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# Examination of Interactions Among Eighth-Grade Language Arts Students During Literature Circles

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EXAMINATION OF INTERACTIONS AMONG EIGHTH-GRADE LANGUAGE  
ARTS STUDENTS DURING LITERATURE CIRCLES

by

Rachel M. Smith

A thesis submitted to the faculty of

Brigham Young University

in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts

Department of Teacher Education

Brigham Young University

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BRIGHAM YOUNG UNIVERSITY

GRADUATE COMMITTEE APPROVAL

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As chair of the candidate's graduate committee, I have read the thesis of Rachel M. Smith in its final form and have found that (1) its format, citations, and bibliographical style are consistent and acceptable and fulfill university and department style requirements; (2) its illustrative materials including figures, tables, and charts are in place; and (3) the final manuscript is satisfactory to the graduate committee and is ready for submission to the university library.

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## ABSTRACT

### EXAMINATION OF INTERACTIONS AMONG EIGHTH-GRADE LANGUAGE ARTS STUDENTS DURING LITERATURE CIRCLES

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This study examined the nature of interactions that took place among eighth-graders as they participated in literature circles. The teacher/researcher organized students into literature circles based on the students' novel selection. Students completed a different role assignment each week. The role assignments included word wizard, passage picker, connector, summarizer, and question asker. As the students participated in literature circles, the teacher/researcher tape recorded their conversations and took observational field notes. Analysis of the data four weeks later showed that some students' voices were silenced and students went through the motions of completing and talking about their role assignments with little discussion and inquiry. These findings may be due to the way the role assignments were used and the role of the teacher during literature circles.

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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

#### *Statement of the Problem*

Language arts teachers are given the responsibilities of communicating and conveying different cultures and ways of life through literature, promoting contemplative dialogue through language development, and developing analytic thought through evaluation of the written word (Mantle-Bromley & Foster, 2005). As the success or failure of these duties and privileges is often measured according to educational standards, teachers strive to teach their students to comprehend, create, analyze, interpret, evaluate, appreciate, synthesize, and reflect on print and nonprint texts (Mantle-Bromley & Foster, 2005; NCTE, 1996)

After significant effort on the part of many language arts teachers and students, school districts may report gains in test scores and graduation rates. While making annual yearly progress, meeting state standards and benchmarks, and promoting students to the next grade are great accomplishments, such achievements may give educators a false sense of security. These successes demonstrate that students are able to clearly, strategically, critically, and creatively use language for a variety of purposes (NCTE, 1996), but little discussion occurs about how these school-learned skills prepare students to contribute, perform, and participate in a democratic society in order to affect political, social, and economic change (Harris, 1992). If the cycle of discrimination and oppression prevalent in today's society is to be broken, students will need to be able to apply the skills they learn in school to a larger democratic society (LaGuardia & Pearl, 2005; Shujaa, 1993).

Many school-based skills such as working as a part of a collaborative and cooperative group, discussing one's ideas and opinions, and negotiating meaning of written text are the fundamental building blocks of democracy. That connection is often not made for our students. A danger exists that formal instruction in schools is only the subject matter of school assessment and is separate from the subject matter of life-experience (Dewey, 1916). As long as this continues, the division between what is taught strictly for school purposes and what is taught for life purposes will continue to grow wider (Dewey, 1916).

While formal instruction in schools should address the subject matter of school assessment as well as life experience, it should also provide opportunities for students to engage in democratic participation. As students engage in democratic participation they communicate and cooperate with diverse groups as they take part in discussions and inquire together about issues and problems that affect a global society (Dewey, 1916; Pohan, 2003; Powell, 1992). Not only do students involved in democratic participation discuss global issues and problems, they view themselves as part of the solutions (Powell, 1992). Democratic participation allows equal opportunities for student voices to be represented and heard (Powell, 1992). Individuals respect the opinions of others and participate meaningfully in the goals and decisions that affect their lives (Edelsky, 1994; Shannon, 2004) but also abide by the decisions of the majority (Bolmeier, 2006). As students participate democratically they give and take, exercise initiative and leadership, and develop self-control (Bolmeier, 2006).

Connections between school assessment matter and life subject matter may not be made explicit for students because educators often fail to recognize that preparing

students for democratic participation ought to be the driving force behind education rather than merely creating a “skills-as-an-end environment” (Mantle-Bromley and Foster, 2005, p. 71). In other words, where some current educational theories focus on teaching isolated skills to be practiced independently, classroom instruction needs to emphasize democratic participation so students are prepared to embrace opportunities to pursue life’s goals and capable of participating in a democracy as an informed citizen (Edelsky, 1994; NCTE, 1996).

The promotion of democratic participation in schools can be difficult to implement given today’s emphasis on standards. Goodlad, Mantle-Bromley, and Goodlad (2005) explain that “[c]reating a technology to explore outer space that includes the necessary human expertise is a piece of cake compared to forging the infrastructure necessary to accomplish a culture’s most exalted moral educational mission – sustaining a wise citizenry” (p. 4-5). A wise citizenry is one that is able to carry out the responsibilities associated with democratic ideals and that demonstrates respect, responsibility, justice, integrity, industriousness, caring, trustworthiness, empathy, and self-discipline (Pohan, 2003). Educators can, and some do, contribute to students’ development toward wise citizenry by providing opportunities for them to engage in democratic participation (Mantle-Bromley & Foster, 1994).

### *Statement of Purpose*

Developing sensible and discerning citizens through education, citizens who are capable of actively participating in a democracy, is a complex undertaking, yet entirely attainable with appropriate classroom practice. Studies have explored and emphasized the roles and responsibilities of language arts teachers in facilitating democratic participation

in their classrooms (Mantle-Bromely & Foster, 2005; Powell, 1992). However, examining the nature of interactions among students and opportunities for democratic participation during literature discussions in the form of literature circles remains uncharted.

Literature circles, a term first coined by Short and Kaufman (1986), refers to a small group of students who consistently read the same text and come together to discuss their reading (Daniels, 2002). During literature circles, students generate personally meaningful discussions about complex issues while developing comprehension and critical thinking and reading skills (Brabham & Villaume, 2000; Burns, 1998; Daniels, 2002; & King, 2001). These characteristics are complementary to the goals of language arts programs which include effectively communicating with individuals in a diverse society, valuing language and cultural expression, and appreciating language and literacy (Powell, 1992), as well as principles of democratic participation such as engaging in discussion and inquiry, allowing equal opportunities for all voices to be heard, respecting the opinion of others, and participating in making goals and decisions. This study, therefore, examined and described the nature of the interactions that took place as 37 eighth grade language arts students participated in literature circles.

#### *Research Question*

The following question guided this study: what was the nature of the interactions that took place as eighth grade language arts students participated in literature circles?

