A QUASI-EXPERIMENTAL ANALYSIS OF THE EFFECT OF LITERATURE CIRCLES ON STUDENTS’ READING ATTITUDES

MASTER’S THESIS

Submitted to the Department of Elementary Education, University of Dayton, in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree Master of Science in Education

by

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April 14, 1999

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DEDICATION

First of all, I would like to thank my husband who supported me through every step of my graduate work. In addition, I would like to thank my son whose big blue eyes implored me to finish!

I can't fail to acknowledge my faculty advisor who never stopped challenging me to do my best, and who always reminded me that the thesis is not a great American novel!!!

Finally, I dedicate this research to my 1998-1999 fifth grade class - Without their cooperation and support, this work would have no meaning.
CHAPTER I
INTRODUCTION

Purpose of the Study

Imagine a classroom where children beg for more reading time. Books pack every desk. All students list reading as their favorite subject. Students feel compelled to finish class work so that they may continue reading a book of choice. In the content areas, they devour books like chocolate. At home, they shun television and curl up with a favorite book.

Most Americans agree with Mahler (1995) that all student learning is rooted in reading. In life and in the classroom, reading is fundamental for success. If that is so, why are Americans spending four times as much leisure time watching television or listening to the radio than they are spending on reading (Selsky, 1990)? Students no longer spend quiet evenings at home with a good book. In school, they rush through assignments so they can run home to watch their favorite television show.

Teachers, parents, and even politicians have begun to express concern about students' attitudes toward reading as it affects students in Ohio. Ohio Senate Bill 55 emphasizes reading with clear implications for Ohio reading classrooms. According to The Ohio Department of Education (1998) beginning with the July 1, 1998 school year, districts must begin assessing student reading skills at the end of grades one, two, and three; identifying students who are reading below grade level; providing intervention for such students; and offering intense summer remediation for third grade students reading below grade level. Furthermore, beginning with the July 1, 2001 school year, districts must begin retaining fourth grade students who are deemed "below proficient" on the fourth-grade proficiency test in reading. Besides retention, school districts must offer summer remediation for students marked "below proficient" on the fourth-grade reading proficiency test.
Reading proficiency is clearly of prime importance to legislators. In sixth grade, only the reading proficiency standards increased for the 1997-1998 school year. Also, reading proficiency scores will be the only scores that will increase for the 1999-2000 school year. Lack of increase in the other four proficiency areas—writing, science, citizenship, and science—stresses the importance of reading in education. Can a student achieve success in any area without acquiring reading skills? If this is the case, are students' reading skills affected by their attitudes toward reading?

Swanson (1982) suggested that determining programs which positively affect students' reading attitudes can make a difference. If that is so, then educators must determine which programs influence their students' attitudes. The author of this study believes that integration of literature circles into the intermediate reading classroom will significantly influence readers' attitudes.

Literature circles completely challenge traditional reading instruction. As opposed to teacher-led class discussions, students lead and control reading discussions in small, self-directed groups. By taking control of their reading, the students become sold on the process. Simpson (1994-1995) disclosed that students who have participated in literature circles report that literature circles "helped me 100% with my reading" (p. 293). She quoted a student as saying:

Sometimes you read a book and later can't remember anything about it, but talking about and writing about and discussing a book you've read with other people helps you to think about it more and later on probably remember everything about it (p. 293).

Samway et al. (1991) found that literature circles changed reluctant and inexperienced readers into more confident, engaged and knowledgeable readers. It seems that literature circles seem to appeal to students and thus enhance their reading attitudes.
Statement of Problem

The purpose of this study was to analyze the effects of literature circles on the attitudes of fifth grade students toward reading.

Hypotheses

There will be no significant difference between the pretest and posttest mean attitude scores of fifth graders toward reading after the students have been taught reading through the use of literature circles.

There will be no significant difference between the pretest and posttest mean attitude scores of fifth grade females toward reading after the females have been taught reading through the use of literature circles.

There will be no significant difference between the pretest and posttest mean attitude scores of fifth grade males toward reading after the males have been taught reading through the use of literature circles.

Assumptions

In order to carry out this study, the author made several assumptions. First, the author assumed that the student respondents were honest on the semantic differential. It was also assumed that students comprehended the semantic differential. Further, since the author created the semantic differential based on the literature, content validity was assumed (Isaac & Michael, 1995). Instrument reliability was also assumed.
Limitations

One limitation of this design, One-Group Pretest-Posttest was the sample size. From a stratified, nonprobability sample, (Best and Kahn, 1989), generalizations were applicable only to a small population. A second limitation was geography. The participants all resided in a community which fosters unusually high academic expectations. Third, maturation may have limited the study. Students were be pre- and posttested after a lengthy period of time. Pretesting procedures may have altered students' responses on the posttest which possibly further limited this study. In addition, this study may have been limited by the testing instruments. The design of this study also lent itself to the limitations of history. Students' outside experiences with reading over the testing period may have limited the study. Finally, the interaction of selection with maturation, history, and testing could have limited this study. There may have been additional subject characteristics other than the treatment variable which affected the posttest scores.
Definition of Terms

Intermediate Students
For the purpose of this study, intermediate students are fourth, fifth, and sixth graders.

Literature Circles
Literature circles are groups of three to eight students who have read the same work and have gathered to discuss their reading (Scott, 1994).

Ohio Proficiency Test
The Ohio Proficiency Test is a criterion based test given to all Ohio elementary public school students in grades four and six. Proficiency tests evaluate students in five categories which are reading, writing, mathematics, science, and citizenship. Additionally, ninth and twelfth graders must take a proficiency test. However, for this report, the author refers only to the elementary tests.

Reading
Reading is the process of constructing meaning from written text. It is a complex skill requiring the coordination of a number of interrelated sources of information. (Anderson, 1985 as cited in Dowhower, 1988).

