THE EFFECT OF STUDENT-LED LITERATURE DISCUSSION GROUPS ON READER RESPONSE

A Master's Thesis

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the literacy experiences of a fifth grade language arts class, specifically as they participated in student-led literature discussion groups in a literature based reading program that used small group discussion to create meaning. The students responded to the reading of novels by writing a literary letter in their reading logs to books read independently and to books read and discussed. A three point rubric was used to score the levels of thinking evidenced in the student writing. Using quantitative methods, the level of thinking was measured before, during, and after the treatment of literature discussion groups. The research followed a time series design and used exact non-parametric inferential procedures for whole group analyses of student responses about four elements: character, theme, writer's craft, and summary. Tests of significance were used for the group that did not pass fourth grade proficiency and for the group that was proficient. Tests of statistical significance were also used for three different ability levels. The study provides insights into the value of using student-led literature discussion groups.
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CHAPTER I
INTRODUCTION
Purpose of the Study

The joint position statement by the International Reading Association (IRA) and the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) states that learning to read and write is a crucial element to a child's success in school and later in life (IRA & NAEYC, 1998). Classroom teachers continue to look for reading strategies and practices that increase student learning and thinking about reading and writing. Literacy education research presents a plethora of ideas for the reading teacher about emergent literacy, response to literature, and the writing process. The question remains which innovations classroom teachers will choose to incorporate into their teaching of language arts. What reading activities will prepare students to think, know, understand and learn? How will students be taught to go beyond the task of just accumulating knowledge? What reading strategies encourage collaboration and support others in their learning? Which reading activities will meet the literacy needs of a diverse classroom? What practices foster a love of reading and books in children so they may develop into lifelong readers and writers?

Besides the vast array of reading activities to select, teachers are faced with a change that shifts away from total teacher control in reading programs. Current research in the teaching of reading indicates a shift in the roles of the reading teacher and that adds more to the role of students in the reading process (IRA, 1988). Today's reading programs should allow students to have an active role in the learning and reading comprehension process. Students bring to the reading process prior experiences that are an important
element to the learning environment. Reading programs are more student centered. As the student's role is changing so does the role of the teacher in literacy programs.

Being questioned in our schools is the traditional belief that the teacher is the source of all knowledge and that their job is to fill up any void of knowledge in their students (National Assessment of Educational Progress, 1985). No longer is the teacher viewed as the only source of information and the sole provider of direction and structure in the classroom. The teacher is viewed as a facilitator whose job includes getting students to attend to print, to motivate students to read, and to provide the structure and appropriate reading materials for the construction of meaning. Classrooms once viewed as teacher dominated are now cooperative communities of learners (Routman, 1988).

Research also reflects a shift in reading practice from packaged reading programs containing text written solely to teach reading to textbooks that use the full text of high quality children's literature (Anderson, Hiebert, Scott, & Wilkinson, 1985; Atwell, 1987; Goodman, 1994). The move in language arts materials offers students well written, whole texts with many opportunities for students to respond critically to the literature in discussions, journal writing, and a variety of language activities with the teaching of skills worked into the language experiences.

Along with these changes in practice, teachers face the challenge of meeting the needs of a wide range of students in classrooms. Children's ability levels, language, ethnicity, race, and background are vastly different in classrooms (Goatley, Brock, & Raphael, 1995; Hill & Van Horn, 1995; McMahon, 1992; Samway & Whang, 1996). Teachers make difficult decisions about what teaching practices and reading materials to use that will meet the needs of diversified classrooms. Flexible grouping that include different
ability levels is part of today's reading programs (Routman, 1988). Differentiation of curriculum is another way to provide for the needs of a diverse classroom (Strickland, 1995). With the conflicting recommendations about how to teach to all of the diverse children in reading programs, the dilemma is often met with a call for a balanced reading instruction program (Spiegel, 1998).

A balanced reading program sees teachers as informed decision makers that are flexible when trying to meet the challenges of teaching reading. Learning to read is a very complex process. Reading instruction is not a single dimension. To read children must be able to perceive the symbols of language, interpret what they see, follow linear and grammatical patterns of written words, connect words back to prior experiences, make inferences about the reading material and evaluate it. In addition children must remember what was previously learned and add new information, recognize the relationship between symbols and sounds, and understand the connections between words. Children must then put everything together to make sense of the reading material (Burns, Roe, & Ross, 1992).

Today many teachers seek a balance in the selection of reading materials and the methods of teaching reading. Current trends in the teaching of reading skills are moving toward literacy instruction within the context of whole literature texts instead of reading skills taught sequentially in isolation (McMahon & Raphael, 1997). Reading programs reflect a shift away from reading skills being taught in isolation. When skills are taught separately, they no longer function as they would when embedded in activities of reading and writing. The direction of reading programs has less emphasis on the teaching of discrete skills and more emphasis toward teaching strategies that learners apply through meaningful use (Strickland, 1995). Baumann and Ivey (1997) state the need for a balance in literacy
instruction where the teacher is an informed decision maker and views literacy as both reading and writing being learned simultaneously

A balanced reading program includes many opportunities to respond to reading through discussion and a variety of written forms. In literacy programs, reading and writing are closely linked in the learning of language (Strickland, 1995). There is a reciprocal relationship between reading and writing (Spiegel, 1998). As a student's reading level increases the student's ability to make connections between sound and letter increases which increases the student's ability to form words. The ability to form words increases the student's ability to write. Better writers tend to be better readers (Stosky, 1983). Poorer readers tend to write less syntactically mature pieces of writing as better readers produce more clearly stated and complex pieces of writing. The language arts curriculum should serve as a framework for integrating reading and writing into all areas of teaching.

Rosenblatt (1991) states that the purpose for reading is for the reader to interact with the text. This is referred to as the reader-response approach. It views reading as a process of transactions between the reader and the text. The reader brings to the process all of his/her past experiences, beliefs, and assumptions. Through interactions with the perspectives in the text, meaning is determined as the result of the transaction of student and text. This transaction is referred to as the stance a reader takes with the text and is described as either aesthetic or efferent. Many opportunities for students to read and write and to take an aesthetic or efferent stance to text is part of a balanced reading program.

One response to supporting children in a balanced reading program is a strategy to teach reading using student-led literature discussion groups also referred to as book clubs (Spiegel, 1998). The student-led literature discussion group is an instructional strategy based
on a sociocultural perspective. This perspective is an important aspect of the social constructivist viewpoint and is based on the work of Vygotsky. Vygotsky (1962) claims that learning results from the interactions of learners. Learning is social. Placing students in small discussion groups increases the opportunity to interact and gives the student more of the responsibility for the comprehension and meaning making that takes place in literacy learning.

Social interaction is important in the making of meaning (Scott, 1994). Being part of a literature discussion group invites readers to extend their thinking and prolong the amount of time they interact with the text. Student-led literature discussion groups promotes higher level thinking skills in students as they analyze and interpret information (Knoeller, 1994; Nystrand, Gamon, & Heck, 1993). Students go beyond just retelling the story in literature discussion groups.

Response to literature using critical thinking skills is not a new idea in literacy programs. Discussion about the reading of literature and writing responses to literature help teach students to learn how to think. During student-led literature discussion groups, students actively participate in a process of analyzing, synthesizing, and evaluating novels that provide opportunities for students to formulate and communicate ideas with others. Students respond to open ended questions generated by the students and think about why and how rather than who, what, and when (Routman, 1991). Research illustrates that active participation in literature discussion groups is possible in all grade levels.

As children pass through elementary grades, research shows a trend that children's attitudes toward reading is progressively less positive (McKenna, Kear, & Ellsworth, 1995). It is important to understand the role that attitude plays in the developing reader. Attitude
may affect the ability level of a reader because of its influence on the practice and engagement of the reader. A negative attitude toward reading keeps even a fluent reader from choosing to read.

The implementation of student-led literature discussion groups is one innovative method that increases enthusiasm for books and reading. Changes in the classroom from reading stories from the basal reader to reading high quality literature sets with their peers prove successful in improving student attitude toward reading. Students no longer have to wait for high school literature classes to read whole books and students can now have opportunities to interact with other students in the construction of meaning.

The practice of using literature discussion groups for teaching reading as part of a balanced language arts program is consistent with the core beliefs of The National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) and the International Reading Association (IRA). Jointly these organizations compiled standards for the teaching of language arts. The learner is viewed as central and interactive with how, what and why a meaningful literacy event is experienced (NCTE & IRA, 1996). According to the Standards "Literary response and expression are aesthetic acts involving complex interactions of emotions and intellect" (p. 13).

NCTE and IRA (1996) state that language is learned to make sense of the world around us and to communicate our understandings with others. The learner becomes a critical language user when he/she questions, hypothesizes, reflects and interprets text. Critical thinking goes beyond noting differences. Effective critical thinkers draw connections between texts, between their own responses to text, between bodies of knowledge, and between their own experiences.
Statement and Significance of the Research Problem

This research project focuses on one strategy in a literature-based reading program using student-led literature discussion groups. Literature discussion groups have many different appearances and allow for great flexibility by the teacher. The popularity of this strategy of teaching reading continues to grow and is supported by empirical data (Evans, 1996).

Literature discussion groups are seen as a powerful teaching framework that encourages collaboration, allows for choice, and develops content in reading (Leal, 1993). The responsibility for understanding challenging text is transferred from the teacher to the students. The teacher is a member of the discussion group and is a useful knowledgeable other. Students are motivated as they take turns having their voice heard when making an interpretation of text (Knoeller, 1994).

