In What Ways Does Differentiating Reading Instruction By Interest, Through the Use of Literature Circles, Affect My Reluctant Readers?

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In this study, the effect of differentiation through interest-based literature circles on reluctant readers was investigated. Four struggling fourth graders, two boys and two girls, were studied. Students were given a choice of books and upon selection were grouped with 4 or 5 students of similar interests. Students decided on daily reading assignments and selected literature circle roles. Literature circles met daily. Teacher observations, audio recordings, student surveys and self-assessments, and parent surveys were used to collect data. The reluctant readers showed increased levels of participation, improved comprehension and word decoding, and elevated levels of confidence. They emerged as leaders and began reading independently. The flexible grouping, self-selection of reading material, and daily participation in book discussions drastically changed their attitudes toward reading and enabled them to acquire crucial reading skills.

Introduction

When I chose to become a teacher, after working a few years in another field, I made it a personal goal that I would reach every one of my students. I knew that I wouldn't drastically change the lives of many children, but I knew that if all of my students made even the smallest of advances, then I would have reached my goal.

As a third year teacher, I realized that this goal is one not easily achieved. I am currently teaching fourth grade in a suburban setting. I had the state assessments looming in the very near future and the expectations that I would prepare my students for success on these exams. With this pressure, my focus became finding ways to get my lower achieving students ready for such tests.
I immediately became very interested in these lower achievers and in what the significant weaknesses of these struggling students were. I observed and listened, and soon realized that reading was their biggest challenge. They were struggling with various aspects of reading, such as decoding and comprehension, but above all, they showed a lack of interest and confidence in their reading ability. Those students who enjoy reading and feel capable in their reading ability usually perform better than those who don’t hold these beliefs (Moser & Morrison, 1998). How was I going to develop self-confidence and an interest in reading in my most reluctant readers so as to increase their performance?

At the same time that my concerns with my low readers emerged, my building began to discuss one district-wide initiative, differentiation. I had my first experience with differentiation in one of my graduate classes and was soon interested in implementing it in my own classroom. I was able to try various methods, but differentiating by interest was one I didn’t use very often. As I began to get excited about differentiation, I realized that maybe this was the key to helping my lower readers.

"Different students need different books, and all students need many books" (Ivey, 2000). If I differentiated the reading material, maybe I could develop an interest in reading.

From these thoughts emerged my question: in what ways does differentiating reading instruction by interest, through the use of literature circles, affect my reluctant readers?

Opitz (Opitz, 1999) states that flexible grouping can empower the reader. He refers to different ways to group students for reading, and grouping by interest can be effective. He claims that when lower achieving students read the same material as their higher achieving counterparts, they receive a powerful message and feel much ownership
of the material. This ownership is ultimately what I hoped my struggling students would gain.

In addition, it has been stated that students are often more motivated to read if they can self-select the reading material (Kragler, 2000). Self-selection has generally not been a component of reading instruction. Rather, it has been used during independent reading time. If this self-selection were to be incorporated into the reading instruction so that supportive, heterogeneous groups were created, would those struggling readers change their opinions about reading?

**Literature Review**

Aliteracy is having the ability to read but lacking the motivation to do so. Anderson, Heibert, Scott, and Wilkinson (1985), in the report, *Becoming A Nation of Readers*, state that our nation’s fifth graders rarely read for pleasure. Of these fifth graders, 50% of them read books for an average of four minutes per day or less, 30% read two minutes or less per day, and 10% reported not reading any book on any day. Researchers have expressed concerns over this lack of interest in reading. The negative attitudes around reading are exhibited by students as early as elementary school. Those students most commonly considered as hesitant readers are those of low ability. However, it has been found that “...those considered hesitant readers are not just the poor readers, but also include many capable readers” (Turner, 1992). A major goal that has therefore emerged among the teaching profession has been to develop a desire to read in young students so they will become life-long readers. “Teaching children how to read is not enough; we must also teach them to want to read ” (Trelease, 1989).
Given this dilemma of unmotivated readers, it has become critical that teachers look at the ways in which reading instruction occurs. In this literature review, I will review literature that discuss this problem and a means to correcting it. The topics included in this are differentiation, student motivation, self-selection of books, and literature circles.

Heterogeneous groupings of students have always existed in classrooms. As times have changed, the diversity in classrooms has increased. Differences can be found in culture, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, as well as in abilities, achievements, and experiential backgrounds. The advancements in the understanding of brain development and functioning have informed educators of the variance in learning styles and intelligence potentials (Callahan, 1999). Teachers are challenged with the task of providing some students with strong foundations while stimulating others with more complex interactions with these same concepts. Educators that have been able to “...capitalize on differences to maximize understanding of differing cultures, experiences and knowledge, approaches to learning, and expression...” (Callahan, 1999) have been able to enrich the lives of all their students. Differentiation is an approach that addresses the needs of the wide variety of learners in a mixed-ability classroom so this kind of enrichment can occur.

In a differentiated classroom, a teacher accepts students and acknowledges who they are while expecting them to meet their potentials. Through continuous assessment, the teacher can alter the content, process, or product (Tomlinson, 1999). Content is what the educator wants the students to learn. This may include the materials used to learn the desired concepts. Process describes the way in which the students arrive at the
understanding of key ideas. The activities created to ensure students learn the desired outcomes are considered parts of process. Products are the ways through which students demonstrate their understanding (Tomlinson, 1999).

Content, process, and product may be differentiated by readiness (a student's starting point relative to a concept), interest, or learning profile (how a student learns best). Individual lessons or complete units may be differentiated. However, teachers should only alter the curricula when a student need is seen or when modification is likely to increase the understanding and use of important concepts and skills (Tomlinson, 1999).

