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Literature circles in a fifth grade classroom: A qualitative study examining how the
teacher and students used literature circles and the impact they have
on student learning

By

Laura Claypool Pambianchi

A Dissertation
Submitted to the Faculty of
Mississippi State University
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy
in Curriculum and Instruction
in the Department of Curriculum, Instruction, and Special Education

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Literature circles in a fifth grade classroom: A qualitative study examining how the
teacher and students used literature circles and the impact they have
on student learning

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State and national standards, including the Common Core State Standards, state that students should be expected to learn to discuss and analyze texts, comprehend ideas in increasingly complex texts, and justify their thinking. Literature circles are an instructional practice suggested by many educational writers as an instructional practice that can help students meet these standards; however, research examining the impact literature circles have on students and their teacher in the classroom is needed.

The purpose of this study was to investigate the implementation of literature circles in a classroom by examining how students engage in the literature circle process and the instructional practices that contribute to the level of engagement that is experienced by the students during literature. Vygotsky's socio-cultural learning theory provides a context to understand the impact that literature circles and learning with and through others have on students.

The data revealed that students engaged in the literature circle process by participating in discussions, through purposeful collaboration, and by thinking critically. The data also revealed that the level of student engagement was influenced by several

practices the teacher had in place. These included (a) purposeful tasks and learning; (b) choice, (c) questioning; (d) argumentative reading and writing; and (e) role sheets.

This research demonstrates the ways that using literature circles supported authentic literacy in a 5th grade classroom. Implications include instructional practices that supported engagement including purposeful tasks and learning, choice, and questioning. These instructional practices helped students learn to think critically, have evidence-based discussions, and justify their thoughts and ideas about texts.

Additionally, this research has specific implications for the use of role sheets. Role sheets are frequently recommended as a practice for scaffolding student engagement, although little empirical research supports their use. Data from this study suggest that using role sheets as a conversation scaffold and as a means to train students to participate in discussion can support engagement but that discontinuing their use once students are comfortable having text-based conversations and tracking their thinking may be beneficial.

DEDICATION

I would like to dedicate this research to my husband, Dustin. Words cannot express how deeply appreciative I am for the constant and continuous encouragement, support, and selflessness you have shown me throughout the duration of this research. You have cheered me on and made me laugh when I was overwhelmed and never lost faith in me or my ability to complete this dissertation project. I am forever grateful (and I know that I do not tell you enough). I could not have done it without you.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

As an elementary principal, one of the classroom issues that I regularly address with teachers is the necessity to have an appropriate balance of student and teacher talk in the classroom. Having rich conversations around text is a key component of learning to read for meaning (Pearson, Cervetti, & Tilson, 2008). Social interaction through language is critical to developing highly skilled readers.

The theories that direct this study are Vygotsky's (1978) socio-cultural theory of learning and authentic literacy. The key element of Vygotsky's socio-cultural theory of learning is that "all the higher functions originate as actual relationships between individuals" (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 57). Pearson, Cervetti, and Tilson (2008) elaborate on that idea by stating that people must interact around ideas if they are to incorporate them into their own thinking. Authentic literacy provides students with opportunities to read, write, and discuss for a purpose in order to make knowledge their own (Schmoker, 2006).

Vygotsky's (1978) theory incorporates the concept that thinking aloud helps organize and clarify thinking and develop conceptual frameworks for deeper learning to continue. Discussion with peers serves as both a forum through which students can sharpen their cognitive skills and deepen their involvement in the reading process. In order to increase this active reading, there should be a focus on authentic, student-to-student dialogue about rich texts that allow students to make connections with their lives,

our society, and the cultural groups they represent. Unfortunately, according to Corden (2001), oral language and its importance to literacy and learning is rarely focused on after third grade; lessons tend to be dominated by teacher talk in many classrooms. Schmoker (2006) goes so far as to say that “*generous amounts of close, purposeful reading, rereading, writing, and talking*” (p. 53) are underemphasized in K-12 education even though they are the foundation for a powerful mind and future.

Since *A Nation at Risk* (U.S. Department of Education, 1983), a large number of reports have been written to explain our need for more powerful learning that focuses on demands of 21st Century learners. We have the demanding task of “preparing students for jobs that yet exist, to use technologies that have not yet been invented, and to solve problems that we don’t even know are problems yet” (Darling-Hammond, 2008, p. 2), while knowledge is increasing in such a manner that it is difficult to keep up with all the new findings. Because of these new challenges, education must focus on helping students learn in powerful ways in order to manage the difficulties of evolving information, technology, jobs, and social conditions.

With the recent comparisons of American schools against each other, as well as to some of the top performing nations throughout the world, there is an increased set of expectations for teachers and students. According to Darling-Hammond (2008), teachers are expected to address standards and assessments in their instructional practice while meeting the needs of the various learners in their classrooms. Teachers are now expected to “teach for understanding” while students are expected to evaluate and justify their ideas, problem solve, and produce a high quality of work all while indicating that they understand the standards and what they ask of them. Raising the standards for student

learning so that powerful and productive learning is occurring requires that changes occur in our classrooms. One of the ways that states are working to address these concerns is by adopting more rigorous state standards.

Common Core State Standards

Most states have adopted a version of the Common Core State Standards (CCSS), which has set the stage for changes in the delivery of education throughout the United States. States have made a unified commitment to ensure that every student is college and career ready by the time that they graduate from high school (Wilhoit, 2013). For decades, each state has set its own expectations for what their students should know and have mastered by the time they reach graduation. Although each set of standards satisfied individual state's needs, there was no unity throughout the 50 states. The standards varied in expectations and degree of difficulty from state to state. With the implementation of the CCSS, nearly all students in the United States, regardless of where they live, will be expected to meet the same set of standards at the same degree of difficulty which is a major advance for equal opportunity (Rothman, 2012). Calkins, Ehrenworth, and Lehman (2012) and Alberti (2012) go so far as to say that very few documents have ever had such influence over teaching and learning in American schools.

The focus of the CCSS is to provide educators with standards that are fewer, clearer, and more advanced, as well as more focused and coherent than most state standards (Rothman, 2012). They are built on the best of state standards and learning experiences seen around the country and make it possible for students to graduate being college and career ready (Alberti, 2012). The CCSS encourage schools and teachers to focus on the most important topics at each grade level and subject. They highlight the

importance of asking text-based questions and providing evidence from the text in oral and written responses to what was read. The English Language Arts (ELA) standards demand a focus on the close readings of texts, a literary skill that has mainly been used in college English classes, and the expansion of informational texts at all grade levels including kindergarten (Sawchuk, 2012). Rothman (2012) discusses the impact reading and comprehending complex texts have on the new standards. He states that the complexity of materials used in college classes and required in the work force has increased in recent years, yet the standards and expectations of most high schools has decreased over time. The CCSS require that students read and comprehend more difficult texts each year. Much more effort and focus must be put forth by students to meet these more rigorous standards (Billings & Roberts, 2012).

The CCSS is a set of standards that has an emphasis on increasing students' literacy development from kindergarten through high school (Calkins, Ehrenworth, & Lehman, 2012; Hiebert & Pearson, 2012). Reading in the CCSS refers to making meaning rather than simply "calling out words." Understanding the meaning of the text comes through having a deep relationship with the text and developing an understanding of why and how the author wrote it. Jaeger (2012) adds that as students read, the goal is to "uncover and discover, rather than cover" (p. 31).

According to the CCSS (2010), the instructional focus should be to prepare students to be college and career ready in the 21st Century by requiring that they "demonstrate independence;" "build strong content knowledge;" "respond to the varying demands of audience, task, purpose, and discipline;" "comprehend as well as critique;" "value evidence;" "use technology and digital media strategically and capably;" and

“come to understand other perspectives and cultures” (p. 7). The introduction of the CCSS for ELA & Literacy in History/Social Studies, Science, and Technical Subjects (2010) define what it means to be a literate individual in the 21st Century by stating that

...the skills and understandings students are expected to demonstrate have wide applicability outside the classroom or workplace. Students who meet the Standards readily undertake the close, attentive reading that is at the heart of understanding and enjoying complex works of literature. They habitually perform the critical reading necessary to pick carefully through the staggering amount of information available today in print and digitally. They actively seek the wide, deep, and thoughtful engagement with high-quality literary and informational texts that builds knowledge, enlarges experience, and broadens worldviews.

They reflexively demonstrate the cogent reasoning and use of evidence that is essential to both private deliberation and responsible citizenship in a democratic republic. In short, students who meet the Standards develop the skills in reading, writing, speaking, and listening that are the foundation for any creative and purposeful expression in language. (p. 3)

With the passage of the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) (2001), much emphasis surrounding literacy was centered around phonics, phonemic awareness, vocabulary, comprehension, and fluency; and while these skills are important components for learning how to read, the writers of the CCSS view the components of literacy as reading, writing, speaking, and listening (CCSS Initiative, 2010). Hiebert and Pearson (2012) comment that attending to the foundational skills does not occur at the expense of engaging students with the text. The goal of literacy should be to develop

powerful readers, writers, and thinkers. They state the CCSS support classrooms in which learning to read and reading to learn transpire concurrently- building knowledge, increasing responsibility for reading, and providing students with more time with the text.

Authentic Literacy

Authentic literacy is one practice that encompasses the overarching goal of the CCSS. According to Schmoker (2011), “authentic literacy is integral to both what and how we teach” (p. 11). It is purposeful and argumentative reading, writing, and talking. Schmoker (2006) states that this type of reading, writing, and talking are rare in most classrooms. Although discussions are an integral component of a university education, most K-12 students do not engage in this type of academic dialogue until college.

Literature Circles

In order to meet all of the CCSS and experience authentic literacy, students should learn to read, write, and critically think about complex ideas. Social interaction plays an important role in this, because it provides students with opportunities to engage in shared activities and shared meaning, which helps learners make sense of new information. Literature circles can provide students with the opportunity to read, discuss, and write about complex ideas. Daniels (2002), considered one of the leading writers on literature circles, describes them as

...small, peer-led discussion groups whose members have chosen to read the same story, poem, article, or book. While reading each group assigned portion of the text (either in or outside of class), members make notes to help them contribute to the upcoming discussion, and everyone comes to the group with ideas to share.

Each group follows a reading and meeting schedule, holding periodic discussions on the way through the book. When they finish a book, the circle members may share highlights of their reading with the wider community; then they trade members with other finishing groups, select more reading, and move into a new cycle. (p. 2)

I became interested in literature circles while teaching fourth grade in a high poverty area in the middle of the Delta- an area considered one of the poorest in the United States. Although I was a fourth grade teacher, I was expected to follow the practices of the K- 3rd grade teachers who were being supported by a Reading First grant at the time. At the time, I was a graduate student, as well as a participant in the Writing Thinking Institute, which is sponsored by the National Writing Project. I did not feel that the practices I was being encouraged to implement were leading to strong readers, writers, or thinkers. Due to high test scores on state achievement tests and the trust of my principal, I was allowed to implement literature circles and other practices that I thought would create stronger learners and help instill a love of reading.

Literature circles were developed from the research conducted by McMahon and Raphael (1997) on book clubs. After reviewing the socio-cultural perspective of literacy learning (which emphasizes the way that learning is constructed in social interactions), the researchers came up with an alternative approach to literacy instruction-the Book Club program. The program emphasizes four components: reading, community share, writing, and book club. Students are given opportunities to read literature that is intended to convey meaning. Book clubs are small, student-led discussion groups in which students are given the opportunity to discuss with peers the issues and ideas they find

important or captivating from the text they are reading. According to McMahon and Raphael (1997), book clubs allow both teachers and peers to serve in an instructional capacity and provide opportunities for students to enhance their ability to read, to use writing as both a means for thinking and expression, and to discuss issues related to the text.

Lyons and Pinnell (2001) defined learning as the active process of bringing together what the learner already knows with new information. Much of class time is spent focusing on the reading standards, while the writing and speaking and listening standards are often neglected. Participating in classroom discussions of challenging texts allows students to reach a deeper level of understanding and produces more authentic writing (Billings & Roberts, 2012). Literature circles provide a change from previous practices where time was spent on reading but not on speaking and listening. According to Pearson et al. (2008), reading is a cause and an effect of comprehension. They discussed how book clubs or literature circles make thinking public and provide an opportunity for dialogue around texts. Students gain a deeper understanding of themselves through their reading and conversations about literature. Allowing students to work through their understanding of the text publically, they are able to become more aware of what they understand and seek clarification as needed.

Some advocates of literature circles, such as Daniels (1994), encouraged teachers to use role sheets as a support to focus on particular aspects of the text while reading and as a guide to structure the discussions. Students are asked to take on roles such as illustrator, word finder, summarizer, questioner, connector, etc. as they read the text and later discuss the text with their group. Daniels (2002) indicates that role sheets are

intended to be a support as students' transition from teacher led instruction to more student led instruction, and set a "...cognitive purpose for the reading and an interactive one for the group discussion. Each of the roles was designed to support collaborative learning by giving kids clearly defined, interlocking, and open-ended tasks" (p. 13). They were created with the idea of a key assumption of reading discussed in Keene and Zimmerman (2007) that readers who approach a text with a purpose will comprehend more.

Problem Statement

In order to meet the increasing standards that are set forth for students to meet, teachers need to teach students how to struggle with ideas in text and to read deeply and thoughtfully and learn to discuss and analyze texts, as well as justify their thinking. Although literature circles are considered to be a "best practice" by educational writers; are the topic of many practitioner-based journals, websites, and books; are considered one of the "best" ways to have students discuss and analyze texts; and seem to instantiate the principles of Vygotsky's (1978) socio-cultural learning theory which supports the notion that "learning takes place in a social context and relies on communication and interaction with others" (Darling-Hammond, 2008, p. 197), there is little documented research on the connections between literature circles and theory. There is more empirical research on literature circles' predecessor, book clubs (Clark & Nolan, 2014; Goatley & Raphael, 1992; Jacobsohn, 1998; Krashen, 2003). Although some studies have occurred that support the practices observed in literature circles, such as cooperative learning, independent reading, defending ideas, authentic conversations about literature to name a few (Alpert, 1987; Anderson, Wilson, & Fielding, 1988; Enciso, 1996; Langer, 2002;

Marzano, Pickering, & Pollack, 2001; Zemelman, Daniels, & Hyde, 1993), there has been little empirical research since the 1990's to support this reading practice in a systematic manner. While there has not been as much empirical research completed on literature circles recently, it is a practice that is often referenced on websites, in practitioner journals, and in books that discuss literature circles as a teaching practice with students using role sheets. Although these role sheets seem to be a common tool used by students, there are no documented studies on the impact that the role sheets have on comprehension and understanding of the text nor their contribution and support to the discussion.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this research is to examine and understand how teachers and students use literature circles and the impact that they have on the students' engagement, discussions, and learning. It is also the goal of this study to determine how role sheets and other instructional practices that are used contribute to the level of engagement experienced by the students during literature circles. If literature circles have an impact on student learning, shedding light on the impact that they have on teacher instruction and student learning may alter reading instruction.

Delimitation of the Study

It is important to note that I am the principal of the suburban school in the state where the study took place. I have worked with Mrs. Jones, the teacher participant, for the past four years. She and I are both advocates of literature circles and share similar views on most aspects of education and literacy, in particular. As an administrator, I see

the difference in the learning that occurs in classrooms where best practices, such as literature circles occur versus the classrooms that have a more test-preparation approach. The level of thinking, questioning, discussion, and risk-taking involved is vastly different. Mrs. Jones's role in this study is only one component, yet it is important. I interviewed and observed students in her classroom but also interviewed her and asked her questions about how and why she manages literature circles in her classroom, as well as her purpose for using them. Because I am not an outsider, the students were comfortable with me observing in their classroom; they were familiar and relaxed with me being in their classroom and talking with me about what they were working on, why they were doing it, and explaining its significance and importance to what they were learning. I regularly ask students about their learning and have them talk with me about what they are learning, how they are learning, and why it is important.

Research Questions

The goal of this study is to examine how teachers and students use literature circles and the impact that they have on the students' engagement, discussions, and learning. If literature circles have an impact on student learning, shedding light on the impact that they have on teacher instruction and the ways that roles and role sheets support discussion and student learning may alter reading instruction. The research questions addressed in this study are:

Research Question One: In what ways do students engage in the literature circle process?

Research Question Two: What instructional practices contribute to the level of engagement that is experienced by the students during literature circles? In particular, how do students use role sheets during the reading and discussion of the text to help them

through the literature circle process?

Definition of Terms

There are several key terms used throughout the study and are operationally defined below. These definitions will be integrated throughout the study.

Assessment is defined by Dietel, Herman, and Knuth (1991) as any technique used to understand the current knowledge a student possesses.

Authentic literacy is purposeful and argumentative reading, writing, and talking (Schmoker, 2011).

Book Clubs are defined by McMahon and Raphael (1997) as an approach where students “read literary selections, write responses in their reading logs to text selections, and engage in both small-group and whole-class discussions (p. 3).

Collaboration is “the social discourse among students in a learning community that enables them to see perspectives and to socially construct knowledge from text” (Guthrie & Wigfield, 2000, p. 413).

Common Core State Standards are a clear set of shared goals and expectations for the knowledge and skills students need in English language arts and mathematics at each grade level so that they can be prepared to succeed in college, career, and life.

Learning is defined by Lyons and Pinnell (2001) as the active process of bringing together what the learner already knows with new information.

Literature circles are student-led reading discussion groups where a small group of students choose a book to read, divide the text into sections, and meet to discuss what they have read (Harvey & Daniels, 2009).

Reader response is a theory that describes the interaction between the reader and the text where the reader creates meaning with the text based on personal associations (Rosenblatt, 1995).

Role sheets are defined by Daniels (2002) as handouts that give group members jobs that set a purpose for reading and support collaborative learning by giving students tasks with the purpose of helping students read and discuss better.

Zone of proximal development is “the distance between the actual developmental level as determined by the independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers” (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 86).

CHAPTER II

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

For the last several decades, literature circles have been a hot topic for many educators. According to Daniels (2002), this can be attributed to several factors- the renewed interest in adult book clubs, trade book publishers' publication of reading group guides, online book clubs, and even Oprah's Book Club. Harvey and Daniels (2009) added that literature circles and other collaborative group settings where students work and discuss their thinking and ideas is not a passing fad, but rather a model of teaching and learning that has strengthened over the years. This study will examine how teachers and students use literature circles in a fifth grade classroom and the impact that they have on the students' engagement, discussions, and learning. This chapter will review the literature related to defining and understanding collaboration in the classroom, Vygotsky's socio-cultural learning theory, book clubs, talk in the classroom, authentic literacy, reader response, choice, and literature circles.

Collaboration in the Classroom

Guthrie and Wigfield (2000) defined collaboration as "the social discourse among students in a learning community that enables them to see perspectives and to socially construct knowledge from text" (p. 413). Working collaboratively provides students with many benefits. Working collaboratively leads students to higher academic achievement, as well as to a stronger socially conscious attitude, stronger work habits, and more

persistence in school (Darling-Hammond, 2008; Zemelman et al., 2012). Collaboration allows students to engage in each other's ideas and drive each other's thinking. Furthermore, it also provides students with the opportunity to build knowledge, to care, and to act.

Although the importance of students working collaboratively is well known, very few classrooms are actually fostering or even allowing for student collaboration. After studying more than 1,000 students from more than 2,500 classrooms in more than 1,000 schools across the United States, Pianta, Belsky, Houts, and Morrison (2007) found that American fifth graders were spending 91% of their day working in a whole-group setting or completing seatwork individually, and only 7% of their day was spent working in a small-group setting. The findings were similar to those for first and third grades, as well. They also learned that the average fifth grade student received five times as much instruction on basic skills as they did on problem solving or reasoning.

During a time in our world when Americans are making efforts to compete globally (Friedman & Mandelbaum, 2012), the impact of the NCLB (2001) and the testing frenzy is still leaving students with an education that is subpar. Teachers are requiring that students sit in straight rows and complete test-prep worksheets while allowing the state test to become their curriculum (Harvey & Daniels, 2009). Friedman and Mandelbaum (2012) claimed that the education our students should be receiving ought to “aspire them to achieve: ingenuity, creativity, and the inspiration to bring something ‘extra’ to whatever the student winds up doing in the world” (p. 142). Tom Wagner, the Innovation Education Fellow at the Technology and Entrepreneurship Center at Harvard (as cited in Friedman and Mandelbaum, 2012), suggested that

educators must be preparing students to be creative and critical thinkers, effective written and oral communicators, and collaborators. He states that thinking critically involves asking the right questions and knowing what you can do with what you know, not memorizing the correct answers.

In order to be creative and innovative, students must be able to communicate and collaborate with others. Lleras (2008) conducted a study where she analyzed data from the National Educational Longitudinal Study, which followed 11,000 tenth grade students for ten years. She found that high school students who had been identified as having better social skills, work habits, and participated in extracurricular activities in high school had higher educational attainment and salaries. The findings indicated that student work habits and conscientiousness, as well as the ability to get along well with others and participate in extracurricular activities were more important for socioeconomic success as adults than cognitive ability.

Zemelman et al. (1993) explained that collaborative learning is open-ended and student centered. They mentioned several benefits to the practice including fostering a sense of democracy, community, and shared responsibility within the classroom, as well as investment from the students. Collaboration can be viewed in many forms in the classroom including, but not limited to, reading with others, sharing ideas, student-led discussion groups, book talks, group projects, and peer feedback (Guthrie, 2013). Chinn, Anderson, and Waggoner (2001) discussed a collaborative classroom structure that allows students to make claims about the text, add to each other's interpretations, ask clarifying questions, and synthesize their own understandings. This collaborative learning structure has been shown to impact higher order thinking and produce a

collective understanding about text by scaffolding students' contributions based on reading about a topic. Wentzel (1996) discussed that when studying sixth through eighth grade students, high correlations between collaborative learning, reading motivation, and reading self-efficacy, as well as willingness to help classmates who needed assistance were noted.

Theoretical Frameworks

Literature circles are an instructional practice that instantiates Vygotsky's (1978) socio-cultural learning theory. Vygotsky's socio-cultural learning theory suggests that learning is affected in many ways within social settings. People learn from one another through modeling and by observing and imitating each other. He indicated that students can learn a great deal by observing their peers (Ormond, 1999). Vygotsky referred to children's learning as "imitation" in that when students are surrounded by more knowledgeable others they are able to learn and grow from them. The more knowledgeable others serve as a guide for thinking and doing that is beyond what they are capable of doing without the model of others. Vygotsky (1978) claimed that

...human learning presupposes a specific social nature and a process by which children grow into the intellectual life of those around them. Children can imitate a variety of actions that go well beyond the limits of their own capabilities. Using imitation, children are capable of doing much more in collective activity or under the guidance of adults. (p. 88)

Imitation requires the learner to be in the midst of a community of more knowledgeable others. LePage, Darling-Hammond, and Akar (2005) argued that the development of learning communities allows students to construct knowledge through

social interaction where they engage in guided collaborative peer inquiry. They added that learning is enhanced when experts and novices engage in learning activities together and have opportunities to talk about their work. Shepard, Hammerness, Darling-Hammond, and Rust (2005) stated Vygotsky's socio-cultural learning theory suggests that learning from peers who provide feedback can be valuable, because feedback facilitates learning. Without sufficient feedback, the learner will continue to make the same mistakes. They added that when students ask questions and explain their reasoning to each other, scaffolding of student learning occurs without requiring one-on-one teacher time. Shepard et al. (2005) stated that learning communities provide students with opportunities to generate new ideas, solutions, and transfer what they have learned to new situations. Transfer of knowledge is the ability to use one's knowledge in new situations. Transfer is more likely to occur when (1) student learning is focused on understanding principles; (2) explanations and relationships are considered; and (3) principles or concepts are directly applied.

A focus of implication of Vygotsky's (1978) theory is the conception of language (Clark, 2009). As individuals' mental development is strengthened through the language-based interaction with others, understandings are developed and improved. Peer-led discussions strengthen language development as students are able to use language to construct meaning and deepen their understanding of the text or conversation. In order for students to understand and interpret texts in a meaningful way, they must discuss questions and interpretations as they come across them while reading, as well as listen to the questions and interpretations of others.

Language and the Development of Thought

Vygotsky (1978) argued against assumptions established by Piaget and others that development of thinking in school children occurs by itself, without any influences from school learning and with respect to teaching of disciplines, “regardless of the irrelevance of these particular subjects for daily living, they were of greatest value for the pupil’s mental development” (pp. 81-82). From Vygotsky’s point of view, it is assumed that as students have more opportunities to engage in disciplined training and analysis, memorization, and attention training, they would transfer this knowledge to create more effective and interesting talk about the text (McMahon & Raphael, 1997).

Vygotsky (1978) argued that higher-order thinking, thinking made possible through our language systems, is what makes our species unique. Wertsch (1985) explained that Vygotsky’s distinction of higher mental functions reflects a shift in control from the environment to the individual, a conscious realization of mental processing, social in their origins- learned first through their interactions with others, and mediated by the use of sign systems such as language. Vygotsky (1978) stated that our language reflects a system of signs and symbols that we can use as tools to organize, reflect upon, and modify our thoughts and actions.

Zone of Proximal Development

A Vygotskian perspective on learning does not assume that children learn on their own without the support and guidance of others; it assumes that someone more knowledgeable is guiding their learning. The appropriate point for teaching is the zone of proximal development (ZPD). Vygotsky (1978) described the ZPD as “the distance between the actual developmental level as determined by the 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). The ZPD is the areas in which students can reach a goal with the support and guidance of more knowledgeable others; it is defined by the students’ level of development and the form of instruction and can be determined by how students seek help, how they use their environment, and how they ask questions. Using these cues allow the more knowledgeable other to make instruction specific to the learners’ needs. Teachers who consider the student’s ZPD arrange the environment and create a “scaffold” so that learners are able to attain a higher or more abstract perspective on the learning task. This benefits the students by having someone who understands their current capabilities, the end goal or objective, and the means to help them reach it. Bruner (1989) elaborated on Vygotsky’s ideas about ZPD by indicating that two important concepts must be present for successful learning. First, learners must be willing to try and must be engaged in the processes associated with literacy. Students are more likely to understand guidelines from their teachers, and their teacher is more likely to provide meaningful help when students are engaged in meaningful literacy processes. Second, teachers must provide a scaffold that narrows the task for the learner. The task should be neither too easy nor too difficult. Dixon-Krauss (1995) noted that when working within students’ ZPD, the scaffolding of learning can occur through social interaction, learners’ roles are flexible, and the level of support is based on the students’ needs.

In learning situations, we are more successful if we have another person with greater experience working alongside us. We learn from the “more expert other” by getting ideas of what success looks like, suggested next steps to take in our learning,

suggested ways to break down the information so that it can be processed, and support and encouragement. The more expert other creates the context and conditions for the learner and models appropriate behaviors that are critical for understanding.

Processes of Internalization of Newly Learned Concepts

Vygotsky (1978) suggested that individuals are directed by their own mental processes as they participate in social acts, but these processes are influenced by each individual's own social experiences. He proposed that mental functions begin on a social plane, then move to an inner plane through the process of internalization. McMahon and Raphael (1997) argued that "if individuals are regulated by their own mental processes as they participate in social contexts, then classrooms can be powerful settings in which learners develop their thinking about the texts they read" (p. 10). These social contexts must provide opportunities for students to actively participate, reflect, critique, and to think about their thinking in a different way. Students internalize these language strategies and tools as they develop the ability to establish and regulate their literacy goals.

The Establishment of Book Clubs

McMahon and Raphael (1997) developed book clubs based on the idea that language leads to the development of higher-order thinking. Based on Vygotsky's (1978) writings, they believed that learners develop the ability for logical memory, selective attention, decision-making, and language comprehension as they use language within social context. The more opportunities students are given to use language as a means for constructing and communicating meaning, the greater the development of higher-order

thinking. In Western cultures, higher-order thinking is associated with language use and is heavily dependent on literacy. Book clubs offer students multiple methods for using oral and written language to construct and communicate meaning in order to ensure the development of higher-order, literate thinking.