## CHAPTER 2

### REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Important to the success and progress of our society is individuals who are well equipped and prepared to participate responsibly and appropriately in a democracy. Our school system is potentially the most influential and effective instrument for shaping social attitudes and behaviors (Bolmeier, 2006; Pohan, 2003). Dewey (1916) stated that simply growing up does not guarantee the recreation of beliefs, ideals, hopes, happiness, misery, and practice necessary for the continuation of humans' physical existence. Rather, a group continues to exist by communicating habits of thinking, feeling, and doing as well as ideals, standards, hopes, expectations, and opinions from an older generation to a younger generation. This process, however, is not automatic. Because there can be no guarantee that this happens outside the classroom, education must be the facilitator (Dewey, 1916).

#### *Education for Democracy*

Education in its literal sense means to lead or bring up (Dewey, 1916). For the purposes of this literature review and study I will refer to education as Dewey did. Thus, education should be viewed as a shaping, molding, or forming and a fostering, nurturing, and cultivating process (Dewey, 1916). It is through these nurturing and shaping processes in schools that the continuation of humans' physical existence is possible.

Schools have the opportunity to prepare students for the world beyond the classroom. Though many schools have produced first-rate test takers, they have an additional responsibility to produce considerate, thoughtful, and democratic citizens (Goodlad, 2004). As Goodlad, Soder, and Sirotnik (1990) explain, educators have a

moral responsibility to cultivate the skills, character, and knowledge necessary to participate effectively in a social and political democracy. This involves helping students think, reason, and comprehend and providing them with opportunities to develop an enlarged appreciation of values and ideas (Goldenberg, 1992/1993). Yet teaching aimed at meeting these goals is largely absent from U.S. classrooms (Goldenberg, 1992/1993). Though these attitudes, behaviors, and democratic skills can be learned in other institutions and environments such as our churches, our homes, and our communities, schools are the only places we can guarantee that this learning and development is taking place (Mantle-Bromley & Foster, 2005).

With the growing diversity in America and in American schools, students must be provided opportunities to learn how to get along and inquire with individuals who are different from them. An estimated one in twenty Americans was foreign born during the 1950s and 1960s. The number of Americans born outside of America rose to one in thirteen in 2000 and is projected to be one in seven by 2020 (Davis-Wiley, 2002). Of the more than fifty-three million children enrolled in American elementary and secondary schools, thirty-five percent are from racial or ethnic minority groups. By 2010, this number is estimated to rise to sixty percent (Futrell, Gomez, & Beddin, 2003), and results of the 2000 Census suggest that nearly three out of ten Americans are members of a minority group (Davis-Wiley, 2002). To be prepared for an increasingly diverse society, schools have a responsibility to prepare students to contribute to and benefit from a democratic society (Futrell et al., 2003). Free and universal schooling in America is meant to prepare all students to become literate adults capable of critically thinking, reading, and writing, and able to participate in, contribute to, and benefit fully from



society (NCTE, 1996). Failure to prepare students for these tasks challenges the nation's vision of public education and America's democratic ideal (NCTE, 1996).

If teachers only teach content and testing strategies and do not provide purposeful instruction of true democratic principles and participation, students may leave school without a clear idea of what the principles of democracy are and what democratic participation looks like. We cannot assume that once students are out of school they will suddenly know how to use their individuality as a tool for good, be wise consumers, be able to sort through and make sense of masses of new information, be able to communicate effectively and respectfully with those who are different from them, or be able to negotiate and compromise ethically (Edelsky, 1994; Mantle-Bromley & Foster, 2005). We cannot assume that, upon graduation, students will be transformed from literate to critical and as such are enlightened as to the ways a democratic society runs and functions and what their roles and responsibilities within that society are (Edelsky, 1994; Mantle-Bromley & Foster, 2005).

This study addressed the need for students to be immersed in a classroom environment that encourages, even requires, written and oral communication to explore the issues and problems which impact our society and which allows students to view themselves as part of the solution (Powell, 1992). Additionally, this study attempted to provide that very environment for middle school students in the form of student led-literature discussions in order to encourage and develop democratic participation and democratic skills such as cooperating and communicating with one another (Pohan, 2003), engaging in the task at hand, and doing so industriously (Edelsky, 1994; Goodlad, 2004; Pohan, 2003).

In this review of literature I will first define democracy. I will then discuss the ways in which our school systems can facilitate democratic participation and the roles and responsibilities language arts teachers share in teaching and leading those activities. Finally, I will conclude with a discussion of various student-led literature discussions and the potential for literature circles in particular to support democratic participation.

*Democracy defined.* A democracy is a system in which all citizens have equal opportunities for their voices and viewpoints to be represented and heard (Powell, 1992). In such a system, individuals participate in the decisions that impact their lives, they consciously and rationally make those decisions together, and they negotiate goals and meanings (Edelsky, 1994; Shannon, 2004). An effective democracy requires that all participants are equal, active, and engaged (Edelsky, 1994; Goodlad, 2004).

John Dewey viewed democracy broadly, more than simply electing individuals to positions of governance (Anderson & Major, 2001). He realized, and others have concurred, that a democracy has the power and potential to act abominably and to further existing inequities, but it also has the same power and potential to improve societies by dismantling inequities (Anderson & Major, 2001; Mantle-Bromley & Foster, 2005). Dewey understood the major duties and obligations of a democracy to be judging people as individuals, rewarding people based on their behavior, and allowing people to shape their own careers (Dewey, 1916). Dewey also believed that individuals living in a democracy should be skeptical, should possess a desire for evidence, should rely on observation rather than sentiment, and should engage in discussion and inquiry rather than bias and idealization (Dewey, 1916).

In a democracy, individuals must understand how to exercise their democratic rights and freedoms responsibly, and they must cooperate and communicate effectively with diverse groups of people (Pohan, 2003). Communication is not merely the telling or stating of information, it is the sharing of an experience until it becomes a common possession, a joint interest (Dewey, 1916). Communication should alter the nature of all parties who partake in it, so much so that one is eager to give and one is eager to receive (Dewey, 1916).

It is necessary to understand that one does not pursue democracy per se as democracy is an ideal. Rather one pursues a society which values a democracy (Pohan, 2003). A society shares interests that are material, intellectual, and aesthetic (Dewey, 1916). Additionally, the participation and progress of one member of a society should hold worth for the other members (Dewey, 1916). Furthermore, members of a society should not be isolated from one another; rather, they should be closely related across businesses, schools, political groups, and other agencies (Dewey, 1916). All citizens should support the society and in turn receive support from it (Dewey, 1916). The pursuit of a democratic society then includes the pursuit of a shared common interest which is mutually beneficial and values respect, responsibility, justice, integrity, industriousness, caring, and trustworthiness (Pohan, 2003). Dewey (1940) went so far as to warn that as long as these values and qualities are lacking from the core of every citizen, democracy is destined to fail.

*Democratic participation.* Students learn about democracy best through democratic experiences (Bolmeier, 2006). Opportunities for democratic experiences and opportunities to engage in democratic participation are abundant in schools. There are

seven factors conducive to democratic participation in classrooms. The first factor of democratic participation is providing students with opportunities to practice governing themselves. Individuals who have never had the experience of governing will not automatically know how to do this (Pohan, 2003). With help and support from teachers and other faculty, students should be given opportunities to co-create the governance system in the classroom. They will then be partly responsible for the way in which the community operates (Pohan, 2003). They will need to balance their individual rights with the welfare and rights of all individuals (Pohan, 2003). They must also be taught and given opportunities to practice communication skills and conflict resolution (Pohan, 2003).