Reading Attitude
Reading attitude is the mental position or feeling with regard to reading (Woolf, 1974).
CHAPTER II
REVIEW OF THE RELATED LITERATURE

Much has been written about literature circles. In this chapter the author reviews some of the related literature. The chapter is divided into three sections. In the first section, the author describes various elements of literature circles. Secondly, the author presents the role of the teacher in the implementation of literature circles. Examining some of the strengths and weaknesses of literature circles is the final component of this chapter.

Elements of Literature Circles

According to Daniels (1994, p. 30), Short and Kaufman “get credit for assigning the name ‘literature circles’ to this special small-group literature discussion structure, kid-led groups that show the genuine features of cooperative learning and student-centeredness.” Since Short introduced literature circles in her 1986 dissertation, many variations of literature circles have been used. Most literature circles exhibit many of the following elements of literature circles. Pure literature circles exhibit most or all of the them. (Daniels, 1994).

The first element of literature circles is student choice (Daniels, 1994; Simpson, 1994-1995; Samway et al., 1991). Instead of teachers deciding upon reading materials, students must choose their own reading materials (Roller & Beed, 1994). Allowing students to choose their own reading materials is important because they have some say in what they read (Simpson, 1994-1995). Children report higher motivation for reading when given the chance to choose their own reading material (Palmer and Codling, 1994).

There are many ways to ensure that literature circles allow for student choice. Teachers may encourage readers to venture out into new genres by limiting the book selections to four or five preselected novels (Samway, et al., 1991). Initially teachers
introduce books by giving book talks and then asking children to choose from among
them. Many teachers ask children to note their book choices on secret ballots without
any interaction with peers. This eliminates peer pressure directing student choice.
Furthermore, as a way to encourage meaningful book selection, it may be valuable for
the teacher to suggest books to individual students. In contrast, the teacher may form
a group and let them decide on the reading materials as a whole (Simpson, 1994-1995).

A second element of literature circles is group formation (Daniels, 1994; Evans,
1996; Samway et al., 1991). Small temporary groups should be formed based on
students' book choice. Instead of organizing groups based on ability or behavior,
groups grow out of student book selection. This eliminates tracking, homogeneous
grouping, and encourages students to learn from one another (Daniels, 1994).
Teachers may give book chats on preselected books and let the students choose
which book to read (Daniels, 1994; Samway et al., 1991; Simpson, 1994-1995; Evans,
1996). On the other hand, students may initiate group formation independently based
upon a common interest like immigration or child abuse (Noll, 1994). Furthermore,
students may bring unique books to the circle (Roller & Beed, 1994). Students' book
selection is the basis for all grouping in literature circles.

Each group reading a different book is a third element of literature circles
(Daniels, 1994). In one classroom, four or five circles may be meeting and/or reading
simultaneously (Daniels, 1994). On the other hand, each group could meet one at a
time with the teacher (Simpson, 1994-1995). Either way, a pure literature circle does
not develop from the use of one class novel.

The fourth element of this pure type of literature circle is that the groups control
regular meetings (Daniels, 1994; Samway, et al., 1991; Evans, 1996). At their first
meeting, the groups determine the reading calendar. Groups may choose to nominate
a group coordinator (Simpson, 1994-1995). The teacher schedules a daily time for all circles; reading time and meeting time must be preset so that students may organize their reading and meeting agenda. Within each group, students hold each other accountable for completing assignments, which proves to be quite motivating (Daniels, 1994).

The fifth element of literature circles is that the students must use written or drawn notes to guide their discussions (Daniels, 1994). Role sheets are one way to structure students’ notes. Daniels (1994) suggested using predesigned role sheets during students’ first experiences with literature circles. Role sheets direct discussions but may be discarded as students develop their own discussion tactics. Students may also use sticky notes (Simpson, 1994-1995) or journals (Evans, 1996). On sticky notes students mark the text with responses to reading. In the group, they exchange and note their responses. A two sided chart can also be used to focus notes (O’Flahavan, 1994-1995). One side of the chart clarifies group interaction rules, and the other side highlights reader interpretations. The teacher may or may not collect these artifacts for evaluation purposes.

The written notes support students’ development of discussion topics which is the next element of literature circles (Daniels, 1994). The teacher does not create the questions or lead the exchange. In sharp contrast, Gavelek and Raphael (1996), pointed out that traditional models are:

characterized by teachers’ dominating classroom talk, students’ responding to questions provided at the end of stories or within teachers’ manuals, and students’ lacking opportunities to participate in meaningful discussions with both their teacher and their peers (Denyer & Florio-Ruane, 1995; Ulichny & Watson-Gegeo, 1989). (p.183)

Typically, students in literature circles prepare their notes before the meeting (Daniels,
1994; O’Flahavan, 1994-1995; Samway, et al., 1991). As mentioned earlier, students use their responses to direct the group discussion, and teachers might also use those written notes for student and group assessment.

Another element of literature circles is that group meetings mirror “open, natural conversations” (Daniels, 1994, p. 23). Students respond naturally to details in the text which interest them. Discussions need not focus on explicit literary elements, although one author suggested that when students met to discuss a book, they initially sought clarification by “constructing simple meaning” (Sebesta, 1997, p. 547). From there, they moved onto “grand conversations” (Sebesta, 1997, p. 547) where they became personally involved with the literature. Similarly, Commeyras & Sumner (1996) found that when students gain control over their learning, they assume more responsibility for ensuring understanding and for developing their own learning process.