McMahon and Raphael (1997) stated that Vygotsky's (1978) studies and theories of the role that language plays in the development of thought provided the basis for the development of multiple opportunities for both written and oral language within book clubs. A sense of community develops within book clubs, which leads to attitudes of open-mindedness and mutual respect within the group. McMahon and Raphael (1997) claimed that three concepts related to Vygotsky's theory of children's learning and development were critical to the creation of book clubs: (1) the role of language in the development of thought, (2) the ZPD, and (3) the processes of internalization of newly learned concepts.

Short (1990) described book clubs as communities where there are opportunities for getting to know and valuing one another, problem solving and inquiry, learning through actions, and sharing responsibility and control. Book clubs are based on the social constructivist theory, which emphasizes learning as a social process. Based on this theory, the reading and writing processes develop through interactions with adults and peers. Vygotsky (1978) showed that the kinds of social situations learners are involved in impact their learning. He argued that the way we talk and interact with others becomes internalized and helps shape the way we think and learn:

Every function in the child's cultural development appears twice: first, on the social level, and later on the individual level; first, between people

(interpsychological), and then inside the child (intrapsychological)... All the higher functions originate as actual relations between human individuals. (p. 57)

Once a skill is modeled, explained, and/or clarified by a teacher or a more knowledgeable other and a student understands it, with some teacher prompting they can become responsible for applying the skill or concept to various learning situations. Through interactions with others, the student can demonstrate understanding of the concept. “Real concepts are impossible without words, and thinking in concepts does not exist beyond verbal thinking. That is why the central moment in concept formation, and its generative cause, is a specific use of words as functional tools” (Vygotsky, 1986, p. 107).

Literature Circles Instantiate Sociocultural Theory

Literature circles were developed with the principles and ideas of book clubs in mind. Based on Vygotsky’s (1978) notion that learning increases through social interaction, many teachers began using literature circles in an effort to increase social learning (Clarke & Holwadel, 2007). These literature-based peer-led discussions are grounded in his theory; Vygotsky emphasized that learning occurs when students collaborate with those whom are more knowledgeable (Clark, 2009). He stressed the importance of students being provided support in situations where success would be unachievable if they completed it alone. His theory suggests that when students are allowed to work in cooperation with peers, a variety of internal developmental processes are ignited. He stated that students must see the learning activity as meaningful and relevant, and assistance should be seen as important to the learner. He believed that the conversational interactions parents and teachers have with students play a vital role in

their learning process; teachers are the guides for creating a structured environment with the help of the students (Wells, 1994). Literature circles provide students with opportunities for structured social interactions where they can work together to construct meaning and share ideas with each other.

Working with Peers

Hogan and Tudge (1999) posited that children's problem solving ability can improve by working with other peers, but there are several conditions that must be considered for improvement to be seen. The age and ability level of students and their partners, students' motivation to collaborate, and the nature of the activity are conditions that must be considered while planning for a successful collaborative classroom experience. Ybarra et al. (2008) argued that social factors, as simple as engaging in social interaction, can play a role in long-term and short-term cognitive development. They found that the more socially engaged an individual is, the higher his/her level of cognitive performance. They also discovered that short-term interaction lasting ten minutes increased students' cognitive performance to the same degree as engaging in intellectual activities for the same amount of time. The results showed that students reap cognitive benefits from socialization and that the process is responsive to even small amounts of interaction. As the importance of social interaction is explored in classrooms, students are able to develop an ability to think about what they are reading and to develop a deeper understanding of how different interpretations of text exist.

Lack of Talk in the Classroom

Although sociocultural learning theories imply that students should engage in talk, there is actually little talk in most classrooms. According to Paratore and McCormack (1997), Dewey (1900) believed that as a result of a lack of socialization, schools were not equipped to satisfy the impulses and instincts of students and failed to teach students to use their social instincts in an effective manner. Dewey felt as though the lack of socialization in schools stifled the development of children's language. He stated that school language was simply a repeat of information learned from textbooks rather than an opportunity to encourage natural motives and purposes for language. Based on his observations, Dewey indicated that school should reorganize in order to prepare students for society by providing students with more opportunities to interact with more adults and other students.

Although many schools attempt to provide students with the social environments promoted by Dewey (1900), teacher-controlled lessons continue to control the organization of classroom interaction (Cazden, 1988). Research has suggested that teachers indicate a desire to change the social structure of the classroom lesson by establishing a greater balance of teacher and student talk and control in the classroom; however, there is evidence that this has not been successfully accomplished (Cazden, 1988; McCarthey, 1990).

Most literacy instruction across the United States over the past decade has focused on the five components of reading, phonics, phonemic awareness, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension, but this emphasis on these components has not helped prepare students for the complex texts that they are required to read and comprehend as they

progress through school (Fang, 2008). Increasing time spent in conversations about the text can help develop a deeper understanding for how the genre is written so that students are better able to cope with the demands of the text (Fang, 2008). When students are learning something new, discussion is a necessity to sharpen thinking and clarify understanding. Discussions in a trusting context serve a useful purpose in learning. Conversation is the shared mode by which learners construct meaning (Lyons & Pinnell, 2001).

Allington (2002) explained that after studying first through fourth grade effective teachers from six states, one of the common features occurring in their classrooms was an atmosphere that fostered student talk. “These exemplary teachers encouraged, modeled, and supported lots of talk across the school day. This talk was purposeful talk, though, not simply chatter. It was problem-solving talk related to curricular topics” (Allington, 2002, p. 744). Talk in these classrooms was more of a conversational nature where teachers and students discussed ideas, concepts, strategies, and responded to each other.

Literature circles allow for highly engaged talk about texts and provide the opportunity for thinking particularly related to text to be made public. Pearson et al. (2008) stated “students learn about self and others through reading and conversations about literature, particularly if the literature engages the important themes of human experience...” (p. 79); this makes literature circles worth studying.

Authentic Literacy

Viewing socio-cultural learning theory through the lens of authentic literacy as defined by Schmoker (2011), allows us to see literacy as purposeful and argumentative reading, writing, and discussion as students learn to think through text and process

content. Duke, Purcell-Gates, Hall, and Tower (2006) described authentic literacy as reading and writing activities that occur in the lives of people outside of a “learning-to-read-and-write context and purpose” (p. 346). To determine the authenticity of a text, the purpose of the activity must be established as one that serves a true purpose, and the text must be like text that is used outside of the classroom setting. According to Schmoker (2006), authentic literacy skills impact our ability to think and affect our understanding of the world and how we understand concepts and ideas. Phillips and Wong (2010) credited it as being the cornerstone of all subject areas. Schmoker (2006) explained,

Generous amounts of close, purposeful reading, rereading, writing, and talking as underemphasized as they are in K-12 education, are the essence of authentic literacy. These simple activities are the foundation for a trained, powerful mind and a promising future. They are the way up and out of boredom, poverty, and intellectual inadequacy (p. 53).

This type of literacy goes beyond “‘decoding’ or ‘fluency,’ which are only the beginning of literacy” (Schmoker, 2006, p. 54) and provides students with opportunities for higher-order literacy (Schmoker, 2006). According to Vacca (2002), as students read they should be able to “think with text” (Vacca & Vacca, 2001, as cited in Vacca, 2002) by being able to decide what is important in the text and being able to “synthesize information; draw inferences during and after reading; ask questions...” (Schmoker, 2006, p. 59). “Students came alive when they realized they were writing to real people for real reasons or reading real-life texts for their own purposes” (Duke, Purcell-Gates, Hall, & Tower, 2006, p. 354).

Authentic literacy requires students to read strategically, write, and think. Schmoker (2011) described the template for authentic literacy as three parts that do not necessarily have to go in this order. These three parts are “Close reading/underlining and annotation of text. Discussion of the text. Writing about the text informed by close reading, discussion, and annotation” (p. 74). Schmoker (2006) claimed that close, strategic reading is one of the strongest ways to develop the ability to think critically and analyze information. In order to accomplish this skill, students should be given opportunities to read and reread texts for a purpose with a pen in hand so that they are able to document and track their thinking. Schmoker (2006) emphasized that the importance of writing becomes clear when we understand how it enables students to make connections in their learning and learn to think across disciplines. Writing leads to learning.

If students are to make knowledge their own, they must struggle with the details, wrestle with the facts, and rework raw information and dimly understood concepts into language they can communicate to someone else. In short, if students are to learn, they must write. (National Commission on Writing, 2003, p. 9)

Schmoker (2006) stated that writing is necessary to students’ ability to think and process information; it allows them to create meaning, make connections, and see patterns which leads to understanding and the ability to see problems and solutions in a new light.

Authentic literacy stresses the importance of argumentative literacy and discussions related to what students are reading and writing. Schmoker (2006) reiterated the importance of this kind of talk in the classroom by emphasizing that it stimulates thinking, fights boredom, and “nourishes our critical capacities as it gives kids a chance

to try out and test their ideas and viewpoints. And it is fun” (p. 67). Reading, writing, and discussing are the keys to learning and being able to become a literature being.

Schmoker (2011) claimed that these activities are the center of what and how students learn. These activities are stimulated by establishing a purpose for reading and by asking good questions. There should be a purpose for reading and writing in order to create interest in the context of the text and to establish a connection to the content. By setting a purpose, “*students, regardless of grade level, will read with greater interest when we get their attention and when we give them a clear, legitimate task or purpose for their reading*” (Schmoker, 2011, p. 77). Asking high quality questions that reinforce higher-order thinking is essential to engagement as students interact with authentic literacy.

Reader Response

Readers construct meaning as they read. In doing so, Rosenblatt (1995) explained, “The reader, drawing on past linguistic and life experiences.... The special meanings and, more particularly, the submerged associations that these words and images have for the individual reader will largely determine what the work communicates to him” (p. 30). Reader response stresses the importance of the reader’s role in interpreting text. Rosenblatt (1995) described the relationship between the reader and the text as a “to-and-fro spiral, in which each is continually being affected by what the other has contributed” (p. 26).

There are several factors that teachers should consider when understanding students’ experiences with literature. Each reader’s response to the text varies, because each brings forth his/her own set of experiences and understandings as he/she engages in

the text. These experiences and understandings help determine the message and meaning of the text to the reader.

The reader brings to the work personality traits, memories of past events, present needs and preoccupations, a particular mood of the moment, and a particular physical condition. These and many other elements in a never-to-be-duplicated combination determine his interfusion with the peculiar contribution of the text.

(Rosenblatt, 1995, p. 30)

If these experiences and understandings do not match the meaning that has developed, the reader may have to revise it to incorporate the new information or start over again with a different viewpoint or set of expectations. This relationship explains why it takes both the text and the reader to make meaning.

There is much diversity in literature and differences in the experiences of the reader based on the text. “Very different kinds of sensitivity and knowledge are required for the fullest appreciation of each of these works” (Rosenblatt, 1995, p. 31). Rosenblatt (1995) further explained,

The infinite diversity of literature plus the complexity of human personality and background justify insistence on the special nature of the literary experience and on the need to prepare the student to engage in the highly personal process of evoking the literary work from the text. (Rosenblatt, 1995, p. 31)

In order to ensure that students are able to make meaning from the text, teachers must have an understanding of the students’ personalities and be prepared for the fact that those students’ temperaments and backgrounds will have a factor in how they understand the text. The student’s life experiences will determine how he or she responds to and

interprets the text and can determine his/her willingness to develop insight and skills necessary for continued participation with grappling with text (Rosenblatt, 1995).

Choice in the Classroom

Guthrie (2013) defined motivation to read as the values, beliefs, and behaviors we associate with while reading. He stated that giving students choice is one of the most motivating factors for learning to read. Providing students with choice enables students to develop self-direction in the classroom (Guthrie, 2013), which provides students with opportunities to become self-directed learners.

Teachers can provide students with several kinds of choices within the classroom. These are mini-choices that allow students to have a voice and feel a sense of autonomy and investment in their learning, yet they do not allow students to be able to have complete control of everything they are expected to do. Students can be allowed to select texts of their choice, have input with the topics that are studied and the order they are taught, have choice in using the comprehension strategies that make the most sense to them, determine how they would like to demonstrate what they have learned, and have choice in who they would like to work with in groups or partners. Although these choices may appear small, they provide students with an opportunity to feel empowered which lends itself to a commitment of larger amounts of effort being given to their work.

Allington (2002) stated that exemplary teachers assign tasks that involve student choice. “Students did not have an unlimited range of tasks or topic choices, but it was less common to find every student doing the same task and more common to observe students working on similar but different tasks” (p. 745). His findings coincide with Turner (1995) who found that choice of this kind has been shown to lead to greater

ownership and engagement with the work for students. Anderson, Wilson, and Fielding (1988) also stated that when students are allowed to choose their own books and read these self-selected books on their own, they become the strongest readers. Mason-Singh & Guthrie (2012) suggested that when students experience no choices or few choices in reading, they experience losses of motivation for reading.

Guthrie and Wigfield (2000) discussed autonomy support, “the teacher’s guidance in making choices among meaningful alternatives relevant to the knowledge and learning goals” (p. 411), and stated that studies confirm that allowing students choice in the reading classroom increases motivation with students. Choice is motivating, because it gives students some control over their learning. Several studies have shown the benefits of autonomy support in relation to motivating students. Grolnick and Ryan (1987) found that students who read text and answered questions they developed themselves showed higher comprehension than students who memorized content or read without direction. Deci, Schwartz, Sheinman, and Ryan (1981) found that when students were given the opportunity to make choices over participation in their instructional decisions, students were more intrinsically motivated to learn the content and participate in classroom activities.

Literature Circles

Literature circles are student-led reading discussion groups where a small group of students choose a book to read, divide the text into sections, and meet to discuss what they have read (Harvey & Daniels, 2009; Kasten, 1997; Noe & Johnson, 1999).

Literature circle discussions are authentic, student-led discussions about characters from the text, connections made during the reading, and opinions formed while reading.

Students engage in critical response where they interpret the text and each other's points of view, reflect about what they read, question each other's thoughts and opinions, and discuss issues that the text brings up (Long & Gove, 2003). This reading experience is a dynamic process that provides students with an opportunity to read about, discuss, and gain a deeper understanding of issues that impact their lives (Lapp, Flood, Kibildis, Jones, & Moore, 1995).

In a study on students' perspectives of literature circles, Samway et al. (1991) found that literature studies impact students' perceptions of their thoughts. The open-ended questions that were used by some helped focus the discussion in the groups and allowed students to share their thoughts and feelings that related to the text they read. In the same study, students spoke about how they would disagree at times in their literature circles. Although they did not always agree, the students were aware that through their discussions they gained new insights about what they read and had a greater respect for the opinions of others. They added that having an opportunity to talk about books provided them with an opportunity to become more knowledgeable readers and develop a deeper understanding of themselves. The best language lessons occur through good books and interesting discussions in which children are absorbed in the meaning of the text (Lapp, Flood, Ranck-Buhr, Van Dyke, & Spacek, 1997). The use of quality literature within the structure of a literature circle supports students' use of language and language development because of the emphasis on rich conversation and systems of scaffolding that take place.

Literature Circles Potentials

Much has been written about the potential of literature circles, as well as many educational writers advocating their use and providing explanations on “how to” use them. Literature circles provide opportunities for authentic reflection and dialogue about the book (Kasten, 1997). The dialogue is guided by the students’ responses to what has been read (Noe & Johnson, 1999). Literature circles have been adapted to meet the needs of teachers all over the world and with a variety of grades and subject areas (Daniels, 2006).

Literature circles consist of several traits that accompany them: engagement, choice, and responsibility. Students are encouraged to engage in conversations about the text and view these conversations as fun. Block and Pressley (2002) indicated that group discussions are an avenue for engaging students in questions that they might not have formulated without the support of their peers. It is these questions and variety of ideas that engage the students and drive their desire to read and learn. Literature circles have also been found to improve classroom climates. Burns (1998) explained that literature circles help support cooperative classroom settings by providing students the opportunity to work and make decisions together. She also posited that students learn to be better listeners by working with others, having responsibility for their own learning, and being exposed to multiple perspectives on topics.

Literature circles offer choice. Literature circles provide students with opportunities for choice, which according to Guthrie (2013), is one of the positive motivators that drive students towards reading. Literature circles allow students the opportunity to select a text they are interested in, dedicated to, and confident they can

read. Students are often allowed to choose the book they would like to read from a preselected set of titles chosen by the teacher usually all based on a particular theme, idea, topic, or setting, helping to ensure that the text is comprehensible and interesting to the students. Atwell (1987) found that when students were allowed to select their own reading material, they read more and experienced greater pleasure while reading. Pardo (2004), as well as Routman (1988), stated that allowing students to choose their own reading materials increases the desire and motivation to read. The chance that students will actually finish reading the book and comprehend the content is increased, because they are interested in it.

Text selection. In order for literature circles to be meaningful to students, book selection must be given careful thought. Several considerations when choosing the texts that students should choose to read are that there be humor, potential objectionable elements, and a variety of fiction and nonfiction. Texts should also be about the same length and appeal to reluctant readers (Carpinelli, 2006). Text selection is an integral component of the literature circle process, “because a sociocultural perspective recognizes the important role that language conveying meaning, engagement, and evocation of strong personal response plays in readers’ constructions of meaning” (McMahon, 1997, p. 56). Students and their teacher must be interested and excited about the topic, genre, characters, etc. in order for the construction of meaning to take place (McMahon, 1997). The text selection should be based on the purpose of the task and should depend on the performance tasks students are expected to master. Bisesi and Raphael (1997) discussed that teachers often use these book study times to integrate language arts and social studies. This provides students with the opportunities to read

multiple forms of texts, such as informational, short story, and chapter books. This provides students with necessary context to build background knowledge. Using the multiple types of texts allows students the opportunities to strengthen their ability to read, respond to, and discuss multiple types of genres. According to Daniels (2006), when students are engaged in well-structured literature circles, their comprehension and attitude towards reading improves.

Providing students with relevant texts that appeal to the students' interest is an approach that helps ensure that students are motivated to learn. Brozo (2002, as cited in Guthrie, 2013), found that males respond when teachers address the students' personal interests. Male students are more likely to become engaged in a text or topic if their curiosities are identified and addressed through literacy. Allington (2002) stated that if there is to be an increase in the amount of reading students do, it is necessary to give them books they can read and choices regarding which books they will read. Guthrie and Wigfield (2000) stated, "the logic is that students will devote effort, attention, and persistence to reading about topics that they find enjoyable or intriguing" (p. 412).

Texts can also become relevant to students when they are based on real-world issues. Johnson and Cowles (2009) discussed how a teacher was able to captivate her students by using a newspaper article about civil rights. They were eager to read and discuss this historical situation in order to develop a deeper understanding of the economic and moral pressure surrounding racism. Darvin (2006) posited that the majority of students would dedicate themselves to mastering texts that are relevant to them in spite of the complexity of the text.

Literature Circles Promote Engagement

After interviewing 24 students in first, third, fourth, and fifth grades, Certo, Moxley, Reffitt, and Miller (2010), learned that the participants experienced enjoyment when participating in literature circles and considered it the best part of language arts. The students preferred reading their literature circle books over any other required reading material and indicated that they were more interested in reading other books similar in genre, theme, author, or book series to the book they were reading in literature circles. They also found that participation in literature circles and student-led discussions provide students with opportunities to make meaning of the text and build relationships with group members. Students claimed that participating in the literature circles, learning how to write about what they read, and learning how to ask questions improved their ability to make meaning of the text and talk with others about what they were reading.

Literature Circles Promote Ownership

Literature circles help students become more responsible and take ownership in their learning (Daniels, 2006). According to Certo et al. (2010), important aspects of literature circles or small group discussions are student-led talk and time to discuss the book. When talk and time were encouraged, responses to literature and comprehension strategy use increased. After participating in literature circles, students were able to make connections with the text and monitor their own comprehension as teachers limited their own talk and questions. Students were able to consider confusing aspects of the text, explore important issues related to the text and reality, and influence others' thoughts and ideas. Students reported using several strategies to make meaning of the text; the strategies included making and clarifying predictions, summarizing, and learning

new words. The researchers stressed the importance of using literature circles as part of balanced literacy instruction among all grade levels; literature circles help encourage excitement about reading and discussions and provide opportunities for students to write formally and informally which improves reading comprehension and group discussions.

Literature Circles Promote Critical Reading

Long and Gove (2003) suggested that literature circles can promote critical reading of texts. They developed a criterion to use to determine if a student had developed an ability to look at the text critically. They looked for responses that were purposeful, inquisitive, and reflective. Students should be able to infer and draw conclusions, and understand the underlying messages and themes of a text. In an effort to reach their goal of developing critical respondents amongst fourth grade students studied, the researchers introduced literature circles and engagement strategies into a classroom. Edminston and Long's engagement strategies (1999, as cited in Long & Gove, 2003) are a process that encourages students to question and interpret events as they read in an effort to deepen meaning and understanding of the text.

As students read and listen to text, they are expected to ask thought-provoking questions and make inferences, determine the text's overt and hidden meanings, and pose and solve problems about information from the text. Engagement strategies are intended to aid students in reflecting and making connections with the text and interpreting what they read and saw. The engagement strategies are intended to encourage students and teachers to work together to make meaning with the text as they read. As teachers and students employed the engagement strategies, teachers provided situations in which

students of all levels were given opportunities to respond to the text and support one another as students thought through the text.

Long and Gove (2003) stated that using engagement strategies in the classroom requires that teachers read the text many times before reading with the students so that they are aware of opportunities to stop throughout the text and pose thought-provoking wonder questions. Students are expected to use their imagination to justify their responses. Teachers provide situations for students to pretend that they are part of the story or a part of the character's past to help determine why a character acts or behaves in a certain manner. The students become investigators of the text and make inferences to help form deeper understandings and meanings for a character's actions.

Comprehension Strategy Use in Literature Circles

Literature circles can provide students with opportunities to use and reinforce comprehension strategies. While studying small group literature circles using 19 fifth graders, Clark (2009) found that peer-led discussions can be effective when students use comprehension strategies as they discussed text during literature circles. She discovered that the most frequently used strategies were questioning, evaluating, interpreting, and summarizing. Students used questioning to search for information within the text, to clarify each other's ideas, and to make or prove a point. Students used evaluating to share an assumption or opinion related to the text. Students used interpreting to determine the meaning of what the text or group member was saying or implying. Students also summarized what they learned to begin discussions and to recall events or add to the discussion. She found that when students work together, they are aware of their strategy use and learn how to use strategies from others. The more opportunities

students are given to use comprehension strategies, the more aware they become of these strategies and the more likely they are to internalize the strategies, and use them to make meaning of the text so that they are able to transfer knowledge across texts and reading contexts. Certo et al. (2010) stated that the goal of literature circles to replace asking students questions about what they have read with meaning-making strategies that encourage analysis, reflection, and critical thinking.

Literature Circles Help Students Learn Content

Traditionally literature circles have been used with fiction text, but recently they have been updated to use with a multitude of texts, including nonfiction (Wilfong, 2009). Daniels (2006) reiterated that literature circles are well-structured collaborative learning opportunities that are conducive to nonfiction texts. Some studies suggest that literature circles can help students learn content. Stien and Beed (2004) found that when allowed to participate in nonfiction book talks, students developed an appreciation for nonfiction texts. Literature circles provide teachers with an opportunity for their students to read informational texts and share what they found interesting or thought provoking. When using literature circles to read and learn from nonfiction text, positive results have been exhibited. A natural progression of literature circles into the realm of nonfiction beginning with historical fiction then progressing to biographies and other forms of nonfiction has been successful for many classroom teachers (Stein & Breed, 2004).

Wilfong (2009) and a fifth grade science teacher studied the impact of using literature circles to study science concepts on student test scores. Using both the traditional literature circle roles and ones typically used when using nonfiction text with literature circles in order to scaffold the implementation of the strategy, readings were

assigned based on the topic or chapter, discussions on the information in the chapter occurred, and final projects were presented. The researchers determined that through the use of literature circles to read and study science concepts, students average test scores increased from 86% to 89.3%, which was determined to be statically significant.

Wilfong (2009) found that literature circles helped students learn from each other. The strategy allowed students the opportunity to share their ideas about their reading, as well as teach each other through culminating activities. Fang (2008) discussed how students must transition from storybook reading to expository reading. Wilfong (2009) stated that using literature to read textbook materials and study content specific concepts can help ease the transition through genres. Students were able to apply new knowledge they gained from the reading to culminating projects that focused on reading, writing, and speaking and listening skills.

According to Stien and Beed (2004), nonfiction literature circles aid students in expanding their thinking in both personal and text-based ways. The students became very emotional when reading about Egypt when they learned that an Egyptian child was sacrificed in the hope that the sacrifice would bring rain, and they were able to use the text they read to justify their shock and anger. They also found that many of the students thought learning factual information was very important as evident by their selections of Sustained Silent Reading books. The students used their literature circle skills to discuss topics and issues that were across all areas of the curriculum. The literature circle skills also lend themselves well to the inquiry process and text-based reading and writing encouraged by the CCSS. Literature circles should be adapted into literature circle inquiries where students immerse themselves in the text, investigate and search for

answers to questions they develop, coalesce and synthesize the information to build knowledge, and go public with what they have learned.

The research questions addressed in this study are:

Research Question One: In what ways do students engage in the literature circle process?

Research Question Two: What instructional practices contribute to the level of engagement that is experienced by the students during literature circles? In particular, how do students use role sheets during the reading and discussion of the text to help them through the literature circle process?

CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY

Through this study, I investigated the implementation of literature circles in a classroom based on observation data and interviews with students and their teacher, as well as work samples produced during literature circles. Through this study, I examined how and in what ways students engaged in the literature circle process and the instructional practices that the teacher participant put in place that contributed to the level of engagement that was experienced by the students during literature circles.

I sought to answer two research questions.

Research Question One: In what ways do students engage in the literature circle process?

Research Question Two: What instructional practices contribute to the level of engagement that is experienced by the students during literature circles? In particular, how do students use role sheets during the reading and discussion of the text to help them through the literature circle process?

In this chapter, the design and methods of this qualitative study are presented including the purpose, as well as information about the context and the participants. This chapter includes a description of the data collection and analysis, as well as issues related to validity and reliability. The chapter is organized in the following areas: (a) qualitative

inquiry, (b) context of the study, (c) data collection, (d) data analysis, and (e) internal and external validity.

Qualitative Inquiry

Given that the purpose of this study was to examine how teachers and students use literature circles in the classroom and the impact they have on students' engagement, discussions, and thinking, as well as determine how role sheets and other instructional practices are used to aid students during the reading and discussion of text, qualitative methods were deemed appropriate. Although Merriam (2009) asserted qualitative research is elusive, she argued that "qualitative researchers are interested in understanding how people interpret their experiences, how they construct their worlds and what meaning they attribute to their experiences" (p. 5). With this study, I was particularly interested in how fifth graders used literature circles in the classroom and the impact they had on the students' learning. I wanted to determine how students and their teacher interpreted the experience and the impact it had on the students' learning. By including student participants, I was able to receive first-hand information related to how the students viewed the literature circle process and made meaning from the experience. Berg (2009) also emphasized the role of an individual's experience and how it is interpreted. He stressed, "Quality refers to the what, how, when, and where of a thing—its essence and ambience. Qualitative research, thus, refers to the meanings, concepts, definitions, characteristics, metaphors, symbols, and descriptions of things" (p. 3). Given the plethora of complexities related to this type of research, Merriam (2009) identified four characteristics as key to understanding qualitative inquiry:

- Focus on meaning and understanding—The purpose of qualitative research is to examine and understand how individuals interpret their personal experiences in order to “achieve an *understanding* of how people make sense of their lives, delineate the process (rather than the outcome or the product) of meaning-making, and describe how people interpret what they experience” (p. 14).
- Researcher as the primary instrument— “The researcher is the primary instrument for data collection and analysis” (p. 15). The human instrument is advantageous in that understanding perspectives and experiences is made possible through immediate responsiveness, verbal and nonverbal communication, as well as the ability to immediately clarify any misunderstandings or unexpected responses.
- An inductive process— “Researchers gather data to build concepts, hypotheses, or theories” (p.15). Qualitative researchers shape theory and attempt to understand social patterns using intuitive understandings gathered in the field from interviews, observations, and document analysis. Berg (2009) states that social life operates in patterns that make sense and can predict future events.
- Rich description—Qualitative research is dependent on words and images to convey meaning. Descriptions of the setting, participants, observations, and artifacts contribute to the development of the study.

