Modified Literature Circles as an Effective Comprehension Strategy: A Focus on Diverse Learners

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Modified Literature Circles as an Effective Comprehension Strategy:
A Focus on Diverse Learners

By

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Abstract

This study investigates modified literature circles as an effective comprehension strategy for diverse learners. The data from this action research indicated that when modifications and appropriate levels of support and pre-teaching are made available, literature circles can support developed discussions and improve comprehension for diverse learners. Important implications emerged from the data for special educators teaching literacy. Teachers should utilize the following modifications: clearly defined/displayed roles during literature circle discussions, sentence starters, pre-literature circle conferences to develop questions and clarify thoughts before meeting as a group, and explicit vocabulary and comprehension instruction. Meaningful literacy experiences and strong comprehension skills can be attained for diverse learners through participation in literature circles.
Modified Literature Circles as an Effective Comprehension Strategy: 
A Focus on Diverse Learners

The essential goal of reading is to comprehend or understand the text. Key comprehension strategies include: activating and using background knowledge, generating and asking questions, making inferences, predicting, summarizing, visualizing, and self-monitoring for understanding (Zimmermann & Hutchins, 2003). All of these comprehension strategies can be implemented through literature circles. Literature circles are a context in which comprehension skills can be strengthened through student-led discussions. Ferguson & Kern (2012) describe how literature circles are used by teachers, “Literature circles offer teachers a way to organize peer-led student discussion of texts and provide students with the necessary structure to respond to assigned reading” (p.24). Typically roles are assigned like: discussion director, connecter, questioner, literary luminary, vocabulary builder. During literature circles, students' reflect on what they have read and engage in meaningful conversations about books that are of interest to them. Literature circles provide a platform in which students are able to think critically and negotiate meaning as they make text to self, text to text, and text to world connections during meaningful dialogue with their peers. Rosenblatt (1995) describes the importance of teachers recognizing the relationship between the text and the reader as “Demanding that teachers think constantly of “the relationship between the individual student and the book”-that is, of the transaction between potentially powerful texts and readers whose emotional engagement should be “read” as closely as the text itself” (p. 8). The transaction that takes place between a reader and a text is so powerful and uniquely created by each reader and text. Teachers should recognize the importance of what each of their students brings to the transaction with texts. Literature circles will allow these meaningful transactions to take place and deeper understanding and comprehension to occur.
I teach a class of diverse learners that struggle with comprehension and need to further develop their repertoire of comprehension strategies. Literature circles are an effective approach, as part of a balanced literacy program that will allow me to teach my students comprehension strategies. For this reason, the topic I chose to research is modified literature circles as an effective comprehension strategy with a focus on diverse learners.

This topic is important and worthy of further research because it will provide teachers with informed pedagogical approaches that will improve comprehension skills for their students. The ability to think critically about literature and express one's thoughts and opinions about it to gain a better understanding will be a skill that is used not only in school, but far beyond. Twenty-first century thinking skills can be taught and nurtured through literature circles. Rutherford (2008) describes eight thinking skills that she sees as important for the twenty-first century, “They are: perspective, awareness of patterns, critical thinking, response time, context, effectiveness, and diversity I.Q.” (p.12). My students would benefit from literature circles because participating in these will allow them to develop these twenty-first century thinking skills that are necessary for success in school and work. The students in my class have delays in communication skills as well as social skills. The structure of the literature circles will allow my students to learn how to express their ideas as well as build their reciprocal conversation skills. These skills will benefit my students in academic and social settings in and out of school. This research will also be useful to other teachers and the students that they teach.

One highly effective strategy that I have learned in my teaching experience is to give students a choice in what they read and learn about. Providing student choice is extremely motivating and greatly increases their engagement in learning opportunities. Gee and Rakow (1990) explain the importance of providing student choice relative to books, “If readers enjoy what they are reading and perceive a connection, between what they read and their own lives, their interest in the literature is high and their
comprehension of what they have read is likely to be good” (p. 341). The books for literature circles are chosen by students and therefore the texts will be of high interest and motivation, increasing the students' comprehension. According to Ferguson and Kern (2012) some of the benefits of literature circles are “…language development, reading comprehension, engagement and enjoyment of literature, and improved sense of self-efficacy when reading and understanding texts” (p.24). Moreover, the discussions during the literature circles will provide opportunities for students to make connections to their own lives and draw upon and connect to their interests, as well as the learn about their peers.

In conclusion, based on sociocultural and reader response theories, learning occurs through communication and the transaction between the reader and the text. Literature circles embody these theoretical philosophies. However, modifications must be made to fit the needs of diverse learners so the question that guided this action research was, how can literature circles be modified to fit the needs of diverse learners to improve comprehension? According to the review of literature and this action research, literature circles can be modified in many ways in order to improve comprehension for diverse learners. Modifications such as pre-teaching, modeling, think-alouds, sentence starters, and clearly defined roles and responsibilities can support diverse learners in participating in developed discussions during literature circles. These developed discussions promote a higher level of comprehension for students.

**Theoretical Framework**

Significant to Gee’s (2001) concept of literacy is the notion of discourse, which he treats as less reading and writing strictly, but instead is a way of being, “an integration of words, acts, values, beliefs, attitudes, and social identities” (526). Gee goes on to discuss discourses as ways of being in the world; they are forms of life which integrate words, acts, values, beliefs, attitudes, and social identities as well
as gestures, glances, body positions, and clothes (526). Primary discourse is when we first use language to make sense of the world and interact with our intimates (family) in unstructured, casual social interaction. Secondary discourses are various non-home-based social institutions in the public sphere; social institutions demand discourses beyond the primary discourse and we acquire these with access to institutions and allowed apprenticeships. Dominant discourses are secondary discourses that, once mastered, bring the acquisition of social goods such as money, power, and prestige (Gee, 2001).

Literacy acquisition occurs first in a child’s home with their family or intimates. Then as they grow, mature and enter new social contexts like daycare and pre-school, new and more complex and refined literacy skills are developed. The theories that informed the development of this research topic are sociocultural and reader response. Both of these theoretical frameworks view students as active participants in their learning. Students are not merely vaults in which knowledge is deposited in. In sociocultural theory individuals learn through communication with others, and it is through this interaction that they attain skills that allow them to live in diverse social and cultural environments (Larson & Marsh, 2005). The ability to communicate their own ideas as well as listen to those of others during literature circles supports students in their learning and comprehension of texts. This skill will continue to benefit students in their work and lives as they interact with many diverse groups of people in a variety of cultural contexts. Students drive their learning and what each student brings to the experience, such as background knowledge, life experiences, interests, and beliefs, creates a unique learning opportunity. Communicating about books through literature circles allows students to construct meaning and comprehend what they have read. Students are able to hear other perspectives which broaden their thinking as they construct meaning from the text. The demands placed on students are constantly increasing, not only with the complexity of texts but the rigor in which students are expected to interact with these texts. Literature circles are a platform in which students can meet these arduous demands as they engage in meaningful dialogue and think critically about texts.
In reader response theory the reader is emphasized as well as the interaction between the reader and the text. Rosenblatt (1984) describes the role of the reader in the relationship with the text, “Reading is a transaction, a two-way process, involving a reader and a text at a particular time under particular circumstances” (p.268). Responses to text will vary on the individual reading it and the context in which the reading and discussions take place. Prior knowledge and experiences vary and impacts the perception or meaning of texts. The text comes to life as a result of the transaction between the reader and the text. Rosenblatt (1984) goes on to discuss the reader's stance toward reading. She categorizes these stances into two types of reading, efferent and aesthetic. Rosenblatt describes efferent reading as something that is done to gain logical information that can be taken away from the experience. Conversely, aesthetic reading is engaging not only with the text but with what is created between the reader and the text, how the text makes the reader feel during the transaction. It is essential for educators not to limit students to efferent reading. Common core standards have changed the way that texts are taught and approached by readers. Teachers must provide students learning experiences to read both efferently and aesthetically to teach the purpose and importance of each type of reading. Opportunities to read both efferently and aesthetically can be facilitated through literature circles.

**Research Question**

Based on sociocultural and reader response theories, learning occurs through communication and the transaction between the reader and the text. Literature circles embody these theoretical philosophies. However, modifications must be made to fit the needs of diverse learners so the question that will guide this action research is, how can literature circles be modified to fit the needs of diverse
learners to improve comprehension?

**Literature Review**

A clear understanding of the prior research on a particular topic is the foundation for conducting a thorough and meaningful action research project. Researchers must gain deep insights into other studies completed on the topic and determine what implications the results have for education and their future action research project. Three themes were identified through a culmination of the collection of literature reviewed. The themes support the topic of using literature circles to improve comprehension for diverse learners. The first theme is peer-led discussions and how these are effective models that promote engagement and comprehension among all students. Topics that will be discussed as part of this theme are: the theoretical framework that guide literature circles, a description of what peer-led discussions should look like, as well as the benefits of, and the use of peer-led discussions with diverse learners. The second theme that will be discussed in this review of literature is pedagogical approaches to facilitating literature circles. In this section, teacher training as well effective and ineffective teaching strategies will be discussed. Text selection will also be expanded upon as this is an integral component of powerful literature circles. The last section of the pedagogical approaches section will be focused on the necessary modifications needed to support diverse learners. To conclude, the third theme will examine reading comprehension gains for all learners as a result of participation in literature circles. The specific skills necessary for the comprehension of texts will be elaborated upon in this section.

**Peer-Led Discussions Improve Motivation and Engagement**

There are many synonyms used for peer-led discussions such as: literature circles, small group
literature discussions, book clubs, literature discussion groups, and student-led discussion groups (Potenza-Radis, 2010). For the purpose of this literature review and action research project, the specific focus will be on literature circles. According to Ferguson & Kern (2012), “Literature circles offer teachers a way to organize peer-led student discussion of texts and provide students with the necessary structure to respond to assigned reading” (p.24). Typically, roles are assigned such as: discussion director, connector, questioner, literary luminary, vocabulary builder. Further, Certo, Moxley, Ruffitt & Miller (2015) assert that all students are capable of participating in literature circles, regardless of grade level or ability. It is a common misconception that higher level discussions are not attainable to diverse learners. Therefore, Celani & McIntyre (2006) caution teachers to avoid “…dummying down material when their students do not read well. That students do not read well does not indicate that students do not think well” (p.116). All students should be active participants in their literacy experiences regardless of their academic abilities. Engaging, meaningful conversations about texts are vital for all learners to be successful in their literacy learning. Celani & McIntyre (2006) discuss the possibility of successful literacy learning “…can occur when teachers’ and students’ knowledge, beliefs, and values are honored, and when good questioning and teacher support rule” (p.100). Literature circles or peer-led discussions are a context in which this type of validation, support and learning can exist for students. Maloch (2004) elaborates on the teacher’s role in peer-led discussions and emphasized the importance of explicit teaching within student-led literacy circles. A common misconception is that the teacher has a small or invisible role in student-led discussions. Teachers must remember that student-led discussions require a higher level of thinking and skills so the teacher’s role is pivotal in supporting students as they reach these high standards of cognition.
Ferguson and Kern (2012) touch upon some of the many benefits of literature circles “…such as language development, reading comprehension, engagement and enjoyment of literature, and improved sense of self-efficacy when reading and understanding texts” (p.24). Interacting with quality, multicultural literature that connects to the students’ lives and experiences should be an opportunity that is provided for all students. If students feel a personal connection to the text they are reading, he/she will be motivated to discuss the text and construct meaning within the context of the classroom community. Certo, et al. (2015) stressed the importance of motivating students and increasing their enthusiasm for literacy activities by providing a platform in which their voices can be heard. Peer-led discussions during literature circles are an effective way to motivate students as well as to give each of them a voice as an active part of discussions about text.