Literature discussion groups tie together reading, writing, skill instruction, and community sharing (Raphael & McMahon, 1994). The connection between reading and writing is key in the teaching of language arts. Opportunities to respond in writing to reading texts are numerous and varied (Kooy & Wells, 1996; Ollmann, 1996; Routman, 1991). The purpose of this study is to evaluate the effect of literature discussion groups on the written responses to literature in fifth graders' reading log journals.

The significance of this research is the contribution that it makes to the call for more research that effectively expose elementary students to literary concepts such as character, theme, and writer's craft. This research also adds to the knowledge base about the growth and extension of student's thinking evidenced in their written response to books read.
Research Hypothesis

The research hypothesis for this study is that the students' written journal responses to books read and shared collaboratively in a literature discussion group will have more examples of higher level thinking than written journal responses to books that students read individually without group discussion. The research will study the writing journal responses for higher level thinking about books read independently before and after the intervention of literature discussion groups.

Null Hypothesis

There will be no statistical differences between the mean score of students' written journal responses about books read independently and the mean score of students' written journal responses about books read collaboratively.

Limitations

There was no equivalent time-on-task allotted for each of the sequences (i.e., phase $O_1$, phase X, and phase $O_2$). Some books took longer to read than others. Each individual book read independently was self-selected by the students. The books for discussion groups were self-selected from a pool of teacher choices. The sample was limited to the 20 students presently enrolled in the researcher's language arts class.

Assumptions

In order to conduct this study, the researcher needs to assume several criteria. First, all books were equally disposed to analysis and higher levels of understanding. Secondly, the researcher assumes that the students will give their best efforts to each literary log letter assigned.
Definition of Terms

Aesthetic  This term was used by Rosenblatt to describe the reading process of a reader when she is mainly concerned with what the words refer to but mainly to what the reader is experiencing, thinking, and feeling during the reading.

Efferent  This term was used by Rosenblatt to describe the reading process when the purpose of the reader is to acquire information that she wishes to retain after the reading has ended.

Higher level thinking  This refers to the type of thinking a student does that goes beyond the knowledge and comprehension levels on Bloom's Taxonomy and uses analysis, synthesis or evaluation.

Literary letters  This refers to the letters students write in response to literature they've read and written in their reading logs. Literary letters are explained by Atwell in her book, *In the Middle*.

Student-led literature discussion group  This is a reading strategy that structures a framework for students to read novels and discuss them with their peers in order to construct meaning. It is interactive with the components of discussion, reading, writing, group share, and instruction.

Social constructivism  This is a perspective that emphasizes reading as a social process. Students develop reading and writing skills through interactions with adults and peers and is based on a sociocultural perspective.

Think sheets  These are the papers that set the purpose for reading before a student reads their novel. Different jobs for the discussion group are on each sheet.
Zone of proximal development This is a term Vygotsky used to describe the difference between the child's capacity to solve problems on her own, and her capacity to solve them with assistance from a more knowledgeable other and is part of a sociocultural perspective about learning.
CHAPTER II

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

The review of literature section addressed the following six areas: 1) reading instruction in the United States, 2) the theoretical perspective of student-led literature discussion groups, 3) higher level thinking, 4) comprehension strategies, 5) literary elements and 6) the implementation of student-led literature discussion groups in language arts programs.

Reading Instruction in the United States

The political climate of our country calls out for a return to "basics" in our schools and questions whether our children read and write as well as they could in the past. Teacher practices in language arts are investigated by the media and criticized by the general public. Routman (1996), in her book *Literacy at the Crossroads*, refutes this negative opinion of our children's reading and writing achievement. She encourages practicing teachers to no longer accept this criticism and to stand up for the practices that they know promote the learning of language in our classrooms. Routman suggests in her ten point plan that one way to provide children with good, solid reading instruction, is to give children time to discuss excellent children's literature in small groups.

There is a growing movement toward literature-based instruction in literacy and a need to examine ways of changing teacher roles, and student's response to literature that promote more student centered classrooms (McMahon, 1992). The goal of literacy programs is to prepare proficient readers. To reach this goal, schools responded and created literature-based programs in many ways (Hiebert & Colt, 1989). Tradebooks became the entire
reading program in some schools. Schools resumed the practice of students participating in sustained silent reading after stopping the practice in the 1970s when skills oriented reading programs dominated. Textbooks increased the amount of high quality literature between their covers. Students used writing responses to engage in the understanding of literature (Calkins, 1994). Students participated in cooperative learning groups where the students help to select, learn to discuss, and respond to literature.

There is no set formula for combining all of the components that make up a comprehensive reading program. Different aspects considered for reading programs are teacher instruction, teacher and student-led interactions, teacher and student selected materials, and independent application of reading skills (Hiebert & Colt, 1989). If these components are viewed in a continuum, today's reading programs aim towards more student involvement and responsibility and away from total teacher control. Today's reading programs work to achieve a balance between teacher guidance and independent reading. Ideally the balance takes place when teacher guidance is offered embedded within text from perceived student needs.

A balanced approach to reading is a statement often heard about literacy learning in today's schools. The 1997 International Reading Association's Convention theme called for a balance between books and basics. Strickland (1995) addresses some of the issues faced by teachers and administrators as they work to reinvent literacy programs in a search for balance. Strickland states different points where teachers are challenged when teaching in new directions in the preparation of literate students. She places these points "along a continuum of thoughtful change" (p. 301).
The direction of literacy curriculum values and builds on student prior knowledge and emphasizes the construction of meaning through activities that require higher order thinking. Literacy curriculum has opportunities for learners to apply literacy strategies and their underlying skills within the context of a meaningful text (Strickland, 1995). These basic understandings are grounded in the knowledge that reading and writing are inextricably linked, that students have much existing knowledge, and that to be literate, learners must engage in literate acts.

A balanced approach promotes the ideas that literature discussion groups bring to the reading/writing process in a comprehensive reading program. Spiegel (1998) outlines in a recent edition of the Reading Teacher the findings of extensive research concerning students literature response, literature response groups, and reading development. Multiple research is cited for each of the findings that follows about characteristics of students participating in literature discussion groups. These characteristics are found in Figure 1.

**Figure 1. Characteristics of participation in literature discussion groups**

- Students think of themselves as successful readers.
- Students become risk takers.
- Students become metacognitive about their reading and writing and the processes of literacy.
- Students become reflective readers.
- Students develop high levels of thinking about literature.
- Students develop a repertoire of responses to literature.
- Students develop an appreciation of and understanding of the elements of literature.
- Students score well on tests of reading.
A balanced approach to reading uses the contributions of many different approaches and perspectives. Literature discussion groups that are a part of an effective literacy curriculum allow students to both read and write, to take different stances toward text, and to think critically.

Individual research studies influence the practice of teachers in their classroom (Shanahan & Neuman, 1997). Listed in a chronological list of the 13 most influential studies since 1961 was the work of Nancie Atwell. Atwell (1987) describes an approach to teaching middle school literacy. She describes what full immersion into a reading/writing workshop looks like. Based on many of the ideas of writing workshop from Donald Graves work, Atwell shares the complexities and practicalities that define literacy teaching. Her book, *In the Middle*, is cited in many of the reference lists in research concerning literature discussion groups.

Theoretical Perspective of Literature Discussion Groups

There are three theoretical perspectives that support student-led literature discussion groups. Reviewed in this section are: 1) Vygotsky's sociocultural view of learning, 2) Rosenblatt's transactional view of literacy, and 3) the curricular integration of reading and writing.

Current views of reading instruction emphasize learning as a social function. Raphael and McMahon (1994) write that book clubs were developed based on social constructivist theory. A tie between the student and the text develops when literature based instruction is connected through sharing with student-led literature discussions. Instruction in decoding and comprehension is important, but it is more important to provide
opportunities for personal response, to actively engage students in constructing meaning with their peers, and to question whether meaning is inherent in the text.

Goatley, Brock, and Raphael's (1995) research study discussed how diverse learners (i.e., Chapter I, ESL and Special Education Resource Room) participated in literature discussion groups. The study demonstrated that both peers and teachers could effectively serve as the more knowledgeable other in group discussions. The students constructed meaning from a complex piece of literature as they moved beyond simply decoding. Their research is based on a Vygotsky perspective that is social-historical in nature. Individual thinking along with a person's higher level thinking processes such as those used in reading and writing must be viewed in a broader social and historical context. Vygotsky believed that learning was facilitated through help from a more knowledgeable person in the community and culture. Interactions among people facilitate learning. The group is a scaffold during learning for the individual. Student-led discussions are viewed as a social place where students and teacher can create meaning.

Vygotsky (1962) explored how students construct meaning. There are three key concepts of the Vygotsky theory of learning. The first idea is that language has a role in the development of thought in humans. Secondly, the zone of proximal development has implications that a knowledgeable other takes a child beyond what he/she can do independently. The third idea is that the process of internalization of newly learned concepts by learners is regulated by their own thinking as they negotiate text in a social setting. What a child can do in cooperation today, he can do alone tomorrow. Teachers and peers serve as more knowledgeable others and support students as they construct meaning of text. A
student-led literature discussion group is one practical application that relies on this social, interactive nature of literacy.