This method of research allowed me to spend a great deal of time developing a rapport with the participants and provided me with opportunities to see firsthand the impact that using literature circles in the classroom had on the students' learning. I was able to spend extended time watching the interactions of the students as they became familiar, interested, and excited about texts that were new to them. I was also able to watch how their thoughts and conversations evolved from simple topics that required little effort to discuss and "wonder about" to deep and thought-provoking topics and issues that arose from the topic of study. Merriam (2009) points out that qualitative research allows the researcher to develop an understanding of the meaning individuals make in situations and how it makes sense in their world.

Using qualitative research, I was able to focus on understanding how each of the participants interpreted their personal experiences with literature circles, as well as how the process impacted the entire group. The teacher participant, Mrs. Jones's, viewpoint was equally important as she provided an interpretation of how the process impacted the students overall and the evolution she saw in each of the participants as the process continued.

By serving as the primary instrument, I was able to see first-hand the literature circle process evolving in Mrs. Jones's classroom. I was able to attend to and notice the multiple forms of communication exhibited and the students' responses to each other and the text so that I was able to quickly respond and question the participants on what I noticed in order to get a deeper understanding of how the students felt and perceived the situation in order to view and understand the entire process rather than parts.

Using this method of research, I was able to develop an understanding of the social patterns using intuitive understanding based on information gathered through interviews, observations, and document analysis. I was able to determine how the students made sense of the literature circle process and how it impacted what they learned and how they learned, as well as how they interpreted the experience. The study provided me with evidence to determine patterns noted in the students' learning through the literature circle process.

Interviews, observations, and document analysis provided me with a rich description of how the students and their learning were impacted by the literature circle process. These data provided a thorough description of the setting, participants, observation, and artifacts, as well as an understanding of how each element of literature circles impacted their experience and what was gained and learned through the process. Meaning for each component of the students' experiences with literature circles was determined and gathered through the words and images the students conveyed, as well as their explanations for what was noted and questioned from observations to ensure that the interpretations made from the observations were true to the students' experiences.

Context of the Study

The interviews, observations, and document analysis were conducted at a public, elementary school in the third largest school district in a suburban area in a Southeastern state using a purposeful sample of fifth grade students and their teacher. Merriam (2009) states, "purposeful sampling is based on the assumption that the investigator wants to discover, understand, and gain insight and therefore must select a sample from which the most can be learned" (p. 77). The public school is located in a suburban community,

about eleven miles away from the nearest metropolitan area. The majority of the economic base of the community is comprised of retail trade, health services, manufacturing, and education. The community is comprised of about 144,000 residents with a median household income of approximately \$55,000. The average household size is 2.6 people. About 33,000 residents own the place where they live. Within the community, there are 28 public schools; there are 16 elementary schools, three middle schools, eight high schools, and a learning center.

The particular elementary school that was the focus of this study is relatively diverse. During this study, the school enrolled 685 students in grades kindergarten-sixth; 24.45% of the student population was eligible for free or reduced-price lunch. Of the 685 students, 47% were female and 53% were male. The population consisted of 14% African American; 83% Caucasian; 1% Asian American; 1% Hispanic American; and less than 1% was Pacific Islander. One hundred seven students were in the fifth grade. Of the 107 fifth grade students, 51% were female and 49% were male. Of the fifth grade students, 9% were African American; 87% of the fifth grade students were Caucasian; 1% of the fifth grade students were Asian American; and 3% of the fifth grade students were Hispanic American (C. Creel, personal communication, February 2, 2015).

Although overall the school was rated high on state measures of the accountability, not all students were achieving at the same levels. Some students struggled to achieve proficiency in literacy. According to the state's most recent accountability label, this school was considered an A with the lowest area of proficiency, growth for all students, and growth in the bottom 25% being in reading (Mississippi Department of Education, Division of Research and Development, 2016). Within this

school, there were 46 highly qualified certified staff members and 12 teacher assistants. Planning, teaching, learning, and assessing of students was based on the college and career readiness standards that had been fully adapted by the state's department of education.

Participants

A central characteristic of qualitative research is to understand the meaning participants gain from interacting within their world. Because qualitative research allows the researcher to determine how individuals interpret and make meaning from their experiences in life (Merriam, 2009), it was imperative to select participants who were involved in the literature circle process and were willing to voluntarily participate in order to determine the academic impact that literature circles have on students' learning.

Given that fifth grade ELA scores on the 2014-2015 state assessments were the lowest in the school, a fifth grade ELA teacher was of interest to this study. The teacher participant, Mrs. Jones, was purposefully selected based on her knowledge of literature circles, the fifth grade ELA curriculum, and fifth grade students. The teacher had experience as both a classroom teacher and a leader of professional development. Because of her experience and knowledge of best practices in education, she was sought out to participate in the study, as well as the students in her classroom.

The student participants in the study were five students from Mrs. Jones's fifth grade self-contained classroom of 22 students where they received instruction in the areas of ELA, math, science, and social studies. As Rubin and Rubin (2005) suggested, I chose participants from different backgrounds with different perspectives to serve as interviewees. All students in the class were invited to participate in the study. From the

pool of participants who agreed to participate in the study, I selected a sample representative of the student population in the elementary school. Of the five participants, two were male and three were female. One of the participants was African American and four of the participants were Caucasian. The participants were all successful in reading, like their peers in the classroom, but I selected students to represent a range of abilities, including one student who was receiving special education services, one student who was receiving dyslexia therapy, and four students who participated in the gifted education program. Students also represented a range of personalities. One student was very quiet in class, and one student did not enjoy reading. The five participants represented a range of demographic, academic, and social characteristics in order to provide for a range of perspectives on the literature circle process. Detailed descriptions of the participants are included in the following section.

Descriptions of participants. *Mrs. Jones* was a fifth grade self-contained teacher who had been teaching for 19 years. She had spent her educational career in elementary school settings in two Southern states. She was certified to teach general elementary courses, special education, gifted education, and English as a second language. She had experience teaching self-contained special education, gifted education, second grade, fourth grade, and fifth grade. She had also served as a professional development trainer leading teachers in their understanding of thinking maps, continuous improvement, and technology. She was in the process of pursuing a master's degree in educational leadership. Mrs. Jones considered herself an avid reader and enjoyed reading young adolescent literature with her students. She was a proud Star Wars fan and claimed that she related especially well to the boys in her class.

Mrs. Jones was eager to work with others and enjoyed sharing her classroom practices with her peers, as well as learning from them. Mrs. Jones was a strong proponent of students working and learning together. She spent the first several weeks of school establishing a classroom culture where students learn to value, appreciate, and respect the thoughts and ideas of others. They learned how to work in groups and hold each other accountable.

Amy was an 11-year-old Caucasian fifth grader who was compassionate and cared deeply for others and how situations impacted them. She appeared to be mature for her age and more serious than many of her classmates. Although she enjoyed a joke and laughed often, she did not enjoy or engage in silliness.

Amy considered herself to be a passionate reader who spent hours a week reading a book. She enjoyed reading most genres of books but had most recently become interested in Greek and Roman mythology. Amy was a strong student who enjoyed school and was successful in all subject areas. She was tested and qualified for gifted services in the first grade. According to the latest state assessment data, she scored in the highest proficiency level possible for two of the subject area tests that were taken, mathematics and science, and she scored in the proficient proficiency level for English language arts. Amy took all of her classwork and assignments seriously and completed them with care and intention. She enjoyed working with others but also appreciated and valued the time that she was asked to work independently.

Sara was an 11-year-old African-American fifth grader who was social and enjoyed being the center of attention; she loved to talk and have a good time with her friends. She made sure that everyone felt included and important, and she was not

inclusive. She enjoyed working with others and sharing her thoughts and ideas.

Sara enjoyed reading, preferably fiction; she most often read at home in her bedroom. Sara was an academically and socially geared student who enjoyed school and was successful in all subject areas. She was tested and qualified for gifted services in the first grade. According to the latest state assessment data, she scored in the advanced proficiency level for math and science and scored in the proficient proficiency level for English language arts. Sara enjoyed learning and making friends.

Anna was an 11-year-old Caucasian fifth grader who was shy and quiet and would usually only speak when she was called; she rarely volunteered in class unless she was called on by Mrs. Jones. Anna was conscientious about her work and would help others around her who needed help.

Anna began reading for pleasure in the third grade. She was in the middle of a six book series and was looking forward to reading all of the books in the series. Anna was often seen using writing as an avenue to show others what she knew or had learned rather than discussing it. She claimed to always like to have a sheet of paper available, so she could jot down notes. Anna attended the school's gifted education classes weekly. She preferred to work alone rather than with partners or in small groups. The most recent state assessment data indicated that Anna scored in the proficient level of proficiency in the areas of English language arts and math and in the advanced level of proficiency in science.

Samuel was an 11-year-old Caucasian fifth grader who had been diagnosed with dyslexia. He got along well with others and was very social. Because he struggled to read, he compensated for it by strengthening his listening comprehension and being

attentive to the conversations and discussions he had with others about the text and what they were learning.

Samuel enjoyed working with others in groups and listening to others read. His classmates did not mind reading with him. Mrs. Jones stated that they were eager to support him in any way they could. Although he did not consider himself to be a reader, he enjoyed reading things that were not too much of a struggle for him and rereading things that he had read before. He credited his third grade teacher for instilling a love of reading in him and openly discussed the relationship he had formed with Mrs. Jones, his fifth grade teacher. He saw her as a teacher who understood him and valued his strengths in spite of his difficulty with reading. Samuel scored in the proficient proficiency level in science, in the passing proficiency level in math, and in the basic proficiency level in English language arts on the most recent state assessment.

Tim was an 11-year-old Caucasian fifth grader who received gifted services during the week in the gifted education classroom and tutorial services in his special education classroom throughout the school day. He enjoyed reading mysteries and adventure stories, especially ones where the person was on a journey or quest. Because of his disability, Tim was very literal and often had a hard time understanding other's viewpoints or allowing them the opportunity to share their thoughts and ideas with him. On recent state assessments, Tim scored in the advanced proficiency level for science and in the proficient proficiency level in math and English language arts.

Data Collection

The data sources used to collect data for this study consisted of interviews, observations, and document analysis. IRB approval was sought and obtained (Appendix

C, IRB Consent Forms and IRB Approval Email). Informed consent was ensured by receiving permission from the parents of the student participants, as well as the assent of student participants. An Informed Consent Form and letter explaining the research project were sent home with students in Mrs. Jones's classroom. Data were collected from the pool of students who returned consent forms.

Interviews

Berg (2009) and others (Denzin, 1978; Spradley, 1979; Patton, 2002; Salkind, 2008; Babbie, 2007) defined the interview process as a purposeful conversation; the specific purpose of the conversation is to gather information. A semi-structured format was used for the interviews. Merriam (2009) suggested, "interviewing is the best technique to use when conducting intensive case studies of a few selected individuals" (p. 88). She explained that semi-structured interviews are "guided by a list of questions or issues to be explored, and neither the exact wording nor the order of the questions is determined ahead of time" (Merriam, 2009, p. 90).

Three interviews were conducted with the teacher participant, and two interviews were conducted with each of the student participants throughout the study. An initial interview was held with Mrs. Jones to discuss the preparation for literature circles and how texts were selected prior to beginning literature circles with her students. Questions about previous experiences with literature circles, such as what the students thought of literature circles and how they felt about them now were also addressed. The teacher participant was interviewed during each of the literature circle cycles to determine how students reacted to and experienced the process and to determine how the process was impacting the learning in her classroom. Students were interviewed during each of the

literature circle cycles to determine how they engaged in the literature circle process, used role sheets during the reading and discussion of the text to help them through the literature circle process, and engaged in authentic literacy while participating in literature circles. The second interview also served as a follow-up interview to discuss any missed points or follow-up questions that arose after the initial interview, from observations, and document analysis. Each of the individual interviews lasted between 40 minutes to an hour during non-instructional times during the day. The interviews were conducted first thing in the morning, after school, and during the students' activity period and were conducted in a location where the participants felt most comfortable. Some of the participants chose to be interviewed in their classroom, while others chose to be interviewed in the school office. These interviews were recorded and transcribed.

I intended for these interviews to be more like purposeful conversations (Berg, 2009) and semi-structured (Merriam, 2009) rather than structured interviews. This was particularly important, since I was interviewing a teacher and 11-year-olds and was attempting to develop a trusting relationship with each of them. In an effort to make the interviews more of a conversation rather than a question-answer session, I prepared and used a conversational guide or interview guide that provided guidance on which topics to bring up that would best present the impact of literature circles on the participants' learning and understanding of their experiences with literature circles from the viewpoint of the participant (Merriam, 1998; Rubin & Rubin, 2005). These guides consisted of topics related to the research questions, experiences with reading, work in literature circles, assessment, and reading and writing preferences. As I began each of the student and teacher interviews, I gave the participants the opportunity to tell me about themselves

in order to understand their background and general interests and used each individual conversation and the conversational guide to steer the interview (Appendix A, Participant Conversational Guides). Questions and conversations for these interviews were also based on what was observed during observation, as well as follow-up questions from the previous interview session, such as the difference in the students' interactions with each other throughout the literature circle process and how those interactions had changed, how the students felt about not getting their first choice of book to read, and student conversations related to finding evidence from the text.

Discussions during the interviews were determined by the direction the students took in their conversations with me, as they were allowed to guide the discussion; however, the interview guide was used to keep the conversation focused on the literature circle experience, as well as keep the flow of the conversation going. As interviews were conducted, participants were encouraged to add new information based on new experiences or to elaborate on what was addressed in previous interviews. For example, the participants shared how literature circles had changed since they first started them, the difference in how they had completed the literature circle tasks, their experiences working in groups with classmates, and what they were reading with their classmates. The teacher participant was asked to share her thoughts and ideas related to what she believed students experienced. She was also asked to provide feedback and provide explanations based on the students' comments, such as the students' comments related to their interest in the author's choice of words and his or her message, their conversations and what they were learning from each other, and their priority in finding evidence to justify their thinking.

Observations

Merriam (2009) explained, “observations take place in the setting where the phenomenon of interest naturally occurs...” and represent a “firsthand encounter with the phenomenon of interest...” (p. 117). Observations of the students’ interactions during literature circles were conducted. The observations lasted between 40 and 90 minutes five times throughout the literature circle process. During the observations, conversations were recorded; field notes were simultaneously recorded to capture extra-linguistic occurrences. According to Merriam (2009), field notes are the written account of the observation. She recommended that these notes be “highly descriptive” (p. 130) and describe “the participants, the setting, the activities or behaviors of the participants, and what the observer does” (p. 130). She stated “field notes can come in many forms, but at the least they include descriptions, direct quotations, and observer comments” (p.137). I used my research questions and theoretical framework as a guide as I determined where to focus my time and attention during the observations. I focused on the students’ social interactions; how they interacted with each other and the text; how they tracked their thinking as they read and discussed the text; and how they responded to each other through their questioning, responses to questions, and explanations of thoughts. I also focused on markers of engagement such as overlapping speech and participation in conversations. During the observation, I noted the physical setting and the relationships between the individuals within the study. I listened to conversations, asked questions to clarify any ideas that were confusing or unfamiliar to me, and located subgroups and the central figures within the groups (Berg, 2009). I also paid careful

attention to Mrs. Jones and how she interacted with the students during literature circles and the role she played as students participated in literature circles.

Documents

Literature circle notes and assignments were collected and used as documentation for the study (Appendix B, Documents). The documentation was organized into categories to develop a deeper understanding of the perspectives and understandings of the participants. As Berg (2009) pointed out, studying different forms of documentation and original work from the participants adds another avenue into understanding their viewpoints. The documents provided access to unique information about the participants and evidence for how they were impacted by the implementation of literature circles. Merriam (2009) added that documents aid the researcher in uncovering meaning, developing understanding, and discovering insights important to the research problem. The collected documents served as a key to forming connections throughout all of the data that was collected; they served as tools for triangulating the information gained from the interviews and observations. The documents were used to develop a deeper understanding of the students' experiences with literature circles as I was able to use them as a reference as students discussed their role sheets, the pamphlet, and their tasks. I was able to reflect back on the documentation collected as students referred to tasks, explained how they used role sheets, and described their thinking during the literature circle cycles. I was able to use them to see how students were preparing for their group discussions and how they were interpreting the text. I also used the documents to specifically help answer research question two in order to determine how the role sheets and tasks influenced the students' engagement in literature circles.

Data Analysis

Merriam (2009) defined data analysis as the “process of making sense out of the data. And making sense out of data involves consolidating, reducing, and interpreting what people have said and what the researcher has seen and read—it is the process of making meaning” (pp. 175-176). Data analysis was conducted as data were collected, which according to Merriam (2009) is the most effective way. “Without ongoing analysis, the data can be unfocused, repetitious, and overwhelming in the sheer volume of material that needs to be processed. Data that have been analyzed while being collected are both parsimonious and illuminating” (Merriam, 2009, p. 171). Miles and Huberman (1994) acknowledged that this process allows the researcher to collect new data, fill in gaps as they arise, and generate alternative hypotheses.

The data were analyzed using the constant comparison method (Glaser & Strauss, 1967, as cited in Merriam, 2009). Merriam (2009) asserted that this “constant comparative method of data analysis is inductive and comparative” (p. 175). In addition, Strauss and Corbin (1990) stressed that this method is dependent on both making comparisons and asking questions as the coding process ensues. Miles and Huberman (1994) described coding as the act of analyzing data; “This part of analysis involves how you differentiate and combine the data you have retrieved and the reflections you make about this information” (p. 56).

Matrices were developed after the interview, observation, and document collection as a way to organize the examples given, information gained, as well as my thoughts. This type of display allowed for “careful comparisons, detection of differences, noting of patterns and themes, seeing trends, and so on” (Miles & Huberman, 1994, p.

92). These tables were based on the research questions and trends I noted from the data. They provided me with a rich description of how literature circles were impacting the fifth grade students and served as a method for me to keep track of my perspectives, feelings, and interactions that shaped how I viewed and analyzed the data (Glesne, 2011). As the data were analyzed, I grouped the data and information based on the ideas and patterns that reoccurred throughout the study. These patterns were themes that cut across all three forms of data that were collected (Merriam, 2009). These patterns were used to code the data and modify it based on the evidence I found. The patterns were related to engagement in literature circles, behaviors exhibited by using role sheets, and the terms of authentic literacy. As each of the patterns were operationalized, several patterns were modified based on the evidence found.

In order to organize the information that was presented, a coding system was developed based on the information obtained. According to Miles and Huberman (1994), codes are the labels given to units of meaning gathered during the study. These codes were used to retrieve and organize the data. Berg (2009) suggested that coding allows the researcher to identify and extract themes, topics, or issues in a systematic method. Information and insights gained from the different data sources were used to determine further information that needed to be collected. This process of analyzing the content, according to Bogdan and Biklen (2006), involved developing ideas about the information found, patterns that were emerging, and the meaning that was suggested. These ideas should be related to the literature and concerns of the research questions. This analysis provided an avenue for determining how these experiences fit into the research field.

Mayring (2000) and Strauss (1987) agreed that the categories researchers use may be determined inductively, deductively, or a combination of the two.

When analyzing information presented, researchers identified seven major elements that should be included and can contribute to the coding process; they are words, themes, characters, paragraphs, items, concepts, and semantics (Berg, 2009; Merton, 1968; Selltitz et al., 1959). I used the following relevant elements to code the data for analysis in this study.

- Words- Their use resulted in a frequency distribution of specific words or terms.
- Themes- A theme was a string of words with a subject and predicate.
- Items- An item represented the whole unit of the sender's message.
- Concepts- Ideas that constituted a deeper content.

When sorting through the data presented and coding the information to help determine the meaning, Strauss (1987) offered four basic guidelines when coding:

- Use a specific and consistent set of questions when reviewing the data. Keep the research questions in mind.
- Analyze the data minutely. The more information that is analyzed and coded, the better. All information is viewed as important and may play a role in the understanding of the study.

- Frequently interrupt the coding to write a theoretical note. Determine how the information gained is impacted by theory throughout the analysis process.
- Never assume the analytic relevance of any traditional variable such as age, sex, social class, and so on until the data show it to be relevant.

Listen to the data rather than predetermining conclusions.

As matrices were developed using the research questions and previous research as a guide, I carefully read through all of the interviews and observation transcripts and studied the collected documents using words, themes, items, and concepts as my guide to code the data. I made an effort to constantly refer to the question I was using the data to answer and analyze each word, theme, item, and concept carefully so that no data were missed or looked over and all relevant data were used to determine how the students engaged in the literature circle process and the instruction the teacher used to support engagement in literature circles.

As the data were placed in the matrices, I wrote theoretical notes to help determine how the data and quotes related to the research questions, coding used, and the theory guiding the study. This helped ensure that the data were relevant to the coding and also allowed me to determine when and if data and coding needed to be modified or added to the analysis.

Miles and Huberman (1994) suggested creating a starting list of codes prior to collecting data, as it assists in linking research questions and conceptual research directly to the data. Based on previous research by Ormond (1999) and Vygotsky (1978), initial

coding of the data was based on evidence where the students were talking “through” their thinking, imitating each other, and repeating the ideas of their peers. I looked for evidence of student problem solving (Hogan & Tudge, 1999; LePage et al., 2005). I also looked for evidence of students questioning the ideas and reasoning of others, offering explanations of reasoning, and transferring knowledge (Shepard et al., 2005; Vygotsky, 1978). Based on research by Rosenblatt (1995), I searched for places where students made connections to the text to gain a deeper meaning and a greater understanding of the text.

Initial coding was established to answer the research questions, which included ideas from previous research, authentic literacy, and the role sheets. Initial codes included discussions, problem solving, asking questions, explaining thinking, transfer of knowledge, summarizing, learning new words, discussions, guided by questions, argumentative reading, argumentative writing, argumentative talking, and thinking critically among others. I also coded for instructional practices including role sheets, each specific role, choice, and explicit skill practice. After each code was analyzed individually, the initial code list was modified. Codes were modified based on data noted during the analysis. As I was reading the data, new trends were noted as prevalent throughout the data. Some initial codes were collapsed or combined while other codes were added or separated. For example, as I was analyzing the data, I noted that some data originally coded as discussion fell into two distinct categories, including discussion and collaboration, so these became two separate codes. I originally attempted to code data with the specific roles used on the role sheets, but I noticed that the data were more related to how the students used the role sheets in general rather than the particular roles.

I originally analyzed the data using the components of authentic literacy as codes, but I noticed that argumentative writing was not a strong factor, so I combined it with argumentative reading. After multiple passes through the data, the final set of codes included discussions, collaboration, thinking critically, purposeful tasks and learning, choice, questioning, argumentative reading and writing, and role sheets.

Validity

According to Merriam (2009), qualitative research has strategies for establishing the validity of a study.

Internal Validity

Internal validity is concerned with ensuring that the research findings and the reality match and that the findings are an accurate reflection of the participant's reality. Several ways have been identified in which the researcher can ensure internal validity throughout the research process including triangulation, member checks, providing rich descriptions, and clarifying researcher bias (Merriam, 2009). In order to ensure reliability and validity, self-reports in the interview were confirmed by direct observation, and included additional questions related to the same idea within the interview.

Interviews were conducted in a nonbiased location selected by each of the participants.

Throughout the entire process, I made an effort to present all information gained through the eyes of the participants by including quotes and details from observations. In an effort to enhance the trustworthiness of the study, I triangulated the data by comparing and cross-checking data collected through observations, interviews, and document analysis, as well as provided clarification of any potential researcher's bias by reporting

throughout the findings and data analysis how my preconceptions, beliefs, and position may have come into play during the research process (Glesne, 2011; Merriam, 2009).

During the course of this research, I was the principal at the suburban elementary school used in the study. Being a colleague and administrator of the participating teacher had both advantages and disadvantages. First, I had already established a rapport with the teacher. When discussing her experiences about literature circles, as well as her beliefs about reading and English Language Arts instruction and teaching, the participant felt comfortable, because she knew me. On the contrary, however, my relationship with the teacher may have adversely affected her willingness to share information that may have been interpreted as criticism of the reading practices that are used throughout the school. It might also have affected her willingness to be honest related to her teaching practices, as she might have been afraid that it would appear as a lack of ability or effort. I assured Mrs. Jones that her perceptions related to the literature circle experience would not be held against her in any way and explained the importance of her being honest in her explanations of her experiences with literature circles. I transcribed the data exactly as they were presented and had Mrs. Jones ensure that the transcriptions were accurate.

During the course of this study, I was the principal of the student participants. Although I was not their teacher, our conversations about learning and the importance of reading, writing, and discussing may have altered or influenced their views of literature circles. They might have felt obligated to respond in a certain manner. I assured each of the student participants that their perceptions of their experiences were very important to this study and would not be held against them. I explained the importance of their

honesty related to their experiences throughout the process and the importance of being able to report the data with honesty and integrity.

My assumptions about literature circles were primarily based on my own experiences. I was aware that my personal experience with this reading practice may have influenced the present study. Since my experience with literature circles was not like that of the participants, because the teacher and each of the students approached texts and discussions about texts with a different set of strengths and weaknesses than I experienced or am familiar with, I reported biases as they presented themselves. Given that I experienced literature circles as a teacher and have observed the practice as an administrator, this opportunity allowed me to become a better researcher and to appreciate a unique perspective regarding this teaching practice. In his text on qualitative research, Patton referenced the classic study of educational evaluator, Edna Sharpiro's (1973) study of young children in classrooms (1973, as cited in Patton, 2002). He stated that through her closeness to the children in those classrooms, she was allowed to see what was happening that was not captured by standardized tests. She could see differences in children, observe their responses to different situations, and capture the varying meanings attached to common events. Patton (2002) stated that the closeness to the people and the situations being studied provides major contributions to our understanding of the world. This closeness and understanding of the people and setting lend itself to empathy which "enhances the researchers direct experiences in the world and insights about those experiences" (p. 51).

As I was collecting data, I was deliberately looking for elements of authentic literacy, as well as components of Vygotsky's (1978) socio-cultural learning theory. I

looked for evidence of students asking and answering questions; purposefully reading, writing, and talking in an argumentative manner; and thinking critically. I also looked for evidence of students discussing the text, working together to solve problems, and using role sheets. Some of the evidence that was noted and used might not have been observed had I not been purposefully looking for it.

Merriam (2009) also suggested using member checks or participant validation to ensure internal validity. According to Merriam (2009), member checking “is to take your preliminary analysis back to some of the participants ask whether your interpretation *rings true*” (p. 217). Mrs. Jones and the student participants were asked to ensure that the transcripts were correct and efficient in an effort to ensure that what the students said and experienced was appropriately captured. I allowed each of the participants access to his or her transcribed interview in order to clarify any comments that were made; none of the participants chose to alter or change any of their comments.

External Validity

According to Merriam (2009), external validity is concerned with ensuring that the research findings are generalizable and can be applied to other situations. Merriam (2009) emphasized that “probably the most common understanding of generalizability in qualitative research is to think in terms of the reader or user of the study” (p. 226). She stated, “... when rich, thick description is used as a strategy to enable transferability, it refers to a description of the setting and participants of the study, as well as a detailed description of the findings with adequate evidence presented in the form of quotes from participant interviews, field notes, and documents” (p. 227). External validity was established through the use of purposeful sampling. Purposeful sampling allowed for

careful attentiveness when selecting the study sample. According to Merriam (2009), “Purposefully seeking variation or diversity in sample selection to allow for greater range of application of the findings by consumers of the research” (p. 229) enhances transferability. External validity was established by providing detailed descriptions of the context and the data collected, as well as including detailed descriptions of the findings with adequate evidence presented in the form of quotes from the participants.

CHAPTER IV

FINDINGS

Through this study, I investigated the implementation of literature circles in a classroom based on observation data, interviews with students and their teacher, and documents collected. This chapter is divided into three main sections. The chapter begins with a description of the implementation of literature circles in Mrs. Jones's classroom, as well as the students' descriptions of their experiences participating in literature circles in order to provide context for analysis of the data related to each research question. Sections two and three present findings that answer both of the two research questions:

Research Question One: In what ways do students engage in the literature circle process?