The second factor that plays a role in democratic participation in school is constant and early instruction and experience in democratic practices (Bolmeier, 2006). As students become familiar with and trustworthy in the democratic process, they are gradually given more responsibilities (Bolmeier, 2006). Only when habits of democratic behavior such as sharing responsibilities, exercising initiative, and developing self-control are initiated in the primary grades will students reach their greatest potential development (Bolmeier, 2006).

The third factor that encourages democratic participation is the type of activity conducted. The activity students are engaged in determines the degree of planning and control that each student can have. Certain activities, such as student council and homeroom organizations, lend themselves very easily to democratic practices by promoting shared responsibility and initiative; however, all aspects and phases of school

ought to be explored for opportunities to promote critical thinking about complex issues and democratic behavior (Bolmeier, 2006; Pohan, 2003).

The fourth factor vital to successful democratic participation among students is a teacher who believes in democratic practices (Bolmeier, 2006). Not only must she believe in the process, she must also possess the desire and ambition to exercise democratic practices as a part of her teaching (Bolmeier, 2006).

The fifth factor conducive to democratic participation in the classroom is an appropriate physical environment (Bolmeier, 2006). Regardless of the beliefs, passions, and desires of most teachers, the typical school classroom is a serious detriment to democratic participation (Bolmeier, 2006). A classroom designed to promote democratic practices would be large enough that furniture could be arranged in a variety of positions to fit the needs of a variety of activities. In addition to the arrangement of furniture, the presence of certain supplemental materials such as maps, encyclopedias, and modern equipment would encourage independent study (Bolmeier, 2006).

The sixth factor necessary for democratic participation in schools is moral support for the teachers and students involved (Bolmeier, 2006). Such moral support would involve the administrative staff, the board of education, and the patrons of the school encouraging and aiding teachers in employing up-to-date methods of instruction and practice for the purpose of advancing democratic participation (Bolmeier, 2006).

Traditional approaches to discipline and management must be forfeited and in their place communities must be created in classrooms and schools (Pohan, 2003). Classroom and school communities must share aims, beliefs, aspirations, knowledge, and a common understanding (Dewey, 1916).

In establishing classroom and school communities, educators and patrons must realize and understand, for example, the difference between getting students to obey a pre-established set of behavioral standards and teaching them principles which will help them discern right from wrong and make good behavioral choices independently (Pohan, 2003). Schools must create environments where students feel a sense of support, respect, and belonging, and have opportunities to contribute so they are able to act on internalized attitudes, values, and democratic principals (Pohan, 2003). Only then can we move toward the goal of endowing students with the knowledge, skills, and dispositions needed for participation in a diverse, democratic society (Pohan, 2003).

The seventh and final factor needed for democratic participation in schools is an effective guidance program. An effective guidance program would allow students to determine their skills, their rate of development, and their strengths and weaknesses. Students could then preserve a balance between their own welfare and the welfare of the group of which they are members (Bolmeier, 2006). By way of example, grading and reporting student progress are more conducive to competition than collaboration. Some students are labeled failures and some are praised for their marks. Reporting student progress does not promote democracy among students, as students compete for high marks, but allowing students to ascertain their individual strengths and weaknesses would promote the democratization of the student body by encouraging students to collaborate and support one another (Bolmeier, 2006).

There are many factors that can encourage and develop democratic experiences in schools. Within schools, language arts teachers can provide students with opportunities to practice and experience democratic participation.

### *Teachers of Language Arts*

The teaching of English language arts has undergone a considerable transformation over the last four and a half decades. Before the 1960s, teaching language arts consisted of a heavy emphasis on spelling drills, grammar practice, the study of classical literature, and the rules of writing and syntax (Squire, 1991; Tchudi & Tchudi, 1999). In the late 1960s and early 1970s a new language arts began to emerge. Rather than emphasizing aspects of print literacy as it had before, the new focus for language arts became centered on understanding how language is acquired and used successfully for business and pleasure which affords more opportunities for reading, writing, listening, speaking, viewing and presenting using various modes of communication (Tchui & Tchudi, 1999). Instead of time being spent on learning how to write, students were given time to actually write (Tchudi & Tchudi, 1999). What was once deemed classic literature and therefore worthy of study was broadened to include literature for children, young adults, and adults (Tchudi & Tchudi, 1999). Some educators took an interest in students' responses and reactions to literature and valued their contributions to literary knowledge (Tchudi & Tchudi, 1999). The shift that has taken place in language arts over the last forty years has opened the door for more democratic processes and has made it possible for students to participate in their own education in democratic ways.

Language arts teachers have an obligation to teach their students how to communicate in a world and a society that is becoming increasingly diverse (Powell, 1992). In order to progress as a nation and as a society, students must not only accept the diversity and challenges that face them in the twenty-first century, they must also be actively involved in change. Communication with others in our society and throughout

the world is vital if students are going to solve current and future problems (Powell, 1992).

At a time when test scores are so highly emphasized, language arts teachers can be a link between skills-based curricula found in so many schools and the connection of these skills to a larger purpose essential to a democracy (Mantle-Bromely & Foster, 2005). The knowledge and skills gained in a language arts class, such as comprehending, creating, analyzing, interpreting, evaluating, appreciating, synthesizing and reflecting on various texts, as well as using language for a variety of purposes and being able to apply that knowledge and those skills, provides the foundation for students to participate in a democracy (Mantle-Bromley & Foster, 2005). Everyday language arts teachers make decisions ranging from the types of texts they will use to the ways they will provide feedback on assignments. All of these decisions have a deep impact on students' preparation for democracy (Mantle-Bromley, 2005).

Language arts teachers incorporate peer readers and reviewers, Socratic Seminars, collaborative groups, and writing rubrics into their classes, and as they do so, they acknowledge and encourage student voice and responsibility, which helps to prepare students for engaged citizenry (Mantle-Bromley & Foster, 2005). As students engage in these activities, they learn to trust each other, to listen with care and empathy, to respectfully disagree with each other, and to use feedback to improve their work (Mantle-Bromley & Foster, 2005). They learn what it looks like and what it feels like to be treated fairly by their peers and teachers, which are vital lessons in a student's life and crucial experiences for democratic participation (Mantle-Bromley & Foster, 2005).



Language arts teachers can prepare students to participate in a democracy by setting three main goals for their curriculum. The first goal of a democratic language arts curriculum should be to ensure that all students are capable of effectively communicating with all individuals within a multicultural, diverse society (NCTE, 1996; Powell, 1992). In a democratic society, all voices and viewpoints are represented, thus the ability to communicate one's viewpoints and opinions is crucial. A language arts program can teach students to use their voices for a variety of purposes: to share ideas, to express opinions, and to persuade others (Powell, 1992). Students must also learn to interact with others who may come from different cultural backgrounds and understand and respect their viewpoints and opinions (Powell, 1992). As individuals strive for a more peaceful, humane, and democratic society, they must be able to communicate with those whose linguistic and cultural backgrounds are very different from their own. In other words, they must have access to a number of secondary discourses, and in order for that to be possible, students must have opportunities to interact with and explore other communities and cultures (Powell, 1992).