Polleck (2010) explains the conceptual framework for book clubs beginning with the transaction (reader response) when the reader engages with the text and individual literacy and personal growth are generated from this transaction. Other scholars in the field have studied this aspect of the transaction between the reader and the text as discussed in the following:

Every reading act is an event, a transaction involving a particular reader and a particular configurations of marks on a page, and occurring at a particular time in a particular context….The “meaning” does not reside ready-made in the text or in the reader, but happens during the transaction between the reader and the text. (Rosenblatt, 1986, p.4)

A unique product or learning is culminated through the transaction between the reader, text, and context. The next tenet in the conceptual framework for book clubs, according to Polleck (2010), is the interaction with others to discuss the book in the form of literature circles or book clubs. This
transformational space (social constructivism) is where textual interpretations and understandings are enhanced through dialogue with others. Polleck continues, “It is the collaborative quality of a book club that allows for a transformative experience” (p. 52-53). As students articulate their understandings as well as hear a variety of perspectives from their peers, meaning is modified and constructed. The context of a safe, learning community in the classroom, such as literature circles, supports and promotes these powerful discussions about books. The last tenet in the conceptual framework for book clubs, according to Polleck, is the outcomes or transformation that is derived from the interactions about texts. When meaning is constructed in a particular context, with a particular text and particular people, a unique change is made in each participant. The transformation for each student depends on what was brought to the literacy act, as far as background knowledge and life experiences from each of the participants. The members of the discussion group, as well as what each of them brings to the experience also colors the transformative product or construction of meaning. Similarly, McElvain (2010) explains the transformative process as discussed in the following.

> From a social constructivist perspective, reading can be seen as a transactional process between the student, the text, peers, and the teacher. Messages move between each member of the literacy even as ideas are exchanged for the purpose of generating knowledge. (p.181)

Participation in literature circles transforms not only the specific academic and personal growth of each student but transforms the entire group as a whole based on the interactions that they share. Polleck (2010) describes these transformative outcomes as: reading development, identity development, personal growth, and social growth. Literature circles are spaces in which transformative experiences are cultivated. Polleck (2010) asserts:
Transformation is the act of changing in form, nature or character. It is the process in which we learn something new or are so affected by an event or a conversation that our own selves are no longer the same. (p.50)

Powerful texts can have this transformative impact on students. The discussions and exchange of ideas and perspectives can also be a catalyst for change.

Transformation occurs when “…participants share, negotiate, and ultimately transform their understanding of the texts, themselves and the world” (p.52). It is essential to consider the transformational power of literature and make students an active part of selecting the text for literature circles. It is our hope that by providing students with meaningful, relevant texts, as well as a place to explore these texts will result in new learning. Not only in the arena of literacy, but in other aspects of one’s social, emotional identity. We hope that through the use of multicultural literature, students will become tolerant citizens whom develop an understanding and empathy for those that are different from themselves. Pollec (2010) reiterates the power of these discussions in the following excerpt:

These kinds of conversations provide transformative experiences in that students learn not just from the characters but also from each other—thus empowering them as readers and empowering them as young adults who seek to understand and refine themselves and their communities.

(p.66)

It is our hope as educators that students feel empowered by these transformations and understand the power they hold as agents of change in their own lives and communities.

Literature circles demand more of students and place them in a leadership role in the process of their learning as described by Maloch (2004) in the following excerpt.
Literature discussion groups require more of students than traditional teacher led discussions. Students generate their own response topics rather than responding to teacher’s questions, negotiate interpersonal conflicts, make decisions as to how and when to jump into the often chaotic and overlapping conversation, and monitor the quality of their own and others’ contributions to the discussion. (p.16)

We must abandon the old pedagogical approach in which teachers were at the front of the room asking all of the questions and evaluating each response.

Further, asserted by Mahdavi and Tensfeldt (2013), Students need to become more involved in their reading of text, “…moving from being passive listeners to active participants in the reading experience” (p.84). Students must be afforded the opportunity to interact with text and grapple with the meaning of it through developed discussions with their peers. Developed discussions are defined by Celani and McIntyre (2006) as those in which a substantial topic is maintained and the student-teacher talk included interpretations of the text and responses supported by textual, personal, and/or prior knowledge” (p.97). Many studies have examined the dialogue that takes place in literature circles and determined these conversations to represent both cognitive and social-emotional gains. The students were able to exhibit higher level thinking skills as they interrogated the text with their peers. Ferguson & Kern (2012) examine discussions from their research on the dialogue of seventh and eighth graders during literature circles. The following excerpts are from student responses to the book, And Then There Were None by Agatha Christie. A student in the questioner role offered up this inquiry to the group:

Why do all the people go to an island if they don’t know who invited them? Most people would
be scared or would ignore the invitation in this situation. It just seems like common sense not to go, yet these characters do. (p.28)

A student in his group, who was in the role of inference maker, made this inference about the books setting:

I inferred that the small island they are on is the perfect place for a crime such as this. It is deserted, and not many people go to it. Also, you have to travel by boat to get there, so people can’t really get off. If I were the killer, I think it would be the perfect place. (p.28)

The students responded to reading in authentic and purposeful ways. The students exhibited many of the keys to comprehending text such as: connecting reading to their background knowledge and other texts, created sensory images, asked questions, made inferences, determined main ideas, and synthesized ideas. Ferguson and Kern (2012) discuss how all of these skills are interwoven and feed off of one another, “…given the natural overlap of these strategies (i.e., inference making often occurs as a result of a reader’s ability to connect prior experiences or background knowledge to text), student discussions became more natural and spontaneous” (p.26). Providing roles to each student participating in literature circles provides a natural framework that should support the flow of the discussion. Student responses to literature circles across most of this research were very favorable, and many of them said that literature circles were their favorite part of the day. Additional findings about the perceptions students have about literature circles are as follows according to Certo, Moxley, Reffitt and Miller (2015). Findings included: (a) students described literature circles as the most enjoyable part of language arts, (b) students believed that writing before and after literature circles enhanced the discussion, and (c) participants perceived that students used (and observed others using) responses to
literature and comprehension strategies. If students perceive literature circles to be meaningful, enjoyable, and relevant to their lives, they are more apt to be fully engaged and learn more from the experience. The students involved in the study conducted by Ferguson and Kern (2012) described what they liked about literature circles: “…the questioner job because it really makes me think…getting to discuss our reading in a group to share other’s thoughts…getting to choose what we read…getting feedback to make my work better” (p.29). This is just a small sampling of the positive responses students’ have expressed in the research about literature circles.

There are many benefits to participating in literature circles for students. The structure and purpose of literacy circles are described by Potenza-Radis (2010) as “…small groups of children read, respond, and discuss texts together in an effort to construct meaning and enhance understanding. As discussions occur among the children, ideas are transformed, adapted, and eventually internalized by the participants” (p.62). As students interact with and interrogate texts through their discussions new ideas and knowledge are developed. Skill development through literature circles is further discussed by Celani and McIntyre (2006), as “…actively identifying and correcting inconsistencies in comprehension, asking questions, making connections, supporting/verifying/rejecting predictions, interpreting character motives, actions, and text events, and connecting text to author’s craft, self, and history” (p.99). In literature circle discussions, students are actively engaged through dialogue about a text. There is a spontaneity to literature circles that is appealing and motivating to students. They can engage with their peers about the text through lively conversation that allows them to share personal experience and background knowledge related to the text. Potenza-Radis (2010) further examine the many benefits of participating in literature circles such as: allowing readers to express their thoughts,
building relationships with their peers and teachers, and providing adults a glimpse into their world. This window into our students’ worlds can provide us with meaningful information about their literacy skills but also, and equally important, we can learn about their emotional reaction and connection to texts.

**Pedagogical Approaches and Modifications**

There has been a major shift in education and that has negatively impacted the way that some teachers are approaching their pedagogy. Due to teachers being given a score based on their students testing performance, according to Certo, Moxley, Reffitt and Miller (2015) “some teachers feel forced to relinquish authentic instructional activities” (p.12). Authentic instructional activities could fall to the waste side as teachers ‘teach to the test’ and use only the literature mandated through rigid modules. McElvain (2010) draws upon the work of the Irish poet William B. Yeats in reference to the right way to view our students, “Education is not the filling of a pail, but the lighting of a fire” (p. 4). Students should not be viewed as blank slates to be filled with knowledge. Drawing on the analogy from the previous quote by Yeats, the students themselves are the fuel or wood, they come to the learning experience with background knowledge, and life experiences. As educators it is our job to recognize what students bring to the learning transaction, and light their fires by providing engaging, meaningful learning opportunities. Potenza-Radis (2010) elaborate the importance of valuing all students, “When a more holistic approach is taken to learning about students, it embraces a social constructivist perspective on learning, one that values the community of learners, focuses on strengths, and views differences among learners as “variability not disability” (p.74). The Common Core standards place such a narrow focus on the content that the learner, the most important part of the process is sometimes
an afterthought when planning lessons. Pedagogy that has the student at the center of all learning will produce the most authentic, meaningful learning opportunities that will engage students as well as value each of them as an integral part of a learning community.

Knickerbocker and Rycik (2006) also recognize the importance of putting our students first when making crucial pedagogical choices, “We need to rethink our strategies and approaches in line with a better, stronger understanding of youth cultures and adolescents’ everyday lives” (p.44). Literature circles are a format in which we can provide these connections to our students and their lives. This can be accomplished through providing students with a choice in the texts used for literature circles. Students can also be afforded opportunities to make text-self connections by sharing their experiences through literature circle discussions. Mahdavi and Tensfeldt (2013) describe the types of instructional choices that will best support students, “Teachers must continue to engage in evidence-based practices for reading instruction, such as activating background knowledge, modeling skills and strategies, guided practice, scaffolding, role-playing, discussing, and active participation” (p.86) A balanced literacy approach rich with learning opportunities that are relevant to students’ lives and interests coupled with explicit teaching of literacy skills will meet the needs of students.

