

Literature Circles and Their Effects on Student Motivation and Reading Comprehension

by

Katie Covert

December 2009

A thesis submitted to the

Department of Education and Human Development of the

State University of New York College at Brockport

In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Science in Education

Literature Circles and Their Effects on Student Motivation and Reading Comprehension

by

Katie L Covert

APPROVED BY:

Thom R. All

Advisor

10/14/09

Date

[Signature]

Director, Graduate Programs

10/29/09

Date

Table of Contents

Chapter 1: Introduction	1
Chapter 2: Literature Review	6
Social Constructivism.....	6
Student Motivation and Learning.....	8
Engagement Strategies.....	11
Independent Reading.....	13
Literature Circles.....	16
Chapter 3: Applications and Evaluation	21
Chapter 4: Results and Data	26
Chapter 5: Conclusions and Recommendations	31
References	35
Appendices	38
Appendix A: Parent/Guardian Consent Letter.....	38
Appendix B: Letter to Students.....	39
Appendix C: Student Motivation Survey.....	40
Appendix D: Houghton-Mifflin Comprehension Check (example).....	42

Chapter 1

Introduction

Reading is a critical skill for learning and can be found across all curriculum areas throughout one's schooling. That being said there are a large number of students out there who struggle with reading. Some lack interest and others simply have difficulty understanding what they are reading. Comprehension and motivation are two critical factors when it comes to the success of struggling readers.

In order for students to become stronger in the area of reading comprehension I believe it is critical they feel engaged and motivated by the texts they read. Long (2003) believes students who are engaged in what they read make deeper connections to the text, whether fiction or non-fiction, by questioning, investigating, and interpreting what they read as they read. Reading is thinking and if students are not thinking about what they read as they go through the text they are missing key connections and failing to comprehend all there is.

According to Burns (1998) literature circles incorporate several features that enhance students' reading experiences and encourage growth in reading. Student choice, groups of mixed ability, and student-directed

interactions are among them. It is powerful when students are given the responsibility to control their own learning.

Statement of the Problem

Research by Lehman and Scharer (1996) argue that by talking with others, as opposed to reading alone without discussion, readers receive a more global understanding of a text and become more critical, literary thinkers. When students are left on their own to read they are not able to hear others' perspectives, questions, thoughts, or connections and, therefore, may not have a deep understanding of the text. Without this understanding students do not comprehend as much as they could and are less likely to see themselves as "good readers". This may also lead to students becoming less motivated.

Significance of the Problem

Struggling readers do not one day become competent readers simply because they want to. In order for a student to become a competent reader they must be taught, given opportunities to practice and be supported unconditionally. You cannot simply learn how to read well unless you are given adequate opportunity.

Literature circles offer many moments to grow as a reader. In my time as an educator I have come across countless students who claim to dislike reading and shy

away from literary opportunities. Being a struggling reader once myself I remember feeling alone and helpless when it came time to make meaning from what I had read. Literature circles help with this by creating a social environment for all students to thrive and be a part of.

Burns (1998) shares the idea that the study of literature, through literature circles, takes an individual act and turns it into a social one where students create meaning with other students. Students are not left to guess or figure things out on their own; rather, they are supported by their teacher and peers to do well.

Rationale

I designed this study on increasing student motivation and reading comprehension because I believe it is critical to the success of my students. In order for a student to be a successful reader I believe they need to make meaning as they read; otherwise they are merely reading words on a page with no significant purpose. Rosenblatt (1995) argues that text is just ink on a page and will be useless unless a reader goes through it and gives their personal meaning.

Given students are expected to make meaning from what they read I, as an educator, cannot just assume they know how to do that. I need to take time early on to show students how to do this and allow them opportunities to

practice what they have learned. I believe literature circles are a wonderful opportunity to do so.

Literature circles target many learning styles and allow all students to be successful. Students learn cooperatively with one another in a safe and protective environment where they can share their experiences and grow as a learner. Long and Gove (2003) discuss the idea that reading should be purposeful and reflective. In literature circles students are in an environment that promotes inquiry, curiosity and pushes the learner to read, write, think, feel, and talk in depth about what they have chosen to read.

This study will contribute to my teachings in many ways. I believe I will have a greater sense of who my students are as readers through this process. Literature circles are a practical way to target my students' skills when it comes to reading comprehension. I also believe they will encourage reluctant readers to be more engaged in their reading selections. Literature circles can be used throughout the year with both fiction and non-fiction texts, allowing for maximum results.

