integrating Literature Circles into content-based, cross-curricular subjects, rather than just ELA (Wilfong, 2009; Guise et al., 2011). The idea for content-based literature (or use of the textbook) in Literature Circles seemed to stem from the realization that for students to be successful in any classroom, it was necessary to reinforce positive and effective reading practices (Wilfong, 2009).

Educators have used this particular method to enhance vocabulary or even for specific purposes, such as supporting science learning. Similar roles from novel-based Literature Circles can be implemented in this type of Literature Circles (Wilfong, 2009; Guise et al., 2011). This method of Literature Circles proved to bring students together not only to share ideas about the textbook, but also to teach knowledge to peers pertaining to the sections being read (Wilfong, 2009). Wilfong (2009) mentions that other researchers, like Toumasis (2004), Miller et al. (2007), and Stein & Breed (2004) have all found success using this cross-curricular method. Guise et al. (2011) studied multicultural and political text discussion in Literature Circles and found great success. Guise et al. (2011) found that students’ dialogue during their Literature Circles could be described as interpretative and engaging.

Small group, in Class Literature Circles

Small group, in class Literature Circles are explained by Blum et al. (2002) as a form of engagement to read with a focus. Daniels (2004) defines Literature Circles as “small, student-led discussions of student-selected texts” (p. 11) throughout his various books. Ferguson & Kern (2012) mention Literature Circles have been known to be called “grand conversations” (p. 24) and provide

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interpretations of a text's meaning. Blum et al. (2002) explain that these types of Literature Circles are small (typically four to six students) and temporary discussion groups, comprised of students reading the same book, article, or poem. Each student is assigned a role for the discussions; O'Brien (2007) defines popular roles involved in Literature Circles, such as the questioner, the summarizer, the clarifier, the predictor, and the artist.

Impact and Effectiveness Literature Circles

It's apparent through research that there are numerous benefits of Literature Circles. Ferguson & Kern (2012) state "the widespread enthusiasm for literature circles as an instructional strategy is not surprising given empirical studies confirming that they can lead to increased academic achievement" (p. 15). Blum et al. (2002) have determined "that literature circles bolster students' academic problem-solving and practical decision-making skills" (p. 100). Literature Circles promote "higher level thinking and questioning techniques in a meaningful context" (Cameron et al., 2012, p.ii). Cameron et al. (2012) describe how Literature Circles allow for students to work at self-managing, cooperative learning, and positive interactions- encouraging students to take responsibility for their own learning. The acknowledgment that one text can be viewed in numerous perspectives is another positive aspect of Literature Circles (Cameron et al., 2012).

Literature Circles promote a student's self-determination and confidence within a classroom discussion (Blum et al., 2002). Blum et al. (2002) discuss how literature circles encourage students to read with a focus and then report on what they have read, which is a form of literary (Blum et al., 2002). Students can then determine on their own what is significant in their reading and why (Blum et al., 2002). By allowing students to participate in the decision-making process, Literature Circles promote empowerment for the reader (Blum et al., 2002). Students cannot only apply what they have learned in Literature Circles to small group discussions, but they can also take the inquiry practices and interactions to other aspects of their education and whole group discussions.

Summary

The theoretical base for Literature Circles has been shown throughout time in various research studies (Raphael & McMahon, 1994; Daniels, 1994, 2002; Latendresse, 2004; Long & Gove, 2003; Sandmann & Gruhler, 2007), some of which elaborate on the zone of proximal development and the intermental development zone. There are also different roles and various forms of Literature Circles that teachers may implement, such as Online Literature Circles, small group-in class Literature Circles and Content-Based Literature Circles. The impact and effectiveness of Literature Circles is evident through the research that shows there are numerous benefits of Literature Circles (Ferguson & Kern, 2012).

Chapter 3: Methods and Procedures

The main purpose of this study was to examine talk within Literature Circles, specifically in an 8th grade English Language Arts inclusive classroom. I focused on what kinds of talk students engaged in during a Literature Circle with assigned roles over a six-week period.

Through this study, I explored the following research questions:

- What kinds of talk do students engage in during a Literature Circle with assigned roles?
- What type of discussion do students prefer (Literature Circles or Whole Group)?
- Why do student prefer one type of discussion to the other?

Proposed Participants

The participants for my study included my 8th grade ELA students during the 2012-13 school year. The students in my fifth period classroom were in an ELA class with twenty-one students. Primarily the students in this class were all Caucasian, except for one student who was Indian American. The students were between the ages of thirteen and fourteen years old. All of these students were tracked together and maintained the same schedule throughout the school day. They have been grouped this way for years, which provides a close-knit scenario for most classmates, but at times can be a deterrent and distraction because of the close level of friends. Students in this classroom ranged from being “below-grade-level” to “at-level” in reading and writing, based on their current Scholastic Reading Inventory lexile level.

All students in my class took part in Literature Circles. I selected one Literature Circle group as the focus group for collecting data on talk in the circles. Each Literature Circle group was assigned a number. I then draw a number from a container to choose which group was the focus group. I did not include groups with students for whom I did not have informed consent and assent.

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Context of the Study

The participants in this study were from a small rural school in Western New York. This is a small town community, where everyone knows each other pretty well. Most students grew up in this town and plan on staying in this town past graduation, based on students' discussion with their classmates. The community mainly consists of farmers and Amish families. During the year of the study, 95 % of the students were Caucasian, 1% of the student body was Indian American, Hispanic and Asian (each) and 2% were African American (The New York State Report Card, 2011).

This study took place in my own classroom. Participant students were from my 5th period class (11:47 pm -12:38 p.m.). The classroom layout consisted of twenty desks and one table with two chairs. There was one teacher's desk that was in close proximity to the three classroom computers. The back of the classroom contained built in bookshelves with storage under a large row of windowsills. To the left of the students, there was a white board the length of the wall and in front of them was a Promethean Board. The classroom desks were set up in pairs with three rows facing the front of the room and the table in the back of the room in one of the rows.

My Positionality as the Researcher

I am a twenty-five year old, white female living in Rochester, New York, and was in my first year of teaching in the aforementioned school. I graduated from Nazareth College with a Bachelor's Degree in Inclusive Childhood Education, and hold New York State Initial Certifications in Early Childhood Birth-2nd Grade, Childhood Education Grades 1-6, English Language Arts Grades 5-9, Teaching Students with Disabilities at the Childhood Level Grades 1-6, Teaching Students with Disabilities at the Middle Childhood Level (English) Grades 5-9, English Language Arts Grades 7-12, and Students With Disabilities Generalist Grades 5-9. I am currently enrolled in the Masters of Literacy Program at SUNY Brockport and will graduate in December of 2013.

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My prior experience involved student teaching in a 6:1:1 self-contained classroom at a BOCES building and in a general education first grade classroom. I received a job as an aide in a second grade classroom working with a student with disabilities during the 2011-2012 school year, and then in September of 2012, I was hired as a full time Middle School and High School English teacher. I feel that my educational course work and teaching experience in integrated classrooms has given me a great deal of knowledge concerning the inclusive model of education and providing a differentiated learning environment for my students.

My priority as an educator is to help students reach their full potential through fostering a strong academic foundation with an emphasis on creativity, values, community and lifelong learning. My values for teaching have developed over time and throughout my years in school. Educational theorists, my peers, past teachers and my own personal teaching experiences, have influenced me tremendously. I believe in providing a learning environment that embeds real-life learning into everyday lessons along with the implementation of technology into the classroom. Providing students with both the use of print and electronic learning devices is a pathway for students to not only become career ready, but ready to join our global society. It is imperative that students can see the many possibilities that they have when it comes to their development, regardless of their age.

My priorities as an educator at times mirror Vygotsky's (1978) theories and the importance of emotional and cognitive abilities of children as well. Vygotsky's (1978) theories indicated that students had a "zone of proximal development" and he believed that teachers would instruct students at or beyond this level of learning. I believe that in my classroom I scaffold students learning and provide an environment where learning is social. Students can all be reaching their full potential within a classroom and they can do so by working collaboratively with their peers.

As a teacher-researcher, my own philosophies shape the way I conduct my classroom. Having a literacy background is one of the most important aspects to my teaching. I believe in providing students

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with all of the knowledge necessary for a successful future. My research fosters higher level thinking skills and collaboration among peers within the classroom. Literature Circles promote meaningful discussion and allow for students to voice their opinions and what they have learned. I believe that promoting a Literacy education that fosters a strong reading and writing background will allow for students to become successful. However, a teacher must also focus on students' abilities to communicate their thoughts and ideas, effectively collaborate among peers, and develop confidence in their reading and writing skills in the classroom.

Data Collection

I collected data through the use of semi-structured interviews, audio recordings, and observations.

Interviews

Through interviewing students, I gained insight as to what their feelings were about Literature Circles. Interviews were conducted independently with students in the focus Literature Circle group. I documented student responses in my notebook and audio-recorded our interviews. I interviewed students in the small group that I have chosen in reference to their thoughts on Literature Circles. My interview protocol is attached in the appendix.

Observations

I took field notes in my data collection notebook daily on my observations of student talk and engagement within the Literature Circle. I took note if students were attentive to other students and responding to questions asked by other students. I have attached the observation protocol in my appendix.

Audio Recordings

The audio recordings were used to document student talk during Literature Circles. I audio-recorded the students with my recording device, and once transcribed the recordings were deleted. Students that did not have signed consent were omitted from my transcriptions. I only documented the students with informed consent.

