The Effects of Literature Circles on Non-fiction Reading Comprehension

and Self-Perception of Reading Skills

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CERTIFICATION OF PROJECT WORK

We, the undersigned, certify that this project entitled THE EFFECTS OF LITERATURE
CIRCLES ON NON-FICTION READING COMPREHENSION AND SELF-PERCEPTION OF
READING SKILLS by Ashley N. Miranda, candidate for the Degree of Masters of Science in
Education, Curriculum and Instruction, is acceptable in form and content and demonstrates a
satisfactory knowledge of the field covered by this project.

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Abstract

The purpose of this research was to determine if the use of literature circles, a discussion strategy, would have an impact on the comprehension of non-fiction texts as well as student self-perception of their reading comprehension skills in one Academic Intervention Services (AIS) classroom. The participants were 9th grade students in one AIS classroom within a rural high school located in western New York. This study included pre- and post- intervention comprehension and self-perception data, an intervention that introduced literature circles and their roles, a period of student practice, and a lesson on generalizing the skills learned to all literature. The results of this study were measured based on comparing the pre-and post-intervention data for individual students as well as the group as a whole. Results determined that in this study student comprehension was not positively affected by the use of literature circles, while student self-perception of reading skills was positively impacted slightly throughout the study.

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Introduction

The Common Core State Standards call for *all* students to be able to, "initiate and participate effectively in a range of collaborative discussions (one-on-one, in groups, and teacher-led) with diverse partners on grade topics, texts, and issues, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively" (National Governors Association Center for Best Practices, 2013, p. 61). Collaborative discussions, "require that students contribute accurate relevant information; respond to and develop what others have said; make comparisons and contrasts; and analyze and synthesize a multitude of ideas in various domains" (National Governors Association Center for Best Practices, p. 22). In order to achieve these standards, classroom discussion practices must be proven to be effective.

Students in Academic Intervention Services classrooms have proven to show need for improvement in specific areas of English Language Arts based on state assessment scores. Students who are at-risk in ELA often have a deficiency in literacy skills which causes reading comprehension to falter. If students are unable to comprehend the text at hand, they most likely will not be able to engage in the types of collaborative discussions that the Common Core State Standards call for. In order for students to be able to comprehend the text and then discuss the topics and express ideas, struggling readers need support in reaching these goals.

One practice that has been shown to be effective with a variety of students, including at-risk students, students with disabilities, and other diverse students is literature circles. This strategy uses collaborative discussion and active participation in order to allow students to learn and practice reading comprehension strategies that may aid in effective reading instruction. The use of literature circles has shown improvement in reading comprehension in several classrooms across the country (O'Brien 2007).

Statement of the Problem

Engaging every student within a classroom in discussions on literature is an issue that researchers and educators have been grappling with for some time now. Though there are several ways in which to immerse students in collaborative discussion, one of the most widely talked about and used practices in the English classroom is literature circles. Literature circles have become more widely accepted since their beginnings in 1982 due to the research that through time has proven them to be effective. Anderson and Corbett (2008) stated, "In 1996, the International Reading Association (IRA) and the National Council for Teachers of English (NCTE) both endorsed the use the literature circles as a recommended strategy for increasing literacy skills" (p. 25). Although there are hundreds of articles and books describing the effectiveness of literature circles, only very few of these articles speak to how students with disabilities are affected by this practice.

In response to the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (2004), there is now an emphasis on educating students in the least restrictive environment, thus creating inclusionary classrooms all over the country. While Whittaker (2011) describes literature circles as, "Used widely in general education classrooms and popular with many classroom teachers, this instructional approach is effective in improving reading comprehension and social skills for a broad range of students, including students with disabilities" (p. 215) others do not have the same outlook. Drecktrah and Berttram (1997) explain that in surveys given to over 200 Wisconsin teachers, an overwhelming amount of teachers, including teachers of students with disabilities, explain that literature circles are one of the strategies used least in their classrooms. However the researchers also state that, "a statistically significant greater portion of general education teachers than teachers of students with learning disabilities reported using literature

circles" (p. 177). Even though literature circles have shown positive results through research for both students with disabilities and normally developing students, some educators still feel cautionary when using them.

In my educational path to becoming a teacher, I have had several mentors that brought to my attention that in order for students to be engaged in their reading, teachers must make the experience as authentic as possible. Literature circles create this type of authentic atmosphere, because although students are able to socialize during their group time, they are actually becoming better readers through completing the different roles associated with literature circles. Daniels (2006) describes this by stating literature circles use, "the proficient-reader strategies that are now staples of our everyday teaching: questioning, connecting, inferring, visualizing, and determining importance" (p. 13). Every student can experience positive outcomes through engaging in what good readers do on a daily basis, whether they are reading at grade level and have no disability or they are struggling readers who need practice. Daniels also explains that, "In book clubs, we ask kids to do everything that real adult 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 conversations, performs various self-assessments, and keep their own records" (p. 11). If literature circles are presented to students as tools that will not only help them become better readers, but also allow them to understand that adult readers do the same thing, this positive approach may promote a more meaningful outlook on the work being done in literature circle groups.

Though the data on how literature circles are effective for general education students is endless, much less data on students with disabilities is available. Out of every database related to education in the Reed Library online database collection at SUNY Fredonia, only seven different

articles were available through the search terms "literature circles" and "students with disabilities". Each of the articles referenced at least one of the other seven articles that were found and read through the databases. Common themes that emerged through the reading that were specific to students with disabilities include: literature circles allow for those students who typically do not feel confident speaking up in a whole-class discussion to have the forum to do so; students feel more at ease to take risks since there is not a teacher to say that the response is wrong; roles can be assigned so that students with disabilities can show off their strengths; teachers of students with disabilities do not readily use this strategy; and literature circles enhance students' self-confidence in reading and comprehension. Though the previously mentioned themes were discussed widely, two themes were particularly interesting because of the lack of data to support them. Despite several of the articles stating that students' self-confidence in reading increases, only one includes evidence to this statement, thus creating a gap in what the literature says and any type of data to show it. The idea that teachers of students with disabilities do not use literature circles was also stated and cited in several articles, but only one of the articles hinted at to why this might be. The research states that the statement is true with data, yet it is missing the data to explain why special education or resource teachers refuse to use this strategy.

Literature Review

Literacy and Collaborative Discussions

Collaborative discussions are often used as strategies in aiding students' comprehension of a text either as a whole class practice or as smaller group practices. Several theorists and researchers help to supplement effective collaborative discussion practices to the academic

discussion as well as including the characteristics that make these literacy practices effective.

Sportsman, Certo, Bolt, and Miller (2011) claim, "Cooperative learning methodologies such as

peer-assisted learning have been linked to gains in student achievement" (p. 16). In order for a

collaborative discussion to help improve students' literacy skills, a variety of the characteristics

that are described by these theorists must be applied in these literacy conversations.

Hadjioannou (2007) suggests that teachers in collaborative discussion classrooms must get

to know their students, as well as students getting to know each other, in order to create a

positive, trusting, and respectful relationship. These relationships cultivate an environment that

furthers successful conversation. The creation of a positive and trusting environment is an

important piece that is connected another characteristic of these discussions: accountability.

Berne (2006) explains that holding students accountable is one of the most important concepts,

especially when using small group discussion practices. Accountability includes not just

offering up ideas, but rather engaging related talk with other students about those ideas in order

to further create meaning and explore other perspectives. Interpersonal relationships in the

classroom lay the groundwork for this type of interaction to become possible (Berne, 2006).

Berne (2006) also suggests that students must employ comprehension strategies

throughout the reading and discussion process in order to create a multifaceted interpretation of a

text. Ferguson et al.'s (2011) research on employing comprehension strategies within literature

circle roles also justifies this statement. The National Reading Panel's review of comprehension

strategy instruction found that approaches that discussion practices that follow natural discussion

can create the foundation for higher-level reading. Sandora (1999) found that in order to allow

for natural discussions to occur, there should be a form of scaffolding in order to support higher

levels of interactions between students and the text through questioning. This type of

intercommunication in the classroom is what Langer (2003) found to be present in English programs that beat the odds on achievement on large-scale English assessments. Langer's research (2003) found that, the modeling of strategies for successful participation discussions was present in successful classrooms. These approaches were determined to be effective across racial and economic barriers as well as academic ability (Langer, 2003).

