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Using literature circles to increase reading comprehension and student motivation

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USING LITERATURE CIRCLES TO INCREASE READING COMPREHENSION AND STUDENT MOTIVATION

by

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Abstract

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Many educators arrange students in guided reading groups based on ones reading lexile. Usually the books selected for guided reading are from a basal reading series and are used to teach different reading components and strategies. However, the books don't always reflect student cultures, making it difficult for students to hold discussions and make connections. Oftentimes, students are unmotivated to read the assigned books and rarely engage in discussions. Based on research conducted by Daniels (2006), when kids are engaged in well-structured book clubs their comprehension and their attitude towards reading both improve. With ongoing changes in education, educators must provide opportunities for students read culturally relevant text and discuss with peers who share similar interests. This can be accomplished by implementing literature circles as a daily reading activity.

This study was designed to determine how literature circles effect reading comprehension and student motivation towards reading. After collecting and analyzing the data over the course of three weeks, the researcher determined that the implementation of literature circles increased student motivation towards reading and deepened comprehension. The results indicated that students benefited from choosing their own books, roles, schedule, and discussion topics.

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Chapter 1

Introduction

At the end of every school year, anticipation starts to build as teachers construct class lists for the upcoming year. As the fifth grade teacher, I was concerned with the upcoming class because of the difficulties faced by the fourth grade teachers. The fourth grade students often argued and fought with each other, making learning in the classroom extremely difficult. Parents were frequently notified; however, many worked multiple jobs, making their involvement minimal. Many of the students were reading below level and the teachers struggled to strengthen their comprehension skills because students remained unmotivated. After hearing stories from the fourth grade teachers, I knew I had my work cut out for me.

As I received my class list, I remained open-minded. Since the school was relatively small, I was familiar with most of the students. I was aware of the environmental and emotional factors that had previously impacted learning. Although I was warned, I tried to ignore the feedback from the fourth grade teachers and made a commitment to build a positive classroom community, regardless of student differences. To create a supportive and trusting climate, I started each day by meeting students on the carpet to discuss anything on their mind. In my class of fifteen, nine students were African American and six students were Latino; therefore, the students usually brought different experiences and stories to the daily morning meeting. Typically, students discussed dinner plans, after school activities, and morning ordeals. My struggling readers had a habit of sitting at the end or back of the carpet and rarely discussed with the whole class. Usually, they whispered to other students close to them, without ever

addressing the whole class. I encouraged participation from all students; yet, the same students always volunteered to share.

To encourage collaboration amongst all students, cooperative learning groups were utilized on a daily basis. During the reading block, students were grouped according to their lexile level and assigned a weekly book. Although the books were appropriate for students based on their reading level, they did not always display understanding or interest in the content. The books used for guided reading came from the Journey's reading program and were accompanied by a list of questions. In order for students to read and complete their guided reading requirements, they were given time throughout the school day to discuss with their group.

The purpose for grouping students based on their lexile level was for students to collaborate and comfortably discuss each book. Upon implementation, I quickly realized that my intentions did not correlate with reality. As students worked in their groups, I saw minimal discussion with an over emphasis on answering the comprehension questions. It appeared the students developed the mindset that their grade only relied on completion of their reading worksheet. Also, as the week progressed students became irritable and argued with their groups members. At times I felt my role in the classroom was to be the class referee. Although I didn't want to accept what was happening, I began to see several of the behaviors my co-workers warned me about.

As I took a step back and observed what was happening, I knew something had to change. I needed to find ways to build a positive classroom community where all students felt comfortable to communicate with peers. I needed to deepen student comprehension and close reading gaps. Lastly, I needed to increase student motivation

towards reading by providing opportunities for students to read interesting books for fun. I realized the task would not be easy, but it was necessary in order to improve the students' attitudes towards reading.

Based on cultural and environmental factors, I decided to implement literature circles using culturally relevant text. I read about literature circles in the past and studied the effectiveness of using multicultural literature; though, I never attempted to integrate both factors into one activity. Considering the students' needs and my goals for my students, I felt it would be beneficial to attempt this strategy with my students as a way to increase their desire to read. As discussed throughout research, providing time for students to participate in peer discussions creates opportunities for students to build familiarly with social and cultural issues of their classmates. Literature circles allow students the opportunity to develop cultural knowledge, build intrinsic motivation, and strengthen comprehension skills, especially when literature is aligned to interests and cultural experiences.

Story of the Question

As elementary school teachers, we strive to create bright, colorful, and inviting classrooms where students feel welcomed. We purchase posters with inspirational sayings and quotes to motivate our students. We spend most of our summer planning for the upcoming school year; however, as we meet and learn about our students, the original plan usually changes. We begin to wonder if students find those posters motivating and inviting, and if not, we ponder over ways to develop a positive community where all students feel successful.

This is especially true in districts such as mine, where the students live in an under-privileged urban community, composed of minorities. The majority of students come from single-family homes and parents work multiple jobs; therefore, parental involvement is extremely low. At home the students have a role that exceeds completing homework and reinforcing skills learned in school. The students are responsible for caring for younger siblings, cooking, and cleaning. As their teacher, it is my job to find ways to make learning meaningful and relevant to their everyday experiences.

Within my class, 75% of the students are reading significantly below grade level; therefore, it is difficult to find high interest books on their reading level. I provide time for read alouds, independent and guided reading in both whole and small group settings; yet, students remain unengaged. Although I assign twenty minutes of reading each night, many of them do not use the time to actually read, understand, and reflect on what they are reading. As I thought back to the initial days of hanging premade posters and considered my class dynamics, I realized my walls would be better filled with reading strategies and decoding techniques. Rather than assigning reading time, students need to be taught how to interact with books, how to interact with peers, and how to enjoy reading. For these reasons, I became focused on researching ways to deepen reading comprehension and motivation of diverse students. Using previous knowledge and the work of several researchers including, Au, Daniels, and Rosenblatt, I decided to implement literature circles using culturally relevant text to strengthen comprehension and increase motivation of my fifth grade students.

Statement of the Research Problem and Question

Within my fifth grade classroom, there lies a problem with comprehension and student motivation towards reading. In my class of fifteen, 75% of students are reading below level. Those same students state that they are unmotivated when it comes to reading and rarely read for pleasure. In response to this problem, I implemented literature circles in my classroom using culturally relevant text. I will examine how culturally relevant text effects reading comprehension and motivation towards reading when students choose their own text. I will observe how reading comprehension is impacted, how student motivation is impacted, and the strategies used to discuss and understand text.

Purpose Statement

As previously described, many of my students are reading significantly below grade level. Through informal discussions, 25% of my students expressed an interest in reading realistic fictional text. The remaining 75% indicated that they read for the mere purpose of completing assignments, instead of reading for pleasure and engagement. Based on these factors, I will investigate the effects literature circles have on reading comprehension and student motivation when students read culturally relevant text. The purpose of implementing literature circles is to build a classroom community where students can deepen their comprehension and love for reading through interacting with peers.

From correlating research, taking a culturally responsive approach to maximize literacy development has proven to be effective. Students need opportunities to read about characters and experiences they can relate to. Au (2001) asserts, "Culturally

responsive instruction fosters new literacies that make connections to students' home cultures" (p. 3). This research supports that students learn best when instruction is aligned to personal cultural values and those of peers. When planning instruction, it is imperative that goals are designed to help students understand academic concepts by considering cultural elements, experiences, and practices. One way to bring culturally relevant text into the classroom is through the implementation of literature circles.

Based on research, literature circles can be identified as a teaching model where books are discussed in groups according to student choice (Daniels, 2002). They are temporary literature groups where students meet regularly to read and discuss the same book. During meeting sessions, roles are assigned as a way for students to organize discussions and establish a manageable routine. Literature circles allow students to deepen comprehension and extend their initial understanding through talking with peers. As students read and internalize information with others, questions and textual elements are scrutinized. According to Rosenblatt's Transactional Theory, all students will interact differently with text depending on their cultural experiences. As students discuss their experiences, elements from the text are being reinforced. Therefore, students construct meaning through eliciting connections, making predications, inferring, and generating questions, which contributes to their overall comprehension of the text (Connell, 2000). Considering the percentage of students reading below grade level, implementing literature circles would be a positive contribution to enhance reading habits and comprehension skills of my fifth grade students.

Literature circles have the potential to increase motivation and engagement towards reading. They can be used to incorporate student interests into daily activities.

When students are provided with opportunities to self-select books based on personal interests, they are more likely to become intrinsically motivated towards reading. Additionally, as students participate and acquire roles, research has shown increased dedication. When students are dependent on others, they realize the importance of commitment and work to fulfill their established roles. Lastly, literature circles also help create a positive classroom community where students can learn from peers and strengthen their confidence as readers. According to Lin (2004), "Literature circles promote classroom climates that are cooperative, responsible, and enjoyable because students are given the responsibility for working with each other to make decisions in accordance with their needs and interests" (p. 24). Through the implementation of literature circles, responsibility shifts from the teacher to the students and holds students accountable for their learning. As a result, students are expected to display qualities of confidence, leadership, and independence.

