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Literature Circles and Their Improvement of Comprehension

Lauren Coccia
St. John Fisher College, lauren_coccia@aol.com

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Literature Circles and Their Improvement of Comprehension

Abstract
Literature circles are an ideal reading instructional method when it comes to holding students accountable for their own understanding of literature. The research question asked in this study was, “How do literature circles improve comprehension?” Research was collected on six primary leveled students at Freedom Charter School (pseudonym) in Western New York. Through a questionnaire, pre and post-assessments, student work, and field notes, there was a noticeable increase in comprehension of the chosen text within this study once literature circle sessions came to a conclusion. Teachers must be thoughtful when it comes to choosing literature used in literature circles, constructing ways for participants to employ comprehension strategies, and motivating students to participate in peer-led discussions.

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Abstract

Literature circles are an ideal reading instructional method when it comes to holding students accountable for their own understanding of literature. The research question asked in this study was, “How do literature circles improve comprehension?” Research was collected on six primary leveled students at Freedom Charter School (pseudonym) in Western New York. Through a questionnaire, pre and post-assessments, student work, and field notes, there was a noticeable increase in comprehension of the chosen text within this study once literature circle sessions came to a conclusion. Teachers must be thoughtful when it comes to choosing literature used in literature circles, constructing ways for participants to employ comprehension strategies, and motivating students to participate in peer-led discussions.
Literature Circles Ability to Improve Comprehension

Literature circles allow students to cooperatively learn and comprehend texts through casual conversation amongst their peers as well as immersion in discussion surrounding purposefully chosen questions that will aid in text comprehension. Literature circles diverge from heavy teacher-led instruction that is commonly seen within our schools as a result of pressure of demanding curriculum and standardized testing.

According to Marchiando (2013), “American fifth graders were spending 91% of their school day either listening to a teacher talk or working alone” (p.1). This statistic is a direct result of the balanced literacy approach that is being used in many American elementary classrooms because the approach is seen as “best practice” by district administration. The major problem with this “balanced” literacy approach is the presence of heavy teacher based instruction and the amount of time a student spends working independently. Students in this technological age should be learning about texts in ways that are meaningful to them. Involvement in discussion is a relevant way for students to comprehend a text because they place a heavy value on conversing with their peers whether it be face to face or through on online medium. Conversation around a desired topic allows voices to be heard and opinions to be expressed.

Working with chatty 2nd graders has always been a struggle when trying to make sure that they are comprehending the material that they are being taught. Some students participated in classroom discussions while others allowed their more vocal counterparts to take accountability for their own learning. If talking to their peers is what makes school enjoyable for students, then why not offer them opportunities to be involved in conversation around the topic of literature.
Literature circles are important because the literacy method promotes cooperative learning as well as the opportunity for students to deepen their understanding of a text through the thoughts and ideas of others. Literature circles can also intrinsically motivate students to be involved in the act of reading because they are associating the method with the pleasurable act of conversation with their peers. If literature circles are not explored, those who allow their more vocal counterparts in the classroom to participate in teacher-led comprehension activities then these students understanding of classroom material will continue to struggles as well as their self-confidence in school. If literature circles are explored, all of the students involved in this cooperative learning method will deepen their understanding of the text, voice their thoughts and opinions surrounding the text, and participate in the enjoyable act of talking. Ultimately, students involved in literature circles will be accountable for reading and comprehending the text at hand because they are a part of a conversation, not just another hand left out of the air or incomplete worksheet.

Literature circles have been a comprehension tool for the last 33 years. Daniels (1994) sites a teacher named Karen Smith as the originator of the literature circle idea. As suggested by Wilfong (2004), “She observed students forming their own discussion circles after having discovered a box of forgotten books in the classroom” (p.15). After overhearing her students’ discussion over the rediscovered books, Karen Smith knew she was witnessing something profound happening. Wilfong (2004) explains that Karen Smith began to develop the concept of what is now recognized as literature circles with the assistance one of her professors at Arizona State University. Once the idea of Literature circles was coined, Harvey Daniels became the next big name associated with the valuable comprehension method. According to Daniels (1994), “Literature circles bring together powerful, research-based theories of education” (p.13).
Literature circles incorporate collaborative learning, motivation, as well as an increase in responsibility.

Literature circles have a number of components that are considered to be identifiable and unique to only this literacy method. Daniels (1994) has frequently written about the use of Literature circles in classrooms with kindergarten students all the way up to college students. His definition of this strategy is widely accepted and often quoted:

Literature circles are small, temporary discussion groups who have chosen to read the same story, poem, article, or book. While reading each group determined portion of the text (either inside or outside of class), each member prepares to take specific responsibilities in the upcoming discussion, and everyone comes to the group with the notes needed to perform that job. The circles have regular meetings, with discussion roles rotating each session. When they finish a book, the circle members plan a way to share highlights of their reading with the wider community; then they trade members with other finishing groups, select more reading, and move into a new cycle. Once readers can successfully conduct their own wide-ranging, self-sustaining discussions, formal discussion roles may be dropped. (p. 13)

Daniels (1994) has been a firm believer in the benefits of incorporating literature circles into classroom instruction regardless of the interdisciplinary subject being taught. Daniels recognizes the power of small literature discussion groups and the power of collaborative learning. Noe (2009) provides the following rationale for considering the use of literature circles in the classroom for those apprehensive to the literacy method in saying:
Literature circles look different in every classroom; they change from teacher to teacher, grade to grade, student to student. Literature circles have no recipe, they are not a specific "program", and they never look the same from year to year -- or even from day to day. (p.1)

Daniels and Noe are researchers who both know that an instructional method that truly engages individuals with literature is a method that is worth trying.

With literature circles being a recommended and relevant instructional method for students, I believe as a teacher ready to take action, that time as well as energy must be put forth to find out if this method could work in my own classroom. The comprehension of my students is severely lacking due to opportunities for all students to be involved in literature discussion being dismal. Some students at the age of seven and eight are seeing reading and learning as an unenjoyable act as a result of tedious worksheets and assessments that are used in order for the teacher to understand their own students comprehension of the day’s lesson. In reality, literature circles will not only act as a medium to observe my students comprehension of a particular text or lesson but it will also be an instructional method that will hold my young learners accountable as well an experiment to witness the benefits of cooperative learning and peer-led discussion.

A major drive of my participation in an action research study is the concern of all of my students comprehending the Common Core Curriculum. Thus my research question will explore the factors that allow literature circles to promote participants comprehension through cooperative learning.

At the beginning of this action research study, I asked myself the following question, “How do literature circles improve comprehension?” I used Sociocultural History Theory Framework to make connections and draw conclusions with ideas surrounding the instructional
method of literature circles because this theory shows relevance to instructional methods that involve gaining knowledge through socialization with members of the society of which we associate with. When reviewing the literature surrounding literature circles, the following ideas presented themselves: the adaptability of the literature circle approach, the increased engagement and motivation towards literacy acts, and the implementation of comprehension strategies and critical thinking skills. Once literature circles were implemented in my classroom, observations of students were recorded and quantitative data was collected. The collected data was then analyzed in its entirety where three themes emerged. The three themes that presented themselves were the importance of developmentally appropriate reading material, the effect of employing a variety of comprehension strategies, and peer-led discussion can improve comprehension surrounding a text. Ultimately, it was concluded that literatures can improve comprehension of the text through the ability of peer-discussions to hold students accountable for their own learning and understanding of the text at hand.

**Theoretical Framework**

When thinking about literature circles and their connection to literacy as a whole, literature circles offer multiple opportunities for participants to be involved in multiple literacy acts. Literacy is defined by the cultural demands of a society and expects its members to deal with written text in a way that is determined as socially appropriate. Luke and Freebody (1990) believe that a member of a literate society is able to perceive what acceptable literate behavior is. The pair argue that a successful reader in our society must take on four roles when they are dealing with reading and writing acts.
According to Luke and Freebody (1990) these four roles that a member of a society must adopt in order to be literate is that of a code breaker, text participant, text user, and text analyst. The role of the code breaker is to crack the text by using the sound-symbol relationship in the English language in order to make meaning of the written word. The role of the text participant is to make meaning of the discourse common to certain genres. A text participant can connect their background knowledge to the text so that they can draw inferences needed to develop meaning within the text. A text analyst is aware of the perceptions and views that an author using in their writing by analyzing the language used in the text. Finally, a text user has the ability to participate in socially activities associated with the text.

Literature circles are an ideal example of a literacy event that allows participants to be involved in a social activity around a piece of literature. Literature circles also offer opportunities for participants to become code breakers when reading the book used in the circle, text participants when those involved make personal connections with the text, and text analysts when group members discuss author’s perception and views towards society by analyzing how as well as what type of language the author used.

Just like the four roles that Luke and Freebody (1990) deem necessary for a member of society to be literate, Literature circles also require participants to take on a role in order to allow text discussion to emerge. Many literature circles require the students to fill out role sheets after they read a chapter or assigned part of the text. These roles are completed and carried out during Literature circles so that everyone has a chance to participate in discussion. Each role is vital to creating thoughtful and deep conversations.

Discourse is an important term to understand when talking about the definition of literacy and it’s relation to Literature circles because literacy is a social act and control of discourse is
needed to communicate with others. The term discourse, as discussed by Gee (1989), is the use of language in a socially acceptable way and when controlled a person can be identified as a member of a socially meaningful group. A person acquires many discourses through their life, where the discourse being used can be recognized as primary or secondary. All humans literate or not, have made use of their primary discourse during times when they interact with those within their family or with others who are intimate to them. Secondary discourses extend the use of our language that we previously learned when acquiring our primary discourse to ease our ability to associate with those at secondary institutions such as school, work, and other social institutions.

A major problem in the American School System is that many student’s primary discourse is not being used during instructional time. In other words, students are not receiving the same type of language delivery that they hear at home as they are in school. Some students may even struggle in school because they are unfamiliar with the way the teacher and other instructors speak. Some students may even feel ashamed of the way they speak because adults in the school setting may discourage them from speaking their primary discourse in school. Literature circles allow students opportunity to speak in their primary discourses within an instructional setting because they are having a conversation surrounding a piece of literature with their peers. As a result of being able to use their primary discourse during literature circles, participants will be more likely to express their thoughts and opinions.

The Sociocultural History Theory is a relevant theory to look at in regards to literature circles. As stated by Larson and Marsh (2005), Sociocultural-Historical Theory is an emerging theory that defines the learner as “an active member of a constantly changing community of learners in which knowledge constructs and is constructed by larger cultural systems” (p.100).
As an active member of a constantly changing society learners construct meaning or comprehend information by interacting with other individuals that are a part of their social system. According to Larson and Marsh (2005), “Sociocultural-historical theory presents a culturally focused analysis of participation in everyday life, in both formal and informal learning settings, that offers teachers and researchers a way to meaningfully use or analyze students’ practices in the classroom” (p. 101). In other words, students are active members of a constantly changing community of learners. Educators need to rethink how literacy is used in the classrooms so that learning is relevant in their students’ lives. The students in school presently are a part of their own cultural system because they communicate with their peers in ways other than face-to-face interactions. Literature circles have the ability to incorporate the relevant learning strategies though conversation, culturally responsive reading material, and the ability to take literature circles into a digital mode. Literature circles can be adapted so students can discuss a text with their peers using modes of communications that are relevant to individuals living in a technological age. Literature circles can be implemented using eReaders, smartphones, and computers.

Larson and Marsh (2005) believe that school based literacies need to recognize the amazing changes going on in the world and various literacy modes and practices needed for today’s students. Larson argues that literacy instruction should be taught in an engaging and meaningful way so that the existing marginalization of students in urban schools does not worsen. Students from diverse backgrounds may find disconnect from traditional teacher centered literacy instruction, as our world continues to evolve technologically and socially, therefore our instruction needs to change as well. Therefore, through the implementation of literature circles into classroom instruction, students will find engagement in the act of reading
by participating in cooperative discussion amongst their peers using a discourse that is comfortable and familiar to them.

**Research Question**

As discussed previously, literacy is a social practice and learning occurs during social interaction, therefore this action research project asks, how do literature circles improve comprehension?

**Literature Review**

An action research study involves a teacher who wishes to take action in their classroom in order to make a positive educational change. A teacher will not be well equipped to make such reform in his or her classroom without reviewing the literature associated with the area identified as needing positive change. As stated before, when reflecting on the strengths and weaknesses of my classroom, my major concern with my second grade classroom was the hope that all of my students were employing comprehension strategies while working with a text, not just the minority participating in the daily lesson. Collecting exit tickets and completed comprehension worksheets did not feel like enough. I want to create students who employ comprehension skills that good readers use to decode and understand a text. My goal was to find a method that subconsciously allowed readers to apply such skills on their own seemed very attractive.

Literature circles or Book Clubs place a heavy focus on peer-lead discussion about literature where students must rely on their comprehension of the text in order to share their understanding of the reading to their group members. Peer-lead discussion about literature forces a participant to be aware of the text itself as well as be accountable for the talking points they bring to the conversation. Since some of the strengths in my classroom were participation in daily lessons
and detailed discussion of the curriculum at hand, literature circles looked like a great place to start making positive educational reform in my classroom.

In this literature review, there will be a strong focus on the following three major themes that presented themselves when discussing the idea of literature circles. The first theme focuses on the approach that allows literature circles to function properly in a classroom setting. The second theme that arose when reading about literature circles was the increase in student engagement when working with a text as well as high motivation levels in regards to student involvement in this particular literacy activity. The final theme that emerged when reviewing the literature surrounding literature circles was the implementation of comprehension strategies and critical thinking skills when working with literature and during involvement in group discussions about the text.

**The Adaptable Literature Circle Approach**

After reviewing literature surrounding the topic of literature circles, one can conclude that this particular literacy method is not always implemented in the same way amongst classrooms. Teachers implement literature circles in a way that fits the needs of their particular classroom in order to yield maximum benefits. Daniels (2006) writing expresses the following idea:

> Over and over, teachers in all corners of the world have adopted, adapted, modified, and personalized the basic model. The consistent outcome is that kids are falling in love with books they have chosen and talked about with their friends. (p. 10)

This statement by Daniels reinforces the idea that literature circles are a literacy method that can be modeled and reformed to fit certain circumstances that don’t always present themselves in
every classroom. Dillon (2007) explains that she decided to put a twist on the original literature circles that Daniels (2006) promoted that incorporated students roles within the method to increase discussion around the text. Dillon (2007) states, “I found these roles somewhat inappropriate for college readers, so I kept the essence of the idea and altered the use of the literature circles for my developmental reading classes” (p. 84). Similarly, Thomas (2014), explore online literature circles in order for her to create a classroom environment in which students can learn together through thoughtful discussion and authentic experiences. In other words, Thomas (2014) adapted literature circles to fit the needs of the students within her classroom who needed to be involved in a type of literature circle that would be more meaningful than the traditional face-to-face method. It would seem that some examples of circumstances where implementers of literature circles would call for an adapted version of the literature circle Approach are student age level and student need. However, the following key components that all the literature circles reviewed had in common were the possession of thought-provoking literature, assigned student roles, and peer-led discussion where the teacher becomes a facilitator of student learning.