Research Question Two: What instructional practices contribute to the level of engagement that is experienced by the students during literature circles? In particular, how do students use role sheets during the reading and discussion of the text to help them through the literature circle process?

Section One: The Implementation of Literature Circles in Mrs. Jones's Classroom

I begin by describing the implementation of literature circles in Mrs. Jones's classroom. As discussed in Chapter 3, Mrs. Jones was a strong supporter of literature circles; she had used them as an instructional practice for eight years. Throughout the

interviews, she spoke of the important role they play in her language arts instruction. She claimed that literature circles help her cover most of the state standards for reading literature, speaking and listening, and even some of the writing standards. She reported that she chooses literature circles for many reasons:

...it gives children choice. I can bring in a range of similar novels. I can have several different books that are the same genre, and they can choose their top three. It gives them a chance to have some choice, which makes them want to read more. The other reason is I can get them independent practice on things that we have done as a whole group, and they hold each other accountable.

Mrs. Jones spoke of a variety of the benefits of literature circles, ranging from choice and differentiation to motivation and opportunities to apply skills taught during group instruction.

Getting Started with Literature Circles

In order to prepare students for the literature circle process, Mrs. Jones explained in an interview that the class spent time at the beginning of the school year reading a novel as a class. This allowed her to meet with students in small groups and/or individually and get to know them as readers. She credited the process for also allowing her to teach procedures, expectations, and reading strategies, as well as skills to the whole group before having the students work together in small groups.

Mrs. Jones explained that once basic procedures had been established, she began teaching students the literature circle process by using role sheets. Each group had a Summarizer, Literary Luminary, Word Wizard, Discussion Director, as well as roles that changed periodically that focused on the skills that the students were learning about in

class. As the students read a whole-class novel, they spent a week practicing and working with each role individually. They met in groups to practice discussing the text using the particular role they were learning to use as their guide. After Mrs. Jones taught each of the roles individually, she assigned roles to each of the students. The class read another whole-class novel, and students were divided into groups based on their literature circle role. All of the students with the same role were grouped together to discuss the text and their findings or discoveries based on the role sheet. They practiced this process with each of the roles. Finally, when the students were confident and comfortable with the roles, Mrs. Jones allowed students to choose the novel they would like to read and assigned them individual roles. Using the role sheets as a guide for their conversation, students met in literature circle groups; they discussed and learned from the text and each other. Once students were proficient with the literature circle process and learned how to engage each other with the text through their conversations, she had the students complete a “pamphlet” or task sheet that included a portion of all of the roles. This allowed students to focus on all of the roles or tasks rather than simply focusing on one. They were given practice working with each skill. Mrs. Jones stated that the students:

...end up having an individual packet that they have to fill out. I think it is better, because they interact with all parts of the text- not just the part that they had a job. They are not just looking at the words, and they are not just looking for figurative language or whatever. They are looking at the entire text.... I think that they are more involved in what the text is saying and less involved in what their job is- which is what my whole point is. I want them to read and talk about it.

The students practiced using the role sheets with two whole class novels, *Island of the Blue Dolphins* and *Bridge to Terabithia* during the first four months of school before beginning literature circles.

Teaching literature circles. Mrs. Jones led the class through whole class readings of two or three novels from August to December. When Mrs. Jones's class began to move from whole class literature based instruction to literature circles, she started with *Tuck Everlasting* then transitioned to a set of realistic fiction books that included a variety of elements that she knew would appeal to her students based on her students' interests. In the beginning of January through mid-February, she used *Tuck Everlasting* to teach her students how to participate in literature circles and have a small group, text-based discussion. In mid-February, Mrs. Jones introduced the class to the first set of literature circle books. She selected books with a variety of styles, topics, and lexile levels. She explained that she presented the books to students in a commercial-like format during a class period and had them select the three books that they would most like to read. She made sure that the students chose books at or near their reading levels so that they were able to stretch their reading and push their thinking but also read independently. This also allowed her to group students to minimize distractions and behavior problems when they were working independently. Mrs. Jones was purposeful in her selection of books that students were allowed to choose from in literature circles. She stated that she searched for books that were award winning, had a relevant theme, were written by a familiar author, allowed for reinforcement of skills focused on in class, or were of interest to her students. She also understood the importance of reading each of texts herself before she assigned them to the class so that she could answer questions,

probe deeper thinking and talking, and guide or redirect thinking when misconceptions arose. She followed this pattern of giving book talks for each cycle of literature circle units she taught from February through May of the school year.

During the first cycle of literature circles observed, students were reading *Tuck Everlasting*. This round of literature circles lasted about five weeks. For this cycle, each student participated using each of the roles; they had a different role each week. During the second round of literature circles observed, students selected from a range of books, which included *Shiloh*, *iFunny*, *Jake and Lily*, and *Flora and Ulysses*, with a theme that focused on change. This round of literature circles lasted for about six to seven weeks. For this cycle, the students began using role sheets but transitioned to using a “pamphlet.”

Students met weekly, usually on Thursday or Friday, in literature circle groups to discuss the section of the text that was read. They were given 20-30 minutes daily throughout the week to read the section they had predetermined should be read before the meeting and complete role sheets or any other assignments that were expected to be completed by the meeting time. Each novel took about five weeks to complete. During the instructional day when students were not meeting or preparing for literature circles, they were engaged in standards-based mini lessons related to focus skills of the week, writer’s workshop, and nonfiction texts that addressed the science and social studies standards she was covering. Mrs. Jones also spent several minutes each day reading aloud to the students from a novel.

During the first three months of the school year, Mrs. Jones read a class novel with the students and got to know them as readers. She taught the students procedures for reading time, as well as reading strategies. She had the students begin working in

small groups and established a culture of talk in the classroom. During the fourth and fifth months of school, Mrs. Jones used a whole class novel to teach students how to use role sheets to read with a purpose and as a guide for discussion. During the sixth month of school, Mrs. Jones divided the students into literature circle groups. All of the groups read the same novel; they used role sheets as a guide for reading and preparing for their group discussions. During the seventh and eighth months of school, students participated in literature circle groups with each group reading their own text. Mrs. Jones removed the role sheets and had the students complete the pamphlet, as well as other tasks related to the text and standards that she was wanting to reinforce as they read.

Student Participation in Literature Circles

Students shared how they felt while engaging in the literature circle process. They described in their own words how they felt while engaging in the literature circle process.

Amy. Amy enjoyed participating in literature circles. Her favorite part of the process was being able to read and talk to others about what she was reading. Amy stated that “if it is more advanced or really an un-understandable book, then I will want to talk about it to help me and others, because I might get something that they don’t.” Her other favorite part was to think of and ask questions as they were reading; she enjoyed the deep conversation that stemmed from the questions that led to a deeper understanding of the meaning of the text. Amy reported,

...whenever we are answering questions as a group, we go back and look for a specific part, because we have to find evidence if we are going to answer a

question, and so we have to prove it if we are going to give the answer. We have to go back and discuss that part and make sure that everyone agrees. Sometimes we will just be talking about a part that we recognize that has something to do with a different part or we thought that might have something to do in the future. Amy preferred collecting information by writing it down and taking notes.

I think the way that works best for me is putting it down on paper. I am not really sure why; I just like writing it down. Before I do that, I like to discuss it so that I can get my ideas and make sure that I understand my ideas of what is going on.

Amy took her responsibilities in literature circles seriously and expected the others in her group to do the same. She would make sure that the group members who were unengaged with the conversation were called on to share their thoughts, because “when we got back to them they would focus more on what we were doing. Then it was easier for all of us to focus.”

Sara. Sara enjoyed participating in literature circles. She stated, “It’s a very fun experience- learning what my friends think about the book and writing down what I feel about the book.” Her favorite part of the process was being able to talk to others about what they were reading and illustrate her favorite part of the section of the book they read that day. She spoke of how she was able to use her illustrations to express her thinking and understanding. She enjoyed the feeling of being able to escape life and only think about and talk about what is happening in the book.

The best part about talking about the book is that you can talk about everything that is going on in the book. There might be something going on in another book or in real life, but you can just talk about the book, which is really fun.

Sara considered it her responsibility to make everyone in her group feel important and valued. She had several members in her group that were shy and not comfortable sharing their thoughts with each other; she made sure that their thoughts were heard and valued. Sara stated, “We give them a chance to talk. We are like ‘Do you want to talk now?’ ‘Do you have anything to add on to this?’ We give them lots of chances.” She loved a deep, argumentative discussion where each participant was able to share his or her thoughts and ideas and learn from each other.

My favorite part of the group discussions was when we would argue and go back and prove-‘oh yea that and that-’ because we would really understand it more. I think that we learned a lot from each other.

Anna. Anna considered herself to be an introvert and preferred to work alone. She stated during the first interview that she did not like to talk to others about what she was reading or about her work; however, as the literature circle process unfolded, she became a leader in her group and was eager to share her thoughts and ideas with others as was seen throughout the observations that were conducted. Anna appreciated the humor in her book and was observed laughing about the events with others in her group. She enjoyed coming up with ways to describe the events that were happening in the text and often times did it with much animation as seen when she and her group were discussing the vacuum cleaner scene from *Flora and Ulysses*. Anna was very animated, moving her hands and changing her voice, as she shared her ideas for the summary of what they read for the day.

Throughout the literature circles process, a change was seen in her perspective. Towards the end, she stated that her favorite part of the process was talking to others about what they were reading and learning. She stated that talking to her group about what she was learning “helps me understand things better.” She enjoyed illustrating her favorite parts of the text. “We read out the important events, and I can show them the pictures; I love to draw the pictures. That’s one of my favorite parts.” She also enjoyed learning new words and determining their meaning. “I like Word Wizard. We are looking for words that we don’t know, but if there is a word that stands out to you from all the rest, then you would write it down.” Anna took many notes as she interacted with the text. She stated that she used these notes to help her decide what to talk about. “We have to look at our paper, and we will say what we have written down. Sometimes if there is a question, the summarizers will write down the questions, and we will use the book to find the answers.”

Samuel. Although Samuel did not read the book independently, he was an ardent participator in the literature circle process. He contributed regularly to the conversation and “carried his weight.” He stated that he helped his classmates in literature circles by “giving them questions, going back in the book to find answers to other’s questions, and helping find examples of character traits.” He recognized the importance of working together as a group. “We help each other, and if we have a problem, we solve it as a team.” “If I have something that everyone else doesn’t know but I know, I can tell them to go back and look right here.” The others in his group valued his thoughts and opinions as were evidenced by their responses to him during observations. He was often seen leading the group discussion, sharing his thoughts, and reminding his group what the text

said. They were attentive to his ideas and opinions and jotted them down on their task sheets or packets.

Samuel's favorite part of literature circles was working with others. He reported that "it helps me understand what we are reading better," and "I have learned different ideas and different points of view" from working with other group members. He understood the value of working with his classmates and how much they learned from each other. "I like that we work as a group or team. If I need help, I can get help." He said that "talking about what you are reading helps others, because they might understand it in a different way than you do." He reported that they are able to feed off of each other's ideas. He did not mind taking notes as he was reading and thinking; he saw it as an important task to help him remember what he was learning and thinking. Samuel reported that he would "write it down" as he was tracking his thinking while reading. He felt as though he "just can't remember it as good" when he did not write it down. Whenever he was reading and would find something that he really liked, he would "write it down.... If you like it, you write it down. If it's interesting, you write it down." He recognized that his group helped him to see different points of view and to understand others' ideas about the author's message. He thought that extra support and understanding allowed for it to be "more interesting."

Tim. Tim's favorite part of literature circles was getting to share his personal opinions about the book with others.

I like sharing ideas with friends and getting to hear what others think of the book. If someone doesn't agree with your opinion about the book, we get to talk it out and go back to our book and look it up in the text.

He valued the opportunity that the practice allowed for sharing their thoughts and ideas about the book with each other.

I am glad that we get to say what we got for confusing words, and I am glad that we get to express what we get for some words that we got and some words that we didn't get or figurative language; I like that.

He added, "I like that we got to express our thoughts about the book and also saying what we think about the book." He also liked when Mrs. Jones decided to have all of the students complete the packets that had each of the roles on it rather than the individual roles, because he stated that "it made it fair for everyone. Everyone had to do the same amount of work and no one was stuck doing the job that they didn't really want to do." Tim stated that the task that benefitted him the most was the important events one, because it "helped me understand the author's message the best- where we wrote at least three important events."

All of the students stated that they enjoyed participating in literature circles and the discussions that stemmed from the texts they were reading. The students took their responsibilities for the group seriously and knew that everyone had to do their part to ensure a successful literature circle.

Section Two: Research Question One

In what ways do students engage in the literature circle process? To answer this question, I will discuss the three themes that demonstrated how students engaged in the literature circle process in Mrs. Jones's classroom. These included discussions, collaboration, and thinking critically.

Discussions

Students engaged in the literature circles process through discussions related to the text. Before students could be expected to have these discussions, they had to be taught how to hold a text-based conversation. These discussions led to a deeper understanding of the characters in the text and how they impacted the outcome of the story, the author's central message, and how to justify and defend their thinking. They provided students with opportunities that promoted metacognition and led to a deeper understanding of the assignments students were working towards and the standards these assignments addressed.

Fostering discussions. Mrs. Jones discussed how she spent time at the beginning of the year establishing a culture in which they learned to listen and respect each other's ideas and opinions so that everyone's thoughts would be valued when they shared their views and interpretations.

We've built that culture into the classroom where what you have to say is important but so is what this person has to say. You have to build that culture first and allow them to interact with each other and teach them as they are learning.

Mrs. Jones carefully considered the students' book choices and their personalities before making the decisions about who would be in a literature circle group together.

Tim stated that when one person has an opinion about the text and another person has a different opinion about the text, they work it out by "talking about it. We have to use evidence from the book to justify our opinions." He continued by stressing the

importance of talk in the process but also the importance of being able to justify their thoughts. “We get to talk it out and go back to our book and look it up in the text.”

Enjoyment of talking about the book. Enjoyment of talking about the book led to motivation and interest. Many students commented on the enjoyment they experienced from talking about their book. Tim stated that “getting to explain what our personal thoughts are about the book we read” was his favorite part of literature circles. Samuel enjoyed talking about what he was reading because, “it helps me to express and understand the story. It helps other people, too, because they might understand it in a different way than you do.” He reiterated that talking to his group members about what he was reading, “helps me understand what we are reading better.” He also pointed out that the group work has increased his interest in reading and “really helps me.” “We read it together, and we do the work together- unless it’s like tests. We don’t do that together.”

Sara stated she “liked group discussions” and that her favorite part about them was when they would have to prove their point. Not only did she enjoy the group discussions but also going back and finding the spots in the text that they were talking about during the discussions. “It is mostly me and my friend, Anna, that love that the most in our group.”

Amy’s favorite part about literature circles was “the reading and getting to discuss about what you think the book is trying to say and that sort of thing.” She mentioned that to be able to talk about the book “you need to understand the book.” She thought that if you did not understand the book, “you would have a harder time comprehending and discussing with the rest of the group.” She particularly enjoyed talking about what they

were reading, “if it is a more advanced or really un-understandable book, then I will want to talk about it to help me and others, because I might get something that they don’t.”

Anna also thought that her favorite part of literature circles was “being able to talk to her group members about what they read” even though they did not always understand the point she was trying to make. She explained, “Sometimes I have to explain, but other times, they agree with me and get it.” The students all talked about how much they enjoyed the process of engaging in literature circle discussions.

Learning from each other. Several students discussed learning from each other and how they were able to understand each other’s point of view and use text evidence to understand the meaning of the text better. Sara discussed that they “learned a lot from each other,” and that one of her favorite parts of literature circles was “sharing ideas with her friends,” but she also valued “getting to hear what the others think about the book.” If someone didn’t agree with the other’s opinions about the book, “we get to talk it out and go back to our book and look it up in the text.” Tim agreed. He stated, “We just talk about it. We have to use evidence from the book to justify our opinions.” Samuel stated that he learned “different ideas and different points of view” from talking with his group members. If someone disagreed with his point of view or with what he thought, he said that they would “go back and prove it.” Anna agreed and stated that “it helps me understand things better.”

Sara stated that talking about their discussions led to changes in their group. Group members who were not comfortable sharing and participating in the beginning were talking, participating, and helping other group members understand the book better. She shared when she began to notice some of these changes. “Probably because it was a

big important moment when we read about when Flora found Ulysses when he got kidnapped; so, maybe they just wanted to talk more.” Sara stated that she and Anna made sure that the other three girls in their group had an opportunity to share their thoughts and opinions, as well. She believed that participating in literature circles increased her interest in reading, because “I get to discuss with people my book and that is going to help me in the future.” Sara mentioned that she helps others in her group. She discussed how she helped one of her group members “try and understand what’s going on, because sometimes she asks questions while we are reading, and I have to tell her.” But, her group also helped her. She said, “They help me summarize. I’m a good summarizer, but sometimes I get stumped on words and they help me with them.”

Learning to come to an agreement. The groups did not always share the same thoughts, opinions, or interpretations of the text and often had to learn how to come to an agreement. Mrs. Jones shared a moment when Sam and Amy’s group could not come to an agreement, and they wanted to divide the group.

All six of them don’t always get to a point where they can actually function, and they have asked me a couple of times if they can split apart into two groups. ‘No sorry- that’s not going to happen. You have to learn to work together.’

She shared another example of when the group struggled to come to an agreement. Mrs. Jones elaborated,

The discussion where they were trying to convince each other of what they should put on their form was really interesting, because I watched two girls basically go head to head and try to persuade their group. They went from one end of the

spectrum to the other. It was interesting. I thought that was a really big turning point for that group.

Mrs. Jones told of another incident where a group got into a big argument about what the inciting incident on their plot diagram was going to be. She elaborated on the event.

It was funny to see that one child had a thought and everyone agreed expect her friend. Then, her friend started to explain why and more of the kids went over to that side, and they kept talking. I just let them keep going, and they were trying to get it all done. Their points were so similar that they could join them, but they never got to that point. Finally, I walked over and said, ‘Rather than worry about who is right, let’s think about this- are these two points really different?’ The students didn’t think they were. ‘How could you bring these together?’ Nobody even thought that maybe we could combine the two and make it into one incident, and they were like ‘Oh! That’s true; we didn’t even think about that!’

Mrs. Jones shared another time that the students worked together to come to an agreement. A group had a passionate debate one day when they were working on their plot diagrams. “We had a heated discussion about what really caused the story to happen- which one was the inciting incident and how do you know.” She said, “It’s funny, because they will get louder and louder, and I will walk by and say ‘getting louder doesn’t prove it,’ and they always say ‘yea, I have to go back and use text evidence.’”

Mrs. Jones explained that she reminded the students that:

...you know your argument is not more valid because you yell at me; it’s more valid because you give me reason. You can give me reasons to support this view,

and you can give me reason to support that view; I have to use my brain to figure out what is better.

Tim shared that they did not always agree with each other's opinions about the book. He said, "We get to talk it out and go back to our book and look it up in the text." Sara noted that when her group had a disagreement about their text, they would "work it out" by talking "about our points and the other person's points."

Argumentative talking impacted the classroom in many ways. According to Mrs. Jones, "Not only has it become a literature experience, but it is also a working together, collaboration, and understanding how to be a decent human being experience. So that is really cool."

Discussions used to justify thinking. Discussions were an integral component of the literature circle process. One of the ways that students talked about literature was to use discussions to justify their thinking. Students spent much time discussing the text and supporting their thoughts and ideas with text-based evidence. When the students were discussing and making a point, they would justify their point by reading text from their book. Often times the students would have different interpretations of the same text. In one of the earlier observations, Amy's group was discussing how Mae and Tuck could have handled a situation differently. Amy shared her idea that Mae could have waited until the constable showed up and tried to explain what happened to him, so maybe he could have helped figure out a way to stop them. The group discussed why the character would not have thought of that idea and why she could have thought that was not a good idea. Samuel enjoyed discussing the text and discussed the impact that it had on his understanding of the text, as well as the effect it had on others. "It helps me to express

and understand the story. It helps other people too, because they might understand it in a different way than you do.” Samuel indicated that knowing what was important to discuss was not an issue or something they struggled to come up with. “If it is a very important event- like something that changes the story around or changes the story a little bit- if it is something like that, then we know it’s important to discuss.”

Students were aware that all text-related discussions should be backed with evidence from the text. The students found this challenging at times. In one of the earlier observations, Amy’s group was in a deep discussion about the trust issues associated with one of the characters from *Tuck Everlasting*; however, they lacked the evidence they needed to come to the conclusion they were discussing. The students in the group could not understand how the constable could “kind of” trust a man that had done so much scheming and planning. Although the group knew that the man is “creepy” and could not be trusted, they did not have their text evidence to support their conversation and opinions. After several minutes of searching through chapter 16, Amy found a passage that supported their thoughts that the character was “creepy” and not trustworthy and read it to her group; the group then discussed the evidence from the passage that supported their conversation. They mentioned that the character tried to sneak up on people and wanted to know what they were talking about and was trying to figure out where the water was, as well as how he always seemed to be planning and scheming.

When describing how her group used evidence to support their thinking, Amy stated that her group talked about questions they had about the book that would “make us think and try and understand what it’s saying. We have to explain, find an answer for

those questions and find evidence in the book. We have to explain why we think the way that we think.” According to the pamphlet, each statement or opinion related to the text required a text-based justification.

Discussions used to make connections and relate to others. Group discussions allowed students to make connections and relate to others. Anna stated that “being able to talk to other people about what they read” was her favorite part of literature circles. She discussed how she liked to make connections, because they helped her understand the text better, and she enjoyed sharing those connections with her group members. She saw the discussion part of literature circles as a way to help others in her group.

They learn words that they might not know what they mean, and they actually hear what you think was best or something that they didn’t really think was that important that could help them. Like they really didn’t think about that part and it also helps them learn what they are reading better when they hear what other people say they think.

Amy stated that “the reading and getting to discuss what you think the book is trying to say” was her favorite part of literature circles. “If somebody missed a part or something then we can go back and explain it.” Amy thought “a bunch of people got different ideas from each other.” She elaborated on how there were times she was talking to her group members and partners, and they would help her come up with new ideas or points of view. “Sometimes I would be like ‘oh- I never thought of that,’ because it will be like a new idea, because I would have thought one way. I am open to any idea.” Sara thought that literature circles were “going to be difficult, but when I got into it, I was like ‘oh yes- this is pretty easy.’” Her favorite part was “talking about it.” She said, “I liked

my group discussions.” When asked about her favorite part about them, she responded “when we would- this probably sounds bad- when we would argue and go back and prove- ‘oh yeah that and that,’ because we would really understand it more.” She thought the discussions were more valuable, because “I think that we learned a lot from each other.”

Sara thought that one reason her group enjoyed talking about the book so much was because they were able to read a book that was interesting to them. “I think it was just the book- how interesting the book is- because *Flora & Ulysses* is a great book.”

Tim also saw value in how the discussions allowed the students to connect to others and the text. He stated, “I liked that I got to explain what my personal thoughts are about the book we read.” Sara felt the same. “It’s a fun experience- learning what my friends think about the book and writing down what I feel about the book.” She described how she felt when her group met to discuss the book.

The best part about talking about the book is that you can talk about everything that is going on in the book. There might be something going on in another book or in real life, but you can just talk about the book, which is really fun.

Through discussion of the text, students were able to make deeper connections with the text, which helped them understand the text at a deeper level and relate it to their lives, which also helped them see the experience as “fun.”

Discussions allowed for metacognition. Discussions provided students with opportunities to monitor their comprehension and share what they learned. Amy thought that it was important to track her thinking and monitor her comprehension as she read, so she would be able to participate in the discussion.

We did it mainly in literature circles for the discussion questions. ‘I think this is going to happen’ and ‘what was going on right now’ and sometimes we would refer to past things that have happened in the book to make a point and say ‘well this happened so we know that could have happened.’

Amy valued the role discussion played in her process for collecting her thoughts and ideas. She stated that before she put her “thoughts down on paper,” she liked “to discuss it so that I can get my ideas and make sure that I understand my thoughts and what is going on.” Amy stated her group did not have any trouble deciding what to talk about.

Sometimes we’ll go in order and one person will just tell if they like this part and will explain why and what they thought was interesting. We can do whatever we were discussing. We can pretty much talk about any part of it, but whenever we have to do a specific thing then we normally just find that part and look at it. She added, “Sometimes someone will notice something completely random, and we will discuss it and be like ‘okay that makes sense.’”

Development of class discussions. In the beginning of the literature circles process, the students in Mrs. Jones’s class did not all enjoy talking and sharing with each other in class. Several of her students were shy and not comfortable with this type of classroom format. She spent time at the beginning of the year developing a classroom culture that allowed for these discussions to be a priority and helped develop this skill in her students. She explained,

We had talking sticks and once you speak, you pass it and move on, and we have the tap in circle. When you have something to say, you can tap your partner and

come in. If you don't have something to say and you are not speaking, it's okay, but if you want to come in, you can.

Mrs. Jones provided the class with exit tickets or an exit packet, because there were students who were not comfortable sharing and she needed a method for determining their understanding of the material. There were several students who would not share in front of the class at first, but based on the exit tickets, Mrs. Jones knew they understood exactly what was going on. She would also have individual conversations with some of the students in order to get them to think deeper. She mentioned one particular student that she would push deeper by meeting with her individually. She shared that she would question her and ask "What about this? And she would come tell me." She explained that she did not mind having to have the extra conferences with some of the students. She said, "That's okay. I have to respect that, because there are introverted children in the world that don't like to talk to a whole group." She made sure that the class knew that she would not force them into any situation that they were not comfortable with, but also had in mind what the end goal was. She explained,

We will talk with partners. At the beginning of the year, they were paired up with nine different people. When I would spin the spinner, they would get with the partner number that I spun, and just share with that partner.

She thought that in the beginning this was especially good, because it gave those two students practice sharing with each other, "because if you have three or more pair off, the quiet kids get left behind." They also divided into shoulder-to-shoulder partners or would pick partner cards. She said they even worked with computer-generated

partners. Mrs. Jones made every effort for students to learn to work with those they do not consider themselves to have much in common with but also with their friends.

Sometimes I allowed them to pick their friends, and they would get in a group together.... Other times I would say that they have to work with a partner and here are the five things that I need you to do. If you mix it up a little bit and allow kids to be who they are, they will eventually do what they need to do. There are kids who are never going to be comfortable with it, but they have to understand that it is expected. So, they have to get to a point where they can function- even if it is something that they don't like.

Mrs. Jones stated that discussion plays a key role in everything they do. She said that when she attends a meeting and is asked to work something out, she will work it out and look at the person next to her and "my immediate reaction is 'How did you do it?'" She continued,

As adults, we want validation, and we want to understand what other people think, because their idea might be better than ours. I say that I am getting you ready for the real world, but I am also allowing you to hear different ways brains work.... I am also giving you the tools to be able to explain your thinking so that you can help a friend.

Mrs. Jones stated that there are times when they are expected to complete a task independently, but "while we are in the formative stage, I want them to talk about it, because that is where your learning happens." She supported talking in the classroom and saw it as a necessity. "I think discussion breeds deeper learning, and I have seen it work in the classroom. We are loud; we talk about everything."

Discussions led to deeper understanding of the text. Group discussion led to deeper understanding of the text. Sara and Anna's group was observed discussing the important events in *Flora and Ulysses* in order to gain a deeper understanding of its meaning. Anna stated how they could document the events while the other group members contributed to the discussion of what was happening with the vacuum cleaner. As they were discussing the events, Sara asked why they just didn't unplug the vacuum cleaner. Anna reminded the group that the text said that the vacuum was multi-terrain, so they could just open the door and try it outside. That's when Flora looked out the window and asked why someone would want to vacuum their front yard.

Another example in an earlier observation was that Amy's group encountered the word 'amiss' in *Tuck Everlasting*. They discussed the context of the word to try and determine its meaning. Amy read the sentence that included the term and stated what she thought the word might have meant. Another group member added what she thought it might mean. Another group member wrote both of their ideas down, but no one was certain that either was correct. The group went back to the text and reread the section to try and get a better understanding of what the word meant. Later in the discussion, the students were observed talking about an event in the story as they tried to make meaning of what was going on in the character's mind. One of the group members asked how Mae and Tuck could have handled the situation differently. The group discussed how Mae was not calm, because she wacked him on the side of the head. Amy shared her idea that she could have waited until the constable showed up and tried to explain what happened to him, so maybe he could have helped figure out a way to stop. The group

discussed why she would not have thought of that idea and why she could have even thought that it was a bad idea.