In several studies involving literature circles, the results remained consistent. Literature circles created opportunities for students to generate connections between text and personal experiences. Collaborating researchers, Latendresse (2004), Long & Gove (2003), Sandmann & Gruhler (2007), examined the results of implementing literature circles and concluded that discussions are often purposeful and critically minded (as cited in Wilfong, 2009). The inclusion of literature circles into daily reading practices promoted inquiry, curiosity, and encouraged learners to reflect on their chosen text in relation to personal experiences.

Similarly, in a study done by Avci and Yüksel (2011), researchers saw positive results regarding comprehension and motivation. As students collaborated with peers to

discuss their text, results showed that students retained what they read and better understood the story. Participants reported that they were motivated to read each night because they were able to discuss the book with their friends. These findings support that implementing literature circles creates a positive impact on reading comprehension and student motivation towards reading.

With more than half of my class reading below level and declaring to be unmotivated to read, the implementation of literature circles offers the opportunity for positive changes in my classroom. Upon reflecting on the types of books read in my class, I noticed that several books did not relate to the cultural and environmental factors of my students. Research has proven that providing culturally relevant text and allowing students to discuss with peers is effective; therefore, I feel it would be beneficial to implement literature circles into my reading block. From my research, I am hoping to encourage other educators in the field to implement this strategy as a way to deepen comprehension and increase student motivation towards reading.

Organization of the Thesis

Chapter two provides a detailed review of past and current research surrounding literature circles and multicultural literature. It defines literature circles and the outcomes of several studies related to comprehension and student motivation. The chapter also discusses the purpose for including multicultural literature into instruction and research supporting its inclusion in the classroom. Chapter three describes the design and context of the study. It includes information about the participants and my plan for implementing literature circles into my classroom. Chapter four reviews and analyzes the data and research by discussing findings of the study. Chapter five presents the summary,

conclusions, and limitations of the study. It also offers implications for implementing

literature circles using culturally relevant text.

Chapter II

Literature Review

As described throughout research, there are various ways to implement literature circles into the classroom; however, all should include the following elements; diversity, self-choice, and student initiative (Daniels, 2002). Teachers at all grade levels can utilize literature circles as a model for cooperative learning where students can make connections based on experiences. Regardless of cultural differences, it is important for students to feel connected to their school by having positive interactions with peers. Implementing literature circles allows students to make choices and demonstrate initiative in response to their learning. Choice typically leads to increased engagement and motivation; therefore, students need opportunities to self-select text that is important and relevant to their cultural experiences.

With the enrollment of children who are culturally and linguistically diverse from the mainstream U.S. culture steadily increasing, there is a drastic need to reshape teaching and instruction to reflect the lives, cultures, and experiences of students with diverse backgrounds. Incorporating culturally responsive instruction can be accomplished with the inclusion of literature circles and multicultural literature. From the implementation of literature circles, students are provided with opportunities to read, discuss, question, and make connections from their own experiences to those of different cultures. Literature circles allow students to engage in rich, meaningful, student-directed dialogue about books they read, which promotes oral language and literacy growth for all students, including minorities and English language learners (Carrison, Ernst-Slavit, Spiesman-Laughling, 2009). When considering a culturally responsive pedagogy,

student lives, cultures, and experiences are valued and acknowledged. Using this pedagogy, teachers must include a variety of authentic books that reflect diverse cultural groups.

Along with several other factors, educators must prepare and provide opportunities for students to make their own choices when it comes to reading. Many times we habitually choose books for our students and forget the importance of allowing students to self-select reading topics. Samway (1991) asserts, "Because many students have few opportunities to choose what they will read, they have few opportunities to become informed and independent readers" (p. 204). In literature circles, students are exposed to various types of books, which increases choice and independence. The act of choosing gives students control over their learning and the opportunity to select books meaningful to them. By allowing students to choose their own reading material, Samway (1991) noticed that students acquired a positive attitude towards reading and couldn't wait to read each day. As students read, they used their connections to the characters and events as a way to initiate conversations.

Similarly, educators must encourage student initiative through discussing and questioning different topics of interest. Rather than always guiding the way, we must support the idea of student-centered learning where students are in control of their learning. Using literature circles, the responsibility shifts from the teacher to the students and holds students accountable for their own learning. As Daniels (2006) states,

> In book clubs, we ask kids to do everything that real adults readers do: choose a
> book, assemble members, create a reading and meeting schedule, establish ground
> rules, use writing to harvest responses as they read, sustain productive on-task

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conversations, perform various self-assessments, and keep their own records. (p. 11)

This chapter defines literature circles and its effects on reading comprehension and student motivation. It also describes the benefits of literature circles and the importance of including culturally relevant text in the book selection. The chapter discusses ways to implement literature circles into the classroom based on research from other researchers. The research in this chapter provides a comprehensive view of social constructivism and ways student interaction can influence learning through the implementation of literature circles.

Defining Literature Circles

According to Daniels (2006), "Literature circles are small, peer-led discussion groups who have chosen to read the same story, poem, article, or book" (p. 2). Literature circles can be used to discuss any type or genre of text, for example: fiction, nonfiction, chapter books, picture books, textbooks, articles, or poems. The purpose is for students to interact with peers and their chosen text through ongoing discussions. Students are expected to guide their own instruction by making connections and focusing on issues that are meaningful to them (Carrison, Ernst-Slavit, Spiesman-Laughling, 2009).

Traditionally, the idea of literature circles has been used to read and discuss fictional text; however, Wilfong (2009) encourages educators to use literature circles when reading textbooks. Due to the success with fictional text, the concept of literature circles has been extended to enhance content area vocabulary and related concepts. Although student roles may differ, the process is similar. Discussion techniques are modeled as students participate in student led sessions that involve higher level thinking

skills: questioning, responding, inferring, summarizing, and reflecting. Additionally, through extended roles and discussions, students gain a greater sense of responsibility and accountability.

The implementation of literature circles as an instructional practice is grounded in the social learning perspectives and reflects the Socio-Cultural Theory. The Socio-Cultural Theory is credited to Lev Vygotsky and falls under the category of a social learning perspective. Vygotsky proposed that activities take place in cultural contexts; therefore, literacy development is understood by exploring the cultural, social, and historical contexts in which children have grown (Davidson, 2010). Learning is not just the process of memorizing, but instead, it is an interactive process that is specific to the learner's socio-cultural environment. An individual's values, beliefs, and practices will affect how they engage with different types of literature. Utilizing the Socio-Cultural Theory to maximum learning, students will benefit from engaging with peers to link literacy and experiences. As described by Tracey & Morrow (2012), literature circles are consistent with the Socio-Cultural Theory. As students participate, they learn from other group members by talking about books and making different connections. Regardless of the similarities and differences amongst cultures, the concept of literature circles emphasizes the importance of students constructing knowledge based on cultural and environmental factors. Based on experiences, readers interact differently with text, representing Rosenblatt's Transactional Theory.

Research supports that reading comprehension is an interactive, transactional process that is neither top-down nor bottom-up. Successful reading comprehension approaches emphasize a culturally relevant pedagogy, so that readers can connect with

the text. McElvain (2009) affirms, "From a social constructivist perspective, reading instruction can be seen as a transactional process between the student, the text, peers, and the teacher" (p. 81). Members within each literature circle interact to generate and exchange knowledge, which may reflect interests and cultural connections. Although all group members are reading the same text, each member may contribute and interact differently depending on their experiences. According to Rosenblatt, "The relationship between the text and the reader is fundamental to having aesthetic experiences, and thus the reader counts for at least as much as the book or poem itself" (as cited in Connell, 2000, p. 27). As described, the reader plays an active role in the reading process by constructing meaning through lived experiences.

In addition to the Transactional Theory, Rosenblatt supports expanding traditional reading material to include unrepresented groups. Students must be exposed to a range of literary works. Expanding literature to include diverse cultures, especially those present within the classroom will elicit aesthetic experiences and make reading more meaningful.

Similarly, Au (2009) states in relation to cultural text, "Student-led small groups in the form of book clubs can be used to promote higher level thinking about text" (p. 182). Implementing culturally responsive literacy instruction will provide opportunities for students to become thinkers, instead of workers. Students from diverse backgrounds need opportunities to read and respond to culturally relevant text. The approach behind culturally responsive instruction helps students understand text and concepts through their cultural values and/or practices (Au, 2001). Au emphasizes the importance of setting ground rules in each group to reinforce values of cooperation and collaboration. When working with students from diverse cultures; values, traditions, and customs may

differ, making it beneficial for students to choose group rules and roles. By providing choice and encouraging student initiative, students are more likely to experience increased intrinsic motivation.