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Data Analysis

When analyzing my research, I looked at audio recordings, interviews, and my field notes in my data collection notebook.

What kinds of talk do students engage in during a Literature Circle with assigned roles?

Data for this question were analyzed using a constant comparison method (Hubbard & Power, 1999). I looked at transcriptions from my audio recordings of the Literature Circles and my field notes to constantly compare the data. From the data, I was then able to infer about the students' talk in their Literature Circles based on my prior field note comparisons. I used my transcriptions, along with my observational field notes to look for student engagement. I noted if students were attentive to other students and responding to questions asked by other students. I noted if student talk was exploratory and if each student was contributing to the conversation as a whole.

What type of discussion do students prefer (Literature Circles or Whole Group)?

Data for this question was analyzed using a constant comparison method. I looked at transcriptions from my audio recordings of my interviews with each student.

Why do students prefer one type of discussion to the other?

Data for this question was analyzed using a constant comparison method. I looked at transcriptions from my audio recordings of my interviews with each student.

Procedures

I recorded my thoughts about implementing the Literature Circles for the first time and how it affected my daily lessons and planning. I discovered what kinds of talk students engage in during a Literature Circle with assigned roles. I interviewed students about which type of discussion they prefer (Literature Circles or Whole Group) and why each student prefers one type of discussion to the other.

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- Week 1- Introduced Literature Circles by showing videos of exemplars, a broad overview of the roles, selected books/groups
- Week 2- Introduced specific roles/expectations and began reading
- Week 3- Literature Circles (2x/week)
- Week 4- Literature Circles (2x/week)
- Week 5- Literature Circles (2x/week)
- Week 6- Closing Activity: Project chosen by the student completed to bring closing to the book read.

Criteria for Trustworthiness

As a teacher-researcher, I am confident that I conducted this study in an unbiased and ethical manner. I feel that I stayed objective and conducted myself with the utmost professionalism during this study. With this study being conducted within my own classroom, it was imperative that I accurately collected and analyzed data. This study affected my future teaching decisions and plans for next school year, along with adjustments that I made along the way during this school year.

To ensure trustworthiness I used prolonged engagement and persistent observation. I conducted weekly semi-structured interviews and daily field notes on our Literature Circle, along with recordings of my own teaching, lesson planning, and reflections. I triangulated all of the data, including the observations, interviews, and audio recordings so that they all worked together to give me an accurate account of the information.

I believe that the utility of the research is important to notice as well. It is not practical to think I will have discovered the most efficient and best practice for implementing Literature Circles. I have used this data for my future teaching instruction and applied the knowledge I possessed from this study to my next endeavor.

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There were also member checks of the various data collected. I submitted transcripts of interviews and of Literature Circle discussions periodically to my focal students. I conducted many checks on my own data and made sure that it aligned to my research questions.

Limitations of the Study

One limitation of this study was the time frame--only administering one cycle of Literature Circles with the students. Due to the time frame and fact that it is our first classroom Literature Circle, I only was able to do one round of books. While this was helpful, it would have been even more helpful to do two or three cycles. Another limitation was the time allotted in the classroom for the Literature Circles. I only see the students for forty minutes each day, which doesn't leave a lot of time for students to talk and converse daily. I only focus on one small group, but looking at more small groups over time might alter the findings.

Summary

In an English Language Arts classroom, student talk is very important and can significantly contribute to a student's success. It can be challenging to promote higher-level thinking with student talk around a book or text. Literature circles are set up to integrate both dialogue and a deep thinking process with student-led discussion and student roles

Chapter 4: Interpretation of the Data

The main purpose of this study was to examine student discussions during their Literature Circles. Research has shown that Literature Circles promote the use of higher level thinking skills and questioning (Cameron, Murray, Hull, & Cameron, 2012). Throughout this study, the four focal students demonstrated a need to feel comfortable in their learning environment and the need for time to share their thoughts and ideas about the Literature they were reading. I discovered these findings through audio recordings, interviews, and observations over the six-week study.

Research Results

Research Question # 1: What kinds of talk do students engage in during a Literature Circle with assigned roles?

The kind of student talk varies between students depending on the situation they are in within the classroom. Typically, I found in the classroom, students discussed content-based material with some social talk (about their daily lives). As documented in this interview with Brooke, when asked about her experience last year with Literature Circles, she responded: *“I did not really like the experience. The people in my group did not even talk about the book. They sat there talking about random stuff”* (Interview Brooke, 5/6/13). Literature Circles were an opportunity in my classroom for students to have the feeling of controlling their own conversation surrounding the literature they were reading.

Talk can take shape in many ways within a classroom. Majors, Mercer & Simpson (2010) make reference to teachers putting students in groups so that they can problem solve collaboratively and point out that there is research to support it being beneficial. However, Majors, Mercer & Simpson (2010) discuss that this type of work is not always productive and the research presents that this type of learning only works well when the students know the proper way to have an educational discussion. The quality of group work within the classroom can increase when students are exposed to these positive social interactions (Majors, Mercer & Simpson, 2010).

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Mills & Jennings (2011) promote reflection during discussion within Literature Circles as means of deepening the power of conversation. For example, if something isn't working during the conversation, the students could point it out. During their study, students watched videos of themselves in their group discussions; they took notes and wrote down key ideas that stood out to them, paying close attention on community and equity in the conversation (Mills & Jennings, 2011). Reflecting on talk can encourage students to revise the way they interact with their classmates (Mills & Jennings, 2011). My focal group students did reflect on their Literature Group experiences and indirectly reflected on their talk at the same time, especially during my interviews with them.

The talk that students engaged in during Literature Circles with assigned roles ranged from polite conversations to some conversations that had disrespectful comments. There were times when the students could keep on track with their conversation and they stuck to their protocols. A few times, the students went beyond their role cards and engaged in a meaningful discussion surrounding the novel.

Initiating Conversation

During my focal group's conversations, it was apparent that one student in particular did not feel confident speaking up as much and usually didn't get too many words in. At other times, I noticed that the talk the girls were engaged in was not always the kindest when initiating a conversation, which could be attributed to the fact that the girls were all pretty good friends and very comfortable with each other. When the focal group students would initiate a conversation, there appeared to be two different methods of going about starting the conversation- polite or impolite.

The impolite initiation of their conversation is apparent during their discussion on 5/16/13 when Sydney tried to get the discussion going:

Sydney:	<i>Hello!</i>
Bri:	<i>Shut up, Sydney.</i>
Nancy:	<i>Kay, what do you think is going to happen next?</i>
Sam:	<i>Wait, what happened?</i>

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Sam:	<i>I forgot what happened. (Laughs)</i>
Nancy:	<i>Oh, um, I think --</i>
Bri:	<i>Why don't you just --</i>
Sydney:	<i>I think people are going to find out about Stewart.</i>

Clearly, Bri's response to Sydney when she said "Hello!" was very impolite. Even when Bri stopped herself from completing her statement: "why don't you just--", was not too kind. This could be due to the fact she was annoyed for some reason or because she was frustrated with the group. However, on 5/23/13, a more polite tone was shown when Bri commented during a conversation, "Okay guys, so let's move on to another question...", which was after a lull in the conversation and it seemed the girls needed some reassurance to keep the discussion going.

During the 5/7/13 Literature Circle discussion, three members of the group politely asked Sam, "Do you have anything to say?" and later on asked, "Do you have any comments... concerns?" I can assume that these questions were asked due to her not speaking during the entire conversation (occasionally she would say "okay" or "yes", mostly one word answers). The girls noticed that her interactions with the group were minimal and chimed in with a question to get more participation and initiate a discussion. Rather than becoming frustrated, they tried to keep her involved in the discussion. This type of discussion shows reflection and not even realizing they were doing it within those few seconds. They made the conscious choice to involve Sam. Mills & Jennings (2011) describe this type of realization throughout their research and their study, making note that Literature Circles are not always perfect; students will get off-topic, some will struggle not to dominate the talk, and others will struggle with talking in general (participating).

During 5/9/13, Sam began to ask a question to initiate the Literature Circle conversation that may not have been easy for her to ask her group, politely saying, "I don't understand what the discussion director is". The group responded by directing her to her paper and having her read the provided

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definition and pointing out that next time she won't need to read that part of it. By doing this, they could keep the conversation going. I found it to be interesting that Sam, when interviewed, stated: "Yes, I think we have enough time. We all get a chance to talk and everyone can share out" when asked if there was enough time for discussion during Literature Circles and she was the student that spoke the least during the study.

Group Regulation: Sticking to the protocols to keep on task

Each girl in the focus group demonstrated keeping the group on task and sticking to their roles a little differently. When Literature Circles were introduced, the whole class discussed how the discussion should run and a method for keeping the conversation going (utilizing their roles cards when needed). The approaches ranged from being very straightforward to sarcastic at times. On 5/7/13, at the end of the conversation when Nancy wanted to share something from the news, but Bri stopped her, it was apparent Bri wanted to keep things on task:

Nancy:	<i>I was going to tell you something about the news -- this one man...</i>
Bri:	<i>No, we're not done.</i>

A few times during the conversation, the girls did try to keep each other on track with behavior expectations, for example, Sydney said "*Because I'm kind. I'm trying to be kind and polite, that's what were supposed to be*" (during Literature Circles) in response to another group member about to spoil the next part in the book (because she read ahead), asking why she couldn't just say what she wanted to say. When Bri wanted Nancy to "just do two more" vocabulary words, Nancy stuck to the Literature Circle protocol and said "no- I want to do all three!"