Playing an assortment of rotating roles is yet another element of pure literature circles (Daniels, 1994; Katz, Kuby, Hobgood, 1997). Of the roles, Daniels (1994) wrote:

> These basic roles are designed to invite different cognitive perspectives on a text (drawing a response, reading a passage aloud, debating interpretations connecting to one’s own life, creating a summary, tracking the scene, focusing on words, tuning in to one character). (p. 25)

In the beginning, students may need structured role sheets to teach them how to develop each role. For every novel, each student plays a variety of roles within the unit. One day they lead the summary, and the next day they illustrate some aspect of their reading. Rotating the roles is as significant as employing the role. When students get the opportunity to vary the angle from which they are looking at a piece of literature, they develop new perspectives about it.

In literature circles, an element is that the teacher serves as a facilitator. Most
of the teacher’s role in this type of literature circle is organizational, managerial, and logical (Daniels, 1994). The teacher evaluates reading combined with student and group input. Because teachers do not direct daily reading lessons, they have more time to view each child’s reading work carefully (Evans, 1996). In assessing students’ work, the teacher hopes to facilitate more growth in each circle.

Creating a lively atmosphere is another element of literature circles. Daniels (1994) suggested that literature circles should create a fun, playful classroom atmosphere. He argued children learn best from play and remain most engaged when classroom activities are fun.

Daniels also pointed out that forming new groups based on new reading choices is another element of true literature circles. This remixing of students allows them to meet with new perspectives, new challenges, and new ideas.

Pure literature circles combine all of the above elements. However, many teachers adapt the purist literature circle concept to meet their needs and to meet their students’ needs. This is why the role of the teacher is discussed in the following section.

Teacher Roles In Literature Circles

When using literature circles in the classroom, the teacher plays a variety of roles when using literature circles in the intermediate classroom. In this section, the writer describes the teacher’s role in more detail.

One teacher role is promoting participation through book talks and organization (Simpson, 1994-1995; Daniels, 1994; Samway, et al., 1991). This is one of the teacher’s first tasks. Before beginning a literature circle program, the teacher selects a group of novels from which students may choose. Books should deal with issues related to student interest, should be literally challenging (i.e. plot, theme, style, genre, theme), and should be at students’ independent reading level. After the teacher has
read each novel (Simpson, 1994-1995), the teacher introduces each book to the class using book talks. Each book talk is intended to generate enthusiasm and interest in the book while introducing story elements. Based on book talks, students nominate three book they would like to read. So that they are not swayed by their peers’ choices, the teacher may choose to ask students to nominate books independently by indicating their choice on a secret ballot. Additionally, teachers may guide special education students toward appropriate books. That means that all readers may be encouraged to choose books which match their reading ability. Based on book preference, the teacher forms literature circles. If too many children elect the same book, the teacher may use a lottery system to determine which children read their first choice book.

Once the groups are selected, but before they actually meet, the the role of the teacher is to organize rules and guidelines for conducting the literature circles (Simpson, 1994-1995). Teachers and students may develop group guidelines together, or the teacher may teach them autonomously. Nonetheless, before groups initially meet, rules must be set to ensure participation and individual safety (Commeyras & Sumner, 1996). O’Flahavan (1994-1995, p.355) gave examples of the following group rules: “Don’t interrupt; Pay attention; Speak one at a time; Don’t dominate the discussion and; Don’t put anyone on the spot.” Without set group rules, the group will have trouble cultivating discourse.

In addition to setting group rules in place before the circle gathers, the teacher’s role of developing discussion guidelines with the students helps define discourse expectations (Commeyras & Sumner, 1996). Traditional reading exchanges are centralized around the teacher’s participation (Cazden, 1986 as cited in O’Flahavan, 1994-1995). However, researchers and teachers are now realizing that this traditional reading structure inhibits student response (Barnes, Barnes & Clark, as cited in
O’Flahavan, 1994-1995). Teachers may begin teaching questioning techniques by using whole class read alouds (Commeyras & Sumner, 1996). Sebesta (1997) suggested that the best reader interaction is based on teacher modeling. When teachers model their own “shared transactions” (Sebesta, 1997, p. 545) with literature, students begin to explore issues to make sense of their reading and their lives (Commeyras & Sumner, 1996). By modeling and explaining these discussion practices, the teacher sets the stage for appropriate literature circles sessions.

While groups meet, one role tackled by the teacher is that of participant observer (Sebesta, 1997). Teachers should move freely among groups. They should watch the students and listen to them. In doing so, teachers might identify students or groups causing discipline problems. A group may have problems cooperating with each other, or they may sway off-task. In that case, teachers should redirect the difficult student or group. Additionally, teachers might notice students or groups failing to grasp the book’s meaning. When groups or individuals appear to have difficulty with book comprehension, teachers should promote participation by helping members clarify or summarize important ideas. Readers who do not understand will participate more fully when they understand (Gilles, 1994). Perhaps a teacher might ask, “Why do you think that?” Or maybe the teacher will slow down the group by saying, “I want to hear what John said again.” By participating him/herself, the teacher models in action.

Furthermore, as a participant observer, the teacher may capitalize on significant literary responses by framing students’ ideas. Teachers become “framers” (O’Flahavan, 1994-1995, p. 355) when they help students gain perspective on their thinking. Smith (1993 as cited in Gilles, 1996, p. 9) recalled, “I wanted to have at least one group member (me) who could seize opportunities when students began moving toward more literary ways of responding, and who could then illuminate and share their significance.” Teachers can address reading, writing, and oral language
objectives when they elicit and frame students' ideas (O'Flahavan 1994-1995). Teachers in the framer role participate by asking groups questions like, "How do you know the character is mad?" (O'Flahavan, 1994-1995). Participation in the groups inspires these invaluable impromptu lessons.

During meeting time the teacher must also intervene and collaborate with non-functioning groups (Gilles, 1994; O'Flahavan, 1994-1995). Redirecting off-task groups and individuals or reminding them of rules and guidelines leads to more focused interactions for groups. By becoming a participant observer, the teacher enhances group satisfaction. Reconstructing roadblocks is an important teacher role in the implementation of literature circles.