As with any field, in teaching there are effective and ineffective teaching approaches. Abbot, Greenwood, Kamps, Kaufman, Veerkamp, and Wills (2008) discuss how teachers can support literature circles, “…given appropriate professional development and resources” (p.111). Ineffective approaches will not be discussed in detail as these strategies are not pertinent to the research or improving the field of education. A few out of date teaching approaches will be briefly discussed as a caution to teachers of what to avoid doing in their classrooms. Celani and McIntyre (2006) touch on some ineffective
instructional strategies and a necessary shift away from these approaches, “…focus on moving beyond traditional classroom discourse in which the teacher does most of the talking, is the only one to respond to students, and does all of the questioning” (p.100). Teachers should no longer participate in IRE patterns of teaching in which he/she is seen as the only knowledgeable person in the learning process e whom teaches in an authoritative, evaluative style. According to Maloch (2004) “…IRE (initiation-response-evaluation) pattern of interaction that often relegates students to more passive and reactive roles in discussions” (p.1). With most outdated, ineffective teaching strategies, students play a passive role in the learning process. Polleck (2010) asserted that “Teachers need to exchange skill and drill instruction with personal connection, in order to transform the classroom into a community where literacy learning is fostered and enhanced” (p.66). During literature circles students are engaged in active cognitive practices and strategies as they construct meaning from text with a community of learners.

First, it is important to closely examine what effective comprehension skills encompass. According to Ferguson and Kern (2012):

Proficient readers most often employ the following comprehension strategies before, during, and after reading: 1) activating background knowledge and/or making connections; 2) self-questioning the text; 3) making inferences; 4) determining important information; 5) employing fix-up strategies; 6) visualizing; and 7) synthesizing and extending thinking. (p.24)

Effective pedagogy entails creating a balanced literacy program that teaches effective comprehension skills. Literature circles, as part of a balanced approach, are an ideal teaching platform for strengthening comprehension skills. Blum, Lipsett and Yocom (2002) explain:

The challenge then is to create a learning environment that uses varying grouping formats, encourages all students to develop a variety of reading strategies, and encourages them to
develop in their metacognition of how these work for them and can help them understand what they read. (p.100)

Teachers play an important role in coordinating a balanced approach to teaching literacy. Furthermore, Hollenbeck (2013) states that “All teachers need foundational knowledge in the process of text comprehension and the role of cognitive strategies as well as the importance of fostering motivation and engagement with text” (p.123). Developing effective literature circles requires careful planning and pre-teaching. It is essential to take the time to carefully plan and pre-teach so that the literature circles can run smoothly and optimal engagement and learning can take place.

Hudson & Browder (2014) discuss what teachers can do to prepare and support literature circles, pre-teach academic and nonacademic skills-vocabulary, reciprocal conversation skills, use adapted grade-level literature that is of interest to the students, and allow adequate time to read and process (graphic organizers, notes, etc.) the text before discussing in literature circles. Pre-teaching and clearly defining roles within literature circles will give students the confidence and structure needed to participate in meaningful discussions about texts. Maloch (2004) discusses other preparatory activities which include: whole-group modeling of appropriate discussion behaviors, fishbowl activities (in which a small group discusses a piece of literature as others watch and critique), and audiotaping discussions for later critique and discussion.

Text selection is an integral component of literature circles. Students should have a voice and actively participate in the selection of texts. According to Certo, Moxley, Reffitt & Miller (2015) there is “…the need for teachers to use interests inventories to gather data about students to inform text selection” (p.11). Students are usually willing to share about topics that are of interest to them so interests inventories are a good starting point to learning about your students and what types of texts might be a good developmental and social fit for them. A result in student ownership with text, is discussed by McElvain (2010) “Students interest and involvement increase when teachers include
instruction that makes explicit connections between literacy activities and students’ own lives and concerns” (p.181). These connections can be fostered through text that students take part in choosing. Young adult literature contains topic/themes that students are currently dealing with and can directly relate to. Finding texts that students are interested in and that connect to their lives will increase their motivation and curiosity for reading and discussing these texts.

It is also important to provide multicultural literature as discussed by Knickerbocker and Rycik (2006), “…culturally diverse literature is distinguished more by its portrayal of elements of culture such as attitudes, customs, beliefs, and ethics than by a focus on differences in race, ethnicity, gender, sexual preference or special needs” (p.46). The authors discuss the focus of multicultural literature being on the cultural aspects of particular groups of people, rather than focusing on the features of race, gender, etc. I think a focus on the cultural aspects and not the differences of certain groups of people is an important distinction to make because the reason for using multicultural literature is to teach our students to have an appreciation for people and cultures that are different from their own. Multicultural literature is a vehicle that can get our students to a place of tolerance, and acceptance of people different from themselves. Authentic texts can rescue us from state mandated literacy activities and rejuvenate our enthusiasm for reading and making meaning from text. Celani and McIntyre (2006) expand upon the importance of the texts, “Literature selected is profoundly important for sustaining well developed discussions. When students and their teacher read about subjects in which students have direct experience, and/or carry sophisticated concepts, the talk can be richer and the discussion sustained” (p.116). Further, the importance of finding texts that students can connect to is integral to supporting developed discussions in which higher order thinking skills and deep understanding can take place.

Finally, the last section of this theme to be discussed is the modifications needed to support diverse learners. Diverse learners, in regards to this literature review and action research entail
students with special needs and ELLs (English Language Learners). The teacher’s role and level of support provided to students participating in literature circles will be explored. Specific modifications will also be discussed.

According to Celani and McIntyre (2006) “Research on traditional instruction has shown that the less skilled readers only get more “skills” rather than the meaningful instruction. In fact, these may be exactly the students who need high-level conversation so that they can learn needed vocabulary and become more involved with books” (p.117). Students will learn more in an authentic, engaging discussion rather than being taught vocabulary in a rote, isolated context with little opportunity to make real meaning or connections to the world or their own lives. In contrast to what we know about powerful teaching, as discussed in the previous quote, McElvain (2010) claims that “…many mainstreamed English language learners (ELLs) across the United States experience reading as a futile process of memorizing discrete language skills with little purpose or meaning” (p.178). Teachers often approach teaching ELLs with the notion that because these students are learning English, the teaching must be taught using a very basic, foundational approach. Effective pedagogical approaches are quite the contrary. Teachers must be trained to teach in more engaging, meaningful ways like through the use of literature circles, as asserted by Certo, Moxley, Reffitt and Miller (2015) “…sustained, high quality professional development should be provided to help teachers implement complex literacy pedagogy, such as literature circles, in their curriculum” (p.12). This same balanced literacy approach should be adopted for students with disabilities. Feiker Hollenbeck (2013) elaborate, teachers “…need additional specialization in relation to direct, explicit, research-based practices with LD as well as knowledge of instructional frameworks designed to scaffold multiple strategy application, such as reciprocal teaching, and collaborative strategic reading” (p.123). It is a misconception that peer-led discussions in the form of literature circles lack explicit reading instruction. It is quite the contrary, if facilitated correctly, literature circles serve as an environment in which powerful, explicit reading
instruction can take place. This type of teaching approach takes careful orchestration on the part of the teacher as he/she monitors student-led discussions and finds natural teachable moments to interject with explicit teaching. These types of engaging learning environments are empowering to students with disabilities as they reach their personal goals, as evidenced by Blum, Lipsett, and Yocom (2002) “Self-determination has been defined as empowerment for people with disabilities and also as the ability to identify and achieve goals based on a foundation of knowing and valuing oneself” (p.100).

Differentiated reading instruction should not just be allocated for students with disabilities because these instructional practices and supports could produce benefits for all learners. Similarly, Blum, et al. (2002) describe the importance of differentiating for all students, “Differentiated reading instruction has been viewed in the past as an intervention or remedial measure, but is fast becoming the way to teach all students” (p.99). Individualized instruction is best practice for all students.

Teachers play an integral role in the implementation of literature circles with diverse learners. According to Feiker Hollenbeck (2013) the best approach to teaching students with learning disabilities is “A combined instructional model, integrating elements of direct instruction and strategy instruction, has been demonstrated as most beneficial to students with LD” (p.113). Similarly, students whom are English Language Learners should be taught in meaningful, engaging ways. McElvain (2010) describes teachers role in meeting the literacy and language needs of ELLs “…through conversations that develop higher-level comprehension rather than literal recall. Effective ELL reading comprehension approaches facilitate meaning, self-efficacy and, most importantly, viable membership in a classroom literacy community” (p.182). Being part of discussions about books, allows diverse learners to share their knowledge and experience. This will support these learners in feeling a sense of belonging in the classroom community. It is the natural instinct of many teachers to give the students the answer. Celani and McIntyre (2006) “…it is clear that students’ construction of new understanding
depends on the patience and insight of the teacher” (p.112). Instead of just defining a word or saying the main idea, teachers should scaffold using questioning techniques. Ultimately, teachers should guide the students in generating the answers themselves.

Group dynamics in a literature circle group can be crucial to the learning environment. Further, Camahalan and Wyraz (2015) discuss that forming groups for literature circles is a process that should be paid close attention and detail to. A teacher should consider all of the factors that might affect the group dynamic and each student’s access to and participation in the discussions. Cognitive abilities, social competency, conversation skills, interpersonal skills, and interests should all be taken into consideration. Celani and McIntyre (2006) discussed the importance of knowing when to let the students take the lead, “The power of the connection between literature and the lives of the students at times took precedent over the relative importance of Kristen’s questions and prompts” (p.111).

Teacher prompts support students as they engage in developed discussions. The discussions, according to Celani and McIntyre (2006) “…emerged as related to her specific prompts and responses, the literature selected, and Kristen’s focus on individual students” (p. 98). A balance of guidance and support, differentiation, and text selections are all integral pedagogical choices in facilitating literature circles. The teacher’s role during literature discussions was further discussed by Celani and McIntyre (2006):

The teacher’s role as questioner, scaffold, and contributor was critical. 1) ask open-ended questions 2) acknowledged students’ responses or extending their responses 3) asking for evidence (text or personal to support answers 4) inviting participation, either in general or to specific students. (p. 106)
The types of questions that teachers ask during literature circle discussions are also a critical aspect of the teaching process. Comprehension questions can be broken down into two types: literal and inferential. Cutting, Eason, Geist, Goldberg, and Young (2012) explore the differences between question types as:

Literal questions assess a child’s recall of information explicitly presented in a passage.

Inferential questions, on the other hand, require the reader to develop a situation model and integrate pieces of information by either relating multiple pieces of information presented in the text to each other or combining previous knowledge with the information from the passage. (p.517)

While it is an important skill to be able to recall specific information from a text, it is even more critical to be able to synthesize the text with prior knowledge, experiences, and other texts. The connections made among all of these components are what bring texts to life for students. This type of thinking can be achieved and supported by teachers asking challenging, higher-order thinking questions that have the power to transform students and their knowledge and perspective of the world around them.