During a conversation on 5/16/13, the students began the conversation off task, by discussing a song, "how do you not like that song", "it's so awesome". Nancy eventually got the girls back on track by stating, "let's talk about the book guys!" and apologizing to Sam "I'm sorry Sam, my greatest apologies"

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(kind of sarcastically). As noticed in this section of the conversation, (5/23/13) Nancy did try to keep the girls on track and had a little success by asking them to finish their questions.

Nancy:	<i>My sister --</i>
Bri:	<i>I can be mean to her, but I'm nice to her 'cause she behaves. And, Ashley --</i>
Nancy:	<i>She sounds like a little devil.</i>
Bri:	<i>Ashley will tell on me, but -- if it doesn't have anything to do with her, she'll still tell just to tell. But, she doesn't tell because she knows I have leverage against her. I've got a bunch of dirty stuff she's done to me, so...</i>
Nancy:	<i>Anyways, finish your questions.</i>

It was apparent that the girls became very comfortable with each other during 5/28/13 and 5/30/13.

This was also the week of their Spanish final exam, so they were a bit preoccupied at times. However, Sydney does eventually tell the group “let’s go”, to keep them on task

Nancy:	<i>Who was your top picks?</i>
Bri:	<i>Um, my first one was -- I had that we were going on a picnic --</i>
Bri:	<i>And you had to describe, like, what you brought and stuff. And I said "yo, I have apples." (laughs) And she's like, "I like apples. And cheese. And ham. You like that?" And I'm like, "Si. Mi like." Or whatever. I didn't, use, like -- I'm like, "Mi - -"</i>
Sydney:	(After a few minutes, Sydney gets the girls back on track) <i>Okay guys, let's go.</i>

Talking About Text

During Literature Circles, the focal group students discussed their assigned text in various ways. At times they would go off on tangents during their conversations (becoming off task), while other times they would make personal connections to the text and bring in background knowledge. A few times the girls went beyond their role cards and made their own inferences during the discussions.

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Going Beyond the Role Cards

While there were only a few times the girls went beyond their assigned roles in their discussions, the times they did were very meaningful. On 5/14/13, Sydney made a comment that a character in their book would get sick. This then led to:

Bri:	<i>Stewie was coughing a lot</i>
Nancy:	<i>At first, I thought he would get captured</i>
Bri:	<i>Yeah, I thought that too, but realized it probably wouldn't happen</i>
Sydney:	<i>Bri, you are right! I forgot about that!</i>

The girls were comfortable moving forward with this comment and actually supporting the comment with details. Nancy admitted to the group that she had a different feeling about Stewie and Bri commented that she felt the same way, but then thought again he most likely wouldn't get captured. Sydney chimed in that Bri was correct and she didn't remember something from the novel prior.

The discussion on 5/23/13 was much more focused than other weeks, it began with an off-the-cuff question by Sydney, "came up with that off the top of my head" and the girls responded "good!" Their conversation was in-depth and went beyond the literal responses I noticed from the weeks before:

Sydney:	<i>Yeah, he wants to tell someone but he doesn't want to get his dad in trouble 'cause he knows his mom -- well, his mom doesn't really (unintelligible) his dad, but.... I don't know.</i>
Bri:	<i>I think his mom wants to get as far away from his dad as --</i>
Sam:	<i>Yeah</i>
Nancy:	<i>But she's too scared to.</i>
Sydney:	<i>Cause, like, they don't want to get beat up.</i>
Bri:	<i>Exactly. They -- they don't want them tracking them down. He doesn't want them to track them down.</i>
Sydney:	<i>Yeah. They don't want to get hurt.</i>

At one point in the conversation:

Nancy:	<i>You know what I don't understand? I think they both like each other 'cause Stewart was, like, one part was, like, Stewart looked at her dreamy eyes...</i>
Bri:	<i>What I don't get, is, okay.... If he threw a grenade and killed a bunch of Germans, then how'd it kill him?</i>

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The girls each responded with their reaction to this part of the book and reason why he died based on their inferences from the text. This was beyond their “role-cards” and involved deep thinking.

Personal Connections/Background Knowledge

On 5/30/13 the girls were completely engrossed in the Literature Circle and only had one or two moments where they got off task for a second. Nancy commented in her connection to the book, “No, I said, “linking.” “Forever and always, no matter what happens, we’ll be best friends.” I could connect with this part of the story because I have best friends. Even though we argue a lot we always have each other’s backs”. This came prior to conversation that took place a few minutes later.

Sydney:	<i>What did you think of when Margaret and Elizabeth held hands at the end of the story?</i>
Bri:	<i>Uh, it was a crappy ending.</i>
Sydney:	<i>I didn't say ending! I said "what did you think of when Margaret and Elizabeth held hands...?"</i>
Bri:	<i>What? Are you trying to say they're lesbian?</i>
Sydney:	<i>No!</i>
Nancy:	<i>She's asking what you think of it.</i>

The girls were making connections beyond the text and Nancy even questioned the girls to dig deeper and respond to what they think about the part in the novel. Nancy clarified what Sydney was asking the girls to respond to. Sydney wanted to see how the group members felt about Margaret and Elizabeth holding hands at the end of the novel; Bri didn’t seem to understand the context to which Sydney was asking her question.

On 5/7/13, the girls were discussing an incident in the book and had a conversation about a personal experience Nancy had. This was completely on topic and related to the character in the novel they were discussing.

Nancy:	<i>I think Gordy likes Elisabeth, cause he tried to kiss her</i>
Sydney:	<i>To get her attention?</i>
Bri:	<i>That's still creepy</i>
Nancy:	<i>A lot of boys do that</i>

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Sydney:	<i>Disgusting!</i>
Nancy:	<i>He is single, when I was single, boys would try to talk to me a lot, now that I am with Jon, no one tries to talk or kiss me!</i>

Nancy clearly could bring in her background information from dealing with boys at another time. She brought in her personal experience to connect with a character. Nancy was able to use an experience she had to explain her reasoning as to why she inferred Gordy liked Elizabeth. Even though Sydney couldn't connect, Nancy was comfortable enough to continue to explain her reasoning.

Tangents

On 5/7/13 there were two instances where the group went off on tangents, discussing their problems with their siblings at home:

Bri:	<i>At home, my sister and I have these of fights, and when she annoys me, I really annoy her (laughs)</i> <i>(group laughing)</i>
Sydney:	<i>Obviously, and then, uh, so</i>
Nancy:	<i>Yeah, same thing with my sister</i>
Bri:	<i>You should see Amber. She –</i>
Bri:	<i>You should see her, she really annoys me</i>
Nancy:	<i>When?</i>
Bri:	<i>You know, like when she acts all prissy, she goes on and on about how cool she is and she really isn't, I know she isn't. I really hate her sometimes.</i>
Sydney:	<i>None of your life stories Bri!</i>
Sam:	<i>What does this have to do with this?</i>
Bri:	<i>Well it kind of does</i>
Nancy:	<i>Calm down children, okay, let's just talk</i>
Sydney:	<i>Okay then, talk</i>
Bri:	<i>Well I'll be done now then!</i>

This off-topic conversation did stem from a conversation pertaining to a character in the book, but took the group members away from making meaning of the text specifically. When the group would “go off on a tangent” like this, they were distracted from discussing the text they were reading. They were comfortable enough with each other and know enough about each other's lives, so this would happen

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periodically. The students seemed to be using their thinking about the text to think about issues in their own lives.

On 5/14/13, Sam asked about a minute into the conversation, “Where are we in the book”? Sam later admitted she forgot to do her reading and assignment when the girls questioned her. Three out of the four girls in the group enjoyed reading the novel, but Sam didn’t always keep up with the reading assignments. At times, the interest in the book played a role in this off-task/going on a tangent behavior as the girls took a few minutes just to calm down halfway into the conversation they were having pertaining to the summary of the chapter. Sydney had taken on Sam’s role since she didn’t complete her assignment. They began laughing for a few minutes as Sydney threw together a summary for the pages assigned. To calm down, Nancy said, “Okay, okay everyone. This is the way you calm down...”. They counted to ten:

Nancy:	<i>One black sheep</i>
Sydney:	<i>One!</i>
Nancy:	<i>Two black sheep</i>
Bri:	<i>Two!</i>

and so on...

They then reminded Sydney to write down her answers, rather than try to remember what she read “that’s why you need to write it down”.

Summary: What type of talk do students engage in during a Literature Circle with assigned roles?

The talk that students engaged in during their Literature Circles varied during the five weeks of this study. Their conversations ranged between being completely on task and sticking to their role cards, to at times, making very meaningful connections and applying their background knowledge to assist them within the conversation. They were not always polite during the discussion, which I concluded may be

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due to the fact that they were all very good friends prior to being in this Literature Circle group; therefore, they were very comfortable with each other.

Research Question # 2: What type of discussion do students prefer (Literature Circles or Whole Group)?

And

Research Questions # 3: Why do students prefer one type of discussion to the other?