Ferguson and Kern (2011) established that peer-led discussion of literature can aid in the benefits of language development, reading comprehension, engagement and enjoyment of literature, and improved sense of self-efficacy when reading and understanding texts. These theorists immediately noticed a decrease in the number of students who "fake read" through observable improvement in the depth and quality of written responses as well as an increased engagement in reading and discussion. (2011, p. 28). Paxton-Buursma (2008) supplements these benefits by noting that a learning environment that is rich in talk about text assists in developing comprehension, critical thinking, and basic communication skills. Fox-Cardamone (2003) determined that active and cooperative learning opportunities serve to encourage both cooperation and personalization in classrooms. This research also disclosed that students could often learn more by teaching others than by passively listening, which also enhances motivation to get involved. Finally, Fox-Cardamone (2003) expresses that active learning approaches such as student-led collaborative discussions are more democratic than teacher lectures, allowing for more student autonomy and activity, while also encouraging broader and deeper learning.

Literature Practice and Gender

After surveying the literature on gender and literacy, it was evident that in much of the existing research, females are largely left out of the conversation, while most of the articles focus on males. Only two articles fit the topic of males and females interacting with literature circles

specifically. This type of literature is particularly pertinent to this study due to the sample being made up entirely of females.

The first article deals with male students in the English Language Arts classroom. Lloyd (2006) explains much of what occurs around the reading process, "May be seen as inconsistent with boys' perception of masculine practices" (p. 31). Lloyd (2006) describes the issues with this idea in American schools when she states, "While girls in the U.S. have narrowed the achievement gaps in math and science over the last decade, American boys continue to lag behind girls in the literacy skills" (p. 30). She further goes on to explain, "The silence, the passivity, the lack of social interaction, and physical control that school-based reading practices demand are all cited as possible ways in which boys may further come to see reading as feminized" (Lloyd, 2006, p. 31). Though the research focuses mainly on what boys *do not do* within the realm of literacy, Lloyd describes a growing interest in what boys *do* when faced with literacy tasks. She states, "Traditional classroom texts, pedagogies and practices may be part of the problem for many boys; and these are certainly areas where educators can attempt to effect change" (p.31). One of the probable effective changes that Lloyd (2006) describes that can be implemented in traditional classrooms is the combination of, "the features of dialogic principles and critical literacy pedagogy in the use of literature circles" (p. 32). She goes on to explain that the practice of literature circles might be important to boys because of the elements of choice, social interaction, and control of learning are more masculine to males than the typical recitation of information given by the teacher.

On the other hand, Johnson (2000) speaks to the female perspective in the secondary English classroom and how the current practices do not match watch female students need in order to participate in literacy activities either. Johnson (2000) explains that, "[Girls] wrestle

with the dual messages of 'be silent' and 'participate'" (p. 377). The researcher had come to this conclusion based on her studies of female students and the effect of society on their performance in academics and school life. Johnson (2000) then goes on to state, "As school and societal cultures drown out and mute their voices, girls are convinced they are nonviable members of their classroom communities. They disown themselves, their ideas, and their feelings. In essence, they lose their voice" (p. 377). From this research, she resolved that in order to allow females to regain their "voice" back in the English classroom, that she would complete a study in which a girl's only literature circle was enacted. The approach to her experiment was that it would allow the female students to break away from the typical school and societal cultures expectations of girls, especially during the middle school years where this silencing seems to be most prominent. After the research was completed, Johnson discussed the effects an all-girl literature circle had on the participation of female students in discussion. Johnston (2000) disclosed that whereas the girls "...were silent observers instead of active participants in the academic world they inhabited [in regular classroom conversation]. They did not, however, display this passive behavior in the 'girls only' literature circles" (p. 376), thus confirming her hypothesis. Johnson (2000) affirmed, "By observing 'girls only' literature circles, I learned that these discussions can become a means for girls to resist their own silencing, sustain their own voices, and maintain their sense of self" (p. 386). However, Johnson did point out one finding that cannot be ignored. In her discussion, she expressed, "...it took girls almost a year to become more willing and able to talk across the silences engineered by schools, society, and themselves" (Johnson, 2000, p. 387). This final statement should be considered in future research.

Literature Circles

Definitions

Daniels (2006) explained that ever since their beginnings, there has been a constant want to define and redefine literature circles within the education realm. Many researchers have looked at the already existing definitions of literature circles and feel that they can refine the definition to their liking, which then creates several different definitions of literature circles that others must sift through (Daniels, 2006). The many interpretations of the concept of literature circles have often altered the original ideas and practices of literature circles, therefore this section allows for several definitions to shape what literature circles are. However, one idea seems to permeate much of the literature, that is literature circles are a, "…combination of individual reading and collaborative teaching" (Avci Yuskel, 2011, p. 535). Another idea that is similarly compared within the existing literature is the comparison between the terms "literature circles" and "book clubs". Casey (2009) explains, "The terms literature circles and book clubs are often used interchangeably and share similar grouping procedures, though literature circles traditionally include more prescriptive roles than book clubs" (p. 286).

O'Brien (2007) allows for his definitions to encompass the idea that, "Literature Circles are a strategy that could generally be described as collaborative, group interaction related to reading texts- texts that are interesting and allow for discussion" (p. 8). He then facilitates this idea even more by stating, "This current term, unfortunately, dissuades educators from using this strategy with nonfiction texts, assuming that the structure is specifically intended to be a form of book club" (O'Brien, 2007, p. 9). The idea of the use of literature circles and nonfiction texts together has not come about until recently. Another researcher, and common name that appears when researching literature circles, is Harvey Daniels. In his article in 2005, Daniels explains that, "Literature circles are a 'best practice' structure that embodies the possibility paradigm... [They] begin with students choosing a book they want to read (and that they *can* read, fluently

and enjoyably) and discussing it with a group of friends" (p. 55). Daniels definition of literature circles actually incorporates the idea that Hardin (2002) imposed on collaborative discussions, students must be learning and reading at the levels in which they can function as independently as possible; this is especially important when educators are expecting students to have natural conversations about literature. The idea of having students all learning at the same time, yet learning within their limits is important to remember, especially when including students with disabilities in these discussion practices.

In order to use collaborative discussions within the classroom and to actualize the demands of the new standards, teachers must strive to ensure the collaborative discussions happening within their classrooms follow certain features that have been determined by prominent literacy organizations. In 1996, the IRA and the NCTE both endorsed the use of literature circles as a recommended strategy for increasing literacy skills (Anderson, 2008, p. 25). This idea supports Daniel's statement that literature circles are a best practice and will continue to be used in classrooms nationwide and ensures that this practice will continue to be researched so that knowledge on the practice can be furthered.

Characteristics

Along with the research and need to define literature circles, comes the need to define common characteristics of which literature circles are comprised. This need stems from the idea that so often when a practice is created and/or implemented without a set of common characteristics each educator who uses in in their classroom are to follow, the names of these practices are often used yet the strategies that are supposed to accompany them are completely absent. Daniels (2006) coined the term "terminology drift" to describe this phenomenon.

The first feature of literature circles that was commonly discussed in the extant literature dealt with the size of the groups of students. Blum (2002) explained that "A literature circle is typically composed of four to six students, but conversations about literature can take place with as few as two readers or with the whole class" (p. 100). He goes on to clarify that literature circles "need to be configured so that the size of the group does not interfere with the readers' opportunities to becomes increasingly adept at expressing interpretations of texts and responding to the contributions of others in thoughtful, respectful, and probing ways" (Blum. 2002, p. 100). Teachers must know their students so that groups can be created or shifted, to allow for the most benefit from the use of literature circles, whether it means that two students comprise one group or five do. In response to the need for students to have as many opportunities as possible to engage with and discuss a text, Clarke (2007) explains that "successful literature circles depend on a classroom climate in which everyone feels valued" (p. 22). Creating a climate that is suitable for each student to feel comfortable speaking about a text because they know their opinion will be appreciated is extremely important and therefore becomes an essential tenant when using literature circles in a classroom.

Two researchers, O'Brien (2007) and Anderson (2008), give specific key elements of literature circles within their articles. O'Brien (2007) lists the following eleven elements within his research:

"(1) the ability for students to choose their own reading materials; (2) establishment of small groups that continue temporarily based on choice reading materials; (3) different reading groups working with different reading materials; (4) establishment of a routine schedule for students to meet in their reading groups; (5) use of notes to guide further discussion either in writing or in drawings; (6) student led discussions, including student

selection of topics; (7) focus on natural dialogue in open group discussions; (8) teacher as

facilitator not dispenser of knowledge; (9) assessment performed through teacher

observation and student self-evaluation; (10) positive atmosphere for *reading for*

enjoyment; (11) group conclusions that include a sharing session with classmates

followed by establishment of new reading groups" (p. 9).

In her review of literature circles, Anderson (2008) gives her reader four guidelines, the first

three have already been explained by O'Brien (2007) in his first, second, and eighth elements.