With the increased value placed on standardized tests, differentiation doesn't always benefit the lower achieving students. In reading, teachers often feel the struggling students need to spend more time on the basic skills (Ivey, 2000). It is believed this extra practice in the basic skills will develop better readers. However, it is known that the time spent actually reading is what separates successful from unsuccessful readers (Ivey, 2000). Commonly, the good readers are given the time in class to read while the struggling readers typically get low-level, fragmented skill instruction. In addition, many teachers modify the reading instruction by slowing the pace. This may hurt rather than help the low readers by limiting their amount of exposure to print (Allington, 1994). Therefore, if not implemented correctly, "...differentiating opportunities to read may actually widen and increase reading differences among students" (Ivey, 2000).

Worthy, Patterson, Salas, Prater and Turner (2002) state that historically, those who have struggled with reading have received poor reading instruction. This has resulted in boredom, apathy, and a cycle of recurring failure that leads to decreasing motivation and self-confidence. Along with these come the feelings of helplessness in
regard to learning. This leads to a state of passivity. The students stop participating and
"the intricate internal organization of the material that has to take place..." (Worthy,
Patterson, Salas, Prater, & Turner, 2002), for learning to read to occur, ceases. The
students who view themselves as capable and competent readers soon outperform those
who don’t share these beliefs. As non-participants, low readers don’t see reading as
valuable or important. They lack personally relevant reasons for reading and have been
found by Moser and Morrison (1998) not to engage in a planned or effortful manner.

A number of factors have been found to affect a student's motivation to read.
These include attention to students’ interest, access to inspiring reading material, and
positive social interaction around literacy (Worthy, Patterson, Salas, Prater, & Turner,
2002). Early pioneers of education considered interest to be of the utmost importance.
Later, research indicated that interesting instruction and materials led to increased
learning, motivation, and effort, and improved attitudes (Worthy, Patterson, Salas, Prater,
& Turner, 2002). Thus, providing students with materials that are relevant and engaging
will increase interest in reading. Elementary and middle school students who claimed
hatred for reading were willing to read given such materials (Worthy, Patterson, Salas,
Prater, & Turner, 2002).

Leading educators have suggested four methods to draw the hesitant reader into
the world of literature: allowing time for silent reading, offering a variety of reading
material, sharing of student-read literature, and adult modeling of reading (Moser, &
Morrison, 1998). In a study conducted by Moser and Morrison (1998) these methods
were tested. Each day, students read silently, wrote in journals, discussed books with
other students and listened to read-alouds. It was concluded that after the implementation
of these methods, interest in reading increased, even for the most reluctant readers.

Comprehension increased an average of 2.7 years and sharing of books occurred more often. The increase in interest among these students was attributed to the large selection of reading material available and the time given for sharing. In addition to these factors, Burns (1998) has found that “student choice, social interaction in a heterogeneous group, and a substantial amount of time to read during the day lead to motivation…”

When students are allowed to select their own materials they are generally more motivated to read, are more deeply involved in the learning process, and thus develop a sense of ownership for reading (Kragler, 2000). Olson’s (1959) theory of child development also supports this self-selection of reading material. In his theory, Olson states that children are “self-seeking, self-selecting, and self-pacing organisms”. They will choose books appropriate for their level and will read at a comfortable pace, if given a large selection of literature to choose from.

Current research on the ability of students to self-select reading material is mixed. Some research indicated that poor readers generally choose books written at a level too difficult for them (Kibby, 1995). In Hiebert, Mervar, and Person’s (1990) study, it was found that poor readers typically select literature that is at a lower level than the literature selected by average readers.

Kragler (2000) determined that poor readers choose books that were interesting to them. Sometimes the books were easy and other times they were difficult, however, the emphasis was on finding books that were of interest. She also found that students enjoyed selecting their books and the independence they developed as a result. The students began to view themselves as better readers, as they had more time to read.
Kragler states that as schools move away from basals and begin using literature as instructional tools, "...it becomes important to allow students choice and freedom in selecting some of their reading material."

However, self-selection of literature can be problematic. Students have specific preferences and book collections don't always match these interests. In many schools, there are still a limited number of books available in different languages or those that reflect different cultures (Worthy, Patterson, Salas, Prater, & Turner, 2002). Classrooms often have an even smaller selection. Even in those classrooms with large numbers of books, the books don't necessarily match the academic needs of the students. The books may be too difficult, outdated, or inappropriate (Worthy, & McKool, 1996).

Social influences when selecting books can also be detrimental. Many students, to be like their peers, choose popular books that are beyond their reading level. These books, being too difficult, become areas of frustration and are seldom completed. Students are more likely to engage in further reading if they first experience success. Therefore, it becomes vital the literature matches the students' reading level (Worthy, Patterson, Salas, Prater, & Turner, 2002).

These same social influences that can be harmful, can also be beneficial. When there is a wide range of students in one room, it becomes important that each child holds ownership of the material being used. "When a beginning reader holds, tracks, and reads the same material as a more experienced reader, the message is powerful" (Opitz, 1999). Flexible grouping is one way to have students of mixed ability working together and reading the same book.
Flexible grouping can occur for different reasons. Students may be grouped in these ways: random, social (according to certain social skills), interest, task (can be by learning style), knowledge of subject, skill/strategy (those who need extra help), and by student choice (Opitz, 1999). Student choice is a good approach to use when literature response groups are desired.

Literature circles are groups of four to six students who come together to discuss and read a shared piece of writing. The groups are typically based on student choice and are heterogeneous in reading ability (Daniels, 1994). Literature circles also give students management of the group and allow for ample reading time during school. This feature of being student-led encourages the group members to participate in more problem-solving talk and leads to a better understanding of the literature. The discussions that occur in literature circles are relevant to the students and thus more meaningful responses occur when compared to teacher-led discussions (Maloch, 2002). For those poor readers who have had few successes in reading, these small group discussions can be extremely beneficial. "The social interaction that takes place in a literature circle is a key component of its success. To be able to verbalize the content, to listen to other modes of thinking, and to hear other perspectives all contribute to deepening comprehension" (Burns, 1998).