Focal Students Thoughts on Literature Circles From Past Experiences

At the beginning of this study, I really wanted to know how students felt about Literature Circles prior to entering my classroom, just to gauge their feelings from the start. I interviewed each student prior (week of 5/2/13) to Literature Circles beginning and also after they had taken place (the week of 6/3/13). All interviews were individual. The first question I asked each of my focal group members was: “ Last year, in seventh grade, when you participated in Literature Circles in your English class, what did you like or dislike about the experience as a whole?” After hearing all of their responses, it was evident that three out of the four girls did not like Literature Circles, due to their dislike of group members, unprepared classmates, and off topic conversation. I found it to be interesting that there were more problems caused by social issues than disagreements about book choices. The following are excerpts from individual interviews with the focal group students:

(week of 5/2/13)

Nancy:	<i>I didn't really like the experience because I didn't like my group. We didn't get along.</i>
Sydney:	<i>I felt that Literature Circles were a waste of time. Most of the time people didn't read. Sometimes me too. But if I didn't read ahead then I would do it quick. I could discuss the questions at least.</i>
Bri:	<i>I did not really like the experience. The people in my group did not even talk about the book. They sat there talking about random stuff.</i>
Sam:	<i>I liked how everyone participated and we worked together. We didn't even fight with each other.</i>

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Three out of four of the girls were more concerned about getting along with their group members and whom they were working with, rather than if the work was getting accomplished at times. One other member found Literature Circles to be successful because her group participated and worked together. This was a bit ironic however; after listening and observing their conversations, I noticed that the focal students were off task quite a few times, were not prepared a few times, and did not always get along with each other.

The off task behavior is shown during the 5/14/13 Literature Circle, mid conversation when Bri and Sydney are concerned with a noise:

Bri:	<i>Sydney, who was that? (laughs)</i>
Sydney:	<i>What?</i>
Sydney:	<i>I didn't say anything!</i> <i>(laughing)</i>
Bri:	<i>You laughed.</i>
Sydney:	<i>I didn't say anything, I didn't even laugh.</i>
Bri:	<i>You are (unintelligible) nuts.</i>

Eventually, the conversation continued for a few minutes and was interrupted with a bit of laughter.

Nancy:	<i>Oka -- okay, everyone.</i> <i>(Laughing)</i>
Bri:	<i>That's not how you calm down.</i>
Sydney:	<i>Slow, deep breaths...</i> <i>(Laughing)</i>
Bri:	<i>Count to ten!</i>
Nancy:	<i>During the pages thirty-six and (unintelligible) --</i>

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	<i>(Laughing)</i>
Bri:	<i>Stop. Okay. Count to ten.</i>
Nancy:	<i>One --</i>
Sydney:	<i>One black sheep --</i>
Nancy:	<i>Two --</i>
Sydney:	<i>Two black sheep --</i>
Nancy:	<i>Three--</i>
Sydney:	<i>Three black sheep--</i>
Nancy:	<i>Four-</i>
Sydney:	<i>Four white sheep--</i>
Nancy:	<i>Five!</i>
Sydney:	<i>- White sheep-</i>
Nancy:	<i>Six...</i>
Sydney:	<i>- white sheep--</i>
Nancy:	<i>Seven...</i>

Not getting along within the group

Nancy mentioned in her interview that she did not get along with her Literature Circle group last year. On 5/30/13, the girls' last Literature Circle, there seemed to be some great conversation but also some tension in between topics of conversation. All four girls seemed to be annoyed at times with each other's responses or with talking over one another.

Nancy:	<i>I think of --</i>
Bri:	<i>Would you shut your mouth and listen?</i>
Nancy:	<i>Whoa, that was rude</i>

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Sydney:	<i>What's your connection?</i>
Bri:	<i>It's for Salma.</i>
Nancy:	<i>Aw.</i>
Bri:	<i>The term butthead refers to Salma</i>
Nancy:	<i>That's awesome! I'll hang it in my locker.</i>

After discussing the two characters in their novel making a promise:

Nancy:	<i>Think it was cute that they were making a promise?</i>
Bri:	<i>Yeah.</i>
Sydney:	<i>She didn't say (unintelligible) -- she said "held hands!"</i>
Sam:	<i>That's what I meant!</i>
Sydney:	<i>Well, I didn't know what she meant, sor -- ree!</i>
Bri:	<i>Whoa, whoa, whoa.</i>
Sam:	<i>Could I say something?</i>
Sydney:	<i>They need to shut their big old mouths.</i>
Sam:	<i>You're mad at me.</i>
Sydney:	<i>I'm not mad.</i>
Sam:	<i>Excuse me. Two days ago, Bri got mad at me.</i>

It's apparent from the girls dialogue back and forth to each other there were some short fuses during this conversation. The girls were all friends outside of school, which could have attributed to this type of dialogue: they were very comfortable with one another and seem to have always been aiming to please

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one another. It was also the last week of them being together and they were very passionate about getting their ideas and views across about the novel. This was also right before their finals in school, which was also added stress for them.

Not being prepared

Sydney mentioned during her interview that at times others were not prepared and she herself didn't always do her assigned work for the Literature Circle. During the first two weeks of Literature Circles, there were times when some group members were not prepared (5/9/13-5/14/13):

5/9/13

Bri:	<i>Sam, do you have anything to say?</i>
Sam:	<i>I didn't finish my assignment...</i>

5/14/13

Nancy:	<i>I didn't write it all down, I didn't have room</i>
Bri:	<i>Next time, you could use lined paper, so you can do your whole assignment</i>

Later in the conversation

Bri:	<i>So what are your words?</i>
Sydney:	<i>I'm doing two jobs here, cut me some slack!</i>
Bri:	<i>You didn't have to, so don't complain about it</i>

It was clear that most of the time work was not completed it was Sam who did not do the assignment, but it wasn't always her. Nancy didn't think she had enough room on her paper so she didn't

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write all of her response down but was still able to discuss with the group. Sydney even took on some of Sam's work at times to make sure the group kept up even when another member didn't.

Off topic conversation

Bri mentioned during her interview that at times people were off topic in the past and didn't discuss the actual book they were reading. On 5/16/13, the girls were off topic at times, sometimes referring to a popular song or situations at home with their siblings. None of these topics went along with the novel discussion.

Nancy:	<i>Roar!</i>
Sam:	<i>What?</i>
Bri:	<i>You never heard that song?!</i>
Sydney:	<i>Oh my god, I love that song.</i>
Bri:	<i>How do you not like that song?</i>
Nancy:	<i>Okay guys, we're getting off track, Sam please continue.</i>

Later in the conversation:

Nancy:	<i>So, I told Amber -- well, I told Erin to get me it, and Erin said Amber, you can do it, so, I told Amber that I wouldn't read her any more of the book I'm reading if she didn't give me the Nook. She got all mad and started screaming at me, but in the end she gave me what I wanted.</i>
Sam:	<i>Wow! That is nuts.</i>
Bri:	<i>Yeah!</i>
Sydney:	<i>I blackmailed my sister once 'cause I knew something -- I don't know what it was -- but, I'm like, if you don't give me that cookie, I'll tell so-and-so that you like him. She's like "Okay! Here!"</i>
Nancy:	<i>Okay, Okay, now I am going to start my fricken' summary!</i>

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Since each girl knew each other very well, they were familiar with each other's family dynamics. They knew the girls' siblings and could relate to having a frustrating brother or sister. These conversations took away from having time-on-task, discussing the novel. However, they were not ever the sole focus and eventually they were back on track each time.

It is apparent that in the past, that three out of the four focal group students did not like Literature Circles for various reasons: such as students not completing assigned readings, students that would go off topic too much, and being in a group of students that they did not particularly care for. Therefore, it was clear that they preferred whole group instruction to Literature Circles because of the circumstances they discussed in their interviews. However, what I saw was almost the opposite during this year's Literature Circles.

Focal Students' Current Thoughts on Literature Circles

I sat down with each of the focal group students individually during the process of starting Literature Circles (during the week of 5/2/13) and asked "If you had a choice to pick between having a whole group discussion about a book or participating in a Literature Circle discussion on a book, which would you prefer and why?" After I went over my expectations for Literature Circles with the whole class and after interviewing the four focus students, it was evident that students preferred Literature Circles to whole group discussion this school year. Based on their response to my interview questions, the four students all chose Literature Circles for various reasons surrounding social issues and getting along with other group members:

Nancy:	<i>Literature Circle because then I wouldn't have to share my ideas with the whole class-only to my group.</i>
Sydney:	<i>I would pick Literature Circles because you can talk with your friends. I feel more comfortable asking questions in Literature Circles.</i>
Bri:	<i>I would rather do a Literature Circle discussion. I like to be with my friends and we can actually get work done. It's wasting time to wait for the whole class to talk.</i>
Sam:	<i>Literature Circles because it's fewer people and we can make good connections.</i>

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All of the girls had their own opinions about why Literature Circles were clearly a better choice for their learning this school year. I believe that their feelings have changed immensely since last year due to the fact that they are all in the same class this year for ELA and they were able to pick their group members. One thing that the girls liked during Literature Circles during their 8th grade year was that they got to work with their friends. This was seen as an important piece to them throughout the entire Literature Circle process. While during Literature Circles the girls did not discuss their enjoyment of Literature Circles rather than whole group discussion specifically, it seemed like a nice change of pace for them and they enjoyed the reading because they were able to pick the book they discussed.

The focal group students made it clear in their interviews that they liked feeling comfortable within their group setting, having a nice discussion with friends, and setting their own pace to get their point across without waiting for the entire class to respond.