As described by Cambria & Guthrie (2010), engaged readers are those who are intrinsically motivated and who read for pleasure. Engaged readers use metacognitive strategies to understand, respond, and discuss text. Research shows that engaged students read eight times more than disengaged students making it imperative that educators find ways to increase student motivation towards reading (Tracey & Morrow, 2012). Engagement and achievement have a reciprocal relationship, which Stanovich (1986), refers to as the Matthew Effect. Stanovich applied the Matthew Effect as a term to model effects occurring in the reading process. Using research behind the Matthew Effect, Stanovich stated that differences in readers are impacted by active and evocative organism environment correlations. Those who possess a stronger foundation of reading continue to excel because of factors within their environment. Typically, these students choose to read during leisure time, have friends that read in their leisure time, request books for presents, and display eagerness or motivation towards reading. Those who lag in reading do not construct the same environmental factors and are exposed to less text in school, due to specialized reading programs. As a result, students are less motivated to read due to the difficulties they encounter when reading.

Strategies for Implementation

When implementing literature circles in the classroom, there are several different approaches. The maturity level of students, classroom routines, and organizational styles must be considered. Educators must remain flexible and make modifications as needed

to design an approach that works best for students. The grouping of students can be either heterogeneous or homogeneous. Depending on the students, they can be grouped by reading level or based on self-chosen texts. Within each group, students can read the same text, or different groups can read different texts. Literature circles do not have to be used every day; however, students should be aware of their meeting schedule. Observations, performance tasks, or traditional assessment methods, can be utilized to monitor comprehension (Tracey & Morrow, 2012).

Literature circles allow opportunities to practice proficient-reading strategies: questioning, connecting, inferring, visualizing, determining importance, comparing, and contrasting. Rather than teaching higher-level thinking skills in isolation, they can be explicitly taught; therefore, teachers must guide the group dynamics to create a trusting and vigorous classroom community. According to Daniels (2006),

> Peer-led reading groups need much more than a good launching; they require constant coaching and training by a very active teacher who uses mini lessons and debriefings to help kids hone skills like active listening, asking follow-up questions, and disagreeing agreeably, dealing with "slackers," and more. (p. 13)

Literature circles provide opportunities for students to think critically about topics of their interest. Within each group students can respond orally or through writing. Usually, most tend to communicate orally while a group member jots down notes for the group; however, written conversation is another strategy. Students can write letters to each other, pass notes in pairs, or circulate journals around the group, resulting in ongoing communication and engagement. In order to achieve this, modeling strategies of thinking and responding to text is beneficial.

In typical classrooms, the term assessment is used to identify a type of project or standardized test given at the end of a lesson. In previous years, books reports where used as a way for students to demonstrate understanding of the text they read, and also a way for teachers to grade students on their reading. Although projects are beneficial, Daniels (2006) emphasizes the importance of performance-orientated projects in which students participate in talk shows, song parodies, and reader's theater activities. In addition to a final project, teachers should continuously observe the activity itself (peer-led literature circles). Therefore, teachers must develop a rubric and track student performance within each group through informal observations. Both, literacy comprehension and discussion skills should be assessed.

Many times leadership roles in each literature circle are developed amongst students. Developing roles ensures that all students are actively participating and involved. As strategies for implementation may vary, student jobs and/or roles may also vary. Ferguson and Kern (2012) discussed roles they assigned to students based on comprehension strategies: sensory image-maker, inference maker, questioner, connector, and synthesizer. In each role, the researchers provided guidelines and example questions for students to respond to. In another study, the researcher Lin (2004) identified key roles such as the questioner, illustrator, passage master, and connector. Students were given a role sheet and expected to complete their own assignment sheet each time their group met. Although student roles and strategies may differ, research supports shaping literature circles to meet the needs of the students.

Benefits of Literature Circles

With the many different implementation approaches, literature circles have been viewed as a durable and sustainable classroom activity. Around the world the idea of literature circles has been included into daily instruction with the outcome that kids are starting to enjoy reading (Daniels 2006). Daniels places literature circles into the categories of engagement, choice, responsibility, and research. As students work in peer-led discussion groups, there is a greater opportunity for "positive peer pressure." At times many students are reluctant to respond in a whole group setting due to the fear of being ridiculed or wrong in front of their teacher and peers. With the inclusion of literature circles, teacher involvement is minimal, putting students in control of leading their own discussions.

Literature circles allow students to experience success, rather than frustration. One of the leading components is choice. Allowing students to choose their own books creates opportunities for all students to obtain a readable and interesting book. When students have the ability to choose, they are more likely to remain motivated and engaged when completing a task. Literature circles also establish responsibility amongst students. Usually the teacher is responsible for running each lesson; however, in literature circles, the students are expected to lead. Students are expected to choose books, create schedules for reading and meeting, establish rules, respond, discuss, and sustain on-task communication. Based on Daniels research, when students are engaged, given choice and responsibility, reading comprehension and attitude towards reading are likely to improve. With appropriate accommodations and support, all students will have the opportunity to succeed (Daniels, 2006).

Previous Research

There has been extensive research supporting the implementation of literature circles in classrooms. From analyzing the work of several researchers, Lin (2004) concludes that studies have resulted in "stronger reader-text relationships, improved classroom climate, enhanced degrees of gender equity and understanding, and a learning environment more conductive to the needs and abilities of English language learners" (p. 24). Through the implementation of literature circles, Lin observed that students had opportunities to make and discuss connections with peers. In doing so, students deepened their understanding and enjoyment of the text. Literature circles also helped create a positive classroom community in which students collaborated and worked together. From working with others, students learned to respect different perspectives on topics and the importance of active listening.

In a study done by Johnson (2000), a "girls" only literature circle was observed. The participants included 11 middle school girls from a reading class. The girls were placed in literature circles and discussion techniques were observed. The study indicated that girls are more likely to express themselves and remain confident without male classmates dominating the conversation. Additionally, the examination of gender issues is more likely to occur if groups are gender orientated. Learning and working in literature circles provided a low-risk environment for learners, which increased participation.

In another study, Ferguson (2012) introduced literature circles to her seventh and eighth grade students. She followed the typical routine; encouraged the use of written notes and student jobs; however, she noticed many of her students were "fake reading".

Through ongoing reflections and extended research, she made changes in her own teaching and immediately saw a decline in the number of students who "fake read". According to Tovani (2000), fake reading refers to students who struggle with comprehending and making sense of words. Fake readers are those who can decode words, but they do not understand what they are reading. In addition to the decline of "fake reading", Ferguson saw improved classroom management, where more students remained on task. As part of the changes, Ferguson modeled strategies, provided examples of student roles, considered group interests, and met with groups regularly to discuss what worked and what needed improvement. Once students received the necessary support, Ferguson saw an increase in discussion, comprehension, and leadership.

Avci and Yüksel (2011) aimed to examine the effects of literature circles on fourth grade students. In the study, the researchers gathered pre and posttest results and collected the opinions of students and teachers. Students and teachers both reported that literature circles provided opportunities for students to better comprehend text compared to when students read individually. As students discussed text details over an extended period of time, students were able to remember details and understand the story. The students noted that they enjoyed performing different tasks and cooperating with their friends to discuss the story. The findings showed that from implementing literature circles, reading comprehension skills and student motivation towards reading improved.

Martínez-Roldán & López-Robertson (1999) initiated literature circles in a first grade bilingual classroom. As researchers they wanted to explore the use of Spanish literature and critical dialogue. Prior to the study, teacher surveys indicated that

transactions between bilingual children and literature were neither expected nor encouraged. Participates of the study included 22 Latino students; 12 were English dominant and 8 were Spanish dominant. As the study progressed, it was noted that the students explored and responded to social issues surrounding their community by making connections. When unsure of words or ideas, the students relied on the illustrations to make meaning of the text and validate their ideas. The students also made several connections to personal experiences, other books, and environmental factors. Through ongoing observations, it was discovered that story telling was an important part of family life for the Spanish-speaking students because it helped bring out their own feelings. At the end of the study it was concluded that all students, regardless of their linguistic backgrounds were able to hold discussions when provided opportunities to engage with text and their peers.

Contrary to the positive aspect of implementing literature circles, Daniels (2002) describes the criticism towards literature circles to be relatively minor. The first concern regards the over emphasis on testing, grades, and data. As literature circles were implemented, many teachers reported that they felt obligated to grade student performance. This mindset counteracts the purpose of literature circles and the push to read for enjoyment. Additionally, literature circles are criticized because they do not resemble testing procedures. Since school funding relies on testing results, many feel literature circles are not as practical as administering a practice test. Although the strategies encourage critical thinking and responses, several teachers believe practice tests are more beneficial in boosting testing scores.

There is also a recurrent problem, which Daniels (2002) calls the "terminology drift". Terminology drift refers to those who incorrectly use a strategy and the terminology associated with the strategy. In relation to literature circles, Daniels witnessed teachers misuse the term literature circles to describe any reading activity that grouped students together. To avoid misconceptions, literature circles should only be used to describe student-led reading groups, rather than groups led by teachers.