Andersons' fourth key element for the implementation of literature circles is that, "Circle activity

is aligned with curriculum standards and systematically assessed" (2008, p. 26-27). Aligning the

activities within the discussions with the curriculum standards as addressed by Anderson could

be in relation to both the school, state, and nation curriculum that have been established based on

the context of the classroom. Instating the characteristics that are commonly found in this

research-based practice is needed to ensure that this strategy is being implemented properly and

that students are being given the proper opportunities to engage in an activity, that when

implemented correctly, has the potential to be effective.

Literature Circle Roles

Literature circle roles promote students to become more proficient readers through using

specific reading strategies. O'Brien (2007) concludes that "The role choices are not arbitrary;

rather they have significant basis in theory of reading instruction" (p. 12). The roles provide

students with strategies for improving reading comprehension that include "(1) activating prior

knowledge; (2) deciding what is important in a text and synthesizing information; (3) drawing

inferences during and after reading; (4) self-monitoring comprehension, repairing faulty

comprehension; (5) asking questions, and; (6) using strategies for building vocabulary"

(O'Brien, 2007, p. 12). Throughout his article he explains that in order for this strategy to be

effective within a classroom context, these features should be evident within student's learning

and discussion, therefore, these six strategies are then compiled into six literature circle roles:

Questioner, Passage Master, Vocabulary Enricher, Connector, Illustrator (O'Brien (2007),

Whittaker (2011), Daniels (2002)).

The student in the role of Questioner uses several literacy strategies at once including

asking questions when one does not understand a piece of the text, forming critical questions

about the text rather than surface questions, and making or challenging a prediction that an

individual or the group has come up with (Whittaker, 2011). Whoever is the Questioner in the

group is responsible for writing down a few questions for the group to discuss, self-monitoring

comprehension, and asking questions of self and text. O'Brien (2007) suggests that teachers

encourage students to ask questions that promote natural conversation about the text rather than

surface questions that can be looked up within the text. The Questioner can keep conversation

natural through questioning group members and fits into two of O'Brien's (2007) key

instructional strategies: asking questions of the text and drawing inferences during and after

reading.

The Passage Master, also known as the Literary Luminary, allows for students to decide

what is important in a text, to synthesize information, and to pick out and paraphrase the main

idea of a text (O'Brien, 2007). Whittaker (2011) also suggests that this role allows for students to

recognize text structures as well as understanding literary elements. When a student is acting in

this role within the group, it is important that as he/she is reading he/she selects sections of the

text that he/she wants to share with the group. The selections chosen should reflect the main idea

of the text, something that is interesting, or something that is controversial, but ultimately the

student should choose parts of the text that can help to develop an understanding amongst group members that the explored text is "discussable material" (O'Brien, 2007, p. 11). This role uses one of O'Brien's (2007) effective literacy instruction strategies: deciding what is important information within the text.

The role of Vocabulary Enricher is very unique - it encourages students to admit what they do not know (O'Brien, 2007). A student that is acting in this role is expected to note unknown words so the group can discuss them and use context clues in order to expand their vocabulary of the group as a whole (O'Brien, 2007). The literacy strategies used in this role include: analyzing text for unknown vocabulary, using context clues, earning unfamiliar words, and understanding figurative language (O'Brien, 2007, Whittaker, 2011). The Vocabulary Enricher follows O'Brien's instructional method of using strategies to build vocabulary.

The Connector role is one in which students activate prior knowledge through making text-to-self, text-to-text, and text-to-world connections. When performing this role, the student is likely to analyze, interpret, infer, and relate to the information in the text thus allowing group members to acknowledge that the literature is relatable to student's lives (Whittaker, 2011 &, O'Brien, 2007). O'Brien (2007) proposes that the role of Connector is one that might be most useful for students with disabilities to begin with, since, as explained by O'Brien, this group member's contributions cannot be deemed as incorrect. This role follows the instructional strategy of activating prior knowledge.

The role of Illustrator is highly creative and artistic and requires students to "visualize a situation or concept" (Whittaker, 2011, p. 218). The artistic renditions can be in the form of illustrations or graphic organizers. This role requires special attention to detail and the practice of the role comes after the reading rather than during, as is the case for the other roles. After

reading Illustrators are expected to "make mental pictures, construct visual representations of ideas, or create graphic organizers of thinking" (O'Brien, 2007, p. 12).   This practice can aid in greater comprehension of every group member, especially if organization of the information is displayed in an easy-to-understand chart.

Theory

Since literature circles are a well-researched area of collaborative discussions, multiple theories have been applied to this specific strategy. Wilfong (2009) justifies this point through stating, "Literature circles and book clubs bring together powerful research-based theories of literacy education" (p. 165). Through the many theorists and researchers, literature circles are better defined.

Clarke (2007) positions a theory well-known in the literacy practice realm within the use of literature circles. She states "book groups capture the belief that reading is transactional and that meaning is not just found in the text or a reader's head but also in the transaction between the reader and the text" (p. 21). The theory that reading is a transactional process is one that many prominent researchers in literacy have proven to be applicable to all readers (Clarke, 2007). Clarke also stated, "Students who talk about what they read are likely to engage in reading" (p. 21). The understanding that reading is transactional is important in **r**ecognizing this idea. Wilfong (2009) adds, "Researchers have examined the discourse that takes place during literature circle meetings and found that discussion is often purposeful and critically minded" (p. 165). If students interact with the text first on an individual level, having students talk about that transaction in a literature circle could only enhance the transaction they experience with the text.

Other theorists focus specifically on literacy instruction of adolescents. Roberts' (2008) theory in application to literature circles is that "Finding ways to motivate and engage students in reading is an essential feature of adolescent literacy instruction, particularly as older readers face increasingly difficult reading material and classroom environments that seem to deemphasize the importance of fostering motivation to read" (p. 67). By de-emphasizing the need for students to have motivation to read, teachers force students to read texts that are unimportant and not applicable to students' lives. The job of educators then is to find texts that motivate students to want to read by allowing students to explore texts that are relatable to their lives, which then mimics what adult readers are able to accomplish.

One fundamental theory in relation to literacy instruction is that reading is a social practice. This idea was founded by Gee (1998) when he discussed people not only have multiple literacies, but literacy is also inherently connected to social practice. Gee claims that written language should not be something that is read and not acted upon afterwards through oral conversation and that the reading and conversation is affected by the different values held by the social groups that the person reading is part of (1989). Gee's theory is very closely associated with the sociocultural views that other theorists have. Casey (2009) describes:

> Sociocultural views of learning suggest adolescents' literacy development is related to the unique social communities that they inhabit. According to sociocultural theory, mapping adolescents' literacy development involves understanding the larger community in which the school is situated, recognizing the multiple social systems that exist within the classroom, and understanding the unique needs and interests of the individual students. (p. 285)

During the conversations that follow the individual reading time that literature circles allow

students, "…decode, describe, and react to a shared reading even, their individual identities and

experiences shape conversations and the texts being considered" (Casey, 2009, p. 286). Both

Gee's theories as well as sociocultural learning views also lend way to the reader response theory

which, "stresses the dialogic nature of the reading process and expressive talk facilitates the

transaction needed between the meanings reads bring to, and take from, the text" (King, 2001, p.

33). These common approaches to literacy instruction and practices are all found within the

practice of literature circles.

Another theory underlying the instruction and practice of literacy is that students must

learn for authentic purposes. Parsons and Ward (2011) declare "The argument underlying the

promotion of authenticity is that too many school tasks are unauthentic, unrealistic, and, by

implication, not useful for engaging in real-world literacy activities; that is instead of teaching

kids how to 'do school' we should be teaching them to 'do life'" (p. 462). Since language is best

learned in functional contexts, Purcell-Gates and Hall (2006) assert that "students learn language

not in abstract, decontextualized terms, but in application, in a context that language is really for"

(p. 347). Students who learn and practice within contexts that relate to real life situations are

more motivated to learn and participate in instruction than students who are forced to complete

tasks that are not applicable to life outside of school.

According to many sources, literature circles allow students to experience learning in a

context that allows them to practice strategies used in everyday life, which then enhances the

value the work being done. Daniels (2006) describes the real life application of literature circles:

"In book clubs, we ask kids to do everything that real adult 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 conversations, perform various self-assessments, and keep their own records" (p. 11).

Several other researchers (O'Brien, 2007   Whittaker, 2011; Blum, 2002; and Brabham, 2000) have found the same types of real-world features that literature circles include. Brabham (2008) explains that students must independently prepare for discussion through reading the agreed amount of text. Just as in adult book clubs, Blum (2002) discussed that "Students, not the teacher, set the agenda and determine what is of value in the reading, responding from the tasks associated with the assigned reader role" (p. 101). The idea of students determining what content is important allows students to think critically on their own in place of the teacher-led initiation, response, evaluation (IRE) pattern of conversations that typically occur in the classroom. O'Brien (2007) emphasizes that making personal connections with a text that students choose allows for them to create personal experience, thus making learning relevant to their lives. The use of authentic practices, such as literature circles, allows students to see that their learning is applicable to their lives inside the context of school as well as the real world.