With literature circles that require little regulation, the teacher often sports the role of coach (O'Flahavan, 1994-1995). In this case, the teacher concentrates his/her effort during the opening and closing sessions of the circles and gives the group more control over the discussion. First, the teacher orients readers before they meet. During this orientation, students are briefly reminded of the rules and discussion guidelines. From there, the groups shift to their peer discussion groups, and the teacher waits until afterwards to continue his/her role. After meetings conclude, the teacher debriefs the class. Instead of teaching impromptu lessons within the circle, concepts may be taught based on the groups reflections. Again, this teacher role works most effectively for experienced literature circle participants who can and will regulate their own discussions. "Good teachers today are different from good teachers 50 years ago," argued Sebesta (1997, p. 544). A good teacher knows when he/she can relinquish control.

Evaluator is another role of the teacher when using literature circles (Daniels, 1994; Gavelek and Raphael, 1996). First of all, teachers must evaluate books for use in the circles. Second, teachers must evaluate groups to determine the appropriate
amount of teacher interaction. Third, teachers must evaluate individual student reading progress. Does each student participate to their full capability? Does he/she come to the circle prepared? Has the child responded to and comprehended the literature? Teachers may choose to collect artifacts for evaluating students. Journals, sticky notes, charts, and role sheets all serve as individual documentation. Fourth, the teacher must evaluate the group progress. Did the group create meaning together? Did they complete the novel? Did they take turns and use time wisely? To do so, many teachers create group progress sheets. Group meetings may be video or tape recorded.

So that each literature circle experience becomes more successful, each child and each group must identify its strengths and weaknesses. From these strengths and weaknesses, the groups set goals for future circles. Group critique sheets may be used here, too. Some teachers use a fish bowl technique (Daniels, 1994) to encourage students to evaluate themselves and one another. In this case, the teacher asks the class to watch one literature circle in action. After watching the meeting, the class then critiques it. Also, teachers might conference with individual group members to gain insight.

The preceding paragraphs outline the role played by the teacher in the implementation of literature circles. Benefits and weaknesses of literature circles are presented by the author in the following paragraphs.

Benefits and Weaknesses of Literature Circles

Literature circles are a relatively new idea, so research is limited. However, studies of teachers using literature circles support idea that the use of literature circles in the classroom are advantageous. Nonetheless, the use of literature circles is not without a few weaknesses.
Benefits

One benefit of using literature circles is the small group size. The small groups used in literature circles benefit the reader because they compel total involvement (Daniels, 1994). Too often whole class discussions are led by the teacher and supported with the ideas of few students. Research suggests that talk leads to deeper comprehension. Students who talk to other students verify and clarify opinions and ideas. Research showed that this talk leads to deeper comprehension (Gilles, 1994). Perhaps that is why when the teacher directs the dialogue many readers fail to connect with the lesson. In a classroom of twenty or twenty-five children, it is difficult for all voices to be heard.

On the other hand by encouraging total participation, literature circles discussions involve more readers than whole class discussions. Without competing against a plethora of hands in response to one teacher question, participants frequently share ideas. As a matter of fact, no hand raising is necessary when circles are running appropriately. Like a natural discussion, students contribute as thoughts come to mind. From vocabulary to characters, deep connections with the books elicit animated, lively discussions (Samway et al., 1991).

Unlike partaking in the intimate literature circle, participation in whole class reading discussions is a risk. For many adolescents, risking a wrong or dumb idea in front of an exclusive group of classmates is much less threatening. Therefore, normally shy or quiet students feel free to contribute to the small group. Students say, “It’s a lot easier to discuss books in small groups than in whole class discussions (Simpson, 1994-1995, p. 290). In doing so, the circle discussion provides students with the opportunity to communicate some knowledge he/she might not normally express (Johnston, Nolan & Berry, 1993).

Because it is a less threatening environment for offering opinions, the use of
literature circles benefit reluctant readers, too (Simpson, 1994-1995). Special needs students feel more comfortable to offer their opinions in front of a small group than in front of the class. Additionally, students who fail to complete the reading or who fail to fully comprehend the literature may come to the group, listen, and ask questions as needed. Listening is still learning and inspiring (Simpson, 1994-1995). As a result, they do not get too discouraged or give up on their reading. Literature circles provide opportunities for much more student participation than regular reading discussions.

Students' enthusiastic attitudes toward reading is a benefit of the use of literature circles that can not be discounted (Daniels, 1994; Samway, et al., 1991; Noll, 1994). Students reported that before using literature circles they dreaded reading time, but that when they participated in literature circles they could not wait for reading time (Samway, et al., 1991). Children using the program are quoted as saying, “I loved doing this program...” (Simpson, 1994-1995, p. 293). In one classroom where students used literature circles, students were so excited about reading they greeted their teacher at the door with ideas for new literature circles they wanted to create on their own (Noll, 1994).

Literature circles seem to benefit the reader by increasing text understanding. The group tends to produce more meaning that one person could create alone (Gilles, 1994). Each individual brings different views, perspectives, and experiences to the circle. These individual book connections combine to form a deeper comprehension for the group (On-line, September 29, 1998, 4:01 p.m.). Gilles (1994, p. 499) said that “Talk is key.” In talking to each other, the students verify their meanings and interpretations. Furthermore, as mentioned earlier, the intimate group situation enables students to ask each other more clarifying questions. A large group reading session would not facilitate that type of peer tutoring. From each other, the students in literature circles appear to understand literature more clearly.
Generating questions is a skill which benefits students partaking in literature circles (Commeyras & Sumner, 1996). In literature circles, students as opposed to teachers assume the responsibility for determining the questions. In doing so, students learn to ask questions which promote comprehension. By generating their own query, they think about what is pivotal to them. As a matter of fact, Dole, Duffy, Roehler & Pears (1991, as cited in Commeyras & Sumner, 1996) reported that instruction to promote student generated questions leads to improved text comprehension. Smith (1994, p. 169, as cited in Commeyras & Sumner, 1996, p. 262) noted that “comprehension of text is a matter of having relevant questions to ask and of being able to find answers to at least some of those questions.” Only the reader knows his/her questions. Learning to pinpoint those questions is a benefit of literature circles.