The Concept of Comfort

A theme that developed during the interview process was the idea of being comfortable. The girls were comfortable with each other and not so comfortable with sharing in the whole group discussions. It was apparent in both my interviews and listening to their conversations that they were very comfortable with each other and had never really shared like they did in the small group in the large group setting. They really appreciated being able to work with their own friends and have their voices be heard in a timely manner. The process of making meaning of a text and being honest about the text was easier when they felt comfortable, which is shown in the following conversation from 5/30/13:

Bri:	<i>My favorite part was when --</i>
Nancy:	<i>When Elizabeth punched Gordy in the face?</i>
Bri:	<i>I liked it when Stewart (unintelligible).</i>
Nancy:	<i>Yeah, I liked that, too.</i>
Sam:	<i>Oh, I liked that.</i>

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Sydney:	<i>That was, like, the ending.</i>
Sam:	<i>And -- Gordy's Dad got arrested.</i>
Nancy:	<i>Yea--</i>
Bri:	<i>Yea, that was good.</i>
Sydney:	<i>Okay.</i>
Nancy:	<i>Next.</i>
Bri:	<i>Would you recommend this book to others?</i>
Nancy:	<i>Yes.</i>
Sam:	<i>No, wait—I don't know.</i>
Bri:	<i>And why?</i>
Sam:	<i>Maybe...</i>
Sydney:	<i>Yeah?</i>
Sam:	<i>Because – it's kinda boring, but interesting.</i>
Sydney:	<i>It's kinda boring, but it teaches you good things.</i>
Nancy:	<i>It's cool I would recommend it to littler kids. Even though it has – it has bad words in it.</i>
Bri:	<i>If there was a second book, would you read it?</i>
Nancy:	<i>Yes.</i>

This conversation shows great participation, which stemmed from honest answers and the comfort of being among friends. The girls were able to give constructive criticism and critique the novel they were reading in a comfortable setting. This type of discussion aligned with their responses in my interviews with them.

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Having a nice, quality discussion with friends

When I asked the students (during the week of 6/3/13): “Do you feel that Literature Circles allow you to have an adequate discussion about a book you have read? Meaning, do you feel that your voice gets heard and your opinions are valued during Literature Circles? Why or why not?” I found that the girls really liked feeling secure within their group when sharing their thoughts and opinions.

Nancy:	<i>Yes, because we take turns talking. Everyone can understand your opinion and your point of view.</i>
Sydney:	<i>Yes, I think so. I was so much more comfortable. Yes, I get heard, usually.</i>
Bri:	<i>Yes. I can speak my mind. Only a few people have to listen to me.</i>
Sam:	<i>Yes, I think we have enough time. We all get a chance to talk and everyone can share out.</i>

It was apparent that each of the girls felt they could have an adequate discussion within their Literature Circle. They clearly appreciated being heard by the group members and each having time to discuss their point of view, rather than when in a whole group discussion and possibly not getting your point heard.

However, having a nice discussion with friends at times turned into the students having off-topic conversations (or going off on tangents) because they knew each other so well. This is shown during the 5/14/13 Literature Circles, when Bri and Nancy had a discussion about dance class:

Nancy:	<i>You feel cool when you're the oldest of, like, anyone --</i>
Bri:	<i>Yeah.</i>
Bri:	<i>Cause I'm the oldest.</i>
Nancy:	<i>-- but you also sometimes feel awkward because then no one understands you. Like when you have to go with a bunch of like, fifth and sixth graders, now that we're in eight grade</i>
Bri:	<i>Yeah. Like, my dance for example. I'm the oldest, so, I don't -- they are all friends, so I don't really hang out with them --</i>
Nancy:	<i>Yeah, that happened to me.</i>
Bri:	<i>So, I kinda just end up standing there, waiting for -- to practice our dance.</i>

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Nancy:	<i>Yeah, that's what I did. Like, 'cause, like everyone was (unintelligible) –</i>
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While the girls appreciated having conversations in their groups, it was not always in their favor. The conversation that stemmed from this excerpt clearly did not align with the novel. The positive is that each time this occurred within a discussion, the girls came back rather quickly and re-focused. At times, the girls could make good meaning from the text and tie the novel into their everyday life. This is shown during the conversation on 5/23/13:

Nancy:	<i>Like, he doesn't care though, he is drunk</i>
Bri:	<i>He's an alcoholic</i>
Sydney:	<i>When you're on alcohol and stuff, you do weird things</i>
Nancy:	<i>Are you making excuses for him?</i>
Sydney:	<i>No, but that's what-</i>
Bri:	<i>It's not excuses, that's the truth</i>

Working at your own pace

During an interview (week of 6/3/13) with each of the focal group students, I asked if next year, in 9th grade, would they prefer to talk about a book in a whole group discussion or Literature Circle and why. I noticed that they each had their own reasoning but with one underlying theme: pace. The following are responses from my interview with each of them:

Nancy:	<i>I would want Literature Circes because then you can work at your own pace, independently with help from the group.</i>
Sydney:	<i>Literature Circles. They are neat. It's just nicer to talk with friends.</i>
Bri:	<i>It's so much easier in Literature Circles. We don't have to wait for the whole class.</i>
Sam:	<i>I like to talk about what went on in the book during a Literature Circle because I am more comfortable.</i>

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Both Bri and Nancy thought it was nice to work at their own pace and not have to wait around for the entire class to discuss something. Sydney and Sam felt they would rather talk with friends and it was of course, more comfortable for them. On 5/23/13, Bri said to her group members: “Okay, that’s not on topic, let’s go!” She was able to keep the group going and steer away from off topic conversation. On 5/16/13, Nancy said “Shhh, she’s connecting, now let's connect!” She was able to keep the group on task and quieted down so they could continue their conversation in a timely manner.

It is clear that the focal group students liked feeling comfortable within their group setting, having a discussion with friends, and enjoyed setting their own pace for Literature Circle discussions based on their interviews and their conversations. The girls’ current thoughts about Literature Circles changed drastically during the current school year compared to their past experiences. The girls all would rather have a Literature Circle discussion, rather than a whole class discussion.

Reflection: Thoughts After the Completion of Literature Circles

It is clear that over the six weeks they took part in Literature Circles, the focal group students enjoyed working with each other and having their own pace set for discussions. They repeatedly mentioned in whole group discussions with other classmates they loved being with their friends and not having to sit in the whole class discussions waiting to speak and feel uncomfortable at times. I wanted to end Literature Circles finding out what the girls would like next year in their ELA class, knowing that I could have some of the same students. As it turns out, they all chose to do Literature Circles again.

Benefits and Challenges of Literature Circles From the Focal Students’ Point of View

I wanted to know how Literature Circles benefited the students and I wanted to find this out through their perspective. When I asked (during the week of 6/3/13) what the most beneficial aspects of Literature Circles were, the girls responded with the idea of being with friends and talking with friends.

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Nancy:	<i>Everyone gets to speak out and share their opinion. It teaches us communication too!</i>
Sydney:	<i>I got to enjoy talking to my friends. I even got to ask a question if I needed to.</i>
Bri:	<i>I get to have a nice discussion about something I enjoy with my friends.</i>
Sam:	<i>All of us learned things from the book and we concentrated on the book. We got to talk about our feelings.</i>

The girls each felt that they learned something from Literature Circles and discuss something meaningful with their friends. They seemed grateful they were given class time to work with each other and discuss a reading they completed on their own. It was a bit ironic that Nancy mentioned “communication”, as it is shown in previous discussions that sometimes the group’s communication skills needed some fine-tuning!

I asked the girls each in an interview (week of 6/3/13) what were some things that didn't go so well during Literature Circles or were challenging...finding out that they admitted things were not always perfect.

Sam:	<i>Sometimes we were moody and that messed up our group. Maybe next year you won't have all girls working together</i>
Sydney:	<i>Nothing really. I got to choose the book I wanted and most of the time I liked reading it. Next year, maybe it won't have to be about World War II</i>
Nancy:	<i>I didn't like doing all the work. But, I guess that's a part of it</i>
Bri:	<i>Nothing really went wrong, we had a spider fall on us! Sometimes we were a little crabby</i>

These interview responses indicate that each of the girls felt things were not always on track and at times challenging. However, they still felt Literature Circles were overall a success. The following lines of dialogue from the Literature Circle discussions on 5/23/13 and 5/9/13 shows a challenged presented during Literature Circles:

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Nancy:	<i>I'm not even listening to this question.</i>
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Later on....

Nancy:	<i>You're being rude</i>
Bri:	<i>Sorry</i>
Nancy:	<i>I'm trying to share</i>

Bri:	<i>Shut up Sydney!</i>
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These blunt responses from Nancy and Bri show that working with friends may not always be effective because they were too comfortable at times and didn't always act kindly towards one another.

It was clear from Literature Group conversations and the interviews that working with friends was great but not always the most productive. It was apparent that the girls did not always get along and were snippy with each other at times. Sam even admitted in the interview that maybe next year I would not have all of the girls work together. Sydney really just wanted another topic for the novel to be able, while Nancy and Bri didn't really see any issues (or admit to issues!).

Applying What Was Learned in the Future

After Literature Circles were done I asked each of the girls if they could apply what they learned and discussed in Literature Circles to their whole group discussion in the classroom. I wanted to know this because it was my hope that they would go beyond their comfort zone after five weeks of working with their close friends. The following are responses from my interview (week of 6/3/13) with each of them.

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Nancy:	<i>I could try it, even though I do not like speaking out</i>
Sydney:	<i>Yes, because I can be more prepared and maybe not as nervous to share out</i>
Bri:	<i>No, people would interrupt me. I would get grumpy because the class wouldn't focus, I only talk in front of people I really trust.</i>
Sam:	<i>I would not want to share what we talked about in our Literature Circle in the whole class because that was our own conversation. I don't always want to share out.</i>

Two out of the four girls felt like they could share out, while the other two didn't want to go beyond their comfort of the small group setting. Nancy and Sydney were willing to give it a try after gaining some experience in Literature Circles. Bri and Sam felt like it was not necessary to share out what they discussed and didn't feel like they could trust everyone in the class not to judge them.