When looking at the first key component necessary to running a literature circle, one needs to obtain a challenging book for the students to read, analyze, and discuss. Fredericks (2012) argues that through literature circles, participants should view the literature that they work with as a source of knowledge for their discussions and a catalyst to challenging the views of their group members. Texts that contain historical, cultural, and social issues allow students to make relevant connections between the challenging topics within the pages with experiences in their own lives. Students who make personal connections with literature will be students who can freely discussion these connections with their group members. Not only do students make
personal connections with the text but Hughes (2014) discusses that students engagement with the text will increase when they begin to hear their peers experiences, perspectives, and ideas. Hughes also agrees that a thought-provoking book is a necessary component of literature circles because it is important for the participants to identify deeply to the books content.

The second common component of the literature circles reviewed were the student roles involved within group discussion. Avci and Yuksel (2011) suggest, “In Literature Circles, roles are used in order to maintain group discussions within the required frame. Students share what they did about their tasks in the group discussion” (p. 1295). Roles provide structure in literature circles and help with facilitation of peer-lead discussion. When reviewing the literature, implications with literature circle roles emerged. Belizaire and Peterson (2006) argue that experiences when implementing literature circles into their classrooms showed that roles sometimes got in the way of thoughtful, from-the-heart conversation (p. 37). As talked about in Avci and Yuksel, there are many roles that can be used with book circles. It is up to the implementer to decide which roles will work for their classroom or teachers can give the students the power to choose the roles in which they wish to embody. DeWit et al. (2014) explains an upside down method to literature circle roles in which their students choose how they will discuss their literature circle texts. When looking at the upside down method, when all discussion around the text is complete, groups can choose the culminating activity that they wish to create in regards to the text. Groups can choose from activities such as the creation of a graphic novel or picture book about the text or the development of a sequel to the story. This freedom not only allows thoughtful conversation as stated in Belizaire and Peterson (2006), but the upside down method is also a form of differentiation in terms of building on students’ differences and seeing the strengths of the students arise.
The final common key component associated within traditional literature circles is a major focus on peer-led discussion of the text rather than a teacher-centered model. When implementing book circles in the classroom, the teacher will act as a facilitator of their students learning and will involve the students in the literature circle process so that the students are in charge of creating the classroom expectations as well as being involved in social learning experience. Marchiando (2013) believes that students should discuss the necessary behaviors needed within their groups in order for each group member to succeed. Like in a classroom community, each member of the small discussion groups should be given a role to fulfill in order to benefit the greater good of the classroom. Together as class, these roles can be decided and should correspond with instructional goals of the teacher. Such instructional goals can be seen through the teachers modeling and insistence of the students to question, visualize, and analyze the text in order for the student to have responsibility of their own learning. Mills and Jennings (2011) agree with Marchiando’s statement of giving students roles within their literature circles in order to benefit the greater good or class as a whole. The pair believes that classrooms that invite children to be involved in reflective conversations around a text in their daily classroom lives enhances academic growth and build strong classroom communities.

When students engage in reflective conversations around a text without teacher assistance, classroom learning makes a transition from a teacher-centered model to student-centered model of learning. The participation and discussion that happens within the groups are authentic opportunities for the student to engage with and wonder about the text. According to McElvain (2010), “Teachers play a facilitative role in the TLC model. They guide and promote purposeful literacy events through experiences that relate to the contexts of the students’ lives” (p. 184). The TLC model is an acronym for the Transactional Literature Circle Model where the
job of the teacher is to facilitate student questioning of the texts content by monitoring peer-led discussions. Huffman and Whittingham (2009) argue that literature circles create a pleasurable experience for its participants and attracts reluctant readers to become involved because they view the activity as a social gathering rather than as a tedious process. Often students find that their favorite parts of their school days revolve around interacting with their peers. By bringing an activity such as socializing into a literary activity, can increase they students’ motivation to read and discuss the text with their peers. Marchiando (2013) explains the following about student engagement:

Students experience ownership in literature circles from that point forward. They have the opportunity to choose what books their groups will read, how much of a text will be read between group meetings, and what will be discussed during each conversation. (p. 14)

When used on a regular basis and students assuming assorted task roles, student-centered literature circles can yield more than authentic opportunities to learn as well as an increase in student ownership but they also yield the positive benefits of increased motivation to read and the capability to comprehend the text as well as use critical thinking skills when dealing with the text.

**Literature Circles Increase Engagement and Motivation towards Literacy Acts**

Motivation and passion are not words commonly associated with struggling readers when it comes to written text. However, if the student is involved in an authentic opportunity to read, think, and talk amongst their peers about topics that are thought-provoking as well as relevant than these readers will be engaged and motivated to be involved with the text. After a study that
investigated students across elementary grade levels perceptions of their experiences with 
literature circles, Certo et al (2010) found the process as the most enjoyable part of language arts. 
After being involved in literature circles in class, the students found a new love for reading 
through the introduction of books they might not have read on their own. Certo et al (2010) 
surveyed the students’ perceptions towards reading prior to their involvement in literature circles 
and after. The students confessed that they wanted to pick up and read other books that were 
related to those used during the literature circle as well as their excitement of being able to 
develop their own understandings about the text through diverse contributions from their group 
members. According to Heller (2006), “Clubs are social settings associated with having fun. The 
children might feel special, almost “grown up,” if they belonged to a club where books were read 
and responded to in a risk-free environment” (p. 358). Literature circles also offer the ability to 
move past the text and involve students in multimodal literacy events associated with the books 
theme. Thomas (2014) argues that literature circles are proven to engage students in various 
types of texts as well as facilitate students’ digital literacy knowledge. After reviewing the 
literature, the traditional face-to-face literature circle method was not the only type of approach 
that motivated students to learn but emergences of a new digital form of this recommended 
literacy method presented itself in an online learning environment.

When talking about engagement and motivation with students of this informational age, 
incorporating online learning into your classroom is crucial. The sociocultural history theory 
promotes learning experiences that are culturally relevant and authentic to the students as well as 
exploring other methods of classroom book discussion can be very helpful to the students in this 
technological and multimedia age. After reviewing the literature, one can conclude that literature 
circles have the capability to motivate students through online learning. According to
Whittingham (2013), “Literature circles, while commonly used in the face-to-face classroom, can easily be transitioned into an online environment” (p. 57). The traditional in-class method can be easily transitioned to online setting because the teacher can still act as a facilitator by posing questions and posting discussion topics in online forums while participants can freely respond to their peers’ posts. Discussion is made possible through implementation of discussion threads. McCarthy and Rizopoulos (2009) explain that online discussion threads allow discussion to exist between the student and their peers. Discussion threads allow the teacher to continue to act as facilitator by posing questions where students respond, which then allows other students to respond to those students’ responses. Eventually, in the web-based discussion forum, an asynchronous conversation presents itself when the students exchange their opinions, perspectives, and ideas. From here, the teacher can monitor conversation and periodically pose questions that further conversation. This ability to facilitate conversation is a major benefit of online literature circles because the literature expresses the concerns of students’ discussion in regular face-to-face literature circles often being suppresses by group roles and inability of the teacher to oversee every group’s discussion at the same time.

Online literature circles have become an alternative to the traditional face-to-face due to a variety of factors. Day and Kroon (2010) refer to today’s students as “digital natives.” They observed their sixth grade students online tendencies and concluded that these students knew how to “surf” the internet, send emails, chat via instant message, and text friends. The pair decided to make the transition to online literature circles in order to build on the strengths that their students already had. Their goal was to create a digital literacy environment for their technological students. Diltz (2012) believes that online book clubs offer a genuine opportunity to engage students and increase the depth of student responses. He also argues that this different
medium of discussion can create new leaders and active participants who may not have presented themselves during in-class book discussions. Diltz (2012) brings up an interesting revelation in terms of traditional face-to-face literature circles that some participants may be afraid to voice their thoughts and ideas because the group dynamic could intimidate some students. Since the students will be involved in group work, one must understand that not one student is the same. Therefore, some students will take the lead on conversations while other students will allow their more powerful counterparts take over conversation. Literature circles are meant to improve comprehension of the text through discussion and if students are not involved in conversation that there comprehension of the text may be lacking. A student from Day and Kroon (2010) explains, “Online discussions are stupendous! Our literature discussion was much more in depth than face-to-face] and there was less pressure to talk. It was fun and easy” (p. 18).

Digital literature circles allow students to freely express themselves through a medium that they feel comfortable using. Online versions of literature circles can be more appealing because the students find interacting through a digital medium as a familiar and comfortable practice. Bowers-Campbell (2011) also touches upon the fact that face-to-face literature circles have certain limitations. She argues that cooperative learning roles where students are assigned in the traditional method can stilt conversation and lead to students simply reading off the role sheet. In other words, students do not react to each other or question each other. Thomas (2014) agrees with the idea that traditional literature circles can possibly hault student discussion. Ideally literature circles conversations should be a reciprocal process where the students are presenting their thoughts and understandings of the text and their group members are adding to those initial comments or explaining their own thoughts or understandings. According to Thomas (2014), “The online literature circle set-up enhances face-to-face literature circles. They provide all
students with an equal opportunity for their voices to be heard” (p. 46). Students involved in online literature circles can feel free to express their thoughts and opinions without having to worry about their group members’ judgements or verbal retaliations. Bowers-Campbell (2011) also saw behavior issues occur when she as the teacher left and group cohesion fell apart. Online literature circles eliminate issues such as these because students will not fell pressure to say what they want to say from behind a computer screen and behavior problems are eliminated because students are not face-to-face.

Not only do digital literature circles alleviate some of the implications of traditional literature circles, but participants are involved in relevant online learning activities that can be used in conjunction with the online discussion groups. Tobin (2012) uses Digital Storytelling Circles (DSCs) in conjunction with online discussion forums. A DSC is a small, student-led collaborative group of students who are reading the same text and then creating a digital representation of the text. The digital representation of the text is seen in the form of a digital movie. Similar to traditional face-to-face literature circles, the group members of DSCs have assigned roles in order to work as a team to create their digital movie that represents their text. According to Tobin (2012), “Through the process of selecting words and producing multimodal representations as a group, students gradually assume responsibility for their own comprehension, interpretation, and understanding of the text, guided by the roles assigned to them” (p. 41). Student roles used in online literature circles reflect a familiar component of traditional face-to-face literature circles. In contrast to Bowers-Campbell (2011), Tobin made students roles successful in an online environment by having the participants work as a team to reach a common goal. This success could be a result of non-involvement in face-to-face
discussion groups where often students feel more pressure to participate in groups as well as the increase in likeliness that behavior issues could arise such as off-topic conversation and bullying. In Tobin’s digital literature circles, participants were assigned their own individual roles that when completed individually created success for other students in their group.

Research shows that students can do more than learn how to represent their interpretation of a text through a digital medium but online literature circles can also familiarize students with different forms of literary expression available in cyberspace. Another form of literacy expression available to a classroom courtesy of the internet are blogs. Kitsis (2010) advocates the following idea about the usefulness of classroom blogs:

I had used a class blog for several years to announce assignments and communicate with parents, and occasionally for students to share short responses to homework prompts.

What I had not done was use a blog as a virtual meeting space for small groups. (p. 50)

Teachers who are hesitant to trying an online version of literature circles may not realize how easy the transition can be. Since there is a strong push to incorporate digital learning in the classroom, many teachers may already have a blog set-up in their classroom to bridge the gap between in-class learning and out of school learning. When it comes to finding a blog that works best for your classroom, the literature often recommends to create a class Wiki. A wiki can be defined as a user-editable website. Edmondson (2012) favors Wiki spaces because they are digital forums that allow for collaborative authorship. This type of blog allows any member granted access to add or change content which makes it easier for readers to browse and input their thoughts as well as ideas about the text. According to Edmondson (2012), “Love and social belonging are just as central to our students as they were to previous generations. It’s no wonder that Web 2.0’s collaborative, co-creative nature and social networking capabilities are so
attractive to teens” (p. 44). Since students enjoy being social literature circles are the perfect literacy method to incorporate into your classroom because they place a major focus on discussion of the text at hand. Online literature circles go a step further to motivate students because they are able to be social with their peers while use a digital medium that is relevant to today’s generation of students. Ewing et al (2009) also incorporated online literature circles into their classroom using a class Wiki. In this study, the goal was to boost student motivation and engagement as well as deepen students’ comprehension and responses to literature. Likewise to Edmondson (2012), Ewing et al (2009) used multimedia technologies to create an authentic, inquiry based learning experience for students. A major finding in this action research study was that the participants in this online literature circle became flexible in order to work with the different opinions, work ethic, and styles of their classmates. Once again, no roles where assigned in this particular study, but the online environment of literature circles allowed students to freely express themselves through a digital form without the implications of face-to-face interactions. A common finding in the studies that used blogs to facilitate online literature circles was the ability of students to build off and work from other student’s responses. This benefit alone makes digital literature circles a more appealing option because text discussion can thrive in an online environment because teachers do not have to worry about students simply reading off their roles sheets or other group members suppressing other students’ ideas and perspectives coming to the forefront.

A final finding of literature circles evolving into a digital form is through the use of e-book readers. Cavanaugh (2006) provides the following rationale for considering the use of e-readers in the classroom in place of traditional printed text specifically in saying:
Using e-books in the classroom is an excellent application of technology. Whether accessed on a handheld, laptop, desktop, graphing calculator, cell phone, or even an MP3 player, electronic books are the reality of our lives, as we as parents, teachers, and school administrators should start maximizing their potential. (p.4)

The sociocultural history theory believes in creating relevant learning opportunities in the classroom. Creating opportunities for students to read digitally allows students to become familiar with the way the text will be represented on the state test. An easy way to incorporate digital readers into your classroom is to replace traditional printed text with e-books during your implementation of literature circles. Larson (2010) explains that e-readers allow students to become comfortable with new technologies that demand the knowledge of new literacy skills to be known in order to use such technologies. By using e-books during literature circles in a second grade classroom, Larson (2010) was able to teach her student these new literacy skills that were necessary to know when using digital readers. She taught the students how to use the note tool that was available on the kindles that her students were using. After close examination of the notes that the students inserted into their readings, Larson concluded that the participants understood the story, made personal connections, questioned the text, answered questions within the text, and responded to text features. These digital responses using the note-taking tool on e-reader are not only a new literacy skill but the students used their responses as fuel for their discussion in face-to-face literature circles. Digital readers are something to take in consideration when implementing literature circles into your classroom because they offer students an authentic opportunity to learn how to use this progressive form of reading as well as an opportunity allow your students to develop new literacy skills that are necessary for students in this information age to know. Whether you are using the traditional face-to-face literature circle
in your classroom, an online version of a literature circle, or the traditional method with digital text, literature circles can be engaging as well as motivating to students because they are relevant to social beings who enjoy sharing their perspectives and letting their voice be heard.