Correspondingly, Kong and Pearson (2003) highlight the importance of challenging questions, “…teachers who use higher-level questions as prompts can engage students in thinking critically and reflectively about what they read” (p.115). Developing questions that will challenge students should be a very mindful, deliberate process which leads students to not only comprehend the text at hand but to also promote a transformation of thought about themselves and the world around them.

Modifications must be provided to support diverse learners in literature circles. Camahalan and Wyraz (2015) describe how differentiation of instruction can be challenging for some teachers but it is key to meet the needs of all learners as “…differentiation can be overwhelming for some teachers. Even though it can be overwhelming, it is important to look at each student’s individual need. By
doing this, a teacher can find the needs that each of them have as a reader, and literacy activities can be tailored to their individual needs” (p.26). Differentiation to meet the needs of each student can be achieved by knowing each of your students’ strengths and areas of need in reading, learning styles, and interests, and using this knowledge to scaffold your teaching. Mahdavi and Tensfeldt (2013) discuss the importance of this “…indicating that students with disabilities may need additional time and scaffolding to grasp new strategies” (p.79). With the proper supports in place, higher-level discussions are possible for diverse learners. Celani and McIntyre (2006) explain how teachers must tailor teaching strategies to meet the needs of each student, “his or her personalities, academic talents and struggles, and background knowledge; this was critical for helping the individuals participate in high-level discussions” (p.106). The possibilities are endless for diverse learners when teacher’s carefully plan and support with each of their unique needs in mind.

Maloch (2004) defines scaffolding as “…the ways in which teachers guide students in the appropriation of new skills and understandings. Scaffolding involves children in developing self-regulated cognitive and communicative skills through active participation with who gradually withdraw unneeded support” (p.2). Scaffolding is a necessary support for diverse learners. This support can allow them to think critically about texts and make meaningful connections through discussions. Potenza-Radis (2010) elaborate on the need for scaffolds as “…literature discussion groups embrace the need to identify a student’s current level and provide scaffolded opportunities for growth within a social context” (p.63). The role of the teacher in scaffolding is to initially provide a higher level of support and then as the student progresses, systematically lower the level of support provided. Maloch (2004) goes on to discuss the role of the teacher in transitioning students from teacher-led to student-led discussions “…providing preparatory experiences for the students prior to the implementation of literature discussion groups, and engaging actively and supportively within the actual discussions”
As students make the transition from teacher-led to student-led discussions, the teacher slowly fades his/her support when the student exhibits that he/she is ready to participate in peer-led discussions more independently.

Enhancing Comprehension Strategies through Discussion

There is no single comprehension strategy that will fit needs of all children. Instead, Mahdavi and Tensfeldt (2013) assert “The use of multiple strategies has been demonstrated not only to improve the immediate comprehension of text but also to transfer to other tasks that are beyond the teaching environment” (p.85). Our goal as teachers is to give our students a toolbox full of strategies that they can continue to use and generalize in aspects of their lives beyond the walls of school. Literature circles are an ideal setting to teach a variety of comprehension strategies.

Explicit comprehension instruction should contain the following elements, “…explicit comprehension instruction, which must involve techniques such as teacher modeling via think-alouds, articulation of strategy cues, and the integration of guided and collaborative practice using a gradual release of responsibility model” (Hollenbeck, 2013, p.123). It is a misconception to think that teachers play a small role in literature circles. Instead, teachers have a large role in teaching explicit, high level comprehension skills within the context of literature circles. These comprehension strategies are explained by Celani and McIntyre (2006) as “…verifying recall answers, supporting inference, evaluating text, and sharing personal stories” (p.99). Students should be leading literature circles, however teachers continue to play a pivotal role in teaching explicit reading strategies by modeling, monitoring, and challenging students to think deeper about texts.

Typical reading comprehension instruction for diverse learners is focused on isolated skills and often neglects to focus on the aspects of reading that promote meaningful engagement and enjoyment
of texts. Feiker Hollenbeck (2013) discuss the past 20-plus years of research deficits in the area of comprehension instruction in the field of special education. There must be a shift from teaching strategy alone, according to Potenza-Radis (2010) “When strategic reading is valued over thoughtful reading, all readers, especially struggling readers suffer, as their perspective of the reading process is needlessly limited” (p.62). The reading process is multifaceted and should be a balance of explicit teaching as well as opportunities for student-led discussions about texts. The reading process should be viewed as enjoyable for students. When teaching diverse learners, some educators make the mistake of seeing reading as a tiered process and limit students to lower level recall activities. Further, Feiker Hollenbeck (2013) asserts “...reading instruction for students with LD typically focuses on the connections between accurate word recognition and reading, rather than the process of gaining meaning from text, regardless of students' area of need” (p.112). Moreover, students with disabilities must be taught the process of gaining meaning from text. A vital part of making meaning from text is having the opportunity to discuss texts with their peers. In many instances, students with special needs are taught in isolation and have limited opportunities to discuss texts. If any, discussions take place as a large group in which the teacher is asking the questions and there is one correct answer to be produced by the students. Feiker Hollenbeck (2013) discuss the challenges that students with learning disabilities face, “The complexity of reading comprehension, with the diversity of skills and sub processes that must be activated, coordinated, and monitored to achieve deep understanding, creates a multitude of potential difficulties for students with LD who have serious reading challenges” (p.113). These challenges are why it is necessary to provide scaffolds for diverse learners so that they can fully participate in literature circles. Participation in these discussion will improve not only the comprehension of texts but the enjoyment of reading.
Before effective teaching strategies for reading comprehension are discussed, it is important to explain the reasons that diverse learners struggle with comprehension. According to Blum, Lipsett and Yocom (2002):

Most students with special needs have more difficulty comprehending what they read than do students without disabilities. The major reason for this is that many students experience poor comprehension due to a failure in to read strategically and to spontaneously monitor their own understanding of what is being read. (p.99)

Modifications and scaffolds can be provided to support students in monitoring their understanding and to read strategically. Specific questions through reading guides can be provided by the teacher to be more purposeful and strategic with their reading. Graphic organizers can also be used to help students organize their thoughts and make sense of the reading. Similarly, Feiker Hollenbeck (2013) discuss the comprehension challenges faced by students with learning disabilities, “...many students with LD experience difficulties with the activation, implementation, and/or coordination of the complex cognitive skills necessary for comprehension, including inference generation, management of working memory, and integration of prior knowledge” (p.113). This complex set of cognitive skills is necessary to comprehend text. A well-structured literature circle is an avenue in which the activation and implementation of these skills can be taught and practiced. Comprehension is especially difficult for diverse learners because they are expected to “learn to read” and “read to learn” in tandem as they develop their decoding and comprehension skills simultaneously. (Feiker Hollenbeck, 2013, p.112). Comprehension and decoding skills can be developed at the same time using a balanced literacy approach with explicit teaching coupled with opportunities to engage in discussions about texts. Opportunities to see the skill modeled by the teacher or more skilled peers and many chances to practice with support are essential. Active engagement with a text entails reading for meaning but also
and equally important is connecting to the text on an emotional level as discussed by Mahdavi and Tensfeldt (2013) “Skilled adult readers engage actively and even emotionally with text. Students with learning disabilities tend not to become actively engaged with text, self-monitoring their comprehension or using strategies to improve it” (p.84). Students with learning disabilities put forth a great deal of their energy into first decoding the words, and secondly into making meaning from the text. These cognitive processes require a great deal of energy and effort, so it may be difficult for them to connect to text on an emotional level. Literature circles are an effective teaching method to help improve the opportunities for diverse learners to make emotional connections to texts. This can take place because in literature circles, students are part of the text selection process. Reading texts that are of interest to them and that connect to their own lives and experiences will greatly increase the opportunity for emotional engagement with the text.

Effective reading comprehension instruction for diverse learners is a complex process that requires mindful planning and teaching on the part of educators. Celani and McIntyre (2006) note that high-level reading comprehension strategies can be practiced and refined during literature circle discussions. Effective comprehension instruction has many components that can be taught and practiced within literature circles. Further, Feiker Hollenbeck (2013) discuss the components of effective comprehension instruction for students with LD as, “…most effective when explicit and strategy based, with opportunities for teacher modeling, guided practice, and discussion of meaning construction” (p.112). All of the components of effective comprehension instruction can be taught within the setting of literature circles. Explicit strategy instruction can take place before, during, and after the discussions of literature. Literature circles also provide a venue for teachers to model effective comprehension strategies. In addition, literature circles provide opportunities for guided practice with comprehension skills. Lastly, meaning construction through discussions can be achieved within the
context of literature circles. According to Polleck (2010) “Using personal connections as entry points for students, as evidenced here, is a way for them both to analyze the texts more critically while also understanding how literature can impact their social and emotional development—thus promoting transformation” (p.65). Potenza-Radis (2010) “…struggling readers were afforded both time and opportunity to engage with texts on their instructional level, just as their more capable peers. This was important because students, even those labelled ‘at risk’ or ‘struggling,’ learn to read by reading—having time, opportunity, and support for active construction of meaning from text” (p.74).

McElvain (2010), Mahdavi and Tensfeldt (2013) all discussed the power, academic, and social gains that arise from peer-mediated learning within literature circles. Students are more open to and respond more authentically to their peers. This openness creates meaningful dialogue about texts during literature circles. Students often feel that when they are responding to teacher’s questions they are being evaluated. Students view their peers as equals and are more willing to share personal experiences and connections to the text during discussions. Moreover, peer-mediated learning improved comprehension as described by Hudson and Browder (2014), comprehension was improved for students with disabilities when questions were peer-delivered during book discussions. There was a marked increase in their ability to comprehend the text when the questions were coming from a peer rather than their teacher.

McElvain (2010) discussed reading comprehension instruction specific to English Learners but these strategies would be best practice for all students. Effective second language reading comprehension instruction entails an interactive approach, using a transaction process—not top down or bottom up, meaning that there is not one leader, who is an authority within the group. There should be an equal platform in which students interact with the text and then with each other as they derive meaning from the text. Multi-cultural texts are essential so that all students can relate to and make
connections to the texts. Teachers must engage children in rich interpretative discussion during the reading of a text, explicit reading comprehension and vocabulary development strategy instruction must also be taught in conjunction with the discussions (McElvain, 2010). A constant theme throughout the review of literature has been to use a combination of explicit instruction with the literature discussions. McElvain (2010) goes on to discuss how transactional literature circles used with English Learners increase engagement, “Teacher interviews and student surveys reported an increase in student reading engagement and motivation that positively affected reading, self-efficacy, confidence and a willingness to participate in class discussions” (p.178). Students are usually more comfortable discussing texts in small groups, for example during literature circles. However, the confidence built during the literature circle discussions, will encourage students to contribute more during whole group discussions.