In relation to literacy instruction, there has been research that has been completed in order to prove or deny certain theories. One specific theory about literature circles, which was not traceable to one specific source, is the idea that this strategy can increase comprehension, allow critical thinking at higher levels to occur, and create more natural and valuable responses to the literature that is being read. Brabham's (2000) research in his article explains the actions that skillful readers take. He explains that skillful readers:

"Make predictions, construct visual images, create connections to personal experiences and other texts, monitor their reading and whether it makes sense, solve word- and text-level problems in flexible ways, summarize as they go, argue with the author, and

evaluate content and writing style. In short skillful readers take ownership of their

reading and construct meaning in active and careful ways" (p. 278).

Each of these actions that Brabham explains are strategies that have been proven to be used by

thriving readers and are incorporated within the roles of literature circles. The concept behind

integrating these strategies within literature circle roles is to help struggling readers understand

the tactics used by others to increase comprehension.

Literature Circles and Struggling Readers

Several researchers have confirmed that literature circles, when adapted for use with at-

risk learners, can be just as effective for these students as they are for typically developing peers.

Sportsman (2011) defines students who are at risk as those who, "…are often those who belong

to a disadvantaged group or experience difficulty in academic or social domains" along with

"…at-risk students may be those who differ from other children in terms of their learning styles,

learning disabilities, or life experiences" (p. 14). O'Brien (2007) proposes:

 "Learning and behavior disorders are particularly in need of active student response-

active engagement in learning activities. Special education research has established that

student achievement is enhanced and behavior problems are reduced when students with

learning and behavior problems have opportunities to actively participate in learning

activities" (p. 13).

Literature circles are an active response model of collaborative discussion, which promotes

student learning and reduces behavioral problems that may occur in the classroom. Daniels

(2005) describes literature circles as "best practice for inclusion of students with learning and

other disabilities precisely because the strategy assumes that each student will bring to the group

precisely whatever they do well" (p. 55). The use of several roles within one circle group allows students to first allow others to see what they are capable of before having students press onto more difficult tasks. Daniels (2005) also explains that literature circles can be effective for struggling readers because it gives them the "chance to follow [their] own interests, the sense of control, the predictable structure, the absence of right-answer pressure, and the welcoming differences- these features embody the idea of 'inclusiveness'" (p. 55). This is often a concept that is left out of regular classroom practices.

A study completed by Blum (2002) was done specifically to see how self-determination was affected in a middle school classroom through the use of literature circles. The study results demonstrate, "Members of the target group...accurately assessed their reading difficulties and perceived an improvement in their reading skills due to literature circles" (Blum, 2002, p. 106). This conclusion was determined through the use of a pre- and post-literature circles survey. The post-literature circles survey indicated improved perceptions of reading abilities among students within the target group, which included students with disabilities and struggling readers (Blum, 2002,). On the post-literature survey, students' responses indicated that "After engaging in literature circles...they were better able to read and understand literature" (Blum, 2002, 107). At the end of this study, Blum was able to conclude that "Literature circles are an appropriate accommodation for inclusive classrooms, and this approach promotes self-determination" (p. 107).

Struggling Readers in the Upper-Level Grades

Through much of the reading about at-risk or struggling readers, a common theme was consistent in much of the literature: Students who may have had frustration in the area of reading in the elementary reading are now also failing to thrive in reading in the upper-level grades

(Casey 2009, Fang 2008, & Wilfong 2009). This dilemma is explained by several theorists. Casey (2009) describes this problem by stating, "Adolescents who struggle with literacy typically bring a history of frustration and failure to their transactions with the text" (p. 285). She goes on to point out, "In middle school this frustration is compounded by the expectation that children are no longer learning to read, but instead reading to learn" (p. 285). Fang (2008) seconds this idea through his own portrayal of this issue:

> "It is well documented that many students experience difficulty when making the transition from the 'learning-to-read' stage in primary grades to the 'reading-to-learn' stage in intermediate grades. One major contributor to this difficulty is the difference in the kinds of texts that students are expected to read and write. In primary grades, students are exposed primarily to storybooks whereas in intermediate grades the reading materials that students encounter become more heavily dominated by expository texts. Despite this shift in reading materials, little discrimination is made in the type of reading instruction that students receive between primary and intermediate grades" (p. 478).

By changing not only the type of text that is read, but also the purpose of reading, students continue to fall behind in their literacy practices.

However, these theorists also give answers as to where to begin in fixing the gap between elementary and upper-level literacy instruction and practices. Casey (2009) suggests, "There is support that suggests struggling middle school students meet with greater success when offered a range of motivating activities that encourage reading and writing" (p. 286). Fang (2008) advocates for teachers to stray away from the "Fab Five" (vocabulary, fluency, comprehension, phonics, and phonemic awareness). He proposes that, "The continuing emphasis on these 'Fab Five', which are the hallmark of primary grade reading instruction does not, however, adequately

prepare students to read the more challenging expository texts of, for example, science and social studies that await them in intermediate grades and beyond" (p. 478). Finally, Wilfong (2009) presents strategies to help the transition. He suggests, "Whole-group instruction in reading strategies, whole-class discussion on the readings, and student-led, small-group discussion help students bridge the transition from early elementary reading experiences to intermediate and middle school texts" (p. 165). Though there is a gap between the literacy practices in elementary and upper-level grades and this may be the case for the continuance of failure for struggling readers, there are also suggestions to help the transition.

Accommodations of Literature Circles for Academic Intervention Service Classrooms

The NYC Education Department issued a question and answer handbook on Academic Intervention Service classes in 2000. Academic Intervention Services (AIS) classrooms have been created as a way to provide additional instruction and practice for students that did not scored below on the designated performance levels on elementary, intermediate, and commencement-level State assessments in English language arts (ELA), mathematics, social studies, and science (NYS Education Department, 2000, p. 4). In this handbook it explains that instruction in AIS classrooms supplements regular English Language Arts classes and further assists students in meeting State standards. Students in AIS classrooms will most likely need more supports to complete the same work as students that do not need AIS assistance.

Educators who are using literature circles in their classrooms understand that they are asking students to independently complete work, with direct instruction in the beginning, and scaffolding so that the educators can then focus on facilitating the literature circle groups. Whittaker (2011) gives three instructional approaches that should be used with struggling readers in her article: "(a) use peer and teacher feedback, (b) elicit ongoing interaction, and (c)

encourage task completion" (p. 215). Since literature circles are comprised of these three instructional strategies, they have been deemed as good practice to use with students with disabilities and struggling readers (Whittaker, 2011). There are several articles that describe the types of accommodations that can be used in practice with literature circles, though there is little research to prove whether these accommodations effectively give students the supports that are necessary (O'Brien 2007, Daniels 2009 Sportsman, E., Certo, J., Bolt, S., & Miller, J. 2011, Whittaker 2011).

Literacy instruction that occurs in academic intervention classes at the middle and high school levels are more rigorous than elementary level literacy instruction and struggling readers may have difficulty keeping up with the demands. Roberts (2008) described this difficulty when he explained that even though older readers could have had a solid basis of literacy instruction in the elementary grades, their struggles might have been overlooked and/or not corrected in the proper manner. O'Brien (2007) supports this idea in the following statement:

> "General education classes, particularly at middle and secondary levels, are not about basic skills- they are about acquisition of content knowledge. The job of the special educator is to ensure that students with disabilities have access to the secondary content comparable to their nondisabled peers" (p. 7).

If students are missing the basic literacy skills they need from the elementary levels, they will not succeed in the upper levels of education without targeted instruction on these skills. The National Reading Panel designated five essential areas for reading instruction for older readers: "(1) word study, (2) fluency, (3) vocabulary, (4) comprehension, (5) motivation" (Roberts, 2008, p. 64). These five areas are encompassed within literature circle instruction and practice, but are not the sole purpose of reading.

Though literature circles are meant for students to mostly work collaboratively, with the teacher as the facilitator, this might not always be what is best for students who struggle with comprehension, at least not right away. Struggling readers might need more support in the form of more scaffolding when it comes to interacting with group members independently. O'Brien (2007) explains, "Educators attempting to support struggling students in using this strategy will quickly note the challenge of students selecting their own texts, their own roles, and their own groups" (p. 10). O'Brien's statement provides a starting point for which teachers can begin to understand where their students may need help.