**Implementation of Comprehension Strategies and Critical Thinking Skills**

Comprehension and critical thinking skills associated with written text develop when the student has authentic opportunities to practice such capabilities. Literature circles offer an authentic opportunity for students to develop and practice these skills through teacher facilitated conversations as well as peer interaction regarding the text. According to Sanacore (2013), “As members of literature circles continue to grow with the process of reflection, they come to realize that this effort has fostered sophisticated and higher levels of thinking that can be applied to subsequent readings and discussions of literature” (p. 120). Not only do students apply higher level thinking skills during their involvement of literature circles but they also activate a variety of reading strategies. Reading strategies that can occur during literature circles are activating background knowledge and/or making connections to the text, self-questioning the text, making inferences and drawing conclusions, determining important information, visualizing the text, synthesizing and extending thinking. These reading comprehension strategies can be practiced and applied through assigning students various student roles. Such student roles are the Connector, the Investigator, the Discussion Leader or Questioner, the Word Master, the Illustrator, Literary Luminary, and the Summarizer. Berne and Clark (2008) used their literature circles as an instructional context for students to try and develop knowledge of comprehension strategies through student roles. Literature Circles offer opportunities to apply critical thinking and comprehension strategies to its participants through involvement in reading of the text, students
roles, teacher facilitated instruction, and group discussions about the text. In this section, one will see how each of these reading comprehension strategies are employed through involvement in literature circles.

An important aspect of being a good reader is bringing background knowledge and relating personal experiences to events in the text. One of the roles that can be assigned to students involved in literature circles is the role of a Connector. As stated in Ferguson and Kern (2012), “The connector's job is to make connections to themselves, the world and to other texts” (p. 26). The pair argue that new information can’t stick unless a student has activated their background knowledge to make that personal connection with the text. With this role, it is important to develop questions that will help the participants make proper connections with the text. The connections that these questions should bring out are text-to-self which deal with connecting the reading to real life experiences, text-to-text which deal with connecting to the reading to other literary works, and the text-to-world which deal with connecting the reading to something in the world beyond school. Calmer and Strait (2014) integrate the Connector role into literature circles that surround biology textbooks. The pair asks the individual involved in this role as the group member responsible for identifying the connections in daily life, news, politics, or trends. The connector in these science literature circles also makes connections to the textbook and class lectures. The Connector role allows its participants and group members to make learning accessible by making connections to materials within the text to relevant information in the students’ lives.

When working with younger students, one may notice that the students don’t have the proper amount of background knowledge to make such connections with the text. In that case,
literature circles can be used to create background knowledge. Barone and Barone (2012) believe that literature circles put the responsibility on the students for developing the knowledge necessary to understand the text. Through group discussion, literature circles allow for individual as well as joint interpretations of the text. The pair also discuss the importance of the role as an Investigator in literature circles in order to ensure accountability that this particular participant provide the background knowledge that is necessary to know in order to understand the text as the way the author intended the reader to do so. According to Barone and Barone (2012), “The experience of being an investigator allowed students to personally learn about topics, words, and people that were important in understanding a novel” (p. 14). This role can help expand background knowledge and position students to be active readers who can now employ strategies other than connecting to the text as a result of understanding the true meaning and context of the text itself. The Investigator role can be particularly helpful when implementing literature circles in content areas because there may not be enough time to instruct the students in certain areas such as historical events. In Peterson and Belezaire (2006) the role of Investigator was incorporated into literature circles in a Social Studies classroom that was using a historical fiction text about World War II. The pair explains that the students who participant in this role position themselves as authorities who had information to offer the rest of the group. The information that the Investigator supplies the group with, propels comprehension of the text forwards. Without students activating their prior knowledge or being offered key information to offer the text, students may not be as successful when it comes to making meaning of the reading material at hand.

An important skill that a good reader possess is the ability to distinguish between important details and unimportant details that are necessary for comprehending the text at hand.
Literature circles use the student role of Literary Luminary as opportunity for students to look at quotes, details, sections of text, and passages that are crucial for the reader to focus on as well as analyze to deepen their understanding. According to Marchiando (2013), “Literary luminaries pick quotes or sections that stood out for one reason or another (such as humor or importance) and that they want to share with the group for this reason” (p.15). Participants within this role must employ the reading comprehension skill of determining important text details in order to share key information with their group members that help themselves and others to deepen their understanding of the text. Another alternative to the role of the Literary Luminary is the Passage Picker. Shelton-Strong (2012) describes the Passage Picker as an individual that chooses key passages from the text and explains their thought-process for choosing such passages as well as the significance of the passage to enhance their group member’s comprehension of the text. This role offers participants a chance to revisit the text at hand and look at the words with a more critical lens. Ferguson and Kern (2012), take a different approach on the role by presenting the role of The Importance Determiner. The pair expect the role of The Importance Determiner as a participant who pulls out important details from the reading using the following qualifications. The pair asks the students to pick out only the most important events and details of the assigned reading as well as the important events and details that will keep interest in continuing the text flourishing.

When one thinks about a good reader, someone who questions the text at hand will always come to mind. A role that students can participate in to learn how to question the text is by using the role of Discussion Director or Questioner. Shelton-Strong (2012) describes this role as an individual who maintains the interaction of the discussion through questions and invitations
LITERATURE CIRCLES AND THEIR IMPROVEMENT OF COMPREHENSION

to participate. The Discussion Director is a crucial role to consider when using student roles in literature circles because the participant who is assigned this role is in charge of making sure conversation around the text is continuous. Wolfang (2009) employed this role during literature circles in a science classroom which used science textbooks as a means for group discussion. It was observed that when first working with this role, discussion within the groups was very question-answer based. However, once the participants became familiar with this role, higher-level questions started to be asked and questions were often followed up by other questions. According to Kern and Ferguson (2012), “Readers who question as they read are awake, actively thinking, and having a "dialogue" with the text” (p.25). Therefore the pair ask their participants to develop questions surrounding the following components in the text: What questions did you have prior to the assigned reading? Were there any examples of the author asking the reader questions in the reading? Is there a question that you have about the reading this week that has gone unanswered? Are there any words from this week’s reading that you don’t understand? Is there a part in this week’s reading that made yourself ask questions because it does not make real sense? These guidelines that Kern and Ferguson (2012) offer allow students to create questions that will lead to a deepened understanding of the text. By offering students guidelines for formulating the questions they make about the text could also ensure that conversation surrounding the text is continuous and meaningful.

A reading comprehension strategy that a good reader uses to make meaning of the text is visualizing. They take note of important details in the story, notice the setting, and interpret the language the author uses to paint a picture of the story in their heads. Literature circles allow students the chance to participate as the Illustrator or Artistic Adventurer. According to Daniels (2002), “The illustrator role reminds us that skillful reading requires visualizing, and it invites a
graphic, nonlinguistic response to the text” (p.103). This student role allows the students to interpret the text in an artistic manner. Not does this role ask students to practice the reading comprehension skill of visualizing but students are offered a chance to express their understanding of the text through an artistic form. Shelton-Strong (2012), defines the role of the Artistic Adventurer as a participant who draws or creates something to represent an element of the story. The Artistic Adventurer than explains their drawing or creation to the group orally. The Artistic Adventurer puts a twist on the traditional student role of the Illustrator by allowing the students an opportunity to represent their interpretation of the reading through artistic forms other than a simple drawing. Kern and Ferguson (2012) explained the student role of the Sensory Image Maker that can be implemented in literature circles. The Sensory Image Maker’s role is to share the senses they felt when they are reading. The details they find for smells, tastes, sights, sounds, and feelings will be used to make a “movie” in their group members’ minds. The pair also offers fixed questions for the Sensory Image Maker to follow when constructing their response they will bring to group discussion. Some examples of questions that the participant in this role must ask themselves when reading are: What was the strongest mental image you remember from their week’s reading? What background knowledge/experiences of your own have you added to the details of any mental images you had with this week’s reading? These questions not only act as guidelines for the student participating in this role, but the questions also provide more opportunities to add their thoughts and opinions to peer-led conversation.

Another aspect of being a good reader is having access to a database of vocabulary words. Vocabulary knowledge can only be expanded through exposure to language within a text. A crucial student role that can be assigned to students in literature circles that can be used as a
strategy to expand vocabulary knowledge is the Word Master or the Word Warrior. According to Shelton-Strong (2012), “The Word Master is responsible for choosing new, important, or interesting words and multiword expressions to share, define, and contextualize” (p. 216). The student assigned this role is responsible for deciding which vocabulary words are necessary to know for their group members to make meaning of the text. They must use discretion when choosing which words are new and important for their group members to know. Similarly, Whittingham (2013) believes that a Word Warrior must be able to identify unknown words or intriguing vocabulary within the text. Vocabulary knowledge is part of the prior knowledge that a reader brings with them to make meaning of a text. Using the Word Master or the Word Warrior role when implementing literature circles, the teacher will ensure that participants will be accountable for learning new, important, or interesting words. Students will also be using strategies to help them expand their vocabulary knowledge.

The final student role that can be implemented using literature circles is the Summarizer. The Summarizer ensures that students are employing the reading comprehension strategy of synthesizing and extending student learning. Belizaire and Peterson (2006) define the Summarizer as a participant that provides a brief statement that ties together the key points of the reading. The participant assigned this role is not only practicing the reading comprehension skill of summarizing but they also need to correctly sequence the events that happen within the text as well as distinguish between important and unimportant details. Similarly, Shelton-Strong (2012) as the person responsible for giving an oral summary of the reading. When looking at the Summarizer role, it is important to focus on the fact that the students will be giving an oral summary of the reading to their group members. Students use the role sheet associated with their
role to organize their thoughts, however, literature circles focus on discussion around the text. Therefore the Summarizer role allows its participants to practice the reading comprehension skill of summarizing in written and oral form.

Overall, literature circles can be used as an instructional model that engages students and helps them to learn and practice critical thinking skills and comprehension strategies. According to Sanacore (2013), “As members of literature circles continue to grow with the process of reflection, they come to realize that this effort has fostered sophisticated and higher levels of thinking that can be applied to subsequent readings and discussions of literature” (p. 120). As students become more familiar with literature circles, reflective discussion where critical thinking takes place are more likely to happen. Ferguson and Kern (2012) even re-developed the student roles used in their literature circles in order to make sure that the students engaged in those roles would actually be practicing the reading comprehension strategies that were associated with each role. Teachers know that good readers use critical thinking skills and comprehension strategies when they decode and read literature. When students participate in literature circles, they are offered opportunities to develop good reading skills that will stick with them for a lifetime.

Implications & Conclusion

The research on literature circles has its benefits but it also has implications on teachers and students. First, teachers must reconsider their visions of themselves prior to using literature circles in their classrooms in order to make sure their teaching is culturally responsive. Second, teachers must take on the role of a coach and facilitator when using the literature circle approach. Third, recent studies have shown the student roles used and practices in literature circles can
eventually restrict literary discussion. Finally, a variety of reading materials may not be available to the school in which this approach is being used. In order for literature circles to be successful and habitual the implications stated above need to be addressed.

Literature circles revolve around text discussion and peer interaction. Educators will model and guide students on how to critically analyze written text. However, teachers must always take time prior to trying a new teaching approach in their classrooms to reflect on their current views about reading and writing to ensure that they are not limiting the students’ exploration of the text. According to Hall (2009), “Elementary teacher education programs are faced with the challenge of preparing pre-service teachers to provide high quality literacy instruction to an increasingly diverse student population” (p. 298). Teachers cannot afford to teach the same way they were taught how to read and write when they were in school. Times are changing and students today are a part of a technological generation. Teachers need to always be aware of how to make their teaching innovative and relevant in order to engage this generation of students. Teachers’ literacy instruction should be culturally responsive by building off the cultural, social, and linguistic background of the students in the classroom. Ultimately, educators should take on the role of an activist whose main goal is to address the academic disparities found in school to ensure that all students, no matter their cultural or linguistic variation, receive quality literacy education.

Once teachers take time to reflect on their own views of good literacy instruction and vow to take a culturally responsive teaching approach, the teacher needs to take on the crucial role of a coach while implementing the literature circle approach in the classroom. Literature circles take practice and will take a while to run smoothly. Marchiando (2013) believes that in order for literature circles to be productive, this method needs to be supported by the teacher
through frequent mini-lessons, debriefings, modeling of comprehension skills, and classroom expectation discussions. Not only should the teacher model and lecture about how literature circle should run, he or she should walk around the room in order to troubleshoot any problems that arise or to build on moments that could promote further discussion. Agreeably, Thomas (2014) sees a teacher as a facilitator of student interaction and comprehension when working on the process of construction and deconstructing the text. Even though the students are allowed time to socialize and freedom to explore written text, the teacher will be involved in shared learning events with their students in order to make sure their instructional goals are being met by the literature circle approach.

Even when a culturally responsive teacher acts as a facilitator to their students learning when using literature circles, the schools access to books and digital literacy modes may limit the depth of literacy instruction that literature circles have the ability to reach. Earlier in this literature review, the importance of selecting a thought-provoking book that contains challenging content was discussed. However, some school libraries may be limited when it comes to variety of reading materials that it offers. Whittingham and Huffman (2009) encountered this problem when investigating the benefits of literature circles at a local middle school. The pair claims that library media centers can contain poorly developed collections and limited access to books. A lack of resources may make it difficult for teachers to select good books to use during with their literature circles. Another problem with limited access to reading materials can arise when your students wish to explore other books that are related to the ones you use in class. Literature circles also offer the opportunity for students to become digitally literate by blogging, texting, and using other media sources to share their reactions to literature they have read. If a school has
limited resources available, teachers may find themselves investing in their own reading and
digital materials to use with their students.

Student roles and literature circles have went hand in hand for years. Assigning literature
group members roles are crucial when students are first learning to operate in peer-led discussion
groups. Not only do students find it helpful to fulfill a role in order to have talking points to bring
to student discussion but teachers see student roles as a support structure that eases the transition
between teacher-led discussions to student-led discussions. Another upside of using student roles
in literature circles is the ideology that student roles rotate between group members. With
rotating student role assignments, participants in literature circle have a different purpose for
reading each time they are involved in a session. However, student role assignments can become
a hindrance when student conversation starts to rely on these assigned pieces of paper.
According to Daniels (2012), “What had been designed as a temporary support device to help
peer-led discussion groups get started could actually undermine the activity it was meant to
support” (p.13). When literature circles participants rely on role sheets for conversation starters
for too long, peer-led discussions around the text becomes very mechanical. When students take
turns one right after the other reading off their role sheets, student perceptions and opinions may
not appear in the peer-led discussions. To avoid the implication of student role sheets, teachers
should only implement the role sheets when literature circles are brand new. The literature
surrounding literature circles suggest that better more lively conversations can appear when
participants are not restricted by assigned, clear cut roles.