In closing, modified literature circles can improve comprehension for diverse learners. Potenza-Radis (2010) explore the benefits of literature circles:

Having the opportunity to discuss texts in a supportive context benefits all students, but seems of paramount importance for those who struggle with reading; as they, typically, have received isolated, decontextualized skills instruction rather than experiencing reading as a meaningful whole. (p.62)

Discussing texts in literature circles is engaging, motivating, challenging, and meaningful. Similarly, Blum, Lipsett and Yocom (2002) discuss the gains of literature circles “…can help students with special needs increase their perceptions of their own abilities as readers” (p.106). Powerful dialogue that occurs during literature discussions enhances ones understanding of not only the text at hand, but themselves, their peers, and the word around them.
Method

Context

Research for this study will take place at an inclusive special education school in upstate New York. Lakeside school, a pseudonym, develops and implements programs and services that meet the needs of diverse learners. One division of Lakeside school serves students with multiple disabilities ages 5-21 in 12:1:4 classrooms. Emphasis is placed on academic, communication and daily living skills, social interaction and vocational training. Resources are combined, when and where they are needed, to provide creative solutions that help students stay in school and ultimately achieve success. Lakeside school serves students from 13 surrounding component districts. This action research will take place in a 12:1:4, high school classroom consisting of 11 students. There are 7 paraprofessionals supporting the students in this classroom. A small reading group consisting of three female and two male students from this class will be active participants in this study. Two of the students in the study have one-to-one aides, the other three students will be supported by one paraprofessional. The five students in the study are represented by four component districts. Specific demographic information for each district can be found in the table in Appendance C. The school is very large and serves a diverse population of people of all age’s pre-K-adult. Programs provided in this building include: special education, pre-school, career and technical education, and adult learners (ESL, GED) classes.

Participants

The participants for this study will include the five students from the aforementioned high school, special education classroom at Lakeside school. This group will contain three girls and two boys ranging in age from 14 to 18. One student is in ninth grade, one in tenth, and three in twelfth. Three of the students in this study are from lower socioeconomic backgrounds and receive free lunch.
Two of the students in this study are from higher socioeconomic backgrounds and do not receive free or reduced lunch. All of the students have IEPs and receive all of their instruction in an self-contained, special education classroom.

Amy (a pseudonym) is a 14 year old female student in the ninth grade. She is Caucasian and has two older brothers. She lives in a lower class neighborhood in a rural area of upstate New York with her mother and one of her brothers and his girlfriend. Amy is new to the classroom and has been there for less than a month. She was having severe behavioral difficulties at her previous placement, and was demonstrating minimal academic gains. Amy is a friendly student who enjoys interacting with staff and engaging in conversations that are of interest to her. She is highly motivated by music and loves Justin Beiber. Upon completing the STAR test in Reading (January, 2015), Amy received a scaled score of 282 ( gr. Level 2.5). If given very short passages with 1:1 support Amy is able to answer some literal and inferential questions. However, as the passages increase in length comprehension declines and Amy appears overwhelmed, stating that she cannot understand what she reads. Amy is more successful completing work in a separate location outside the classroom as she is often distracted by activities within the class.

Jennifer (a pseudonym) is an 18 year old female student in the twelfth grade. She is Caucasian and has two younger sisters. She lives with her mother, father, and sisters in a lower class neighborhood in an urban area. Jennifer lives in an area of high crime and often speaks of people getting arrested in front of her house for selling drugs and/or fighting. Her home life is very tumultuous and she has run away several times. Jennifer has been a part of the classroom for two and a half years. She enjoys interacting with peers and adults. Jennifer is very helpful to peers and adults.
She volunteers to help other students in Lakeside classrooms. Jennifer has indicated that she enjoys: spending time with friends, watching movies, going to parks, malls, and restaurants. She enjoys music and is a member of the school chorus. Jennifer is at an end of second grade level in Reading. She indicated that Reading is one of her favorite subjects in school. Jennifer readily volunteers to read aloud in class. She enjoys reading in her free time and regularly checks out books from the school library. Jennifer enjoys reading about historical events. She knows a large number of sight words and has good decoding skills for simple, one syllable words. Jennifer reads with little fluency, expression or attention to punctuation. According to the Fountas and Pinnel benchmark assessment, Jennifer is reading at an I level.

Steve (a pseudonym) is an 18 year old male student in the twelfth grade. He is Hispanic and English is his second language. He lives with his mother, father, and younger brother in a lower class neighborhood in an urban area. Steve’s parents both suffer from serious illnesses and he often takes on the care-taker role in his family. He is very friendly and polite and is generally eager to please. Steve quickly forms relationships with adults, and has formed friendships with some peers. He enjoys helping adults and other students in the classroom. Steve enjoys listening to and playing music and showing his music to others. He likes using the computer and will work for that as a reward. Steve indicated that his strengths are taking pictures, talking, and singing. Steve listens to stories read by the teacher and can comprehend simple stories and other information presented verbally. He has limited sight word knowledge, but attempts to make meaning from pictures when reading and willingly attempts to read sentences written with picture symbols. According to the Fountas and Pinnel benchmark assessment, Steve is at a level C in reading. He is extremely self-conscious about his academic skill level and
becomes defensive when corrected. Steve has improved his ability to answer basic comprehension questions after listening to staff read a short story or passage. He has a strong desire to become a better reader and understands the connection between reading ability and independence.

Sam (a pseudonym) is a 15 year old, African-American male student in the tenth grade. He lives with his mother and father in a lower-middle class neighborhood in an urban area. Sam is relatively new to the classroom, he was transferred about two months ago. His behavioral needs were too intense to be managed in a district based classroom setting. Sam loves elephants and enjoys reading about them, watching videos, and drawing them in his free time. He is an excellent artist and is very meticulous when creating artwork. Sam’s instructional reading level is at the second grade level. He has mastered more than 150 sight words that he is able to state as soon as he sees them. During group reading activities, Sam will always offer to read out loud. He enjoys participating with the class. Sam benefits from having an adult in close proximity to help him over "bumps" and to ensure he is comprehending the text at hand. Sam’s focus and attentiveness during reading activities can fluctuate on a daily basis, but when he is focused, he pays close attention to the detail in pictures associated with the words of the text. Sam is able to answer basic "wh" questions correlating to the text but continues to require adult prompts while answering more abstract questions related to the text. Sam enjoys stories that have humor in the text. Sam is a perfectionist and holds a deep fear and has anxiety about getting things wrong. If he is unsure of his answer, he will not answer out of his fear of being incorrect.

Kelly (a pseudonym) is a 17 year old, Caucasian female student in the twelfth grade. She lives with her mother and visits her father on the weekend. She lives in an upper-middle class neighborhood in a suburban area. Kelly has been in her current classroom for two years. She is a leader in the
classroom and truly enjoys school. Kelly is an active participant in all of the social activities in the classroom and school. She is kind, caring, compassionate, and wants to make people happy. Kelly is a good friend and is very popular with her peers both in the classroom and throughout the building. She enjoys: hanging out with friends, Irish dancing, Artists Unlimited, and attending an after school program in her free time. She said that her strengths include: acting, singing, and helping others. Kelly enjoys reading and readily volunteers to read during large group lessons. She does an excellent job of making personal connections to reading material and this improves her comprehension of the text. Kelly can answer simple questions about a text after reading it or hearing it read but has difficulty with higher level questions. Katie needs to improve her ability to make inferences when reading. She is able to recall details from texts but needs to improve her ability to identify the main topic.

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, and certification for teaching literacy to children from birth through grade twelve. I hold a Bachelor’s degree in Childhood and Special Education grades first-sixth, which I earned at St. John Fisher College. My current New York State teaching certifications are in childhood education and childhood special education. I also have an extension to those degrees in adolescent education. My role in this research was as an active participant observer. I facilitated the literature circles with a small group of my students. According to Mills (2014) “Teachers, by virtue of teaching, are active participant observers of their teaching practice. When they are actively engaged in teaching, teachers observe the outcomes of their teaching” (p.85). Active participant observer was the role that I assumed for the purpose of this action research study. In the role of active participant observer, I
actively taught comprehension skills through literature circles while concurrently noting the outcomes of the study (Mills, 2014). Throughout this process, I will observed through my own small group instruction with this group of five students.

**Method**

Qualitative and quantitative data were collected during this study to determine how literature circles impact comprehension. I specifically looked at how literature circles can be modified to meet the needs of diverse learners to improve comprehension. The study took place over the course of three separate, 30-45 minutes small group lessons. I collected three comprehension assessments, made observations and reflected in a journal, and had students’ complete surveys before and after participating in the literature circles.

The first part of my collection of data involved giving a survey to each student to examine their understandings of literature circles and experience or lack thereof with them. The students also completed a follow-up survey after participating in literature circles. The second part of my study involved students interacting with text and answering comprehension questions without participating in a discussion about the text. This data acted as a baseline to compare future data with the use of literature circles to. The next data I collected was the student’s ability to answer comprehension questions after participating in a literature circle discussion. There were not be modifications provided during this discussion. Lastly, I evaluated each student’s ability to answer comprehension questions after participation in a literature circle with modifications. The level of support was compared with the assessment data to determine the impact of literature circles on comprehension. The survey was given again to see if the students understanding of literature circles and their ability to comprehend text
changed or improved.

I examined existing data on the students such as Fountas and Pinnel benchmark assessments and IEPs. I also be studied surveys and assessments that were completed as part of the action research that I conducted. I was in the role of the active participant observer. I worked with a small group of five students. I facilitated literature circle discussions based on three short stories that we read. My research question had two parts so I scrutinized each part of the question throughout my research. The first question was, "How can literature circles be modified to meet the needs of diverse learners?"

Diverse learners in this specific group of participants are students with special needs and ELLs (English Language Learners). The second part of my question was, "how can literature circles be modified to improve comprehension for diverse learners?" The steps of data collection were collected in three steps: (1) The students read a short story and then answered comprehension questions about the story without participating in a literature circle discussion (2) The students read a short story and participated in a literature discussion (without modifications) followed by a comprehension assessment (3) The students read a short story and participated in a literature discussion (with modifications) followed by a comprehension assessment. The focus group was the small group of students I worked with. I interviewed the students about their conceptions of literature circles before I began the research. After the study, I gave the survey again to get their reactions to the literature circles. For example, "Did discussing the text with your friends help you to understand it better?" Journals and artifacts represent the examination domain of data collection. I kept a reflective journal in which I examined the teaching strategies used and the learning outcomes for the students as a result of those given strategies. Artifacts that I collected were district data, test results, and student work. I evaluated their ability to
comprehend the texts through the assessments after each reading/discussion opportunity. I also used field observation notes, transcriptions, and other anecdotal evidence.

**Quality and Credibility of Research**

The quality and credibility of this action research was be grounded with a foundation of trustworthiness. Mills (2014) coupled with the research of Guba (1981) examine the four criteria for trustworthiness. The tenets of trustworthiness are credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Trustworthiness will be an underpinning of all research completed with these four principles embedded in all aspects of the study.