Rosenblatt's (1991) transactional view of literacy learning points out that the interaction between reader, text, and context is the critical exchange in the construction of meaning. Rosenblatt states that a literacy activity should tie one's personal experiences and thinking to text so that meaning can be constructed. The reader's personal interpretation of text is very important to comprehension. Reader response shifts from the viewpoint that literacy interpretation is either right or wrong. The reader's interpretation is a key element to the understanding of the text.

With Rosenblatt's view of literacy, readers actively construct meaning by responding to a text, then after reflecting on that response to text will refer back to the text to confirm the understanding. Readers comprehend differently because every reader is different. During interpretation of text, there are two stances that the reader takes depending on the type of reading material and the purpose for reading. The student takes an efferent stance when the purpose is to gather information and an aesthetic stance when the purpose is to experience a story or poem.

During student-led literature discussion groups, the students' focus is on the relationship of the characters' lives and emotions, and the events that take place in the story. Students take an aesthetic stance with the text as they make meaning of the text (Almasi, 1995). Transactional theory depicts an active involvement between the reader and the text and that meaning resides in both the reader and the text. Students put meaning to the text and continue to return to the text for further reflection. Rosenblatt's theory suggests that personal response must be extended through a social exchange of ideas (McMahon &
Raphael, 1997). Together Vygotsky's and Rosenblatt's theories support the active role of the reader in the construction of meaning which in turn supports the goals of student-led literature discussion groups.

Another theoretical perspective that supports this research project is the link between reading and writing. The reading-writing connection of language allows for many opportunities that increase student understanding of text. Writing activities engage students in critical thinking about text and allows for personal and critical responses throughout the reading process (McMahon & Raphael, 1997).

Kooy and Wells (1996) state that much has changed in the field of literature study. Teaching practices change in order to accomplish teachers' awareness about what students do during reading and writing. An example of these changes in student-centered classrooms is the use of discussion groups followed by reading response. Reading logs is one suggested way to teach children how to make sense out of text. Kooy and Wells give examples of how to implement discussion groups and ways to encourage students. Suggestions using short stories, novels, and poetry are presented in genre units.

There is an increased interest in the teaching of process writing which includes written activities and extensions about what children read (Tierney, Readence, & Dishner, 1995). Personal written responses along with opportunities to discuss students' reading and writing encourage students to generate ideas and reflect on the quality of their thinking. One such reading-writing connection is the use of journals when students respond to reading.

Writing in journals is one way to record thoughts, but it is also a way to generate thought. Atwell (1987) discusses the use of journals as a place for students to learn about the world of books. Journals are a place to write about what good writers do, what good readers
do, and how readers talk about specific literary knowledge. Students write reactions to text in a classroom that uses student-led literature discussion groups. Students use writing as a tool for thought (Calkins, 1994). The reading and writing of language are interrelated and journal writing about text is one way for teachers to assess when students need help making connections as they read, write and discuss. The use of journals emphasizes response and provides opportunities to learn about and use a variety of comprehension strategies that support the discussion groups and the student learning and thought processes.

The use of literature in literature discussion groups has two primary points of concentration. The reading of the book is a main focus and the other important focus is response to the reading. Literacy is learned both in reading and in writing. The literature discussion group strategy used in this research relies on the reciprocal relationship and supports the growth of skills in both reading and writing. Teachers encourage writing before, during and after reading as a way to prompt students to process ideas about reading.

Higher Level Thinking

The English Language Arts Standards (NCTE & IRA, 1996) state that literature plays an essential part in the development of critical thinking. Critical thinking is defined as thought processes characteristic of creativity, criticism, and logic in literature, the arts, science and other disciplines; divergent thinking. By the use of literary text, students can envision and explore worlds from perspectives other than their own. Literary texts teach students to think about and to question their own perspectives. Students taking a stance with text can recognize, analyze, and evaluate human experiences and learn to analyze and evaluate the literature as well.
One of the most important goals of language arts education is to help students interpret literary texts (NCTE & IRA, 1996). Opportunities to use critical thinking to identify particular text elements, to reflect about text meaning, and to evaluate texts should be an integral part of a student's reading experience.

There have been many attempts to differentiate higher-order thinking from lower-order types of thought (Flood et al., 1991). Most attempts have focused on hierarchies of information processing skills. In education, Bloom, Englehart, Furst, Hill, and Krathwohls' (1956) taxonomy of cognitive objectives is perhaps the most well known. Broad goals and specific objectives are arranged in a hierarchical order from general to specific cognitive outcomes. The description of the levels in this taxonomy help to evaluate the level of thinking. Moving from lower to higher order thinking the description of the cognitive levels is as follows: knowledge, comprehension, application, analysis, synthesis, and evaluation.

The research of Kletzien and Hushion (1992) states the need for more opportunities for students to think about what they are reading and integrate it into what they already know, compare it to other situations, and evaluate the text. Students were encouraged to interact with their reading by using higher level thinking processes in their journal responses. By the explanation and use of a chart of graphic thinking symbols the students could choose divergent ways to respond to their books. The journal responses showed an increase in higher-level thinking that included analyses of the author's writing craft and evaluative comments of the issues raised in the reading.

Anzul (1993) studied group talk about books, levels of student thinking and extension of student insight. Her study noted that as the proportion of student talk increased during literature discussion groups of fifth and sixth grade students, achieving and
sustaining higher levels of thinking increased. By familiarizing herself with Bloom's
taxonomy, Anzul tracked and charted levels of thinking heard in student discussions. The
documentation of the study supported Anzul's belief that children are able to independently
initiate and lift levels of thinking. For this to take place there needs to be an environment
arranged by the teacher that allowed for direct student interaction and freedom to initiate
their own topics.

Writing in response to literature discussion groups gives opportunities to encourage
students to think and respond critically to books (McMahon & Raphael, 1997). A critical
response involves analyses about a text's meaning, the effectiveness of the text, and the
effectiveness of the author's craft in creating text. Student's thinking is extended when they
write to analyze, synthesize, and evaluate text. These are all higher level thinking skills
found in Bloom's taxonomy.

Comprehension Strategies

Insights about comprehension instruction research inform teachers of the importance
of prior knowledge, text structure, and reading and writing and speaking in relation to
reading text (Flood et al., 1991 ). Research about the study of comprehension led to an
awareness of metacognition which is the reader's awareness of what he/she is learning and
the reader's ability to monitor progress of learning. Comprehension curriculum stresses the
interrelationship of the language arts. Writing and discussing after reading are prime
examples of ways that support this relationship of language learning. Current reading trends
in comprehension instruction emphasize the use of literature, writing, and oral language and
place less emphasis on separate instruction of language skills, spelling or grammar.
The basic goals of reading are to increase the reader's understanding of the world and themselves, develop appreciation and interest in books, solve problems, and develop strategies that encourage independence in the comprehension of text (Tierney, Readence, & Dishner, 1995). Comprehension strategies are ways that readers consciously use flexible plans that the reader applies to different texts and tasks. Comprehension strategies include ways of determining important information, summarizing, drawing inferences, generating questions, and monitoring personal comprehension. Advocates of literature discussion groups want to challenge students' thinking that information is located within the text. Teachers provide encouragement to think about what the information means and prompt them to negotiate meaning socially in personally relevant ways (McMahon & Raphael, 1997).

One comprehension strategy monitored in this research is summarization. Students are expected to be competent in writing summaries about their reading. A summary is defined as a piece of writing that is written in the child's own words that restates the topic by concisely listing the major ideas. A summary does not list details and does not add anything to the topic. Copying anything from the topic is not a summary (Hart, 1998).

**Literary Elements**

Through reading and discussing literature, readers become familiar with genres, authors, characters, places, new ideas, and literary language (Routman, 1991). Students learn to identify with characters and themes. Books teach readers to understand and learn about the consequences of human behavior. Connections to their own life and the characters' lives are made. Learning about the literary elements can lead to insights for their own
writing. Three literacy elements that can be identified are character, theme, and author's craft.

A distinguishing trait of high quality literature is true characterization (Huck, Hepler, Hickman, & Kiefer, 1997). The characters in children's literature should be as real and lifelike to the reader as their next-door neighbor. A character's credibility depends on the author's ability to present the character's true nature which includes strengths and weaknesses. Main characters are multidimensional and have depth. Another feature of main characters is they usually show growth and development through the story.

Character development is an important part of reading to consider and discuss. Discussion puts a focus on the character's qualities that are important in understanding the interactions between characters and between the events in the book (McMahon & Raphael, 1997). Students make clarifications and answer questions about characters and other literary elements during literature discussion groups.

Another literary element to consider is theme. The theme of a story is an overarching idea and is the larger meanings beneath the story's surface (Huck, Hepler, Hickman, & Kiefer, 1997). Examples of high quality children's literature usually have several layers of meaning. The theme of the book uncovers the author's purpose in writing the story and gives the story a dimension that goes beyond plot.

The third literary element to consider is author's craft. This refers to the author's writing style and his use of words in regard to plot, theme or character. The mood of the story is set with the author's style. The use of sensory description, figurative language and the creation of tension are all part of the author's craft. Huck et al. (1997) stated that the best test of an author's style is probably oral reading. If the story reads smoothly, the dialogue
flows naturally, and there is a variety in the sentence patterns, vocabulary and use of stylistic devices, much is discovered about the author's craft. One feature in the meeting of literature discussion groups is the oral reading of favorite parts because of excellent writer's craft.