Overall, the focal groups views about Literature Circles versus whole group instruction changed from completely disliking Literature Circles to enjoying them and preferring them to whole group instruction. Throughout their interviews and Literature Group discussions it was apparent the girls were comfortable discussing the content with each other and even though they were off task at times, they were still able to successfully complete their discussion.

Introduction

The main purpose of this study was to examine talk within Literature Circles, specifically in an 8th grade English Language Arts inclusive classroom. I focused on what kinds of talk students engaged in during a Literature Circle with assigned roles over a six-week period.

Through this study, I explored the following research questions:

- What kinds of talk do students engage in during a Literature Circle with assigned roles?
- What type of discussion do students prefer (Literature Circles or Whole Group)?
- Why do student prefer one type of discussion to the other?

During the six weeks I found that the focal students engaged in talk that was off topic at times; however, during other conversations their talk was very meaningful. Based on previous classes, each focal group student did not like participating in Literature Circles. They felt that during Literature Circles they were uncomfortable and their group members were not always on task. During this study however, the focal students all decided that they would prefer Literature Circles to whole group instruction.

Conclusions

Students preferred Literature Circles to Whole Group Instruction because they felt comfortable.

Students prefer having a discussion in a Literature Circle, rather than Whole Group. I found that my focal students would rather share their opinions and thoughts with their friends, instead of the entire class. They each felt comfortable with each other since they had known each other for a few years and they were able to pick their Literature Circle group, which they were not able to do in the past. Cameron, Murray, Hull, & Cameron (2012) interviewed students after Literature Circles took place and found that the students enjoyed being able to “sit around and freely disagree with people on questions, answers, and

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things they thought about the book” (viii). The focal group students were able to do this because they were comfortable with one another.

The idea of being comfortable within their group meant that they could share ideas and opinions without feeling pressured to impress the entire class or feel ashamed/embarrassed as to what they were saying or connecting to. Blum, Lipsett, & Yocom (2002) mention that Literature Circles are a part of literary engagement, which allows students to read with a focus and determine what is significant in their reading and share out why (p. 100). If the students did not feel comfortable in their Literature Circle environment, they would not be able to share out as willingly as the focal group students did.

Marchiando (2013) states “when students approach the text with a purpose and prepare ideas to share with their group, they feel a sense of accountability toward their peers... often, students will not only exercise their own roles but will also help one another in fulfilling their roles as well” (pg 16-18). I found this to be accurate during the Literature Circles, as it was clear the girls were comfortable helping one another if needed. The girls liked the idea of working with one another and asking each other questions. Blum et al., (2002) found that Literature Circles empower the reader by allowing them to participate in the decision making process. Each of the girls participated when they felt comfortable and as time went on, they participated more and asked more questions, sometimes even challenging each other’s ideas (p. 100).

Students’ preferred Literature Circles to Whole Group Instruction because they could work at their own pace.

The focal group students did not like to not wait around for the whole class to share out about a text or book; they felt as if that was a waste of time and they wanted to work at their own pace. My focal students really wanted a chance to share their thoughts and ideas pertaining to the book they were reading,

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without waiting around. They did want to discuss different aspects of the book, as long as they were with each other.

It seemed like they also appreciated being able to ask each other questions or pose questions about pieces of the book if they wished to do so. The girls liked being on their own schedule and deciding where to take the conversation. Blum et al., (2002) discuss that “self-determination is a byproduct of Literature Circles” (p. 101), which promotes problem solving, decision-making, improved self-perceptions, and self-assessment. The students could determine what they were going to discuss when they wanted to discuss it, they were in charge of their own learning.

During Literature Circles, the focal group students had various options. Marchiando (2013) mentions that the opportunity to choose what books the groups will read, how much of the text will be read between group meetings, and what will be discussed during each conversation is imperative to Literature Circle success (p. 14). The four girls were able to work at their own pace distinguishing what chapters of the novel would be read and what questions would be answered during their meetings.

Students’ talk during Literature Circles involved on task conversation while making meaning of the text and at times discussions that were off topic and impolite.

The students’ conversations ranged between being completely on task and making very meaningful connections while applying their background knowledge to assist them within the conversation to being off topic, and going off on tangents. The girls were not always polite during the discussion, which I concluded might be due to the fact that they were all very good friends prior to being in this Literature Circle group. Marchiando (2013) discusses that when teachers allow students the opportunity to have a conversation about the text they are reading and explore questions surrounding the text, students are granted a great deal of ownership over their learning (p. 16). Due to the fact that the girls each knew each other so well, there were some disagreements or off-task conversations at times.

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The focal group students would really connect what was going on in their personal lives to what they were reading in the novel. If a student could compare something that happened to them to something going on with a character in the book, they would bring it up. During Mills and Jennings (2001) research, they found Literature Circle conversations to be attentive, probing, and thoughtful when they were seeking deeper understanding of the literature, interpreting the literature, and observing not only the literature, but also their communities. Students would critically build academic knowledge and had the expectation of observing and supporting each other as learners (Mills & Jennings, 2011). This occurred many times throughout the study. The girls would each interpret their meaning to something in the text and bring it to light when it was appropriate.

Wilfong's (2009) study indicates the need for Literature Circles in the classrooms and states "literature circles and book clubs bring together powerful research-based theories of literacy education... researchers have examined the discourse that takes place during literature circle meetings and found that discussion is often purposeful and critically minded" (p.165). Each of the girls brought to light a new way to look at the novel, based on their own background knowledge and personal experiences. They would make meaning of the text and share out their own ideas and interpretation.

Implications for Student Learning

Students value learning and their education, which was shown during their Literature Circle conversations.

I find that this study turned out to be a real eye-opener for my focal students. Through various interviews with the girls, I found that they really do value learning and their education, in terms of Literacy. Most of the girls (three out of four) seemed to value participation as well. It was apparent that the majority of the group liked to keep each other on track, even if it was sarcastically at times. Cameron, et al. (2011) found that students engaged in Literature Circles were "able to problem solve their own

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issues” and the students commented that in the Literature Circle “you learn how to disagree with each other without hurting feelings, people stayed on task because their roles were interesting, and everyone got to share their ideas and opinions about the book” (p. v). These comments alone show the value that students have in their own learning and making meaning of the text.

Students could benefit from participating in literature circles by noticing how critical sharing your own opinions and values can be during a Literature Circle. The concept of teamwork is also a key aspect to being successful. Marchiando (2013) explains that the research on Literature Circles shows improved comprehension skills for students and increased engagement, all of which provides excellent motivation for teachers to implement Literature Circles (p. 19). If students enjoy what they are doing, are engaged, and are learning at the same time, they will be successful during Literature Circles.

Students may not go beyond their assigned roles during Literature Circle discussions.

During the Literature Circle cycle, I found that the focal group students began the first couple weeks strictly sticking to their assigned roles (discussion director, vocabulary wizard, connector, and summarizer). It wasn't until the last week they really began to go beyond their roles and develop their own discussion topics. The idea of implementing roles within Literature Circles comes from a variety of research (O'Brien, 2007; Ferguson & Kern, 2012). O'Brien's (2007) research discusses that a great strength of Literature Circles is maintaining individual accountability that contributes to the whole group. Roles give students a chance to work on one small part of the discussion and moving away from roles may pose a challenge to some students who do not feel they have much to contribute (O'Brien, 2007). I found this to be true with one of the girls in the focal group who found it to be challenging to keep up with her assigned reading and participation with the group.

Assigning roles can be a positive; Ferguson & Kern (2012) found that by assigning roles to students there was less of a chance of students skipping the reading or fake reading the text – there was a

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promotion of accountability. Without doing the reading, a student would be unable to complete their assigned task for that Literature Circle meeting. Each role during a Literature Circle connects, allowing for the conversation to take off and elaborate effectively. However, the complication with the roles was that the students were too comfortable with them and almost used them as a crutch.

It was difficult to go beyond the role cards when they were right in front of the girls. It took at least three weeks for the focal group students to really push beyond their assigned tasks and to start making their own meaning of the text. They stuck to their roles because they felt it was the protocol assigned to them; however, students do not have to stick to these roles and could eventually fade away from implementing them during discussions. Mills & Jennings (2011) believe that eventually the goal of all Literature Circles that begin with roles is to move away from the role cards and see authentic discussions among classmates.

Implications for My Teaching

The idea of choice is essential for implementing a successful Literature Circle.

It was evident throughout my entire study that each student in the Literature Circle was grateful to have a choice in not only their group members but also the book they were reading. I think that if they did not get to pick their group, they may not have been as productive; however, it may have been beneficial for the girls to work with other students they did not know as well, as they may not have been as inclined to go off on tangents.

Daniels (2004) defines Literature Circles as “small, student-led discussions of student-selected texts” (p. 11). It is essential for teachers to allow for student choice in regard to text variety and flexibility. Students should be able to pick between a few books or texts to read, rather than being assigned a specific one. This will allow for more engagement and student interest (Daniels, 1994). This could mean being

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flexible in terms of members in a Literature Circles or how many texts you supply within your classroom

(Daniels, 2004).

Explicit instruction is essential for implementing a successful Literature Circle.

Prior to implementing Literature Circles, teachers should go over what Literature Circles look like and discuss the elements of a positive atmosphere (Blum et al., 2002). Students should know that teachers will be monitoring their participation and keeping track of conversations and developing themes (Blum et al., 2002). The entire class needed explicit instruction in what a Literature Circle looked like and sounded like. It was clear after I had introduced Literature Circles, that the fishbowl method, (having students watch other students) would have been a great way to implement my instruction so that students had a model. Allowing students to watch an exemplar group could have given them the confidence that they too could participate in a Literature Circle successfully.