Through direct instruction is not a large part of literature circles, it is an important part when beginning the process of introducing the practice to students. Whittaker (2011) suggests when introducing literature circles to students, direct instruction on how to use the tools to complete the roles is important. Students may not comprehend the responsibilities of each role if they have not been properly explained and modeled. This type of direct instruction is not usually found in the characteristics of literature circles since many students may not need this additional help, but all students have the possibility of benefiting from seeing each role and the expectations of that role modeled for them. Whittaker (2011) also explains, "Individual students may need guidance in choosing texts appropriate for their reading level. Frequently there are opportunities for students to access text that is somewhat above their reading level by using technology" (p. 216). Struggling readers might not know the specific reading level they are achieving within. Through having assistance in choosing which book is most suitable for their needs, students will be able to more readily engage in meaningful conversation about the text with peers. Finally, in her article Whittaker (2011) explains that the teacher might have to step into a role that is not the facilitator or the educator in order to help individuals without stigmatizing them. She explains

that there are many "formats for teacher involvement range from most to least intrusive and include teacher as leader, group member, outside observer of one group, and roaming observer of multiple groups" (Whittaker, 2011, p. 219). If a struggling student needs help in communicating with peers or understanding their role, the teacher has many options in order to help this student without indicating the student is having trouble.

After reviewing several articles that incorporate accommodations, a common thread was the flexibility of the use of literature circle roles. Whittaker (2011) acknowledges that initial role assignments should be made based on assessment data on similar goals. Literature circles can be used as an approach to amend the literacy deficits students have; by recognizing specific goals to be met, even more gains may possibly be made. Though students typically rotate literature circle roles, the amount of time typically spent on one role might not be enough for struggling readers. Whittaker (2011) suggests that students practice with one role by keeping it for more than one meeting so the student can practice the many strategies that each role encompasses. Brabham (2008) also recommends amending the use of individual roles. Instead of having one student complete the same role for several group sessions, he suggests a "two-step plan in which circles are arranged first with students sharing the same role. In these groups, students gain competencies that allow them to talk about their role confidently when they form circles with students in different roles" (Brabham, 2008, p. 280). Completing one role at a time as a group can provide at-risk students the scaffolding needed so that they can become confident and competent within each role when it comes time to complete them independently.

Using independent roles associated with literature circles allows for students to come to discussions prepared and for natural conversation to occur. Generally, role sheets in literature circles are temporarily used in an effort to promote students' use of the strategies among the

various roles on their own, without having to interrupt conversation in order to check notes on the role sheets. O'Brien (2007) claims that "departure from the individual roles to a less structured format sounds good on the surface, but presents a challenge to students with limited academic skills who may no longer feel they have anything to contribute" (p. 10). He goes on to explain that the maintenance of clear roles means that students who struggle can still have a clear-cut responsibility so that they will always have something to offer to the discourse of their group (O'Brien, 2007). Though moving away from the role sheet may prove to be a difficult endeavor for some students, Stein and Beed (2004) specify a strategy to remedy some of the anxiety students may face called "tabbing" (p. 516). When tabbing a book students can take a sticky note and write comments, questions, or connections to the text and place it within the book being read. Stein and Beed (2004) explain that the use of this strategy in order to reduce reliance on the role sheets would allow students the flexibility to use one or all of the roles at once within their reading and discussion practices. Using adaptations of characteristics commonly used in literature circles have been shown to be acceptable accommodations for at risk students.

Practice of Reading Skills to Increase Reading Comprehension in At-Risk Students

As stated previously, literature circle roles use many essential reading skills in order to increase reading comprehension. Sportsman et al. (2011) supports this idea in describing, "Literature circles promote a full array of reading skills, including vocabulary work, comprehension, and theorizing, which involves the use of deeper level cognitive processing" (p. 17). Avci and Yuskel (2011) also endorse the use of literature circles because, "The method is quite effective in getting [students] to adopt reading habits. In addition, it improves the reading skills of students" (p. 1296). The researchers go on to explain

"Reading comprehension is finding the meaning of the text read, thinking about it and

making inferences. RC [literature circles] facilitates students thinking about the themes

by means of tasks and discussion and allows them to reach their own conclusions by

carrying out [verbal] evaluations" (Avci & Yuskel, 2011, p. 1298).

Finally, Brown (2002) and Klingner et al. (1998) found that literature circles can improve

students' reading comprehension skills and use of reading comprehension strategies.

Methodology

This research was designed to determine the effectiveness of literature circles on

nonfiction text comprehension as well as self-perception of reading skills in one AIS classroom

in Western New York. It is hypothesized that the use of literature circles will increase

comprehension of nonfiction texts along with gains in students' self-perception of their use of

comprehension skills in an AIS classroom more so than the direct instruction and independent

practice strategy would. The overall design of this project will use a quantitative approach, where

formal and systematic data collection processes are used in order to test this hypothesis. This

quantitative study will focus on a single-subjects experimental design which includes a pre- and

post-test design, an intervention process, and a random assignment of participants.

Participants and Setting

The participants in this study are based off of a convenience sample, which is effectively

a non-random sample. Due to the researcher's lack of classroom access, this convenience sample

was chosen based on one Academic Intervention Services (AIS) classroom teacher's permission

for this research and intervention to proceed within her classroom. This permission was gained

with certain restrictions, further discussed in the limitations of this study. Though participants

for the study were selected based on convenience, there were certain criteria the class as a whole

were required to meet: single grade level, participation in an AIS program, student consent, and parental permission to complete this investigation. The sample of participants was small, with only four participants during the intervention. All four of the participants were female, between the ages of 14-15, were eligible for Academic Intervention Services, and consented to engage in the research.

This study took place in one ninth grade AIS classroom in a rural high school located within Western New York. This location was nonrandomized; it had been chosen by convenience by the principal investigator, due to the closeness in location to her home as well as teacher willingness to participate in the study. The enrollment for the entire school is estimated to be about 570 students. Fifty-seven students have been recorded as registered in ninth grade. The average class size for this school is between 17-20 students and attendance rate is high with an estimated 95%. The graduation for the student population is also fairly high with 86% of senior students graduating. In the school district, 26% of its student population is eligible for free lunch, while 10% of students are eligible for reduced lunches. The school population is not highly diverse. The breakdown of race/ethnicity is as follows: 92% white, 1% American Indian or Alaskan Native, 1% African American, 5% Hispanic or Latino, and 1% multiracial. In relation to performance on Regents English exams, students have performed at varying levels. The last State exam that was reported for the ninth grade study participants was seventh grade, which is what the following data reflects. On the English Language Arts NYS test, 0% of students scored a 4, 52% of students scored between a 3 and 4, and 100% of students scored between a 2 and 4. This data reveals that though no students reached a complete level of mastery, no students were completely non-proficient either.

In this study, the principle researcher also acted as the instructor during the interventions. The researcher is a twenty-three year old Caucasian female. She has a certification in English Language Arts 7-12, which qualifies her to teach the participants in this setting.

Variables

The dependent variable in this study is student reading comprehension levels as well as self-perception of comprehension skills. The independent variable in this study is the use of Literature Circles as an intervention. With the study, students will engage in literature circles through the use of direct instruction of roles, modeling and guided practices, and independent practice during independent literature circle times. It is expected that the use of literature circles as an intervention and independent variable will have a positive effect on the dependent variable.

Several extraneous variables may affect the results of this study due to the nature of working with children. These extraneous variables can include but are not limited to: peer tension, outside issues infiltrating classroom time; lack of social communication/conversational skills needed to complete tasks; lack of motivation; students joining in the study late or leaving early; high rate of absenteeism; and outside interruptions to literature circle time. Each of these variables may affect final data, but will be closely monitored and reported.

Data Collection and Analysis

Pre- and post-intervention assessment data will be collected in a similar manner. The pre-intervention assessment data will be used as baseline data to compare the final data points to in order to see if the intervention was effective or not. Data analysis will be completed in order to determine whether there is a direct correlation between the use of literature circles and nonfiction reading comprehension levels. Self-perception of use of the strategies explored within the intervention will also be measured and compared to the use of literature circles. Baseline data

and final data points will be used in order to complete a correlational analysis and a descriptive analysis of the results.

First, students will complete a Likert-type scale in which students rate the degree to which they agree or disagree with statements about reading strategies and how they pertain to them as a reader. Originally, this scale was to be completed on the web-based survey platform SurveyMonkey©, however restrictions on school computers prohibited this type of access. The Likert-scale was printed out and completed on paper where students were instructed to circle their responses. On the survey there are ten statements that speak to many different facets of comprehension skills and four options for each statement: Strongly Agree, Agree, Disagree, and Strongly Disagree. The options have been weighted with a number 1-4, with Strongly Agree being the most heavily weighted option and Strongly Disagree being the least weighted option. This allows student responses to be recorded quantitatively. The higher the "score" on the self-evaluation of student use of reading strategies, the more strongly the student feels about herself as someone who employs these strategies; lower "scores" indicate that student has less confidence in her ability to use these strategies. The same exact self-evaluation will be administered before the intervention occurs and after to see if the intervention actually had an effect on student self-perception of reading strategy use.