Although role sheets have proven to be effective, it was noted that assigned student roles often become a hindrance to student conversations. Teachers noticed that student literature circles were too mechanical and students never actual got into real conversations, which defeated the purpose of literature circles. In response of this concern, Daniels (1994) states, "The role sheets are supposed to be transitional, temporary devices" (p. 61). Role sheets should only be used in the beginning to model the different types of discussions and gradually eliminated as students become familiar with discussion techniques. As with any new program or strategy, support should be provided, but gradually released to avoid scripted responses.

Even with the criticism surrounding literature circles, research shows that literature circles provide opportunities for students to be successful as they participate in peer-led discussion groups. There are several variations and resources to support teachers through implementation; however, it takes effort to start the process. As students become familiar with the process, instruction and strategies may vary based on student outcomes. Implementing literature circles will not guarantee an increase in testing scores, but it will contribute to the development of independent learners.

Conclusion

After reviewing the research surrounding literature circles and culturally responsive instruction, it is evident that this strategy can be an excellent way to strengthen reading comprehension and student motivation towards reading. Although there are several different methods for implementation, the results remained consistent. In several studies it was concluded that integrating literature circles into the reading block resulted in students showing better understanding of the books they read with their group. As students participated they were engaged in activities to promote critical thinking, discussion, and questioning. Literature circles provided opportunities for students to deepen comprehension by eliciting connections to previous knowledge.

In literature circles, teachers can use books pertaining to the cultures of their students to foster academic success. Purnell, Ali, Begum, & Cater (2007) contend, "Culturally relevant stories and activities help young children connect academic lessons to their life experiences, making the content more meaningful'' (p. 421). Literature circles allow for teachers to reach students on a personal level by choosing a variety of books related to the students' environment, background, values, gender, and interests. When literacy practices are related to cultural traditions, economic factors, and student interests, a greater emphasis is placed on social constructivism, in which learning is guided by experience and fosters collaboration. As students participate, they must be encouraged to discuss as active learners using prior knowledge, text, and experiences (Montgomery, 2000).

It is anticipated that this study will further explore the effects of literature circles and culturally relevant text in relation to reading comprehension and motivation towards

reading. The next chapter of this thesis will examine the design of the research study data and research collection.

Chapter III

Research Design/Methodology

The qualitative research paradigm is the framework of this study. Using this paradigm, the collection and analysis of data is completed by teacher researchers. The method of qualitative research seeks to find issues and concerns in everyday context through interviews, field notes, journals, records, observations, and student artifacts (Smythe & Giddings, 2007). When conducting qualitative research, the context of the study is important because people do not act in isolation. The setting of the study has the potential to influence actions and behaviors of the participants. For this matter, it is best to complete the study in a naturalistic setting. The nature of qualitative research is based on a broad and general question that guides ongoing steps in the study, whereas quantitative research focuses on a narrow question and attempts to prove something. Usually in quantitative research, two or more variables are closely examined and statistical data is gathered. The purpose of quantitative research is to describe, compare, and attribute causality.

As qualitative researchers, teachers must alter curriculum, challenge common school practices, and work for social change by engaging in the continuous process of posing problems, gathering and analyzing data (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009). Contrary to quantitative research, in qualitative research studies data collection is inductive; therefore, researchers must consider the viewpoints of their participants. When collecting and analyzing data about students, there are several factors to consider. Teachers must remain subjective and examine students' culture, environment, strengths, interests, and needs.

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Research is the process of discovering questions, gathering data, and analyzing data to answer those questions. As teachers we often participate in teacher research, which is initiated and carried out by the teachers in classrooms or schools (Shagoury & Power, 2012). When conducting teacher research, teachers must collaborate with others by working in inquiry communities to examine assumptions, pose questions, and gather data (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009). When teachers work together, they learn by identifying and critiquing their own experiences to provide meaningful learning opportunities for all students. Collecting data and using the data to adjust the curriculum to fit the needs of all students is just an extension of good teaching (Shagoury & Power, 2012). Similarly, Glena Bissex wrote, "A teacher-researcher is not a split personality, but a more complete teacher" (as cited in Shagoury & Power, 2012, p. 3). As teachers, we must constantly examine strategies and student responses to create the best possible learning environment. Although there are many versions of teacher research, all use inquiry as a way to ensure social justice, educational opportunity, and equity of all students.

This study analyzes the effects of reading comprehension and motivation when literature circles and culturally relevant texts are implemented into the reading block. The purpose of this study is to strengthen reading comprehension and increase student motivation towards reading through the inclusion of student led discussion groups. The study reflects the qualitative research paradigm because my intent is to improve student learning through the examination of teacher practices within the classroom setting. Since the study is taking place in my classroom and the participants are students from my reading class, the teacher research method will be used as the framework to gather,

interpret, and analyze data. The teacher research method is also being used in this study because student interaction, discussion techniques, and engagement will be observed. The qualitative inquiry strategies used in this study include student surveys, student interviews, observed group discussions, student artifacts, and my personal teacher-research journal.

Procedure of the Study

Prior to collecting data, I conducted informal observations of the classroom climate in relation to cultural diversity. Upon observing the diverse population of the class, I realized a need to incorporate authentic text involving environmental factors of African Americans and Latinos. Additionally, issues of social injustice, cultural differences, and gender differences are the types of topics I planned to focus on. Lastly, I considered the classroom schedule and gathered baseline data about the students' attitudes towards reading using McKenna and Kear (1990), Elementary Reading Attitude Survey. This survey assessed students' feelings toward academic and recreational reading activities.

Based on the classroom schedule, I decided to incorporate culturally relevant text in the form of literature circles during the reading block. The students were already accustomed to working with peers during the block; however, they would now have the opportunity to work with a small group of students of varied abilities and similar interests for 30-minute intervals. Considering culture, interests, and student abilities, I chose the following books: *Take the Court, Nothing's Fair in 5th Grade, Train to Somewhere*, *Number the Stars, and Seedfolks*. Each book was presented and students were encouraged to skim through the books by looking at the back cover, table of contents,

chapter titles, and pictures. I instructed students to choose two books they were

interested in reading and discussing with a group. The four top chosen books; *Take the*

Court, Nothing's Fair in 5ᵗʰ Grade, Train to Somewhere, and *Number the Stars* were used

to form each group. In a period of three weeks, students were given time to read each

book and discuss different topics with peers.

Take the Court, by, Bob Lanier and Heather Goodyear is based on a group of

African American students who enjoy playing basketball. Despite their skills and

commitment to practice every day at recess, there is another team who wants the court to

themselves. In the story, the main character, Lil Dobber must find a way to share the

court so both teams can play. I chose this book to attract my students who enjoy playing

basketball at the city court.

Nothing's Fair in Fifth Grade, by Barthe Declements is a humorous fiction that

tells the life of a group of 5ᵗʰ grade girls. The typical issues of 5ᵗʰ grade girls are

presented in this book through the main characters Jenny and Elise. In the story the girls

must overcome challenges of bullies, body image, friendship, and academics.

Considering the gender demographics within my class, I felt this book would spike the

interest and deepen discussions of my 5ᵗʰ grade girls.

Number the Stars, by, Lois Lowry tells the story of two best friends who are

living in Copenhagen during World War II. The main characters, Ellen and Annemarie

are faced with many challenges including, school, food shortages, and the daily patrol of

Nazi soldiers. Jewish families are being stripped of their rights, separated from their

families, and relocated to various camps. Ellen tries to hide her identity by moving in

with Annemarie's family and Annemarie is asked to go on a dangerous mission to save

her best friend. Although this book does not depict the lives of African American or Latinos, the issues of social injustice and inequality are similar to the challenges other cultural groups faced in the past.

A small group of students chose to read the book *Train to Somewhere,* by Eve Bunting. I chose to include text by Eve Bunting in hopes that students would become familiar with the author and her style of writing. Bunting immigrated to the United States and has written a variety of books. The majority of her books address issues of racial prejudice, death, troubled families, and war. Considering the community and environment in which my students live, I felt *Train to Somewhere* would be appropriate for students to generate connections. The main character Marianne, is heading west on an orphan train with fourteen other children. As the train approaches each stop, she patiently waits for her mother; however, there is no sign of her mother and no one shows any interest in adopting her. As the train pulls up to the final stop "Somewhere", Marianne is hopeful she will find her mother.

All students were given three weeks to read and discuss their books. I discussed student roles and students were provided time to self-select roles in their group. Throughout the three weeks, each group developed a schedule, made daily reflections on sticky notes, and kept track of discussion topics in their journal. In the final week of the study, the students worked together to present their book to the rest of their classmates. Rather than providing explicit instructions, the students were encouraged to work as a team to present the major themes of their book. If needed, guidance and suggestions were given.