During the same observation, Sara's group discussed that the character was really lonely because he did not have a wife or girlfriend, because he did not change, and because the wife would think he was crazy. Another student flipped through the text to find the part in the book they were discussing; she had the group refer to page 71 and read what the text said about it. The students agreed with each other as one stated that he was desperate. As their discussion led to an understanding of the situation, they discussed how the situation was "kinda funny."

Sara felt as though discussing the text helped her group understand the author's meaning more deeply. She explained, "We would write down things that we didn't know and discuss at the same time." She added,

I think that we just thought that it would be easier, because if we discuss first and then write all the stuff down- well, if you write all the stuff down, how would you really get into it, if you write it down then discuss it?

She went on to say that it was easier for her group if they talked about it then wrote down what they came up with in their discussions. Sara clarified that sometimes it was necessary to take notes in order to prepare for the discussion. She said, "I would say that it was important to me when we were sharing. I would say 'this was important to me, because dah, dah, dah, but I wouldn't really write all of that down.'" Amy mentioned that discussing the text was especially beneficial if you got something out of it or learned something new.

Mrs. Jones noticed that the students' discussions were "more in-depth." She said, "They are much more in tune to the fact that reading something is going to give you knowledge and that knowledge is going to help you have a conversation." She also noted that the work they are producing has improved greatly. She explained, "Their writing and their understanding of the characters is amazing, because they are really treating the characters like real people.... They actually talk about them like they are real people."

Evidence-based discussions. By purposefully and argumentatively talking, students were required to have evidence-based discussions. Sometimes the discussions would get involved and an agreement could not be settled upon within the group. Sara pointed out that if a disagreement occurred, "we would work it out. We would talk about our points and the other person's points and later realize that we were wrong or we were right." Sara explained that Mrs. Jones did not usually have to get involved in disagreements, but "sometimes people would ask her a question to back up their point" or she would remind groups that "you guys need to talk about it instead of arguing with each other especially when they would just say that we're right and you're wrong."

Students were given freedom to determine what was important to discuss. When Amy discussed group discussions, she mentioned, "one person will just tell if they like this part and will explain why and what they thought was interesting.... We can pretty much talk about any part of it." She included that they will notice different aspects of the text and bring it to each other's attention. "Sometimes someone will notice something completely random, and we will discuss it and be like 'okay, that makes sense.'"

The groups spent time discussing not only the ideas in the text but also the author's word choice and their assignments which led to a deeper understanding of the

standards these assignments reinforced. For example, in an April observation, students were expected to come up with a trait to describe a character in their book and provide text-based evidence to support their opinion. Samuel and Amy's group was observed discussing the character traits of one of the characters in their book, *Jake and Lily*, and how one of the characters, Jake, does not get in trouble. Part of the group decided that they would like to use the term "goodie-two shoes" to describe him. One of those members took her sheet over to the other group members to share their character trait. The rest of the members began looking for text evidence to support their idea. As they were looking for evidence to support claiming that Jake is a "goodie-two shoes," another group member and Samuel found evidence that Lily is honest. The group members began to discuss this trait and had to decide whether they were going to focus on the character traits of Jake or Lily. Two of the group members got into a deep discussion regarding the character traits that they each chose to describe the character. Both of the group members were able to use text to defend their thinking. The group could not come to a consensus so they decided to vote; they decided to discuss Lily, because "she has more character traits" and the text "tells us how she feels more." As they discussed some of the traits of Lily, the group reminded themselves that they could not focus on one event in the text or how a character described another when he/she was mad; the character trait had to focus on the character as a whole. One of the group members found in the text where it stated that Lily is cheating, lying, and confessing. Another group member said, "So, is she a liar?" A third group member interjected, "I think we need something that is more like her normal personality." They decided not to focus on an isolated event described in the story, but rather focus on character traits that told who

“she really is.” “And not technically what her brother thinks she is.” Amy reminded the group that they had to find details in the text that showed what Lily is like. “Jake might just be calling her that, because he is her brother and this is their brother/sister relationship.” The group used text-based evidence to determine that they were not thinking about the text or the questions appropriately and needed to adjust their thinking and points they were trying to make so that it was justified by evidence.

Discussions acted as a vehicle to encourage students to increase the rigor and think deeper within the text as they participated in literature circles. Students were expected to justify their ideas and assumptions about the text with text-based evidence. This encouraged students to reread the text and take a deeper look into what the author’s message to the reader was. These discussions allowed for students to make authentic connections with the text and their group members, which led to a deeper understanding of the skills and standards on which Mrs. Jones had the students focusing while reading.

Collaboration

Students engaged in the literature circle process by working with others, which led to purposeful collaboration. Several students commented on the collaborative nature of literature circles and how they allowed opportunities for problems to be solved, a reason to dig deeper into the text, and changes to occur over time.

Collaboration allowed for solving problems. One of the benefits of working together was that classmates were available to help solve problems. For example, Samuel reported that he was able to see the importance of working as a team, “because we help each other; and if we have a problem, we solve it as a team.” He recognized that he was able to help his teammates, as well. “If I have something that everyone else

doesn't know, but I know, then I can tell them to go back and look right here. I will say 'look right here'." Samuel credited his group for helping him read the text. "They read to me, because I have a dyslexia problem, so I like that. I listen and follow along while they read to me." He also recognized that his group helped him learn "different ideas and points of view." Sara acknowledged that working together allowed for the opportunity to share ideas.

Sometimes I would help someone or another person would help someone. I remember when I was sitting right next to Anna, and I found some words. I knew that she didn't have some. Then I said, 'Hey, do you want to see my words?' and she was like 'sure.' Then I showed them to her, and she didn't really know them, so I let her write them down.

Sara also thought that working with others helped make her a better reader. She discussed how they would explain words and parts of the text to each other, as well as question each other as they read. They were able to read over it together so that they could understand.

Tim enjoyed getting to express his thoughts about the book; he valued the opportunity to help others.

We help each other by showing each other. Not all of us finish our assignment by the meeting time, so what we do is give them some ideas. We don't tell them our answers; we just give them ideas of what they might want to put by the question or confusing words.

This was true in observations, particularly early in literature circles. During early observations, some of the groups were seen reminding each other of what they were

looking for while stopping to discuss interesting parts that they read as they were searching for evidence. Some groups were seen reading to each other as others in the group followed along. Collaboration to solve problems was common during literature circles.

Collaboration led to digging deeper into the text. Collaboration also provided students with both a reason to dig deeper into the text and with new ideas. Sometimes the groups had differing opinions about the text. Sara saw this as an opportunity to “work it out” and a chance to learn from others. “We would talk about our points and the other person’s points and later realize ‘oh, yea, you’re right’ or ‘Oh, I am sorry. We were wrong, and you were right.’” Tim saw the task of proving your opinion so that others will understand your viewpoint as important. “I go back in the text, and I prove if my opinion is correct or not, because people should always have a place in the text to show their opinion.” When he felt like someone in the group was wrong, he would “look back in the book and show them the page” to help justify his assumption.

Students in Sara and Anna’s group each contributed as they summarized the text and worked together to determine the most important events and parts in the text and how they impacted the author’s message. Students in Samuel and Amy’s group worked together as they determined character traits that actually described the character rather than how the other characters felt about her. The group members used text to defend their thinking and compromised on a way to focus on both of the traits identified. Students in Tim’s group supported each other as they discussed the character traits of one of the characters in their book. They shared evidence and descriptions of the characters as one of the group members presented to the class. Earlier, I discussed the ways that

discussion facilitated students in working to understand the text more deeply. In these examples, collaboration is highlighted in that students were building on each other's ideas in order to develop deeper understandings of the text.

Collaboration led to changes over time. Collaboration led to changes in the format of literature circles, as well as individual changes with at least one of the students and the groups. When students began literature circles, they were tasked with being in charge of one role and sharing their role and the responses they discovered as directed by the role during the group discussion. As students began to become more knowledgeable and comfortable with the process, the students were tasked with completing a pamphlet that included components of all of the roles that were taught and used, as well as with answering a few discussion questions or tasks that required the students to think deeply about the text. Anna discussed that she liked to do the pamphlet better than the role sheets, because she liked to do “a little bit of it all, then I can get to do the job that I really want to do and other jobs that I liked.”

In an effort to ensure that all students were getting practice and experience in all components of literature circles, Mrs. Jones thought it was necessary to make some changes and restructure the format used during the literature circles. She stated,

...we changed the way that we structured the literature circles, because they had an individual job in the beginning of the year. I switched it...to make them each do a tiny little piece of each job.... I think it is better, because they interact with all parts of the text- not just the part they were having as their job.

Mrs. Jones felt like the students were more ready for their discussions. “They are much more comfortable, and...it doesn't take them as long to finish, because they are

reading through and thinking about what they need to say. They are much more interested in talking about what's going to happen.”

One of Mrs. Jones's favorite changes was when she was surprised “because the kids who were the most reluctant to start reading are the most excited to finish.” “I have noticed that their discussions are much more mature, because they will say ‘this point of view comes up a lot’ and ‘why does the author say it this way?’.” She was proud of this transformation, because “they will talk about it, and I will think ‘ok, so they are not only looking at the text as a reader but as a writer, too’ - and that made me really happy, because it did not happen before.”

One example of the impact collaboration had on the students was seen with Anna. Throughout the first few observations, I observed Anna doing much more writing than talking or discussing. However, as the observations continued, Anna became more comfortable and open and was even identified by Sara as being the “leader of their group,” because “she brought the group together.” In one of the first observations, Anna wrote independently without sharing her thoughts and ideas with anyone else. When it was her turn to share her role, she read straight from her paper without adding any extra information or thoughts. In one of the latter observations, Anna discussed an important event from her group's book in an animated manner. As they discussed the vacuum cleaner scene, Anna, moving her hands and changing her voice, shared her ideas for the summary. She eagerly answered Sara's question when asked about why he just didn't unplug the vacuum cleaner by explaining that it was multi-terrain. She stated, “that's when Flora looked out the window and said ‘why would someone want to vacuum their front yard.’”

At the beginning of the literature circle experience, she preferred working alone; however, as the process unfolded she began to transform her viewpoint and determined that if given the opportunity to talk to her group about everything she was learning about or reading, she would want to, because “it helps me understand things better.” She even commented, “I think it is fun to work with people.”

Changes were noted in the dynamics of the groups. Sara shared an example as she discussed how her group changed over the course of their literature circle. She spoke of how at first not everyone wanted to talk and share their ideas, but now they do. When asked about the change, she credited her book. “Probably because it was a big, important moment when we read about when Flora found Ulysses when he got kidnapped. So maybe they just wanted to talk more.”

During February and early March observations, students were seen questioning each other while the other group members were looking for evidence to support their thinking and responses for the questions in the text. Other students were writing their responses as they found and shared them. Later in the process, during the latter part of March and April, working with others appeared to lead to deeper thinking and discussions and supporting each other.

Collaboration led to several positive changes throughout the course of the literature circle process. Students became more independent thinkers and learned to trust each other as they became more open and eager to share their ideas. One student expressed concerns about collaboration with peers, but upon further questioning, the concerns proved to be unwarranted. Tim reported that he liked “doing stuff as a group, but the thing is that some people skip over some people and try to get their thing done

with.” He gave an example of what could happen if someone didn’t want another person to take a turn sharing, and they just wanted to rush to their next part. When asked what they would do if that happened, he stated that didn’t happen and that his group would do it the right way. He also discussed concern about embarrassing himself while speaking in front of others, but stated that did not happen, because “I actually didn’t embarrass myself,” as well as the thought that people “would argue and argue and raise their voice to prove their point and also they would yell about my answer is correct and yours is not- which would disrupt the other groups.” He stated that this also did not happen. “We explained to each other although the other person might still disagree.”

In conclusion, students were seen engaged in collaboration as they relied on each other, listened to each other’s thinking, and held each other accountable for work and discussions. The students viewed collaboration as important. It set the tone for deep discussions, shared decision making, appropriate scaffolding, and put in place safety nets for those students who needed extra support. All of the student participants recognized that they benefited from working with others in their group. Each of the participants discussed how they benefited from each other in a different manner and how they supported others throughout the process.

Think Critically

Students engaged in literature circles by thinking critically. Several students and the teacher commented on the idea that literature circles are an avenue for thinking critically and allowing for higher order thinking to occur. They shared how talking about the text and using text evidence led to more critical thinking. Critical thinking often led to disagreements but also to learning from each other and developing a deeper

understanding of comprehension skills. Critical thinking occurred when the students made logical, thought out decisions and questioned each other in a manner that allowed for evidence-based arguments and conclusions to be formed.

Talking about the text led to more critical thinking. As students talked about the text, critical thinking became the basis for the conversations. As the conversations became more in-depth, students were able to understand the author’s message. For Mrs. Jones, literature circles had changed in her classroom over the years. She shared, “They change every year because of the kids, and I am far less concerned with what gets written down and much more concerned with what is said and processed.” She stated that it was necessary for her to have some sort of “tangible” document to assess,

...but the main purpose for me is to hear them discuss the reading so that I know that they have comprehended it. Go a little bit beyond that and go deeper into analyzing the structure of the text, making sure that they understand. How does this compare to a novel that you have read before?

Sara discussed that talking about the text was her favorite part of literature circles, but it also helped her understand the text more. “I liked when we talked about the climax and all that, because it really made us realize what all of it means.” It also helped her determine the author’s message to the reader. She emphasized that talking about the text helped her make sense of the message in *Flora and Ulysses*.

I think the message was...well, I think that she had a lot of messages. People can change. I think that was the main one. People can change, because at first Flora- she was a cynic- she just didn’t really like anything but comics. Then she found Ulysses, and she turned into more of a caring person. Then Mr. Buckham and

Mrs. Buckham were fighting at first, and now they changed and are together again. And Ulysses- Ulysses was just a squirrel, and he didn't really care about anything. Now he just likes the world. At first, he was just like 'I will just die.' He didn't really care; now he cares and is like 'yay- I love Flora' and all of that.

Sara thought that the discussions they had in literature circles were more meaningful than the discussions held during content area instruction, because "in science and social studies and math, the books just tell you. In literature circles, you need to understand it more instead of just reading it out of the text book." She thought that understanding the text and the author's message was critical. She explained,

It is important for you to understand it, because it is better for you to find out for yourself instead of someone just telling you. If someone just tells you, you are like "oh, okay," but when you figure it out, you are like 'ohhh.'

Amy thought that the talk that came from critically thinking about the text was an important element of literature circles. She explained that sometimes her group would be so engrossed in their discussions that some of the group members would lose track of time and not finish part of a task and would have to quickly get it finished. Amy stated that her group would often be one of the groups that "would just keep talking" even though some of the group members had not finished their task, but those discussions often led to a deeper understanding of the text and allowed for students to add or change their preexisting thoughts. "Some people would want to change their idea and say 'oh, that's a good idea' and write that down."

Using text evidence to support their thinking. Thinking critically required students to use text-based evidence to justify their points and what they thought was

important. Mrs. Jones stated that “being in their own groups has also helped them become more independent and really think about where they can find the evidence and where they can find the answers that they don’t know.” Students were observed using these skills to guide their discussions and even to keep other group members on track when necessary.

An example of a time when the students were thinking critically and used text evidence to justify their thinking was during an observation when Amy read a passage to her group from *Tuck Everlasting* and explained that she chose that one because she thought it was important because of how one of the characters actually made a discovery. The group members agreed and stated that it made sense. Amy’s group was discussing the evidence they had from chapter 16 that justified the point they were trying to prove. One of her group members discussed the trust issues that were revealed in the chapter. Another group member pointed out that one of the men planned and schemed; yet somehow the constable still “kind of trusted the man.” Another one of the group members discussed what she would have done if she were the constable; however, as a group, they agreed that they still did not have evidence to support their original assumption. Amy began reading from the text possible pieces of evidence.

Another example of a time when the students were thinking critically and used text evidence to defend their ideas was seen in an early observation during a discussion of *Tuck Everlasting*. Tim’s group was in a deep discussion about how the character was keeping secrets from the world, because if his secret came out his girlfriend would leave him, and he would be alone. One of the group members began to question the group’s assumption and added, “yea, but what if....” The group members began discussing an

aspect of the story where something lasts forever. One of the students discussed the comparisons to the character's life that were made in the text. The group's discussion director added how the man was trying to tell about the springs and how bad they were, but they did not think that anyone understood or knew what they meant.

Thinking critically led to disagreements and learning from each other.

Thinking critically often led to discussions that allowed for students to disagree with each other, but also provided the opportunity for students to explain their thinking. According to Tim, "sometimes we explained to each other, although the other person might still disagree."

Sara felt like her group learned from each other and that she taught them something new. "I taught them something new. First, I thought the climax should be one thing, then it took me awhile to realize that it could be two things that make up the climax instead of just one thing." Amy also saw her group learning from each other. They were able to come up with different points or ideas or understand the author's message or point of view better. In an interview, Amy agreed that disagreements supported her learning. She said,

Sometimes, I would be like 'oh, I never thought of that,' because it will be a new idea, because I would have thought one way about it, but I am open to any idea- I just didn't think of that. I think that a bunch of people got different ideas from each other.

Thinking critically led to an understanding of comprehension skills.

Thinking critically helped students understand and apply comprehension skills they were

learning in class. Sara discussed that she was learning a great deal with her group in literature circles. She explained,

I am learning how to summarize the passage; how to find words- words that I don't know; and figurative language and what it means. I am also learning how to get important information down- kind of like summarizing but a little different.

Tim stated that thinking about the important events helped him “understand the author’s message the best- where we wrote at least three important events.”

Mrs. Jones emphasized the impact that the author’s craft and message had on the group discussions. The groups spent time questioning each other on why “the author told this part of the story about this character and why this chapter is longer and why this chapter included illustrations.” She also pointed out that literature circles served as an avenue for preparing students to think critically which will transfer to state assessments. “The skills that I teach them using good reading techniques will allow them to answer the test questions.... They understand the concept of what is the answer to this question and what evidence can you use to back that up.” For example, Mrs. Jones discussed having conversations with her students about questions that asked the students to prove their thinking. She stated that she will tell the students “don’t tell me unless you can go back in the text and find evidence to support your theory.” Literature circles have served as a venue for teaching students to find their evidence and support their thinking and opinions through text, and “that alone has been really beneficial for them, because they understand it on a much deeper level.”

Literature circles encouraged critical thinking by providing students with the opportunity to talk about what they were reading, which helped to deepen their thinking

about the text. They called for the students to understand the text in such a manner that allowed them to disagree with other group members but also to learn from them.

Students were able to make logical claims and support them with evidence.

In conclusion, students engaged in the literature circle process by participating in discussions, by participating in purposeful collaboration, and by thinking critically.

Students were learning to think critically by talking about the text, using evidence to support their thinking, disagreeing and learning from each other, and learning to use and apply comprehension skills learned in class.

Section Three: Research Question Two

What instructional practices contribute to the level of engagement that is experienced by the students during literature circles? In Particular, how do students use role sheets during the reading and discussion of the text to help them through the literature circle process? To answer this question, I will begin by discussing the four themes that demonstrated instructional practices that Mrs. Jones put in place that contributed to the level of engagement that was experienced by the students during literature circles. These included purposeful tasks and learning; choice; questioning; argumentative reading and writing; and role sheets. Next, I will address how role sheets allowed for conversation scaffold, explicit skill practice, and an association with deeper meanings of the text. I will conclude the chapter by discussing the tradeoff or downside to using role sheets.

Purposeful Tasks and Learning

Mrs. Jones promoted student engagement during literature circles by ensuring that the tasks were purposeful and led to deeper learning of the standards addressed in class. Several students and the teacher commented on the idea that literature circles were an avenue for purposeful learning. One of the ways the tasks were purposeful was that she provided students with an opportunity to practice or reinforce skills learned as a whole group. According to Mrs. Jones, students were able to get “independent practice on things that we have done as a whole group, and they hold each other accountable.” The tasks were purposeful by ensuring that there were connections among what the students were learning about in class, using evidence to support claims and interact with the text, providing individualized learning, and providing students with assignments that led to deeper understandings of the text.

Every task had a purpose. Every task had a purpose, and the students were aware of the purpose so that they were able to understand the importance of the task and what they would gain from it. Mrs. Jones informed, “They have to be done with purpose. You can’t just give a group of four kids a book and say go.... I think they have to be a piece of a larger puzzle.”

Mrs. Jones made each task purposeful. She made sure that the students knew what the task was, and she made sure that she took the time to explain the purpose to the students so that they would understand the importance of it. In one observation, she told a group that when you share the character trait, you have to have evidence from the text to back up and defend your thinking. In another observation, Mrs. Jones explained to the discussion directors the importance of giving each other enough time to think about the

question asked and enough time to answer and discuss their thinking. She reminded the students how she gives the group time to think by themselves then talk about their thinking, because when they immediately start talking their brains don't have enough time to think and get their thoughts together.

Tim understood the purpose for justifying his thoughts. "I go back in the text, and I prove if my opinion is correct or not. People should always have a place in the text to show their opinion." Samuel also spoke on this. He stated that "you have to have evidence for your opinion." He also saw the purpose of working in groups. He said, "We work as a team. We go and look for the pages for the important events and stuff like that." He mentioned that they always had a purpose. "We help each other, and if we have a problem, we solve it as a team."

Students were not only able to see the tasks as purposeful, but they were also able to see the purpose in the author's choices, which led to deeper understanding of the author's message. Amy shared her thoughts on *Jake and Lily* and how the author was purposeful in the perspective from which he wrote the book. "I liked the book and that it showed two different perspectives- from Jake and Lily- and then in some parts from both of them. The author would show how they both felt at the same time. Sometimes it would show what they were doing, and so, I thought it was really interesting the way the author set up the book."

When the tasks were purposeful and students valued the purpose, true learning and authentic literacy were prevalent. Because the tasks were purposeful, they were viewed as important and worthy of completing with full effort. Because purposeful

learning surrounded the students, they were able to see the purpose in the author's craft, word choice, and how it impacted the central message.

Connection to standards students were addressing in class. Mrs. Jones made literature circles purposeful by connecting them to what the students were learning in class. Students were able to see the connection between what they were learning through direct teacher instruction and what they were doing in their literature circle groups. Mrs. Jones informed me that she encouraged her students to use their reader's notebooks throughout the day as they were discussing different aspects of the text. She also stated that "being on their own in the groups has also helped them become more independent and really think about where they can find the evidence and where they can find the answers they don't know." By ensuring that there was a connection between what the students were learning in class and what they were reading, students were more engaged in the group discussions and their texts. This engagement helped the students understand the characters more deeply which led to conversations about the characters' traits. Mrs. Jones reinforced understanding how a character's traits impact the events in a story through literature circles.

Their understanding of the characters based on what I taught them in second nine weeks to now is amazing, because they are really treating the characters like real people. 'I don't think they would do this' and 'what if they were in this situation' - they actually talk about them like they are real people.

According to the pamphlet document, students created a plot diagram to determine how the characters impacted the most important events in the story. Mrs. Jones discussed that they used text evidence to help determine the inciting incident. "We

had a heated discussion about what really caused the story to happen. Which one is your inciting incident, and how do you know?”

Mrs. Jones made an effort to connect what they were learning in social studies to the text they were reading in literature circles. “I will pair nonfiction that goes along with my novel. Right now we are learning about Ponce deLeon and the Fountain of Youth, and they all gasped,” because they were able to connect what they were learning about in one subject with what they were reading in literature circles. This helped the text and the setting make more sense to them. Mrs. Jones continued by explaining that they usually cover,

...summarizing, vocabulary and learning from context, inferring information, foreshadowing, making predictions- this is what I think is going to happen and this is why and then what the author is doing- not necessarily author’s purpose, but rather why did they choose this word and not this word.

She added that they also discussed, “How does the point of view change or how would first person be different from the third person in this section?” Whatever skills were taught that can be addressed in the particular texts were reinforced as much as possible.

Facilitated the curriculum. Literature circles easily facilitated the curriculum. Mrs. Jones shared that “literature circles help me cover most of the standards for reading literature, for speaking and listening, and even some of the writing.” She commented that she hasn’t tried them in the content areas yet, but she could see how they could be “used to cover standards for reading informational texts.” Anna discussed what she was learning about in their groups. She said that they were learning to “find words we don’t

know or think anybody else in our group knows.” They summarized what they read and wrote their own questions, as well as used some of the questions that Mrs. Jones gave them. Anna explained, “You write down passages from what you read that you think are most important, then on the back you pick one and draw it out.” Sara stated that literature circles “made me understand the book more talking with another person than just thinking thoughts in my head.”

Mrs. Jones indicated that there were several reasons why she used literature circles in her classroom. She said that:

It gives students choice. I can bring in a range of similar novels. I can have several different books that are the same genre, and they can choose their top three. I can pick it for them based on their ability level, and it gives them a chance to have choice, which makes them want to read it more. The other reason is I can get them independent practice on things that we have done as a whole group, and they hold each other accountable-which is nice. The biggest reason to me is they need to have those conversations, because that is building skills they are going to need in the workplace and in their lives in general. They are using information that they read in the text to have an academic conversation.

She pointed out that:

...their discussions are much more mature, because they will say ‘this point of view comes up a lot’ and ‘why does the author say it this way.’ They will talk about it, and I will think that they are not only looking at the text as a reader but as a writer, too. That makes me really happy, because it did not happen before.

Mrs. Jones stated that the focus of the literature circles was important. “We always have the vocabulary, the questions, most important event, and summary,” but they also focused on what they were learning about in class. For example, “Right now we did a huge lesson or unit on figurative language, so they are looking for figurative language when they read.” When the focus was on informational text during whole group instruction, “I will pair that along with my novel...,” because she was able to fit the literature circles texts in the curriculum by integrating what the students were learning about in social studies with their texts. She continued with how literature circles facilitated the curriculum by explaining that

We will pull things along, and we’ll look for them, but usually we will cover summarizing, vocabulary and learning from context, inferring information, foreshadowing, making predictions, author’s purpose, and why did the author choose this word and not this word. How does the point of view change or how would first person be different from third person in this section? Whatever skills I have taught we focus on.

Used evidence to support claims and interact with the text. Mrs. Jones made literature circles purposeful by ensuring students used evidence to support claims and interact with the text. Evidence of this was noted on the students’ role sheets and was observed when one of the students in Tim’s group discussed his/her evidence from the text to justify his/her character trait. Mrs. Jones stopped him and asked the class what they heard. It was an allusion to *The Simpsons* and a simile. She modeled for the students what she was visualizing as the group member read the passage.

Students were given practice interacting with different types of texts. Mrs. Jones indicated that the students interacted differently with each text. For example, “like with *Tuck Everlasting*, it’s a lot of decoding- not decoding words- decoding what the figurative language means. You have to understand the rhythm of how the words go in order to determine the overall theme.” For other texts, the students were “inferring, making predictions, figuring out vocabulary from the context.” Sometimes the students were “tying it back to their lives and making it meaningful for themselves.” Sara stated that she read *Flora and Ulysses* in such a manner that allowed her to “really get into it.” She took time to go back and reread- especially when it was “really funny.” Amy expressed that they “got different ideas” about the point of view of the text depending on how they read it.

We would just talk about what we were reading and when we were going over our thing we would say ‘well, I read like this, so I get that point of view’ or because you read it a certain way, you got that idea.

Amy also indicated that she really only liked to talk about what she was reading for certain types of texts. She preferred for the books that she discussed to be ones that challenged her and did not see the need to discuss texts that she already understood with the support of others. Amy said,

If it is more advanced or a really un-understandable book, then I will want to talk about it to help me and the others, because I might get something that they don’t. But, if it is more just straight to the point and easy to understand then usually I really don’t like to discuss it, because you are just going over stuff that you already realized.

She thought that it was only beneficial to talk about the text if “you are going to get something out of it or learn something new or learn to think about things in a different way.”