The other assessment that will be given twice, once before intervention implementation and once after, evaluates student performance on nonfiction text reading comprehension. Selections and questions were taken from ReadWorks.org©, which is a non-profit organization that provides free and research-based tools in order to help solve the nation's reading comprehension struggles. The selections and questions taken from this site are also aligned with the Common Core State Standards. Students were given a selection of nonfiction text and ten

comprehension questions that they were to complete. The selections chosen were based on

student Lexile level for these assessments to assure that students are not given a text that is too

difficult or easy for them to comprehend (thus tainting the data) as well as similarity in topic.

The data will be scored using the answer key provided by ReadWorks.org© and the investigator's

professional judgment. The post-assessment for reading comprehension will first allow for

typical literature circle implementation before the assessment is given.

Experimental Design and Procedures

After pre-intervention assessment data was collected and analyzed, the intervention

began with an introduction to literature circles (LC). Students learned the purpose of LCs and

also learned about the goals associated with this intervention. Direct instruction and modeling of

LC roles further explained how this strategy should look when students are to complete LC

independently. Some of the direct instruction was modeled after Harvey Daniel's literature

circle roles, while other pieces were created by the teacher. The instruction occurred through

several mini-lessons will of the different LC roles which then lent way to whole-group practice

of the LC roles in an attempt to scaffold the different levels of responsibility expected of

students. The first whole-group discussion was through the researcher's modeled roles. After

completing another reading, students each chose a role as well as the researcher and the literature

circle discussion included the researcher. Once students were able to practice literature circle

roles and the discussion, students worked independently without the researcher present in

conversation. Once independent work began, all students read the same non-fiction text and then

completing the LC role chosen by the students in the previous class. Students engaged in small

group discussion with each other and conversation was meant to seem natural. During this time

the researcher observed to ensure that roles were being completed correctly, scored the students

for the day, and provided assistance when needed.

The gradual scaffolding of release of responsibility from teacher to student generally

followed Whittaker's (2012) suggested procedure for scaffolding each step in the literature

process. By scaffolding as much as possible, it allowed students the extra support they needed to

better complete their roles independently. Once students had been properly prepared, several

choices of non-fiction texts that varied in content were presented to students with a brief

description of what the text was about. Students voted on the text they would like to work with

and the text with the highest number of votes was set to be used for the next LC time.

Once students had chosen their text, they began independent reading followed by

collaborative discussion Students were be given time to meet with their LC group during class

time; it was not expected that students would meet outside of class. For each LC meeting

students were expected to have the agreed upon reading completed and their literature circle role

prepared for discussion. While students engaged in LC time, the researcher listened to group

discussion in order to record on-task behavior of each LC member. The researcher ranked the

on-task behavior on a scale of 0-3. The assigned number system is as follows: 3-Excellent use of

LC roles/strategies; 2- Good use of LC roles/strategies; 1- Satisfactory use of LC roles/strategies;

0- Unsatisfactory use of LC roles/strategies. If an individual is struggling with explaining their

LC role, the researcher stepped in as a LC coach to support the struggling student. Students were

also scored on their participation in the discussion outside of sharing their prepared role on a

similar 0-3 scale. The scale was as follows: 3-Very engaged in conversation outside of sharing

prepared role; 2- Somewhat engaged in conversation outside of sharing prepared role; 1-Only

engaged in conversation to share LC role; 0- Not involved in the conversation at all.

After literature circles had been completed and each student practiced each role at least once, the post-intervention assessment and Likert-scale were implemented. This post-assessment is assumed to show growth across all students in comprehension of nonfiction texts as well as self-perception of use of comprehension skills on a nonfiction text.

Results

The purpose of this study was to identify whether the use of the collaborative discussion practice known as literature circles would have an effect on student comprehension and self-perception of skill when reading non-fiction texts. The results of this study indicate that the use of literature circles had little to no effect on student comprehension of non-fiction texts. The data collected also directs the researcher to believe that literature circles also did not have a significant effect on students' self-perception of their reading skills in relation to non-fiction texts. The data was analyzed and though certain students indicated more confidence on specific skills, overall totals show diminutive changes.

Non-fiction Comprehension Data

Before comprehension data was correlated, it was clear that the scores of the pre-intervention assessment and post-intervention assessment were not drastically different. By analyzing the data, many conclusions can be made when comparing the pre- and post-assessments. Four students completed the pre-intervention assessment without any direct instruction given or skills explained. On this evaluation students read a non-fiction text and answered ten multiple choice comprehension questions. The data shows students had a mean score of 8.25 out of a total of 10 with a standard deviation of 1.5, meaning that students generally were able to answer many of the questions correctly.   The post-intervention assessment data showed similar results. Only three students completed this assessment, due to Student 4

dropping out of the class (later discussed in the Limitations section). On the post-intervention

assessment, which students took after completing direct instruction, modeling, and practice,

students had a mean score of 8.17 out of 10 total points with a standard deviation of 1.041. The

mean score of the post-intervention evaluation actual decreased 0.08 points from the pre-

intervention scores. This decrease in the mean illustrates that the use of literature circles within

this study prove to be non-effective in increasing reading comprehension of non-fiction texts.

This assumption is validated through correlating the pre- and post-intervention assessments. The

correlation between the two assessments shows a 0.996 correlation, which shows an almost

complete positive correlation. This shows that the correct response rate on the comprehension

evaluations was very similar between the two tests.

Self-Perception of Reading Skills Survey Data

As students' survey results were collected and compared, it was clear that while some

students felt more confident on certain skills, they also felt that they were not as good at others

after practicing them. However, the data from the survey totals did not seem to significantly

change. The pre-intervention survey was taken by four students and the mean was 27.5 points

out of a possible 40 points with a standard deviation of 2.646. This data indicates that students

had a slightly high self-perception of their non-fiction reading skills all together. The post-

intervention survey data shows the responses of 3 students, once again due to Student 4 dropping

the class. The outcome of the post-intervention data illustrates a total mean score of 28.67 out of

a possible 40 points with a standard deviation of 5.132. The larger number in standard deviation

shows that student's responses on the post-survey varied much more than those from the pre-

survey. Interpretation of the data reveals that the mean actually slightly increased for the post-

survey by 1.17 points, showing that students overall had a heightened self-perception of their

abilities, though it was an insignificant increase. The pre- and post-intervention surveys were

correlated and the analysis shows that the Pearson *r* correlation was 0.990, which once again

shows an almost perfect positive correlation, signifying that students' responses on the survey

did not waiver much from before the intervention to after it was completed.

Role Completion

During each literature circle, students would complete a new literature circle role. The

schedule of when roles were to be completed ensured that no two students would be working on

the same role during a single literature circle discussion.. The researcher scored each student's

completion of the role based on a proficiency scale with 3 being the highest number signifying

the student completed the role with complete proficiency and 0 indicating that the student did not

complete the role at all. A more detailed explanation is given in the Experimental Design and

Procedures section above. The data collected from the scores that students earned were analyzed

using descriptive statistics with missing variables in place of 0s if a student was not present.

Using missing variables allows for the data to be interpreted without a misreading of a 0, which

would indicate a student being present and not completing the role rather than the student not

being present, thus making the data more reliable.

The data is disaggregated to reflect the five different literature circle roles involved in this

study: Artful Illustrator, Discussion Director, Connector, Word Wizard, and Summarizer in

addition to descriptive data having been analyzed for each role. For the Artful Illustrator role,

three students completed it and the mean score was 3, showing that the students who completed

this role were completely proficient in completing the role as described in direct instruction.

Three students also completed the Discussion Director role with the mean being 3 once again

indicating all students also getting the completely proficient score for this role as well. All four

students completed the Connector role. The minimum score received was a 2, while the

maximum score achieved was a 3 creating a mean of 2.75, displaying that only one student

received a 2 while the other three received a completely proficient score. The role of Word

Wizard was completed by three students with a minimum score of 1 (achieved by only one

student) and a maximum score of 3, establishing a mean of 2.33. Finally, only two students

completed the Summarizer role and both students received a mean score of 2. After interpreting

these descriptive statistics, it can be concluded that while the role of Artful Illustrator and

Discussion Director were completed with the most proficiency, students struggled more so with

the roles of Word Wizard and Summarizer.