Definition of Terms

Comprehension: The ability to grasp and demonstrate an understanding of something, in this case, text being read.

Literature Circles: Small, temporary groups of students who have chosen to read the same book and participate in discussions with one another (Daniels, 1994).

Motivation: A student's feelings of interest or enthusiasm toward a subject that make him or her want to be successful.

Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD): The difference between what a learner can do without help and with help (Vygotsky, 1978).

Chapter 2

Literature Review

The following literature review summarizes literature circles and how they affect student learning and motivation. The research also looks at the social constructivist theory as well as motivational and engagement strategies that influence student learning.

Social Constructivism

Social constructivism is a philosophical view that challenges traditional theories about reading. To support learners with varying abilities learning in small, social groups Lev Vygotsky's (1978) "Zone of Proximal Development" is perhaps the most quoted theory. In his own words, ZPD is "the distance between the child's actual developmental level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers" (p. 86). Within this theory Vygotsky argues that social interaction is the basis for cognitive growth. In other words learning takes place when an interaction between individuals is occurring. Vygotsky felt the communication that occurs in social settings with more knowledgeable and skillful people (teachers, peers,

etc.) help children build a better understanding of the concept.

Vygotsky's ZPD emphasizes his belief that learning is, primarily, a socially mediated activity. He felt children could problem-solve three different ways. One is having students independently work without assistance. Another is when the children cannot work independently and their learning depends solely on the aid of others. The final style falls somewhere in the middle between independent and dependent learning where children learn with the help from others, but are not dependent upon it. As children interact with others, such as teachers and fellow students, they often learn skills that are considered new to them. As this learning occurs they begin to develop skills they will be able to practice independently later on.

According to Oldfather, West, White and Wilmarth (1999) social constructivism is learning constructed through interacting with others. In order for students to learn they must construct new information in ways that are meaningful to them. Classrooms provide an excellent environment for this to take place given there are many opportunities for peer interactions and new information.

Oldfather et al. (1999) argue that teachers who organize their classrooms under the social constructivist

perspective understand learning takes place when students make sense of the new information they are presented with rather than memorizing it "by heart". This student-centered learning becomes the focus of the classroom rather than the more traditional teacher-centered room.

Literature circles, by definition, are student-centered. They allow opportunities for students to create new understandings based on discussion with their peers. When children engage in literature circles they are interacting and learning from those around them, both peer and teacher. Since literature circles are set up as heterogeneous groups students are able to challenge each other's thinking to new levels. For Vygotsky and other social constructivists, learning is not seen from the perspective of the individual learner but in terms of how the individual learner interacts and learns with others.

Student Motivation and Learning

According to Woolfolk (2001) student motivation refers to a student's desire to participate in the learning process as well as the reasoning behind their participation. Motivation can take the form of intrinsic or extrinsic. Intrinsic motivation is when a student does something simply because they feel a pull towards it

whereas extrinsic motivation is when something is done based upon the rewards seen from the outcome of the act. External motivation is based upon external factors that motivate oneself rather than internal. It is this intrinsic motivation so many educators strive to see in their students.

Gambrell, Palmer, Codling and Mazzoni (1996) define reading motivation as "an individual's self-concept and the value the individual places on reading" (p. 519). Motivated students are privy to many benefits within the school framework. Gambrell et al (1996) found that students who are motivated in school are more competent students who outperform other students who are not as motivated. They have more opportunities to succeed in school given their drive to do so. Their learning becomes internalized and deep rather than shallow and limited.

When students first begin school they tend to be excited about the adventure ahead. Woolfolk (2001) believes that as children grow up they begin to lose their enthusiasm for learning. What, then, is causing students' motivation to learn to dwindle and how can we as educators curtail it? Research by Gambrell et al (1996) indicate that students who see themselves as capable and competent learners will be less likely to lose their motivation in

school. In order for students to view themselves as capable of being successful in reading they need to be supported in their literature development.

Gambrell (1996) believes motivation plays a key role in a youngster's learning. The years one spends in elementary school are of particular importance because they are the stepping-stones to later years and can set the stage as far as learning is concerned. Aarnoutse and Schellings (2003) found a strong correlation between pupil interest in texts and their comprehension. They believe motivation is crucial for many students in order to find success with reading comprehension. Gambrell (1996) argues the elementary school years are "of considerable consequence for shaping subsequent reading motivation and achievement" (p. 15). It is during these first years in school that many students begin to either enjoy or dislike reading. It is not motivation alone, however. Aarnoutse and Schellings (2003) found that motivated students had a tendency to read a more significant number of books. That exposure to more literature, they believe, tends to increase student comprehension.