The relationships with peers and adults shape the development of a student's understanding. "Doing important, engaging work with others leads not only to cognitive and academic growth, but also to social and personal growth" (Worthy, Patterson, Salas, Prater, & Turner, 2002). These social interactions can increase a student's interest in reading.
Though literature circles can change the classroom climate to one that is more cooperative, responsible, and pleasurable, it does have its disadvantages. Teachers have much preparation to attend to if literature circles are to run smoothly. Books must be collected and available in sufficient quantities. The role sheets must be ready and student expectations must be clarified and explained. If the teacher wants to effectively facilitate the groups, it becomes necessary that he/she has also read all the books (Burns, 1998).

Student-led discussions also come with potential problems. They don’t always yield the type of dialogue desired. The small groups may just re-create the inequitable relationships already present in the classroom (Maloch, 2002). In addition, the responses elicited by students may be simple summaries, devoid of insights and connections. Again, much preparation is needed to avoid this. Students must be taught the appropriate ways to respond and the types of responses expected.

The articles reviewed for this study state that students must show an interest in reading in order to be successful at it. They must enjoy reading both in school and in their free time. Poor readers have been found to prefer other activities to reading. The reading instruction taking place in many classrooms is insufficient to change the attitudes of these poor readers. The reading program used by teachers must be examined. A reading program that responds to individual readers needs to be established. Though many suggestions are given as to how to engage these hesitant readers, no clear program has been defined.

Curriculum guides often state students need to develop an appreciation of literature and should be given time in school to read. This rarely occurs in the typical classroom (Burns, 1998). Literature circles are one way to provide for both appreciation
and time in addition to providing social interactions about literature. These response groups commonly allow for self-selection of books, a vital ingredient to helping students becoming hooked on reading. This form of flexible grouping gives reluctant readers the opportunity to learn how to read with the support of classmates. In a sense, the reader, rather than reading, is being taught (Opitz, 1999).

In conclusion, “students who can proficiently read a wide variety of materials and formats will be more prepared for the real world reading that they will encounter in their lives, to work, to gain information, and for pleasure” (Worthy, Patterson, Salas, Prater, & Turner, 2002). As educators, it must become our goal to ensure all students are capable of reading. By continuing to learn about reading and what makes certain students successful, we will be able to modify reading instruction so that all find it engaging, relevant, and worthwhile. Only when this occurs will we develop lifelong readers and learners.

**Methodology**

**Participants**

This research was conducted at French Road Elementary School, a suburban school in Rochester, New York. The classroom consisted of 22 fourth graders, ranging in age from 8-10. This class was a heterogeneous grouping of eleven boys and eleven girls of varying backgrounds and ethnicities. They ranged in academic ability and socioeconomic status. In total, eight students received services (push-in or pull-out) for academic acceleration, academic intervention, speech and language, and counseling. In
addition to these, seven other students received reading and writing instruction before school hours.

Four students were selected for this study: Kyle, Chris, Melissa, and Ilana. Kyle is a nine-year old boy who comes from a middle class home. His parents are divorced but extremely supportive. Kyle has an IEP and receives special services. He has been diagnosed with ADHD and requires medication to maintain a certain level of self-control.

Chris is also a nine-year old boy. He comes from a divorced home where only his mother is active with the school. Chris has never qualified for services for he has never scored low enough on exams. His test scores have always placed him on the borderline and he has struggled with academics throughout his education.

Melissa is a nine-year old girl. Her family moved to the district so she could attend this school. Prior to the move, Melissa attended school in an urban district. Melissa has always struggled with reading and qualified for participation in an early morning reading program and math tutoring. She also receives speech and language support.

Ilana, a nine-year old girl, has struggled with reading since kindergarten. She does not have an IEP, but receives services from the Special Education Teacher and receives speech and language support. Ilana has also qualified for the early morning reading program.

These four students were quickly considered for this project for each had obtained below average reading test scores in third grade. Upon further observations of reading habits and self-confidence, all four were determined to be good candidates. They showed a strong unwillingness to read independently during silent reading. All required constant
reminders and much prompting before opening a book. They had many excuses as to why they weren’t reading. These ranged from not realizing it was time to read to not being able to find their books. They also conveniently needed to use the bathroom during this time.

The students demonstrated a deficiency of appropriate book selection and rarely read an entire book. Most often, they would read from a book much too difficult for them to comprehend. For the allotted time they would flip the pages, pretending to read. The next time silent reading occurred each would choose a different difficult book and the same procedure would be repeated.

It became very obvious that they were selecting books their peers were reading. When handed books at their level, they quickly skimmed them, returned them to the shelves and went back to the much too difficult chapter books. One of these students, Kyle, became a behavior issue every time silent reading took place. He required so much attention that by the time he became settled with a book, silent reading was over.

These four students vividly exhibited a lack of self-confidence when it came to reading. In social situations, all could verbally express themselves. They spoke clearly and loudly. However, when it came to reading aloud, whether in a small or large group, they seemed to lose their voices. The students whispered, skipped words, and rapidly read through the text. All would fidget in their seats and even their eyes would dart around the room. They would often look to me for guidance, support and encouragement.
Materials

The literature circle roles created by Harvey Daniels (1994), discussion director, passage picker, artful artist, connector, and word finder, were used (Appendices A-E). These are roles that have successfully been used by other teachers. They have been designed to enact the key principles of collaborative learning and to initiate student-led discussions. While different role sheets have been developed, these were chosen for they were specifically designed for elementary students.

For assessment purposes, the literature circle observations form and literature circle individual evaluation form (Gilbert, 2000) were used (Appendices F-G). These forms were presented in a college course and used to document discussions in group meetings. The literature observation form was a place to quickly note participation and responses. The literature circle individual evaluation form was used for self-reflection and self-assessment, in addition to teacher evaluation.