Ainley & Day (2008) began their Literature Circles by reading picture books aloud and stimulating discussion that pertained to certain themes and had the students work in partners to develop their ideas and share their thoughts (p. 162). They supplied each student with open-ended prompts and then discussed the text as a whole class. This method allowed the students to gain confidence and feel comfortable dissecting a text with another classmate (Ainley & Day, 2008). With this explicit instruction, the students then successfully implemented a Literature Circle cycle.

Encourage students to link background knowledge to Literature Circle discussions and make connections based on prior experiences.

Mills & Jennings (2001) found conversations during Literature Circles to be attentive, probing, and thoughtful when they were seeking deeper understanding of the literature, interpreting the literature, and observing not only the literature, but also their communities. Students would critically build academic knowledge and had the expectation of observing and supporting each other as learners (Mills & Jennings,

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2011). Once Literature Circles end, the students' roles in the Literature Circles expanded beyond just the classroom. Mills & Jennings (2012) explained that students apply their knowledge to other real-world situations and "imagined new possibilities for themselves and their futures" (p. 598).

It is important to encourage students to link background information during their Literature Circle discussions. However, students need to have prior instruction with how to keep on task when discussing their own experiences and knowledge so that they do not become entirely off task. I noticed that even the highest achieving students (which my focal group consisted of) would become off task at one point or another. One student in particular seemed to make many personal connections throughout Literature Circles, which led to a distraction from the text-based discussion. However, this could have been due to the close-knit friendships and level of comfort. The girls all knew each other outside of the classroom, which meant they would easily be able to discuss personal matters. The girls each would share their own personal connections when it came to mind during their Literature Circle discussions. The "connector" is supposed to make connections between the text and the outside world; however, all students within the group will partake in this discussion.

Allowing non-fiction texts to support Literature Circles could impact the outcome of discussions.

This study had me wondering if I had allowed the students to bring in non-fiction texts to support their learning of World War II (the topic their novel was on), would their conversation go beyond literal interpretation and really have the students strive to make deep meaningful connections and conversations. Wilfong (2009) found that Literature circles have been used in conjunction with nonfiction texts and had positive results. However, it is suggested that there be a natural progression of literature circles into the realm of nonfiction with historical fiction and then using biographies (Wilfong 2009).

Many teachers are now integrating Literature Circles into content-based, cross-curricular subjects, rather than just ELA (Wilfong, 2009; Guise et al., 2011). The idea for content-based literature (or use of

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the textbook) in Literature Circles seemed to stem from the realization that for students to be successful in any classroom, it was necessary to reinforce positive and effective reading practices (Wilfong, 2009). This method of Literature Circles proved to bring students together not only to share ideas about the textbook, but also to teach knowledge to peers pertaining to the sections being read (Wilfong, 2009).

Wilfong (2009) mentions that other researchers, like Toumasis (2004), Miller et al. (2007), and Stein & Breed (2004) have all found success using this cross-curricular method. Guise et al. (2011) studied multicultural and political text discussion in Literature Circles and found great success. Guise et al. (2011) found that students' dialogue during their Literature Circles could be described as interpretative and engaging. I believe that incorporating non-fiction pieces to Literature Circles will promote more discussion and encourage students to think beyond-the-text and beyond their roles.

Recommendations for Future Research

Literature Circle cycles should takes place multiple times throughout the school year and vary in text-type.

Looking at Literature Circles over an entire school year would be very helpful in determining how the same set of students grow over a period of ten months. Would their conversations grow into more meaningful and thoughtful responses? Would they become more comfortable with groups that do not consist of their friends? Would their participation differ if the text were fiction versus non-fiction? By setting up more than one cycle of Literature Circles, teachers can see how students apply their learning within the classroom and through discussion with peers.

It would be beneficial to see the classroom setting change from teacher directed to student directed throughout the school year. As time went on, students would become more independent in the classroom and during their Literature Circles. There would be more options for grouping, more choice of student selected texts and materials, and more time for the students to review their own learning and implement

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new strategies. It would be useful to know which strategies worked best within Literature Circles, which groups worked together most effectively, and discover which type of Literature Circle was the most effective.

Allowing for choice in the type of Literature Circles within the classroom could impact student learning.

Allowing the entire class to partake in various types of Literature Circles would be an interesting choice. If students had the choice to pick between online Literature Circles, Role Based Literature Circles, or Literature Circles without assigned roles, what would the outcome be? Does the class have to be doing the same type of Literature Circle to be successful?

As a teacher, I find it to be very difficult to manage different groups of students within the classroom. It would be beneficial to see if a classroom could be successful when implementing multiple types of Literature Circles. This would allow for differentiation between students and different learning methods could take place simultaneously within the classroom. Some students may learn best when working with non-fiction texts and may prefer to write blogs, rather than have a student discussion in person. Another student may really want to talk with classmates and share out his or her ideas one-on-one with a small group. The possibilities could be endless for Literature Circles.

Final Thoughts

Over the course of this six-week study, I learned about my students and the concept of Literature Circles and what they bring to a Middle School ELA classroom. Often within an English Language Arts classroom, student talk is vague and centered around their social lives. It can be challenging to dig deep into a student's thought process surrounding a book. Literature circles integrate both dialogue and a deep thinking process involving a book and other students reading the same book.

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I have learned that students prefer to discuss literature with their friends whom they are most comfortable with in their classroom. Students also enjoy working at their own pace and setting their own goals during Literature Circles, rather than be set to a rigid schedule. They also really value choice, whether it be with who is in their group or what text they are reading, they appreciate options.

It's important to understand that while you may not think students are "on-task" during their Literature Circle discussion, they probably are. Their discussions will entail multiple conversations pertaining to the text they are reading and they will be making personal connections the entire time, building on background knowledge or an experience they had. They will even apply their learning during Literature Circles to other classes and even outside of the classroom. Ultimately, students really do value their learning and their education, even if they do not show it right away.

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Appendix A
INFORMED CONSENT FOR OBSERVATION AND INTERVIEW OF STUDENT

The purpose of this research study is to investigate student talk within a Literature Circle in comparison to student talk in whole group instruction. The person conducting this research is a graduate student at The College at Brockport, SUNY as well as your child's teacher. If you agree to have your child participate in this research study, your child will be observed during his/her ELA class. Your child may be selected for an interview.

In order for your child to participate in this study, your informed consent is required. You are being asked to make a decision whether or not to allow your child to participate in the study. If you would like for your child to participate, and agree with the statements below, please sign your name in the space provided at the end. You may change your mind at any time and your child may leave the study without penalty, even after the study has begun. Your child can decline participation in the study even with your consent to participate.

I understand that:

- a. My child's participation is voluntary and s/he has the right to refuse to answer any questions.
- b. My child's confidentiality is protected. Her/his name will not be recorded in observation notes. There will be no way to connect my child to the observation. If any publication results from this research, s/he would not be identified by name. Results will be given through the use of pseudonyms, so neither the participants nor the school can be identified.
- c. While the study will help researchers understand talk with Literature Circles and whole group discussion, this study is not designed to benefit you directly.
- d. My child's participation involves participating in regularly scheduled classroom activities in her/his classroom. There will be no impact of my child's grades or class standing due to nonparticipation.
- e. The researcher will observe my child during ELA time on a daily basis for approximately six weeks. Observations will be documented in a notebook and audio-recorded. I will only transcribe my audio-recordings of the students with permission for audio recording.
- f. The results will be used for the completion of a thesis paper by the primary researcher.
- g. My child's participation may involve being audio-recorded during an interview answering questions during his/her ELA class. It is estimated that it will take 5-15 minutes to complete each interview. The researcher will transcribe the audio-recordings. There will be no way to connect my child to the interview. If any publication results from this research, he/she would not be identified by name. I will only audio record students that have permission to be audio recorded and if permission is not granted I will write down response to the interview only.
- h. Data, audio-recordings and transcribed notes will be kept in a locked filing cabinet in the classroom by the investigator. Only the primary investigator will have access to the notes and recordings. Data, audio-recordings, transcribed notes and consent forms will be destroyed by shredding or deleted when the research has been accepted and approved.

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I understand the information provided in this form and agree to allow my child to participate as a participant in this study. I am 18 years of age or older. I have read and understand the above statements. All my questions about my child's participation in this study have been answered to my satisfaction. If you have any questions, you may contact:

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Consent to Observe: Signature of Parent _____ Date: _____

Consent to Interview: Signature of Parent _____ Date: _____

Consent to Audio-record: Signature of Parent _____ Date: _____

Child's Name _____

Appendix B
Interview Questions

1. Last year, in seventh grade, when you participated in Literature Circles in your English class, what did you like or dislike about the experience as a whole?
2. What does the term “whole group discussion” mean to you in our English class?
3. If you had a choice to pick between having a whole group discussion about a book or participating in a Literature Circle discussion on a book, which would you prefer and why?
4. Do you feel that Literature Circles allow you to have an adequate discussion about a book you have read? Meaning, do you feel that your voice gets heard and your opinions are valued during Literature Circles? Why or why not?