Data Sources

I used multiple different qualitative research techniques to establish data for the study. At the beginning of the study, I gathered data about the students' interest and motivation towards reading using the Elementary Reading Attitude Survey. I charted that data to further analyze how the students felt about reading for academic and recreational purposes. I also considered multiple cultural factors including: gender, ethnicity, language, community conditions, environmental factors and used this information to select five books. Throughout the study I observed all students as they worked in their peer led groups. I observed discussion techniques, interaction, and engagement. I recorded student responses in my teacher research journal to track the progress of the students' thoughts, reactions, and connections. By analyzing this data, I was able to determine the students' level of comprehension. Keeping a teacher research journal allowed me to record my own thoughts and feelings about the data collected each day. Using my teacher research journal, I reflected on my own teaching. Student journals and artifacts were gathered to gain insight into the study and further reflect on the effects of implementing literature circles.

Data Analysis

The data collected throughout the study was used to determine the effects of literature circles and culturally relevant literature in relation to comprehension and student motivation. I used the Elementary Reading Attitude Survey to gauge how the students viewed themselves as readers and how they felt about reading books in different settings. I also considered ethnicity, gender, and reading ability to carefully choose books for my students. My goal was to choose books that students could relate to on a

personal level and enjoy reading. From informal observations, I gained information regarding the students' comprehension, discussion strategies, and engagement. By collecting ongoing data in my teacher research journal, I was able to find patterns among each group and determine areas to focus my instruction. My teacher research journal also allowed me to analyze my reflections in response to my observations. Data was also analyzed from each group's journal. Examining student journals allowed opportunities to gain further insight into student responses within their groups.

Context

Community. Summerdale School is a small K-5 elementary school, located in Pleasantville New Jersey. It is one of four elementary school in the Pleasantville Public School District. Currently, about 20,000 people live in Pleasantville. Based on information provided by the United States Census Bureau, the racial makeup of residents include: 45.9% African American, 24.3% Caucasian, 0.8% American Indian, 2.4% Asian, and 41.1% Latino.

The community demographics indicate that the majority of people residing in Pleasantville have completed some form of schooling, but did not obtain a high school diploma. Among all families in Pleasantville, single females whose weekly salaries are below poverty levels lead 60% of households. Additionally, about 50% of its occupants do not have health insurance and have multiple families living in one home.

School. Considering the socio-economics of the community, Summerdale School offers several after school resources and special programs. Students have a variety of clubs to participate in and usually meet one or two days a week. Within each club, students work on building skills to expand knowledge in specialized areas. The

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Pleasantville school district also offers two special programs to accommodate working parents. The K.E.Y.S program is an after school program that allows students between the ages of five to nine the option of staying at school until 6:00 p.m. During this time students receive homework help, and are provided opportunities to collaborate with peers. Those in the fourth and fifth grade attend the C.A.R.E program. Students enrolled in the C.A.R.E. program receive homework support, participate in extracurricular activities, and attend field trips.

Summerdale School currently services over 400 students ranging from preschool to fifth grade. The students vary in ethnicity: 55% of students are Latino, 34% are African American, 8% are Asian American, and 3% are Hawaiian Natives. Pleasantville is an under-privileged urban community and the majority of students walk to and from school.

Within the school, 48 students are classified as having learning disabilities, 379 students are economically disadvantaged, and 49 students are labeled as English Language Learners. Of the 48 special education students, 34 have been mainstreamed, 4 are in a self-contained setting, and 10 students are placed in the classroom/program for those with autism. According to the student population, the male to female ratio is 200:208. Based on the socio-economic levels of the population within the school, 91% of students receive free/reduced lunch.

According to the school report card, 50% of students missed between five to fifteen days of school, and 16% of students exceeded that rate. In terms of academics, Summerdale School outperformed 8% of schools state wide, and 75% of schools with similar demographics. Additionally, in measuring college and career readiness, the

students outperformed 16% of schools state wide, and 71% of schools with similar demographics. Overall, 39% of students are considered proficient or above proficient in reading and 57% are considered proficient or above proficient in mathematical skills.

Classroom. My 5th grade class consists of 15 students. Of the students, 7 are females and 8 are males. The makeup of the class is composed of 9 African Americans and 6 Latino students. There is a positive learning community within the class. Throughout the day, students work in pairs and in small groups to maintain a trusting, and cooperative relationship. On a daily basis students rotate through centers for all subject areas. The classroom walls are full of student work and resources supporting all subject areas. Students are aware of the resources and frequently utilize the math, reading, writing, social studies, and science word walls. The majority of information is presented on the Promethean Board, so students are engaged in interactive lessons.

Students. The majority of the students attend some type of afterschool program. In the class, 3 students attend the C.A.R.E. program in which students receive homework help and participate in a variety of extra-curricular activities such as, gym, art, cooking, and technology. There are 7 students who attend power hour, which is an hour session of extra support in math and reading. The students vary in maturity and academics. I have not noticed any correlation between maturity level, academics, and club participation.

With my class of 15, 3 students have IEPs: Kwan, Murad, and Enrique. Enrique receives services for Autism Spectrum Disorder. He is functioning on the higher end, with a reading lexile equivalent to ninth grade. Currently, Enrique is working on improving his social interaction with peers in his class. He is able to communicate through writing and is working on improving his oral communication skills.

Kwan and Murad receive services for Specific Learning Disabilities. Both students are very intelligent, but need extra support in different areas. Kwan often needs to be redirected and provided visuals to remain focused. He is working on improving his reading comprehension skills to be on level with his peers. Kwan also receives occupational therapy once a week to work on his fine motor skills and improve his handwriting. Murad has dyslexia and is reading significantly below grade level. His lexile is equivalent to kindergarten. During a 30-minute intervention block, I work with Murad on strengthening his knowledge of sounds using a multisensory approach by writing, tracing, reciting, and manipulating sounds.

Students in the class usually demonstrate kindness and collaboration when working in groups. At times there are some occurrences of teasing, but this usually occurs during specials, lunch, or on the bus. In any setting, the students bring disagreements to my attention and we discuss possible solutions.

Chapter four of this thesis discusses the results of the Elementary Reading Attitude Survey, daily observations of student responses and discussions, my personal teacher research journal, student journals and artifacts. Chapter five presents the summary, conclusions, and limitations of the study as well as recommendations for further topics of study.

Chapter IV

Data Analysis

Introduction

Chapter four discusses the findings of my study, which focuses on examining the effects literature circles has on reading comprehension and student motivation as students read culturally relevant text. The data collected and analyzed came from a variety of sources including: student surveys, student interviews, teacher-research journal, student journals, and student artifacts. The data analyzed and included in this study helped determine the benefits of student led discussion groups. The benefits observed in this study are related to student motivation and comprehension.

Revisiting the Study

As explained in chapter three, I collected data over a span of three weeks. In that time, the students completed an interest inventory to assess their attitudes towards reading in various settings. I used the interest inventory to learn more about my students as readers. This information was charted so I could easily find patterns based on their attitudes toward reading. After completing the inventory, students self selected a book according to their interests. The students were grouped based on their selection and met with their group five days a week for 30 minutes during the reading block. As students discussed the text with their peers, I recorded their behaviors and discussion techniques in my teacher research journal. At the end of each session, I analyzed my observation notes and looked for changes in the areas of student motivation and reading comprehension. Throughout the study, I interviewed students to gather their opinions and feelings

towards literature circles. At the end of the third week, students presented projects on their books, which allowed me to determine their areas of growth.

Implementation

In the initial days of implementation, students completed an Elementary Reading Attitude Survey to determine their feelings towards recreational and academic reading. On this survey, ten questions were geared towards recreational reading and ten questions targeted academic reading. Each question was worth a total of four points; therefore, students could obtain a high score of 80 points. Table 1 provides a breakdown of each student's score, which I used to analyze their attitudes towards recreational and academic reading.

Table 1

Elementary Reading Attitude Survey Results

Student	Recreational Reading	Academic Reading
Enrique	20	31
Abdul	14	12
Kwan	19	22
Kesha	31	33
Sabri	17	25
Brooklyn	23	31
Diana	20	31
Armani	12	15
Tyanna	19	25
Bianca	26	29
Daniella	18	21
Murad	12	17
Armando	18	25
Manuel	20	28
Miguel	11	15

The scores indicated that the majority of students had negative feeling towards both; recreational and academic reading. Those with higher scores; Enrique, Kesha, Brooklyn, Diana, Bianca, and Manuel are students who are reading on or above level. These results were not surprising considering that stronger readers are more likely to read

and have a positive mindset towards reading. Additionally, these students come from households where parents are involved in the school district and promote reading at home. Since reading is a daily activity, they expressed interest in reading on a rainy day, reading in school during free time, starting a new book, and reading different kinds of books.

Contrarily, 75% of the students indicated that they rarely read for fun, which was validated on the Elementary Reading Attitude Survey. Based on the results, I noticed that 100% of the students would prefer to read for academic purposes instead of recreational purposes. Since the students usually read for academic purposes, they scored questions related to academics higher. This denotes that students need more opportunities to read for pleasure.