A student reading survey (Appendix H) was created and given before and after this study. The questions pertained to attitudes toward reading and books. It was designed to see trends in hesitant readers and negative attitudes regarding reading.

Data Collection

Various forms of data collection were used in this study. The students were given a survey before and after the differentiated reading instruction (Appendix H). This survey asked students to answer questions regarding their feelings on reading. It was a means of getting to a student's self image as a reader before the study began and to determine if this image had changed as the study terminated. Also, upon completion of
the literature circle and book, each student was given a self-assessment to complete. This asked students to rate their reading, group discussion and responses (Appendix F).

Observations of the four students were made on a daily basis. Their body language, comments and interactions with other group members were closely examined. While the literature circles were being conducted, field notes were taken to document the discussions held between the students and the behaviors exhibited by all.

As literature circles on the different books were occurring simultaneously, not all discussions were heard by an adult. As a result, certain groups were tape recorded. These recordings were reviewed for student discourse on the books. Those groups being recorded changed on a daily basis as the adult interaction with the groups rotated.

Parents were notified of the research being done in the classroom. They were asked to note any changes in behavior or mood around reading. They documented any additional time they saw their student reading outside of the assigned homework (Appendix I). Changes in self-esteem or positive comments made during family discussions were readily shared.

Procedures

Students were taught the roles and how literature circles function before the study began. While the class was reading a single book for reading instruction, each role was introduced. Each student performed the same role for the same reading assignment. This role was then modeled and all practiced it in a mock literature circle. This was repeated for each role.
Upon completion of this book, students were grouped by readiness. In this small group setting, the literature roles were practiced again. This time, each student was given a different role to perform. With adult guidance, the proper implementation of each role was experienced. Appropriate discussions and interactions were modeled and carried out. Once the students demonstrated a complete understanding of the literature circle procedure, the groups were allowed to independently hold discussions on the books being read.

When these groups had finished their assigned books, four new books were introduced to the class. They were shown to the class, quickly summarized, and each student was given a chance to flip through the pages. The students were then asked to rate the books, indicating which would be their first, second, and third choices for reading. The four students chosen for close observations were given their first choices and the others were divided so as two groups of five and two groups of six were formed. All students were guaranteed one of their three desired books. The students were told of their reading selections and got into their respective groups. A deadline was stated for completion of the books and within the groups, a schedule of assigned readings was created. Once the groups had determined the daily reading assignments, these schedules were turned in for approval by the teacher.

Literature circles were held everyday. The roles rotated so as to ensure every student was given a chance to lead his/her group. For those groups that were made up of five students, each student was given one of the five roles: discussion director, passage picker, artful artist, connector, and word finder. In those groups where six students were present, two artful artists were assigned for each reading.
As a facilitator, I met with two groups each day. I listened in on book discussions, taking note of who was contributing and what was being said. Occasionally, the students needed to be redirected, but usually the discussions were student-run. For those groups that weren't met with, a tape recorder was used to record the discussions.

When the books were completed, each group created a visual and used this in a class presentation. All groups rated and summarized their respective books to the class. These books later became available for students to read as independent reading books.

**Results and Analysis**

Before implementing literature circles, I made observations while the class participated in language arts. I saw students yawning and frequently putting their heads down on the desks. They moaned, groaned, and complained when asked to pull out their reading folders. Many could not remember what had been read the day before, and few voluntarily followed along with the reading. Most could not connect with the book and showed no interest in finishing it. Kyle, Chris, Ilana, and Melissa were no exception. They needed to be reminded and prompted numerous times to open books and follow along. Not one participated in discussions unless specifically called on. When asked if the book was enjoyable to read, none of the four students said it was. Kyle acted out during this time, for he claimed to be bored.

When I announced that the students were going to be given choices as to what book to read next, outbursts of excitement and disbelief were heard. Though only four choices were offered, the students were now bouncing out of their seats with elation. In addition to this, they showed extreme impatience in regard to finding out what book
they'd be reading. The class was thrilled when the literature circle groups were announced and most could not wait to get the new book. They began reading the books immediately upon receiving them. Each student was reading independently without any prompting!

When the literature circles convened, another great change was witnessed. Not one single moan, groan, or complaint was heard. In comparison, the excitement felt when the new books were handed out was also present in the literature circles. The students were smiling, had their books open, and were prepared to share their insights with the group.

While the feelings toward reading improved among the entire class, the behaviors and attitudes of my reluctant readers were further affected. Of the four students closely observed, Chris and Ilana showed the greatest number of changes. In comparison, Kyle and Melissa showed some growth but their changes were not as drastic or as many in number.

Chris

Chris showed improvements in comprehension, interest, participation, amount of time spent reading outside of class, and was found to take leadership positions. Chris' interest and participation increased within two literature circle meetings. While he was notorious for not speaking in class, during literature circles, Chris was found not only to participate but would interrupt others to be heard. The following is a discussion that took place during the second meeting of his literature circle.

Jacob: "My first question is why do you think Suds liked third grade?"
Mikaela: “Liked third grade?”

Jacob: “Yeah.”

Mikaela: “I think he liked third grade because…”

Chris (interrupting): “He liked being an angel and not a rat.”

Jacob: “Yeah.”

Mark: “He doesn’t like being a rat and he likes being an angel…”

Chris (interrupting): “‘Cuz he doesn’t want to be mean to people.”

Through this brief dialogue, Chris exhibited his desire to be heard. He not only had he been actively listening, but also had ideas he could not wait to share. In addition to this dialogue, Chris was often heard agreeing or disagreeing with others’ comments and adding his own opinions. For a student who seldom could tell the class what had just been read during whole group instruction, this level of participation was unexpected.

Later in this same literature circle, this dialogue was recorded:

Chris: “Okay, I’m word finder and my first word was rotten.”

Mikaela: “Was what?”

Chris: “Rotten, page 16.”

Mikaela: “Got it. I found it.” (reading from the book) “I do rotten in school?”