Engagement Strategies

When individuals are engaged in activities they are interested in they tend to get more from those experiences. In order for students to maximize their learning they must be engaged in the activities they are participating in.

Long (2001) describes engagement strategies as a three-tiered process that encourages students and teachers to use their imagination while reading. The first tier is to ask, listen, honor, respond, and encourage students during their interactions with a text. For example when a teacher is reading a story aloud to their students they stop to "wonder" out loud. By modeling this action they are encouraging students to follow suite in the hopes they mimic this thinking when they are reading on their own. Furthermore they ask open-ended questions to the students about the text being read. This helps students understand how to interact with their reading.

The second tier is to deepen student's feeling and thinking about the text. For example students might put themselves in the characters shoes and try to better understand the motivations behind the character's behavior.

The final tier is to pose and solve problems. An example for this tier might be to write a reflection about the relationships between characters. All three tiers are

intended to deepen the meaning students make while they are interpreting and questioning both the fiction and non-fiction texts being read. By doing so they are enhancing their reading experiences and engaging in more meaningful ways with the texts.

Literature discussion is one way to engage students in their learning. Farris, Nelson and L'Allier (2007) believe literature circles engage students in meaningful discussions while also allowing them to make compromising stances and work cooperatively with one another. These are all essential skills for students to develop. Kelly (1990) believes this to be a crucial element in engaging students. To encourage students to interact with one another as well as the texts they are reading they get to see how others view the reading and can, therefore, stretch their thinking in more meaningful ways.

Farris et al (2007) also believe literature discussions help to engage students with the world around them. When students are conversing about literature with their peers they participate in higher level thinking through connections such as text-to-self, text-to-text, and text-to-world. By offering opportunity for students to interact with one another and the text they are reading they become familiar with different ways to interpret

the information and, therefore, deepen their comprehension of what they have read.

Working cooperatively with a small group also tends to engage students. Lent (2006) found that when students were actively engaged in critical thinking activities with peers they participated more, took part in rich discussions with one another and expanded their knowledge about the subject matter. One reason cooperative learning groups work so well is because "they are inherently engaging" (p. 69).

Cooperative learning groups' sole purpose is for people to collaborate with each other for a specific purpose. Lent (2006) believes that students who learn by way of cooperative learning will have more opportunities to become engaged in a subject because they have more opportunity to think reflectively.

Independent Reading and Its Impact on Student Motivation and Reading Comprehension

Independent reading gives students an opportunity to select books they are interested in and read them independently. Independent reading offers students an opportunity to use their voice and make their own choices based on interest rather than reading what they are told simply because their teacher instructed them to.

According to Humphrey and Preddy (2008) students perform better when they participate in independent reading. People who are successful at tasks are often that way because they practice. Therefore it stands to reason that students who practice reading become better at it. Humphrey and Preddy (2008) also note that reading independently supports student reading in many ways. To start with, students select books on their own without being told what to read. This can allow students to find value in what they are reading rather than view it as a chore, thus resulting in students becoming more engaged with reading.

Independent reading is not so much an independent activity as it is a collaborative effort between students and teachers. Humphrey and Preddy (2008) report the teacher's role is not a sedentary one. Teachers are expected to be a support system to their students by conferencing with them, modeling reading strategies, offering feedback and guidance. In order to maximize gains made by students during independent reading teachers must be active supporters.

According to Fountas and Pinnell (2001) students have many roles during independent reading as well. They do not inattentively read through the book of their choice and move on. They are expected to interact with their reading

by means of recording and reflecting about it. Similar to literature circles students keep a reading log, recording the books they have been reading during independent reading. This helps them keep track of the different books and genres they have read. They can also keep track of how they rated the book, and whether they liked it or not.

Fountas and Pinnell (2001) also note it is critical for students to reflect upon what they are reading. Sometimes they respond to prompts given to them by the teacher while other times they take charge of the direction of their reflection. In a study by Kelly (1990) it was found that students became more engaged in their reading when they participated in this recording and reflecting process. Each student brings with them their own experiences. When students reflect on what they are reading they connect with the text in different ways. Having the opportunity to reflect on what they are reading affords them the chance to bring that background knowledge out. It is with this background knowledge that new understandings are constructed within the individual.