Although the responses varied on each question, several questions acquired similar scores. On questions geared towards academics, "How do you feel about stories you read in class", "How do you feel when you read out loud in class", "How do you feel about taking a reading test", many of the students scored these questions with one or two points. As I further analyzed the results, I realized that the types of stories read in my class; *Old Yeller, A Package for Mrs. Jewls, Frindle,* etc., do not relate to the cultures of my students. This may explain the low scores on questions related to stories read in class. Secondly, students indicated that they feel uncomfortable when reading out loud in class. Rather than reading books in whole group settings, I needed to utilize alternative methods that allow my students to develop a positive attitude towards reading. Lastly, students portrayed dislike in taking reading tests. Since students verbalized their frustration each time they take a reading test, I anticipated that this question would

receive low scores. Although the district mandates reading tests to be administered, reading for enjoyment purposes should be included into my reading block. Based on the results from the reading survey, my proposal to implement literature circles using culturally relevant text to increase motivation and deepen comprehension became more of a necessity.

Take the court. A group of three African American boys chose to read, *Take the Court* by, Bob Lanier. The students in this group read significantly below level, so I expected extra assistance to be needed. During the first group meeting, the boys argued over their roles. Abdul and Sabri both wanted to be the text connecter. After observing five minutes of their argument, I intervened and explained that all roles were equally important. Luckily Sabri volunteered to take the summarizer role, so Abdul could be the group connector. Shortly after that argument was diffused, the boys started disagreeing about the number of pages they should read. Realizing that more guidance was needed, I worked with them to create a daily reading schedule.

As the group met each day, they seemed to need less assistance getting started, collaborating, and organizing their group journal. Abdul and Murad came prepared each day; ready to discuss the text. Both students used sticky notes to write down questions, connections, and interesting events they read the night before. Abdul seemed to have a deep connection with this book. I frequently overheard him summarize a specific part in the story as he made a connection to his experiences. For instance:

Abdul: Last night I read about an older boy making fun of Lil D because of his jersey.

They use to be friends but they aren't now because they are on different teams.

This happens outside at recess when people change their football teams.

As Abdul, Murad, and Sabri made comments similar to the one above, they used connections and personal experiences to deepen comprehension.

Although the boys committed to following their schedule, Sabri did not complete his reading assignment for two days; therefore, he was unable to discuss with his group. From his actions I could tell he was upset that he let his group down. He apologized to his group for not coming prepared and promised to follow their reading schedule.

Abdul: Ms. J, Sabri did not do his reading and doesn't have anything to say.

Ms. J: Well Sabri, you know the expectation is for you to read every night so you can contribute to your group discussion. Since you have nothing to contribute, you need to go back to your seat and complete the reading.

Sabri: Can't I just listen and catch up?

Ms. J: That was not the rule your group agreed on. Please read at your seat.

(*Sabri put his head down, went back to his seat, and started to read his book. At the end of the reading block he went over to his group.)*

Sabri: Hey guys, I want to say sorry for not following the schedule. I will come prepared tomorrow. What pages do I need to read?

As I saw this interaction between the boys unfold, I noticed a few different things. First of all, I saw increased engagement in which students were intrinsically motivated to read (Cambria & Guthrie, 2010). Prior to the implementation of literature circles, Abdul, Sabri, and Murad rarely completed homework; however, 2/3 of the boys completed their assigned reading every night. Over the span of three weeks, Sabri missed two days of reading. His reactions showed that he was truly upset about letting his group down and not being able to participate. At this point, I saw characteristics of dedication. The boys

were dedicated to their roles, determined to complete their reading commitments, and motivated to discuss with their group.

Nothing's fair in 5th grade. Likewise, four girls expressed interest in having a girl's only literature circle and reading *Nothing's Fair in 5th Grade*. As I observed this group, I noticed that they did not require any teacher assistance. They read, discussed, developed questions, and made connections. In this group all of the girls were friends, which I feel contributed to their success. The girls referred to the book as fun and funny to discuss. They made connections to the Babysitter Club Series and stated that the book is easy to relate to because all the characters are girls with girl problems.

The girls felt it would be beneficial to read together and discuss the text as they read. At the end of each session, the girls had a pile of sticky notes, and continuously marked interesting parts as they read. I also observed peer monitoring as the students read. Since two of the girls were struggling readers, the other group members supported them while they read. As Brooklyn read, she turned to Kesha and asked, "Did I read that right?" As I observed, I immediately saw that the girls felt comfortable asking their peers for help when needed. This type of interaction was again portrayed when Kesha asked her group to explain a part she found confusing.

Kesha: I didn't understand who the author was talking about here. Who was concerned
    about their grades?

(All group members went back into the text and reread that part to help clarify.)

As the group discussed, I closely listened to their questions and responses. Based on their conversations, I was confident that each member comprehended the story. The girls asked a variety of question types, developed connections, and generated inferences.

They utilized sticky notes to document all questions and responses. Below, figures 1 and 2 are sample questions and responses the girls discussed in their group.

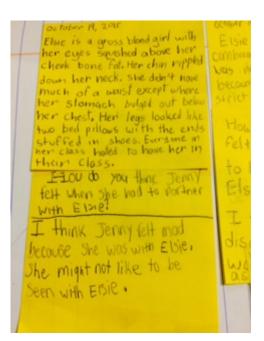*Figure 1*. Responses and Connections

Figure 2. Responses and Connections

Within this group, I also saw an increase in student initiative. On Thursdays, the girls have band practice at the start of literature circles. Upon returning to the classroom, they noticed that students were working in their literature circles, so they immediately grabbed their materials and started working. As this occurred I was extremely impressed with their leadership skills. Rather than running up to me and questioning what to do, they observed the other students and followed suite.

Train to somewhere. In the third group, the students varied in gender and ethnicity: Miguel, Tyanna, Armani. I didn't find out to the end of this study when the students presented their final project, that they chose this book because they all

experienced a time when someone abandoned them. I was surprised to find this out

because as I listened to the students discuss this book, I didn't hear any connections being

made. All group members worked extremely well together; yet, they constantly asked

text-based questions. See figure 3. From analyzing my notes, I realized this became the

pattern of discussion. When students asked questions, the other group members would

construct an answer, without actually discussing the text. To address this issue, I

presented a mini lesson on the QAR strategy. I made a chart of each question type and

response stems to help the students respond appropriately. I encouraged students to

utilize the chart to generate a variety of question types. Below, figures 3 and 4 show

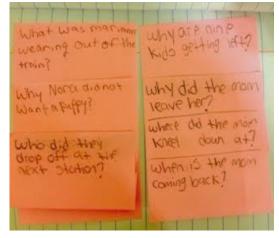questions before and after students learned the QAR strategy.

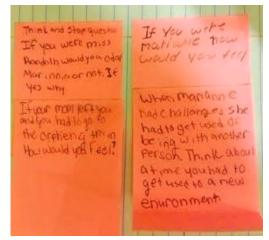*Figure 3.* Before QAR   *Figure 4.* After QAR

Once students started to think more deeply about the text, they began to pick up

on the minor, yet significant details. Miguel noticed that the main character Marianne,

referred to her parents as mama and papa; therefore, he felt the family was Spanish.

Miguel made the connection to his family stating, "That's what I call my parents too."

Once Miguel identified that the characters might be Spanish, the students frantically looked for clues to determine where the story took place. Tyanna read the street sign, St. Christophers and began to search online for street names located on the west coast. These actions showed that the students were utilizing all text features to think and respond critically about the text.

After finishing their book, the students used their understanding of the text and connections to create a tri-fold poster. Their poster included a summary of the text, characters, and major events in the story. As I observed the group over a three-week span, I saw several positive interactions between the students, which was reflected throughout the planning and presentation of their poster. As the students worked, they continued to support each other.

(Miguel was typing up information about the story)

Tyanna: Miguel, you should minimize this screen and open up another one, so we don't get confused with our notes.

Miguel: Okay, but how do I spell the main character's name?

Tyanna & Armani: We will look through the book.

The students collaborated and worked well together from the beginning of the study. During each week they relied and depended on each other, without hesitating to ask for help. From their interactions, I saw that the students developed a comfortable and trusting relationship with their peers. This relationship was also portrayed as the students presented their poster. Students reflected on a time they were abandoned by someone important to them. Tyanna, Miguel, and Armani all connected their experiences to Marianne's experience as she searched for her mother. As students discussed their

connections, I saw more than just students comprehending the text. I saw the importance

of using culturally relevant text to develop connections. The students internalized the

information in ways that were meaningful and relevant to their lives. Below, figure 5 is a
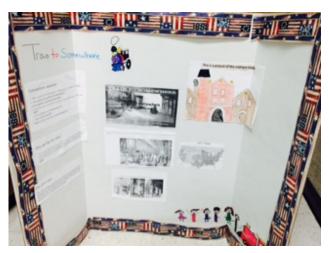
display of their finished project.

Figure 5. Train to Somewhere

Number the stars. In the final group, the students were reading on or above

grade level. Although they were all reading on similar levels, they had the most

difficulty completing daily assignments because of conflicting personalities. When I

observed this group, I noticed that in this group of five, three of the students attempted to

lead and take control. As this occurred, it caused disruptions and the students spent more

time arguing, rather than actually reading the book. It was obvious the group needed

more direction; therefore, I met with the group to develop a daily routine that

incorporated each student's role. See figure 6.