Gee (1989b) defines discourse as “a socially accepted association among ways of using language, of thinking, and of acting that can be used to identify oneself as a member of a socially meaningful group or ‘social network’” (p. 18). In other words, one's discourse is the way one uses language to integrate speaking, listening, writing, reading, acting, interacting, valuing, believing, and feeling for the purpose of performing a socially situated identity or activity (Gee, 2001). More simply put, one's discourse is an identity kit that predicts and determines the ways one uses language in social situations

(Gee, 1989b; Gee, 2001). Some examples of primary discourses include being an American or a Russian, a teacher or a student, a doctor or a patient, or a man or a woman.

Gee (1989b) goes on to explain that in addition to having primary Discourses, most people have numerous secondary Discourses. A secondary Discourse builds on the ways people use language in their primary Discourse and is developed by having access to and associations with secondary institutions, such as churches, schools, and workplaces. By helping students develop and access various secondary Discourses, language arts teachers can teach students how to communicate with individuals whose primary discourses, backgrounds, and cultures are different than their own, and thus prepare them to participate in a democracy.

The second goal of every democratic language arts program should be to teach students to value and celebrate linguistic and cultural expressions which are different from their own (NCTE, 1996; Powell, 1992). One way students can begin to value their own language and the language of others is to study the history and structure of various linguistic systems (Powell, 1992). Gee (1989a) suggests that when we teach students how language works, we are actually giving them power over their own linguistic limitations and introducing them to their own cultural biases. These lessons are requisite for functioning within a society while at the same time working to change it (Powell, 1992).

The third goal of democratic language arts programs should be to help students see the importance of literacy and language in their own lives as well as their value for social, political, and economic transformation (NCTE, 1996; Powell, 1992). While traditional language study often promotes divisions along class and cultural lines, it should prepare students to help create a more equitable and humane society and empower

students to bring about change (Powell, 1992). This means students should engage in conversations about sometimes highly controversial issues and problems that affect their society and should become part of the solution to those problems (Powell, 1992).

Language arts teachers can use literature discussion groups to accomplish these goals.

The use of literature discussion groups can help language arts teachers prepare students to communicate with diverse populations, value diverse cultural expressions, and appreciate the power of literacy and language. Traditionally teachers have led literature discussions, but there has been a recent push toward student-led literature discussions. Traditional teacher-led literature discussions are characterized by the teacher initiating a topic, students offering responses, and the teacher evaluating their responses (Maloch, 2004). The teacher assumes a leadership position and helps the students learn what the teacher already knows (Goldenberg, 1992-1993). Typically teacher-led discussions favor learning a single interpretation and encourage procedural interactions such as raising hands and waiting to be called on (Fielding & Pearson, 1994; Maloch, 2002). This kind of exchange of ideas and pattern of interactions often places students in a passive, less responsible role (Maloch, 2004).

To avoid discussions where the students are silenced and engage in routines rather than expressing personal insights and ideas, many teachers have implemented student-led literature discussions. Student-led literature discussions offer a more engaging way for students to share and discuss their ideas as they actively construct meaning and understanding rather than simply receiving it from the teacher (Goldenberg, 1992-1993; Maloch, 2002). Additionally, student-led literature discussions encourage equal

participation among students, more complex responses, and a valuing of multiple interpretations (Maloch, 2002; Maloch, 2004).

Despite the benefits of student-led literature discussions, students' conversations can often fall flat. Because students may find it difficult to carry on a meaningful conversation about a book when they assume full responsibility for the course and focus of their discussions, they often need some kind of support system (Goldenberg, 1992/1993; Maloch, 2002; Maloch, Green, Tuyay, Dixon, & Floriani, 2004). Several varieties of student-led discussions, grand conversations (Eeds & Wells, 1989), literature study (Fountas & Pinnell, 2001), the book club program (Raphael & McMahon, 1994), and literature circles (Daniels, 2002) in particular, provide the support students need and have been successfully implemented in language arts classrooms.

Eeds and Wells (1989) developed grand conversations, which invite children into the world of story first so they can lose themselves in the story they are reading, and then so they can share their responses with their peers. Grand conversations stray from the mindset that education is simply a checklist of objectives and literature is merely a tool for teaching skills or areas of curriculum. The goal of grand conversations is to identify and discuss story elements found in the text (Eeds & Wells, 1989). Grand conversations are based largely on Rosenblatt's (2004) transactional theory of reading and writing (Eeds & Peterson, 1997; Eeds & Wells, 1989) which states that text may be interpreted in multiple ways by many different readers.

Fountas and Pinnell (2001) also contributed a model of reading instruction known as literature study. Fountas and Pinnell (2001) believe that meaning consists not just of factual information, but of emotional responses and visual images. During literature

study, students share their questions, insights, and emotional responses to fiction and nonfiction. The purposes of literature study include increasing enjoyment of reading, generating personal and valuable responses to the text, discussing and recognizing good literature, expanding literacy and background knowledge, and thinking critically (Fountas & Pinnell, 2001). Fountas and Pinnell (2001) suggest routines such as hand raising, only speaking when one person is finished, and using hand signals when a student has a comment or wants to change the subject. Teachers are involved with literature studies as facilitators, participants, guides, or observers and suggest activities for a culminating project at the end of a book (Fountas & Pinnell, 2001).

Raphael and McMahon (1994) developed the book club program, which reflects a change in the fundamental beliefs about how literacy is developed and goals for reading instruction. Teachers identify good literature and identifiable themes, discuss the characteristics of good speaking and listening in small groups, and introduce reading logs to support students' discussions (Raphael & McMahon, 1994). The teacher provides reading log entry suggestions such as character maps and book or chapter critiques (Raphael & McMahon, 1994). Book clubs involve reading, writing, whole class discussion, and instruction to support student-led discussion groups (Raphael & McMahon, 1994).

Daniels (2002) developed literature circles which provide opportunities for students to have personally meaningful and student generated discussions about complex issues presented in text while developing reading comprehension skills (Brabham & Villaume, 2000; Burns, 1998; King, 2001). Students take on suggested roles each week to

help them think deeply about literature. Literature circles are largely based on cooperative learning and Rosenblatt's (2004) transactional theory of reading and writing.

While there are several models of student-led reading groups, they are built on similar principles. Traditional methods of reading instruction need to be revised so that students can directly and continuously interact with the materials in their environments (Dewey, 1916). To increase the likelihood that education supports democratic practice and is not, as Dewey (1916) said, only about telling, preaching, and lecturing, schools must be environments that provide opportunities for doing. Literature circles have the potential to address these needs and encourage and support democratic participation.

Though literature circles, grand conversations, literature study, and book clubs are all built on similar principles and theories, literature circles may be more conducive to democratic interactions than the others. Literature circles may provide the needed structure for middle school students to read a novel together. The structure of weekly roles allows the students to focus on particular aspects of their novel while also focusing on particular elements of literature study such as making connections and summarizing portions of the text. This process provides students with a starting point to begin their discussions while still allowing them the freedom to choose and discuss personally relevant and meaningful aspects of their book.