Participation in literature circles is beneficial, too, because it allows adolescents to develop new perspectives on social issues (Noll, 1994). Most adolescents are able to focus only on their own life and problems. Literature aids their development of social sensitivity. Even though problems like immigration and injustice may be foreign to them, studying issues through the eyes of characters similar to themselves helps the students start to relate to and understand the situations. Through examination of the characters' lives and journeys, students develop some sensitivity to these unfamiliar problems. Because literature circles offer students choice of literature, adolescents may explore issues that are important to them while developing a sensitivity to complex problems like immigration or war. When teachers choose appropriate books for students to pick from, they create mini-lessons and understanding of ideas that the adolescents might not normally confront. From those encounters, students develop a new understanding about social issues (Noll, 1994).

Furthermore, literature circles drive students to expand the circle outside of the
classroom which is another benefit (Noll, 1994). One role that evolves in students is that of connector (Daniels, 1994). Connectors link their reading to the outside world. For example, students reading Walk Two Moons (Creech, 1996) may explore the history of Native Americans in more depth. Perhaps they would conduct an interview of one. Even without this specific role, students seems driven to find links. Noll (1994) described her students' motivation to research child abuse after reading Good Night, Mr. Tom (Magorian, 1981) as almost insatiable. Students could not learn enough about the issue even after hours of supplemental reading, personal interviews, and field trips to local child abuse centers. Surely this drive to link the literature to life is a benefit that can not be disregarded.

The incentive to finish group set reading goals is another benefit of literature circles (Simpson, 1994-1995). The first goal of groups is to set reading schedules and to assign roles as directed by the teacher. When one students fails to complete his/her responsibility, he/she "lets-down" his peers. He/she fails to be able to partake in the group discussion. As a result, the group suffers and the group's disappointment in its member is obvious. These natural consequences induce students to complete work more than any teacher incentive. One might say the positive peer pressure of group goals benefits students dramatically.

Satisfying an appeal to students' innate need to talk is an additional benefit of literature circles (Daniels, 1994; Samway, et al., 1991). Intermediate students thrive on peer interaction. Literature circles appear to unleash student's interactive energy and integrates it with reading. Since literature circles are based on talk, the integration is naturally successful. Literature circles provide students the opportunity to talk with their peers while developing comprehension, exploring issues, and creating ideas.

Unfortunately, students sometimes fail to use their literature circles to talk about
literature. As is true in all learning strategies, literature circles are not free of problems. Although there are many benefits of using literature circles, there are also some weaknesses.

**Weaknesses**

One weakness of literature circles is that students may spend too much time on social talk. In one study which videotaped and then later analyzed a circle of intermediate students, researchers found that talk unrelated to the book dominated most of the discussion (Evans, 1996). Instead of discussing plot or theme, students described their weekends or talked about their favorite movies. Sometimes failure to keep literature circle talk focused is a weakness of this reading method.

Another weakness of the use of literature circles is the pressure on teachers to keep up with a plethora of student novels (Simpson, 1994-1995). In order to limit book choice, teachers may feel driven to preview each book. At any one time in the classroom, five to eight books might be in use. Should the teacher read each groups’ assignment? Should a teacher read each book prior to introducing them to students? If the answer to either of these questions are yes, then the teacher may be bogged down with reading and discontinue the program.

Daniels (1994) absolved teachers of this duty. As a matter of fact, he suggested that if groups are running smoothly, teachers may become “fellow readers.” This honest sharing offers students a real life model of mature reader (Daniels, 1994, p. 26). So, the literature circle weakness of overwhelming reading responsibility for the teacher can be disputed.

In summary, literature circles are an excellent teaching strategy which compel students to interact with literature enthusiastically. Appealing to students’ basic need to talk and interact, literature circles appear to increase text understanding for high and low readers. Unlike more traditional models of teaching, the students direct their
reading choices and discussion. Teachers play a much less directive role in literature circles. Instead, they watch, redirect, and evaluate their students' progress. When used effectively, literature circles could become an extremely exciting learning tool in the reading classroom.
CHAPTER III

PROCEDURE

Subjects

A nonprobability sampling (Best & Kahn, 1993) of fifth grade students in two language arts classes participated in this study. Class A had twenty-one students of whom eleven were male. Ten of the seventeen students in Class B were male. In all, twenty-one subjects were male, and seventeen of the subjects were female. The thirty-eight participants had a strong background in reading instruction and rank in the average range of reading ability. Thirty-four of the participants passed the fourth grade Ohio Proficiency Test in reading. Only one student received additional reading support from the special education teacher. In addition to spending at least forty minutes a day on reading instruction at school, most students had significant reading support at home.

Setting

School

This survey was conducted in two of the three fifth grade language arts classes. Students from kindergarten through grade six attend this school of 600 elementary students. Intermediate classes are departmentalized, and the two classes have the same language arts instructor. Every day students attend language arts for an hour and forty minutes. Language arts lessons are divided between reading, writing, grammar, and spelling activities.

School District

Set in an affluent suburb of a metropolitan city, the school where the research was conducted is one of two elementary schools in a small suburban school district. Education is the top priority for the community. As a result, the school district is
supported through high property taxes. There are two elementary school buildings educating almost 600 students each. One separate building houses 200 junior high students and 400 high school students.