Chris: “Yeah. I think it was a weird word.”

Mikaela: “Do you have the…”

Jacob: “definition?”

Mikaela: “Yeah or did you already know?”

Chris: “Umm, I think it’s bad.”
Alex: “Yeah. It’s like you rotten, or it’s a rotten banana. That doesn’t taste good. It’s all brown.”

Jacob: “Yeah, we get it.”

Chris: “Yeah, but this kind of rotten isn’t used like that.”

For this particular literature circle, Chris’ role was that of word finder. In the previous dialogue, he clearly showed he understood the use of the word rotten. Alex was sharing his understanding of the word, but it was the incorrect usage. Chris was the only one in his group to demonstrate he understood the book and the author’s usage of rotten. He took a stand and disagreed with Alex’s opinion.

Disagreeing with his peer, Chris demonstrated he possessed enough self-confidence to voice a difference in opinion. In addition, it showed the beginnings of leadership tendencies. The following day in literature circle, Chris was found keeping his group on task. When conversations started wandering, he would bring to the group’s attention that the book was no longer being discussed. Chris also jumped in as the discussion director, though he was the artful artist, by telling Alex to share his role with the group. When it came time for Chris to serve as the discussion director, he not only offered his group higher-level questions to ponder over and discuss, but also kept tangent conversations at a minimum.

Through the course of this study, Chris was also observed reading during free time. While he would previously have wandered the room aimlessly when finished with tasks, now he was found to be reading. This independent reading occurred not only with the literature circle book, but he also was found selecting books from the classroom library to read in class. When asked if this behavior was seen outside of the classroom,
his mother wrote, “Yes, Chris has been more willing to read at home. He is reading about 15-20 minutes per night. His interest in reading has definitely increased! Chris is not intimidated by more difficult books. His focus is primarily the topic of the books.” The interest in reading that was observed in school was also seen at home. In the absence of a teacher and a room full of books, Chris still chose to read. While his lack of reading was a topic of conversation at parent/teacher conferences, now Chris was reading by choice.

Ilana

Ilana also made tremendous growth in a short period of time. She, too, participated more, exhibited greater interest in reading, read more outside of language arts, and had more self-confidence. However, unlike Chris, Ilana also increased her reading fluency and word decoding.

As with Chris, the most obvious improvement was that of participation. Ilana was found to offer many comments and fully completed each of the roles she was assigned. Where as she used to be nervous to participate in whole-group discussions, in her literature circle, Ilana was almost demanding her thoughts be heard. For example, she could be heard saying things as found in this dialogue:

Ilana: “Do you have another question while we wait?”

Micah: “Why, why do you have… would you like?”

Ilana: “No, I want to ask a question. If you were Cinderellis, would you like…umm, brothers like that?”
Not only does this prove she was actively participating in her group, but it also indicates that Ilana was thinking about what was being read. For a student who struggled with the decoding of words, reading for meaning and understanding was a huge gain. This dialogue demonstrates another instance when she focused on understanding the book.

Ilana: “Okay, when I first read this book, I didn’t know why they did it Cinderell-IS.”

Sydney: “Yeah, me neither.”

Ilana: “Like, why didn’t they just call it Cinderella?”

Sydney: “Yeah, instead of Cinderellis.”

Micah: “Yeah, why is it called Cinderell-IS instead of Cinderella?”

Ilana: “I haven’t read it yet. And why would they have a glass hill?”

Sydney: “Instead of like a…”

Micah: “Instead of like a regular hill?”

Ilana was questioning the author’s choice of title. She was wondering why the title differed from the title she’s familiar with, Cinderella. Ilana was going beyond the words by trying to make sense of what she was reading.

As a passage picker, one of the literature circle roles, a student is required to read a passage aloud to his/her group. When literature circles began, Ilana struggled with the passages she chose. She showed signs of nervousness. She became extremely fidgety and sometimes defensive when others would help her with the correct word pronunciations. Within only a week’s time, Ilana’s fluency had improved. She was recorded sharing this passage with her group:
Ilana: “After noon, before midnight, the wind picked up. Cinderellis felt a ...tremor?”

Anna: “tremor”

Ilana: “The wind howled. Midnight came. The ground rocked and burst. The wind went wild, blowing in every direction. A tree uprooted and sailed away into the east. Cinderellis’ hands shook. His teeth rattled and his stomach growled. The world went black. The moon had gone out. The stars had gone out. Cinderellis’ heart pounded up and down.”

This passage, though it may not seem extremely difficult, would have been extremely problematic for Ilana in the past. She had been struggling with recognizing and reading suffixes. While this passage was full of suffixes, Ilana didn’t miss one. Whether it was the daily reading, the increased self-confidence, or the pressure of having to read aloud to her group, some variable caused this student’s fluency to noticeably improve.

When asked to self-assess, Ilana’s self-image was found to have changed. In a two-week time frame, Ilana’s perception of herself went from being a good reader to a great reader. She went from reading 0-10 minutes per day to reading 20-30 minutes per day. When surveyed, Ilana’s mother stated Ilana was reading more and more each day and was averaging one hour of reading at home. She also said that Ilana had shown an increased interest in reading, an improvement in reading ability and had not once complained of the increased time spent reading.
Melissa

Melissa's changes were found to take a different form than either Ilana's or Chris'. Her improvements were subtle and didn't present themselves as quickly. Melissa emerged as leader, was an active group member, showed more effort, and improved her vocabulary skills.

When Melissa was discussion director, she very quickly took on the role of the group leader. As seen in the proceeding dialogue, she took charge and ensured all group members were included in the discussion.

Melissa: "My first question is, what do you think will happen next? Lea?"

Lea: "I think grandma, after she gets the medicine, will probably, umm, be a little cuckoo."

Jake: "Umm. I think the grandma is gonna blow up."

Melissa: "Kyle?"

Kyle: "I think the same thing as Jake, but like maybe she be like not open in like all these different pieces."