During an observation, students were determining and discussing character traits to describe one of the characters from their text. Mrs. Jones reminded them that they could not just come up with three character traits; they were expected to “tell us about the character, describe the trait, and prove it with evidence from the text.” They had to have “evidence from the text to back up and defend their thinking.” As the groups worked together determining traits that described the characters that they had chosen from their text, Amy and Samuel’s group was in a particularly intense conversation over whether they should use the character trait “stubborn” or “demanding” to describe Lily from *Jake and Lily*. They looked for examples and evidence of each of the traits in the text. The group came to the conclusion that Lily was more demanding than stubborn.

Individualized learning. Literature circles provided students with an avenue for learning in a manner that was purposeful for each student. Students were able to determine what was important for them to learn by asking questions about the text and using the questions and important details to determine the author’s central message. They were also given opportunities to use strategies they knew would benefit them the most as was noted on some of the groups’ notes, outlines, and sticky notes. Mrs. Jones wanted the students to “pick up the words that were interesting to them.” She encouraged the students to use the text to figure out what they thought a word meant. Samuel stated that he wrote things down to track his thinking. He thought that it helped him remember what he had read and wanted to talk about when he wrote it down. Anna discussed how

she valued the privilege of being able to draw what she read. “It’s a way to let me know what I read. When I draw what I thought about in my brain, it lets me know more what it was about.” When discussing any particular reading strategies that she used to track her thinking as she read, Anna stated that she was “asking myself questions- mostly questions like ‘I wonder what is going to happen next’ or ‘who is this person talking about’ or ‘why would someone want to do that.’ I usually find the answer after I finish reading.”

Assignments led to deeper understanding of the text. Literature circles also had purpose because they helped students better understand the text, which students found meaningful. The assignments were viewed as important to understand the author’s purpose and perspective, as well as the central message of the text. Students knew they were expected to find text evidence to justify all of their ideas, assumptions, and opinions about the characters, plot, and the author’s meaning.

Sara especially valued the task of creating the plot diagram where they discussed the rising action, climax, falling action, and the resolution. She stated that discussing the climax was her favorite thing they talked about, because “it really made us realize what it all means.” She continued as she elaborated further on the importance of understanding the climax. “In literature circles, we are trying to find out what they are saying and what they mean or what a word means. You need to understand it more instead of just reading it out of the text book.” She thought it was especially important for the students to be able to make meaning of the text themselves.

It is important for you to understand it, because it is better for you to find out for yourself instead of someone just telling you. If someone just tells you, you are like ‘oh, okay,’ but when you figure it out, you are like ‘ohhh.’

When asked about the assignments that he did with the book, Tim responded that the “important events one helped me understand the author’s message the best- where we wrote at least three important events.” He discussed how they first used the events to help write a summary of the text but eventually moved towards using the events to help create a plot diagram. Mrs. Jones thought that many of the students were interested in the author’s choice of words and his or her message. She stated that they were also attentive as to why the author chose to tell:

...this part of the story about this child and why this chapter is long and why this one has pictures. Then they will talk to me about the author and will ask if this author has written anything else so that they can read it.

Mrs. Jones ensured that the literature circles provided students with purposeful tasks and learning. This allowed for the literature circles to be viewed as important to each student, as well as a vehicle to reinforce skills that the students were learning throughout the day. When the readings and tasks were purposeful, the students were able to view the process as meaningful and worth the effort and time they were putting into them.

Allowed Choice

Data on literature circles suggested that students were more engaged if they were allowed choices. Mrs. Jones promoted student engagement in literature circles by providing students with choice. In Mrs. Jones’s classroom, students were allowed to make large and small choices. The literature circle process allowed for students to have free choice, limited choice, and structured choice. Although the choices ranged from large, like choosing the book they read, to small, like determining the order they

completed their requirements for their group discussions, these choices provided students with opportunities to have a voice and take part in their own learning. There were three aspects of choice that were important- choice of preselected titles, choice of how to track their thinking, and choice of reading independently or with others.

Choice of preselected titles. Students were allowed to choose the books they wanted to read. Mrs. Jones preselected titles for students to choose from to read during literature circles. As she decided which books she would offer to the students as a choice for literature circles, she gave it much thought. She wanted her students to be engaged with powerful and meaningful literature.

I choose classic texts that I have used with success in the past, like *Bridge to Terabithia*, *Shiloh*, and *Where the Red Fern Grows*. I also like to try new books from great authors, like *Jake and Lily* by Jerry Spinelli. I also talk to my educator peers to find new, well-written pieces of literature that kids will enjoy.

Mrs. Jones preselected a range of books, and students had the opportunity to request or pick their top 3 book choices. Sara shared how they were allowed to select the book they wanted to read.

We did a thing where we read the back of the book and scanned through all of the books, and we wrote a little note that said first book choice, second book choice, and third book choice. *Flora and Ulysses* was my second choice, but it was kind of a tie between my first choice and my second choice.

Sara discussed the importance of choice in the selection of the titles for literature circles. She stated that she would prefer to choose her top choices over being given a title to read by Mrs. Jones even though “I think that she knows what I like better than I do.”

She stated that she would like to select her top choice “because we get to choose.” She also indicated that selecting one’s top favorites “would be good because you actually get to pick instead of her assigning you the book.” Even though Sara didn’t get her first choice, she was still excited to read one of the books that she selected. She shared that her book “was actually my second choice, but I was kind of hoping I would get it, because it was about a squirrel, and I love animals.” Tim did not seem to mind that he might not have gotten his first choice either. When asked if *iFunny* was his first, second, or third choice, he responded, “truthfully, I forgot. . . . but I chose it as one of my choices. I think it was first or second.”

Choice of how to track thinking. Students were given the option to track their thinking in the manner that worked best for each of them. For example, in one of the early observations, one of the students stopped Mrs. Jones as she walked by and asked her if they were supposed to “write it down,” and she reminded the students that they were allowed to collect notes in any manner that best helped them. She reinforced this idea by asking, “What do you think? If writing helps you, that is great. If writing does not help you, then you do not have to write it down.”

Sara decided that she could keep up with her thinking or collect information best by writing. She explained that she preferred “writing it all down as I was going. I would be like ‘huh. . . maybe I will just mark that or remember that.’” There were a few times that she decided that it wasn’t necessary for her to write down why something was important to her, so she would just “mark it.” “Marking it” allowed her to place a reminder in the text indicating that part was important to her. “I would say it was

important to me when we were sharing.” I would say ‘this was important to me, because dah, dah, dah, but I wouldn’t really write that down.’”

As I observed, I noticed that some of the groups chose to write first then discuss and other groups chose to discuss first then write. Some of the groups liked to write while they were discussing. Sara stated that her group would do “both at the same time. We would write down things that we didn’t know and discuss at the same time.” She elaborated by clarifying why she thought her group chose to participate in this manner.

I think that we thought that it would be easier, because if we discuss first and then write all the stuff down- well, if you write all the stuff down, how would you really get into it? If you write it down and then discuss it- I guess that would be fine, we just didn’t want to do it that way.

Samuel stated that whenever he was reading and found something that he liked or wanted to remember, he would “write it down. If I like it, I write it down. If it’s interesting, write it down.” Anna stated that they don’t have to take notes, but if she could not remember a word, she said she would “put it on a sticky note and mark our spot, but we don’t have to.” She explained her strategy by stating that she usually doesn’t:

...pull out a piece of paper, but sometimes I will write down some things that I find interesting; or, I will take the paper that we are supposed to write on, and I will turn it over to the back and will make a rough draft of what I wanted to say.

Choice of reading independently or with others. Mrs. Jones allowed students to decide whether they would like to read the text independently or with a partner in a small group. She discussed the fact that she had a couple of students that were not good

readers and a couple that had a hard time focusing, so if they had a partner to read with them, they focused better. She expressed that:

I gave them the option and said if you want to read along with someone then you may. I have some kids that are like ‘I can’t listen to someone else read; I have to read it myself.’ That is completely up to them; it is their choice. There are days when my independent readers want to read with a friend, because this is a really funny part, and I want to read it with a partner.

Amy preferred reading independently. She shared, “Mrs. Jones lets us have a choice...she will let us read and do that together or by ourselves. I personally like to read by myself;” however, she preferred to work on the tasks with others, “because I am not really good at staying focused, and so, that helps me make sure that I am not getting off task.” On the other hand, Seth preferred reading with others. He stated that one of his favorite parts of the literature circle process was getting to read with others.

Expectations within choices. The students had expectations that were given by Mrs. Jones; however, there was still choice within those expectations. Anna stated that the group had certain responsibilities that they had to get done; however, there was some leeway in what and how they discussed. She said,

...pretty much we talk about what is on our pamphlet and what we read, because we all read the same book- well my group does. We have bookmarks with what page we need to stop on and when our stuff is due. Then we talk about what we are reading.

Anna continued,

We have a box of sticky notes and we take one if we find a word or a passage that we like or are important to us or something that we would want to use in our summary. We just-at the end-pull out all of the sticky notes and write down what we have or what we were thinking. That's how I keep up with it. I don't know how other people's brains work. Like how they would think about it.

Mrs. Jones indicated that she didn't "dictate the conversation structure." She said "go through your packet and make sure that everybody gets to share." She gave them a suggestion for how to structure their conversations before, but stated that she doesn't:

...want to hinder those that can come up with the structure on their own. My feeling it out as they were going was to let them decide on the structure of the situation.... I think you let them do it, and then you scaffold them if you need to.

The aspect of choice appeared to be more important to the students than what they actually got to read. The students did not seem to mind that they might not have gotten their first choice to read, but were excited to have the option available to them which promoted their interest and engagement. Several of the students shared that they were allowed choice in the manner they tracked their thinking and discussed what they read. The students were aware of their expectations but also knew they could work together with their group to determine the manner in which they wanted to address these responsibilities. Because of the elements of choice throughout each stage of the literature circle process, students did not seem to mind the tasks and were engaged throughout the process.

Guided by Questions

Students were engaged in literature circles by participating in reading, thinking, and tasks that were guided by questions. These questions promoted deep discussions and allowed for transfer of learning throughout the day. By asking guiding and thought-provoking questions, deeper thinking and deeper conversations were present throughout the literature circle cycles. As the students' ability to ask thoughtful questions improved, their conversations became deeper and more text-based.

Thoughtful questions guided deep discussions. Productive discussions began with thought-provoking questions. They helped initiate deep thinking and text-based discussions. Amy explained that they have “questions that talk about the book and make us think and try and understand what it’s saying. We have to explain, find an answer for those questions, and find evidence in the book,” so they were able to “explain why we think the way that we think.” She also noted,

Whenever we are having to answer questions as a group, we go back and look for a specific part, because we have to find evidence if we are going to answer the question. We have to prove it if we are going to give the answer, so we have to go back and discuss that part to make sure that everyone agrees. Sometimes we will just be talking about a part that we recognize that has something to do with a different part or we thought that might have something to do in the future. We just do a little bit of it all.

Guiding questions allowed students to use comprehension strategies as they read. For example, Amy discussed how they made and clarified predictions and monitored their reading using guiding questions as their lead for this type of thinking.

We did it mainly in literature circles for the discussion questions. ‘I think this is going to happen.’ ‘What is going on right now?’ Sometimes we would refer to past things that have happened in the book to make a point and say ‘well this happened, so we know that could have happened.’

Samuel saw his role of providing questions as important and as a way to support the others in his group. Samuel thought that he helped his classmates during literature circles by “giving them questions,” and then, by helping them “go back in the book and find the answers.” Not only did the students use the questions to support other’s thinking, but they also saw asking questions as fun. They enjoyed the conversations that developed from the questions. Amy added that this was one of her favorite parts of literature circles. She said,

You write down two discussion questions and your opinion. I like that, because then you could ask, and it would start a discussion over who thinks what and we will get deeper into the meaning of the part that we read.

Several of the students discussed how the questions they came up with helped others, but Anna spoke of how the questions that the others in her group asked helped her understand the text more deeply. Anna shared that the questions the others came up with helped her to understand aspects of the text that were confusing to her. She stated that they came up with questions themselves,

...then we try to get answers. For example, if I was looking through it, and I couldn’t find anything but someone else might know so then I can ask them the question, and they can answer me- then I will know.

Anna continued, “Somebody might understand what I didn’t understand. I write down the page number and . . . what I think it means from context then figurative language.”

During an observation when the students were reading *Tuck Everlasting*, one of the students in Amy’s group asked the question ‘Does the constable trust the man to be honest with him?’ A group member began the discussion by stating that she thought that he was suspicious about him. The group discussed the reason the constable should not trust him. The same group member described to the group what she saw in her mind. The group began to discuss how “creepy” the guy was as he tried to sneak up on people and wanted to know everything they were talking about. Amy added to the discussion about how he wanted to know where the water was. This lead into the discussion of how the Fosters did not know anything except that their little girl was gone. A group member directed the group to find their evidence for their thinking for the question. The group began to read the book looking for their evidence. They reminded each other of what they were looking for by recapping their conversation. As they were searching for evidence, one of the group members noticed something in the text; they stopped and began discussing how the man knew what he was doing and had everything planned out.

Another example in a February observation occurred when Tim’s group was reading in *Tuck Everlasting* to justify a thought. One student explained his thought and had the students connect what they were reading to what happens in the movies. The other group members “got” his point and agreed by stating “that makes sense now.” One of the group members stated that basically the man in the yellow suit knew how, because he was spying on them. He then said, “One question- why would he be spying on them?”

Another group member responded, “Maybe he wanted to own the wood so that he could live forever.” The group discussed this question.

During that same observation, as the discussion director led Samuel’s group, he asked what caused the boat to get stuck. One of the group members gave an answer and the other two nodded their heads as though they agreed, but they all picked up their books and began looking for the evidence to justify the response. The student who answered the question originally read the evidence from the text. The discussion director asked another question. All of the students shared their responses. In Anna’s group, one of the students read a question aloud to the others. One of the group members started to write while the others picked up their books to begin looking for their responses.

Student- and teacher-developed questions were seen to guide the students’ thinking and discussions. These questions helped students learn from each other and understand the text in such a manner that allowed them to have text-based discussions. Allowing students to learn to question themselves and others encouraged self-monitoring. The ability to transfer this skill helped the students question and understand material in other subjects more deeply.

Literature Circles Fostered Argumentative Reading and Writing

Students engaged in literature circles by reading text and writing about it argumentatively. The students read the text with the intentions of interpreting the author’s meaning; questioning his or her ideas, as well as their own assumptions about the text; and expanding their own arguments. Several students and the teacher discussed their experiences with reading and writing during literature circles and how the argumentative reading led to deep discussions and increased interest in the text.

Argumentative reading and writing provided students with opportunities to think deeper about the text and provided students with interactions with the text.

Argumentative reading led to discussions. Argumentative reading led to deeper discussions. Students were able to justify their thoughts and assumptions about the text. An example of this was seen in a later observation when Amy and Samuel's group was working on the assignment to identify character traits of a character. They were observed spending time reading through the text and writing down the page number and paragraph information for their evidence. As they were reading and thinking, some of the other group members came up with more words they could use as traits to describe the character, Lily, from their book, such as "energetic." One of the group members reminded them that they did not write that trait down, and they should focus on the traits they had already selected, such as "restless" and "stubborn." Another group member got frustrated because she could not remember where the group "got restless from." The other group members began to discuss how Lily was restless, and they all began searching for the evidence with her as they continued to discuss.

The group moved on to the word "stubborn." They found examples of how Lily was stubborn in the text. One of the group members reminded the group that they have to find the details in the book and write down how those details described how the character was stubborn. "You have to prove it and have the evidence." While one of the other group members was looking for examples that would help explain that Lily was stubborn, she looked up and said, "Demanding! Demanding!" The group agreed, and they began to discuss how she was demanding. The group member reread what they had written on

their sheet to the group. The group was satisfied with their findings and began discussing character traits of Jake.

In another example, Samuel talked about how they determined what to discuss based on what they had read and what was important in the text. He said, “Like if it is a very important event- like something that changes the story around or changes the story a bit- if it is something like that- then we know it’s important to discuss.” Sara also shared how her group really enjoyed talking about the book because there were so many important parts and things to talk about in the book.

Argumentative reading increased interest in the text. Argumentative reading increased the students’ interest in the text. Because they understood it more deeply, they were eager to continue reading and sharing their thoughts with others. Tim discussed that reading had gotten him more interested in his book. He was even planning on reading the sequel to his book as soon as he was finished. He was anxious to discuss what he just read that was happening in his book. Tim said, “In the book I got, the main character is telling something personal about his life that he told no one else except a very good friend to him.” He continued, “The main character, Jamie Grimm, told a girl named Suzie about how he got in the wheelchair. It happened when he and his family were driving a car and they wrecked. He was the only one who actually survived.” Tim stated that this reading led to a deep conversation in his literature circle group. “We said that it was sad how his family died. We didn’t even know Jamie had a sister.” He stated that the group was shocked and that they did not find out about this until “he was explaining to Suzie about what happened.”

Argumentative reading and writing led to deeper thinking. Argumentative reading and writing led to deeper thinking. Anna shared that reading the books and illustrating her thoughts was “a way to let me know what I read, and when I draw what I thought about in my brain- when that happens, it lets me know more about what it was about.” She discussed that she used certain reading strategies while she was reading to help track her thinking. Anna said,

I am usually asking myself questions like ‘I wonder what is going to happen next.’ or ‘Who is this person she is talking about?’ or ‘Why would somebody want to do that?’ I usually find the answer after I finish reading.

She stated that when she asked herself a question as she was reading, she would “read it over one or two times more to make sure that I really know what it is talking about. Then, I will keep going.” She also stated that she had to make inferences “a lot” when she is reading, “because sometimes it doesn’t explain, and then I have to guess why they did it.”

Amy thought that different individuals reading the same text with different perspectives allowed the groups to get different ideas about the book. She stated,

When we were going over our thing, we would say, ‘Well, I read this like this, so I get that point of view,’ or it’s like because you read like this, you got this idea. We got different ideas from our point of view because of our different reading styles.

She also commented, “I think that understanding different ways of reading helped us better in writing, because when we were discovering different ways of writing, I think that it helped us so that we could become better writers.”

Interaction with the text. The students interacted with the text in multiple ways throughout the literature circle process. Mrs. Jones discussed the different ways her students interacted with the text during literature circles. She said that it:

depends on the text. Like with *Tuck Everlasting*, it's a lot of decoding- not decoding words- decoding what the figurative language means. Understanding the rhythm of how the words go; getting the overall theme, inferring, making predictions, figuring out vocabulary from context.... They talk about what could the author have meant or why would they use this word, and then just tying it back to their lives and making it meaningful for themselves.

She believed that the literature circles provided a safe setting for students to learn how to interact with the text and become confident in their individual ways this occurred. It provided them with a setting to practice and use this skill. Mrs. Jones stated, "They are going to interact with it differently, but it allows them to do it in a safe setting." They were able to interact with the text "on a lot of different academic levels, and they also do it on a personal level."

Students were allowed to interact with the text and record their thinking in the manner that was most beneficial to them. Some groups were observed writing independently then coming together to share their thoughts while other groups were observed writing together as they talked through their thoughts. In an early observation, Anna's group was seen each writing independently. Two of the group members were writing in paragraph form, and another one of the students was seen creating a chart and adding information to it. In a later observation, Sara and Anna's group was writing together. Sara asked Anna to read what they had written so far. She asked her to reread

the last part again. Sara contributed to that part and added the next sentence. The group liked it, so Anna added it to their summary. Anna read the completed sections of the summary they wrote together. She pointed out that she added a question mark at the end of the sentence after the word ‘yard,’ so that the reader would know that Flora was questioning the action. She made sure that the group saw and agreed with the use of this punctuation mark; she read the sentence again, reading it as a question.

Samuel stated that when he was reading and came across something that he really liked, he would “write it down. If you like it, you write it down. If it is interesting, you write it down.” Tim also thought that it was important to write down what he was thinking and about what he wanted to talk. “There are ways that I could just write down what I want to say...and draw a picture....” Sara added that when she was reading and needed to keep up with her thinking or collect information, she “would write it all down as I was going. I would go back and say that ‘I remember that being there.’” Anna stated that when she collected her information she “doesn’t usually pull out a piece of paper, but sometimes I will write down some things that I find interesting, or I will take the paper that we are supposed to write on, and I will turn it over to the back and will make a rough draft of what I wanted to say.” She saw it necessary to record her thinking in some manner, because “I don’t think that I could have ever memorized all of the questions that I had and my answers plus the words and definitions. I would forget something.”

Amy thought that the best way to collect information was to write it down; however, she had a more difficult time with this task than the others did. “I think the way that works best is by putting it down on paper, but the only problem is that sometimes it is harder for me to put my thoughts down on paper. I am not really sure why; I like

writing it down. It's just that before I do that, I like to discuss it so that I can get my ideas and make sure that I understand my ideas of what is going on.”

Argumentative reading and writing led to deeper discussions, deeper understanding of the meaning of the text, deeper thinking, and an increased interest and interaction with the text. Students were seen making the text meaningful to each of them on an individual basis and learning how to read and write about the text in such a way that caused them to think deeper.

Roles Sheets Served as a Tool to Scaffold Conversations and Learning

The role sheets students used during literature circles served as a guide for scaffolding conversations. They were used as a safety net for students, a guide for preparing for meetings, and an outline or guide for their thinking and discussions.

Using role sheets to prepare for conversations. Mrs. Jones spent time preparing students to use role sheets during literature circles. They were used to help students prepare for discussions by providing extra support as they read and determined what was important to focus on as they talked with their group members. I observed two cycles of literature circles. For the first cycle and for a few weeks of the second cycle, students used role sheets. Mrs. Jones valued role sheets. She discussed how and why she used these. She stated that she liked:

...to have a plan for my reluctant, less able readers. If they know exactly what they need to have complete before coming to a meeting, it helps them succeed. I find that roles and the role sheets are not a script, but more similar to an outline or notes. Students can refer back to the information but can add to the conversation if needed.

In order for roles to be used effectively in the classroom, time and preparation was spent preparing students to use the roles. Mrs. Jones explained that she had to teach her students the roles and how to use them before she could expect the students to have successful groups. Mrs. Jones modeled the roles then had the students practice the roles in small groups and present their roles to the class in an effort to allow students to become comfortable with each role and the literature circle process. She took time to stress strategies she wanted them to use when they were using role sheets.

In an early observation, Mrs. Jones was observed explicitly explaining to the group how important it was for the discussion director to give each person enough time to think about the question asked and enough time to answer and discuss his/her thinking. She reminded the students how she gave the class time to think by themselves then talk about their thinking. She explained the purpose of this to the group by elaborating on how when they immediately start talking their brains do not have time to think and they cannot get their thoughts together.

Mrs. Jones continued to elaborate on the impact role sheets had during literature circles, as well as how the students interacted with them. “Each week they have a new job, and it’s pretty involved.” For example, each of the sheets had:

...a specific date and a certain number of pages and a certain number of chapters that they have to read, and that’s their week to be Word Wizard. The next week they have a different section, but they are in charge and have to ask the questions.

She went on to explain, “I tend to be kind of open about what they are doing in their groups, because it is not about me checking their work. It’s about them having prepared for their group.”

The role sheets served as a guide for preparing for literature circle discussions.

Anna stated,

Mrs. Jones printed off these colored papers that tell us what we need to do. I am the Word Wizard right now.... It will tell me everything that I have to do and who I need to go talk to step by step.

She thought they were helpful,

...because sometimes while the teacher is giving directions, I will be trying to prepare myself for what she is asking me to do for the first part, and I don't hear the last part. I think it is better to have those sheets, and then I can be like 'oh, she told me to do this.'

Anna discussed how the sheets served as a guide for her group's conversation.

When having conversations in our group,

...we have to look on our paper, and we will say what we have written down. It goes in a certain order in our circle. Sometimes, if there is a question, the summarizers will write down the questions, and we use the books to find the answers.

Amy thought that using the role sheets made the discussion "just a little bit easier to do instead of just discussing it." She especially enjoyed when they had:

...the discussion questions on the front or you write down two discussion questions and your opinion. I liked that, because then you could ask a question, and it would start a discussion over who thinks what and we will get deeper into the meaning of the part that we read.

Role sheets provided students with the support they needed to be prepared for literature circle discussions, as well as helped them focus on the strategies of each role.

Structure of group discussions. The role sheets served as a path for ensuring that everyone in the group had an opportunity to contribute to the group discussion. They also allowed for choice when deciding what was important to share and how to share. Mrs. Jones stated, “I don’t dictate the conversation structure. I say ‘go through your packet and make sure that everybody gets to share.’” Mrs. Jones said that she had given suggestions before on the structure of the conversations, but she doesn’t,

...want to hinder those that can come up with the structure on their own. My feelings are that they should decide on the structure of the conversation, because they are the ones that are doing it.... That is a learning process, so I don’t feel like you have to say do these five things in order. I think you let them do it, and you scaffold them if you need to.

Anna stated that she was able to use her role sheets to help her during discussion time. She explained,

I don’t think that I could have ever memorized all of the questions that I had and my answers plus the words and definitions. I would forget something, and nobody would have been able to see my pictures that I drew if they hadn’t have had the role sheets.

Tim thought that the role sheets also helped them to pay attention to the text as they read. “If we didn’t have the sheets, we would just read the book and not really pay attention, because you know that some kids like to read the book and just get it over with.” Sara said that the role sheets:

...help me lot actually. They help me to understand the book in general. They keep me on track and help me with the discussions. We look at our paper and share our work or words or figurative language or our summaries or our questions we had.

Although role sheets were not used after students were trained and comfortable with discussing the text, they still served as a tool to “keep the conversation going.” In an April observation, the students had completed their tasks and appeared to be at a ‘stand-still,’ so one of the students in the group grabbed the group’s yellow folder and pulled out the role description sheets and passed one out to each group member. They used these sheets as a guide to rekindle the group’s discussion. They immediately began filling out the blank role sheets. After everyone had several minutes to complete the role sheets, they began with the Word Wizard. One of the students discussed a couple of the words that she did not know, what she thought they meant, and the context she used to determine the words’ meanings. The other group members took turns sharing new words they found and what they discovered that they meant.

Using skills from role sheets throughout the day. Students were able to use and apply the skills addressed on the role sheets throughout the instructional day. Amy discussed how she internalized the skills focused on the role sheets and transferred that to help her to make sense of what she was reading throughout the day. She thought about how she was able to use some of the practices they used with the role sheets even when they did not have the sheets to use as a guide.

It depended on what I was reading. If I was reading more stuff that was easier to understand- like straight on stuff that was happening- I wasn’t really using the

skills, but when it was just like something weird was happening, then it would just be weird. I would start being like ‘what is happening.’ I like that you can write out that on paper and discuss how you felt about certain parts.

In an early observation, Amy’s group was using their role sheets as they discussed the book. They used the role sheets to help incorporate other skills that were addressed outside of literature circles to add to their conversation. One of the students shared what she wrote as a word that she did not know. She also added that the word was part of an idiom and had everyone turn to page 64 to discuss this passage. She moved on to the next finding and gave the group a little background knowledge about the tree of life then read the metaphor that she selected.

Mrs. Jones shared how they used what they were learning in literature circles throughout the day.

It’s not a literature circle; it’s a close reading group, but it’s the same thing. I give them questions; they discuss them; they find their evidence; then they write. I have so many kids that want to go and find the information and copy it verbatim. We talk about how if you are really answering the question from your brain, you are going to use the information and change it into your own words, and you are going to put it out there.

Role sheets served as a conversation tool to help guide their group discussions. They gave the students talking and thinking points and helped keep them on track and focused on the text. They helped ensure that students were ready for group meetings with their thoughts, notes, and text-based evidence.

Roles Sheets Allowed for Explicit Skill Practice

Using role sheets during literature circles allowed Mrs. Jones to provide the students extra practice with using the skills they were learning in class, as well as with completing the task required by each of the roles. The role sheets exhibited that the students were given opportunities to practice providing evidence to justify their ideas, as well as served as a tool for tracking their thinking. Mrs. Jones felt like role sheets allowed teachers to “place skills on their small groups that will make them grow but will also allow them to have the interactions that are reinforcing what they need to be doing all throughout the day.”

Mrs. Jones explained that she used *Island of the Blue Dolphins* to teach students the roles, but she used *Tuck Everlasting* when she started the independent literature circle groups.