Trudel (2007) found that when she instituted independent reading in her classroom students responded positively. Her students were more willing to share and discuss what they were reading with her. Furthermore they began to share

their reading with one another. Trudel (2007) also noted that negative behaviors and perceptions about reading all but disappeared when she began independent reading with her students. Students were instructed on how to select "Just Right" books. These are books that students can read with little to no problem. Now aided with the knowledge of how to select appropriate books from conferencing with the teacher Trudel (2007) found students began choosing books that interested them and were at their reading ability. Their motivation and engagement had seen vast improvement.

Literature Circles and Their Impact on Student Motivation and Reading Comprehension

Literature circles are one important tool to motivate students. When students are given a voice in what they read they are more likely to learn and enjoy the experience. Additionally when they are afforded the opportunity to discuss what they are reading with others, who are also reading the same text, their understanding deepens and becomes more meaningful.

Daniels (1994) defines literature circles as temporary discussion groups between students who have chosen to read the same book. The groups of students choose to read a predetermined amount of their book and participate in specific roles throughout their reading. Upon completion of the pre-

determined reading and reading role, students then come together to discuss what they have read. It is through this discussion of texts that meaning is created. Daniels (2002) believes the motive of literature circles is to combine literacy skills and strategies in a supportive social atmosphere with a non-threatening peer group. Students are free to express themselves, their connections, and their questions without worrying about the judgment of others. The whole idea behind literature circles is to grow from seeing the same story from different viewpoints.

Clarke and Holwadel (2007) found that because of literature circles their students "enjoy and understand books so much more" (p. 21). Literature circles provide for great opportunities to discuss books and get students wanting to read. Long and Gove (2003) argue that students are more likely to engage in purposeful and reflective discussions with literature circles because they are interpreting the text from more than one perspective or point of view. In literature circles students question one another, change their point of view and push each other to delve deeper into the text.

Lehman and Scharer (1996) believe that discussion is one of the most meaningful ways to discover what others are thinking about literature. When students have the

opportunity to discuss what it is they are reading they are able to stretch their thinking beyond their own limits and gain the insight of others.

Lehman and Sharer (1996) found it important to provide opportunities for students to discuss what they are reading in unpredictable ways. Questions predetermined ahead of time limit students' thinking. However allowing students to talk with one another can deepen their understanding and therefore can lead to a strengthened understanding of the text being read. This comprehension is critical for the success of students in school.

Long and Gove (2003) found that students who participated in literature circles became more curious about what they were reading as well as more involved and absorbed in the texts. Lehman and Sharer (1996) argue that when teachers create an environment, such as a literature circle, they are promoting curiosity and inquiry amongst their students. Teachers who use literature circles push their students understanding beyond the obvious by having them discuss with one another their viewpoints and questions. Daniels (1994) believes literature circles give students the power to select the books they will read and discuss on their own as well as opportunities to understand their readings in cooperative learning groups. Too often

are students instructed on what to read. Literature circles give them the opportunity to read what *they* want to read and that choice can be powerful.

Daniels (1994) feels it is critical for students to choose their own books in literature circles. Children are often seeking opportunities to make choices and this offers an outlet for that need. Groups are formed by the choice of the reading material rather than the typical grouping by ability. This opens up the opportunity for students to read with other students of multiple reading abilities. Discussions stem from student interest and connection rather than the common classroom pattern of the teacher asking the questions and the students taking turns answering them.

Closing

The research on student motivation and learning clearly shows how important it is for students to be motivated in order to learn. This information has important implications for educators. Given that many researchers find a link between student motivation and learning it is critical for educators to continue presenting interesting and intrinsically motivating materials to their students.

Literature circles are just one way to motivate students to read. They are a valuable tool to get students interested in reading different and, at times, more challenging books. When students have the opportunity to discuss with others without judgment or fear of being incorrect they are more likely to take risks and make gains in their comprehension. Remembering that literature circles are student-centered it is critical for teachers to be there to support their students along the way. Only when that occurs will learning be maximized.

Chapter 3

Applications and Evaluations

Introduction

The purpose of this study was to evaluate the effectiveness of using literature circles as an intervention to improve student motivation and reading comprehension. This intervention was designed for use with an entire classroom. Literature circles are, by design, differentiated in order to meet each student's interests. The intervention occurred every three out of six cycle days with students meeting to discuss the book they all had chosen to read. The results of this study were intended to better my understanding of how valuable literature circles are in raising student motivation and reading comprehension.

Participants

The participants in this study were fourth grade students in a suburban school district located in Rochester, NY. The district services approximately 3,800 students.