Another solution that can be implemented into literature circles in order to avoid an over-
reliance on student role sheets is incorporating student roles that focus strictly on employing
reading comprehension strategies that good readers use. Ferguson and Kern (2012) offer the
following idea of using student role sheets that use strict requirements in order to promote deep reading of the text:

As a result of combining what was best about literature circles with the application of comprehension strategies, Liz immediately noticed a marked decrease in the number of students who "fake read" their literature circle books, and as such, she observed an improvement in the depth and quality of the written responses as well as the observed discussions. (p.26)

Here the pair is explaining the results of the re-envisioned student roles incorporated in their literature circles. It is also noted that when student roles are paired with strict requirements for forming text conversation, students are highly encouraged to read the text in a deep and thoughtful manner.

A wealth of research validates the reading benefits that come from literature circles. With a diverse population of students continuing to enter our schools and a lack of motivation to read amongst secondary students, a creative strategy that involves our students socializing and collaborating is crucial. Literature circles allow students to be accountable for their own learning and develop their own understanding of written text through the contributions from their peers. This literacy approach can be used across grade levels as well as subject areas. Literature circles offer experiences for students to practice higher level thinking skills and employ reading comprehension strategies that good readers use to make sense of the text at hand. Not only can literature circles be used in conjunction with the familiar balanced literacy approach but the Common Core State Standards require students to share their own ideas and expand on others’ ideas. This requirement can be easily incorporated into classroom instruction through the use of literature circles. Most importantly, literature circles are culturally responsive and allow students
to use less formal academic discourse when interacting with their peers. Those who are often marginalized in school by the white middle class academic discourse that exists in public education, will no longer feel afraid to share their thoughts and reactions surrounding the text with their peers.

Method

Context

Research for this study took place at a kindergarten through eighth grade School in Western New York. The school where the research was collected is a charter school in an urban setting. Freedom Charter School, a pseudonym, uses a lottery system to enroll its’ students. Any student in the area can enter the charter school lottery if the school has open seats in the grade level the student is entering. By law the school must give preference to returning students and siblings of currently enrolled students. The school may also give preference to certain at risk-groups such as English Language Learners and students who are eligible for free or reduced lunch. The mission of Freedom Charter School is to engage young minds through projects and partnerships. In other words, the school promotes expeditionary learning so that students develop the necessary tools for intrinsic lifelong learning and ongoing academic success.

According to the New York State District Report card for 2013-2014, 47% of the students enrolled are male and 53% are female. When it comes to observing the students by ethnicity, 54% are African American, 38% are Hispanic, 3% are Multi-racial, 2% are Caucasian, 2% are Asian, and 1% American Indian. Of the students enrolled in Freedom Charter School, 95% are economically disadvantaged students, 18% are students with disabilities, and 9% are
limited English proficient students. The school is a kindergarten through eighth grade school, with two classes per grade. The students who participated within this research study were all students currently enrolled in Freedom Charter School.

**Participants**

As stated before, the students chosen to participate in this action research study are all students currently attending Freedom Charter School. The students who participated within this study were all students a part of my small RTI group, or Response to Intervention group. The RTI group was made up of five second grade students and one third grade students. Within the group there were two girls and four boys. When it comes to ethnicity, four of the students were African American’s and two were Hispanic. All of the students were receiving free or reduced lunch.

RTI group met from 10:30 am- 11:00 am every day. The goal of this group was to work on fluency, phonics, and comprehension with their own leveled texts. All of the group members were reading at a 1B reading level according to the leveling system used at Freedom Charter School. A student who is reading at a 1B reading level should be currently in the middle of their first grade year. In other words, the second grade students within the group were about a half year behind in reading success and the third grade student within the group was about a year and a half behind in reading success. It was clear that the students required some type of intervention that would be more effective than the current guided reading process being used.

The first student, Tim (pseudonym), is a second grade student. Tim is seven years old and African American. He enjoys reading and writing about the Avengers, Legos, and Ninja Turtles. He is very friendly and energetic. Tim can become easily distracted in school by talking and
joking around with other students. Even though Tim lacks focus once in a while, he responds positively to redirection. When it comes to his academics, Tim relies heavily on teacher help and struggles working independently.

The second student, Yadiel (pseudonym), is a second grade student. Yadiel is seven years old and Hispanic. Like Tim, he enjoys reading and writing about superheroes and comic characters. He is very friendly and kind. Within RTI group, Yadiel is easily distracted by his friend Tim. These students are usually separated during this time. Academically, Yadiel is a quick learner and is able to apply the skill used in the day’s lesson to his own reading.

The third student, Joseph (pseudonym), is a second grade student. Joseph is seven years old and African American. Joseph’s favorite subject is writing. He enjoys writing about the vacations he has been on. He is shy and quiet. Within RTI group, he often becomes frustrated and shuts down. If a word, sentence, or question is too hard for him, he will normally give up. In order to get him to try, he needs teacher redirection and aid. Sometimes his voice is quieted by his more vocal group members.

The fourth student, Kayanna (pseudonym), is a second grade student. Kayanna is seven years old and Hispanic. She is enrolled in the other second grade class at Freedom Charter School. Kayanna enjoys reading and writing. She likes to social with the group members as well as participates during RTI time. She seems to be a stronger reader than the other group members which allows her to be one of the first to respond to the questions posed. She also finishes the required work in a timely fashion.

The fifth student, Amari (pseudonym), is a second grade student. Amari is seven years old and African American. Amari enjoys writing about her family and friends. She is very
artistic. She is shy and quiet. She always listens and follows directions. Behaviorally, she rarely needs redirection. Academically, she requires the teacher to reread the directions and expectations. Sometimes her voice is quieted by her more vocal group members.

The sixth and final student participating in this action research study is Cam (pseudonym). Cam is in third grade and is eight years old. Cam is African American and small for his age. He has risen to be a leader within the RTI group because he is a year older and in one grade higher than his group members. Like Kayanna, he is a stronger reader than the other group members. He reads the texts provided fluently and comprehends the material in less time than the other group members. Cam is well-behaved which allows him to act as a student helper and role model during RTI time.

When collecting data on literature circle discussions with the group of students, each day the students receive a role to fulfill. Since the students were brand new to literature circles, I had to jump in and facilitate conversation when necessary. In order to make the discussions peer-led, I assigned Cam, the third grade student in my group, to be the discussion leader. His job was to make sure conversation between his group members was continuous and flowing. Cam was chosen for this role because according to data collected previously on the students, he is the strongest 1B leader in the group. He is also a grade above this peers so he brought a sense of leadership to the group.

Norms were also set for group conversation. All students agreed to raise hands before speaking and remaining quiet when other group members shared. The students also agreed to make sure they have completed the assigned reading and role sheet prior to participating in group discussions.
**Researcher Stance**

I am currently a graduate student at St. John Fisher College. I am working toward a Master’s of Science in Literacy Education. I hold a Bachelor’s degree in Childhood Education from SUNY Cortland. My current New York State teaching certification is in Childhood Education. My past teaching experiences include student teaching 3rd and 5th grade. I also taught 5th grade reading and writing in Fredericksburg, Virginia for a year. Currently, I am teaching 2nd grade at Freedom Charter School and in charge of facilitating the RTI group discussed earlier.

As a researcher for this study, I am an active participant observer since I am directly teaching and working with the group of students involved. As a teacher, you are constantly observing your students and adjusting your instruction to meet the needs of your students. According to Mills (2014), “As an active participant observer of our own teaching practices, however, we may be so fully immersed in what we are doing that we don’t have time to record our observations in a systematic way during the school day” (p. 85). I am in agreement with this statement from Mills because many a times our observations of our students are internalized but not scripted. Therefore, we lack the ability to analyze the data that we observe and could ultimately wonder how effective our instruction is to our students.

This concern of mine, led me to thoughtfully and carefully plan the ways I would be compiling my observations during this action research study. Developing ways to systematically track my observations was not my only goal during this study. I also needed to determine ways in which I could measure the successfulness of my study as well as the trials of my study. Without planning the ways to collect data and actually collecting data, there is no way for one to
analyze the study’s results. In other words, in order for an action researcher to make meaningful change within their classroom, they need to make meaningful decisions when it comes to the ways they choose to collect data.

Method

For this study, I collected qualitative data and quantitative data to determine how literature circles improve comprehension. I specifically looked at the ways in which literature circles allow its’ participants to be involved in all aspects of understanding a particular text. I looked at the ways students choose a book to use during literature circles. It also meant looking at the different roles students can participate in as a part of literature circles. I had to look at the types of questions students developed to bring to literature circle conversations. I observed the unknown words the participants found within the text to share with their group members. I noticed how they made connections to their own lives using details within the text. Finally, I observed their interactions with one another during group conversations. I collected my observations and the data associated with this study for a whole week. Each day consisted of a 30 minute session. Therefore, my participants were involved in literature circles for a total of three and a half hours.

When collecting data, the participants will be in a small group. An important component of literature circles is that the teacher acts a facilitator to aid in student understanding rather than the sole factor. For the first day of my study, the students completed the questionnaire (Appendix B), read the book chosen, and worked on the pre-assessment (Appendix C) for literature circles independently. No help was provided for the students by either the teacher or the peers. I wish to see what the students knew before any involvement in literature circles. After collecting the pre-
assessment data, the literature circles began. The book chosen by the students is called, The Magic Fish by Freya Littledale. The book is a fantasy story about a greedy fisherman's wife is granted every wish but can't find happiness. The book also happened to be at a 2B reading level which is one level above where the students were reading. The reasoning behind offering the students to pick a book at a higher reading level was to see the potential progress they could make when incorporating the text into literature circles. The second day involved explaining and modeling how literature circles work. A student was chosen as the discussion leader in order to keep conversation flowing without the need of a teacher to control dialogue. The teacher jumped in once in a while to simple facilitate conversation flow but mainly I acted as a coach to their learning rather than the sole provider.

The next three to seven days involved the students participating in literature circles. Each day the student had a different group role or assignment to complete. The role they were given and the work they complete was used as potential talking points for the students during conversation. Since the students are in second grade, these role sheets and worksheets allowed them to have a focus as well as have a purpose for conversation. The conversations the students had during literature circles helped the students complete the assigned work after literature circles conversations were completed because their peers were providing them with a multitude of information about the text.

Quality and Credibility of the Research

Since I am undergoing an action research study, it is essential that my research is qualitative and credible. I am researching literature circles so that I can make a positive change amongst my RTI group’s comprehension of literature. If my research is not reliable, my results
will be meaningless. Therefore, I must ensure credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability amongst my research.

The first criterion for trustworthiness in research is credibility. According to Mills (2014), “The credibility of the study refers to the researcher’s ability to take in account the complexities that present themselves in a study and to deal with the patterns that are not easily explained” (p.115). In order to ensure credibility in my own research, I made sure to follow the following considerations suggested by Mills (2014). First, I made sure to allow myself prolonged participation at the study site by using my own students as participants. By collecting data on my own students, I gave myself more opportunities and time to make sure I explored a number of factors specific to literature circles that could have the ability to increase their comprehension when it comes to reading. If I had less time, I would not have been to explore all the components that make literature circles successful. The second consideration I took to heart while implementing my research was practicing triangulation when it came to the types of methods I used to collect data. I made sure that I was collecting qualitative data that allowed me to be an experiencing researcher, an enquiring researcher, and an examining researcher. The final consideration I incorporated into my research was using a variety of methods to collect data. My data collection includes questionnaires, pre and post-assessments, student work, audio recording transcripts, and field notes.

The second criterion for trustworthiness in research is transferability. According to Mills (2014), “Transferability of an action research account depends larger on whether the consumer of the research can identify with the setting” (p. 116). This statement by Mills (2014), suggests that action researcher must provide a detailed description of where the study is taken place in order for those reading your research to gain a visual of the school or location of your work. I ensured
transferability in my study by providing background information about the school location, school ideologies, student demographics, and context on the small RTI group of students who were participants in the experimental literature circles.

The third criterion for trustworthiness in research is dependability. To ensure dependability, your data that you collect must be stable. In order to make sure that your data is sound, one can use multiple methods of data collection so that the methods can overlap one another. According to Mills (2014), “Use two or more methods in such a way that the weakness of one is compensated by the strength of another” (p. 116). In my action research study, I have six different methods that I used to collect data during the implementation of literature circles. Some of the methods met show more arguable evidence than the others. Since I have multiple methods of collecting data, I was able to transfer knowledge from one of my stronger forms of data collection to help gain a greater understanding of the results I found from one of my worker data collection methods.

The fourth and final criterion for trustworthiness in research is confirmability. To ensure confirmability within your research, the data you collect must reflect results that are free from bias. For example, when creating interview questions, one can formulate questions which can lead participants to respond in a certain way which will not provide neutral responses. Confirmability can be seen in my data, once again, through triangulation. Having multiple methods to collect data allows for more opportunities for data results to be free from bias. Mills (2014) suggest that researchers keep a journal when collecting data so that the researcher can reflect on their methods of data producing neutral results. In my study, the students are producing their own reflection journals where they honestly record their opinions on how their
participation is going. This form of data collection is an example of confirmability because the results produced through this medium will be neutral.

**Informed Consent and Protecting the Rights of the Participants**

When conducting a research study, all participants must give informed consent that they agree to participate and are aware of the potential risks associated with the student. In the case of this action research study, no risks were posed for the students involved. Before starting literature circles, I explained to the students that I was going to collect research for my graduate program on the student’s participation with the literacy method of literature circles. They were notified that there were no risks involved with participating within this study. The students were also informed that their names would be replaced with pseudonyms within the written report and all their names would be erased from the artifacts collected. All of the students gave verbal assent to participate in the study. Since the students are minors, a permission form went home for their parents as well. This form explained to the parents that there were no risks associated with the study as well as their student’s identity being protected by using pseudonyms and erasing their names away from student work collected (Appendix A). These signed and collected permission forms ensure trustworthiness and validity within my research study.

**Data Collection**

The first part of my collection of data involved giving the participants a questionnaire prior to their involvement in literature circles (Appendix B). The questionnaire consisted of seven questions. These questions provided me with background of the students’ perceptions towards reading as well as their perceptions of how they prefer working on an assignment. The questionnaire also asked if they students had heard of literature circles before. The questionnaire
allowed me to see if they students had any background knowledge on the literacy method.

Finally, the questionnaire asked the students which book they would like to use during literature circles. I placed three books on the reading table at this time. I wanted the votes on the books to be anonymous so that students were not biased by others opinions. The students were able to hold and flip through the books. A major reason why literature circles can be so successful is by allowing the groups to choose their reading book.

The second part of my collection of data involved giving the participants a pre-assessment to assess their reading abilities and comprehension of the chosen text prior involvement in literature circles (Appendix C). The first part of the pre-assessment was the implementation of a running record on the chosen text, The Magic Fish by Freya Littledale. The running record assessed each student’s ability to read and decode the text. From this running record, I was provided with data on the students’ accuracy rates by and recording the words they read incorrectly or skipped over. This data was important in terms of my action research study because if the participants were unable to accurately read the chosen text than they would struggle to have discussions about the text. Therefore, the running record was necessary to see if the book chosen was at the students’ reading level. The second part of my pre-assessment was a 12 question comprehension check. This comprehension check consisted of multiple choice questions and written response questions. Students were allowed to read the book once independently to complete this section of the pre-assessment. The third and final component of the pre-assessment was the story elements worksheet. This worksheet asked the participants to record the following story elements: characters, setting, conflict, solution, and theme. Once again, the story elements sheet was completely independently based on each student’s independent reading of the text. The post-assessment was given after literature circles were
implemented. The post-assessment contains the exact same components of the pre-assessment and will also be completely independently to assess each student’s individual progress (Appendix C.)