The first tenet for trustworthiness in research is credibility. Mills (2014) defines the credibility of a study as “…the researcher’s ability to take into account the complexities that present themselves in a study and to deal with patterns that are not easily explained” (p.115). When patterns from the data that were not expected occur, a credible researcher will honestly look at and evaluate these outcomes. Researchers may predict or expect one pattern to occur and when this does not happen, the researcher may feel torn and misrepresent data to fit with their preconceived notions of what the data would reveal. A credible researcher will not misinterpret data to reinforce his or her original thinking or expected outcomes. Collecting multiple forms of data during research is one way to ensure credibility. I will be collecting an array of data in this research such as surveys, journals, student work, and assessment data. Mills (2014) explains, “In research terms the desire to use multiple sources of data is referred to as triangulation” (p. 104). Using a variety of different data collection allows researchers to get the big picture of what is happening and ensures credibility.

The second tenet for trustworthiness in research is transferability. Mills (2014) describes transferability as “…qualitative researchers’ beliefs that everything they study is context bound and that
the goal of their work is not to make “truth” statements that can be generalized to larger groups of people” (p.116). There will not be one blueprint of truth that can be applied to any setting. True transferability provides detailed descriptions of the data and the context so that others can determine if further research would be appropriate to their setting and participants. I will provide these comprehensive descriptions of the data collected as well as the context to warrant transferability of this research study.

The third tenet for trustworthiness in research is dependability. Guba (1981) defines dependability as the stability of data by overlapping methods and establishing an audit trail. Dependability in data is like having a system of checks and balances. Different perspectives should be presented in various forms of data to ensure dependability. This will be actualized in my data through the use of multiple forms of data collection like the reflective journal I keep and the surveys completed by the students.

The last tenet for trustworthiness in research is confirmability. Strategies like triangulation and reflexivity can be used to achieve confirmability. Confirmability is defined by Mills (2014) as “…the neutrality or objectivity of the data that has been collected” (p.116). Triangulation through the use of a variety of data sources and methods should be cross-checked to ensure confirmability (Mills, 2014). The researcher’s opinions and beliefs should not influence the collection or representation of data. Confirmability will be evident in my research through the use of a variety of data collection and evaluation methods such as student work, audio recordings, observations, and reflections.

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

In advance to beginning data collection for this study, it was crucial for me to inform those students I desired to work with, as well as their parents of what the action research entailed. Provided this information, parents determined if they would allow their child to participate. A parent permission form was sent home with each student. This form informed the parents of the purpose for the study and
asked for their signature, ensuring their permission for their child’s involvement in my study. I also asked the students involved if they were willing to participate and if so were to sign an informed assent form. The parental permission form and the children’s assent forms were collected after they are signed. Participants were assured their privacy through the use of pseudonyms and were notified of this upon agreement to participate in the study. Confidentiality and anonymity will be afforded to all participants through the use of this safeguard.

**Data Collection**

I examined existing data on the students such as Fountas and Pinnel benchmark assessments and IEPs. The information from this data was used to select texts for comprehension assessments that were developmentally appropriate for all of the students involved in the action research. The IEP data was used to provide the appropriate accommodations for each student as well as to determine their learning styles and preferences.

Students were given a questionnaire before and after participating the literature circle groups. The questionnaire data was then discussed individually with each student to gain further information. I interviewed the students about their participation and conceptions of literature circles before beginning the research. I also asked the students what type of comprehension strategies they currently use. Lastly, I asked students to read a description of each of the roles in literature circles and indicate their preference for the group they would be participating in. After the study, I gave the questionnaire again to get their reactions to the literature circles. I used this data to determine if they found discussing texts helpful in comprehending what they had read. For example, "Did discussing the text with your friends help you understand it better?" I also wanted to determine if the students would want to participate in literature circles again.

Teacher reflection journals and student artifacts represented the examination domain of data collection. I kept a reflective journal in which I examined the teaching strategies used and the learning
outcomes for the students as a result of those given strategies. The reflections informed future instructional choices. Student artifacts are represented by the drawings generated by the student in the role of illustrator. These pictures were analyzed to determine his comprehension of the main idea of the texts.

Assessment data was collected from each student after reading each of the three texts. I evaluated their ability to comprehend the texts through the assessments with regards to the modifications provided. I also used field observation notes, transcriptions, and other anecdotal evidence.

**Data Analysis**

I went through all of the data multiple times and used color codes to make sense of what was going on across all types of the data. First, I used yellow to indicate pieces of the data that stood out from the rest. Secondly, I used pink to notate themes that were arising. After I highlighted all of the themes, I determined three main themes that were continually arising among all of the data. Then, I assigned each theme a number (1-3), and went back through all of the pink highlighted themes and assigned a number to each piece of data according to the corresponding theme. Lastly, I used red to indicate any disconfirming evidence or data that brought about further questions.

I used a table to analyze the data based on the students’ answers to the comprehension questions. I compared the three assessments to determine the impact of literature circles on comprehension. I compared each student’s assessment data in relation to the learning environment that it was taken in. The first assessment was taken after students’ read a short story and did not participate in any type of discussion about the text. The second comprehension assessment was completed after students’ read a short story and participated in a literature circle discussion without modifications. Lastly, students’ completed a comprehension assessment after participating in a modified literature circle.
I kept a reflection journal of my observations of the students regarding their level of participation and ability to make meaning from the texts based on their discussions in the literature circles. In addition, I reflected on the students’ attitudes toward participating in the literature circles. I coded my reflections and connected the data to the theme that it supported.

I also collected audio recordings to analyze their discussions. I wanted to determine how developed the student’s discussions were about each text. By developed discussions, I mean drawing on their own experiences, providing details from the story, and adding on to what their peers were saying about the texts. I also wanted to determine each student’s level of comprehension evidenced by their participation in the discussions.

Student work in the form of illustrations was also analyzed. I analyzed Sam’s drawing to determine his understanding of the text. I compared and contrasted his illustrations based upon varying levels of support and participation in the literature circles.

The last type of data that I collected was student questionnaire at the beginning and the end of the action research on literature circles. This data was used to determine what comprehension strategies the students were currently using as well as their experiences with literature circles, and role preferences. This wide array of data was closely examined and coded, as a result of these evaluations, three themes emerged.

**Findings and Discussion**

A wide array of data was collected from this action research including: a teacher reflection journal, student work samples (illustrations), assessment scores, audio recordings of student discussions, and student questionnaires (pre/post literature circle participation). After closely analyzing data collected from multiple sources, three themes emerged. The first theme that emerged across the various data was that diverse learners struggle to participate in developed discussions about texts. The next theme to emerge from a culmination of patterns represented across data was that modifications to
literature circles promote developed discussions about texts. The last theme that emerged from the various data collected in this action research was literature circle discussions improve comprehension of texts.

**Diverse Learners Struggle to Participate in Developed Discussions about Texts**

Before the implementation of the literature circles began each student completed a questionnaire about their experiences with literature circles or lack thereof, comprehension strategies that they use, and the number of people they like to discuss texts with. The choices for this were: a) one other person, b) a small group-3-5 people c) the whole class. According to the data from the questionnaire, none of the student’s had participated in a literature circle before. This lack of experience was very informative to me as a researcher because I knew that this was totally new to all of the students participating so there would need to be a substantial amount of pre-teaching involved to ensure the students understood how a literature circle operates. The table below represents the responses provided by the students in the initial questionnaire. An interpretation of the data and connection to literature will be explored following the table.

**Table 1**

*Student Responses to Literacy Circle Questionnaire*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Student</th>
<th>Comprehension Strategies used by this student</th>
<th>Text Discussion Preferences</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Amy</td>
<td>Highlight</td>
<td>Whole class</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jennifer</td>
<td>Read it, then think about what it means</td>
<td>Whole class</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Steve</td>
<td>Ask questions, re-read it, highlight</td>
<td>One other person</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kelly</td>
<td>Break words apart</td>
<td>Small Group</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
One thing that really stood out to me from this data was that none of the students listed talking about/discussing text as a comprehension strategy. I think the main reason for none of the students listing discussion as a comprehension strategy is because they have not had the opportunity to make meaning from text through developed discussions with their peers. This lack of opportunity to discuss texts in this format may be due in part to teacher’s not valuing it as a discussion strategy. This lack of experience makes it difficult for these students to participate in meaningful conversations about text without a high level of support and modifications. Deriving meaning from text should be negotiated through the conversations with others as described by Potenza-Radis (2010), readers learn through the social exchange and hearing ideas from others to construct meaning. It is evident that these students have not been afforded the opportunity to build the skills to participate in developed discussions about text as none of them listed discussion as a comprehension strategy. Instead, decoding strategies, like breaking words apart, was listed by Kelly in line 5. Highlighting was a commonly used comprehension strategy, listed in lines 2, 4, 6. Feiker (2013) discusses the deficits in teaching methods for diverse learners:

...their reading comprehension instruction was likely skill centered and basal based, or incidental, within a whole language framework. This may lead teachers to perceive effective comprehension instruction as reading and answering questions, as this has been the most common method used in classrooms over the past 35 years. (p.123)

Feiker’s findings, along with this research, highlight the changes that need to be made in how we approach literacy instruction. Students must be actively engaged in the process of making meaning from text. Rather than searching for a single, right answer, which is notated in the table by highlighting, students should discuss the text and construct meaning through social interactions with
According to the reflection journal I kept, I noted some additional information that I obtained from discussing the students responses to the questionnaire. When I asked students how they talked about books in the classroom, the general response was that teachers asked questions and one student in the class would raise their hand to provide the correct answer. Maloch (2004) discusses this style of teaching, “…IRE (initiation-response-evaluation) pattern of interaction that often relegates students to more passive and reactive roles in discussions” (p.1). Literature circles create a learning environment that allows students to take on a more active role in the discussion of texts. Feiker (2013) goes on to discuss this type of comprehension instruction for diverse learners as “…targeted comprehension primarily through low-level questioning” (p.113). It was evident that the students had received this type of top-down, low-level questioning in an effort to evaluate comprehension. This group of participants had not had much experience negotiating meaning through conversations with their peers. Therefore their ability to discuss texts in a purposeful way was not adequately developed.

Sam, a pseudonym, drew this picture (figure 1) below after reading “Andrew’s Story”. He was not afforded the opportunity to discuss the text with his peers in a literature circle. Meaning is developed through discussions and students can demonstrate their comprehension through drawings.
Figure 1. Student Illustration After Reading “Andrew’s Story” Without a Discussion

Sam is skilled at drawing and typically when he draws something it has great detail and depth to it. This drawing has little connection to the story and lacks any type of detail. When Sam participates in the literature circles later in the research, his drawing become much more detailed and it is clear that he has comprehended meaning from the text as a result of the discussions with his peers. These developed drawings will be discussed as they become pertinent to support the other themes addressed in this research.

Modifications to Literature Circles Promote Developed Discussions about Texts

Clearly defined roles are an important aspect of an effective literature circles. Each student indicated their preference for roles in the questionnaire. The literature circle roles for this group were as follows: passage master-Steve, discussion leader-Amy, summarizer-Kelly, connector-Jennifer, and illustrator-Sam. Developed discussions about texts are a possibility for diverse learners when the
necessary modifications are provided. The roles were clearly posted at the literature circle group table. Before the literature circle discussions began, each student shared what their role was and defined it for the group. Any questions or clarifications were also discussed before the literature circle discussion began.