### *Literature Circles*

The term literature circle, first introduced in 1986 by Kathy Short and Gloria Kaufman, refers to a school-based, student-led reading group which exemplifies collaborative learning and student centeredness (Daniels, 2002). Literature circles have been identified as one of the best classroom practices in the teaching of reading and

writing by the national literacy standards (Daniels, 2002). The National Standards for the English Language Arts strongly endorses literature-based collaborative classrooms in which students take responsibility for selecting, reading, and discussing texts (Daniels, 2002; NCTE, 1996) The Standards also encourage exploration of books which represent various cultures, periods, and regions (NCTE, 1996). In the next sections, I will first discuss the theoretical framework of literature circles, followed by the purposes of literature circles. I will then conclude with characteristics of literature circles.

*Theoretical framework.* The creators of literature circles agree that literature circles are built upon three main strands of thinking: (a) independent reading, (b) collaborative learning, and (c) reader response theory (Daniels, 2002). From a theoretical perspective, literature circles are a form of independent reading which is structured and organized within small collaborative discussion groups and are guided by reader response principles.

The 2000 Report of the National Reading Panel explained the significance of independent reading on students' lifelong literacy development (NRP, 2000). Anderson et al. (1985) conclude that children should spend more time reading independently and that independent reading, whether done in or out of school, is associated with gains in reading achievement. Similar studies find that independent reading is linked to increased comprehension and reading achievement (Allington, 2006; Cunningham & Allington, 2007; Fielding & Pearson, 1994). Additionally, the Standards for the English Language Arts (1996) place independent reading at the center of the curriculum and recommend literature circles as one way of implementing independent reading.

While providing time for independent reading, literature circles also take advantage of what educators have learned about the power of collaborative learning. Collaborative learning has been associated with an increase in social skills among students, an increase in time on task, attendance, enjoyment of school and classes, and motivation to learn (Whicker, Bol, & Nunnery, 1997). Collaborative learning encourages inquiry within small groups where students are engaged in higher-order, student-centered, open-ended activities (Daniels, 2002). Gee (2001) argues that the study and use of language cannot be separated from social learning environments, from speaking, listening, and interacting. He continues that the two primary functions of language are to support social activities and interactions, and to support human connections to cultures and social groups. Literature circles support both of these language functions (Gee, 2001).

Finally, literature circles incorporate principles of reader response theory. Louise Rosenblatt, the developer of reader response theory, explored the idea that without a reader, text is just ink on a page (Rosenblatt, 1995). She insisted that there could be no one correct interpretation of a text, rather the text and the reader come together to create meaning (Rosenblatt, 1995). There are sure to be multiple interpretations of the same text varying greatly depending on the readers' cultural discourse and the experiences the reader brings to the text (Gee, 2000).

Rosenblatt explored the notion of text-reader interactions in her transactional theory of reading and writing (Rosenblatt, 2004). In this theory, Rosenblatt posited reading as a transaction involving a reader, a text, and a particular time and context. The



meaning of the text is not something that resides in the reader. Rather, meaning is created during the transaction between the reader and the text (Rosenblatt, 2004).

Essential to any reading is the reader's adoption of a stance that will guide her stream of consciousness. Rosenblatt (2004) proposed two stances that represent two ends of a continuum: efferent and aesthetic. The term efferent designates a type of reading in which the reader's attention is focused particularly on what is to be taken from the text and remembered after the reading (Rosenblatt, 2004). Reading a newspaper, textbook, or legal brief would generally be read with an efferent stance. During efferent reading, meaning results from extracting and organizing ideas, information, directions, or conclusions to be remembered, used, or acted on after the reading event (Rosenblatt, 2004).

In contrast to efferent reading, aesthetic reading is found on the opposite end of the continuum. Aesthetic reading relies on the reader's perception through her senses, feelings and intuitions, and her attention is focused on what is being lived through the reading experience (Rosenblatt, 2004). Not only is the reader acutely aware of sensations, feelings, images, and ideas that are the remnants of past experiences related to those words and their referents, but she also savors the qualities of those feelings and participates in the tensions, conflicts, and resolutions of the text as they unfold (Rosenblatt, 2004). Poems, stories, and plays are usually approached from an aesthetic stance.

Independent reading, collaborative learning, and reader response theory are the foundations for literature circles. By incorporating these three strands, literature circles provide students with opportunities to engage in collaborative reading groups, which

promote sound, thoughtful reader responses and allow for independent reading in a social setting.

*Purpose of literature circles.* By providing safe and trusting environments for students to have thoughtful, enlightening, and personal discussions about complex issues presented in text, literature circles help students gain literary independence and develop comprehension skills (Brabham & Villaume, 2000; Burns, 1998; King, 2001). Students gain literary independence as they are given opportunities to select books based on interest and knowledge and as they rely less and less on teachers to unlock meaning and insight. Comprehension skills are developed during literature circles as students have opportunities to apply skills they have previously learned, such as making predictions, visualizing, connecting the text to personal experiences and other texts, monitoring comprehension, summarizing, arguing with the author, and evaluating a text.

While motivating students to become deeper, more critical readers is a noble goal pursued through literature circles, it is not enough to have students who are capable of reading well and completing worksheets. Literature circles have the potential to serve a far larger purpose. The study of literature in a social context has the potential to bring children of different ages, races, and genders together to be active and engaged citizens in communities which support and sustain their members and which strive to be a part of a larger society that embodies democratic characteristics and attributes by allowing students to negotiate joint constructions of meaning, significance, and implications of complex issues presented in text.

*Characteristics of literature circles.* While the teacher's role in literature circles is multifaceted and absolutely essential, it is not the role traditionally played in that it does

not include lecturing, telling, or advising. Instead, teachers teach mini-lessons to the whole class such as activating prior knowledge, questioning, researching, summarizing, and making connections in order to assist students in completing weekly assignments. Teachers also organize, manage, and support each group by assigning weekly tasks, grouping students according to book choice, and monitoring and encouraging participation of group members (Daniels, 2002).

Each member of a literature circle may be assigned a specific role for each reading assignment (Daniels, 2002). Students record responses to their role assignments (see Appendix A) and turn them in for the purpose of noting their daily and weekly preparation for their literature circles (Daniels, 2002). Traditional role assignments may include the following: (a) question asker, (b) passage picker, (c) connector, (d) summarizer, (e) word wizard, (f) illustrator, and (g) researcher (Daniels, 2002). The primary responsibility of the question asker is to develop questions about the book and to lead a group discussion based on those questions (Daniels, 2002). The passage picker locates interesting parts of the novel to share with the whole group (Daniels, 2002). The connector makes connections between the novel and other novels, films, television, world events, or personal experiences (Daniels, 2002). The summarizer paraphrases events in the novel from each assigned reading (Daniels, 2002). The word wizard finds interesting, difficult, or unusual words from the novel to share with the group (Daniels, 2002). The illustrator creates a visual representation of something in the book that is meaningful or significant (Daniels, 2002), and the researcher locates factual information pertaining to the book (Daniels, 2002). While these role assignments are frequently used during literature circles, they can and should be modified based on the objectives of the learning

assignment and on the text being used. Additionally, role assignments and completions of the accompanying role sheets are intended to be used as a tool to introduce and familiarize students with literature circles and should be used less and less as they become proficient with literature circles (Daniels, 2002).