Completed Role and Survey Question

After completing analysis on both the post-intervention survey and the completion of

literature circle roles, crosstabulation between the two was done. The crosstabulation between

the two data points allowed for the analysis of how well students did in completion of their roles

versus their self-perception of completing similar roles in everyday reading.   The first

statement on the survey is *I can usually remember most of what I read*, which connects to the

role of Summarizer. As stated previously, two students completed this role and both scored in

the "somewhat proficient" category. Student 1 completed this role and on her post-intervention

survey she chose to "agree" with the statement. Student 2 also accomplished the same

achievement on her role and on her post-intervention survey she chose to "strongly agree" with

the statement. Even though both students received the same score on their role completion, they

had somewhat differing opinions on their perception of their ability to remember and summarize

what they read. Students 3 and 4 did not complete this role.

I often picture what I'm reading in my head is the second statement on the survey, which directly relates to the role of Artful Illustrator. Out of each of the participants, only 3 students completed this role, but each scored the same with complete proficiency. Students 1 and 2 chose to "agree" with the statement on the survey while Student 3 answered with "strongly agree". Still, despite each of the three participants receiving the same score in their completion of the role, one of the students had more confidence in her ability of this skill.

The third statement on the student survey is *When I don't know a word when I'm reading, I often try to figure it out,* connecting this statement to the role of Word Wizard. A total of three students also completed this role, with Student 1 receiving a score of "unsatisfactory" and Student 2 and 3 achieving a score of "completely proficient". On the post-intervention survey, Student 1 chose "agree" with the above statement, as did Student 2. However, Student 3 chose "disagree" with the statement associated with the role. This role and its accompanying survey question reveal conflicting results. Though Student 3 completed her role with complete proficiency, she was the one student who felt least confident in her abilities while Student 1, who did not succeed in completing her role satisfactorily, felt much more confident in her abilities with this skill. *When I read I often ask questions about the text in my head* is item number five on the survey and is associated with the role of Discussion Director. Three students completed this role and they each received a "completely proficient" score. Students 2 and 3 both chose that they "agree" with the above statement, while Student 4's data is missing from the equation since she did not complete the study. The response to this survey question seems to be on par with the student performance on the related role.

Finally, the eighth item on the survey states *When I read, I often connect what I'm reading about to my life or other things I've learned in school*, which is associated with the role

of Connector. All of the participants completed the role of Connector. Students 1, 2, and 3 all were given a "completely proficient" score while Student 4 completed the role with "limited proficiency". Student 1 and 2 "agreed" with the statement, Student 3 "strongly agreed", and once again Student 4's data is missing from the analysis. Student 3, once again, is more assured with her skills in connecting the material to her life, even though she received the same score as Student 1 and 2.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to complete research that would either confirm or deny the hypothesis that literature circles would increase non-fiction comprehension as well as self-perception of reading skills in an AIS classroom. As explained in the results, the use of literature circles in an attempt to increase reading comprehension of non-fiction texts was shown to be ineffective with this group of students, though not harmful to student achievement.   There could be reasons that the expected gains in comprehension and self-perception of skills were not realized. The decrease in post-intervention comprehension results may be attributed to the missing score of Student 4, who scored higher than other students on the pre-intervention assessment. It is expected that if Student 4 were to complete the post-intervention assessment, she would have scored on the higher end of the comprehension scale. Thus, Student 4's assumed high score may have created more of a significant change in the overall comprehension scores than was seen with her missing data. Another possible reason for a decrease in the overall mean score of the students could be credited to Student 2's performance on the post-intervention assessment. The day before the post-assessment was given, Student 2 had family issues resulting in her leaving the school district and moving to another the following week. She was very distracted during our last meeting and seemed to circle answers without actually reading some of

the questions. Not only was this a distraction to Student 2, but it also applied to Student 1 and 3 because they were all friends just learning the news for the first time.

In relation to the scores on completion of the roles, there are also several factors that may have come into play with the insignificant gains that were actually made. Once again the missing data from Student 4 may have played a large role in much of the data having a lower mean than was expected. While Student 4 was participating in the study, she generally did well on her roles. Also, the inclusion of her data would allow for three data points on some of the roles rather than only two participants completing them. Another reason that the means were somewhat lower for some of the roles may be recognized as a lack of direct instruction and modeling for Student 1. Student 1 had a high amount of absences during the study, which resulted in her not being present for the direct instruction of literature circle roles, modeling of the roles, and practice using the roles with feedback from the researcher. It is assumed that the lower scores of Student 1 are because of her absences, because Student 2 and 3 were present for the direct instruction, modeling, and practice and they generally scored higher on each role than Student 1.

In looking at the crosstabulations between student performance on each role and the accompanied survey question there were some results that were expected and some that were not. Overall, the two students that showed the most confidence in their abilities based on the survey questions associated with literature circle role were Student 2 and Student 3. Both students generally received "completely proficient" scores on their completed roles, so it was expected that they would feel comfortable with these skills in typical reading. This also may be attributed to their lack of absence through the study and their participation during the direct instruction, modeling, and practice of literature circle roles. These two students were able to see

how the roles should look, try them out, and receive feedback from the researcher before actually being scored on the roles. However, there was one role and survey question crosstabulation result that was very puzzling. For the role of Word Wizard, Student 1 completed her role unsatisfactorily during class but then agreed with the statement that she could easily use contextual clues to figure out words she does not know. On the other hand, Student 3 completed the role with complete proficiency but then disagreed that she could use context clues. This data proves to be the opposite of what was expected of both these students in relation to their survey response and cannot be explained without further questioning of the students which was not permitted.

Relationship to Literature

In the literature that was reviewed, it was shown that most experiments proved to be successful in using literature circles to increase reading comprehension, though much of the research was focused on fiction literature and omitted non-fiction texts. The research in the literature did state that many of the interventions that were implemented lasted much longer than this study was able to, and the studies also had many more participants than what was included in this study. Since the researcher had limited resources in terms of participants, none of the aforementioned studies could be replicated in its entirety. However, the research shown in this study shows that the students involved did feel somewhat more confident in their reading comprehension skills, which relates directly to what of the extant literature also concluded. The reviewed research shows more dramatic increases in self-confidence, though once again these studies included more participants and more time spent with the subjects in the intervention. It is believed that if this study had been done with a larger population of participants, and if the time

of the intervention were lengthened, then the results would have compared more similarly to the literature.

Implications for Practice

It is expected that educators could use the results in this study to use in their classroom. The data shows an overall improvement in self-perception of reading skills for struggling readers, though it is not significant. If a classroom teacher were to use this study to inform their practice, it would be suggested that the duration of the intervention be lengthened to at least half of the academic year. This recommendation comes from the literature of Johnson (2000) and her observation that it took girls, especially in the middle levels, much longer than expected to actively participate in literature discussions. Since this study only lasted a total of six weeks, it was not enough time for the girls to trust one another and use the literature circles as a tool for increasing their comprehension of the text.

Though I, as the researcher, do not have an accessible classroom where I am able implement this study once again with a larger population and lengthened period of time, I plan on completing similar research once I am able to control many more of the variables within my own classroom. The use of literature circles to comprehend non-fiction texts has the possibility of changing how teachers introduce and teach non-fiction literature in their classrooms; if this study were shown to be effective in many different types of classrooms, not just an Academic Intervention Services classroom with a small number of participants. If teachers embed this type of instruction and learning into their practice, it may allow for more accessibility for the teacher to gauge all student progress by listening to, or maybe even recording, the conversations. By listening to each student's responses, teachers can gather much more valuable data than the typical call and response system that is in place in so many classrooms and only allows the

teacher to evaluate a few students per class "discussion".

Implications for Future Research

Future studies focused on the effects of the use of literature circles on comprehension of non-fiction texts have the ability to address many of the uncertainties that were illustrated in the results of this study. In this research there were a couple of students in which the lack of increase in comprehension scores could be focused on, which then could lead to an explanation of the lack of comprehension scores increasing as was expected. Future studies may focus on more descriptive data that allows for background of previous student successes in English before implementing the intervention. By fist looking at the student's achievement background, the research then may be able to hypothesize if literature circles will or will not be an effective practice for the participants of that study. Researchers may also look at the students who do not seem to excel with the intervention, and use descriptions and knowledge of those students to explain why the intervention may not be working for them. This was an impossible task for the present study since the students were not, in fact, actual students of the researcher's and she had no prior knowledge of the students' successes and failures with previous interventions.