Community

From end to end, the city runs no more than two miles. Students walk to school. Crime is low. Few rental homes exist, and even fewer apartments exist. Most community members work in a professional environment. Because of the school district's reputation for excellence in education, the community is growing with young families determined to send their children to one of the most successful school districts in the state.

Data Collection

Construction of Instrument

The researcher measured student attitudes with a semantic differential (See Appendix A). A semantic differential (Osgood, Suci & Tannenbaum, 1957) with thirteen adjective pairs was created by the researcher. Between each adjective pair, a series of five undefined scale positions was included. Since the researcher developed the semantic differential by reviewing the related literature, content validity was assumed (Best & Kahn, 1993).

The semantic differential was field tested by twenty fifth grade students from another classroom in the same school. In addition, fellow research students from the researcher's university course critiqued the instrument. Based on the field tests, changes were made (See Appendix B).

Administration of Instrument

As indicated above, the subjects were selected by using nonprobability
sampling (Best & Kahn, 1993). The semantic differential was delivered to students by the researcher before and after use of the literature circle program. After hearing the directions orally, students were asked to complete the instrument and return them to a manila envelope. The researcher was available to respond to any student questions, however, students were asked not to discuss their responses with their peers. One hundred percent of the instruments were returned.

**Design**

This research fits the classical design entitled One-Group Pretest-Posttest (Issac & Michael, 1997).

**Description of Program**

Literature circles combine collaborative learning and independent reading (Daniels, 1994). Many variations of literature circles exist. Using the literature, this researcher established a three week literature circle program.

First, the researcher promoted six novels through the use of book talks. The purpose of the book talk is to help students choose appropriate reading materials. A book talk is the teacher’s presentation of a novel in which he/she introduces the main story elements. Additionally, the teacher might discuss the reading level of the book. Afterward, students ranked their top three choices on a secret ballot. Based on the students’ ballots and on novel availability, the researcher assigned a book to each student. No more than five students read the same novel. Novels were not assigned according to reading level although readability was mentioned in the book talk. Within the limits of each student’s choices, the teacher tried to assign the books at each child’s independent reading level.

Then, with little guidance from the teacher, each group met to plan reading assignments. Using a month long planner, groups planned to finish the book by
scheduling eight reading assignments. Additionally, students were required to complete a role sheet after each reading. During reading class each day, students either met in literature circles to discuss their reading and role sheets for thirty to forty minutes or spent time in class reading and completing their role sheets.

Role sheets helped guide the literature circle discussions. Each group member prepared a different role sheet for every discussion. In doing so, the students were forced to examine at the novel from a variety of perspectives. Furthermore, it focused the students' reading by giving them a purpose for reading. Students saved all role sheets and notes in a literature circle folder so that the teacher could check their progress.

The student and the teacher collaborated to rate student progress. Each day students scored each member of their group's participation. At the end of the literature circle unit, the group evaluated its work in the circle as a whole. At the end of each literature circle meeting, the teacher examined each student's evaluations and each student's role sheet. In addition to the students' evaluations, the teacher gave each group a grade, and she gave each individual student a grade at the end of the unit.
CHAPTER IV
RESULTS

Presentation of Results

The author presents the results of the semantic differential in three tables. Each table is labeled to indicate the type of data being analyzed. Table I compares the pretest and posttest responses of the whole group. Table II illustrates the pretest and posttest responses of the males in the fifth grade group. Table III depicts the pretest and posttest responses of the females in the same group. Each table includes number in sample, pretest scores, posttest scores, and standard deviation scores. In addition, each table shows the value for $t$, the degrees of freedom (df), and the level of significance. These tables are located on page 33.

Discussion of the Results

Hypothesis One

The results of the study shown in Table I were significant at the .05 level of significance. To be more specific, the t-test statistic of 2.09, with 37 df is statistically significant. In this case, the null hypothesis is rejected (Hinkle, 1982). It appears that using literature circles in the reading classroom enhances students' mean reading attitude scores.

Research supports the idea that literature circles enhance students' attitudes toward reading. Many students report that before using literature circles they dreaded reading time, but when they participated in literature circles, they could not wait for reading time (Samway, et al., 1991). This researcher found similar results. As a whole, the students in this study looked forward to their literature circle meetings. Upon entering the classroom, many students would demand to know how soon they would be meeting in their circles. Even the more reluctant readers who often dreaded
reading time appeared to look forward to participating in the book discussions.

The students in this study were characterized by the researcher as being quite social. As a matter of fact in the researcher's opinion, they seem to learn best through active discourse. Literature circles satisfy students' innate need to talk (Daniels, 1994; Samway, et al., 1991). It would make sense that these students would find that appealing. On the pretest, students characterized reading to be generally unsocial. After literature circles, students evaluated reading as much more social. This match between teaching method and learning style might be another factor contributing to the mean growth.

Through observations the researcher noted that working in groups seemed to enhance students' reading comprehension. Often, when readers understand what they read, their reading attitudes grow. Compared to the researcher's experience with the same novels, students in literature circles seemed to get the gist of the book better than students in the teacher directed reading program. To the researcher's surprise, they asked the teacher very few clarifying questions. Instead, students questioned one another. Some of the more reluctant readers appeared to feel comfortable asking their group to clarify the reading. Research supports the idea that together the groups tend to produce more meaning than one person could create alone (Gilles, 1994). In this researcher's experience, students' reading attitudes increase when they understand what they have read. This increased text understanding might be another factor related to the gain of the mean reading attitudes scores.

Students in this study seemed to connect with their literature circle novels. For the first time, many of the children were able to relate what they were reading in the classroom to their world. One reluctant reader wowed his literature circle when he connected the puzzles in his novel to the puzzles he had at home. First he presented his group with the history of puzzles which he researched on the internet. Then he
gave each member a different puzzle to try. His group members could not keep their hands off the puzzles. For him, this positive experience must have had an impact on his reading attitude. He earned praise from not only his peers but also from his teacher. Another reader could not wait to share his audio tape of the song War with his group. This connection to the theme earned him much respect, too. This researcher believes those connections might have increased their reading attitudes.