Essential to literature circles are student-generated discussions, which are based on students' writing and drawing (Daniels, 2002). The teacher does not provide rigid study guides and questions. Rather, students use the weekly role assignments as a framework for their own discussions. Students have opportunities to connect with each other around open-ended and interpretive questions and statements, thus inviting others to respond (Daniels, 2002). Dewey (1916) said as the old provide opportunities for the young to communicate with each other, the young will learn behaviors which allow them to successfully interact with each other. In the case of literature circles, as teachers allow students to communicate freely with each other, students may begin to develop strategies to interact successfully with one another. As students do this, they gradually produce systems of behavior such as patience, turn-taking, questioning, listening, negotiating, resolving conflicts, and respecting different points of view, behaviors which are conducive to democratic participation (Dewey, 1916).

Student choice of reading material, which may involve both the level of text the student feels comfortable with and the subject of the text, to the greatest extent possible, is also a fundamental characteristic of literature circles (Daniels, 2002). Literature circles provide students with opportunities to select, read, and discuss books together so they may begin to self-direct and take ownership of their reading. Dewey (1916) states that as students share similar ideas and meanings and as students' actions and thoughts influence

others, as likely will occur during literature circles, characteristics of democracy and community will begin to manifest themselves.

Literature circles are established based on students' shared desire to read the same book with each group reading a different book (Daniels, 2002). Teachers may choose to provide students with a list of titles related in theme or specific content from which students are then able to choose. This process encourages students to take responsibility for locating, choosing, and pursuing books rather than waiting for or expecting teachers and adults to make those choices for them (Daniels, 2002). Though teachers consider a variety of factors when placing students together in groups, they should not form groups based solely on the reading level or ability of the student. Rather groups should have mixed abilities so that a variety of perspectives are present (Daniels, 2002). Additionally, mixed grouping allows a more skilled peer to build on the competencies of other students and to help them move from their actual levels of competence to their potential levels of competence (Miller, 2002).

Literature circles should meet on a regular, predictable schedule (Daniels, 2002). Ample time should be devoted to weekly and daily meetings so that students can thoroughly read and discuss the literature. Meeting times need to be predictable so that students can self-assign parts of a book, read with a purpose, make notes, and be prepared to fully and actively participate in the group (Daniels, 2002).

When all groups finish their books, groups are dissolved and recreated for the next book (Daniels, 2002). The rearranging of personalities and viewpoints keeps discussions exciting and challenging. It discourages tracking and encourages communication and friendship patterns that build unity and cohesion (Daniels, 2002).

Literature circles are assessed by teacher observation and student self-evaluation (Daniels, 2002). High-order assessments, such as kid-watching, observational logs, performance assessments, checklists, student conferences, group interviews, audio-taping, and portfolios created by each literature circle measure students' comprehension of the text and success in participating in small-group, student-led conversations about literature (Daniels, 2002). Students also measure their success through writing and talking about goals, roles, and their performance in literature circles.

While there undoubtedly is pressure to prepare students for state and national assessments, those assessments typically portray a narrow and often unreliable portrait of students' achievement (Daniels, 2002). Literature circles do prepare students for state and national assessments as students receive explicit literacy instruction, but high-order assessments go a step further and measure students' abilities to access texts and engage democratically in real-life literary conversations.

### *Summary*

It is important that individuals are prepared and know how to participate in a democratic society. Schools have a great responsibility and opportunity to facilitate this process. More than just teaching specific content and skills to be assessed on standardized tests, schools must teach students how to participate meaningfully, actively, and responsibly in democratic societies both in and out of the classroom. Language arts teachers have a unique opportunity to do this, and incorporating student-led literature discussions into their classroom practice may be one method of doing so.

Studies have shown that student-led literature discussions can be problematic (Maloch, 2002; Maloch et al., 2004). Often conflicts among group members,

management issues, and undeveloped conversation skills lead to a flat, meaningless discussions where students simply retell the text (Maloch, 2002; Maloch et al., 2004). Many teachers feel frustrated when students' discussions follow this course and give up (Maloch, 2002; Maloch et al., 2004). It is important to recognize, however, that meaningful conversations do not just happen when students are placed in a group. As research has yet to be done on the particular nature of student discussions and the interactions among students in literature circles, literature circles, with the support of the particular roles each week, may promote meaningful student discussions while providing opportunities to practice and engage in democratic interactions. Figure 1 illustrates the characteristics of literature circles and their potential to support democratic participation and language arts programs.

### **Characteristics of Democratic Participation**

- Participants have equal opportunities for their voices to be represented and heard (Powell, 1992)
- Participants negotiate goals and decisions (Edelsky, 1994; Shannon, 2004)
- Participants are equal, active, and engaged (Edelsky, 1994; Goodlad, 2004)
- Participants are judged as individuals (Dewey, 1916)
- Participants engage in discussion and inquiry (Dewey, 1916)
- Participants cooperate and communicate with diverse groups (Pohan, 2003)

Literature circles have the potential to support democracy



### **Characteristics of Literature Circles**

- Students read independently (Daniels, 2002)
- Students engage in collaborative learning (Daniels, 2002)
- Students incorporate principles of reader response theory (Rosenblatt, 1968)
- Students generate personally meaningful discussions about complex issues (Brabham & Villaume, 2000; Burns, 1998; Daniels, 2002; & King, 2001)
- Students possess a high degree of choice (Daniels, 2002)
- Students develop comprehension strategies (Daniels, 2002)
- Students think and read critically (Daniels, 2002)

Literature circles have the potential to support language arts programs



### **Goals of Language Arts Programs**

- Students learn how to effectively communicate with individuals in a multicultural diverse society (Powell, 1992)
- Students value language and cultural expression (Powell, 1992)
- Students appreciate language and literacy as a tool for social, political, and economic transformation (Powell, 1992)

*Figure 1: Literature Circles: Potential Support for Language Arts Programs and Democratic Participation*



## CHAPTER 3

### METHODS AND PROCEDURES

#### *Design*

This study used a descriptive design as well as an action research approach. The primary purpose of descriptive research, also referred to as observational research, is to provide an accurate description of characteristics in a given situation (Johnson & Christensen, 2004). Rather than identifying cause-and-effect relationships, descriptive researchers aim to describe the variables that exist in a given situation and provide an avenue for educators to learn about the attitudes, opinions, beliefs, behaviors, and demographics of people (Johnson & Christensen, 2004).

Descriptive research designs hold many benefits for educators who wish to describe the characteristics of a phenomenon. By using descriptive research, researchers are able to observe participants directly. In many cases, researchers are able to study behavior in greater depth than would be possible through questionnaires and surveys because they are able to witness first-hand the body language, tone of voice, and interaction among participants (Angrosino & Mays de Perex, 2000).