As evidenced in Sam’s drawing below, his understanding of the story and ability to convey that meaning through illustration, improved after participating in the literature circle discussion. He was able to provide more detail, included more characters from the story, and provided some dialogue directly from the text.

Figure 2. Student Illustration After Reading “Derek’s Story” With a Literature Circle Discussion

There is growth shown from his previous drawing (figure 1). Comparing the two illustrations, figure two has more detail, specific words and a representation of conversational exchanges. Opposed to figure 1 which has little detail, and no clear words, only letters. The modification of understanding his role and how he was supposed to use his drawing to convey meaning supported Sam in making
meaningful connections with the text through his drawing.

According to Ferguson and Kern (2012):

Proficient readers most often employ the following comprehension strategies before, during, and after reading: 1) activating background knowledge and/or making connections; 2) self-questioning the text; 3) making inferences; 4) determining important information; 5) employing fix-up strategies; 6) visualizing; and 7) synthesizing and extending thinking. (p.24)

These strategies were all modeled by the teacher throughout the literature circle discussions. It is a misconception that teacher’s play a minor role in literature circles. Teacher’s should not be leading discussions, rather facilitating and supporting students when needed, modeling comprehension strategies, and provide scaffolds to meet the students at their current level and support them as they grow.

**Literature Circle Discussions Improve Comprehension of Texts**

Figure 3 below demonstrates Sam’s ability to comprehend what he has read with his illustration. He participated in a modified literature circle discussion after reading “Mike’s Story” and then was able to communicate his understanding of the text by drawing a picture that provided details from the story, the main character’s, as well as other supporting characters or bystanders in this story. In *Mike’s Story*, there a student holding an intricate project that he had worked all night on. Another student accidentally bumps into him and his project gets ruined. There is a clear progression and deeper understanding that is developed and evident in Sam’s illustrations as a result of the literature circle discussions (see figure 1, 2, 3).
Developed discussions took place in the modified literature circles. Celani and McIntyre (2006) define developed discussions as “...those in which a substantial topic is maintained and the student-teacher talk included interpretations of the text and responses supported by textual, personal, and/or prior knowledge” (p.97). Students’ were able to make personal connections to times when each of them had experienced bullying. For example, Steve said that he was bullied by his brother, “He broke a window in my bedroom and stepped on my headphones. He told me if I said anything to my parent’s he would beat my a**!” Steve was able to draw on his own experiences as he was constructing meaning from the text. In the story one of the boy’s projects was smashed. Steve was able to draw upon a time in his life when something that was very special to him was ruined.

The data in the table 3 below supports the notion that modified literature circles can improve
comprehension for diverse learners. All of the students demonstrated an increase in their comprehension scores as a result of participating in the literature circle discussions with modifications. Modifications include: clearly defined/displayed roles during literature circle discussions, sentence starters, pre-literature circle conferences to develop questions and clarify thoughts before meeting as a group, and explicit vocabulary and comprehension instruction during literature circles.

Table 3

*Comprehension Assessment Scores*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Story Title Student</th>
<th>Quiz with no discussion</th>
<th>Literature Circle discussions without modifications</th>
<th>Literature Circle discussions with modifications</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Amy</td>
<td>60%</td>
<td>80%</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jennifer</td>
<td>40%</td>
<td>60%</td>
<td>80%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Steve</td>
<td>40%</td>
<td>40%</td>
<td>60%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sam</td>
<td>60%</td>
<td>60%</td>
<td>80%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kelly</td>
<td>40%</td>
<td>60%</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Source:* Student Comprehension Assessment Scores

Note that three of the students showed an increase in comprehension as a result of participating in literature circles without modifications. Just having the opportunity to discuss texts was able to support some students in slightly increasing their ability to comprehend text. Mahdavi and Tensfeldt (2013) explore how active engagement increases comprehension, “…active student participation in making predictions, asking questions about text, and connecting the reading to what has been previously understood are important elements in teaching students to understand what they read” (p.84). When students are actively involved in constructing meaning from text, their comprehension increases, as evidenced in the above data of comprehension scores. We must create spaces where
students’ voices are heard, and their ideas and experiences valued. As it is the culmination of what each reader brings to the conversation about texts that supports meaning construction. Literature circles are a platform in which this kind of active engagement can flourish for our students.

Table 4 below represents the discussion that took place after reading Derek’s story. This was a discussion without modifications. As depicted by the data, it is clear that the students were struggling to engage in a meaningful, developed discussion about the story.

Table 4

*Literature Discussion without Modifications*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Line</th>
<th>Speaker</th>
<th>Turn</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Amy (discussion director)</td>
<td>What grades did Derek get on his report card?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Kelly (summarizer)</td>
<td>F’s?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Steve (passage master)</td>
<td>No, it was C’s, his mom was mad about it.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Amy</td>
<td>Yep, it was Cs.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Jennifer (connector)</td>
<td>OK, Ms. Boor, what do we do now? This is boring.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Ms. Boor</td>
<td>What is your role?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Jennifer</td>
<td>Connector?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Ms. Boor</td>
<td>How could you connect this book to your life? What questions might you ask your friends?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>Jennifer</td>
<td>I don’t get it. Can you explain, show us an example or something?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Ms. Boor</td>
<td>For example, if I were the connector, I might say, My parents got mad at me once for a bad grade. Have any of your parents ever got angry at you for a bad grade or anything else?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td>Jennifer</td>
<td>Oh!! That’s easy, I got this.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
A clear distinction can be made between the literature discussions with and without modifications. In table 4, the discussion, without modifications, lacks the student’s voices. They are relying heavily on me and my voice is heard in thirteen out of twenty eight lines of conversation.

Celani and MacIntyre (2006) discuss the need for the shift from student-led to peer-led discussions, “…focus on moving beyond traditional classroom discourse in which the teacher does most of the talking, is the only one to respond to students, and does all of the questioning” (p.100). This model of teaching is what most students are accustomed to. It will take time and support to encourage students to take the lead in discussions about books.

Table 5 below signifies the importance of modifications and how these supports enabled the students to engage in more meaningful discussions about the text. As represented by the data, the students are able to engage in more reciprocal conversation with each other, and showing less reliance on the teacher.
### Table 5

*Literature Discussion with Modifications*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Line</th>
<th>Speaker</th>
<th>Turn</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Amy</td>
<td>Why did Mike get into a fight with his sister?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Kelly</td>
<td>She hogged the bathroom. I can relate, I have two sisters and by the time they are done, I have about 5 minutes to get ready in the morning.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Ms. Boor</td>
<td>Nice connection Kelly!</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Jennifer</td>
<td>Wait, that’s my job!</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Ms. Boor</td>
<td>Everyone has roles to help guide our talks but we want people to feel comfortable and speak up when they think of something that connects to the story.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>Jennifer</td>
<td>Oh, well even though Kelly stole my job (laughs) Has anyone else ever had a fight with your brother or sister? My sisters drive me crazy 24/7!</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Steve</td>
<td>All the time…He broke a window in my bedroom and stepped on my headphones. He told me if I said anything to my parent’s he would beat my a**!</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td>Sam</td>
<td>Don’t have no brothers or sisters.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Ms. Boor</td>
<td>Sam, can we see the picture you drew?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Sam</td>
<td>Sure.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Steve</td>
<td>Cool! Your good at drawing man!</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20</td>
<td>Ms. Boor</td>
<td>Lets talk about the drawing, what do you see, how does it connect to the story?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Jennifer</td>
<td>He ruined his project and he called him a jerk.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Kelly</td>
<td>There is a crowd of other kids watching, he’s a bully.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
In table 5, the students begin to interact more with each other in developed discussions about the text. For example in lines thirty one through thirty three, Steve and Jennifer are building off each other’s ideas and adding on their own thoughts. It is in these types of exchanges, that real meaning can be constructed. Maloch (2004) discusses the benefits of student-led discussions during literature circles, “…including more opportunities for student talk, more complex responses from students, a valuing of multiple interpretations, and more engaged discussion of literature” (p.1). Teachers have to take a step back and give students the space and confidence to let their voices be heard.

**Implications and Conclusions**

Meaningful literacy experiences and strong comprehension skills can be attained for diverse learners through participation in literature circles. Powerful literacy events occur when there is a transaction between the reader, the text, and a discussion with others about that text. McElvain (2010) discusses the implications of activities as, “Transaction oriented literacy activities foster productive teacher-student and student-student relationship and communication. These productive relationships
are shaped when students’ interests and involvement in meaningful literacy activities serve as the starting point for instruction” (p.181). Texts are interrogated and meaning constructed through peer-led discussions with the support of a teacher during literature circles. The data from this action research indicated that when modifications and appropriate levels of support and pre-teaching are made available, literature circles can support developed discussions and improve comprehension for diverse learners. Themes emerged from the data that convey important implications for special educators teaching literacy. These themes were: diverse learners struggle to participate in developed discussions about texts, modifications to literature circles promote developed discussions about texts, and literature circle discussions improve comprehension of texts.

In the above findings, diverse learners struggled to participate in developed discussions about texts. In the second collection of comprehension assessment data, the students participated in a literature circle discussion without modifications. The conversations were not natural or flowing, it seemed the students were over relying on me to lead the discussion. Which is not surprising as that has been the way that they have learned for most of their school careers. It also seemed like they were looking for one “right” answer and not really exploring different viewpoints or meanings. The discussion was not very developed, reciting right there facts but not really thinking beyond the text or making personal or text to text connections (Teacher Reflection Journal, 2015).

As evidenced from various types of data, including a transcription of dialogue, teacher reflection journal, and assessment data, modifications to support developed discussions were a necessity for diverse learners. Some modifications that were found to be useful in improving student participation and performance in this action research were: clearly defined/displayed roles during
literature circle discussions, sentence starters, pre-literature circle conferences to develop questions and clarify thoughts before meeting as a group, and explicit vocabulary and comprehension instruction. These strategies should be pre-taught and modeled by the teacher during literature circle discussions. The research conducted by Hudson and Browder (2014), along with my findings, suggest several significant implications for teaching such as: pre-teaching academic and nonacademic skills like vocabulary, and reciprocal conversation skills.