From within this population I selected twelve students. Six students came from one classroom, which was the experimental group (Group A). In this classroom there were five students who received Academic Intervention

Services as a result of not reaching benchmarks at the end of their third grade year. Additionally there were four students who had Individual Education Programs and two with 504 plans. Participants for this study were chosen at random from that population of students. In order to randomly select students all of the students' names were placed in a box and six names were drawn.

The remaining six students came from a second classroom, which was the control group (Group B). Within this particular fourth grade classroom, there were nine students who received Academic Intervention Services as a result of not reaching benchmarks at the end of their third grade year. Furthermore, there were a total of three students with Individualized Education Programs and two with 504 plans. Participants were randomly selected from this population of students in the same manner as Group A.

Procedures of Study

All of the students in Group A participated in literature circles. Only data from six students were part of this study. Informed consent was collected from the parents and guardians by sending home a letter detailing the purpose and value of the study (See Appendix A). Furthermore students were given a student-friendly description of the study and asked whether they would like

to participate or not. It was made absolutely clear that students could revoke their participation at any time and that declining to participate altogether would in no way affect their grade (See Appendix B).

Once consent was received by both parents/guardians and participating students I began to introduce literature circles. I explained to the students how literature circles work and what was expected of them when they fulfilled each of the six roles. Data was collected with the intent of assessing how literature circles impacted students' comprehension and motivation toward reading. Students were given a survey to assess their motivation toward reading prior to the beginning of this study (see Appendix C). Comprehension was assessed using the Houghton-Mifflin comprehension checks (see Appendix D for example) that go along with the reading texts the students selected. Upon the completion of this study students were again given the same motivation survey to see if there had been any changes in their responses.

Students worked together in groups where they were grouped by reading ability, as measured by teacher observations and test scores from third grade. Students were taught the different roles and responsibilities within literature circles prior to beginning their first

literature circle. Students were then given an opportunity to select their group's book to read for their literature circle out of the Houghton-Mifflin selections in the classroom.

Each student selected one to two roles to fulfill within each literature circle meeting. They then independently read the texts and completed their responsibilities. Afterwards students then joined together as a group and began discussing the text they had just read according to their literature circle roles. Upon finishing the text discussion students took an assessment independently in order to assess their comprehension of the text.

Instruments for Study

To collect data for this study I used two different instruments. I used a student survey and comprehension assessments provided by Houghton-Mifflin.

The student survey provided me with information about how the students already felt about reading. Whether they felt good or bad about reading and what they saw as their abilities as a reader were important details to know. At the completion of the study students were given the same student survey.

The comprehension assessments acted purely as an assessment tool. These allowed me to see how well the students comprehended the material they were reading. These assessments were done individually and with no help from group members.

The following chapter describes my findings in detail.

Chapter 4

Results/Data

The purpose of this study was to evaluate the effectiveness of using literature circles as an intervention to improve student motivation and reading comprehension. Twelve students participated in this study. Group A, the experimental group, was comprised of six students. Group B, the control group, was comprised of six students as well.

In order to assess motivation the students completed surveys before and after the study began. Table 1 shows the comparison of those surveys. The pre-survey and post-survey scores can be found in column three and four. The fifth column shows the difference between the two scores and the final column the difference as a percentage.

Each option the students chose from the survey was worth a certain amount of "points". Students could earn a maximum of 118 points in all. In order to assess how a student felt about reading all the points were added. The points were as follows: the first option was worth one point, the second worth two, the third worth three, and the fourth worth four. A higher score meant the student had more positive feelings toward reading. A lower score meant the student had more negative feelings toward reading. Data

from Experimental Group A is shown below using the color green while the Control Group B is shown in purple.

Table 1 – Student Survey Results

Group	Student	Pre-Survey	Post-Survey	Difference (score)	Difference (%)
A	1	38	47	9	24
	2	42	61	19	45
	3	34	56	22	65
	4	37	56	19	51
	5	59	67	8	14
	6	26	39	13	50
B	1	45	47	2	4
	2	48	52	4	8
	3	32	32	0	0
	4	44	41	-3	-7
	5	46	49	3	7
	6	31	31	0	0

Comparing the data of Group A and Group B in Table 1 shows that although many students felt an increased positive outlook toward reading as the year progressed only those who participated in literature circles all felt more positively about reading. Two students in Group B had no change at all while another had a negative change in score.

The students in Group A had significant growth in motivation when compared to Group B.