Tuck Everlasting has a lot more figurative language, so it’s difficult. The Lexile is not high, but it’s a difficult book to understand, and so, we are taking it one chapter at a time. We’re asking questions. We’re inferring. We are trying to figure out the language and how Babbit structures her sentences.

Mrs. Jones made sure that the literature circle roles the students were working with reinforced the skills she thought were necessary for comprehending the text. Sara said,

On our role sheets, we had to ask questions and answer them, then we had to figure out words that we didn’t know or that someone else might not know and write them down. We got to find figurative language and draw out important parts of the book, and we got to write down important things.

Amy thought that the role sheets allowed her “to practice each thing over and over.” This allowed for reinforcement of skills and standards. After the students were comfortable using the role sheets, Mrs. Jones had her class complete a “pamphlet” that included a portion of all of the skills from each of the role sheets. Amy stated that she “liked doing all the roles together, then we could practice more and get more experience doing all of them throughout the year. It’s not just leaping straight into one and not really getting anywhere with another one.” Amy felt like she benefited and learned more by getting to practice all of the roles rather than focusing on just one because of the practice and experience she received from working with all of the skills. She liked the idea of being comfortable and familiar with using all of the roles as she read.

Anna also liked doing a little part of each of the roles together, because “then I get to do the job that I really want to do and other jobs that I liked.” Sara also preferred “doing a little bit of all of them.”

Because if you focus on one thing, it wouldn’t really be the same as doing a little bit of all of them. Because if you do a little bit of all of them, you could just be like ‘oh, for figurative language, I think there was a word in there that I didn’t know,’ and you could just figure it out from there. With the illustrator, you would need to have an important event, so you would just look at your important events and go ‘maybe I will illustrate that one,’ and then go back and illustrate it, but you would not be able to practice doing all of them.

Role sheets provided students with the opportunity to practice the skills that good readers use as they read and that they were learning to use in whole-group instruction.

Mrs. Jones made sure that students were comfortable using the role sheets and they understood the value of them.

Role sheets required students to provide evidence. Roles sheets required students to provide evidence, which turned into a habit for the students. Mrs. Jones said, “Really being on their own in the groups has helped them become more independent and really think about where they can find the evidence and where they can find the answers that they don’t know.”

Anna shared that they wrote down what was important to them from the story and shared what they read and what was important to them from the text. She thought this was important, because “somebody might understand what I didn’t understand.” She explained that when she was looking for new words that she would “write down the page number and the definition of what I think it means from context then figurative language” so that she was able to provide evidence while she was discussing her role. She went on to discuss that the goal was not to have to look up the definition in a dictionary but rather to learn to use context clues.

In an observation, Amy’s group was sharing the words that they found that were new or unfamiliar to them. As each of the group members shared his/her words, such as “envious” and “amiss,” he/she included the context from which he/she came across the word. The group used the context to help determine what the word meant. For several of the words, the students had to refer to the passage rather than the sentence from which the word came to determine the word’s meaning. Students spent much time focused on providing evidence to justify their ideas and opinions. It was the topic of much of the interview conversations. After reviewing the role sheets, it was noted that they were used

to prepare students for citing evidence by providing students with thinking points and providing a guide for thinking about what unfamiliar words meant.

Role sheets were used as a tool for tracking thinking. Role sheets served as a tool to help students track their thinking. Samuel stated that the role sheets helped him track his thinking, because it was somewhere that he could:

...write it down. We have this little pamphlet, and it says ‘words you don’t know,’ ‘important events,’ and you get to draw a picture. Then you draw important events like the main parts of the book, and then words you don’t know, and then figurative language like ‘she was fast as a race car’ - write that down. You have to say what kind of figurative language that is.

Tim also said that he went to certain parts of the packet and added information as he was reading that he needed to remember or think about to help him understand the book. Anna used the role sheets to help her take notes. She discussed her need to “take notes.”

I always like to have this sheet of paper that I am working on now. If I find a word or if I were the summarizer, I would probably just put it on a note, but as a Word Wizard, I just find a word and write it down so that I don’t forget. It’s already there.

Role sheets were used as a tool for explicit skill practice. They were used to reinforce the skills Mrs. Jones thought would best aid their comprehension of the text. She was able to have the students focus on specific skills for which they needed practice. Role sheets served as a tool for assisting students as they defended their thoughts and opinions related to the text. These sheets guided students through text-based discussions

and gave them practice learning how to determine which information was important to use to justify their assumptions. The role sheets served as a tool for students as they tracked their thinking and determined what was important to know and remember. Role sheets allowed the students to process the text and the author's message.

Association with Deeper Meaning of the Text

Role sheets provided students with a tool for making meaning of the text as they read. They were an avenue to practice using the skills students were learning to use in class. The role sheets helped lead students to new thinking and served as a guide for discussions. Students were observed using their role sheets to take notes, as well as referring to them and the descriptions of their task as they read. They jotted notes they took on their role sheets and on sticky notes that were seen on their books, literature circle folders, and role description sheets.

Avenue for using skills of focus in class. After studying the role sheets, it was noted that they provided students with an avenue for using skills of focus in class. Mrs. Jones said, "We always have the vocabulary, the questions, most important event, and summary," as well as a task or role for on what they were working in class. For example, she explained, "Right now we did a huge lesson or unit on figurative language, so they are looking for figurative language when they read." She elaborated on the impact the role sheets had by reinforcing skills she was addressing in class.

We will pull things along, and we'll look for them, but usually we will cover summarizing, vocabulary and learning from context, inferring information, foreshadowing, making predictions, author's purpose, and why did the author choose this word and not this word. How does the point of view change or how

would first person be different from third person in this section? Whatever skills I have taught we focus on.

The roles sheets served as a tool for constant practice of the standards-based skills the students had learned that lead to strong readers.

Mrs. Jones discussed that the structure of literature circles changed as the year progressed so that they were able to interact with more areas of the text.

We had an individual job at the beginning of the year, and I switched it... to make them each do a tiny, little piece of each job. They end up having an individual packet that they have to fill out, and I think it is better, because they interact with all parts of the text- not just the part they were having as a job. So, they are not just looking at the words, and they are not just looking at figurative language or whatever. They are looking at the entire text.

Having students do a little part of each role rather than one role allowed interaction with all parts of the text. She continued,

I think that they are more involved in what the text is saying and less involved in what their job is-which is what my whole point is. I wanted them to read and talk about it. The fact that they all have to come up with questions and everybody has to answer the questions has been beneficial, too, because even my lower readers have questions that they want to ask about the text. If everybody has to answer everyone's questions, then they all get to interact and talk about what they think and predict, as well as how they worked on it.

The tasks on the role sheets were not only used to reinforce skills taught in class, but they were also used to support students as they read multiple genres throughout the

day. Sara used the skills to aid her understanding of readings in other subjects. She was able to transfer the strategies to assist her understanding. Sara stated that she was able to use some of the roles or skills in other subjects throughout the day. “I ... used the important events, so I could sort out what was important and what was just details.”

Leads to new thinking. Role sheets were an avenue for new thinking. Anna explained that the role sheets allowed the students to share what was important to them with their classmates. They learned new information, which allowed for new thinking. Anna stated,

They learn words that they might not know what they mean, and they actually hear what you think was best or something that they didn't really think was that important that could help them. Like they really didn't think about that part, and it also helps them learn what they are reading better when they hear what other people say they think.

Anna added that she specifically learned “lots of new words” that she would try and remember so that she would use them again.

Sara shared that the role sheets allowed for self-questioning which led to understanding. They served as a guide for studying the author's choice of words and for analyzing them.

I would get to write down the questions and answer them myself, and then I would understand it more. The words and the figurative language would make me think ‘okay,’ so that's exaggerated and that's just a sound. I would separate the different categories of the words. The illustrating part was so awesome,

because you would get to illustrate what happened in the book. You got to draw, and could be like 'I think this would happen.'

Role sheets required students to think about the text in ways they were not used to thinking. They helped establish new ways of thinking that helped to develop a deeper understanding of the author's message and perspective.

Guide for discussion. Role sheets served as a guide for discussion and as a conversation starter that lead to deeper discussions about the text. Sometimes the role sheets were used to get the conversation started, but then not referenced again. Sara said that they would start off by using the sheets but then would "get distracted, because the book is so interesting."

In an early observation, students were observed using the role sheets to help them justify their thinking and provide text-based responses. Tim's group was discussing whether the lady in the book died. A student responded and read the last page to justify his response. The discussion director had the other students tell why. He led the discussion by asking several text-based questions such as why the man in the yellow suit stole the horse and how they would feel if they were in Annie's position. As the students in the group answered the questions, the discussion director had the students justify their answers with text.

During this same observation, Samuel's group was observed providing evidence for their thinking and using questions that led to thoughtful responses. Students within the group were seen flipping through the book to find the part in the book that they were discussing. One of the students had the group refer to page 71 and read what the text said about what they were discussing. The students discussed this part and agreed with each

other. The discussion director asked another question about why the character wouldn't want someone to suffer. The group took the lead of this question and began to discuss the character's thinking and rationalization, justifying their responses with the text as directed by the discussion director.

The role sheets supported students as they made meaning of the text and worked to understand the author's message. The students used role sheets to guide their thinking, to guide their search for understanding the text, to practice standards-based skills, and as a guide for discussions. The role sheets kept students on task and allowed students to feel supported as they worked through the text.

Tradeoff or Downside to Using Role Sheets

The students used role sheets as they began literature circles. They were seen as a guide and a tool for discussions; however, the role sheets were also perceived by the participants as a distraction, a limitation to their conversations, and an interference with authentic literacy during the literature circles. They were seen to restrict the student's focus while reading the text to one skill and prevented students from talking about what was interesting to them.

Conversation distraction. At times, role sheets distracted the students from meaningful conversations. Mrs. Jones discussed that role sheets were something hands-on that students could use to help process their thinking as they read, as well as a tool for teachers to have something "tangible" and "to grade" after the students had spent time reading and working in their literature circle groups. Mrs. Jones shared that her literature circles have:

...changed every year because of the kids, and I am far less concerned with what gets written down and much more concerned with what is said and processed. I think that is really hard- especially for younger teachers, because they want something tangible. I do check it, and I do ask them to file it in their binder.... The main purpose for me is to hear them discuss the reading so that I know that they have comprehended it.

Mrs. Jones stated that she stopped using the role sheets:

...the day that I sat with them, and we were going around the circle and talking about the roles. One group in particular that was all boys were staring off into space and looking off.... This group... was too busy filling out their own sheets or worrying about what their friends were doing in other groups. They weren't paying attention to what that child was saying and were missing aspects of the book. So, if I found figurative language or if I found something that was interesting or if the words were interesting to me, and you don't listen, what's the point?

Mrs. Jones added that she doesn't "think the role sheet are bad. I just think that it depends on your group of kids. Next year, I am going to start with the roles again." She continued by explaining that she used the sheet to train the students to participate in the literature circles and what to look for as they are reading.

Restricted focus to one skill. At times, role sheets restricted the focus to one skill rather than the text as a whole. Amy deliberated on the roles for which she was in charge when she was learning to participate in literature circles. She explained that the students were in charge of a role for their group and would get practice in that role;

however, she thought that focusing on one role did not allow the students to practice all of the skills that were reinforced by the roles and kept them from keeping track of their thinking. Amy said,

One was actually every week. We would just randomly get a role... Each week one of us would get something and then you couldn't redo that thing that you had already done. But doing it that way wasn't as accurate as we do it now, because you don't get to practice it, and you don't really keep track of what you have done.

She thought it was more powerful to the learner to get to practice each of the skills rather than just the one role they focused on. Samuel mentioned that when they started literature circles that everyone had a specific job to do, but now they do "a little bit of everything." He said that he liked the new way of doing it, because before he "just thought about my own job." When asked if he would rather complete his role task or take notes as he read, Samuel responded that he would rather "take notes. I like taking the notes better."

Students unable to talk about what is interesting to them. At times, roles sheets prevented students from talking about what was interesting to them and working as a group. When discussing the different roles on which the students worked while preparing for literature circle group meetings, Anna said "the only people that really get to choose what they like best is the Literary Luminary." The students that were in charge of the other roles were restricted to only discussing what their role called them to do. She also mentioned that they just did their "own thing." She did not feel like they were working and discussing as a group. She felt as though the members of her group worked

in isolation as they prepared to share their findings. She thought it lacked the feeling of working as a group because it seemed like there were little opportunities to add to the conversation until it was your turn to share your role findings.

Role sheets were used to teach the students how to participate in literature circles by providing students a structure for group conversations, reinforcing skills taught in class, providing students with explicit skill practice, and helping students associate with deeper meanings of the text; however, role sheets were also viewed as a distraction from Mrs. Jones's purpose for using literature circles. Because of the downside to only using the role sheets for guiding conversations, she transitioned students to a "pamphlet" which allowed students to take part in all of the skill practice and helped keep students on task and engaged with the text and each other. The role sheets served the purpose Mrs. Jones intended to serve by scaffolding, guiding students' conversations, and helping them learn how to think about the text as they read.

In conclusion, the level of student engagement during literature circles was initiated by several instructional practices that Mrs. Jones put in place. These instructional practices were purposeful tasks and learning; choice; questioning; argumentative reading and writing; and role sheets. Students' thinking and discussions were guided by teacher and student originated questions. The tasks were purposeful which allowed for literature circles to fit into the curriculum. The tasks ensured that the students were participating in reading, writing, and discussing that were important. Argumentative reading and writing were present. This led to thoughtful, evidence-based discussions, increased interest in the text, and deeper thinking and interactions with text and each other. These instructional practices also set into motion evidence-based

discussion and helped ensure that students were enjoying the process but also learning from each other. The implications of these findings will be discussed in Chapter V.

CHAPTER V

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

In Chapter II, the relevant literature was provided and was followed by the findings of this study in Chapter IV. The purpose of this chapter is to provide a connection between the previous research and the findings. It is organized in the following sections: (a) Summary of Findings, (b) Discussion of Findings, (c) Limitations, and (d) Implications and Recommendations for Practice and Major Areas of the Research.

Summary of Findings

The purpose of this study was to examine how teachers and students use literature circles in the classroom and the impact they have on students' engagement, discussions and learning, as well as determine how role sheets and other instructional practices that are used in the classroom contribute to the level of engagement experienced by the students during literature circles. As I began the study, I located a teacher who was already using literature circles in her classroom. Mrs. Jones was a proponent of literature circles and had been using them as an instructional practice in her classroom for the past eight years. She spoke of the importance that they played in her language arts classroom. Mrs. Jones and her students were observed over a period of four months. The students participated in two different literature circle groups during this time frame. The teacher and five students participated in both observations and interviews. I spent time meeting

with the participants, as well as observing in Mrs. Jones's classroom as she implemented the literature circles and revised the process based on her students' needs. In order to prepare students for the literature circle process, Mrs. Jones trained students on how to participate in the literature circles, have text-based discussions, use role sheets to guide and track their thinking as they read, and have constructive arguments. She began the process by teaching students how to use the role sheets. She focused on four specific roles, Summarizer, Literary Luminary, Word Wizard, Discussion Director, and another role that was based on a specific skill that the students were learning in class. This role changed throughout the literature circle process depending on the skill the students were learning in class or for which they needed more practice. Mrs. Jones had her students learn to use each of the roles one at a time as they read a whole-class novel. They spent a week focusing on each of the roles individually and learning how to use that role to guide their thinking as they read. The students met in groups and practiced using the role they were learning.

After each of the roles were taught and practiced individually using *Island of the Blue Dolphins* and *Bridge to Terabithia*, Mrs. Jones divided the students into groups and assigned a different role to each student. Students met in their groups to discuss what they learned from their text using their role sheets as their guide for discussions for one full literature cycle and a couple of weeks of the second literature circle cycle. When Mrs. Jones began to notice that not only were the students comfortable and confident with the literature circle process, but that the role sheets were beginning to limit the conversation of the students and were preventing them from focusing on parts of the text that were interesting to them, she created a "pamphlet" that included portions of each of

the roles and gave the students more freedom to determine what was important to discuss. This allowed the students to use each of the roles as they read rather than only the one role they were in charge of completing.

Ways Students Engaged in the Literature Circle Process

Students engaged in the literature circle process by participating in discussions, by participating in purposeful collaboration, and by thinking critically. Students learned to think critically through discussions of the text and collaborating with others.

Discussions. Discussions led to deeper understanding of the text, the author's central message, and how to justify and defend thinking. Mrs. Jones established a culture where the students valued learning from each other. Students were eager to share their ideas but also to hear the ideas of others and discuss their differences. Discussions were used to justify the students' thinking and provided opportunities for the students to hear different interpretations of the text. Students knew that all text-related discussions and contradictions to other's ideas were expected to be supported with evidence from the text. Students made connections to the text and each other through discussions not only by using what they knew to develop a deeper meaning of the text, but also by getting new ideas from others and being able to understand the text from a different point of view. Monitoring their comprehension was important for students to be able to participate in discussions. Students each had their own way of collecting their ideas about the text and being able to use this information to guide their discussions. Discussions allowed students to develop a deeper understanding of the assignments and the concepts these assignments reinforced. Through group discussions, students were able to develop a deeper understanding of the author's word choices, how the characters and their traits

impacted the story, and how the events in the story helped the author relay his central message to the readers. They were also able to understand and determine the author's perspective.

Collaboration. The students collaborated to solve problems by working together as a team and supporting each other as they read, as well as learning to understand and value each other's points of view. Collaboration led to digging deeper in the text by providing students the opportunity to learn new ideas from the text and each other, as well as learn to use text-based evidence to support and defend their thoughts and ideas. Collaboration also led to changes within the group and with individual students over time. Students grew in their ability to hold text-based discussions and share their ideas learned from the text throughout the process. They began the process by focusing on one role and role sheet but transitioned to being able to use a pamphlet that included components of each of the roles, as well as use discussion questions to think deeply about the text. The impact of collaboration was also seen with individual students. For example, Anna began literature circles preferring to work independently and not valuing the input of others; however, as the process continued, she grew in her ability to support her group and was even considered a leader in her group. Overall, literature circles provided students with opportunities to collaborate in a manner that supported learning.

Think critically. Students engaged in critical thinking while participating in literature circles. Literature circles provided an avenue for critical thinking by enabling students to make logical decisions and question each other in a manner that allowed for evidence-based arguments to transpire. Talking about the text led to more critical thinking and forming of conclusions. The talk that came from critically thinking about

the text helped the students understand the text more and make sense of the author's message. Critical thinking allowed the students to add or change their preexisting thoughts. The students knew that understanding the text and the author's message was critical. Thinking critically about the text required the students to use text-based evidence to justify their points and determine what was important from the text to support their assumptions. Thinking critically led to disagreements between the students about the text, but it also led to a deeper understanding of the skills that were being reinforced through literature circles. Students were encouraged to disagree with each other, but they were also provided with opportunities to explain their thinking. The students felt as though they learned new things through these disagreements and were able to come up with different points and ideas to understand the author's message at a deeper level. The author's craft and message had a great impact on the group discussions. The groups spent a great deal of time discussing the author's choices and how they impacted the reader's interpretation of the text. By providing students with the opportunity to talk about what they were reading, literature circles encouraged critical thinking and a deeper understanding of the text.

Instructional Practices that Contributed to the Level of Engagement Experienced by Students During Literature Circles

The level of student engagement during literature circles was initiated by Mrs. Jones through ensuring that the tasks and learning was purposeful; students were able to make choices within their group and with assignments; and reading, thinking, and tasks were guided by questions. Mrs. Jones ensured that there was a focus on argumentative

reading and writing. Mrs. Jones had the students use role sheets as a guide for reading and discussing.

Purposeful tasks and learning. Purposeful tasks led to deeper learning of the concepts taught in class through the connections that were made to the standards. Students were able to see the value in the tasks because the texts they read and the tasks they completed were connected to what they were learning in class. They also learned to use evidence to support their claims and interact with the text. Students were able to determine what was important for them to learn by asking questions about the text and using these questions to determine the author's central message. The assignments led to deeper understanding of the text. The students viewed the assignments as important to understand the author's purpose and message. The students understood the purpose for their roles, discussions, and justifying their thoughts. This helped them to see the purpose in the author's choices, which led to a deeper understanding of the author's message. Ensuring that the tasks were purposeful, helped the students view the tasks as important, valuable, and worth learning.

Making choices. Students were allowed choice throughout the literature circles process. Students were provided opportunities to make choices in various ways and to different degrees. They were given opportunities to select their top three choices of books they would like to read, as well as the freedom to decide the order and manner in which they wanted to complete their group discussion requirements. Even if the students did not get their first choice of the text they wanted to read, they were still excited because they knew that they were going to get at least one of the choices they selected. Students were given the opportunity to track their thinking in the manner that worked

best for them. They were allowed to jot notes, mark pages, develop an outline, write a summary, or even discuss the text before they recorded their thinking. Students were also allowed to choose whether they wanted to read independently or with a partner or small group. Although students were given choices throughout the literature circles process, they were aware that there were expectations within these choices. Regardless of the manner in which the tasks were completed, students knew that there were certain responsibilities that must be completed such as reading and discussion of the text, as well as documenting their learning.

Guided by questions. Students engaged in literature circles when questions guided deep discussions. Productive discussions began with questions that enabled the students to think deeper and led to text-based discussions. The students knew that their role of providing their group with questions was important and was a way to support others in their group. The students enjoyed the conversations that developed from the questions and knew that these questions helped their group understand the text more deeply. Guiding questions allowed for transfer of learning throughout the day. Students were able to use the practice they received from asking good guiding questions to develop this as a skill that they were able to use and apply throughout the day. Strong questions served as a guide for the students' thinking and discussions. These questions helped the students learn from each other and understand the text in a manner that allowed them to have text-based discussions.

Argumentative reading and writing. Through literature circles, students engaged in reading and writing about the text argumentatively. Argumentative reading led to deeper discussions. Students justified their thoughts and assumptions about the

text and determined what was important to talk about and be the focus of their conversations. Argumentative reading increased the students' interest in the text because they understood it at a deeper level and were eager to share their thoughts about it with their group members. Argumentative reading and writing led to deeper thinking. Because the students were reading argumentatively, students had to use reading strategies that helped them track their thinking, as well as make inferences within the text to ensure they were able to make sense of what they were reading. Argumentative reading and writing also allowed the students to read the same text with different perspectives, which allowed the students to stretch their understanding of the text and the author's central message. Argumentative reading and writing encouraged the students to interact with the text in multiple ways throughout the literature circle process. Students were provided with a setting to practice using skills they learned in class. Students interacted with the text in a manner that was most beneficial to them and helped them get the most meaning from the text.

Ways Students Used Role Sheets During Literature Circles

Students used role sheets during the literature circle process to scaffold conversations. The role sheets allowed for explicit skill practice and provided associations with deeper meanings of the text; however, they were also seen as a distraction and limitation for authentic literacy.

Conversation scaffold. For the first literature cycle and a few weeks of the second literature circle cycle, students used role sheets as a tool for preparing for literature circle meetings and as an outline for their discussions and for tracking their thinking as they read. Role sheets helped ensure that all group members had something

meaningful to share when they were ready to discuss and helped the students be attentive as they were reading to ensure that they were focusing on important aspects of the texts or changes that were occurring in the text that should be addressed during their group meetings. They also kept the conversation moving. When students were at a standstill in their conversations, the role sheets served as a tool for the students to use for ideas on what to share about the text and what was important that should be addressed during the conversations. Students were able to apply the skills that were the focus of the role sheets outside of literature circle discussions. The tasks on the role sheets became second-nature to the students and they were able to apply them to other texts and types of texts that they came into contact with throughout the instructional day.

Explicit skill practice. Role sheets allowed the students to receive extra practice using skills they were learning in class; they served as a reinforcement of the skills and standards students were learning throughout the day. They required students to provide evidence for their thoughts and ideas related to the text, which, in turn, helped establish this skill as a habit for the students. Students spent a great deal of time providing evidence to justify their thoughts and opinions. Role sheets were used as a tool for tracking the students' thinking. They served as a tool for training students to record their thoughts as they read, determine what was important from the text, and relay to others in the group how they processed the information they learned from the text.

Associations with deeper meaning of the text. Role sheets were a tool for helping the students make meaning of the text as they read. The students used the role sheets to take notes as they read, but they were also used as an avenue for practicing the skills that were learned in class; they served as a tool for reinforcing the standards-based

skills that the students were learning and provided the students with an opportunity to practice using these skills to aid in their understanding of the text. The role sheets led the students to new thinking. They were able to share what was important to them from the text with their classmates, but they also provided students with opportunities to add to this thinking and stretch their understanding. They provided students with opportunities to think about the text in new ways, which helped to develop a deeper understanding of the author's message and perspective. Role sheets were a guide for discussions and served as a conversation starter that led to deeper discussions of the text. They served as a guide for studying the author's choice of words and for analyzing them, as well as a tool for assisting the students in making meaning of the text and understanding the author's message.

Tradeoff or Downside to Using Role Sheets

Although the role sheets were a valuable tool for supporting students through their reading and discussions of the text, role sheets were also seen as a distraction and limitation to the group conversations and an interference with authentic literacy during the latter part of the second literature circle cycle. They limited the students' conversations and thinking about the texts.

At times, role sheets distracted the students from meaningful conversations. Mrs. Jones had the students stop using the role sheets when she noticed that some of the students were only attending to the conversation when it was their turn to share, so they were missing out on some very important aspects of the text. Role sheets restricted students' focus to one skill rather than the text as a whole. Focusing on one role did not allow students to practice all of the skills that make for authentic literacy that Mrs. Jones

hoped to foster with literature circles. Role sheets often prohibited students from talking about what was interesting to them and working as a group. The students that were in charge of each role were restricted to only discussing that role rather than what they found interesting in the text. Once students had mastered the literature circle process, role sheets were viewed as a restriction to group interactions and caused students to work in isolation as they prepared to share their findings. They also limited the students' opportunities to share their thoughts and ideas until it was their turn to share their role findings.

Discussion of Findings

This study contributes to current research in a variety of ways. This study revealed that students engaged in literature circles by participating in discussions, through purposeful collaboration, and by thinking critically. The study showed that the level of student engagement was influenced by several instructional practices that Mrs. Jones addressed. They were purposeful tasks and learning; choice; questioning; argumentative reading and writing; and role sheets. The study also revealed that students used role sheets during literature circles as a conversation scaffold, to practice skills and concepts students were learning throughout the day, and as a guide for helping the students make meaning of the text. The study showed that role sheets could also be a distraction and limitation to the group conversations, as well as an interference with authentic literacy.

Literature circles were effective in Mrs. Jones's classroom. The success of this practice can be linked to the instructional moves the teacher took and research-based practices she put in place. These instructional moves are supported by previous research that suggests ensuring that the students are making meaning from the text and

understanding how the issues they are learning about from the text impact their lives (Lapp et al., 1995); valuing one another through problem solving and inquiry and are sharing responsibility and control (Short, 1990); and engaging in deep conversations about the meaning of the text (Lapp et al., 1997) are important. This research is different from previous research, because no one has actually recorded how these practices take place together and can be achieved in the classroom setting; therefore, lending empirical support to largely theoretical arguments in the literature. Employing a qualitative approach to this study and including student participants allowed for not only a teacher's perspective to be considered when discussing the impact of literature circles in the language arts classroom but also the perspectives of student participants. The students' perspectives of the direct impact that literature circles had on their learning were pertinent to truly understand the impact literature circles had in the classroom. Through the process, they discussed how they were able to make meaning from the text and value each other's ideas and opinions as they worked together to solve problems, come to an agreement, and develop a deeper understanding of the text. Using a qualitative approach to this study allowed for both the teacher and students' perspectives to be considered when discussing how literature circles impacted their learning and ability to use text-based evidence to hold meaningful discussions about the author's central message and perspective. Using a qualitative approach to this study also allowed for both the teacher and students' perspectives to be considered when discussing how literature circles empowered the students in their ability to build knowledge.

One important finding is that students' discussions and ability to justify their ideas about the text were increased and encouraged by the social interactions within the groups.

The text-based discussions allowed the students to reap cognitive benefits from this socialization which is further evidence of the impact that the instructional practices that were used by Mrs. Jones have on students' ability to think about what they are reading and understand the different interpretations of the texts as suggested by Hogan and Tudge (1999) and Ybarra et al. (2008).