Employing Literature Discussion Groups in Language Arts Programs

This section of the literature review is arranged with the research articles in three different areas. First, the articles about the many variations of literature discussion groups is presented. Research about the use of literature discussion groups with different ages and grade levels follows. The final area discusses the use of literature discussion groups in diverse classrooms with children having different needs.

Literature discussion groups are small groups of children that gather together to read the same book. The groups can be formed in a variety of ways. Sometimes the groups are formed by students' choice of books or from teacher created groups made up of students with similar interests or students that work well together. Often the books are self-selected by the students from a collection of teacher selected books.

Daniels (1994) described a procedure to guide literature discussion groups. Prior to the reading of the book, each child receives a job that they are responsible for presenting to their group in the student-led discussion that follows their reading. The group decides which pages need to be read for the discussion and when they will meet next. The students may then read with a partner or independently. The students independently prepare for their assigned job in the discussion group by noting their observations and reflections in writing. The student writes informal responses to the reading in a journal or think-sheet. Next, the
students come together to discuss their shared novel. After the completion of the discussions, the whole class participates in community share.

Daniels (1994) in his book provided different forms that may be reproduced and used in classrooms. The forms defined student's roles when preparing for their part in the discussion group. The five roles offered on the forms were the literary luminary, vocabulary enricher, discussion leader, connector, and summarizer. Daniels presented suggestions for beginning literature discussion groups in the classroom and ways for the teacher to model the roles.

Literature discussion groups have many different appearances and allows for great flexibility by the teacher. During the whole process of reading a shared novel, a variety of specific reading instruction by the teacher is embedded within the reading and discussion of a book. The teacher chooses the instruction when it is appropriate and supportive of student needs (Raphael & McMahon, 1994). The popularity of this flexible strategy of teaching reading continues to grow and is supported by empirical data (Evans, 1996).

Literature discussion groups have been referred to by different terms. The names literature circle (Daniels 1994), literature study group (Samway et al., 1991), and book club (Raphael & McMahon, 1994) all refer to basically the same phenomenon. Each connected reading, writing, and talking about books in an interactive process as children accept the responsibility for creating meaning with social support.

Raphael and McMahon (1994) described book clubs as student-led discussion groups that have four components: reading, writing, whole class discussion, and instruction that is embedded in the context of reading and writing. Following what others wrote about literature-based instruction, they identified good children's literature around a central theme
and talked with students about how to have discussions based on books. Students wrote in reading logs instead of workbook pages, and discussed during group share the appropriate behavior of speakers and listeners in a small group. Students were told that they should talk popcorn style because that's how people hold discussions. Think-sheets were provided to jot down thoughts during the reading of their novel. Students made meaningful observations during discussion. A year later, book club students recalled at least nine out of the sixteen books that they had read. Students asked what they had read out of basal textbooks the year before could not recall titles, authors, or stories.

Leal (1993) discussed the importance of discussion after read-alouds with first, third, and fifth grade students. Three different types of text were read: a storybook, an informational book, and an informational storybook called infotainment genre. She found allowing students to collaboratively construct meaning from the texts that each child shared prior knowledge with others and took ownership of the topic explored. Leal reported children's conversations were 26 percent longer when discussing infotainment and they made 107 percent more speculations and predictions. Their comments contained 111% more extra-textual connections to text and topic. Student comments that included peer provided information and combined with prior knowledge were 236 percent more frequent with the informational storybook. She found that students came to a clear understanding through their discussions and that peer discussions of all types of text were a powerful tool for enriching the classroom.

Villaume (1994) and four associates collaborated when establishing a reading program where fourth grade students created their own questions about literature. Students constructed meaning of the text through discussion. By each student bringing his/ her
thoughts to the group, the individual understanding was greater. The students identified
topics important to them. Villaume addressed the role of the teacher as a participant in the
discussion groups. The teachers cleared up confusions, offered different interpretations, and
summarized group talk. Observed student needs during discussion provided teachers with
ideas for instruction. The teachers asked the children to think and write down one important
idea about their reading to bring to group. The idea was called a seed. A seed referred to
something that could grow. When a seed was introduced in the group, everyone commented
before they could go on to the next seed. Clearly, the students' conclusions encouraged
meaningful conversations when ideas were respected and valued by everyone in the group.

Employing four heterogeneous reading groups of fourth graders, Keegan and Shrake
(1991) studied literature discussion groups. The groups stayed together in permanent groups
for the entire school year and had choices in determining the novels that they read. Up until
the fourth grade, they read basal readers in homogeneous groups and instruction was very
teacher directed. The open-ended questions were teacher created. In fourth grade they met
in literature discussion groups of six to eight students. They read with a partner before
discussion and responded in reading logs. As the year progressed the log entries extended in
length and depth of understanding. Discussion skills increased as students encouraged one
another and commented on their ideas.

Wollman-Bonilla (1994) compared two discussion groups within the same sixth
grade class. Reading ability determined student placement in discussion groups. The teacher
controlled the lower ability group and the students relied heavily on teacher created
questions. The lower ability group showed little confidence in their discussions and few
commented on fellow students' remarks. The teacher gave more control to the higher ability
group. The higher ability students commented more and had nearly fifty-percent voluntary responses. The teacher wanted both groups to have informal student-led discussions. He treated the groups very differently from the opening comments to the amount of participation expected. The findings of this study suggested that teachers need to provide explicit guidance for students to engage in talk and to benefit from the experience.

Cintorino (1993) studied two classes of tenth graders in a college preparatory English course. She discussed the typical instruction found in high schools which is dominated by teacher talk. Cintorino referred to what Courtney Cazden called IRE: initiate, response and evaluation. First, the teacher initiates a question, which is followed by a response from the student and then is followed by an evaluation by the teacher. In an attempt to move away from IRE, a teacher instructed a group of tenth graders to use literature discussion group with novels. The summary of the study gave positive remarks about the learning that took place with opportunities for peer interaction about books. The study described explanations as to how students initiated discussions, the support that students gave to each other when adding on to comments or qualifying ideas. The findings concluded that learning is increased if students are allowed to make meaning for themselves, among themselves.

Nystrand, Gamoran, and Heck (1993) studied the use of literature study groups instead of teacher-led instruction to gain comprehension. The study of eighth and ninth graders took two years. The project examined what preceded and what followed small group interaction. The researchers identified the tasks students worked on in groups, the teacher instructions to the groups, and the roles of the teacher. It was expected that the students would show enhanced achievement on literature tests from their group discussions, but they
did not. During the second year of the study, the discussions were audio taped. The teachers that said they were doing group work were really doing what was described as prescribed group work. The teacher seated the students in small groups and generated tasks, but there was less than two minutes of student talk out of a fifty-minute period. The recommendations of this study listed teaching activities that used group work effectively that would best achieve the learning desired.

Krueger and Townshend (1997) conducted a study of first graders who spoke English as their second language. In this study the children had the dual job of learning the language and learning how to read. This was a quantitative study that demonstrated positive results found in the students' daily writing journal of language learning. Vocabulary increased in their writing when literature discussion groups were used. Student confidence as readers and writers increased as their vocabulary grew.

Alverman (1995) gathered and presented perspectives of three gifted middle school students. Their teacher started literature discussion groups in their language arts class. After the first novel, the students asked if they could form different groups for future novels according to their talk alike response style. The outspoken talkative students became a group. One student commented that she could no longer just sit back as she did in teacher-led discussions. Gender positioning in a small group also appeared to inhibit some students. Depending on the topics, students exhibited different self-restraining behaviors. Alverman suggested that issues surrounding adolescents' needs for approval of their peers and acceptance by their peers cannot be forgotten when implementing literature discussion groups. She cautioned that a model of teaching that promoted voice and equality in students may cause unintentional harm.
Hill and Van Horn (1995) studied the use of literature discussion groups with troubled teenagers. Hill's research with elementary children encouraged her to attempt to use literature discussion groups while teaching reading in a juvenile detention center for teenagers. The book clubs started with a small group of volunteers and later grew to be so successful that literature discussion groups became part of the educational program at the center. The students demonstrated success with literature discussion groups and the interconnection between their reading and writing was documented. Juveniles not known for their cooperation collaborated and showed respect for others. Their written pieces proved to be insightful, thoughtful, and varied. It gave the students a place to explore their hearts and minds and a place to share those thoughts which was rare at a detention center.

Samway and Whang (1996) pointed out that using excellent books was a key to good discussion. The books selected for discussions should be rich in language, have interesting plots, and build complex characters. Their book was full of ideas for teachers to use literature discussion groups in the development of students as readers and thinkers. Included were reading suggestions for poor readers and a list of books with a multicultural theme. It was noted that students' preferences for books expanded from the commercial types of books that they usually picked to better pieces of children's literature. The students' awareness of their own likes and dislikes increased. Students using literature discussion groups were more resourceful during independent reading times. Literature discussion groups fostered critical thinking and made it possible for teachers to know the intricacies of many cultures.

Samway and Whang found that literature discussion groups had a profound impact with children from different ethnic backgrounds. It helped them in ways to understand
themselves and others. By having diverse students read multicultural books, their membership in that cultural world was affirmed. Samway made the analogy that literature discussion groups are very like the need people have when coming out of the movies to discuss the film. The same was true with books. Children gained insight by discussion. Given some control over the titles that they read and the opportunity to engage in book talk, multicultural students learned to read by reading and write by writing. Choice of reading material was a powerful tool that motivated students to read. The group work provided added motivation to read, opportunities for listening to others, and discussion time for one's ideas.