After Literature Circles:

5. What are the most beneficial aspects for you of Literature Circles?
6. What are things that didn't go so well for you or your group in your Literature Circle? What could I change for next year?
7. What are the most beneficial aspects for you of whole group instruction?
8. Next year, in 9th grade, would you prefer to talk about a book in a whole group discussion or Literature Circle? Why do you think this?
9. Do you think that you can apply what you discuss in a Literature Circle to our discussions in whole group?

Appendix C:
Interview Protocol

Participant pseudonym: _____

Date of Interview: _____

Time of Interview: _____

Purpose Statement: **Start audio recording-Identify participant by pseudonym, the date, and time**

The purpose of this interview is for me to gain a better understanding of your preference between Literature Circles and whole group instruction, along with if you prefer one type of discussion over another. If at any time you feel uncomfortable with a question I ask, please know that you have the choice not to respond. You may withdraw from the interview at any time. I anticipate that our interview will last about 5 to 10 minutes. I will be recording our conversation, if you have given consent.

Questions:

1. Last year, in seventh grade, when you participated in Literature Circles in your English class, what did you like or dislike about the experience as a whole?
2. What does the term “whole group discussion” mean to you in our English class?
3. If you had a choice to pick between having a whole group discussion about a book or participating in a Literature Circle discussion on a book, which would you prefer and why?
4. Do you feel that Literature Circles allow you to have an adequate discussion about a book you have read? Meaning, do you feel that your voice gets heard and your opinions are valued during Literature Circles? Why or why not?

After Literature Circles:

5. What are the most beneficial aspects for you of Literature Circles?
6. What are things that didn't go so well for you or your group in your Literature Circle? What could I change for next year?
7. What are the most beneficial aspects for you of whole group instruction?
8. Next year, in 9th grade, would you prefer to talk about a book in a whole group discussion or Literature Circle? Why do you think this?

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9. Do you think that you can apply what you discuss in a Literature Circle to our discussions in whole group?

Closing:

I truly appreciate your participation and willingness to share your thoughts with me. Your participation and insights will help me during our English class time together. As noted in your consent letter, I will keep your identity confidential. In the event that I need clarification after transcribing this interview, may I request a follow-up discussion?

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Appendix D:
Observation Protocol

Participant pseudonym names: _____

Date of Observation: _____

Time of Observation: _____

Length of Observation: _____

Talk Within Literature Circles and Whole Group Discussions

Description of Activities	Reflective Field Notes

Closing:

I truly appreciate your participation and willingness to share your thoughts with me. Your participation and insights will help me during our English class time together. As noted in your consent letter, I will keep your identity confidential.

Appendix E
Nancy Interview

5/6/13

10. Last year, in seventh grade, when you participated in Literature Circles in your English class, what did you like or dislike about the experience as a whole?

“I didn’t really like the experience because I didn’t like my group. We didn’t get along.”

11. What does the term “whole group discussion” mean to you in our English class?

“It means that all of us should be talking about what we discovered. We need to say our opinions”

5/13/13

12. If you had a choice to pick between having a whole group discussion about a book or participating in a Literature Circle discussion on a book, which would you prefer and why?

“Literature Circle because then I wouldn’t have to share my ideas with the whole class- only to my group.”

13. Do you feel that Literature Circles allow you to have an adequate discussion about a book you have read? Meaning, do you feel that your voice gets heard and your opinions are valued during Literature Circles? Why or why not?

“Yes, because we take turns talking. Everyone can understand your opinion and your point of view.”

After Literature Circles:

5/31/13

14. What are the most beneficial aspects for you of Literature Circles?

“Everyone gets to speak out and share their opinion. It teaches us communication too!”

15. What are things that didn't go so well for you or your group in your Literature Circle? What could I change for next year?

“I didn’t like doing all the work. But, I guess that’s a part of it. “

16. What are the most beneficial aspects for you of whole group instruction?

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“Whole group is good because you can get help if you need it from other kids in the class”

17. Next year, in 9th grade, would you prefer to talk about a book in a whole group discussion or Literature Circle? Why do you think this?

“I would want Literature Circles because then you can work at your own pace, independently with help from the group”

18. Do you think that you can apply what you discuss in a Literature Circle to our discussions in whole group?

“I could try it, even though I do not like speaking out”

Appendix F
Sydney Interview

5/6/13

- 1. Last year, in seventh grade, when you participated in Literature Circles in your English class, what did you like or dislike about the experience as a whole?**

“I felt that Literature Circles were a waste of time. Most of the time people didn’t read. Sometimes me too. But if I didn’t read ahead then I would do it quick. I could discuss the questions at least.”

- 2. What does the term “whole group discussion” mean to you in our English class?**

“Discussion the topic within the whole group or like the entire class”

5/13/13

- 3. If you had a choice to pick between having a whole group discussion about a book or participating in a Literature Circle discussion on a book, which would you prefer and why?**

“I would pick Literature Circles because you can talk with your friends. I feel more comfortable asking questions in Literature Circles”

- 4. Do you feel that Literature Circles allow you to have an adequate discussion about a book you have read? Meaning, do you feel that your voice gets heard and your opinions are valued during Literature Circles? Why or why not?**

“Yes, I think so. I was so much more comfortable. Yes, I get heard, usually”

After Literature Circles:

5/31/13

- 5. What are the most beneficial aspects for you of Literature Circles?**

“ I got to enjoy talking to my friends. I even got to ask a question if I needed to”

- 6. What are things that didn't go so well for you or your group in your Literature Circle? What could I change for next year?**

“ Nothing really. I got to choose the book I wanted and most of the time I liked reading it. Next year, maybe it won’t have to be about World War II.”

- 7. What are the most beneficial aspects for you of whole group instruction?**

“You do not have to talk so much”

- 8. Next year, in 9th grade, would you prefer to talk about a book in a whole group discussion or Literature Circle? Why do you think this?**

TALK WITHIN LITERATURE CIRCLES

“Literature Circles. They are neat. It’s just nicer to talk with friends”

- 9. Do you think that you can apply what you discuss in a Literature Circle to our discussions in whole group?**

“Yes, because I can be more prepared and maybe not as nervous to share out”

Appendix G
Bri Interview

5/6/13

- 1. Last year, in seventh grade, when you participated in Literature Circles in your English class, what did you like or dislike about the experience as a whole?**

“I did not really like the experience. The people in my group did not even talk about the book. They sat there talking about random stuff.”

- 2. What does the term “whole group discussion” mean to you in our English class?**

“It means everyone needs to participate”

5/13/13

- 3. If you had a choice to pick between having a whole group discussion about a book or participating in a Literature Circle discussion on a book, which would you prefer and why?**

“I would rather do a Literature Circle discussion. I like to be with my friends and we can actually get work done. It’s wasting time to wait for the whole class to talk”

- 4. Do you feel that Literature Circles allow you to have an adequate discussion about a book you have read? Meaning, do you feel that your voice gets heard and your opinions are valued during Literature Circles? Why or why not?**

“Yes. I can speak my mind. Only a few people have to listen to me”

After Literature Circles:

5/31/13

- 5. What are the most beneficial aspects for you of Literature Circles?**

“I get to have a nice discussion about something I enjoy with my friends”

- 6. What are things that didn't go so well for you or your group in your Literature Circle? What could I change for next year?**

“Nothing really went wrong, we had a spider fall on us! Sometimes we were a little crabby”

- 7. What are the most beneficial aspects for you of whole group instruction?**

“I don’t have to talk as much”

TALK WITHIN LITERATURE CIRCLES

- 8. Next year, in 9th grade, would you prefer to talk about a book in a whole group discussion or Literature Circle? Why do you think this?**

“It’s so much easier in Literature Circles” We don’t have to wait for the whole class.”

- 9. Do you think that you can apply what you discuss in a Literature Circle to our discussions in whole group?**

“No, people would interrupt me. I would get grumpy because the class wouldn’t focus. I only like to talk in front of people I really trust”

**Appendix F
Sam Interview**

5/6/13

- 1. Last year, in seventh grade, when you participated in Literature Circles in your English class, what did you like or dislike about the experience as a whole?**

“I liked how everyone participated and we worked together. We didn’t even fight with each other”

- 2. What does the term “whole group discussion” mean to you in our English class?**

“Everyone is taking part and the entire group is talking“

5/13/13

- 3. If you had a choice to pick between having a whole group discussion about a book or participating in a Literature Circle discussion on a book, which would you prefer and why?**

“Literature Circles because it’s fewer people and we can make good connections”

- 4. Do you feel that Literature Circles allow you to have an adequate discussion about a book you have read? Meaning, do you feel that your voice gets heard and your opinions are valued during Literature Circles? Why or why not?**

“Yes, I think we have enough time. We all get a chance to talk and everyone can share out.”

After Literature Circles:

5/31/13

- 5. What are the most beneficial aspects for you of Literature Circles?**

“All of us learned things from the book and we concentrated on the book. We got to talk about our feelings.”

- 6. What are things that didn't go so well for you or your group in your Literature Circle? What could I change for next year?**

“Sometimes we were moody and that messed up our group. Maybe next year you won't have all girls working together.”

- 7. What are the most beneficial aspects for you of whole group instruction?**

TALK WITHIN LITERATURE CIRCLES

“I don't always have to answer since the whole class can talk.”

- 8. Next year, in 9th grade, would you prefer to talk about a book in a whole group discussion or Literature Circle? Why do you think this?**

“I would like to talk about what when on in the book during a Literature Circle because I am more comfortable.”

- 9. Do you think that you can apply what you discuss in a Literature Circle to our discussions in whole group?**

“I would not want to share what we talked about in our Literature Circle in the whole class because that was our own conversation. I don't always want to share out.”