Jake: "But like not blow up, but like..."

Melissa: "You know. Okay, umm, Jake do you wanna go (next)? Jake? Go."

Though Melissa wasn't observed sharing her opinions voluntarily or raising questions about the reading, she made it obvious she was actively listening to the discussion. She would frequently offer clarification of another's comments or agree with what a peer was saying. To a group member's comment that he felt like the fire present
in a character’s stomach was also in his stomach, Melissa stated, “It’s just like when you’re sick and your stomach feels bad.” While Melissa may not have been directly discussing the contents of the book, she was readily adding to the conversation in a way in which she was comfortable.

As a struggling reader, Melissa usually focused on word decoding versus reading for meaning. When a word was misunderstood or unknown, she would stumble over it and skip ahead to the next familiar one. This prevented complete comprehension of the text. However, during one literature circle, Melissa showed she was beginning to think about the sentences she was reading for meaning. As word finder, she told the group one of her chosen words was “decks”. She continued to explain that she chose this word because she “…thought it meant like cards, but then (I) read on and found out it was with ships.” This indicates that Melissa was beginning to read for understanding, monitoring herself as she read.

Again, because Melissa was a below average reader, frustration was something she often dealt with. Many times she would shut down and stop trying. Things seemed too difficult to handle. With literature circles, Melissa was seen to put forth effort consistently. In school, she read her chosen book and actively participated in discussions. At home, her mother stated that Melissa was reading for approximately 30 minutes each night. In addition, she said that she noticed Melissa writing more when relating back to her reading assignments. Though the reading level of the material remained the same as the material presented earlier in the school year, Melissa was now invested enough to overcome the frustration. She no longer was seen shutting down, but rather rose to the challenge and managed to improve her reading as a result.
Kyle’s areas of improvement were not as varied as the preceding students, but for him they were significant. He was one of those students that would do anything to avoid reading. Discussing books and writing about them were tasks he despised. Excuses as to why assignments weren’t completed were constantly heard until literature circles. As the following dialogue shows, participation in discussions soon became voluntary.

David: “I drew a picture.”
Kyle: “A picture. That’s him, umm, getting, putting the stuff. And that’s whatever the boy’s name is putting stuff in the pot.”
David: “Where is he?”
Kyle: “He’s in the kitchen.”
David: “Yeah, Kyle got it.”

Kyle did not wait to be asked to participate. He saw a picture and since he had understood the reading, knew what was being depicted. He was so sure of himself and so anxious to speak, no one else in this lively group was given a chance to speak.

In a later discussion, Kyle showed that like Melissa, he too, was beginning to read for meaning. He was not just reading the printed words but instead was connecting what he read to things he already understood. When his group was discussing a character, Kyle made reference to Alzheimer’s disease. He said, “Grandma is like someone with, what’s that disease called when your mind is in a different world?” Though he couldn’t remember the term for what he was referring to, he was indisputably showing that he had understood that the character of Grandma was not normal. Though Roald Dahl never stated this character had any forms of dementia, he portrayed this through her actions and
statements. Kyle picked up on this and made sense of it by relating it to something he knew more about. Kyle had not shown use of this skill prior to literature circles.

Literature circles also brought about a gain in self-confidence. As his group continued to meet, Kyle realized he understood the book. His comments were often met with unanimous agreement. He was praised for his connections and questions. His confidence in his understanding developed tremendously. During one discussion, his best friend, as connector, started talking about laziness. This friend elaborated by talking about a proverb his father had taught him. Kyle, looking his friend squarely in the eye, said, “What does that have to do with the book?” The two boys proceeded to engage in a discussion regarding this connection until finally, Kyle had proven the connection was unrelated to the book. Kyle, being so confident in himself and in his understanding, was willing to argue a point with his best friend. This is the same best friend that in the past had served as Kyle’s much-needed crutch.

Discussion

At the culmination of this study, I saw many interesting and hopeful results. I hadn’t known what effect literature response groups, formed by common interests, would have had on my most reluctant readers. What became quickly apparent is that these literature circles benefited these hesitant readers the most. Participation and active engagement was impacted largely. All four students, regardless of response group composition or of book selection, were active members of all discussions. While during whole group instruction these students required prompting and encouragement to
participate, in literature circles, they advocated for themselves. They made certain their ideas were voiced and acknowledged.

Along with this increased participation, all students displayed increased confidence levels. I am not sure if the increase in small-group discussions brought about the greater confidence or whether the greater confidence brought about the increase in discussions, but regardless, each student attended a literature circle with a well-prepared role and the desire to share it. This confidence was so strong, some even disagreed with peers, who were known to be reading at a higher level, regarding topics of discussion. These students would not have disagreed with those they considered to be smarter than they prior to literature response groups. In addition, these once meek and shy fourth graders emerged as group leaders. They knew what was expected and made sure those expectations were met by all group members.

While none of my reluctant readers were given direct reading instruction from me, within the two-week time of this study, all gained reading skills. Some of these skills developed naturally and others developed with the help of their group members. Chris and Melissa showed they had learned to use context clues to determine word meanings. Ilana learned to pay attention to word endings to make sense of text. Kyle had learned to connect incidents in the book to those he was already familiar with. All these strategies improved the comprehension of each book being read.

Each student, while at one point needed friendly coercion to read silently, during literature circles, would voluntarily read silently. They would sit with their role sheet on their desks and would be absorbed in their books for 20 minutes at a time. Parents noticed this change at home immediately, as their children would independently pull out
their reading assignments to prepare for the following day's literature circle. The parents no longer heard complaints or had to battle with their children for some quality reading time. These students were self-motivated.