Figure 6. Routine

Once students followed their routine, their meetings seemed to run more smoothly. The

amount of times I had to redirect students and intervene to settle arguments was minimal.

As the students focused on their individual roles, they discussed the story calmly, took

turns, and made connections.

Kwan: I remember watching a movie called, *The Boy in the Stripped Pajamas* and a little

boy had to help his Jewish friend, just like Annnemarie helped Ellen.

Armando: When I read about the Jewish people being shot and their homes being

invaded, I thought about the World Trade Center and the Boston Marathon

because they were events where people were attacked.

Based on the students' connections, I saw that they started to think critically about the

text and how it related to past events. They used information from the text and connected

it to personal experiences, news events, and other forms of text. They also began to look

closely at unknown words and discussed meaning as they were used in context. When

they couldn't identify the meaning using context clues, the "vocabulary tracker" used the Internet and classroom dictionaries to obtain the meaning of the word. As students worked to construct their own learning, I saw an increase in student initiative.

In addition to daily meetings, the students decided to construct a clay model and depict an important scene from the book to show their comprehension of the story. The group followed the same procedure used in their literature circles and assigned roles as they prepared for their presentation. Each person was responsible for constructing a character or part of the scenery. As they worked on their project, I began to see increased collaboration and peer support. They refrained from asking questions and reporting problems by working together to find a solution.

Bianca: How are we going to get the clay to stay together to build people?

Manuel: I have an idea; we can use sticks to make arms and legs.

(The students worked on making clay figures together.)

From their presentation, it was evident that they understood the essential elements of the story. Together, they accurately created and retold a significant event in the story, in which a Jewish family was traveling to different houses for safety. The students explained that the families had to hide their identity from NAZI soldiers to remain safe. As they discussed, the students made connections from the challenges within the Jewish community to how African Americans were treated during the time of slavery. In originally choosing this book, those were the types of connections I hoped students would make. I anticipated students to comprehend and interact with the text through personal experiences, which the group displayed as they presented their final project.

Final Reflection

As the study came to a close, I interviewed students to gather their feelings towards participating in literature circles. The following questions were asked: What did you like about literature circles, what did you dislike about literature circles, what suggestions or changes would you make, did you enjoy reading your book or did you feel pressured to read, and would you want to do this activity again? Based on the results, student had positive things to say about literature circles.

Bianca: It helped improve my reading. I learned new words and other students helped me. I read every night because I wanted to find out what was going on. Talking with others helped me make connections to different books, to different community events, and to myself.

Sabri: I like that we can read stories that connect to our own lives. I connected to the main character because I almost got in a fight with someone, but my brother stepped in and I didn't fight. This happened in the story too. I enjoyed reading each night because I enjoy playing and reading about basketball.

Murad: I liked literature circles because I feel like a better reader. It allowed me to talk about my life. I made connections to myself because in my town someone kicked me off the basketball court.

Enrique: I liked literature circles because I had a lot of time to read. Also I liked that I was able to work with a team. I was happy that we got to choose our book to read.

Tyanna: This was my first time doing literature circles. My most favorite part was

      making the project with my group because we were able to make it however we

      wanted.

Manuel: I like literature circles because it improved my reading. Also it helped me

      develop questions. I learned new vocabulary words and their definitions. I

      enjoyed literature circles because I discussed the book with my group. I liked

      that we all had jobs and I especially liked my job because I could search up the

      vocabulary words.

Based on student responses, it was evident that they truly enjoyed the implementation of literature circles in their reading block. Several students reported that they felt participating in literature circles improved their reading. The students were exposed to new vocabulary words, which contributed to their learning. Also, the use of culturally relevant text provided students the opportunity to make connections and discuss their connections with peers. Students identified with the characters and the events, which increased their motivation to continue reading. Lastly, students enjoyed choosing their own books, roles, and projects. By giving students the option to make decisions, it allowed them to take control of their learning and develop leadership. As each week progressed, students showed more initiative and demonstrated independence throughout the completion of their final project.

When students were interviewed on what they disliked about literature circles, they had very little to say. One suggestion made was to provide questions. Although I encouraged the students to develop their own questions, students stated that they would feel more comfortable if they were given a list of questions to think about and answer.

Armando: What I did not like about literature circles was that you had to write and come

      up with your own questions. One of the reasons I did not like this was

      because every night I had to come up with questions and sometimes I didn't

      know what to ask. If I couldn't come up with a question, I would get stressed

      out.

Murad and Bianca had similar feelings and would prefer to be given questions to discuss. Both students would like to continue participating in literature circles; however, they felt groups would have deeper discussions and better comprehension if they were given discussion topics or provided questions. Although Bianca didn't mind coming up with her questions, she stated that some of her group members struggled to develop questions and she was the only one asking questions. At times, she didn't feel she was able to communicate with her group because she was always monitoring everyone's involvement.

Despite these suggestions, all students showed interest in participating in literature circles. Many of the students stated that they would like to do this activity again because it promoted teamwork. As students worked together, they felt confident and comfortable reading, working, and discussing with their peers. The students reported that they made several connections because they could relate to the characters and events they read about. As I analyzed student responses, it was evident that they had a positive experience participating in their literature circles.

Benefits of Literature Circles

Implementing literature circles into my classroom had several benefits on students' learning. While the students worked in groups, they worked to improve their

reading comprehension skills. As I started my observations, I quickly realized that comprehension was a difficult skill to observe. Therefore, I needed to focus on the strategies students used to comprehend the text; rather than, trying to measure growth. In doing so, students focused on expanding vocabulary, making connections, and developing questions related to their text.

The students used group roles as a strategy to increase comprehension. In each group, a student was designated as the vocabulary enhancer, summarizer, connector, researcher, or the questioner. Regardless of the role, all were equally important to support comprehension. Through collaboration, each role was used as a strategy to form discussions about the text. When group members did not understand a word or particular part in the story, their peers quickly responded to assist them. Research has shown that literature circles promote higher-level thinking due to student interaction; therefore, students learn from others within their group by talking about books and making different connections (Au, 2009). As connections were made, it triggered others to think deeply about the text and develop a relationship between the characters and events. Focusing on vocabulary, text details, question types, and connections helped students understand key elements of their story, which created a positive impact on their comprehension.

In addition to comprehension, I saw students motivated to participate and read. As previously discussed, Cambria & Guthrie (2010) relate motivation to interest, dedication, and confidence. From the implementation of literature circles, I saw these qualities within each group. The students showed an interest in reading and interacting with their group. They were excited about choosing their own book and working with

peers who shared similar interests. They frequently asked when they would be able to meet with their group, and often requested additional time to discuss their book.

The majority of students came prepared to work with their group each day. Those who rarely completed homework prior to literature circles came ready to participate and share their feelings about their reading. Throughout the study, only two students came unprepared and did not complete their reading, but they did bring their book and journal. Although their reading was incomplete, they remained dedicated to their group and came prepared with materials to catch up. Prior to meeting, they attempted to complete their assigned reading and role so they could meet and contribute to their group discussion.

In the final area of motivation, I observed self and social confidence. Prior to the implementation of literature circles, below level students were often hesitant to read and participate when paired with higher-level students. As students participated in their literature circles, I saw an increase in leadership and confidence. The students were more inclined to read out loud, answer questions, and develop questions about the text. Regardless of student levels, the students took the lead on discussions specific to their roles. The students did not show any signs of shyness or uncertainty. Through ongoing observations, I noticed that this confidence has extended into other academic areas. I saw an increase in participation and confidence as students worked to complete classroom assignments.

Summary of Data Analysis

As discussed in chapter two, implementing culturally responsive literacy instruction provides opportunities for students to become thinkers, instead of workers. Using a culturally responsive approach to enhance literacy development, I observed an

increase in student motivation towards reading and improved comprehension strategies. The students thought about the text and how it related to their experiences, rather than only working to complete an assignment. They took control of their learning by self selecting a book, assigning roles, developing rules, and enforcing a schedule. These findings were conclusive through the implementation of literature circles and culturally relevant text. As the study progressed, the students became more independent and aware of the expectations. They collaborated with peers to think critically about the text by generating inferences, making connections, and developing questions. Additionally, they learned different questioning types using the QAR model and applied the strategy to develop and answer questions about their book. Once students were confident in their roles, I noticed an increase in motivation. The students were motivated to read and meet with their groups. They used sticky notes to document points of interest, connections, and questions. The sticky notes helped students guide their daily discussions. They frequently asked for additional time to meet, discuss, and plan with their group. Through this experience, students participated in collaborative book clubs that promoted social engagement, intrinsic motivation, and further development of literacy skills.

Chapter five presents the summary, conclusions, and limitations of this study as well as recommendations for further research.