Twenty-three of the participants in this study increased their attitudes about reading after participating in literature circles. Because the computed value exceeded the critical value, the null hypothesis was rejected. For the participants in this study, the use of literature circles appears to have enhanced their reading attitude.

**Hypotheses Two and Three**

Hypotheses two and three were accepted. Perhaps this is due to a Type II error. This means that one accepts “the null hypothesis of no differences when it is false. In other words, to conclude falsely that a difference does not exist in the data when in fact it does,” (Issac & Michael, 1997, p. 193).

The power of a statistical test is due to three factors, one of which is sample size. As the sample size increases, the value of the statistical test usually increases. With hypothesis two, the sample size was twenty-one. In hypothesis three, the sample size was seventeen. This error might not have occurred if the sample sizes for hypothesis two and hypothesis three were larger.
Boys  The results of the study shown in Table II were not significant at the .05 level of significance. The t-test statistic of 1.06, with 20 df is not statistically significant, therefore, the null hypothesis is accepted (Hinkle, 1982). This research suggests that using literature circles in the reading classroom does not significantly enhance mean reading attitude scores for fifth grade boys.

Students’ inexperience with literature circles might have affected the study. For all the students, this was their first encounter with the literature circle program. Adjusting to a less traditional reading program appeared difficult for some students familiar with a more teacher directed reading experience. As a result, the groups appeared to spend more time completing clerical tasks than critically discussing the literature. Studies have shown that with continued practice, each literature circle experience will become more successful for students. Research suggests that when students initially meet in literature circles, they sought to “construct simple meaning” (Sebesta, 1997, p.547). After many experiences, they were described as moving onto “grand conversations” (Sebesta, 1997, p.547). Most of the participants in the study had just begun to move to grand conversations towards the end. Perhaps the findings would have been different if the students had more experience with literature circles.

Outside experiences related to school might also have affected this study. Although the literature suggests that the incentive to finish group set reading goals would motivate students to come to the literature circle prepared so as not to let down their peers (Simpson, 1994-1995), the males in this study came to the circles unprepared most often. As a result, some lost group privileges. As a matter of fact, three boys failed to complete the program. Perhaps these students viewed the experience negatively as a result. This may have influenced their posttest attitude score.

One weakness of literature circles is that students may spend too much time on
social talk. One study found that talk unrelated to the book dominated most of the literature circle discussion (Evans, 1996). In this study, the researcher noticed that the boys’ discussions were easily misdirected. The teacher spent much time redirecting boys who were off-task and reminding them of rules and guidelines. Perhaps this redirection was considered negative teacher feedback which might lessen the boys’ attitudes towards the reading experience.

Although the research proved not to be statistically significant, the mean scores do show a difference which the researcher might attribute to literature circles. Fourteen of the twenty-one boys’ scores increased from pretest to posttest. For over one half of the male subjects in this study, this suggests a success in the program.

Through observations the researcher noticed that working in groups seemed to enhance the boys’ reading comprehension. Often, when readers understand what they read, they feel better about reading in general. Compared to the researcher’s past experience with the same novels, students in literature circles seemed to get the gist of the book better than students in the teacher directed reading program. To the researcher’s surprise, they asked the teacher very few clarifying questions. Students questioned one another. Some of the more reluctant readers appeared to feel comfortable asking their group to clarify the reading. Research supports the idea that together the groups tend to produce more meaning than one person could create alone (Gilles, 1994). In this researcher’s experience, students’ reading attitudes increase when they understand what they have read. This increased text understanding might be another factor related to the gain of the mean reading attitudes scores.

Moving the literature outside the circle (Noll, 1994) appeared motivating and exciting to many boys, too. One reluctant reader wowed his literature circle when he connected the puzzles in his novel to the puzzles he had at home. First he presented
his group with the history of puzzles which he researched on the internet. Then he gave each member a different puzzle to try. His group members could not keep their hands off the puzzles. For him, this positive experience must have had an impact on his reading attitude. He earned praise from not only his peers but also from his teacher. Another reader could not wait to share his audio tape of the song *War* with his group. This connection to the theme earned him much respect, too. This researcher believes those connections might have increased their reading attitudes.

Because the critical value for this study was greater than the computed value, hypothesis two, a null hypothesis was accepted. Still, the increase in mean reading attitude scores from the pretest to the posttest and the researcher’s observations indicate that the literature circles may have had some effect on the boys’ reading attitudes.

**Girls** The results of the study shown in Table III were not significant at the .05 level of significance. The t-test statistic of 1.66, with 16 df is not statistically significant, therefore, the null hypothesis is accepted (Hinkle, 1982). This research suggests that using literature circles in the reading classroom does not significantly enhance mean reading attitude scores for fifth grade girls.

Students’ inexperience with literature circles might have affected the study. For all the girls, this was their first encounter with the literature circle program. Adjusting to a less traditional reading program appeared difficult for some of the girls familiar with a more teacher directed reading experience. As a result, the groups appeared to spend more time completing clerical tasks than critically discussing the literature. Studies have shown that with continued practice, each literature circle experience will become more successful. Research suggests that when students initially meet in literature circles, they sought to “construct simple meaning” (Sebesta, 1997, p.547). After many
experiences they were described as moving onto "grand conversations" (Sebesta, 1997, p.547). Most of the participants in the study had just begun to move to grand conversations towards the end. Perhaps the findings would have been different if the students had more experience with literature circles.

Although, the research proved not to be statistically significant, the mean scores do show a difference which the researcher might attribute to the literature circle. Ten of the seventeen girls' scores increased from pretest to posttest. For over one half of the female subjects in this study, this suggests a success in the program.