An ancillary question that arose during the preliminary stages of this study was whether this change in reading instruction would change how students viewed reading. On the second day of implementation, Chris' group told me they liked their new book so much better than the book they had just finished reading. They complemented the organization of the literature circle and discussed how they liked talking about the books more than answering questions on a worksheet. However, Chris' group wasn't the only group that felt this way. The entire class looked forward to literature circles. When the schedule had to be changed and literature circles were cancelled, a groan was heard throughout the room. My reluctant readers were the loudest complainers. They hated to see literature circles cancelled. More surprisingly, when DEAR (Drop Everything And Read) time came, these hesitant readers shouted for joy. They had gone from being coerced to pull out a book, to being told to keep their enthusiasm for reading under control. Clearly, this experiment had drastically changed their opinions about reading.

The results of this study support the previously conducted research. As Worthy, Patterson, Salas, Prater, & Turner (2002) stated, a student’s motivation in reading is affected by his/her interest in the reading material. When my reluctant readers were allowed to choose the book they were to read, their interest levels automatically increased. Coupled with positive social interactions around reading these books, each student’s motivation soared.
The self-selection of reading material also evoked feelings of ownership. This ownership generated more motivation and thus students became engrossed in the learning process (Kragler, 2000). Once engrossed in learning, it became easy for each student to begin acquiring the skills others in his/her group frequently used. The hesitant readers were now not only willing to put forth effort to learn and understand the material; they sought out this information.

As members of a discussion group, with specific roles, each fourth grader was expected to participate. The group members were depending on all members to come to group prepared to share his/her insights on the reading from a particular perspective (determined by the role). In order for learning to read to occur, the material being read must be internalized (Worthy, Patterson, Salas, Prater, & Turner, 2002). So as not to let group members down, my reluctant readers internalized such material. They made connections to their own lives, asked for clarification of authors' intentions, and read beyond the words to make predictions and inferences. As now participating members of a group, these students were learning skills for becoming better readers and began to view themselves as capable readers.

As now active participants in a small group, better comprehension of the material being read was unavoidable. The discussions that took place during literature circles were relevant to the students. The students determined what the specific topic of conversation would be. They talked about what was interesting, surprising, or confusing to them. These kinds of responses are more meaningful than those that are teacher-led (Maloch, 2002). As well as this, talking about the content and hearing others' perspectives expanded the level of comprehension (Burns, 1998). As one of the surveyed
parents stated, "Not only does this encourage the kids to read more; they are learning to express their thoughts and insights while learning how their classmates think."

Ivey (2000) stated that poor readers were often found to spend the least amount of time reading. Instead, they spent most of their time working on skills. This limited exposure to print put them at a disadvantage when compared to successful readers. The structure of reading instruction during this study provided each student with equal reading time. As the time they spent reading increased, whether in class or by choice at home or during free time, these low-level readers developed into successful readers.

Overall, these components lead to increased confidence levels. The students saw themselves as significant contributors to a group, comprehended the material better, and had feelings of ownership about all these gains. Additionally, these hesitant readers were receiving another strong message. They were reading the identical books as the more experienced readers in the room. Not only were they reading the same books, but they were also in the same group as these advanced readers. As Opitz (1999) said, "When a beginning reader holds, tracks, and reads the same material as a more experienced reader, the message is powerful."

While conducting this study, I, as an educator, gained many insights. I had been exposed to the idea of having students choose what to learn about, but had never attempted it with any of my classes. By allowing my students to have some say in what they learned had an enormous impact on the classroom climate. The class exhibited a genuine investment in learning. They yearned to read, discuss, and do their best. This desire was not only visible in reading, but also became apparent in all other subjects.
In addition, because they were invested in learning, the students became more helpful to one another. They wanted to see each of their peers succeed and volunteered to assist those who struggled. Along with the assistance came a greater amount of patience and tolerance of differences. The students learned to value other perspectives. They realized that they didn’t have to agree with what was being said. As long as all opinions were stated, the group members remained happy.

I believe the flexible groups played a large part in this. Since wide ranges of abilities were grouped together, the students began to see the strengths that each individual brought with him/her. A poor reader emerged as a phenomenal leader. A poor writer emerged as a fantastic illustrator. As the group members learned of these strengths, each student became sought after when tasks involving these strengths were assigned. Again, this extended into all subject areas. The students who once felt unsuccessful were now important members of the class. They possessed talents others didn’t. As they now felt valued, I observed them turning to positive role models for help in reading. As a result, students developed symbiotic relationships. They depended on each other for skill acquisition.

I also realized that student led groups could not only work, but could work amazingly well. I was fearful that the students wouldn’t want to talk about the book but would instead chat about the latest movies, television shows, and games. To my surprise, the group members did not allow these side discussions to occur. Even when all had shared their insights, the discussion directors kept the groups talking about the book. They would come up with more questions to ask and often involved the group in making predictions. Not only was my fear dispelled, I was surprised to see each group engaged
in higher-level thinking. My students were capable, even as fourth graders, to engage in intense discourse. As many educators do, I had underestimated my class.

As the outcomes of this study were so positive, I have begun to think about ways in which to improve the structure of the reading instruction implemented during this study. I am curious to see if it is possible to still have successful literature circles if the groups are organized by both readiness and interest. Can literature circles be successful if they are comprised of average to above-average readers or below average to average readers so that all students can be challenged with appropriate reading material?

I am also wondering how the classroom would be affected if students were given more choices. What would happen if students were allowed to choose the theme for literature circles and teachers then found books that fit the class-selected theme? Would interest, motivation, and ownership increase even further?

In conclusion, this research dramatically altered my classroom. It was proven that with a sense of ownership and interest, students take charge of their own learning. They will meet challenges with motivation and determination. They will turn to each other for help, and in doing so will gain invaluable knowledge. The confidence gained from these experiences will lead to future success and a happier classroom. The flexible grouping will allow for new relationships to develop, along with an appreciation of differences. My students grew as readers, as learners, as group members, and as people. These changes far exceeded my expectations and as a result, the way in which reading instruction occurs in my classroom will forever be changed.
References


Maloch, B. (2002). Scaffolding student talk: One teacher’s role in literature discussion
groups. *Reading Research Quarterly*, 37, 94-112.