Another important implication that resulted from this study indicated that it was essential to redefine and clarify the role of the teacher and students during literature discussions. Maloch (2004) discusses the outdated teaching practices that many students’ with diverse learning needs have experienced as “…IRE (initiation-response-evaluation) pattern of interaction that often relegates students to more passive and reactive roles in discussions” (p.1). It is difficult for students to move from this passive role during discussions to a more active, leadership role, which is represented in literature circles. Therefore, it is vital for the teacher to take the time to define and teach the changing roles of students and teachers. Students must be comfortable and confident in taking the lead in discussions. One way that teachers can ensure this level of assurance is to take adequate time to teach and explore each role within literature circles so that students possess a clear understanding of what their role in the discussion is. The time needed to define the roles was evident in the research that I conducted as well. Having specific roles and jobs to do during discussions greatly increased students confidence and level of participation in the discussions. Teachers should also have the roles with definitions posted in the literature circle area. Each student can share what their role is and what it means at the beginning of each literature circle discussion.
Administrative support is vital to the success of facilitating literature circles. The foundation of a running a successful literature circle in which students are highly engaged in the learning is time. Administrators must allow time to implement literature circles, including the essential pre-teaching time as part of a balanced literacy program. Unfortunately, common core state standards and more pressure and accountability on teachers to improve students’ scores on standardized test, according to Certo, Moxley, Reffitt and Miller (2015), have forced teachers to relinquish authentic instructional activities like literature circles. Authentic literacy events that connect to students lives are crucial and should not be excluded at the expense of state standards. Another implication that hinges on administrative support is professional development for teachers. Educators need to have sufficient training in how to facilitate literature circles as well as time to reflect and share pedagogical implications with their colleagues.

There is no on comprehension strategy that will fit needs of all children. Instead, Mahdavi and Tensfeldt (2013), along with the findings from this research, indicate “The use of multiple strategies has been demonstrated not only to improve the immediate comprehension of text but also to transfer to other tasks that are beyond the teaching environment” (p.85). That is our goal as teachers, to give our students strategies that they can continue to use and generalize in aspects of their lives beyond the walls of school. Modeling of multiple comprehension strategies by the teacher through think-alouds during literature circle discussions can foster the development of these skills in diverse learners.

The last implication of this action research coupled with a review of literature on the topic is the importance of involving students in the selection of texts for literature circles. Knickerbocker and Rycik (2006) claim “We need to rethink our strategies and approaches in line with a better, stronger
understanding of youth cultures and adolescents’ everyday lives” (p.44). This consideration of students’ lives can be represented by literature that students take part in selecting. Research conducted by Celani and McIntyre (2006), along with this research, highlighted the profound importance of literature selection in sustaining developed discussions. Celani and McIntyre (2006) further discuss the importance in the following, “When students and their teacher read about subjects in which students have direct experience, and/or carry sophisticated concepts, the talk can be richer and the discussion sustained” (p.116). Students will be highly engaged and motivated to participate when they can draw upon personal experiences. In a sense, the students become the experts on the topic when they have had direct experiences to draw from. It is natural to speak more when we have had personal experiences connected to the text. Therefore, in an effort to promote developed discussions, students should have a voice in the selection of texts.

In conclusion, based on sociocultural and reader response theories, learning occurs through communication and the transaction between the reader and the text. Literature circles embody these theoretical philosophies. However, modifications must be made to fit the needs of diverse learners so the question that guided this action research was, how can literature circles be modified to fit the needs of diverse learners to improve comprehension? According to the review of literature and this action research, literature circles can be modified in many ways in order to improve comprehension for diverse learners. Modifications such as pre-teaching, modeling, think-alouds, sentence starters, and clearly defined roles and responsibilities can support diverse learners in participating in developed discussions during literature circles. These developed discussions promote a higher level of comprehension for students.
As a result of this action research, further questions for future research were brought forth. Diverse learners encompass many different types of students including English language learners (ELLs). There was a lack of research that focused on literature circles and how they can be modified to fit the needs of ELLs. One of the researchers on the topic, McElvain (2010) described the teacher’s role in this process, “…through conversations that develop higher-level comprehension rather than literal recall. Effective ELL reading comprehension approaches facilitate meaning, self-efficacy and, most importantly, viable membership in a classroom literacy community” (p.182). This leaves me with more questions. Specifically: in what ways can we promote self-efficacy for ELLs? How can literature circles be used to connect students socially to a classroom community? What is the best approach to teaching vocabulary to ELLs within a literature circle? How can higher level comprehension skills be taught if there is not a solid foundation in English developed ELLs?
References


Appendix A

Demographic Information for each Student Participating in the Study

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Student(s)</th>
<th>District</th>
<th>Ethnic Make-up of students</th>
<th>Economically Disadvantaged Students</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Steve, Jennifer</td>
<td>Rochester City</td>
<td>60% African-American, 25% Hispanic, 4% Asian, 10% white, 0% Multiracial</td>
<td>90%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Amy</td>
<td>Red Creek</td>
<td>97% White, 1% African-American, 1% Hispanic, 1% Asian, 0% Multiracial</td>
<td>52%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sam</td>
<td>Greece Central</td>
<td>69% White, 13% African-American, 11% Hispanic, 3% Asian, 3% Multiracial</td>
<td>45%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kelly</td>
<td>Rush-Henrietta</td>
<td>64% White, 15% African-American, 11% Asian, 6% Hispanic, 3% Multiracial</td>
<td>37%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Appendix B

Student Questionnaires before participation in Literature Circles

1. Have you ever participated in a literature circle before?

2. If so, what did you like about it?
   If not, would you like to participate in a literature circle?

3. What are some strategies you use to help you understand what you read?

4. After you read, do you like to discuss what you have read with:
   A) One other person  B) A small group (3-5)  C) The whole class

5. There are different roles in literature circles, which role would you be interested in being?
   A) Illustrator
   B) Summarizer
   C) Connector
   D) Passage Master
   E) Discussion Leader
Student Questionnaires After participation in Literature Circles

Literature Circle Survey

1. Did you enjoy participating in a literature circle?
   Yes
   No

2. Did having a role help you talk more during discussions?
   Yes
   No

3. Did talking about books help you understand what you read more?
   Yes
   No

4. Would it be helpful to you if your teacher was _________ during literature circles?
   More involved
   less involved

5. Would you like to participate in a literature circle again?
   Yes
   No
Appendix C

Comprehension Assessments for all Three Texts

Literature Circle Discussion Group
“Andrew’s Story”
Name: Date:

1. Why was Andrew in a bad mood?
   a) His Mom was yelling at him.
   b) He missed the bus.
   c) His brother took his juice.

2. What was his friend’s name that he tried to play football with?
   a) Animal habitat.
   b) Native village.
   c) Christopher Columbus.

3. What was the name of the boy who knocked Andrew down?
   a) Ryan
   b) Mike
   c) Adam

4. Who offered to help Andrew?
   a) Tyler
   b) Thomas
   c) Sam

5. After his project was ruined Andrew knew it was going to be what kind of day?
   a) Great
   b) Funny
   c) Terrible

6. Have you ever been bullied?
   a) Yes
   b) No
   If yes, did you tell someone?
   a) Yes
   b) No
Literature Circle Discussion Group
“Derek’s Story”
Name: ___________________________ Date: ___________________________
1. Why was Derek in a bad mood?
   a) He got a C’s on his report card.
   b) He got into an argument with his brother.
   c) He overslept.

2. What friend did he try to play football with?
   a) Nate
   b) Mike
   c) Christopher

3. Who kicked them off the field?
   a) Grade tens
   b) Grade sevens
   c) Grade eights

4. How did Derek feel when the project got crushed?
   a) Happy
   b) Excited
   c) Bad

5. What did Derek see when he looked back at the kid?
   a) The boy sitting alone.
   b) A skinny, blond kid join him.
   c) A teacher talking to him.

Literature Circle Discussion Group
“Mike’s Story”
Name: ___________________________ Date: ___________________________
1. Why was Mike in a bad mood?
   a) He got a C’s on his report card.
   b) He got into an argument with his sister.
   c) He overslept.

2. What did Mike say to Derek?
   a) “They’re smarter than you!”
   b) “They’re stronger than you!”
   c) “They’re faster than you!”

3. Who kicked them off the field?
   a) Grade tens
   b) Grade sevens
   c) Grade eights
4. How did Mike feel when the project got crushed?
   a) Happy
   b) Excited
   c) Bad

5. Mike hoped the kid...
   a) Realized he didn’t mean to push him.
   b) Talked to a friend about it.
   c) Didn’t tell on him.
Appendix D

Teachr Reflection Journal

Holley Boor

Date/Story Title: 6.16.15/Andrew’s Story

- The student’s seem excited about participating in the literature circle, they were asking when we could start and how often we would be doing it, generally enthusiastic and positive attitudes about it.
- Based on the questionnaire, none of the students had participated in lit. circles before, so this will be a new experience for all students involved.
- They asked if they were going to be able to go to my college, I told them no but what they were doing could help teachers learn how to help students understand what they read better, and enjoy talking about books and sharing their personal experiences
- Students’ read Andrew’s story individually and answered questions on their own without participating in a discussion about the book. All of the students exhibited limited understanding of the text as the scores were: 3-%40, 2-%60.
- I hope that discussing the text during the literature circles will improve comprehension for all of the students

Date/Story Title: 6.18.15/Derek’s Story

- The students read Derek’s Story before the literature circle discussion
- Each student chose a role when they filled out the questionnaire before beginning the project, shockingly they each chose a different role! So it worked out perfectly. They each were able to fulfill the role they selected as their preference
- The conversation was not flowing, it seemed the students were over relying on me to lead the discussion. Which is not surprising as that has been the way that they have learned for most of their school careers
- It also seemed like they were looking for one “right” answer and not really exploring different viewpoints or meanings
- The discussion was not very developed, reciting right there facts but not really thinking beyond the text
Need to develop modifications to support the discussion: clearly
defined/displayed roles during lit. circle discussions, sentence starters, pre-lit
circle conferences to develop questions, etc. before meeting as a group, explain
my role more in depth, pass the torch😊

Date/Story Title: 6.22.15/Mike’s Story

- The students each read “Mike’s Story” before the literature circle discussion
- I met with each student, discussed what their role was and what they planned
to talk about, ask, share, during lit. circle group.
- Before beginning, each student said what their role was and defined it, I also
had the definition of each role displayed on the wall near our lit. circle group
- I also explained my role, and that I wouldn’t be leading the discussion, just
providing support as the students led the discussion
- I also provided some sentence starters if there was a lull in the conversation
- Yes!! The students were really engaged in meaningful conversations about the
text, making connections to other text and personal experiences, really
listening to each other, and building on what the other members of the group
were saying😊
- I wish I had more time to do this!! I want to incorporate lit. circles into my
classroom next year. The students responded really well to the format. I think
my students have a lot they want to say about the things that we read but are
so accustomed to being evaluated on whether it is the right answer, they have
been stifled into not having the freedom to take risks and share their thinking
about texts.
- The literature circles provide clear roles and expectations for each student, the
structure of the lit. circle actually allows more spontaneity and meaning
within the discussions, like an oxymoron!
- My only concern is the scheduling and fitting in the lit. circles along with the
other reading programs I’m expected to teach. I’m going to do everything I can
to try to make it happen because it was so refreshing to see my students have
more confidence, and enjoy talking about books! The lit. circles also improved
comprehension for all of the participants involved.