This study supports the work of Dewey, who through observations, noted that schools should be reorganized to provide students with more opportunities to interact with others in order to prepare students for society (Paratore & McCormack, 1997). Although there is evidence that teacher-controlled lessons continue to dominate the organization of the classroom interactions (Cazden, 1988), teachers desire to change the structure of the classroom setting so that they are not teacher-dominated (Cazden, 1988; McCarthy, 1990). Allington (2002) suggested that exemplary teachers foster talk in the classroom by encouraging lots of talk throughout the day. He stated that the talk should be problem-posing and problem-solving talk related to curriculum topics. To be beneficial, talk in the classroom should be conversational rather than interrogational. The present study suggests that if literature circles are conducted in this manner, there is evidence that the social structure of the classroom allows for a greater balance of teacher and student talk and joint control. The student participants, whose reading levels ranged from low to high, were given control over their conversations and determining what was important to discuss and learn, as well as the opportunity to determine how to work through the problems they encountered within their literature circle groups.

This study confirms the research on the importance of discussions in the classroom by extending the current research on the impact that discussions have on

sharpening students' thinking, clarifying their understanding, and providing them with a mode for constructing meaning from the text (Lyons & Pinnell, 2001). The data showed that through the students' discussions they were able to understand the text at a deeper level. These discussions led students to thoughtful responses that questioned each other's opinions and the author's choices. The discussions allowed the students to understand the author's perspective and purpose for writing the text, as well as make meaning from the text by relating it to their own lives.

Authentic literacy ensured that the discussions were guided by good questions; were purposeful; included argumentative reading, writing, and talking; and required the students to think critically (Schmoker, 2011). Authentic literacy may assist teachers in ensuring that students receive the most benefit from literature circle discussions and may lead teachers in providing practical support and strategies as used by Mrs. Jones and her students for literature circle success. The assumption may be made that adding the authentic literacy components to literature circle discussions and assignments attributed to the success of Mrs. Jones's class's literature circles. If educators intend for their literature circles to be equally successful, they should consider the important role of authentic literacy in the designing of their literature circles.

Current research indicates that choice is important. For example, Guthrie (2013) expressed that choice is the most widespread recommendation for motivation. He emphasized the role choice plays in enabling students to develop self-direction in the classroom. Even mini-choices empower students to increase their investment in their learning. This was affirmed by Atwell (1987) who found that when students were allowed to select their own reading material, they read more and experienced greater

pleasure when reading and by Pardo (2004) and Routman (1998) who also noted that allowing students to have a say in what they read increased the desire and motivation to read. Mrs. Jones created opportunities for choice throughout the literature circle process and had powerful results. Students were given opportunities to make choices throughout the literature circle process. They were allowed to select their text from a set of preselected titles, which increased their interest and excitement with the text. This confirms previous research about the power of choice to support motivation and engagement.

Through my review of literature, I found no empirical evidence of the impact of role sheets on literature circles and student learning although they were highly recommended by some who strongly suggested using literature circles in the classroom (Harvey & Daniels, 2009), as well as by websites and guides for using literature circles in the classroom. This study's findings provide empirical support for a much used practice. They provided evidence related to how and why role sheets should be used during literature circles. Mrs. Jones used role sheets as a tool for scaffolding student conversations, as an avenue for explicit skill practice, and as a tool for making associations with deeper meanings of the text. Although role sheets had these positive outcomes, they were also limiting. Role sheets were viewed by the participants as a distraction from authentic literacy, as well as a deterrent for meaningful conversations. They restricted the focus of the students' reading, understanding, and conversations related to the text to the task on the role sheet rather than to the text as a whole. When Mrs. Jones noticed that the role sheets had served their purpose and students were able to have text-based discussions, she had the students stop using the sheets in an effort to

prevent loss of interest or boredom in literature circles, as well as to ensure that the students were able to look at the text as a whole, focusing on multiple aspects of the text to determine the author's message, rather than one role.

Although the review of literature did not locate empirical evidence to support the use of role sheets during literature circles, Mrs. Jones did select roles that were linked to authentic literacy. The students were expected to summarize the text. This role supported students in engaging in argumentative reading and writing, as well as thinking critically about what was important and what was not important within the text. Having the students determine the important events was essential, because it helped the students identify which information was necessary for understanding the author's central message and what was included to make the story line more interesting. The Discussion Director role supported authentic literacy by requiring that the students construct guiding questions, participate in argumentative reading and talking, and think critically. Students were expected to read the text in such a manner that required them to create questions from the text that encouraged deep discussions about the text, as well as have the others in the group look at the text from different perspectives or viewpoints. The Literary Luminary chose a paragraph or sentence to discuss with the group that he or she found interesting, meaningful, or powerful in some way. This role supported authentic literacy by requiring the students to read and think with purpose as they determined which passages from the text were meaningful to them and why they connected to what they were learning. This role also required the students to read argumentatively and think critically so they would be prepared to talk argumentatively in order to justify their ideas. Finally, Mrs. Jones selected the Word Wizard as a role for students to focus on as they

read. The Word Wizard supported authentic literacy by having the students read with a purpose as they searched for new or unknown words and think critically as they used the context to determine the meaning of these unfamiliar words. The role of authentic literacy while using role sheets during literature circles needs attention and further research.

The findings from this research support an instructional practice that is often discussed yet seldom implemented in classrooms. Literature circles addressed many standards at each meeting; more standards than could be addressed during mini-lessons or lectures and allowed the teacher to put the responsibility for completing the tasks on the students rather than on her. The conversations between the students were rich and deep and throughout the process became more inquiry-based and more about making meaning from the text. The findings from this study showed that literature circles benefitted a range of students from low achieving and quiet students who rarely speak out in class to those that are considered stronger students by strengthening their ability to use discussions to sharpen their thinking and clarify their understandings, as well as by constructing learning through talking about texts.

Limitations

Although the findings are interesting, the limitations of the study must be acknowledged. Sample size is one limitation. This study focused on a single classroom and a single teacher working in a high achieving school district in a suburban community. The impact that literature circles have on students' learning and understanding of the text might not be the same in other settings. However, this is one study of how literature circles function in action and provides us with much evidence about what is interesting

concerning this kind of teaching practice and its potential. I have made an attempt to provide a great deal of detail about context and method so that readers can evaluate the findings.

Although this study was conducted in a high achieving school within a high achieving school district and not everyone can manage their literature circles in the manner in which Mrs. Jones did, I believe that if literature circles are conducted in this manner they can have powerful outcomes. Literature circles conducted in this manner led students to use evidence, allowed shy students to feel comfortable speaking out, led students to seek deeper understanding of the text, led students to support a claim, and led students to critical thinking.

My own role as the researcher is important to acknowledge. I serve as principal in the school that is the setting for this study, and so, I hold a supervisory position to the teacher and am the principal of the students who participated in this study. The participants were aware that the literature circle process is a practice that I value. Because I have led professional development sessions on the impact that literature circles have on student learning and engagement and I have spent several days observing literature circles throughout our school district and school building, the participants are aware that the practice and its implementation are important to me and one that I used in my own classroom. In order to limit my own bias, I followed several of the recommendations made by Creswell (1998, as cited in Glesne, 2011). I spent an extended amount of time in the classroom so that I was able to develop trust with the participants and learn the culture of the classroom. I used multiple data collection methods and took careful field notes to ensure that there was data immersion. I also used

member checking by sharing the interview transcripts and observation notes with the participants to ensure that their ideas were accurately represented. I have included a thorough description of the context of the classroom to allow the reader to enter the research context, as well as clarified my own researcher bias, subjectivity, and relationship as principal of the school and how it impacted the context of the study.

Implications and Recommendations for Practice and Major Areas of the Research

Implications and Recommendations for Practice

Based on my research, instructional practices, such as including purposeful tasks; allowing students' choice; teaching students to ask guiding questions; including argumentative reading and writing; and using role sheets encouraged student engagement during literature circles. Using these practices during literature circles allowed for the reinforcement and incorporation of authentic literacy in the classroom. The findings from the present study imply that literature circles could be used to reinforce and incorporate authentic literacy in the classroom. Literature circles were a successful practice in Mrs. Jones's classroom that led to meaningful collaboration, text-based discussions, critical thinking, and the implementation of authentic literacy in the classroom. Mrs. Jones used role sheets that supported aspects of authentic literacy, as well as standards-based tasks that were intertwined with what the students were learning throughout the school day.

The present study suggests the use of discussions in the classroom. Because Mrs. Jones spent time at the beginning of the year establishing a culture of talk in her classroom where all students understood that what they had to say was important but so was what others had to say, group discussions were effective and students were able to

learn from each other. Students were able to justify their claims about the text and the author's choices by using text-based evidence.

The findings from the present study imply that literature circles are a living, ever-changing process. Changes should be made throughout the literature circle process based on the students' needs, curriculum needs, and teacher observations. Changes were noted throughout the literature circle process such as the termination of role sheets, level of teacher support, and tasks students were expected to complete. Through these changes, students' learning progressed, as they were required to think deeper, apply skills learned in class, and determine interesting or important information from the text to discuss.

Based on my research, the findings support providing students with choices in the classroom. The data implies that choice was very motivating. Each of the students appreciated having choice. Teachers should find meaningful ways to allow choice during literature-based instruction, even if those choices are relatively small and limited, such as choosing how to keep record of their ideas or more of a perceived choice by the students, such as whether they want to discuss then write or write then discuss.

Based on my research, using role sheets as a conversation scaffold and as a way to train students to participate in discussions was beneficial to students, but their use should be discontinued once students are comfortable with having evidence-based conversations and tracking their thinking as they read. As seen in this study, role sheets served their purpose well and provided students with a support system and a safety net; however, students should be discouraged from using the role sheets for long periods of time. Students should be given time to practice using them in order for the roles and the strategies they reinforce to become habitual, but students should not be restricted to only

these roles; they should be encouraged to think of the text as a whole. Mrs. Jones said that she valued role sheets, but after using them for a while, students became bored with them. They prevented students from having a say in the conversation and how it was going to develop. Role sheets helped get the students started with the literature circles process, were a great scaffold and way to get the students comfortable talking about text, and were an effective tool to teach students how to have a conversation about a book. They also supported the students as they worked to find the evidence to support their claims. Role sheets served an important purpose; however, they became an issue when that is all the students did. They become a stumbling block. The students did not talk about enjoying the completion role sheets, but I was able to see the benefits of using them. Although none of the student participants mentioned that they liked to complete the role sheets, there was a role or two each mentioned that they enjoyed; however, they also mentioned that they did not like being assigned one role especially one that they did not want to do.

Implications and Recommendations for Major Areas of the Research

Authentic literacy was the basis for how literature circles and the role sheets were used in Mrs. Jones's classroom. Authentic literacy was addressed by having the students ask guiding questions and by asking the students guiding questions as they read and discussed. Authentic literacy was addressed as the students read, wrote, and talked argumentatively and by ensuring that the tasks were purposeful; it was a focus by having the students think critically. Although authentic literacy dictated much of the tasks and thinking of the students, research should be conducted in this area to address the impact that authentic literacy has on the literature circle process as a whole, as well as on the

discussions, learning, and dictation of the tasks selected for students to address.

Although writing argumentatively was addressed in this study and in literature circles, its role was very small. If authentic literacy is to be used in literature circles, how can argumentative writing have a greater impact?

Social constructivism was the guiding theory behind this study and the use of literature circles. This study demonstrated that literature circles served as an appropriate classroom social setting for students to learn from their peers, as well as imitate the actions of others that are beyond the individual's capabilities. Additional research should follow to investigate if and how literature circles should be altered to address the need for peer feedback in order to provide the benefit of students facilitating learning and increase the students' ability to ask questions. Determining if and how literature circles should be altered to address the need for peer feedback is also needed in order to determine the impact of students explaining their reasoning to each other and scaffolding learning without the teacher's direct guidance. Additional research is also needed to determine the student's ability to transfer what he/she is learning through literature circles to new academic situations he/she encounters throughout the school day.

Choice, including structured choice, limited choice, and perceived choice, was integrated throughout the entire process of literature circles and was noted to have a positive impact on the student's engagement. Providing students with choice is recommended to support and encourage student motivation. "A theoretical framework for choice in the classroom is Self-Determination Theory (Ryan & Deci, 2000), which argues that students' development of autonomy, or being in charge of their lives, is central to their academic achievement and emotional adjustment" (Guthrie, 2013).

Knowing the role that choice plays in literature circles and the impact that it had on the results of this study, additional research is needed to determine the impact and relationship that the Self-Determination Theory has in regards to literature circles and the students' ability to become self-directed learners and be able to have control over their learning and academic work.

Recommendations for Future Research

This is one study that investigated role sheets; however, their use is strongly suggested on websites, in practitioner journals, and in books that discuss literature circles as a teaching practice. More research is needed on using role sheets to help teachers accomplish their goals and determine impact they have on the students' conversations. More research is needed to determine how role sheets impact literature circles and the students' discussions in order to measure the degree of their benefit.

This study and these results occurred in a high achieving school located within a high achieving school district in a community that strongly supports the public school system. Additional research is needed to determine the impact literature circles might have on a more diverse group of students from a low-performing school and school district.

This study only focused on the perceptions of the teacher participant and student participants. More research is needed to include the perceptions of how the students' parents perceive the impact literature circles have on their child's learning.

In addition, more research is needed on the impact that literature circles have on student learning and engagement when various genres are used such as informational text, poetry, dramas, etc. Although many changes occurred throughout the literature

circles process, one change that was not made was the genre of the texts used. While Mrs. Jones carefully and thoughtfully selected specific titles for the students to choose to read, the same genre was used throughout the process. More research is needed to determine the impact literature circles would have on the students' ability to comprehend, interpret, and learn from a vast range of genres.

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APPENDIX A
PARTICIPANT CONVERSATIONAL GUIDE

Title of Research Study: Literature Circles: Fifth Graders Experience with Meaningful

Discussion of Texts

Researcher: Lee Pambianchi, Mississippi State University

Interview Discussion Topics- Teacher Participant

1. impact on writing
2. impact on reading- interest, quality, quantity, etc.
3. change in grades
4. class conversations/discussions
5. group conversations/discussions
6. choice of what is read in class/at home
7. annotations for/regarding text
8. exploration of what is being studied in school
9. use of roles
10. impact of roles
11. assessments
12. student/teacher conferences

Interview Questions- Teacher Participant

1. Why do you use literature circles?
2. How do your students respond to literature circles versus other teaching methods?
3. How did you learn about literature circles?
4. Do you use roles/role sheets? Why or why not?
5. How do you determine what the focus of the literature circle task will be (if roles are not used)?
6. How have your literature circles changed over the year(s)?
7. How do you determine what books you will use?
8. How are your literature circle groups organized?
9. How do your students “interact” with the text in literature circle?
10. How do your students decide what to talk about and what is important to discuss?
11. Have literature circles increased your students interest in reading? Explain why or why not.
12. Do your students talk about literature circles or texts that they are reading outside of class or just during the allotted discussion time?
13. Can you think of anything else you could share with me about literature circles?

Title of Research Study: Literature Circles: Fifth Graders Experience with Meaningful

Discussion of Texts

Researcher: Lee Pambianchi, Mississippi State University

Interview Discussion Topics- Student Participants

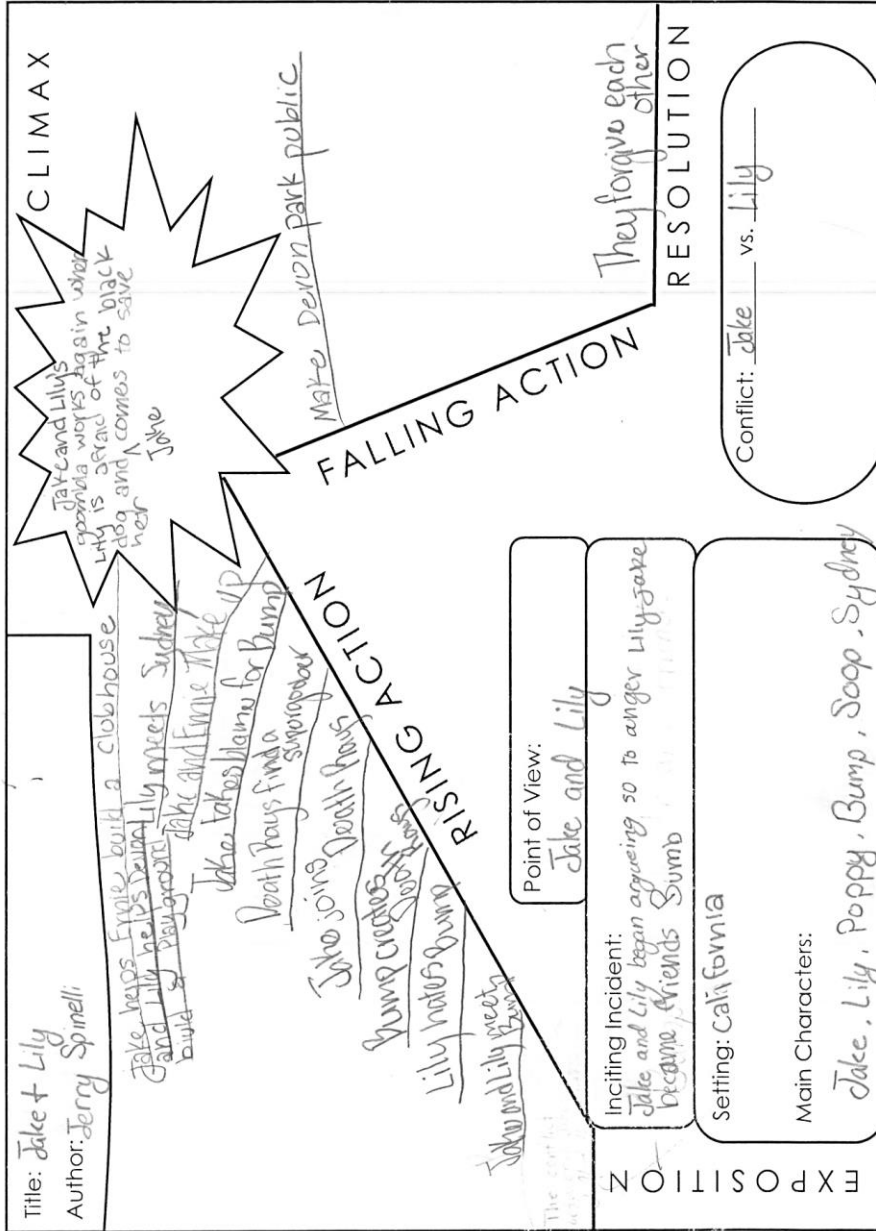
1. reading preferences
2. learning topic preferences
3. collecting information
4. working with group members
5. allowed choice on what to study
6. analyzing text/annotating text/note taking
7. impact of roles
8. reading strategies
9. teaching classmates
10. group discussions
11. class discussions
12. assessments
13. student/teacher conferences
14. use of roles

Interview Questions- Student Participants

1. How do you feel about participating in literature circles?
2. What are some things that you are learning about in literature circles?
3. What is your favorite part of literature circles?
4. How do you help your classmates in literature circles? How do they help you?
5. How do you track your thinking as you read/learn in literature circles?
6. Do you prefer reading fiction or informational texts during literature circles?
Why?
7. Do you use role sheets? If so, do they help you? If so, how?
8. How do you “interact” with the text in literature circles?
9. How do you and your group decide what to talk about and what is important to discuss?
10. Have literature circles increased your interest in reading? Explain why or why not.
11. Do you talk about literature circles or texts you are reading in them outside of class or just during the allotted discussion time?
12. Can you think of anything else you could share with me about literature circles?

APPENDIX B
DOCUMENTS

Plot Diagram Template



© 2013 By Erin Cobb

In the ~~the~~ Tickham House, Tootie Tickham gets a Ulysses 2000X. By the way, a Ulysses 2000X is a vacuum cleaner, really. Flora Buckham was reading her comics when she heard a noise. A yell. Ahhhh! She looked outside to see Mrs. Tickham vacuuming her yard? What! Then, Flora noticed a squirrel about to get sucked up. To Flora's horror, she watched the squirrel get sucked up the Ulysses 2000X. She then ran outside and pulled the squirrel out of the vacuum. She then gave the squirrel CPR. She named him Ulysses, after the vacuum. Ulysses, being hungry, picked up the vacuum. She took Ulysses inside and upstairs, under her mother's nose. She showed him her comics thinking he was a superhero. This has been our summary of the first part

JAMIE Grimm

also known as I am funny

on p. 22

Jamie Grimm is confident because he stands up to Stevie Kosgrove. And he doesn't do it in a threatening way or physical. He does it with jokes, he also knows that even though he is in a wheelchair he still has a personality that is awesome. p. 21-22

on p. 61

Jamie Grimm is funny, really funny even though he thinks everybody thinks he is invisible. He can come up with a clever joke that is hilarious. He also wants to be the next top funniest kid comedian. Pg. 61

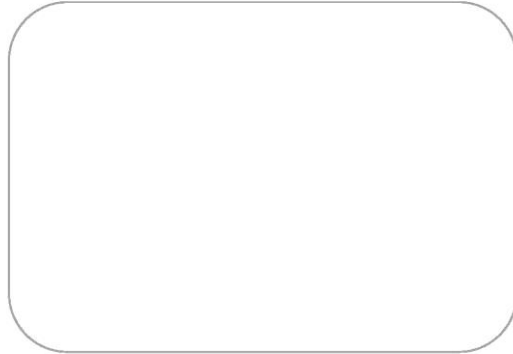
on page 15

Jamie Grimm is imaginative because he imagines people in the morning are zombies, he imagines this cause he thinks that way. Because he lives in Smileyville it isn't a really have place so next time when Jamie says something that isn't true he is imaginative in his own way. p. 15

Literary Luminary

Pg #	Quote (first 3 words...last 3 words)
Why did you choose this quote?	

Adventuring Artist



Word Wizard

Pg. #	Word	My Definition	Clues from context

Name _____

Discussion Director

Stellar Summarizer

Question #1:

My Answer:

Question #2:

My Answer:

Question #3:

My Answer:

APPENDIX C

IRB CONSENT FORMS AND IRB APPROVAL EMAIL

Mississippi State University
Informed Consent Form for Participation in Research

Title of Research Study: Literature Circles: Fifth Graders Experience with Meaningful Discussion of Texts

Study Site: XX Elementary School

Researchers: Lee Pambianchi, Mississippi State University

We would like to ask you to participate in a research study.

If you participate in this study, you will be asked to answer interview questions related to the use of literature circles, allow me to observe literature circles in your classroom, and share student work related to the literature circles. Three recorded interview/conversation will last approximately 40 minutes. The interview/conversation will include questions/topics such as the focus of students' discussions, changes in grades and/or assessment results, choice of books, questions asked in class, impact on writing, use of literature circle roles, etc. Students in your classroom will be observed participating in literature circles. These observations will last about 40 minutes. The notes taken during the interview and observations will be transcribed. Student work, student journals, and student grades will be used as documentation for the study.

Questions

If you have any questions about this research project, please feel free to contact Lee Pambianchi at 601-992-5279 or the research advisor, Devon Brenner at 662-325-7119.

Voluntary consent

Please understand that your **participation is voluntary**. Your **refusal to participate will involve no penalty or loss** of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. You **may discontinue your participation** at any time without penalty or loss of benefits

Please take all the time you need to read through this document and decide whether you would like to participate in this research study.

If you agree to participate in this research study, please sign below. You will be given a copy of this form for your records.

Participant Signature

Date

Investigator Signature

Date

**MISSISSIPPI STATE UNIVERSITY
HUMAN RESEARCH
PROTECTION PROGRAM**

**Parental or Legally Authorized
Representative Permission Template**
Version 12-05-2013

You are being asked to allow your child to participate in a research project. This form provides you with information about the project. Please read the information below and ask any questions you might have before deciding whether or not to allow your child to participate.

Title of research project: Literature Circles: Fifth Graders Experience with Meaningful Discussion of Texts

Site of research project: X Elementary School

Name of researcher(s) & University affiliation: Lee Pambianchi, Mississippi State University

The purpose of this research project:

- The purpose of this research is to examine how teachers and students use literature circles to engage in deep and meaningful text, to examine how teachers and students engage with literature and interpret the literature circle process, and to examine how they use role sheets during the reading and discussion of texts to help them through the literature circle process.

If you agree to allow your child to participate in this research project, we will ask your child to do the following things:

- Participate in an interview/answer questions related to his or her participation in literature circles. Three recorded interviews/conversations will last approximately 40 minutes. The interview/conversation will include questions/topics related to reading preferences, group discussions, choice of books, questions asked in class, impact on writing, use of literature circle roles, etc.
- Allow me to observe him or her participating in literature circles. These observations will last about 40 minutes.
- View his or her work/class assignments related to the literature circles.

The total estimated time to participate in this research project: The estimated time of participation is about two hours for interviews/conversations and 40 minutes for each of the observations.

The risks of participation:

- There are no foreseeable risks associated with this research study.

The benefits of participation:

- The benefits of the project are to improve instructional practices involving literature circles.

Compensation:

- There will be no compensation offered or provided for participating in the study.

Confidentiality and privacy protections:

- The data obtained will be stored in a locked filing cabinet. Students and their teacher will be given a pseudonym for identification purposes. The key to this code will be kept in a locked filing cabinet. Upon completion of this project, all linkages between names and pseudonyms will be destroyed. Participants will be recorded during interviews and observations so that translations of the interviews and observations are accurate. The recorded interviews and observations will also be stored in a locked filing cabinet.
- It is important to understand that these records will be held by a state entity and therefore are subject to disclosure if required by law.

Contacts and questions:

- If you have any questions, please ask now. If you should have any questions later or want additional information, please contact Lee Pambianchi at 601-992-5279 or the research advisor, Devon Brenner, at 662-325-7119. For information regarding your rights as a research subject, please contact the MSU Research Compliance Office at 662-325-3994.

If you do not want your child to participate:

Please understand that your child's participation is **voluntary**. Your refusal to allow your child to participate will involve **no penalty** or loss of benefits to which you or your child is otherwise entitled. You may discontinue your child's participation **at any time** without penalty or loss of benefits. Your child may skip any items that he or she chooses not to answer. Your refusal will not impact current or future relationships with Mississippi State University. To do so, simply tell the researcher that you wish to stop

Protocol Title: Literature Circles: Fifth Graders Experience with Meaningful Discussion of Texts

Protocol Number: 15-219

Principal Investigator: Ms. Lee Pambianchi

Date of Determination: 7/13/2015

Qualifying Exempt Category: 45 CFR 46.101(b)(1)

Attachments: Stamped informed consents in separate email

Dear Ms. Pambianchi:

The Human Research Protection Program has determined the above referenced project exempt from IRB review.

Please note the following:

- Retain a copy of this correspondence for your records.
- An approval stamp is required on all informed consents. You must use the stamped consent form for obtaining consent from participants.
- Only the MSU staff and students named on the application are approved as MSU investigators and/or key personnel for this study.
- The approved study will expire on 5/30/2016, which was the completion date indicated on your application. If additional time is needed, submit a continuation request. (SOP 01-07 Continuing Review of Approved Applications)
- Any modifications to the project must be reviewed and approved by the HRPP prior to implementation. Any failure to adhere to the approved protocol could result in suspension or termination of your project.
- Per university requirement, all research-related records (e.g. application materials, letters of support, signed consent forms, etc.) must be

retained and available for audit for a period of at least 3 years after the research has ended.

- It is the responsibility of the investigator to promptly report events that may represent unanticipated problems involving risks to subjects or others.

This determination is issued under the Mississippi State University's OHRP Federalwide Assurance #FWA0000203. All forms and procedures can be found on the HRPP website: www.orc.msstate.edu.

Thank you for your cooperation and good luck to you in conducting this research project. If you have questions or concerns, please contact me at nmorse@orc.msstate.edu or call [662-325-5220](tel:662-325-5220).

Finally, we would greatly appreciate your feedback on the HRPP approval process. Please take a few minutes to complete our survey at <https://www.surveymonkey.com/s/PPM2FBP>.

Sincerely,

Nicole Morse, CIP
IRB Compliance Administrator

cc: Devon Brenner, Advisor