You are the Discussion Director. Your job is to write down some good questions that you think your group would want to talk about.

1. 

2. 

3. Why . . .

4. How . . .

5. If . . .
Appendix B

Literature Circle Role – Passage Picker

Name ________________________________
Group _________________________________
Book ________________________________
Assignment p _______–p _______

You are the Passage Picker. Your job is to pick parts of the story that you want to read aloud to your group. These can be:

- a good part
- an interesting part
- a funny part
- some good writing
- a scary part
- a good description

Be sure to mark the parts you want to share with a Post-it note or bookmark. Or you can write on this sheet the parts you want to share.

Parts to read out loud:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Page</th>
<th>Paragraph</th>
<th>Why I liked it</th>
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</tbody>
</table>
Name ____________________________
Group __________________________
Book ____________________________
Assignment p _______–p ______

You are the Artful Artist. Your job is to draw anything about the story that you liked:

— a character
— the setting
— a problem
— an exciting part
— a surprise
— a prediction of what will happen next
— anything else

Draw on the back of this page or on a bigger piece of paper if you need it. Do any kind of drawing or picture you like.

When your group meets, don't tell what your drawing is. Let them guess and talk about it first. Then you can tell about it.
Appendix D

Literature Circle Role – Word Finder

**WORD FINDER**

Name ____________________________

Group ____________________________

Book ____________________________

Assignment p —— p ——

You are the Word Finder. Your job is to look for special words in the story. Words that are:

- new — interesting
- different — important
- strange — hard
- funny

When you find a word that you want to talk about, mark it with a Post-it note or write it down here.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Word</th>
<th>Page</th>
<th>Why I picked it</th>
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</table>

When your group meets, help your friends talk about the words you have chosen. Things you can discuss:

How does this word fit in the story?
Does anyone know what this word means?
Shall we look it up in the dictionary?
What does this word make you feel like?
Can you draw the word?
Appendix E

Literature Circle Role – Connector

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CONNECTOR</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Name: __________________________</td>
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<tr>
<td>Group: __________________________</td>
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<tr>
<td>Book: __________________________</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assignment p ______–p ______</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

You are the Connector. Your job is to find connections between the book and the world outside. This means connecting the reading to:

—your own life
—happenings at school or in the neighborhood
—similar events at other times and places
—other people or problems
—other books or stories
—other writings on the same topics
—other writings by the same author

Some things today’s reading reminded me of were . . .
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Meeting #</th>
<th>Book:</th>
<th>Read</th>
<th>Book</th>
<th>Brought</th>
<th>Response:</th>
<th>J/T, R, S, M, or other</th>
<th>Participation</th>
<th>Behavior</th>
<th>Comments:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
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<td></td>
<td>miscues, legitimate questions &amp; participation, predictions/connections within the book and/or to real life situations</td>
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</table>

Student Name: 

Adapted from Barbara L. Bell, Western Carolina University, Cullowhee, NC by Janice Holt & April Bryson, Fairview School, Jackson County, NC
## Literature Circle Individual Evaluation Form

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Scale</th>
<th>1 = never</th>
<th>2 = sometimes</th>
<th>3 = usually</th>
<th>4 = always</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Student</td>
<td>Teacher</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Reading</strong></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>1. Kept up with reading</td>
<td>1.</td>
<td>1.</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>2. Used reading time wisely &amp; didn’t disturb others</td>
<td>2.</td>
<td>2.</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>3. Returned books on time (1 = no; 2 = yes)</td>
<td>3.</td>
<td>3.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Had book at school each day</td>
<td>4.</td>
<td>4.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Goals for next time:</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| **Group Discussion** |           |               |             |
| 1. Participated (voluntary or only when asked) | 1. | 1. |
| 2. Contributed quality comments & conversation | 2. | 2. |
| 3. Asked legitimate questions | 3. | 3. |
| 4. Listened to others in group and responded to them | 4. | 4. |
| 5. Made predictions & connections to other things in the book and connections to real life situations, when appropriate | 5. | 5. |
| **Goals for next time:** |               |               |             |

| **Responses** |           |               |             |
| 1. Kept up with entries and other assignments | 1. | 1. |
| 2. Wrote quality responses to literature & not just retell or summary | 2. | 2. |
| 3. Made connections to what was happening to characters & to out-of-book situations | 3. | 3. |
| **Goals for next time:** |               |               |             |

**TOTALS**

The overall grade I think I deserve for this Lit Study is ______ because:

______________________________

Signature

______________________________

Date

Adapted by Janice Holt, April Bryson, Kathleen Parda, & Kirsten Morgan from Dr. Barbara H. Bell, Director, Reading Center, Western Carolina University, 138 Killian Building, Cullowhee, NC, 28723
Student Reading Survey

Directions: Circle the choice that best answers the question.

1. How do you see yourself as a reader?
   - O.K. reader
   - Good
   - Great

2. Outside of school, how often do you read?
   - 0-10 minutes per day
   - 10-20 minutes per day
   - 20-30 minutes per day

3. How do you feel about reading?
   - I don't like it.
   - I think it is okay.
   - I love it.

4. How do you feel about the books you are reading?
   - They are too hard.
   - They are just right.
   - They are too easy.
Appendix I

Parent Questionnaire

Student's Name

Questions to Consider:

1. Has your child been reading more at home? How much more time does s/he spend reading?

2. Has your child begun reading more difficult books or shown an interest in doing so?

3. Does your child talk about what is occurring in Language Arts? Does s/he tell you about the book s/he is reading? Are the literature circle discussions shared with you?

4. Is your child complaining about the amount of reading assigned each day?

5. Is your child excited or showing more enjoyment in reading than before?

6. Have you seen an improvement in your child’s reading ability?

7. Have you seen your child become more responsible with completing assigned reading and roles?