In order to assess student comprehension students were given questions to answer upon the completion of each literature circle meeting. The comprehension check was then graded and assigned a percentage score. Table 2, shown on the following page, shows the outcome of the average of those scores both before and after the intervention was introduced. The final column shows the difference, in percent, between the pre- and post-intervention scores.

Table 2 – Student Comprehension Results

Group	Student	Pre- Intervention (%)	Post- Intervention (%)	Difference (%)
A	1	84	89	6
	2	89	98	10
	3	79	93	18
	4	86	94	9
	5	92	97	5
	6	71	87	23
B	1	90	92	2
	2	89	93	4
	3	77	81	5
	4	87	88	1
	5	76	80	5
	6	91	93	2

Comparing the data of Group A and Group B in Table 2 shows that overall students' comprehension scores increased after the intervention was applied. Scores increased between 5-23% for Group A and only 1-5% for Group B. Although both groups had increased comprehension scores it is clear Group A found more success in raising their scores than Group B did.

Overall the results from this study show that most students' comprehension improved a great deal when they used literature circles. Although Group B found some success and increase in score, Group A, as a whole, had greater results. Furthermore when you consider the Motivation to Read Student Survey (See Appendix C) you can see Group A showed they felt more motivated to read than Group B.

Chapter 5

Conclusions and Recommendations

The purpose of this study was to evaluate literature circles and their effectiveness of motivating and increasing comprehension within students. To determine whether or not literature circles were an effective motivational strategy I surveyed students both before and after the intervention was applied. To determine whether or not they increased student comprehension I administered comprehension worksheets that accompanied the reading selections students' chose. This intervention was designed for use in an elementary classroom, although it could be used in primary and secondary settings as well.

From looking at Table 1 it is clear that upon implementation of the intervention student motivation increased between 14-65% for students in Group A, the Experimental Group. Students in Group B, the Control Group, who did not participate in literature circles, did not have nearly as high an increase in motivation. This leads me to believe that it may have been the intervention itself that led students to feel more motivated. Although Table 2 shows an increase in comprehension for all six students it is clear that Group A found more success. The comprehension percentages for Group A were much greater than for Group B.

The scores for Group A increased anywhere from 5-23% whereas Group B only increased 1-5%.

Given these results I feel literature circles are useful in improving student motivation and comprehension. As a result I will continue to use them in my classroom. In the future however, I would not rely on the student survey alone. I plan on having discussions with my students about literature circles to discern what they like and do not like about them. It is important my students have a voice in how they learn.

I also intend to share this information with my colleagues. Every teacher has room to grow in their practices and I feel this study provides an excellent example of just how literature circles can benefit both the student population as well as the classroom as a whole.

Lastly I would also share this information with parents. Book clubs are excellent ways for individuals, particularly young students, to experience literature. Parents may not realize the benefits book discussions have and providing them with this information may encourage them to involve their children in these events outside of school.

Although I feel this study was successful there are there are changes I would make. One change would be to

create an open forum with my students where we discuss literature circles themselves. Without having this dialogue I am unable to understand exactly what they liked and did not like regarding meeting in literature circles. Perhaps there could be changes made to the implementation of literature circles that would increase the motivation in my students even more. Without having this conversation I will never know.

Another recommended change I would make would be to help the students select the books they choose for literature circles. As it stood for this study students were given a plethora of books to choose from. In the future it might be more beneficial to use texts that are specific to student interest, current events, current content being studied, etc. Leaving student choice in the equation it may be an additional benefit to students to have a more narrowed selection to choose from.

Upon reviewing the available literature in chapter 2, I feel very strongly that in order for student comprehension to increase individuals must be intrinsically motivated to participate in their learning. Constructing new information in ways that are meaningful to an individual does not always just happen. For this to be done students must, on some level, be interested in what they

are learning. Literature circles provide that opportunity. For one thing the students are the ones selecting the texts their group will be reading. No one is telling them what they can and cannot read. The second reason literature circles help students make meaning is because it is not a sedentary activity but rather an interactive experience where the individual is interacting with both the text and their peers.

This study helped me reflect on my current instructional practices. I realize it is crucial for students to have a voice in their learning. Without that voice many become disengaged. Lack of motivation is a real problem in schools and it is up to educators to continue working hard to reach their students. As I continue my journey as an educator I look forward to the opportunities to improve my teachings for my students. They are the reason I am here in the first place. Students today are the leaders of tomorrow and in order for them to build a successful future they need to have the proper tools.