Evans (1996) reported that when fifth grade students in a multicultural school were given a democratic opportunity for expressing their own opinions and having control over their learning that there were positioning problems. She described literature discussion groups as a complex academic, social, and cultural interaction. Evans stated that the assigning of roles so that all students may participate did not ensure that all opinions were heard or valued. The article supported the use of student-led discussion groups, but it brought up issues concerning positioning in a discussion group. Recommendations were that teachers should identify purposes to guide the discussion, possibilities for initiating discussion, roles of leadership to refocus a group and strategies when someone tries to dominate. The positioning that took place in discourse constantly changed and the teacher could not assume that all group members found an equitable position.

Knoeller’s (1994) study looked at how we might change the way we go about teaching our increasingly diverse population. Student views of peer-led discussions groups were that they help make meaning of the text more accessible, they allow modeling by
classmates, and promotes the understanding of the work. The students appreciated discussion groups because it made reading more meaningful and personal. Small group discussion gave students time to form their own opinion. Students described literature discussion groups as a welcome alternative to school as usual.

The literature review supported the benefits to students learning to read and write using literature discussion groups as part of a balanced literacy curriculum. The opportunity for students to think publicly allows for active engagement by the students to think critically. Listening to students discuss as they make meaning allows teacher expertise to monitor comprehension and nurture a love and understanding of literature. The flexibility of the strategy leaves room for teacher interpretation and choices about ways to provide reading and writing connections for diverse classrooms.
CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY

Chapter III provides an overview of the methodology of this investigation. This research examined the development of fifth grade student written responses to self-selected pieces of literature that were read independently and not discussed with peers and the written responses about literature read and discussed with small student-led groups called literature discussion groups. Based on the studies related to a sociocultural perspective on learning and reader-response literacy theory, this hypothesis guided the study: The critical or higher level thinking evident during collaboration of student-led literature discussion groups will appear in the writing the students do independently in written response to the book. A description of the subjects and setting, and information on the research design of the study are included in this chapter. The instrumentation used and a complete description of the procedure and data analysis follows.

Subjects

The subjects in this study included 19 fifth grade students in a language arts class in a suburban elementary school. Three students are not included in this study; one lost his reading log; two students enrolled in the district during the last half of the school year. All students were involved in a literature-based reading program. The students were accustomed to reading and discussing literature. The students ranged in age from 10 to 12 years of age. All the subjects but one were Caucasian and were from blue collar, middle class or welfare homes. The fifth graders were comprised of seven boys and twelve girls. There are five fifth grade classrooms in this school. The students were placed into a fifth grade classroom to
form heterogeneous ability groups, and to accommodate teachers' and parents' recommendations.

Setting

The school is in a large suburban district in southwestern Ohio that has one kindergarten school, five elementary schools, three middle schools, and one high school. This elementary school provides services for about six hundred students and contains grades one through five. There are three reading specialists, one tutor, two speech therapists, and three LD resource room teachers.

Design

According to Gay (1996), the design for this research follows a time-series design. Time series designs are one way to use an existing classroom of children when it is not possible to have randomly assigned subjects to form the groups. This design is referred to as a quasi-experimental design. Time-series design is developed from the one-group pretest-posttest design. In this study the group was pretested twice, participated in the treatment twice, and then posttested once.

This research follows a time series which basically involves alternating measurement (O) and treatment (X) phases. This design can be depicted as OOXXO. An entire fifth grade language arts class participated in the baseline and treatment phases. The initial measurement phase refers to the pretest of the research. In this phase students responded by writing literary letters in their reading logs to books read independently. During the initial measurement without treatment phase, the students' written responses to literature were recorded and archived for later analysis of higher level thinking in their critical response.
The treatment phase denotes the introduction of the independent variable which is student-led literature discussion groups and is called the treatment phase. The students read books and discussed them in small groups. In this phase the students responded by writing literary letters in their reading logs after finishing discussions about their books. As with the measurement phase, the students' written responses were recorded and archived for later analysis of higher level thinking in their critical responses.

In the final phase, students returned to reading books independently without discussion and this is considered a return to measurement without treatment. The students responded by writing literary letters in their reading logs about literature that students did not discuss with anyone. The dependent variable is the higher level thinking expressed by a four level (0-3) rubric in the examination of the reading log responses.

**Instrumentation**

Creating the rubric for the instrumentation of this study was influenced by four sources. These included: handouts from an inservice on preparation for the proficiency (Hart, 1998), handouts from workshops on differentiation of the curriculum (Collier, 1997; Winebrenner, 1998), performance criteria assessment (McMahon & Raphael, 1997) and the concept creating higher level thinking with reading response (Ollmann, 1996).

The proficiency preparation information helped define the definitions of the levels of thinking so that a number could be assigned to each level (Hart, 1998). This handout outlined a way to assess the level children reach when asked to give an extended response in writing to a reading piece and used a four point scale. Using the general guidelines used in the four point scale in this handout, the scale was simplified into a three point scale to create the rubric used in this research. See Appendix A
The reason for the simplification was to eliminate the fine line between extensive interpretation with text evidence and essential interpretation with text evidence. A student response that demonstrated a thorough understanding and personal interpretation with well supporting text evidence was considered a high level response and scored a three. A student response that demonstrated essential understanding and personal response with some supporting text evidence was considered a medium level response and scored a two. If the student response demonstrated partial understanding or personal understanding, it was considered a low level response and scored a one. If the element was not apparent, a zero was scored.

The differentiation of curriculum materials helped in the defining of levels of thinking (Collier, 1997; Winebrenner, 1998). The handouts are based on Bloom's Taxonomy of Thinking. One purpose of these materials was to get teachers to think of ways that create learning activities for the classroom that go beyond the knowledge and comprehension level. The descriptors of the levels helped in creating the rubric for this study. A low level response would be at the knowledge level. A medium response is at the comprehension level and has some supporting evidence. A high level response corresponds to the higher levels of Bloom's taxonomy and is well supported. See Appendix B.

The charts on performance criteria in journal entries aided when defining what would be included in different levels of student writing (McMahon & Raphael, 1997). The criteria included comprehension skills and responses to literature. This was helpful knowing what the literature stated about what student's different levels of response might look like.

Ollmann (1996) looked at seven different reading response formats students used to respond to literature. Bloom's taxonomy was used to assess the level of critical thinking.
Student written responses were scored looking for evidence of higher level thinking in personal response, textual response, and metacognitive response. While this research used Bloom's taxonomy to evaluate the responses of seventh grade students, the identification of knowledge level responses was excluded from the analysis. For the purpose of this study, all of Bloom's taxonomy were identified on the rubric: knowledge level responses were a one, comprehension level responses were a two, and application, analysis, synthesis or evaluation responses were interpreted as a level three response. See Appendix C.

Procedure

Measurement Phase

All subjects were exposed to teacher-led book discussions and instruction about read-alouds of novels used in class. The elements of novels such as characterization, setting, genre, problem/solution, and themes were discussed whole class. A large classroom chart with these literary elements was created about our read aloud novels. Elements of the literary techniques of writers, and connections to other texts and connections to their life experiences were discussed throughout the school year with read-alouds. Examples of literary letters in response to the read-alouds were modeled on the overhead and discussed whole class.

Concurrently, all subjects were asked to write literary letters (Atwell, 1987) in their reading logs about the books that they were independently reading that explained the same literary elements discussed in class related to read-alouds. Their books were self-selected and read during sustained silent reading in school and at home. Each subject received a letter explaining the parts of a literary letter and the expectations of the teacher. A literary
letter was collected in October and November. A copy of the student requirements included in a literary letter follows in Appendix D.

Treatment Phase

In January student-led discussion groups were introduced with teacher instruction. By reading aloud a picture book, *Dandelions* by Eve Bunting, literature discussion group roles were modeled by the teacher to the whole group. The think-sheets were made into overheads and prepared ahead to illustrate to the students some possible responses to the picture book that would be typical parts of a discussion group response. Then small groups formed to read and discuss multiple copies of the same picture book. The group was formed by the subjects' choice to a particular picture book title. This group then stayed together to read two more picture books. Each person in a literature discussion group was responsible to prepare for a particular job in the discussion group. As the groups finished a picture book discussion, they moved on to a different picture book keeping the same group intact. With each new picture book the student's discussion job changed to give practice with different discussion roles. These jobs were outlined on think sheets fashioned after the forms found in Daniels (1994).

A teacher collection of multiple copies of well written picture books with strong characterization and excellent author style were used in the students' first try at literature discussion groups. Picture books were used first because the shorter text allowed more to be accomplished in a shorter time. The list of picture books can be found in Appendix E.

Following the reading and discussion of picture books, starting in March, the entire class read the same novel but participated in different small peer-led discussion groups for this novel. The book read was called *In the Year of the Boar and Jackie Robinson* by Bette
Bao Lord. This allowed for teacher instruction prior to and after the discussion. The teacher instructions included how discussions are conversational, the importance of inclusion of all members of a literature discussion group, the role of the discussion director throughout the discussion, clarification of main ideas, and any additional information needed to understand the story particularly about Chinese culture which was critical to the understanding of the novel. The same think sheets were used for the novel that were used for the picture books.