In addition to a descriptive design, an action research approach was used. Action research typically involves and data collection by teachers who want to make thoughtful changes to their practice (Kemmis & McTaggart, 2000). Action researchers first ask themselves about their current circumstances, how those circumstances came to be, and how those circumstances may be changed (Kemmis & McTaggart, 2000).

Action research involves a series of self-reflective cycles. Though the phases in the action research cycle are often referred to by different names, action researchers cycle

through the following phases: (a) planning, (b) acting and observing, and (c) reflecting on the processes and consequences of the action (Kemmis & McTaggart, 2000; Torbert, 2001). In phase one, the planning phase, the attention of the researcher's inquiries is directed toward a purpose or goal (Torbet, 2001). In phase two, the observing and acting phase, researchers take their planned action and observe the results of that action (Kemmis & McTaggart, 2000). In phase three, the reflecting and evaluating phase, the consequences of the actions taken are reflected on and evaluated, at which point the researcher modifies her plans and continues through each phase of the action research cycle again and again. (Kemmis & McTaggart, 2000; Torbert, 2001).

Because the purpose of this study was to better understand the ways students interact during literature circles, a descriptive design with an action research approach was appropriate and beneficial. In order to observe students' interactions it was necessary to envision and plan an environment where students were able to participate openly and freely with one another in democratic and nondemocratic ways. I reflected on and evaluated my observations in order to determine how my planning and acting needed modifying, at which point I adjusted my plans and continued through the phases of action research.

### *Participants*

The participants of this study were 37 students from one eighth grade language arts class at a middle school in an above-average socioeconomic residential area located near the mountains southeast of Salt Lake City. This was a regular education class and not an elective; all students were required to enroll in a language arts class. Of the 37 students who participated in this study, 18 were girls and 19 were boys. Thirty-four

students were white, two were Latina, and one was African American. None of the students who participated in this study were receiving special education services. Many of the participants had participated in activities similar to literature circles in the past, but none had experienced the method as described by Daniels (2002). The participating class was purposively selected based on my afternoon teaching schedule. In order to record my thoughts and perceptions of the process as accurately as possible, it was necessary to choose the class which meets the period before my preparation period, thus allowing me to reflect on and evaluate my observations without delay or interruption. This eighth grade class was divided into literature circles of three to five students based on the books they chose. All students in this class participated in literature circles. Students and their parents provided signed consent forms before they participated in the study (see Appendix B) and pseudonyms were used to ensure participant privacy.

I also participated in this study as a participant-observer. I have taught seventh and eighth grade language arts for six years, four years in the school where the study was conducted. I first implemented literature circles in my classroom during my student teaching eight years ago. I have since used literature circles in many of my classes, but I have always used them as a tool to develop reading skills and reading comprehension. Never had I looked closely at the interactions among the students. As a participant-observer I observed the students as they interacted in their literature circles, but I did not engage in any of their discussions.

### *Procedure*

The process of carrying out literature circles in my classroom began with phase one of the action research cycle and continued through all the cycles repeatedly until the

conclusion of the study. Beyond the initial planning, phases one, two, and three frequently overlapped as various parts of the plans were enacted, observed, and evaluated.

*Phase one: Planning.* For this study, phase one involved planning and visioning how to institute literature circles in my classroom in a way that would allow students to interact with one another naturally and in a way that would allow me to observe the nature of those interactions. Though the study was not conducted until two months into the school year, there were many things that I began planning several months before. Some things I was unable to plan until I had met the students. Everything that I planned was recorded in my researcher procedure log (see Appendix C). My researcher procedure log served as a way for me to keep track of my steps in the action research cycle. It includes the actions I took and what happened as a result.

The first thing I planned was the beginning date of the study. I chose October for several reasons. First, in order for literature circles to run as smoothly as possible, it was important that the students had enough time to become familiar with the routines of the class and with my expectations for them. It was also important that the students had enough time to understand the constraints placed on them due to having an unenclosed classroom that is bordered by three other classrooms. Additionally, students needed time to interact with each other and gain each other's trust so they felt they could openly communicate during literature circles. I also took into consideration the school-wide schedule and allowed enough time to begin and complete literature circles without any holiday interruptions or major school breaks. That allowed students to read and discuss their books straight through. Beginning this study in October also allowed me time to

learn the abilities and interests of my students, which aided me in my decision of books to offer for literature circles. Finally, beginning in October allowed enough time for me to begin the year with a study of *The Outsiders*. In the past this has been a high-interest novel which motivated and engaged my students and encouraged thoughtful discussion about themes such as coming of age, identity, and peer and family relationships. Reading *The Outsiders* before beginning literature circles was intended to get the students excited to read additional novels.

Secondly, I planned the weekly schedule (see Appendix D and E). To allow time in the weekly schedule to address other aspects of the Utah State Core Curriculum, I planned literature circles and related activities for part of the class period each day of the week. I used Daniels (2002) to decide how often and for how long to meet with literature circles in my classroom. For middle school students on a double period schedule, he suggests daily implementation for up to 40 minutes. Throughout the literature circles unit, I taught several very short whole class mini-lessons before students moved into their literature circles. The topics were based on the eighth grade language arts core and student needs.

Initially, groups of students were given 40 minutes on Tuesdays and Wednesdays to meet, read, discuss, and begin thinking about their role assignments. On Thursdays students had thirty minutes to share and discuss completed role assignments. On Fridays thirty minutes were allotted for student response journals and for whole class discussion based on common themes and connections among books. After the first week, however, I realized that the schedule needed to be modified. For the last three weeks of literature circles, groups of students read, discussed, and began working on their role assignments

on Mondays, Tuesdays, Wednesdays, and Thursdays. Fridays were reserved for sharing role assignments, response journals, and whole class discussion. Beginning on the first day of literature circles, students determined their reading schedule and how best to use the 40 minutes they were allotted on Mondays, Tuesdays, Wednesdays, and Thursdays.

The third aspect of my planning addressed book choice for literature circles. Many themes found in *The Outsiders* – coming of age, identity, and peer and family relations – are topics that middle school students often care deeply about. These themes served as one basis for book selection. Though each group read and discussed a different book, choosing books with a common theme enabled the students to come together for whole class discussions based on the common themes. I also selected books based on the guidance and suggestions of my committee members, our school librarian, and my own five years experience teaching middle school language arts. As I decided on books, I considered the reading levels and interests of my students, as well as which books students would have already read. To make sure students did not choose a book they had already read, students responded to the Books I've Read Checklist (Appendix F). Students completed this checklist prior to the introduction of literature circles. Then, in order to determine their groups, I showed the students each book and gave a brief introduction and description of each book. The students marked their top four books choices on the My Book Preferences list (see Appendix H) and were assigned a book they had not previously read.