References

- Aarnoutse, C. & Schellings, G. (2003). Learning reading strategies by triggering reading motivation. *Educational Studies*, 29(4), 387-409. Retrieved June 8, 2008 from EBSCO Host database.
- Burns, B. (1998). Changing the classroom climate with literature circles. *Journal of Adolescent and Adult Literacy*, 42 (2), 124-130. Retrieved May 29, 2008 from EBSCO Host database.
- Clarke, L.W., & Holwadel, J. (2007). Help! What is wrong with these literature circles and how can we fix them? *The Reading Teacher*, 61(1), 20-29. Retrieved July 3, 2008 from EBSCO Host database.
- Daniels, H. (1994). *Literature circles: Voice and choice in the student centered classroom*. York, Maine: Stenhouse Publishers.
- Daniels, H. (2002). *Literature circles: Voice and choice in the student-centered classroom*. York, ME: Stenhouse.
- Farris, P.J., Nelson, P.A., & L'Allier, S. (2007). Using literature circles with English language learners at the middle level. *Middle School Journal*. 38(4), 38-42. Retrieved June 6, 2008 from EBSCO Host database.

- Fountas, I.C., & Pinnell, G.S., (2001). Guiding readers and writers, grades 3-6: Teaching comprehension, genre, and content literacy. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.
- Gambrell, L.B. (1996). Creating classroom cultures that foster reading motivation. *The Reading Teacher*. 50(1), 14-25. Retrieved July 3, 2008 from EBSCO Host database.
- Gambrell, L.B., Palmer, B.M., Codling, R.M., & Massoni, S.A. (1996). Assessing motivation to read. *The Reading Teacher*, 49(7), 518-533. Retrieved July 3, 2008 from EBSCO Host database.
- Humphrey, J., & Preddy L.B. (2008). Keys to successfully sustaining an SSR program. *The Reading Teacher*. 26(6), 30-62. Retrieved July 3, 2008 from EBSCO Host database.
- Kelly, P.R. (1990). Guiding young students' response to literature. *The Reading Teacher*, 43(7), 464-470. Retrieved August 9, 2008 from EBSCO Host database.
- Lehman, B.A., & Scharer, P.L. (1996). Reading alone, talking together: The role of discussion in developing literary awareness. *The Reading Teacher*, 50(1), 26-35. Retrieved June 8, 2008 from EBSCO Host database.

- Lent, R. (2006). In the company of critical thinkers. *Educational Leadership*, 64(2), 68-72. Retrieved July 3, 2008 from EBSCO Host database.
- Long, T.W., & Gove, M.K. (2003). How engagement strategies and literature circles promote critical response in a fourth-grade urban classroom. *The Reading Teacher*, 57(4), 350-360. Retrieved June 8, 2008 from EBSCO Host database.
- Oldfather, P., West, J., White, J., & Wilmarth, J. (1999). *Learning through children's eyes*. Washington, D.C.: American Psychological Association.
- Rosenblatt, L.M. (1995). *Literature as exploration* (Fifth edition). New York, NY: MLA of America.
- Trudel, H. (2007). Making data-driven decisions: Silent reading. *The Reading Teacher*, 61(4), 308-315. Retrieved September 18, 2008 from EBSCO Host database.
- Vygotsky, L.S. (1978). *Mind in society: The development of higher psychological processes*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Woolfolk, A. (2001). *Educational Psychology*. Boston: Allyn and Bacon.

Appendix A – Parent/Guardian Consent Letter – Experimental Group

Dear Parent/Guardian,

As part of my master’s degree program at SUNY Brockport, I will be completing a research study this year. This project involves the use of literature circles and their enhancement of student motivation and reading comprehension. In literature circles students are placed into small groups and assigned roles to fulfill for each meeting with their group. The purpose of this study is to examine how literature circles affect students’ comprehension and motivation toward reading. It is my hope that this experience will help the students become more motivated readers as well as increase their comprehension of the material they read.

Our class will be using literature circles throughout the year; however, my data collection will only last for four weeks. While I am collecting data for my research, all information will remain confidential. No actual names will be shared in this research study. All assessments and information will be kept in a locked filing cabinet and shredded at the end of this project.

Although all students will participate in literature circles, your child’s participation in the data collection is purely voluntary and completely up to your discretion. I do not see any likely risk your child will encounter by being a participant in this study. Furthermore your child’s grade will not be affected whether they participate or not. You and your child are free to change your mind at any time during this study. If this should happen please contact me at your earliest convenience so I can begin to properly dispose of your child’s information. If you agree to allow your child to participate please sign below and return the bottom portion of this form to me.