The process followed as the students read this chapter book to use in their discussion groups. The book was long enough so that each student would have two turns at each of the five discussion group jobs before the end of the book. The think sheets were bound as a small spiral book for each student so that the rotation of discussion jobs was clear. After small group discussion, there was community share about any lingering questions or observations. After the completion of this novel in mid April, students independently wrote a literary letter in their reading log in response to their book.

One more opportunity to participate in small student-led discussion groups followed. This time each member of a small discussion group read the same novel based on their choice of the novels that the teacher provided. The novel selections were all connected to the social studies theme of westward expansion. The list of novel choices can be found in Appendix E.

Following the discussion groups for this set of novels, there was a whole group discussion to find out if there were any common themes, issues or ideas between the novels each group read. The discussion also tied in information about the social studies unit of westward expansion. Each time students used the think sheets for their individual jobs in discussion group. Upon completion of the reading at the end of May, the subjects were
asked to write a literary letter about their chosen novel discussed in literature discussion group.

Return to Measurement Phase

After reading the two novels with literature discussion groups, the students were asked to write a leading log letter about a book that they had read independently and hadn't discussed with anyone. The book chosen was self-selected and read during sustained silent reading time at school and at home.

Data Analysis

Researchers who use time series designs can incorporate group analysis. Analyses using exact non-parametric inferential procedures can be employed for ordinal, interval and categorical data. Such techniques can generate exact p-values without making any distribution assumptions about the populations being compared. The data from this study were analyzed by using directly computed exact p-values by permutation methods. StatXact for Systat (Mehta & Patel, 1992), a statistical analysis program, was used for these analyses. This computer package provided stratified analyses that were used to generate descriptive statistics and exact p-value.

The analysis of the collected data from the student reading logs occurred after the completion of the school year in June. Following the grading of student reading logs, the rubric scores for characterization, theme, writer's craft and summary were entered into Microsoft Excel 97. Excel 97 was used to create Figures 2 through 9. These figures clearly show the time series design apparent in this research. The first section of the figures displays results from the first two reading log letters about books read independently and are considered the measurement. These figures are represented as pretest scores. The second
section of the figures included results from the reading log letters after the intervention of literature discussion groups. These scores represent the treatment scores. The third section shows the results of a return to the measurement condition without treatment. These scores represent posttest scores.

Next, Systat 7.0 for Windows (Wilkinson, 1996) was used to analyze and interpret the data sets presented in this study. Systat is owned by the more widely known statistical analysis company, SPSS. When used well, statistics can be used to elucidate the topic or topics under investigation. In the case of this investigation, descriptive statistics helped to understand the perceived values about the higher level thinking of students participating in the program (Wilkinson, 1996).

Finally, StatXact, a software package that employs p-values based on exact permutational methods was used to analyze the small data set used in this study. Tests of significance were used for the group that did not pass fourth grade proficiency and for the group that was proficient. Tests of statistical significance were also used for three different ability levels. The use of this combination of software applications ensured appropriate analysis of the data. The only assumption used in the processing of the data are the ordinal nature of the data gathered.
CHAPTER IV
PRESENTATION AND ANALYSIS OF DATA

The purpose of this chapter is to present the findings of this study. This research studied the influence of literature discussion groups on student thinking evident in their written reading log letters. Four elements were investigated in students' reading log letters: characterization, theme, writer's craft and summary writing. The null hypothesis that guided this study was as follows: There will be no difference in critical thinking in student reading log letters written about books read independently and books discussed.

First, student performance data are presented for the whole group for each of the four elements. Following is the performance data compared among three small groups comprised of like ability scores (SAI) from the Otis-Lennon Ability Test. Finally, there is a comparison of two groups of students: those who passed the fourth grade reading proficiency to those who failed. The data were analyzed by performing StatXact to measure statistical significance of exact nonparametric inference. Statisticians and data analysts can make reliable inferences by exact or Monte Carlo methods when their data are sparse, heavily tied, or skewed, and the accuracy of the corresponding larger sample theory is in doubt (Mehta & Patel, 1997).

Effectiveness of Literature Discussion Groups

The scores from pretest to posttest phases were computed with a Wilcoxon signed-rank test. The Wilcoxon signed-rank test is analogous to the paired t test for parametric data. The data are represented in the following figures.

The first literary element investigated in this study is characterization. Of the four literary elements, characterization has the highest cumulative mean score in the student
letters with a pre-test mean of 3.237 and a treatment mean 4.474. Figure 2 displays the mean score of the entire 19 subjects for each reading log letter scored. There is a steady increase in thinking about character from the beginning measurement phase through the treatment of literature discussion groups. The fifth student letter scored shows a dip in the mean as students returned to the posttest of reading books independently. This dip in the return to posttest is still higher than the original pretest scores at the beginning.

Figure 2. Cumulative mean scores for characterization

![Cumulative mean scores for characterization graph](image-url)
In Figure 3 a box and whiskers plot shows the distribution of students cumulative scores for character. The characterization scores from reading log letters 1 and 2 are combined in the Pretest box plot. The characterization scores from letters 3 and 4, the treatment phase, are combined in the Posttest box plot. There is a maximum score of six. In the character pretest box the median shows that the central tendency is 3. The posttest box plot during the treatment of literature discussion groups shows there was a shift upwards to a central tendency of 5. There was a shift upward by 99% of the students to the Pretest median of 3 or above. Of the four elements, characterization proved to be the element that students demonstrated the most critical thinking about the books they read independently and books discussed.

Figure 3. Box and whiskers for pre post characterization scores.

The second literary element investigated in this study is theme. Of the four elements, theme showed the greatest growth in student critical thinking. Theme rose by 2.47 mean points from pretest to the second measure during treatment and showed a growth of 1.03 in
the mean between the first discussion book and the second. In Figure 4 the mean scores show positive growth through the treatment and then dips with a return to measurement. The return to measurement without treatment of 1.95 mean points is still higher than either of the letters of the original measurement. When comparing the four literary elements, theme started out with the second lowest cumulative mean score of 1.92 and showed the greatest growth in cumulative mean score rising to 4.39.

Figure 4. Cumulative mean scores for theme
Figure 5 box plot shows the distribution of students' scores about theme. The pretest plot box indicates that the median shows a central tendency of 2. The posttest box plot during the treatment of literature discussion groups the median shows a central tendency of 4.5. There was a move upward beyond the pretest median of 2 by 99% of the students. Students' ability to write critically about theme grew more than any of the other three elements.

Figure 5. Box and whiskers for pre post theme scores.

The third element investigated in this study is writer's craft. Of the four elements the pretest writer's craft mean score was the lowest with a 1.55 and the treatment writer's craft mean score was the lowest with a 3.23. In Figure 6 there is an increase of critical thinking about writer's craft from the beginning measurement mean of 0.84 through the treatment of literature discussion groups with a mean of 2.05. The fifth student letter scored after the treatment shows a dip to the mean score of 1.42. This dip in the return to measurement
without treatment is still higher than the original measurement scores. When comparing the four literary elements investigated, writer's craft started out and finished with the least mean score of critical thinking. Writer's craft is second behind theme in showing the greatest growth in student critical thinking.

Figure 6. Cumulative mean scores for writer's craft

Figure 7 box plot shows the distribution of students' scores about writer's craft. The pretest plot box indicates that the median shows a central tendency of 1.5. The posttest box plot during the treatment of literature discussion groups shows a central tendency of 3. There was a move upward to at or beyond the pretest median of 1.5 by 89% of the students.
The final element investigated in this study is summary writing. Of the four elements investigated, summary showed the third greatest growth behind theme and writer's craft. Summary increased by 1.31 mean points during the treatment and showed a growth of 0.32 between the two collaborative discussion books. In Figure 8 the mean scores show a positive growth through the treatment and then dips with a return to measurement. The return to measurement without treatment score of 2.00 mean points is still higher than the first three student letters scored. When comparing the four literary elements, summary writing started out with the second highest cumulative mean score of 2.68 following characterization. Summary writing ended showing the third largest growth of 1.68 means.
Figure 8. Cumulative mean scores for summary

Figure 9 box plot shows the distribution of students' scores about summary. The pretest plot box indicates that the median shows a central tendency 3. The posttest box plot during the treatment shows a central tendency of 4. There was a positive move to or beyond the pretest median of 3 by 84% of the students. Students' ability to do summary writing increased.
Figure 9. Box and whisker for pre post summary scores.

The statistical analysis yielded findings of positive growth in all four areas of literary elements. In all instances the cumulative mean scores increased from the start of the measurement through the treatment. In all instances the learning cumulative mean scores decreased with the return to measurement without treatment but none decreased to the original level of the measurement.

The students participating in literature discussion groups significantly improved their level of critical thinking in their written responses to shared books. Students as a group profited from literature discussion groups the four elements investigated. The probability for character was p=.001, for theme p<.001, for writer's craft p=.001, and for summary p=.004.
Effect of Ability

The Student Ability Index (SAI) scores from the Otis-Lennon School Ability Test for 17 students were grouped to establish a low level (92 or below SAI), a middle level (93-108 SAI), and a high level (109 and higher SAI) ability group. This figure represents two students less than the first analysis of 19 students because a score was not available for one student and another student's score was much higher than the range of the high group. The scores of the reading log letters of these groups were investigated in relation to a student's ability.