The third part of my collection of data involved collect field notes based on my observation of the participants during literature circles. In order to collect field notes, I created a chart with each student’s name. There were three sections on this chart. The first section allowed me to record the work each student completed during literature circles that day. The second section allowed me to record the group role they participated in during literature circle that day. The third and final section allowed me to record the student’s behavior, motivation, and focus during literature circle that day. A new chart was used each day during the implementation of literature circles.

The fourth part of my collection of data involved audio voice recordings taken during literature circles that were converted into written transcripts. Since a major component of literature circles is group discussion, I knew it was extremely important to record the participants’ conversations during their involvement with this literacy method. Hand recording their conversations would have been time consuming and inaccurate. Therefore, I used an app on my smartphone called Quick Voice. This audio recording system allowed me to capture the authentic conversations that the literature circle participants were having. I was able to listen to the recordings later that day in order to type the conversations into a transcript. These transcripts allow me to analyze not only the student’s comprehension of the books material but also figure out how to create equity in voice amongst the participants.
The fifth and final part of my collection of data involved the collection of student work completed by the participants during this action research study (Appendix D). The student work that I collected was the group role sheets, the questioning sheet, the unknown word sheet, and the text-to-self worksheet. The group role sheets allowed the student to be a particular expert that day such as a character expert. The students would read the book independently and fill out their role sheets. Once their sheets were completed, the discussion leader would start with volunteers then pick on certain students. They students would share and explain their findings to their group members. The questioning sheet allowed the students to create questions to ask the group about the text after they finished reading. The group members would take turns asking their questioning during literature circle conversation. The unknown word sheet asked the students to find words in the text that they were unfamiliar with. They would also write the definition of these words on the sheet. This sheet would also be used during group conversation to aid in the students understanding of the book’s required vocabulary. The final sheet is the text-to-self worksheet that required students to find details within the text that they could make personal connections with. These personal connections were shared with their group members so that individuals could see commonalities or differences in personal experiences.

Data Analysis

When analyzing the data that I collected on the student’s participation and involvement in literature circles, I first started my analysis by organizing my data by data type. According to Mills (2014), “If data are to be thoroughly analyzed, they must be organized” (p.132). This step, though seeming simple, was crucial to my understanding and interpretation of the data collected because of the quantity of data types that I collected. During the implementation of literature circles, six types of methods to collect data were used. A questionnaire, a pre-assessment, a post-
assessment, field notes, student reflection journals, literature circles discussion transcripts, and student work were collected to reinforce my research question, how do literature circles improve comprehension? Since I had a large quantity of data collected, I needed to neatly organize my data by data method as well as qualitative and quantitative data methods.

Once my data was organized, I could start to analyze the findings of my data collection methods. The data methods that I could analyze qualitatively were the field notes, the audio recordings of the students’ participation in literature circle discussions transcribed into transcripts and student work examples. Student work examples are normally seen as quantitative data collection methods, however when analyzing the student work examples, I noticed that all of the examples were constructive responses. Therefore, I was able to analyze their responses qualitatively rather than score them quantitatively. I coded the student work responses based on the similarities I noticed amongst the student responses. The transcripts of the audio recordings taken from the students’ participation in literature circle discussions offered common findings as well. In order to code the transcripts, I interpreted the meaning of the verbal statement of each statement. The data methods that I could analyze quantitatively were the pre-assessment and the post-assessment data collected before and after literature circle participation. First, I analyzed the pre-assessment and post-assessment data by grading each question on the two assessments. I calculated the percentage of the students who answered the questions correct as well as the percentage of the students who answered the questions incorrectly. The data method that I could analyze both qualitatively and quantitatively were the collected student questionnaires. Qualitatively, I looked at the responses on the questionnaire in terms of their implication on the study. Quantitatively, I looked at each question on the questionnaire and the student response to
each question. Like the pre-assessment and post-assessment data, I calculated a percentage for how the participants responded to each question and put these percentages into a table.

Once I identified the types of data methods that could be analyzed qualitatively and quantitatively, I could begin explaining the findings that came from my research on literature circles narratively and visually. I was able to represent my findings by coding my qualitative data so that three themes emerged from the research I collected. I was also able to represent my findings by creating tables that reflected the quantitative data of the research that I collected. The information supported from the qualitative data found in this action research study reinforced the three themes that emerged when analyzing the data collected.

**Findings and Discussions**

As stated previously, I used a mixed method when it came to data collection by gaining research findings that expressed both qualitative and quantitative results. My analysis of my qualitative data led to the finding of three common themes that emerged from the data that was collected during the student’s involvement in literature circles. The qualitative data that I collected from the pre-assessment, the post-assessment, and the questionnaire supported the validity of the three themes that presented themselves in this action research study. The first theme revealed the importance of developmentally appropriate reading material when implementing literature circles in the classroom. The second theme that emerged when coding the data collect in this study was the positive effect of employing a variety of comprehension strategies through literature circle instruction. The third and final theme that arose from my research on literature circles was the fact that peer-led discussion can improve comprehension surrounding a text.
The Importance of Developmentally Appropriate Reading Material

Literature circles couldn’t possibly evolve if there was no literature to discuss. Literature circle discussion would also perish if the text at hand is too difficult for students to decode or comprehend. When looking at my data collection, one can conclude that the student’s participation and involvement in literature circles would truly suffer if the text used during the research was above the student’s reading ability level. One could also conclude that if the text was below the student’s reading ability level, discussion surrounding the text would be far from thought-provoking.

As stated earlier in this action research study, the students involved in the literature circles, were all leveled as 1B readers according to the IRLA reading benchmark system. IRLA is an acronym for independent reading level framework assessment. The IRLA reading benchmark system is a formative assessment framework for teaching and learning built on Common Core Standards. Even though the students were independently reading at a 1B level, I thought it would be interesting to see if they could interact with as well as discuss a text at a 2B reading level since the students’ reading goal is to read at a 2B reading level. A 2B reading level is one step above a 1B reading level. Students at a 1B reading level are continuously working on accurately reading and comprehending 1B texts so that they can eventually become 2B readers. However, before I could conduct research on how literature circles improve the students’ comprehension of a text, I needed to make sure the participants within this action research study could accurately decode the text chosen. Therefore, as a part of my pre-assessment, each student was given a running record (Appendix B) on the 2B leveled text, The Magic Fish by Freya Littledale. A running record would provide me with evidence on whether this text was developmentally appropriate for the literature circles participants. If the running records showed
evidence of the text being too difficult for the students, I would have decided to use a 1B level
text with the students during this action research study. Pleasantly, I was surprised to see that the
students were able to accurately decode the text so that the 2B level text would be challenging as
well as developmentally appropriate to use in this action research study.

Table 1 shows the participants first attempt at decoding the 2B leveled text, The Magic
Fish by Freya Littledale. The first attempt represents the students first time reading the text
before any involvement in literature circle discussion. The students were asked to read 88 words
from the text while I recorded any miscues the students had when reading. A miscue is when a
readers fails to decode a word accurately within a text. Once the miscues are recorded, the
miscues are added up and subtracted from the total number of words read. This number is then
divided from the total number of words read to calculate an accuracy rate for the reader.

Table 1  
*Percentage Scores of Running Record Accuracy*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pre-Assessment:</th>
<th>Percentages:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Running Record Accuracy</td>
<td>Tim Yadiel Joseph Kayanna Amari Cam</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pre-Assessment</td>
<td>94% 95% 95% 97% 88% 95%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average Score: 94%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In order to make sense of the data above, one must understand that accuracy rates are
used to determine if a text is easy enough for independent reading, appropriate to use without
frustration during reading instruction, or too difficult for the reader. The accuracy rates for a text
to be at an independent reading level for a text participant is from 95%-100%. The accuracy rates
for a text to be at an instructional reading level for a text participant is from 90%-94%. Finally,
the accuracy rates for a text to be at a frustrational reading level for a text participant is an 89% and below. When looking at the table above, four students were reading the text at an independent reading level before any involvement in literature circle discussions. The table also shows that Tim’s (pseudonym) accuracy rate fell in the instructional reading level percentage. Lastly, the table shows that Amari’s (pseudonym) accuracy rate was an 88% which means her first encounter with the text put the book at a frustrational reading level for her. Despite Amari’s initial struggle with the 2B leveled text, I decided to keep her in the research study since literature circles allow the students to revisit a text multiple times. Amari’s understanding of the text would also be aided by her peers during group discussion. Before literature circle conversation, the students would read the text independently as well as be involved in a read aloud. Daniels (2002) supports the idea of reading the text allowed at the primary level because read-alouds ensure that all students understand the text. Therefore, I was optimistic that Amari’s involvement in literature circles and surrounding activities would be beneficial to her reading development.

Another way I interpreted the data from table 1 can be seen by the average accuracy rate score produced by all six text participants. When all six accuracy scores were averaged together, an average accuracy rate score of 94% was calculated. Therefore, as a whole group, the 2B leveled text was falling at an instructional reading level. Since the 94% was an averaged score, I was optimistic that the students who scored higher reading accuracy rate would help the students who scored lower reading accuracy rates once literature circles started and the text would be revisit over and over again. According to Burns et al. (2015), “Identifying a student's instructional level is necessary to ensure that students are appropriately challenged in reading” (p.437). Since literature circles are a method of reading instruction, I felt that the students’
accuracy rates with the 2B level texts provided me as an action researcher with proper evidence that the text chosen by the student’s was at a developmentally appropriate reading level.

A text at a reader’s instructional reading level should be challenging enough for a reader so that they are learning from the text. An example of something that can be learned from the text is new vocabulary. As part of my study on literature circles, the participants identified words that were unfamiliar to them in the text and used dictionaries to define them. The students also shared these newly acquired vocabulary words to their group members during literature circle discussion. The participants either recorded new vocabulary words reported to them by their group members on their vocabulary work sheets (Appendix E) or noticed similarities between the words reported and their own words chosen. Amari (pseudonym) recorded the following on her vocabulary sheet, “A prince is a son of a king” (Student Work Sample, October 2015). It was then observed when analyzing the other group members vocabulary sheets that every participant recorded the word prince as an unfamiliar word within the text. Since all the students showed evidence that the word prince was a new vocabulary word, one can see that the students either had trouble decoding the word or lacked the background knowledge to identify the term. Tim (pseudonym) recorded the following on his vocabulary sheet about the word beautiful, “Very nice to look at” (Student Work Sample, October 2015). Initially, Tim was the only student to record the word beautiful as an unfamiliar word. During literature circle discussion, Tim shared this newly acquired vocabulary word to his group members and Cam recorded this word on his vocabulary worksheet. This observation is important because it shows that the participants can benefit from the actions as well as knowledge that other group members share during literature circle discussion. If the text used during implementation of literature circle was too easy for the students, the group members would not have had the opportunity to expose
themselves to new vocabulary words. Wilfong (2009) supports the idea of giving the students opportunities to work with new vocabulary words within a text. Similarly, her students would be given a student role involving vocabulary knowledge. However, her students did not use dictionaries to define their newly found vocabulary words but rather used the text at hand to create a definition. The students within her study felt vocabulary work during literature circle sections helped them understand how to look for definitions of vocabulary words within the text. In other words, literature circles offer the opportunity to provide vocabulary instruction for its participants in a variety of ways.

I want to reiterate the fact that the participants in this action research study are labeled as 1B readers. Since these students are normally in my response to intervention (RTI) group outside of this action research study, my goal as their RTI instructor is to help them move up to the next reading level which in their case is a 2B reading level. The IRLA leveling systems suggests that a student reading at a 1B reading level should be reading at this level by the middle of first grade. Five participants within my study are in the beginning of the year in second grade and one of the participants within my study are in the beginning of the year in third grade. Therefore, the participants involved in this study are reading below grade level. Choosing to use a 2B level text during my implementation of literature circles would not only allow me to see the results of using a challenging text in conjunction with my research idea of literature circles but it would also push my students to work with a text at a higher reading level. The results of the running record conducted during the pre-assessment given to the students before their involvement in literature proved that the text would be challenging as well as instructional for the participants within my study. When looking at the data collected, two questions on the questionnaire given to
the students before literature circle participation started could explain why the 2B level text was considered developmentally appropriate for my students to read and work with.

The first question from the questionnaire given to the students before their involvement in literature circles that could explain why the students’ accuracy rates reflected a score identifiable with a developmentally appropriate text can be seen in table 2. The questionnaire was created and given to the participants within this study to provide some insight on the students’ perceptions and abilities when it came to the act of reading.

Table 2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Student Self-Evaluation Questionnaire:</th>
<th>Percentages:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Question 5:</td>
<td>“Yes”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do you enjoy reading?</td>
<td>83%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

When looking at table 2, I was surprised by the fact that not one of the participants responded by selecting “no” as a response to the question of, “Do you enjoy reading?” Five out of the six participants selected “yes” when responding to the question above. Only one student among the participants selected “a little” when responding to the question above. Therefore, during this study, I was working with students who have a positive attitude towards the act of reading. This intrinsic motivation to read amongst the participants could explain the effort each student put forth when attempting to read the 2B leveled text for their first time. I also observed an obvious feeling of excitement amongst the students when it was announced to the group that they would be reading a 2B level text of their choice. Thomas (2014) supports the positive effects that offering book choice can have on literature circles by reporting a higher level of participation results during literature circles when the students are allowed to pick their own
books. Also, the students want to be labeled as 2B readers, thus their positive attitude towards reading expressed in the table above combined with their motivation to read a book of their choice could be possible factors explaining their initial success when decoding the 2B leveled text used within this study.

The second question on the questionnaire that provides evidence that the students were equipped with the capability to accurately read the 2B leveled text and ultimately level the text as developmentally appropriate for the students can be seen in the table 3.

Table 3

*Percentage Scores of Student’s Questionnaire Responses*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Student Self-Evaluation Questionnaire:</th>
<th>Percentages:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>How many minutes a day do you spend reading in and out of school?</td>
<td>0-15 Mins.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3 shows the responses of the students when asked the following question, “How many minutes a day do you spend reading in and out of school.” Once again, I was pleasantly surprised to see that none of the participants responded to reading for less than 15 minutes a day. Two out of the six participants responded to reading for 15 to 30 minutes a day. Two out of the six participants responded to reading for 30 to 45 minutes a day. Finally and proudly to report as the teacher of these study participants, two out of the six participants responded to reading for more than 45 minutes a day. According to Serravallo (2013), “Your goal should be 30 minutes or more in kindergarten and the first grade and at least 40 minutes a day for second grade and up” (p.1). Even though only a third of the group members are reading at or above the recommended
independent reading time for second grade, their ability and motivation to read could have aided in the results found by the initial running record. Yadiel (pseudonym) and Cam (pseudonym) both responded to reading more than 45 minutes a day in and out school. Both of these students accuracy reading rates reflected a score of 95%. An accuracy rate score of a 95% actually make the text at hand at an independent reading level. Therefore, these student ability to independently read for more than 45 minutes could have allowed them to accurately decode the 2B level text at hand.