If similar studies were completed in the future, there are some suggestions that the results of this research can inform. First, a larger population of participants is needed for more accurate results. A population of four students does not work well if students are constantly absent if a conversation about the literature is to take place. Secondly, as stated before, future studies should aim to have the intervention period last longer than six weeks. During the longer intervention periods, teachers may take the time to reteach, model, and be part of the literature circle discussions that are taking place so that students are constantly reminded of the expectations of the outcomes of the discussions, which would be the increased understanding of

the text for all students in the group. Finally, it is important that this intervention is implemented

in a classroom that already has a structure in which students are used to following directions,

discussing, and working for the entire class time. For this study, the intervention was

implemented in a study hall-like classroom where students would complete missing assignments

and get help on other ELA work, and were not used to direct instruction or structured learning

time. Implementing this intervention in an inclusive ELA classroom may show more positive

results. The assumed positive results may be the outcome of more heterogeneous groupings of

students, while still being able to track the progress of a subgroup of participants, such as those

who receive academic intervention services.

Limitations

There are several limitations of this study. First, the study only includes one AIS

classroom comprised of four students. In future research, a study that encompasses a bigger

sample size may yield different results. Another limitation within this study is that the

investigator has never implemented the intervention of literature circles before. The inexperience

of the researcher may lead to issues with validity within this study. Several other limitations not

within the control of the researcher include the following: students were not able to

participate/join in late if English work was not done, all students were female, and the AIS

classroom was more typically run as a study hall rather than structured work/instruction time.

Each of these limitations may have caused variations in the results.

Other limitations include those that were more geared to each specific student. Student 1

was absent very frequently, which then resulted in her missing direct instruction, modeling,

practice with LC discussion with the researcher, and one independent LC time. Another possible

drawback that may affect results was that on the last day of the study, when students took the

post-test assessment and survey, Student 2 had just found out the night before that she was moving to another town and that would be her last day at that school. This resulted in a commotion in the classroom as well as the possibility that Student 2 was not in the mindset to complete these evaluations thoughtfully. Student 3 also had missed one independent LC discussion, which happened to be the discussion about the post-test article, so she may have missed some pertinent information which could have resulted in her post-test comprehension assessment score. Finally, Student 4 dropped the AIS class after two independent LC discussions, which effectively means her data cannot be included in the results of this study.

Finally, some of the extant studies explained that heterogeneous groupings are more beneficial to all students than homogeneous groupings. Since each of the participants of this study was receiving Academic Intervention Services, it created a homogeneous grouping; all students measured around the same achievement level in ELA. The homogeneous mix of students created an environment where students with subpar comprehension skills were all trying to understand complex texts. If the mixture of students had been more heterogeneous, the students who had more of a grasp on the skills needed to fully comprehend the texts may have had more of a positive impact on comprehension than those students who lack the more advanced skills, thus creating a study that may have had more positive results.

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APPENDIX A

Parent/Guardian Consent Permission for Child Participation

Dear Parent/Guardian,

My name is Ashley Miranda. As part of my graduate program, I am to complete a Master's Thesis Project in which I complete research in order to analyze data and contribute to the already established academic literature on an approved topic. I have chosen to complete my study through the use of a specific discussion practice that is used in many classrooms around the country and will be later explained.

The purpose of my study is to find out if there is a positive impact on reading comprehension of nonfiction texts through the use of literature circles. Literature circles are a discussion technique in which a group of students works together in order to complete certain roles and then create their own discussion about the text. The literature circle roles that students are to complete are made to incorporate reading strategies, thus allowing students who may not already have practiced these literacy strategies a chance to improve their skills. Since there is a push in schools for the reading of nonfiction text, the type of strategies used and the completed literature circle discussions are proposed to improve student's comprehension of this genre. For purposes of this study, the use of literature circles will be described as an "intervention" in future paragraphs. Intervention within this study simply means that it is not an academic strategy that these students have used previously.

I am a certified teacher in New York so during this study I will be directly teaching your child. After consulting with the classroom teacher, we have found that in order to complete this study with validity, it would be best if I were to implement instruction and facilitate discussions, though the classroom teacher would step in to aid instruction if need be. As the investigator and the instructor, I will keep student names completely anonymous. Student work through the entire study will be labeled with a pseudonym so that student information cannot be obtained through the course of the study by those that are not involved.

The following is a proposed outline of how the study should look to students and outsiders. This study will last between four to six weeks dependent on the classroom teacher's discretion. Students will first complete a pre-intervention assessment in which data will be compiled as a starting point for reading comprehension levels. Students will then complete a self-evaluation of their reading skills so that I can understand how each student sees themselves as a reader before the use of literature circles. During this study, I as the principal investigator, will then directly instruct this class on the skills associated with literature circle roles through short lessons, modeling, and guided practice. Students will then use short examples of non-fiction text in order to practice the learned literature circle roles. While students are completing literature circle roles independently and within their group, I will observe students and only step into the conversation if need be. I will then teach students how to generalize the knowledge learned from literature circle roles to their everyday reading of nonfiction text. Finally, students will complete a post-intervention assessment and data will be assessed to see if student reading comprehension levels truly increased based on this intervention or not and students will also complete the same self-evaluation of reading skills, based off their self-conception of reading comprehension after the intervention has been completed. I will then analyze the collected data in order to see if there is a direct correlation between the skills learned in literature circle roles and reading comprehension of nonfiction text. The assessment data collected

for this study will not be used anywhere other than my formal Master's Thesis Project and in further classroom instruction if the classroom teacher finds it necessary.

There are no potential risks for students who choose to participate in this study. Students will be engaged in regular classroom practices that are used across the country and have found to be effective with struggling readers. Participation within this study is completely voluntary and participants may withdraw from the study at any time without penalty.

Thank you for considering this opportunity.

If you have any questions about this study contact information is included below:

Ashley Miranda   Cell: 716-531-2002
                                        Email: mira5033@fredonia.edu

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By signing this document I grant permission for my child to participation in this study. I know that my student will be engaged in regular classroom practices and there are no potential risks. I also understand that my child may opt out of this study at any time.

Child's Name: _____

Parent/Guardian Signature: _____

Date: _____

APPENDIX B

Student Consent for Participation

Dear Student,

My name is Ms. Miranda. As part of my graduate program, I am required to complete a Master's Thesis Project in which I complete research on a topic of my choosing and write a report on my findings of the research I do. I have chosen to complete my project in your classroom using discussion practices that many classrooms around the country already use.

The purpose of my study is to find out if your reading comprehension scores increase because of the use of literature circles. Literature circles are a discussion strategy in which you will work in a group of several students in order to complete certain roles and then create your own discussion about the text rather than having your teacher create the discussion for you. The literature circle roles that you will practice use reading strategies that good readers use every day. We will be focusing on nonfiction text, which means you will be reading stories that are true for this unit and working on increasing your comprehension skills of these specific stories. I will refer to literature circles as an "intervention" in further sections since it is a practice you have not used before.

I am a certified teacher in New York so during this study I will be teaching you instead of Mrs. Tonelli. Your teacher and I have discussed this unit and though I will be teaching you, Mrs. Tonelli will still be in the room and will help with instruction if she needs to. Your names will remain completely anonymous throughout my project so you don't have to worry about anyone knowing your grades. Your work through the entire study will be labeled with a pseudonym so that your information cannot be found out by anyone who is not involved in this study.

The following section outlines how the study should flow when I come into your classroom. This study will last between four to six weeks based on Mrs. Tonelli's judgment of your progress. You will first complete a pre-intervention assessment in which I will record your reading comprehension levels before we begin instruction. This first assessment is so that I can compare your final assessment to see if there was growth in your comprehension. You will then complete a self-evaluation of your reading skills so that I can understand how you see yourself as a reader before the use of literature circles. During this study, I as the teacher, will then directly instruct you on the skills associated with literature circle roles through short lessons, modeling, and guided practice. You will then use short examples of non-fiction text in order to practice the learned literature circle roles. While you are completing literature circle roles independently and within your group, I will observe your discussions and only step into the conversation if need be. I will then teach you how to use the knowledge learned from literature circle roles to your everyday reading of nonfiction text. Finally, you will complete a post-intervention assessment so that I can compare your first scores to these final scores and see if your comprehension increased based on this intervention or not. You will also complete the same self-evaluation of reading skills so I can see if you are any more confident in your reading skills or not because of the intervention. The assessment data collected for this study will not be used anywhere other than my formal Master's Thesis Project and in further classroom instruction if Mrs. Tonelli finds it necessary.

There are no potential risks if you choose to participate in this study. You will be following regular classroom practices that are used across the country and have found to be effective. Participation

within this study is completely voluntary and you may withdraw from the study at any time without penalty.

Thank you for considering this opportunity.

If you have any questions about this study contact information is included below:

Ms. Miranda   Email: mira5033@fredonia.edu

By signing this document I consent to participation in this study. I know that I will be using regular classroom practices and there are no potential risks. I also understand that I can opt out of this study at any time.

Signature: _____

Date: _____