Through observations the researcher noticed that working in groups seemed to enhance the girls' reading comprehension. Often, when readers understand what they read, they feel better about reading in general. Compared to the researcher's past experience with the same novels, students in literature circles seemed to comprehend the gist of the book better than students in the teacher directed reading program. To the researcher's surprise, they asked the teacher very few clarifying questions. Instead, students questioned one another. Some of the more reluctant readers appeared to feel comfortable asking their group to clarify the reading.

Research supports the idea that together the groups tend to produce more meaning than one person could create alone (Gilles, 1994). In this researcher's experience, students' reading attitudes increase when they understand what they have read. This increased text understanding might be another factor related to the gain of the mean reading attitudes scores.

Moving the literature outside the circle (Noll, 1994) appeared motivating and exciting to many girls, too. As a matter of fact, this appeared most appealing to the females who found a way to connect food to almost every aspect of their reading. For them, this positive experience might have had some impact on their reading attitude. This researcher believes those connections might account for some of the mean

31
Because the critical value for this study was greater than the computed value, the null hypothesis was accepted. Still, the increase in mean reading attitude scores from the pretest to the posttest and the researcher's observations indicate that the literature circles may have had some effect on the girls' reading attitudes.
Table I
Fifth Grader's Attitudes Towards Reading Before and After Literature Circles

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Test</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>$\bar{x}$</th>
<th>S</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Pretest</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>50.7</td>
<td>6.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Posttest</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>52.4</td>
<td>6.1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

$t = 2.09; \ df = 37; \ p < .05$

Table II
Fifth Grade Boys' Attitudes Towards Reading Before and After Literature Circles

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Test</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>$\bar{x}$</th>
<th>S</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Pretest</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>5.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Posttest</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>6.2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

$t = 1.06; \ df = 20; \ p > .05$

Table III
Fifth Grade Girls' Attitudes Towards Reading Before and After Literature Circle

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Test</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>$\bar{x}$</th>
<th>S</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Pretest</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>7.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Posttest</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>5.9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

$t = 1.67; \ df = 16; \ p > .05$
Summary

Teachers, parents, and even politicians have begun to express concern about students' attitudes toward reading as it affects students in Ohio. Determining programs which positively affect students' reading attitudes has been shown to make a difference (Swanson, 1982). If that is so, then educators must determine which programs influence their students' reading attitudes. By conducting a study of students' reading attitudes before and after participation in literature circles, the researcher might have been able to identify one such program.

The purpose of this study was to analyze the effects of literature circles on the attitudes of fifth grade students toward reading.

There were three hypotheses for this study. There will be no significant difference between the pretest and posttest mean attitude scores of fifth graders toward reading after the students have been taught reading through the use of literature circles. There will be no significant difference between the pretest and posttest mean attitude scores of fifth grade females toward reading after the females have been taught reading through the use of literature circles. There will be no significant difference between the pretest and posttest mean attitude scores of fifth grade males toward reading after the males have been taught reading through the use of literature circles.

Thirty eight students from two language arts classrooms participated in this study. Students were given a semantic differential to determine their attitudes about reading before using literature circles. Following this pretest, the students participated in a three week literature circle unit created by the researcher based on the literature. Following their participation in the program, they were given a posttest semantic differential.
It was discovered that there was a significant difference between the mean gain score of the whole group, therefore, the first hypothesis was rejected. On the other hand, it was discovered that there was no significant difference between the mean score of the boys, and there was no significant difference between the mean score of the girls. Consequently, the hypotheses were accepted. Perhaps this was due to a Type II error. (See Discussion Section.)

Conclusions

The raw scores of the pretest and posttest of each student were compared. It was found that there was a significant difference between the two scores. It was found that literature circles appear to increase the reading attitudes of fifth grade students as a whole.

The raw scores of the pretest and posttest of the boys were also compared. There was no significant difference between the boys' scores. It appears that literature circles did not significantly increase the reading attitudes of fifth grade boys.

The raw scores of the pretest and posttest of the girls were also compared. There was no significant difference between the girls' scores. It appears that literature circles did not significantly increase the reading attitudes of fifth grade girls.

Recommendations

Students' reading attitudes are influenced by their reading experiences. Teachers should try to encourage readers by matching their learning styles to different teaching methods. Literature circles are one method for teaching reading which appears to appeal to intermediate students. Still, further research might want to explore the affects of literature circles on gender using larger samples. At any rate, using a variety of reading teaching strategies, including literature circles, will develop better reading attitudes in all students.
Appendices
Appendix A

READING SURVEY

circle one: Male  Female
match number: ___

For each pair of words, please place a check mark (v) on the line closest to the word which best describes your feelings about reading:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Good</th>
<th>Bad</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Unsocial</td>
<td>Social</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pleasurable</td>
<td>Painful</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unsuccessful</td>
<td>Successful</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Important</td>
<td>Unimportant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Negative</td>
<td>Positive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interesting</td>
<td>Boring</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Difficult</td>
<td>Easy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fun</td>
<td>Work</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relaxed</td>
<td>Tense</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Confusing</td>
<td>Clear</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Complicated</td>
<td>Simple</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Thank you very much!!! Return this to your teacher now.
### Reading Assigned Books

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>GOOD</th>
<th>BAD</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>PLEASURABLE</td>
<td>PAINFUL</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UNSUCCESSFUL</td>
<td>SUCCESSFUL</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IMPORTANT</td>
<td>UNIMPORTANT</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NEGATIVE</td>
<td>POSITIVE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>INTERESTING</td>
<td>BORING</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DIFFICULT</td>
<td>EASY</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FUN</td>
<td>WORK</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
References


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Roller, C. M., & Beed, P. L. (1994). Sometimes the conversations were grand, and sometimes.... *Language Arts, 71,* 509-515.