I have included my contact information as well as my college supervisor’s. Please feel free to contact either one of us if you should have any questions or would like further information regarding this study. I sincerely appreciate your support and look forward to working with your child.

Sincerely,

Katie Covert
French Road Elementary School
katie_covert@bcsd.org
(585) 259-1144

Dr. Thomas Allen
SUNY Brockport
trallen@brockport.edu
(585) 377-0793

I understand the information provided in this form and agree to allow my child to participate as a participant in this study. I am 18 years of age or older. All questions about my child’s participation in this study have been answered to my satisfaction.

Child’s Name _____

Parent Signature _____

Date _____

Appendix B – Letter to Students

Dear Students,

As part of being a teacher it is important to me to continue learning each and every day. In order to do that I go to school just like you do. Right now I am going to SUNY Brockport to further my education along. I have a project I would like to try with our class and I'd like your help.

I'm sending a letter home to your parents asking for their permission for you to help me but I also wanted to ask you. The project involves literature circles and reading books of your choice together with your classmates (kind of like a book club). Please bring this form home to your parents to discuss with them what the project is about and whether or not you'd like to be a part of it.

If you would like to participate in my project please check the "Yes" box and sign your name. If you do not want to participate in my project please check the "No" box and sign your name. If you choose not to participate it is 100% okay. You are not required to participate and it will NOT affect your report card if you don't. I will not be upset if you do not want to participate. I still have many fun things planned for us throughout the year that I think you will enjoy. Also, if you change your mind throughout the project and no longer want to participate just let me know and you can stop. You will NOT get into trouble if you change your mind – that is perfectly okay with me :)

Please return your sheet to me as soon as you can so we can get started.

Sincerely,
Ms. Covert

Yes! I'd like to participate

No, I do not want to participate

Signature

Appendix C – Motivation to Read Profile – Student Survey

1. I read...
 - not as well as my friends
 - about the same as my friends
 - a little better than my friends
 - a lot better than my friends
2. Reading a book is something I like to do.
 - Never
 - Not very often
 - Sometimes
 - Often
3. My friends think I am a...
 - a poor reader
 - an OK reader
 - a good reader
 - a very good reader
4. My best friends think reading is...
 - no fun at all
 - OK to do
 - fun
 - really fun
5. When I come to a word I don't know, I can...
 - never figure it out
 - rarely figure it out
 - sometimes figure it out
 - always figure it out
6. I tell my friends about good books I read.
 - I never do this.
 - I almost never do this.
 - I do this some of the time.
 - I do this a lot.
7. When I am reading by myself, I understand...
 - none of what I read
 - almost none of what I read
 - some of what I read
 - almost everything I read
8. People who read a lot are...
 - boring
 - not very interesting
 - interesting
 - very interesting
9. I am...
 - a poor reader
 - an OK reader
 - a good reader
 - a very good reader
10. I think libraries are...
 - a boring place to spend time
 - an OK place to spend time
 - an interesting place to spend time
 - a great place to spend time
11. I worry about what other kids think about my reading..
 - everyday
 - almost everyday
 - once in a while
 - never
12. Knowing how to read well is...
 - not very important
 - sort of important
 - important
 - very important
13. When my teacher asks me a question about what I have read...
 - I can never think of an answer
 - I have trouble thinking of an answer
 - I sometimes think of an answer
 - I always think of an answer

14. I think reading is...

- a boring way to spend time
- an OK way to spend time
- an interesting way to spend time
- a great way to spend time

15. Reading is...

- very hard for me
- kind of hard for me
- kind of easy for me
- very easy for me

16. When I am in a group talking about stories, I...

- almost never talk about my ideas
- sometimes talk about my ideas
- almost always talk about my ideas
- always talk about my ideas

17. When I read out loud I am a...

- poor reader
- OK reader
- good reader
- very good reader

18. When someone gives me a book for a present, I feel...

- unhappy
- sort of unhappy
- sort of happy
- very happy

Thank you for participating :)

Comprehension

Use the story *Memories for Mom* and your completed Graphic Organizer to answer these questions about story structure.

1. Who are the main characters in this story? Why do you think these characters are the most important ones?

2. What are the most important settings in this story? Why did you choose them?

3. What is the main problem that Adelita must solve?

4. How does Adelita solve her problem?