After re-reading and re-visiting the text multiple times during literature circle sessions as well as involvement in discussions surrounding the text, the students were given a final running record as a part of their post-assessment for this study. Table 4 shows the students’ reading accuracy rates after their involvement in literature circles. The participants were asked to read the same 88 word selection from the 2B leveled text, The Magic Fish by Freya Littledale, as they were asked to read before their involvement in literature circles. Once again, I recorded each students’ miscues or mistakes made when reading the required selection and used this information to calculate each students’ reading accuracy rates.

Table 4

*Percentage Scores of Running Record Accuracy*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Post-Assessment: Running Record Accuracy</th>
<th>Tim</th>
<th>Yadiel</th>
<th>Joseph</th>
<th>Kayanna</th>
<th>Amari</th>
<th>Cam</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Post-Assessment</td>
<td>95%</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>99%</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>97%</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average Score:</td>
<td>98.5%</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>
Table 4 shows the data collected from the final running record taken on the participants after their involvement in literature circle discussions. Tim (pseudonym) showed an initial accuracy rate of 94% and a final accuracy rate of 95%. Not only did his accuracy rate increase by 1% but the 2B level text was initially at an instructional reading level for him prior to his involvement in the study but the 2B level text is now at Tim’s independent reading level after his involvement in the study. Yaidel’s initial running record yielded an accuracy rate of 95%, which proved that the 2B level text was at an independent reading level for him. After his involvement in literature circle sessions, Yadiel’s running record assessment showed that his reading accuracy rate was at a 100%. Therefore, Yadiel read the required selection without making one miscue when decoding the 2B level text used in this study. Joseph’s initial reading accuracy rate of the 2B level text was at a 95%. Once again, his initial reading of the text put the The Magic Fish by Freya Littledale, at Joseph’s independent reading level. His final running record assessment yielded a reading accuracy rate score of 99%. His reading accuracy rate with the 2B leveled texted used during this study increased by 4% after his involvement in literature circle sessions. Kayanna initially scored the highest reading accuracy rate score of all the participants with a 97%. The final running record taken on Kayanna’s reading of the required selection gave her a accuracy rate of 100%. Similarly to Yadiel, Kayanna’s final reading of the text was free of any decoding miscues. The most interesting result found from the final running record assessment data was collected on Amari. Amari’s initial accuracy rate calculated based on the miscues she made on the required reading before her involvement in literature circles was an 88%. An accuracy rate of 88% shows that the text being read is at the reader’s frustrational reading level. In other words, the 2B level text used in this study was evidently not developmentally appropriate for Amari’s reading abilities at the time. However, since five out of the six
participants within the study demonstrated that the 2B level text was at a developmentally appropriate reading level for those students, I was optimistic for Amari’s success during this study. Sure enough, Amari’s final reading of the selection from the 2B leveled text yielded an accuracy rate of 97%. Therefore, Amari’s accuracy rate when it came to reading the 2B leveled text increased by 9% after her involvement in literature circle sessions. Most significantly, the text used in this study was at her frustrational reading level initially. However her final reading accuracy rate shows that the text is now at Amari’s independent reading level. Cam, the final group member, initially read the selection from the text used in this study at a 95% accuracy rate. Similarly to Yadiel and Kayanna, his final reading of the selection showed no evidence of miscues. Ultimately, his final reading accuracy rate of the required selection was at a 100%. The analysis of the running record findings were exciting to me not only as an action researcher but as a teacher because this 2B leveled text used during literature circles was at a developmentally appropriate reading level for my 1B readers after their involvement in this study. The final exciting finding that became evident after my analysis of the data collected from running record given in the pre-assessment and the running record given in the post-assessment is the increase in the averaged accuracy rates amongst the participants. Initially, their mean accuracy rate score was at a 94%. Their final mean accuracy rate score was at a 98.5%. In other words, after the students’ participation in literature circles, the final oral reading of the text reflected less miscues and overall more accurate reading of the 2B level text which at the beginning of this study was labeled as a text one reading level higher than what the students could initially achieve. Kern and Ferguson (2012) offers a possible explanation for this success in reading accuracy rate by noticing that students involved in literature circles “fake read” less. In other words, the students
feel more accountable when it comes to reading and comprehending the text so that they do not let down their group members when it comes to literature circle conversation.

The Effect of Employing a Variety of Comprehension Strategies during Reading

Literature circles can be used as an instructional tool to help your students practice a variety of reading comprehension strategies. The participants involved in the literature circles within this study practiced the following reading comprehension in their student work and in their discussion surrounding the text: predicting, questioning, and making personal connections. The students employed the comprehension strategy of predicting by making a prediction of what will happen once the story ends. The students employed the comprehension strategy of questioning the text at hand by coming up with their own questions to ask their group members during literature circle discussion. Finally, the students employed the comprehension strategy of making personal connections to the details within the text by recording their connections and sharing these connections with their group members. Below you will see the responses that they the participants within this study came up with during involvement in literature circles.

Once the students had read the text, The Magic Fish by Freya Littledale, independently, in pairs, and whole group, it was time to start practicing the comprehension strategy of predicting. The students were presented with a prediction worksheet that asked the participants the following question: “What do you think will happen next?” Since the students had already read the whole book, multiple times, I asked the student to answer this question based on possible events that could happen after the book was finished. In order for you to understand the predictions the students made, I must give you some context about the story line of the book used within this study. The Magic Fish by Freya Littledale has three characters. The fisherman and his wife live in an old hut by the sea. One day, the fisherman catches a magic fish that claims to be a
prince. The fisherman lets the fish go since the fish is special. When the fisherman tells his wife about the tale, his wife insists that the fisherman go back to fish and request a wish. The fisherman asks the fish for three of his wife’s wishes. The fish agrees to the wishes and the wife receives a pretty house, a castle, and becomes queen of the land. However, all of these gifts were not enough for the wife. The wife makes the fisherman go back one last time and ask the fish to make her queen of the sun, moon, and stars. The fish becomes upset with all of the wife’s request and tells the fisherman to return home where he finds his wife as well as their old hut back. The participants in this study were asked to come up with a prediction of events that could happen now that the fisherman and his wife lost everything they were given.

The students recorded their predictions on their predicting worksheets before they were involved in peer-led discussion. Once their predictions were recorded, the students shared their predictions with their group members. All students were able to come up with predictions, some predictions were more detailed than others. According to Cam, “Sad because she don’t have the pretty house no more. She be mean forever cus she is sad” (Student Work Sample, October 2015). This response was recorded on Cam’s prediction sheet based on his interpretation of what could possibly happen after the ending of the book. Similarly, Kayanna wrote, “The wife is going to be mad” (Student Work Sample, October 2015). Kayanna had a similar idea to Cam’s prediction, however, her prediction lacks a reason for the wife to be mad. Therefore, Cam was able to use text evidence to support his prediction. Kayanna’s prediction on the other hand was not as reflective as Cam’s. With more practice with the comprehension skill of predicting, the other group members might have been able to include text evidence in their prediction so that their predictions were thoughtful and reasonable.
When analyzing the transcripts created from the audio recordings of the students’ participation in literature circle discussions, one can see the students expressing their prediction to their group members orally. Amari shared the following prediction to the group, “She is going to be sad because the old hut is back” (Transcript 4, October 2015). Amari shares a prediction that once again reflects a feeling that the wife may have once the story ends but she also adds a reason for her prediction or text evidence. Amari was capable of making an inference based off of text evidence and personal connections. On the other hand, Joshua said, “They are going to be sad, mad and like she is going to be mad and sad” (Transcript 4, October 2015). Unlike Amari and Cam, Joseph was only able to express a feeling that the wife will have once the story has ended. Joseph was able to make an inference based on how the wife was feeling in the text most likely based on a personal connection of knowing how that character would feel based on the storyline in the text. Tim shared this prediction with his group members, “The wife is never going to talk to the fisherman” (Transcript 4, October 2015). Tim provides a particular detail in his prediction but does not provide a particular feeling of the wife like the other group members. Tim was able to use text evidence to support his prediction but lacked a personal connection to help him explain how the character of the wife could possibly feel. Finally, Yadiel expresses this prediction, “I think she’s going to be mad and she’s going to move” (Transcript 4, October 2015). Here Yadiel was able to supply his group members with a prediction that involved the wives feeling as well as a detail that could happen if the story were to continue. Even though some of the participants’ predictions lacked reasoning from text evidence or personal experience, the students had the opportunity to practice and share their predictions with their group members. As stated before, if the students were exposed to making predictions on a regular basis rather than practicing the skills for one literature circle cycle, their predicting abilities may have been
extended. Kern and Ferguson (2012) supports the idea of regular practice with the comprehension skills such as predicting. With constant practice with the skill of predicting, participants in literature circles could start to include question and personal connection in their predictions based on text evidence.

The next comprehension strategy that the students got a chance to employ while working with and discussing the text used in this study was questioning. The students had the opportunity to come up with six questions that they either had about the text themselves or come up with questions that they wanted their group members to think about and discuss. The first way I analyzed the students ability to question the text was by looking at their student work samples. When looking at their questioning worksheets, five out of the six students were able to create questions that could be answered. When looking at Amari’s student work, she recorded responses to questions rather than creating questions that could be asked. For example, Amari recorded, “A beautiful castle” (Student Work Sample, October 2015). Everything she recorded on her questioning sheet were not questions that could be asked. In other words, when completing her student role sheet, Amari was incapable of generating questions to ask her group members. However, once she watched her group members model the ability to ask one another questions, she was able to pose some questions to the group. Of the five that were able to create questions about the text, three out of five students could generate six questions to ask their group members. The questioning worksheet had six places for the students to record a question to ask the group. Three of the students were able to completely meet the requirements asked of them by generating six questions to bring to group discussion. Joseph was able to come up with five questions and Yadiel was only able to come up with three questions. As stated before, none of the participants within this study had participated in literature circles before. Therefore, the
students were generating questions about the text to ask their group members for the first time. Daniels (2002) believes that with continued practice with the student role of questioning, literature circle participants will take their questions from seeking to clarify information in the text to questions that will challenge their group members to extend their understanding of the text.

When looking at the types of questions created by the students, most of the questions generated were created with the intention to clarify information within the text while a few questions posed were created with the intention to challenge the other group members thinking. Tim recorded the question, “What is your favorite part of the book” (Student Work Sample, October 2015). This question was created with the intention to challenge the other group members to reflect on the text. This question if posed during literature circle discussion would force every group member to explain their opinions of the text. Joseph recorded the question, “What are somethings the fish says in the book” (Student Work Sample, October 2015). This question if asked would require the students to go back and look in their books for text evidence to support their answers. This question is an example of a question generated with the intention of clarifying text information. However when looking at the student work samples, not all questions generated were thought-provoking. For example, Yadiel wrote, “What does she ask for first” (Student Work Sample, October 2015). This question would be very easy for the participants to answer because the group has read the book multiple times. Therefore, they would immediately know the answer to this question. On the other hand, this question is answerable which met the requirement of generating answerable questions to pose for your group members.

When looking at the types of questions that were asked during literature circle discussions, the questions that the students posed allowed for students to think about their
responses. During group discussion, Kenya posed this question, “Why is the book called, The Magic Fish?” (Transcript 3, October 2015) When the question was asked, a few group members were able to provide thoughtful responses to answer the question. For example, Tim said, “Because the fish is magic” (Transcript 3, October 2015). This is when I jumped in as a facilitator of conversation and asked the following question, “How do we know the fish is magic?” (Transcript 3, October 2015) Whittingham (2013) supports this action of a teacher acting as a facilitator of group conversation. Within his study, he would only jump in to conversation in order to increase the thoughtful of his group members’ answers. Therefore, my redirection forced the students to think deeper than the simple response Tim gave. Cam responded by saying, “Because when he said, go home your wife has a new house, and their house was really new” (Transcript 3, October 2015). Cam’s response is an example of a thoughtful response that required him to use text evidence to justify that the fish is actually magic. Another example of a good question posed during literature circle discussion is when Tim asked, “Why does the queen ask for too many wishes?” (Transcript 3, October 2015) This question made the students cite evidence with the text as well as draw conclusions as to why she kept asking for more things. I believe with more opportunities for the students to create questions, the questions that they posed to their group members would become more thought-provoking. Shelton-Strong (2012) believes that literature circle discussion meetings are successful when students ask open-ended questions about the book. During my literature circle discussion, all students were able to pose at least one open-ended question to ask their group members about the text.

The final comprehension strategy that the students were able to practice though the instructional practice of literature circles was making personal connections with the text.
Similarly to the comprehension strategies of prediction and questioning, the students took time to look at details within the story and record any personal connections with the text. When looking at the student work samples, only Kayanna was able to record actual pieces of evidence from the text and write down her connection with those text details. However, all students were able to record at least one connection they could make with the text. Many similarities amongst text connection emerged once students started sharing their connections during text discussions. In other words, group discussion helped the students employ the comprehension strategy of making as well as sharing personal connections they have made with the text at hand. Marchiando (2013) believes that peer interaction surrounding the text allows students a chance to further the cognitive strategies the students learned during preparation for literature circle discussions. For example, Cam said, “..my grandma has a dog and a fish and I think that they are cool” (Transcript 5, October 2015). Like Cam, Tim and Amari both shared that they also have or know animals similar to the ones shown in the text. Since Cam offered a personal connections that was similar to other’s within the group, these group members shared their personal connections themselves. Joseph shared a unique personal connection with the text, “I have been in the ocean on a cruise ship” (Transcript 5, October 2015). Joseph used the setting of the story to come up with this personal connection that the other group members were unable to connect with. Therefore, the group members learned something new about Joshua which can foster positive relationships amongst group members. His personal connection also encouraged his other group members to think out of the box when making personal connections with the text.

According to Daniels (2002), “Often, in a successful literature circle meeting, people never refer to their role sheets. After all, if everyone comes to the group with lots to talk about, who needs a sheet?” (p.100) In order to keep conversation to go further than the students simply
reading off their personal connections worksheets, I posed the question, “I am wondering if anyone has a connection to the wife wanting too many things?” (Transcript 5, October 2015)

When this question was posed, I observed the students taking a moment to ponder this question. Joseph and Tim were able to think of people in their own lives who want too much like a sibling or a parent. Yadiel took the discussion in a different direction when he said, “Meeee! Video games!” (Transcript 5, October 2015) This is when the rest of the group members began sharing all of the things that they want as well. The mood in literature circle at this point of the discussion was fun and engaging. Daniels (2002) encourages this type of environment surrounding literature circles because he believes that there should be sense of playfulness and fun in the room while implementing literature circles, especially in the primary grades. Overall, six literature circle discussions took place during my action research study, however the literature circle discussion revolving around employing the comprehension strategy of making personal connections brought on an increase in peer interaction and engagement in group discussion.