The gain scores were used for the four areas (i.e. characterization, theme, writer's craft, and summary) to determine whether statistically significant changes could be detected. The sign-test compares two related samples and is analogous to the paired t test for parametric data. For each case, the sign-test computes the sign of the difference between two variables. By using a one sample permutation test and exact procedures the answer is a resounding yes. The exact inference one sample permutation test for the low level ability group computed a p=.008, for the middle level ability group a p=.002, and for the high level ability group a p<.001. Participating in literature discussion groups effectively benefited all levels of ability groups.

In all three ability groups the students wrote critically more often about characterization than any other element during the measurement phase. While writing about character remained the highest mean for the low ability group, there was a shift to a higher mean score for theme for the middle and high ability groups. The mean for the baseline in writer's craft for the middle ability group had the highest mean score of 3.00 of the three
groups. Writer's craft proved to be the biggest area of growth for the high ability group and the least for the low ability group.

Effect of Proficiency

The students were grouped into two categories. The first group had 6 students that failed fourth grade reading proficiency and the second group had 13 students that passed fourth grade reading proficiency. The scores of the reading log letters for the two groups were investigated in relation to a student's fourth grade reading proficiency.

The gain scores were used for the four areas (i.e. characterization, theme, writer's craft, and summary) to determine whether statistical significance could be detected. By using a one sample permutation test and exact procedures, the answer is an emphatic yes there was statistical significance. The exact inference one sample permutation test for the students who failed fourth grade reading proficiency was p<.001 and for the students that passed reading proficiency it was p<.001. Participating in literature discussion groups effectively benefited those that failed or passed reading proficiency.

For both groups there was growth in all four areas. The highest scores in the pre-test for both groups were for character and summary. The greatest growth during the treatment for both groups was in theme and writer's craft.
CHAPTER V
SUMMARY, CONCLUSION, RECOMMENDATIONS

The purpose of this chapter is to summarize the research, discuss the findings and draw conclusions from the results. Several suggestions are made using literature discussion groups in further research.

Summary

This study focused on the examination of the effect that literature discussion groups had on students' higher level thinking evident in extended written responses to literature. The purpose of this research was to analyze the differences in fifth graders' literary letters in their reading logs in response to books they read independently and in response to books they discussed. There were four elements investigated in their literary letters and these four elements were assessed using a rubric which evaluated students' higher level thinking. This research was conducted over an eight month period of time with 19 fifth graders.

The small sample size in this study suggested the use of exact non-parametric inferential procedures to generate the statistics. Exact p-values were produced from the data sets. Statistically significant results showed literature discussion groups to be effective with low level, middle level and high level ability students. The difference in the means of the four literary elements between the baseline and the treatment of the three ability groups significantly increased for each group. The same advantage of using literature discussion groups applied to students who failed and for those that passed the fourth grade reading proficiency. Again there was a significant gain in the means between the measurement and the treatment. There was significant growth of higher level thinking for the entire sample in all of the four elements during the treatment.
The research findings of this study support the research literature concerning literature response, literature discussion groups, and reading development. In this study, students significantly developed higher levels of thinking about discussed books in their written responses as also noted in earlier research literature (Anzul, 1993; Kletzein & Hushion, 1992; Raphael & McMahon, 1994; Villaume et al., 1994). Students became reflective readers to create meaning in their discussion and writing (McMahon & Raphael, 1997; Samway et al., 1991). Students became metacognitive about their reading and writing and the processes of literacy (Spiegel, 1998; Strickland, 1995). This research study about literature discussion groups provided opportunities for students to analyze, focus, recall, rethink, and gain new insights with social support. Student comprehension was evidenced by their contributions to the group discussions and their written responses about shared novels (Nystrand et al., 1993; McMahon & Raphael, 1997).

The findings of this study support the use of literature discussion groups with students having a broad range of ability and backgrounds. Students of varying abilities benefited by the participation in literature discussion groups (Keegan & Shrage, 1991; Wollman-Bonilla, 1994; Worthy, 1996). Diverse learners with many differences were respected as the students from different backgrounds sustained topics about their books, spontaneously compared books and authors, and were highly motivated readers (Goatley, et al., 1995; Hiebert & Colt, 1989; Hill & Van Horn, 1995; Krueger & Townshend, 1997; McMahon & Raphael, 1997; Samway et al., 1991).

This research study extends the current body of knowledge about the implementation of literature discussion groups as a reading strategy that supports the reader as he/she creates
meaning, responds to the reading-writing process, and increases higher level thinking. From the research reviewed, there were very little quantitative findings measuring reader response and levels of thinking. The findings of this study show a positive influence on the use of literature discussion groups to increase students higher level thinking.

Conclusions

The results of this study indicated that students participating in literature discussion groups improved significantly in their extended written responses about books. This is a proven strategy that strengthens the reading-writing connection and supports literacy in a balanced language arts program. After participating in discussion groups when asked to write critically about a book, the students began with the opportunity to reread text, to question passages, and to clarify understanding with social support before writing critically about the book. This active engagement with the text improved their reading and increased the level of their thinking in their writing. As the researcher read the journal entries from an entire school year, it was evident and gratifying that students not only wrote much lengthier responses but that the responses showed higher levels of thinking that reflected their voices.

It was apparent during the research that the students were highly motivated to read their books and to gather with peers to discuss their novel. Rarely did a student come to their discussion group unprepared to fulfill their job for which they were responsible. This was very gratifying for the researcher. A rich community spirit was built by participating in what the students called their book club. By assessing their written reading log responses, the higher level thinking that was heard during discussion often appeared in their writing. When students construct and write about ideas from books, it shows that they've learned and took ownership of those ideas.
When students discuss and write about writer's craft, students investigate excellent examples of different authors' techniques and ways of writing that hook their readers. It was so exciting to have students discuss and write about vivid sensory words, figurative language, and vocabulary choices used in their shared novels. The students acted like literate people who engaged with others to talk about books. In their literary letters some students were even able to compare the writing of several authors. The hope is that when excellent examples of language are read and discussed that students will use these examples as models for their own writing and incorporate them into their own writing. The use of literature discussion groups is one strategy that truly promotes the writing process.

Looking for the big ideas or issues in books can be hard for young readers. In this study, the use of literature discussion groups helped students go beneath the surface of a story to see other layers of meaning in an author's writing. With the search for bigger meaning, the growth in learning about theme and writing summaries significantly increased through the school year. For students to discuss theme or write a summary shows their comprehension of the story because they must go beyond the knowledge level of just retelling the plot to write about big ideas.

Characterization is key to narrative writing. It was evident that students knew more about the characters in their books than any other literary element. The students' literary letters did go beyond the physical description of characters and talked about their own feelings and personal connections with the characters. Of the four elements, character had the least growth but that was because students started out with a higher understanding of character than the other elements. Theme and writer's craft showed the most growth of the four elements in the student's literary letters.
It is this researcher's opinion that the use of literature discussion groups truly motivates students to actively engage with the texts that they are reading. During this strategy, students are not searching for answers to the teacher's questions but to inquiries of their own and of their peers. Clarification of the text is made in a supportive social experience. The structure of the reading class must be set by the teacher but the topics to discuss and choices of books are best decided by the students.

Literature discussion groups establish an authentic way to differentiate the curriculum for different ability students. Students make higher level connections to their lives and other pieces of literature and help others think about issues not thought of before. The ability to frame open-ended questions is learned. Students who participate in book clubs view themselves as successful readers and discuss the strategies readers use for better understanding and extension of thinking. This researcher believes that literature discussion groups helps to create life-long readers.

Recommendations

During this research project, students were asked to write a literary letter talking about the books they read. The directions for the literary letter did not give the student much direction. One recommendation is for the students to write a more structured written response than a general literary letter. Higher levels of thinking and use of text support to support opinions would be greater if the students received guidance to achieve the goal of better extended response. For instance, where students were simply asked to write about character, a more powerful request would be to ask the students to give three outstanding character traits and then find a quote from the book supports the student's opinion. Extending thinking about characterization even more, students could be asked what
technique the author used to establish this character trait. Was it the character's language or actions? Did the character react to another character or did the reader see the character through the eyes of another character? The student's written responses would be more in-depth and be an avenue for extensions of thought.

The more teachers can structure a way for students to engage in thinking about books and ideas the more powerful a response will be written by the students. My second recommendation would be for graphic organizers for the students to organize their ideas about books. These may range from character maps to plot outlines. They still need to be open-ended but there needs to be a place where students think about an element and then search for the part of the book that backs up their opinion before they write about them.

The most successful literature groups experienced in this study were the ones centered around our social studies theme of westward expansion. Students were able to connect their learning about the United States movement west to the novels that they had read. The community share after reading the four different novels was also stronger and more in-depth as students worked to link the common threads between the novels. Students created a list of generalities about the characteristics of the pioneers that moved west. Students participated in one of the best whole group discussions we had this year. The recommendation would be to have sets of books that correspond to the social studies curriculum and connect with the language arts curriculum.

Next year this researcher plans to incorporate non fiction books into literature discussion groups. The school district has pointed out that our students generally do well on the reading proficiency when the reading is fiction but are less proficient when reading non fiction. The new nonfiction tradebooks are excellent and I believe that students would learn
how to extract information from expository writing with the social support found in a discussion group. Summary writing is another skill students need for proficiency. This researcher will continue to work on summary writing both for fiction and non fiction.