Chapter V

Summary

In concluding my research study, I found that students demonstrated growth in several areas as they participated in their literature circles and read culturally relevant text. All students were motivated to read when they were provided opportunities to self-select books and discuss with a small group of students reading the same book. The students choose books that were meaningful and relevant to cultural, environmental, and interest factors. After spending three weeks planning, reading, and discussing with peers, I noticed that students were developing into more independent learners. The students took initiative by creating and following their reading schedule to meet the guidelines of the study. They remained dedicated to their group roles and prepared discussion topics based on their role. Initially, I planned for students to meet for 30 minutes with their group during the reading block; however, as we progressed through each week, the students requested more time. As students became more comfortable participating in their group, I saw an increase in enthusiasm and a desire to read.

Once students developed a trusting relationship, they began to relate their personal experiences to the characters and events in their book. Some connections were deeper than others; yet, it was evident that students knew they could openly talk about anything. This was displayed as students discussed experiences of abandonment, racial discrimination, ethnic discrimination, and gender issues. As difficult issues were discussed, the students remained supportive and concerned for their peers. They often asked questions and commented on similar experiences.

In addition to increased motivation, I found that students collaborated to comprehend the text. Instead of reading a book and answering a set of questions, the students followed their group roles to expand vocabulary, create questions, generate inferences, and make connections. They used journals and post-it notes to document their thinking and develop a plan for discussion. Anything documented was discussed in detail the next day. This was a way for students to think aloud, while reading independently. As students engaged in their conversations, others were encouraged to make connections, questions, and comments using details from the text. Since reading ability varied in each group, students relied on their peers to help make sense of the text. In several occurrences, students often asked their peers for help with the pronunciation and the meaning of certain words and phrases. From using these strategies, students thought more critically about the text, which strengthened overall comprehension.

The students' understanding of the text was displayed in their final presentation. As my three-week study came to a close, students demonstrated their understanding of the text in various ways. The students used a hands-on approach to present their book and connections with their peers. The presentations showed that students demonstrated a strong understanding of the characters, events, and themes of each story. They actively reenacted important scenes, depicted main characters, and used animations features to reconstruct the story. As each group presented, members provided support when needed, showing a positive and comfortable classroom community. Incorporating culturally relevant text and student-led discussion groups into my classroom created meaningful reading experiences for my students.

Conclusions

In concluding my study and analyzing the results, I found that students were more motivated to read when they were provided opportunities to self-select books and collaborate with peers. As previously described, researchers Cambria & Guthrie (2010) concluded that engaged readers use metacognitive strategies to understand, respond, and discuss text. I found this to be true in my research. As students worked in their literature circles, they monitored their own learning by developing questions, generating inferences, and making connections. Students relied on their peers for support and clarification when needed. In addition to the use of metacognitive strategies, students remained enthusiastic throughout the study. They were eager to meet and discuss with their groups. They often talked about their own cultural experiences and practices as they developed a relationship to the characters represented in the story.

As I attempted to analyze comprehension, I realized it was harder to track then I had anticipated. Since the study was only three weeks, there wouldn't be much growth in terms of statistical data; therefore, I decided to focus on the strategies students used to comprehend the text. The results indicated that students made several connections and frequently developed questions based on the chapter read. The students relied on their roles to develop discussion topics during each session. To fully comprehend the text, each student brought something different to their group discussions depending on their role. This allowed students to understand the text by focusing on vocabulary, questions, connections, and inferences.

Furthermore, the use of culturally relevant also helped strengthen comprehension. As previously mentioned, Purnell, Ali, Begum, & Cater (2007) contend, "Culturally

relevant stories and activities help young children connect academic lessons to their life experiences, making the content more meaningful'' (p. 421). These findings were validated in my study as the implementation of culturally relevant text resulted in increased understanding and deeper comprehension of the text. As student read and discussed, they made connections to family experiences, traditions, and past events. They used the QAR strategy to develop both text based and inferential questions related to the text. Lastly, the students used text features to make predictions about the characters. As a result, providing opportunities to read culturally relevant text allowed students to comprehend and make sense of the text.

As I saw students increase their motivation towards reading and deepen their comprehension using various strategies, I noticed these findings to extend into other subject areas. Students were prepared, displayed leadership, and took initiative throughout other activities. When participating in their guided reading groups, I saw more independence on behalf of the students. Rather than being told what to do, students actively took control and initiated discussions, without my direction. Although not required in guided reading, some of the groups decided to implement roles, similar to their roles within their literature circles. I noticed the use of sticky notes became a common strategy to mark areas of interest as students read and discussed. With these additions, group discussions were more focused and meaningful. Overall, upon implementing literature circles, students appeared to be more comfortable and confident as they worked with peers in other subject areas.

Limitations

A major limitation that affected my study and its findings was the time available to conduct my research. Once approved, I only had three full weeks to implement literature circles. During the month of November, my school had several days off and half days due to holidays and conferences. Although students met as much as possible, this interfered with the consistency of my study. When there were gaps in the meeting schedule, it took students much longer to get on task and start their discussion where they left off. Additionally, due to time constraints, students were only able to read and discuss one book. The study would have generated more results if I was able to track motivation and performance after working within different literature circles. For the purposes of this study, a longer time frame would be ideal so students could read more than one book.

Another limitation that impacted my study was the accessibility to books. Since I needed multiple copies of the same book, I had a limited selection to choose from. I tried to provide culturally relevant books that students could relate to and would be motivated to read based on their reading level. I utilized the school library; however, it was challenging to find culturally relevant books with varied reading levels. Considering book accessibility, e-books would be a better alternative. With e-books, there is a broader book selection and students would be able to access the books using their tablets.

Implications in the Field

After analyzing the data I received throughout the study, I found certain areas that could be further investigated. One area would include analyzing the changes in results after a longer period of time. Extending the length of the study would allow teacher researchers to track changes in motivation and reading comprehension as students read

different books and discussed with students. Students would be able to read a variety of books according to interest, genre, and cultural factors. Based on their selections, they would also have the opportunity to work with different groups. This would allow for students to have more exposure with reading and connecting to diverse text, which could yield further results.

Another implication to consider is the types of books used in the study. For the purposes of my study, I focused on fictional books; however, future teacher researchers should analyze the effects of using informational text, especially with participants in grades four and above. With nonfiction text making up over half of the curriculum, students would benefit from more exposure to informational text. Students usually have more difficulty reading and responding to informational text; therefore, strategies must be taught and practiced. Since students find it challenging to make connections to informational text, working in groups would help this issue. Using literature circles as a way to increase exposure to informational text would provide students with opportunities to utilize different strategies and strengthen reading comprehension of informational text.

As previously discussed, I found it difficult to find multiple copies of books. In my school, the teacher must provide all materials students are expected to use. Therefore, when searching for appropriate books for this study, I was limited to the school library. As I searched for culturally relevant books, I would have preferred a boarder selection; however only certain books were available in multiple copies. For this reason, I would recommend teacher researchers to use e-books. Using technology to access books provides a larger selection without any restrictions on the number of copies.

The same strategies and implementation process could be utilized. The only difference is the use of a tablet, rather than an actual book.

The final recommendation for future teacher researchers would be to record meeting sessions. Throughout the study, I relied on my teacher research journal; however, I felt I missed several informative discussions. Since I had four groups, I only observed one group at a time, which restricted the time I spent observing each group. Also, I noticed that the students responded differently when I took notes in my journal. They answered questions more quickly without actually thinking about the questions asked by their group members. It seemed they were afraid of the silence or felt it symbolized they were not working. Utilizing a voice recorder to tape sessions, rather than sitting with a group and analyzing their participation may eliminate these issues.

In summary, the implementation of literature circles and culturally relevant text can help increase motivation and strengthen reading comprehension. The study suggests that teachers provide students opportunities to read and discuss books that they can relate to with peers. As students work with peers, connections are made, questions are asked, and comprehension is deepened. As educators, it is our role to provide students with engaging activities to foster a love for reading. This can be accomplished by considering cultural factors and allowing students opportunities to read, discuss, and connect with text meaningful to their life experiences.

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Appendix

Participant Elementary Reading Attitude Survey

Date_____ Grade _____ Name_____

1. How do you feel when you read a book on a rainy Saturday?

2. How do you feel when you read a book in school during free time?

3. How do you feel about reading for fun at home?

4. How do you feel about getting a book for a present?

5. How do you feel about spending free time reading?

6. How do you feel about starting a new book?

7. How do you feel about reading during summer vacation?

8. How do you feel about reading instead of playing?

9. How do you feel about going to a bookstore?

10. How do you feel about reading different kinds of books?

11. How do you feel when the teacher asks you questions about what you read?

12. How do you feel about doing reading workbook pages and worksheets?

13. How do you feel about reading in school?

14. How do you feel about reading your school books?

15. How do you feel about learning from a book?

16. How do you feel when it time for reading class?

17. How do you feel about the stories you read in reading class?

18. How do you feel when you read out loud in class?

19. How do you feel about using a dictionary?

20. How do you feel about taking a reading test?

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