**Peer-led Discussion can Improve Comprehension Surrounding a Text**

A major observation that I took away during my involvement in literature circles was the fact that peer-led discussions surrounding the chosen text took the students understanding of the book’s material one step further questions being answered or worksheets being filled out. I believe the participants understanding of *The Magic Fish* by Freya Littledale was more successful when the students were able to hear their own peer’s understandings of the text. In order to make sure peer-led discussion ran smoothly and conversation around the text could flourish, I had to establish and maintain three particular factors. First, the students needed a chance to develop their own thoughts and opinions surrounding the text and recorded their
personal ideas on worksheets or student role sheets. This way the students had a conversation
topic as well as a physical document that they could reference in order to help them participate in
group conversations surrounding the text. Second, I had to set some ground rules for group
conversation. These rules consisted of group members participating in text discussion at least one
time per session and the raising of a hand before sharing their text discussion material. These
guidelines ensured accountability in group conversation as well as a sense of order when sharing
one’s own thoughts and ideas with group members. In order to show the participants’ level of
text comprehension, I will be discussing my findings from the pre-assessment and the post-
assessment as well as looking at the students responses to their individually assigned roles.

In order to assess the students’ comprehension of the *The Magic Fish* by Freya Littledale,
I created a comprehension check to be giving before literature circles were implemented as well
as after literature circle participation was complete. This comprehension check contained 12
questions. 8 of the questions on the comprehension check were multiple choice and 4 of the
questions were constructive response questions. This comprehension check remained exactly the
same each time it was given so that I could see what the participants could understand from the
text prior to involvement in the story and then compare that data to their understanding of the
text after involvement in the study. Table 5 below shows the students’ percentage scores from
the first time they took the comprehension check after reading the text one time independently
before any literature circle instruction was given.
Table 5

*Percentage Scores of Comprehension Check*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pre-Assessment</th>
<th>Tim</th>
<th>Yadiel</th>
<th>Joseph</th>
<th>Kayanna</th>
<th>Amari</th>
<th>Cam</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Comprehension Check</td>
<td>33%</td>
<td>50%</td>
<td>25%</td>
<td>66%</td>
<td>25%</td>
<td>50%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average Score:</td>
<td>41.5%</td>
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</table>

Table 5 shows the students’ calculated scores from the comprehension check given to each participant before they were given any reading instruction through the use of literature circles. When Tim initially took the comprehension check, he received a score of 33% which means he missed 8 out of the 12 questions. When Yadiel initially took the comprehension check, he received a score of 50% which means he missed 6 out of the 12 questions. When Joseph initially took the comprehension check, he received a score of 25% which means he missed 3 out of the 12 questions. When Kayanna initially took the comprehension check, she received a score of 66% which means she missed 4 out of the 12 questions. When Amari initially took the comprehension check, she received a score of 20% which means she missed 9 out of the 12 questions. When Cam initially took the comprehension check, he received a score of 50% which means he missed 6 out of the 12 questions. When the scores of the first comprehension check were averaged together, the mean score from the comprehension check yielded a score of 41.5%.

Marchiando (2013) argues that students are not offered enough opportunities to engage with one another about the books they are reading and to have control over their own literacy learning. Also, students have minimal opportunities to practice their own thinking about reading. These initial results from the pre-assessment comprehension check can be explained due to heavy
teacher facilitated discussion as well as a lack in opportunities for students to discuss a text amongst their peers.

In order to take a deeper look at the initial comprehension check given to the students within this study, I took an item analysis of each question on the comprehension check. When taking an item analysis inventory, I looked at each question and calculated the percentage of the number of students who correctly answered that particular question and the percentage of students who answered the question incorrectly. Table 6 shows the item analysis for each question on the comprehension check.

Table 6
Percentage Scores of Comprehension Check: Item Analysis

| Question 1: What is the genre of this book? | 0% | 100% |
| Question 2: On page 7, what did the Magic Fish claim to be instead of a fish? | 100% | 0% |
| Question 3: What was the wife’s first wish? | 100% | 0% |
| Question 4: Why do you think the wife was happy for a pretty house for only one week? | 17% | 83% |
| Question 5: What rhyming lines does the fisherman use to call the Magic fish? | 17% | 83% |
| Question 6: What did the wife wish for the 2\textsuperscript{nd} time? | 83% | 17% |
Question 7: How many weeks was the wife happy with her castle?  
17% 83%

Question 8: What did the wife wish for the 3rd time?  
50% 50%

Question 9: How do you think the fish is feeling on page 25?  
50% 50%

Question 10: Why do you think that?  
17% 83%

Question 11: What happened to the Fisherman and his wife at the end of the story?  
17% 83%

Question 12: Do you think the Fisherman and his wife are happy at the end of the story? Why do you think that?  
33% 67%

Table 6 shows the percentage of participants who correctly answered the questions as well as the percentage of participants who were unable to answer the question correctly. Overall, besides for a few selections, either all the students answered the questions correct or incorrectly as well as only one student either answered the question correctly or incorrectly. The questions that students seemed to do the best are on where right there questions. This success is due to the fact that right there questions require minimal higher level thinking since the answers to these types of questions are stated right in the text at hand. When it came to constructive response questions, only a few students were able to receive credit for their answers. The question that stumped every students was question one which asked the students to identify the correct genre of the book used within this study. The students’ inability to identify the correct genre could have resulted from an unfamiliarity with the term of genre as well as knowledge of possible
genre examples provided in the questions. Question eight and nine yielded mixed results where half of the participants answered the question while the other half did not. Another interesting finding was the two students, Kayanna and Cam, where the only two students to answer a question correctly when all of the other participants answered the question incorrectly. I believe this finding had to do with the fact that these two students in particular are the two strongest readers when the group. When looking at Kayanna and Cam’s overall score, their scores were amongst the highest of the participants with Yadiel having the same score as Cam.

Table 7 is a summary of the results from the comprehension check taken during the post-assessment for the study. This comprehension check, like the running record, was exactly the same as the initial comprehension check. The final comprehension check was given after literature circle sessions were over. The students read and completed this final comprehension check independently.

Table 7

*Percentage Scores of Comprehension Check*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Comprehension Check: Post-Assessment</th>
<th>Percentages:</th>
<th>Tim</th>
<th>Yadiel</th>
<th>Joseph</th>
<th>Kayanna</th>
<th>Amari</th>
<th>Cam</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Comprehension Check</td>
<td></td>
<td>75%</td>
<td>92%</td>
<td>50%</td>
<td>83%</td>
<td>75%</td>
<td>83%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average Score: 76.5%</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Table 7 shows the scores each participant received upon completing their final comprehension check for the study. Initially, Tim scored a 33% on his first comprehension check. He ended up increase his comprehension score at the end of the study by 42%. Tim’s final comprehension check score was a 75%. Yadiel’s initial comprehension check yielded a score of 50% and his final comprehension check yielded a score of 92%. Yadiel showed an increase in
his comprehension of the text used during this literature circle study by 42% as well. However, Joseph showed the smallest increase when it came to comparing his level of understanding the text used within this study. Initially, Joseph scored a 40% on his first comprehension check. As you can see in the table, his final comprehension check score was a 50%. This increase in score means his comprehension of the text went up by 10%. Kayanna, initially had the highest score when looking at the first comprehension check. Her final comprehension check score was an 83%. In other words, Kayanna showed a 17% increase between her initial and final comprehension check. Amari was the participant who initially read the text at hand at a frustrating level. I was optimistic that the book would become easier for her to read and comprehend once she became involved in literature circles. Surprisingly, my optimism paid off because she showed a 50% increase when it came to comparing her initial comprehension check score with her final comprehension check score. Amari showed the greatest level of progress when it came to comprehension amongst her group members. Finally Cam, who received an initial comprehension check score of 50%, received a final comprehension check score of 83%. Cam ended up showing an increase in text understanding by 33%. Overall, all students showed an increase in their level of text comprehension at the end of this study. The average score of the participant’s final comprehension checks was calculated to be a 76.5%. Their initial average score was a 41.5%. Ultimately, this means that as a whole, the group increased their comprehension of the text by 35%. According to Kern and Ferguson (2012), “Teachers know good readers use comprehension strategies as they read literature” (p. 24). The participants in this action research study practiced comprehension strategies during literature circles sessions and extended those cognitive strategies learned when preparing for literature circle discussion during conversation with their group members. By employing comprehension strategies actively
during literature circle participation, the participants were able to demonstrate an increase in comprehension of the text during their final interaction with the post-assessment comprehension check.

Finally, I wanted to relook at the item analysis of the final comprehension check to see if there was still certain questions that the students either excelled at or struggled on. Table 8 shows the item analysis taken on the final comprehension check given to the students at the closure of this action research study. The item analysis was calculated in the same way that the initial item analysis was calculated on the first comprehension check.

Table 8

*Percentage Scores of Comprehension Check: Item Analysis*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Post-Assessment:</th>
<th>Percentages:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Question 1: What is the genre of this book?</td>
<td>Correct</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Question 2: On page 7, what did the Magic Fish claim to be instead of a fish?</td>
<td>83%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Question 3: What was the wife’s first wish?</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Question 4: Why do you think the wife was happy for a pretty house for only one week?</td>
<td>83%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Question 5: What rhyming lines does the fisherman use to call the Magic fish?</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Question 6: What did the wife wish for the 2nd time?</td>
<td>83%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Question 7: How many weeks was the wife happy with her castle? 83% 17%

Question 8: What did the wife wish for the 3rd time? 50% 50%

Question 9: How do you think the fish is feeling on page 25? 67% 33%

Question 10: Why do you think that? 33% 67%

Question 11: What happened to the Fisherman and his wife at the end of the story? 50% 50%

Question 12: Do you think the Fisherman and his wife are happy at the end of the story? Why do you think that? 83% 17%

Table 8 shows the findings of an item analysis taken on the final comprehension check completed by the participants. Overall, the percentage correct for every question increased except for question 8. Question 8 asked, “What did the wife wish for the 3rd time?” This question was a tricky question for the students to answer because one of the answer choices reflects the wish of the wife asked the 4th time. Half of the students selected this answer choice because she wanted to be queen of the sun and stars the 4th time but queen of the land the 3rd time. The half of the students who responded to this question incorrectly saw queen in both answers but did not consult with the text before selecting their final choice. Therefore this explanation could have led to the percentage of students who answered the question correctly and the percentage of the students who answered the questions wrong remaining the same. Initially, all of the students
answered the genre question, question one, incorrectly. However, the final item analysis taken on the final comprehension check showed that all of the students answered this question in particular correctly. Originally, there were five questions where only one participant answered the question correctly. These question were 4, 5, 7, 10, and 11 shown in Table 8. In the final item analysis, question 4 and 7 yielded results where five out of the six participants answered the question correctly. The item analysis taken on question 7 from the final comprehension check showed that all of the students answered this question correctly. Questions 10 and 11 still proved to be tough questions for the participants. Question 10 was a constructive response question where the students had to explain why the fish looked upset on a certain page in the book. This question was probably difficult for the students because they had to use text evidence to inference why the fish looked and felt upset. The students were asked to explain their thinking in writing which continues to be a challenge for second grade students due to a lack of spelling knowledge. Question 11 was a multiple choice question that asked, “What happened to the Fisherman and his wife at the end of the story?” One of the response choices talked about the Fisherman and his wife living happily ever after. I believe this response choice was selected by some of the participants because during literature circle instruction we talked about the identifiable features of the fantasy genre. As a group, the students and I talked about the terms, “once upon a time” as well as “happily ever after” appearing in fairytales books within the fantasy genre. In the story used, the main characters did not end up “happily ever after” but some students most likely selected this answer choice because of our discussion on fantasy genre elements. Even though the percentage of the students answering these two questions increased from the initial item analysis, the percentage of students who answered these question correctly the final time still remained low.
The last part of my pre-assessment and my post-assessment that I created for this action research study was a story map that focused on the characters, the setting, the conflict, the solution, and the theme within the story, *The Magic Fish* by Freya Littledale. The same story map was given before the students’ involvement in the study and after the students’ involvement in the study. In order for the students to receive a perfect score on this story map, they needed accurately to provide all of the characters within the text, the setting within the text, the conflict in the text, the solution within the text, and theme found in the text. For example, if a student did not list every character within the text than their character section of the story map would be marked wrong. Table 9 below show the pre-assessment results and the post-assessment results of the story map completed the participants within this study.

Table 9

*Percentage Scores of Story Map Elements*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant’s Name</th>
<th>Pre-Assessment</th>
<th>Post-Assessment</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Tim</td>
<td>40%</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yadiel</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Joseph</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>80%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kayanna</td>
<td>40%</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Amari</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cam</td>
<td>80%</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 9 compares the scores of the story map taken in the pre-assessment to the scores of the story map taken in the post-assessment. The first finding that I noticed was the fact that every student except Cam showed struggling scores when they initially completed the story map. I
attribute Cam’s initial success the story map elements worksheet due to the fact that he is in third grade while the rest of the participants are in second grade. Cam has had more exposure with story map elements as well as the term, conflict which appeared in place of the word problem on the worksheet. Since the students completed this part of the pre-assessment independently, the students were not offered any assistance on decoding the terms on the worksheet. However, once the students completed their work in literature circles, all of their story map scores increased dramatically. Yadiel and Amari even showed an increase in understanding of story map elements by 80% since their initial encounter with the activity. I noticed that all of the students except Joseph received a perfect score on their final assessment of story map elements. When looking at Joseph’s work on the final assessment of the story map elements, he left the solution section blank. I observed the fact that he was moving at a slower pace than the other students when completing this activity. My field notes show that the last literature circle session ended before he recorded a response. Therefore, I am unsure if it was an inability to understand the meaning of the term solution or the simple fact that he ran out of time in regards to leaving this section of the story map elements sheet blank. Overall, after the students were involved in literature circle activities and discussions, all of the participants’ comprehension of story map elements increased.

**Implications**

After analyzing the data collected during this action research study, three identifiable themes emerged and were discussed. However, I am now going to explore the findings of my study and their effect on my teaching as well as the practice of other teachers interested in implementing literature circles into their own classrooms. The first implication I noticed as a teacher in this action research study was determining the type of text to use when implementing
literature circles in the classroom. The second implication was exploring ways for the students to practice chosen comprehension strategies during literature circle instruction. The third and final implication that I found during my study was motivating students to participate in peer-led discussion surrounding the text.

When initially choosing a text to use in my action research study, I had specific hopes for the text that I would use within literature circle instruction. The first guideline I was looking for in a book was challenging material. When I think about challenging material in a book, I think about exposure to new vocabulary words as well as a story plot that requires the reader to think lesson the author is trying to get across to the reader. The second guideline I had for the book I wanted to use within literature circle sessions was developmental appropriateness so that the students could learn from the text as well as discuss the text. Since a major component of literature circles revolve around allowing your students to choose the book they wish to use, I had to find three books that met these guidelines I laid out for an ideal literature circle text. For other teachers interested in using literature circles in the classroom, choosing the texts to offer the students can be a timely and thoughtful process. Not only do you need to make sure the book will have a challenging plotline that will encourage text discussion as well as be at an appropriate reading level but you most also make sure you have enough books to offer the students to work with. Luckily, my school is equipped with a bookroom that has many book titles, all labeled by reading level. However, even with a wealth of resources available to me, I struggled to pull texts that would show the most amount of progress when it came to measuring the participants’ comprehension of the chosen text.