Placing the responsibility for learning onto the student requires a teacher and a classroom that is set up with many opportunities that promote thinking and student success. Whether reading fiction or non fiction educators continue to look for ways to increase students' reading and writing abilities. Literature discussion groups provide a way that is motivating to young readers and writers and produces successful results for all students.
REFERENCES


International Reading Association Development Project. (1988). *New Directions in Reading Instruction*. Michigan Reading Association and Colorado Council for IRA.


Appendix A

Paper presented on preparing for the Proficiency using materials from the Department of Education of the State of Ohio.

Extended-response items will be scored on a 4-point scale based on these general guidelines.

A 4-point response provides evidence of extensive interpretation and thoroughly addresses the points relevant to the item. It is well organized, elaborate, and thorough. It is relevant, comprehensive, detailed, and demonstrates a thorough understanding of the concept or item. It contains logical reasoning and communicates effectively and clearly. It thoroughly addresses the important elements of the item.

A 3-point response provides evidence that an essential interpretation has been made. It is thoughtful and reasonably accurate. It indicates an understanding of the concept or item, communicates adequately, and generally reaches reasonable conclusions. It contains some combination of the following flaws: minor flaws in reasoning, neglects to address some aspect of the concept or item, or some details might be missing.

A 2-point response is mostly accurate and relevant. It contains some combination of the following flaws: incomplete evidence of interpretation, unsubstantiated statements made about the text, an incomplete understanding of the concept or item, lacks comprehensiveness, faulty reasoning, or unclear communication.

A 1-point response demonstrates a partial understanding of the concept or item but is sketchy or unclear. It indicates some effort beyond restating the item. It contains some combination of the following flaws: little evidence of interpretation, unorganized and incomplete, failure to address most aspects of the concept or item, major flaws in reasoning that led to invalid conclusions, a definite lack of understanding of the concept or item, or demonstrates no coherent meaning from the test.

A 0 is assigned if there is no response or if the response indicates no understanding of the concept or item.

A N/S (Not Scorable) is assigned if the response is unreadable, illegible, or written in a language other than English.
## Levels of Thinking

### Bloom’s Taxonomy

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Definition</th>
<th>Key Words</th>
<th>Product Ideas</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Synthesis</strong></td>
<td>New and original ideas are created with the knowledge and understanding we have gathered</td>
<td>• compose • invent • create •</td>
<td>• new game • invention • poem •</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>design • develop • hypothesize</td>
<td>news article • TV show • new</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Evaluation</strong></td>
<td>We know so much about a topic we can find the positive and negative and the value of an idea</td>
<td>• rate • judge • rank • criticize</td>
<td>• debate • trial • voting campaign •</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• choose • recommend</td>
<td>advertisement • editorial • letter</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Analysis</strong></td>
<td>ideas are separated and examined closely, taken apart, and we look for evidence</td>
<td>• compare • contrast • categorize</td>
<td>Venn diagram • advertisement •</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• classify • inspect • survey</td>
<td>panel discussion • taped interview •</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Application</strong></td>
<td>the facts and understanding are used to show how to solve problems</td>
<td>• apply • model • organize •</td>
<td>chart or graph • demonstration •</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>select • show • experiment</td>
<td>game • letter • timeline • book</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Comprehension</strong></td>
<td>checks understanding of main ideas</td>
<td>• describe • show • explain •</td>
<td>magazine • crossword puzzle •</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>retell • define • match</td>
<td>project cube • game • poetry •</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Knowledge</strong></td>
<td>recall of information, facts, definitions, or observations</td>
<td>• tell about • observe • recall</td>
<td>diagram • dictionary • poster •</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• name • memorize • list</td>
<td>fact file • filmstrip • illustrated story</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Jackie Collier 1998
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Definition</th>
<th>Trigger Words</th>
<th>Products</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>SYNTHESIS</strong></td>
<td>Re-form individual parts to make a new whole</td>
<td>Compose, Design, Invent, Create, Hypothesize, Construct, Forecast, Rearrange parts, Imagine</td>
<td>Lesson Plan, Song, Poem, Story, Ad, Invention</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>EVALUATION</strong></td>
<td>Judge value of something vis-a-vis criteria</td>
<td>Judge, Evaluate, Give opinion, Viewpoint, Prioritize, Recommend, Critique</td>
<td>Decision, Rating/Grades, Editorial, Debate, Critique, Defense/Verdict</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>ANALYSIS</strong></td>
<td>Understand how parts relate to a whole</td>
<td>Investigate, Classify, Categorize, Compare, Contrast, Solve</td>
<td>Survey, Questionnaire, Plan, Solution, Report, Prospectus</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Understand structure and motive</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Note fallacies</td>
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<td><strong>APPLICATION</strong></td>
<td>Transfer knowledge learned in one situation to another</td>
<td>Demonstrate, Use guides, maps, charts, etc., Build, Cook</td>
<td>Recipe, Model, Artwork, Demonstration, Crafts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>COMPREHENSION</strong></td>
<td>Demonstrate basic understanding of concepts and curriculum</td>
<td>Restate, Give examples, Explain, Summarize, Translate, Show symbols, Edit</td>
<td>Drawing, Diagram, Response to question, Revision</td>
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<td>Translate to other words</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>KNOWLEDGE</strong></td>
<td>Ability to remember something previously learned</td>
<td>Tell, Recite, List, Memorize, Remember, Define, Locate</td>
<td>Workbook pages, Quiz, Test, Exam, Vocabulary, Facts in isolation</td>
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<td>Appendix C</td>
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<td>Low degree</td>
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<td>Demonstrates a partial understanding, or personal interpretation</td>
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<td>Medium degree</td>
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<td>Demonstrates essential understanding, and personal interpretation with some supporting evidence</td>
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<td>High degree</td>
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<td>Demonstrates thorough understanding and personal interpretation with well supporting evidence</td>
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<td>0</td>
<td>Not Apparent</td>
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<td>Descriptive identification</td>
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<td>Retelling</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Lists physical traits</td>
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<td>2</td>
<td>sumanizes traits/ neglects some important aspect</td>
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<td>3</td>
<td>Personal reaction motivation</td>
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<td>Connection to plot, self or other texts</td>
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<td>Connect personality traits to action</td>
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<td>Analyze</td>
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<td>Not Apparent</td>
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<td>Retells story</td>
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<td>List of events</td>
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<td>2</td>
<td>Lacks detailed discussion of major issues</td>
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<td>Discusses secondary issues</td>
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<td>Supports big ideas</td>
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<td>Author's purpose focus on major issues</td>
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<td>Generalizations about life</td>
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<td>Personal reaction</td>
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<td>Recall favorite parts</td>
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<td>Lists</td>
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<td>Evaluative statement</td>
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<td>Some text evidence</td>
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<td>Evaluative statement of writing techniques with text evidence</td>
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<td>Analysis of style</td>
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<td>Sensory language</td>
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<td>Figures of speech connections</td>
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<td>Lists details</td>
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<td>Small details</td>
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<td>2</td>
<td>Somewhat accurate containing some of the big ideas</td>
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<td></td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Inclusion of all important big ideas</td>
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</table>

Appendix D

Monday, September 28, 1998

Dear Class,

This year we will be reading a lot. One thing readers do is to keep track of their reading. You have a chart in the back of your Reading Log to keep a record of the books and authors you've experienced. I hope that you will be proud of your list when you've completed fifth grade. A personal list will also help you spot trends in your reading. Your list should include books of different genres. Special authors that you especially want to remember can be starred.

Each time you finish a book jot down the title and author. Check and see how long it took you to read. Then I would like you to write a letter to me about your book. The first draft should be written in your writer's notebook. Edit and revise your letter in your writer's notebook. Then when it looks and sounds great, copy the letter carefully into your Reading Log. Remember the format of a friendly letter. Sign your letter.

Your letter should be written after you have reflected about your book. Writing is thinking! The letter that you write should show lots of thinking about the story and characters. It should show lots of effort. Whenever you make a statement about the book, you must back up your opinion with an example from the book. That means you must reread to find those parts. Tell me what you think about the story. How does it connect with your life? What is something that you learned from the book?

A basic letter would have three paragraphs. The first paragraph would tell information about the title, author, setting, and genre. The second paragraph could be a thoughtful summary. It should include the overall theme of the book. A summary is not a retelling of the plot. The third paragraph could tell how you connected the story or characters to your own life. Tell why. It might tell how this book reminds you of another book. Tell why. You should tell me about ways the author wrote the book that made the story excellent reading. Your letter must contain exquisite details. You might decide to write about something that you learned from the book. Remember that details make for interesting reading.

I look forward to your wonderful letters. I will write back to you in your Reader's Log. I hope you give your letter a lot of thought and write an extended response!

Sincerely,
Appendix E

Picture books used to introduce learn the individual student jobs used during literature discussion groups.

Miss Rumphius by Barbara Cooney

Uncle Jed's Barbershop by Margaree King Mitchell

Pink and Say by Patricia Poloco

Alejandro's Gift by Richard Alpert

Sweet Clara and the Freedom Quilt by Deborah Hopkinson
Appendix F

Novels used during the treatment phase. All of the novels choices supported the social studies theme of westward expansion.

Jim Ugly by Sid Fleischman

Journey to Nowhere by Mary Jane Auch

Dear Levi by Elvira Woodruff

The Gentleman Outlaw and Eli by Mary Downing Hahn

Caddie Woodlawn by Carol Ryrie Brink