A major conflict I struggled with when choosing a text to use within my study was the reading level of the text. Once again, the goal of my action research study was to observe how
literature circles help those involved improve their reading comprehension. When studying the literature on literature circles, I found that students should be working with a text that is developmentally appropriate in order for the students to increase their own comprehension of the text being used. To further support this theory, when using literature circles, students are always encouraged to choose books that are at their independent reading level (McElvain, 2010). When implementing literature circles into my own classroom, I had to make informed choices when it came to presenting the children with possible texts to be used in conjunction with literature circles. As their teacher, I was aware of their current reading level abilities as well as their instructional goals as readers.

One of the instructional reading goals for my participants was to increase their reading level so that they could eventually be reading at their current grade level. In order for the student’s to achieve this goal, the students needed exposure to texts at a higher reading level. As a teacher, we hope that our students are working with texts that are challenging as well as instructional. In other words, we want our students to be exposed to new words and ideas that present themselves in higher level texts but we also want them to be successful. If the student is frustrated when reading a text, comprehension of the text’s material will be unreachable. Therefore, once the participants within this study choose a book to work with, they all needed to be given a running record on a section of text within the books pages. The running record ensures that the students are able to decode the words within the text accurately so that they can ultimately understand the text once it is read. Once the running record results were determined, five out of six of the participants within the study were reading the text chosen at their independent level. Only one student’s running records results showed that the book chosen during literature circles was at her frustrational reading level. As discussed earlier, the texts used
within literature circles should be at the reader’s independent reading level. However, within this study, only one literature circle group was available. I was optimistic that by allowing this student in particular to continue to participate with the literature circles, would be beneficial for her reading progress. In the case of this study, the student showed a measurable amount of success with the once “frustrating” text by the end of her participation in the study. Ultimately, I was conflicted when choosing texts to present the students at the beginning of the literature circles. I wanted to use a text that would allow the students to show the greatest amount of comprehension of the text’s material as possible. I also wanted to challenge my students by presenting them with a text that wouldn’t be below their reading abilities which could possibly have a negative effect on group discussion surrounding the text. The implication I leave with teachers interested in using literature circles in their classroom, is that it is up to the teacher to determine their students’ reading level abilities prior to implementing literature circles within their classroom in order for all students to be successful with this reading instruction method.

The second implication I found as a teacher implementing literature circles in the classroom was creating ways for the students to employ chosen comprehension strategies in literature circles. Literature circles act as a medium for those participating within the method to practice comprehension strategies through role sheets and text discussion (Kern & Ferguson, 2012). Similarly in this action research study, the students involved employed the following comprehension strategies of predicting, questioning, and making personal connections with the text. By creating role sheets as well as worksheets, teachers have the ability to offer their students opportunities to practice any comprehension strategy of their choice. A feature that makes literature circles a unique instructional method is that they students get to apply their knowledge of the chosen comprehension skills in peer-led discussions. It is one thing for a
student to fill out a comprehension sheet, but they solidify their knowledge of the skill in a greater way when they apply these abilities into conversations surrounding a chosen text.

Not only do literature circles offer their participants a chance to employ the comprehension strategies brought forth by the reading instruction at hand, but they also bring a new excitement to typical reading instruction used within classrooms. Teachers have the ability to pick and choose the types of skills and standards they wish their students to practice with literature circles. Literature circles also offer the teacher the ability to pick the types of texts they want their students to read and present these texts as a chose for their students. By offering the students a choice when it comes to picking a book to read, the students may feel stronger motivation to read a book that they were interested in working with. Once the students feels a personal connection with the text, they may not be so indifferent when it comes to completing activities around the text. The students may also feel even more motivation to participate in reading and comprehending a chosen text when you throw in the opportunity for the students to have a conversation with their peers.

The third and final implication that I can offer teachers who are interested in implementing literature circles in their classroom is finding ways to motivate your students to be involved during peer-led discussions. Any teacher would know that when you ask your students the favorite time of their school day, many students would pick a time where they can socialize with their classmates. At the beginning of my study, I collected background information on the students’ opinions on interacting with their peers through a questionnaire. The questionnaire created to gain insight on the students’ perception towards reading and literacy acts, asked the participants the following question, “Do you enjoy talking with your classmates?” (Questionnaire, October 2015) All six of the participants within the study answered, “yes” to this
question. In other words, not even one student answered the question by say, “no” or “a little.” Therefore, according to the second grade students involved within this study, talking with their peers is a common valued experience. Even more, Marchiando (2013) says, “As adults, one of the most natural activities we may do before, during, or after reading a book is talk to our peers about what we have read, yet we may rarely afford this opportunity to our students” (p. 13). Literature circles allow for students the opportunity to take ownership for their own understanding of literature by being involved in peer interaction where students can practice the skills to become lifelong readers.

Role sheets and student work completed during literature circle sessions can also motivate students to participate in group discussions. Within this action research study, it was seen that every participant improved their comprehension of the text once participation was finished, some even by leaps and bounds. I believe by allowing the students to practice sharing the comprehension strategies that they were taught during reading instruction during peer-led discussions helped the students solidify their understanding of the text. I also believe the students felt a sense of responsibility to share their thoughts, opinions, and understandings of the text to their group members. They completed their required role sheets and activities sheets with more fidelity because they knew they would have to share their findings with their peers during text discussion. I also believe the role sheets and activity sheets, once completed, gave the students a greater sense of confidence to share their findings with their group members. Based on my observations of the students, they also showed a greater motivation to successfully decode and comprehend the text during their participation in literature circles than in previous guided reading sessions. Normally, I dealt with students moaning and groaning when they would have to re-read or re-visit a particular text. When peer-led discussion was thrown in the mix, the students
were more motivated to fully understand the text before talking amongst their peers. Ultimately, peer-led discussions can offer more to a teacher than an increase in their students’ ability to comprehend a text. Their students will become more motivate to read and more responsible for the learning they share with their peers as well.

Conclusions

At the beginning of this action research study, I asked myself the following question, “How do literature circles improve comprehension?” I used Sociocultural History Theory Framework to make connections and draw conclusions with ideas surrounding the instructional method of literature circles because this theory shows relevance to instructional methods that involve gaining knowledge through socialization with members of the society of which we associate with. When reviewing the literature surrounding literature circles, the following ideas presented themselves: the adaptability of the literature circle approach, the increased engagement and motivation towards literacy acts, and the implementation of comprehension strategies and critical thinking skills. Once literature circles were implemented in my classroom, observations of students were recorded and quantitative data was collected. The collected data was then analyzed in its entirety where three themes emerged. The three themes that presented themselves were the importance of developmentally appropriate reading material, the effect of employing a variety of comprehension strategies, and peer-led discussion can improve comprehension surrounding a text. Ultimately, it was concluded that literatures can improve comprehension of the text through the ability of peer-discussions to hold students accountable for their own learning and understanding of the text at hand.
If I were to implement literature circles in my classroom again, the needs of my students would change because I would like to try this instructional method with the entirety of my class rather than with a small group of students. I believe the amount of planning before literature circles would increase dramatically for literature circles to run smoothly amongst a class of 23 students. Small groups would be determined based on individual students reading levels. I would have to obtain a large amount of texts to use when implementing literature circles with a whole class of students because you have to consider all of the books that the group members may discard due to not being interested in the text’s material. With no other instructional support in the classroom other than myself, classroom management systems would have to be established and practiced. I would have to model what literature circles look like and sound like. The students would also have to practice the same expectations before true learning could start. I would collect their role sheets and activities sheets in order to collect qualitative evidence in regards to their progress with the text at hand. However, for qualitative results, I would need track the students conversation by circulating through the classroom and recording the students ability or inability to hold conversations with their peers by using field notes. Finally, I would also make sure to hold mini-lessons and end of session conversations in order to teach strategies the students will be working on within their groups as well as discuss any observations of students’ struggles with the expectations set for literature circle success.

At the close of my involvement within this action research study, I wonder how I can take literature circles with me throughout my teaching career. I have been only teaching for two years now, and I already have taught two different grade levels of students. As stated in the literature surrounding literature circles as well as my own findings, literature circles are adaptable. I also believe literature circles can be a highly successful method when it comes to
improving students’ motivation towards reading as well as guiding students to developing comprehension skills that will stick with them for a lifetime. Even more so, literature circles offer opportunities for students to interact and be a part of a social group. Students who master team work skills in school will learn to be a part of a team which is a crucial ability to have when finding a job or career in the future (Marchiando, 2013). As teachers, are job is to provide all students with a quality education. Therefore, school is an opportune time for students to be involved in literacy acts that they found enjoyable, meaningful, and worthwhile of their time and energy.

Overall, the literature circles implemented within my classroom were a success. All students improved their accuracy to decode the text as well as comprehend the text. Another success was the fact that all of the students increased their reading ability by one whole reading level. When this study came to a close, it was clear to me that there is no correct way to run literature circles in your classroom. The most important question a teacher needs to ask him or herself before implemented literature circles in their own classroom is, “How will literature circles work best for my own students?” Within my own study, I borrowed ideas from my literature circles from other action researchers who reported their own findings. I determined which components would work best for my own students and turned these recommendations into an adaptable version of literature circles to fit the needs of my students. Literature circles are adopted and adapted to fit classrooms all over the world (Daniels, 2006). The reading instructional method has even been turned into a digital form as well. Therefore, the final take away I can offer for teachers who are considering trying literature circles within their classrooms is to review the literature surrounding the innovative reading strategy and create a version of literature circles that work best for you and your students.
References


Hughes, J. (2014). At the Intersection of Critical Digital Literacies, Young Adult Literature, and Literature Circles. ALAN Review, 42(1), 35-43.


Appendix A

St. John Fisher College
PARENTAL PERMISSION FORM
(for use with minors)

Title of study: *How do Literature Circles improve Reading Comprehension?*

Name(s) of researcher(s): *Lauren Coccia*

Faculty Supervisor: Joellen Maples, PhD Assistant Professor St. John Fisher College/Marty Murray, Instructor

Phone for further information: 585-301-1072

Purpose of study: *The purpose of this study is try out the literacy method of literature circles which involve student’s in book discussions in order to improve their comprehension of the text.*

This study has been approved by the John Fisher College Institutional Review Board.

Place of study: *Enterprise Charter School* Length of participation: 10/7/15-10/16/15

Risks and benefits: This study presents no risks to your child. The benefits are the opportunity for improved teaching.

Your child’s name and the location of the research will be changed in order to protect your child’s anonymity. All data will be kept in a locked location and accessible only to the researcher. The findings from this study will be shared with other professionals at the St. John Fisher College Capstone Presentation conference.

Your rights: As the parent/guardian of a research participant, you have the right to:

1. Have the purpose of the study, and the expected risks and benefits fully explained to you before you choose to allow your minor child to participate.
2. Withdraw from participation at any time without penalty.
3. Refuse to answer a particular question without penalty.
4. Be informed of the results of the study.

I, the parent or guardian of ____________________________, a minor ________ years of age, consent to his/her participation in the above-named study. I have received a copy of this form.

_________________________ ___________________________ ____________
Print name (Participant) Signature Date

_________________________ ___________________________ ____________
Print name (Investigator) Signature Date
Appendix B

Name: ______________________________

Student Self-Evaluation Questionnaire

1. Have you ever heard of a Literature Circle or Book Club before?
   (a) Yes (b) No

2. How many minutes a day do you spend reading in and out of school?
   (a) 0-15 Minutes   (b) 15-30 Minutes   (c) 30-45 Minutes   (d) More than 45 Minutes

3. What does it look like when you read at home?
   (a) I don’t.   (b) I read by myself   (c) I read with a family member

4. Would you rather…
   (a) Just read   (b) Complete a worksheet about a book   (c) Discuss the book with your classmates

5. Do you enjoy reading?
   (a) Yes   (b) No   (c) A little

6. Do you enjoy talking with your classmates?
   (a) Yes   (b) No   (c) A little

7. Which of the following books would you like to read on the table?
   ____________________________________________________________
### Appendix C

| Date: 10/15 | Power Goal: 89 |

#### 2B Running Record

**Student:** Carin

**Date:** 10/15

**Grade:** 2nd

**Active Reading**

- Use finger to track different parts of words inside unfamiliar words.
- Stop and reread when reading doesn’t make sense, match the word.
- Use metaphors and similes, when they seem right.

**2-Syllable Decoding**

- Final _Vowel_ Long vowel sounds (aa, ee, oo, ee)
- Single-syllable consonant-vowel-consonant (CCVC)
- Open-syllable syllable-rhyme subject

**The Magic Fish**

We went fishing off the boat. We were fishing for our first time. We went fishing in the dark, and the fisherman. He was fishing with a magic fish. We fished and pulled up some fish. The fisherman. He was really good at it. We went back in the boat and fished again. We saw a lot of fish. The fisherman. He was good at fishing.
Name: _____________________________________

The Magic Fish: Comprehension Check

1. What is the genre of this book?
   A. Mystery
   B. Fantasy
   C. Historical Fiction
   D. Realistic Fiction

2. On page 7, what did the Magic Fish claim to be instead of a fish?
   A. a person
   B. a bird
   C. a prince
   D. a princess

3. What was the wife’s first wish?
   A. a castle
   B. new clothes
   C. lots of money
   D. a pretty house

4. Why do you think the wife was happy for a pretty house for only one week?

__________________________________________________________________
__________________________________________________________________
5. What rhyming lines does the fisherman use to call the Magic Fish?

__________________________________________________________________
__________________________________________________________________

6. What did the wife wish for the 2nd time?
   A. a pretty house
   B. more food
   C. to be a queen
   D. a castle

7. How many weeks was the wife happy with her castle?
   A. one week
   B. two weeks
   C. three weeks
   D. four weeks

8. What did the wife wish for the 3rd time?
   A. a castle
   B. a pretty house
   C. the queen of the sun and stars
   D. to be queen of the land

9. How do you think the fish is feeling on page 25?
   A. happy
   B. upset
   C. silly
   D. nervous
10. Why do you think that?

__________________________________________________________________

__________________________________________________________________

11. What happened to the Fisherman and his wife at the end of the story?
   A. They lived happily ever after.
   B. They had to go back to their old hut to live.
   C. They became friends with the fish.
   D. The wife started fishing.

12. Do you think the Fisherman and his wife are happy at the end of the story? Why do you think that?

__________________________________________________________________

__________________________________________________________________
STORY MAP

Characters  Setting

Conflict  Solution

Theme
FORMING QUESTIONS

Directions: It is important to form questions while you read. Write down any questions you have in the circles below. Try to fill all the circles.

BOOK TITLE:

Name:

Date:
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>What did the text say?</th>
<th>What does it remind you of?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
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</tbody>
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