The fourth issue I considered in my planning was which literature circle roles to include in the unit. Though Daniels (2002) offers many varieties of literature circle roles, I selected the question asker, the passage picker, the connector, the summarizer, and the

word wizard because I felt they would most appropriately address the state core curriculum for language arts and lend themselves most easily to narrative books and democratic behaviors such as, a) having equal opportunities for all voices and viewpoints to be represented and heard (Powell, 1992), b) engaging in discussion and inquiry (Dewey, 1916), c) respecting others, and d) resolving conflicts (Pohan, 2003).

The fifth element of my planning involved what my instruction of literature circles and weekly role assignments would look like. In the two weeks between completing *The Outsiders* and beginning literature circles, I taught a mini lesson on each literature circle role sheet. During that time, I read the class a picture book (See Appendix I) and modeled how to complete one of the role sheets before, during, and after reading. Students first read a picture book and completed a role sheet independently. Students were then assigned to groups of three to five students. Each group was given a different picture book, which together they read aloud and completed one of the role sheets as a group. Each day students learned a different literature circle role with a different book. Additionally, I worked with one group to model and discuss appropriate interactions regarding comments and discussion in a literature circle. On the last day of role instruction, this group demonstrated the process of discussing a novel together that the entire class was familiar with. As the students sat around a group of desks in the front of the classroom, they discussed who would begin and in what order they would share. As one student shared her insights based on her role assignment, the others listened and then asked questions. The questions were not limited to ones with correct and incorrect answers. They discussed what they thought and why they thought it, and sometimes they did not agree with each other. When they did not agree, they continued to discuss the

issue until they either agreed or respectfully agreed to disagree. Each student had a turn, respectfully participated in the discussion, and offered personal ideas and opinions.

The sixth step I took was to determine appropriate and thoughtful journal response prompts (see Appendix J). I did this by drawing on the themes raised in the books as well as on the literature that describes democratic participation. Post literature circle questionnaires and follow-up interview questions were developed so that I could most accurately understand and interpret the interactions that took place as my students participated in literature circles. As the needs and interests of my students changed and developed, journal response, questionnaire, and follow-up interview questions were changed.

The products of my planning during this initial planning phase included a tentative monthly and weekly schedule, a list of possible literature circle books for students to choose from, each literature circle role sheet, a list of possible journal response prompts, tentative questionnaire and focus group questions, and my researcher procedure log.

*Phase two: Acting and observing.* In phase two of this study, I implemented the plans I made during phase one. First, the students had a chance to indicate which books they had already read on the Books I've Read Checklist (see Appendix F). Second, after an introduction and description of each book available for literature circles, students were able to choose the top four books they wanted to read on the My Book Preferences list (see Appendix H). Third, based on the Books I've Read Checklist, the My Book Preferences list, the number of copies available for each book, and the needs of particular students, I assigned students to groups of three to five members.



Students met in their groups five days a week to read and discuss their novels, to begin working on their role assignments, and to share their completed role assignments. All groups were observed and tape-recorded so as to avoid Hawthorne effects during observation. However, only the tapes of students who had permission to be tape-recorded and were chosen as a focal group were transcribed and reported in the results and conclusions portion of the study. All other tapes were immediately erased. Likewise, observational data reported in the results and conclusions portion of the study came only from students who obtained permission to be tape-recorded. This made it possible to theme and code data for one focal group without singling them out during class. I observed a different group for the same amount of time each day. During this observation time, I looked particularly for how students interacted with one another as they met in their groups and discussed their novels, and I recorded my observations in my researcher observation log (see Appendix G). At the end of each week students responded to a student response journal prompt and came together for a whole class discussion.

At the conclusion of literature circles, all students completed a questionnaire about their experiences during literature circles (see Appendix K). I then purposefully selected a small group of students to participate in a non-taped, group follow-up interview (see Appendix L). I tried to include one student from each of the literature circles for this follow-up interview. Some students were selected because I had additional questions based on their responses to the questionnaire. I conducted the interview and took notes during the interview.

Data that were collected during phase two included observational field notes, tape recordings and transcriptions of literature circle discussions, post-literature circle questionnaires, and follow-up interview notes.

*Phase three: Reflecting and evaluating.* During phase three, I reflected on and evaluated the observational field notes, tape recorded transcriptions, post-literature circle questionnaires, and follow-up interview notes. Because this study focused on the nature of interactions that took place among my students as they participated in literature circles and not specifically on the process of action research, I focused most of my time and attention to this phase as I reflected on, evaluated, and analyzed my data.

*Phases one, two, three: Cycle through again.* Upon reflection and evaluation of the data collected in phase three, I again entered into phase one. There I made any necessary modifications to the existing plans and planned for anything previously unaccounted for. Once my plans were complete, I began collecting data again as I moved into phase two for the second time. I then continued on to phase three for the second time and reflected upon and evaluated my data. I continually moved through these three phases of the action research cycle until the end of literature circles.

As I moved through the three phases of the action research cycle, I found that the students did not have enough time to read their novels again, so I had to adjust the schedule to provide more in class reading time. This modification was effective and most of the students were able to manage their reading assignments.

#### *Data Collection*

Data collection began in October of 2007 and data were collected five days a week during all literature circle sessions. Data that were collected included (a) tape

recordings and transcriptions of literature circle discussions, (b) observational field notes, (c) post literature circle questionnaire, and (d) notes from the follow up interview.

*Tape recordings and transcriptions of literature circle discussions.* I transcribed the conversations and discussions that took place for one focal group each Friday. During this time, students were sharing and discussing their completed role sheets. I determined which group to select based on factors such as reading levels, personalities, group dynamics, and which students returned their consent forms. Though only one group was carefully followed throughout the process, tape recorders were placed on all groups' tables for the full time that they met each week in order to avoid Hawthorne effects.

*Observational field notes.* I observed all students working in their respective literature circles during the second phase of the action research cycle. A different group was observed each day for a total of 13 observation sessions. During each observation session, I took field notes, recording in particular the way students discussed their novel. I also noted the ways that they interacted with one another and the conversations that took place.

*Post literature circles questionnaire.* At the conclusion of the literature circles unit, after all students had been assessed and had received their grades, I administered a questionnaire to all the students (see Appendix K). The questionnaire asked students to reflect on their experiences and the nature of their interactions during literature circles. The questionnaire was intended to provide me with first hand information from each student rather than rely solely on tape recordings and my own observations. Each questionnaire was themed and coded.

*Notes from the follow-up interview.* After all the students had completed their questionnaires and the questionnaires had been themed and coded, I conducted a non-taped group interview with nine students (see Appendix L). Students were selected based on questionnaire responses that needed to be explained, clarified, or further detail. For example, when asked how they resolved conflicts within their groups, some students said they talked it over, to which I wanted further explanation and detail. Additionally, because of my interest in democratic participation, group interview participants were selected based on questionnaire responses that demonstrated characteristics of democratic participation or the lack of democratic participation such as communicating and cooperating with one another, resolving conflicts, expressing ideas and viewpoints, listening to one another, and being industrious. The purpose of the follow-up interview was to explore the students' responses on the questionnaire and examine more deeply the nature of their interactions during literature circles.

#### *Data Analysis*

Data analysis and data collection occurred simultaneously so that appropriate modifications could be made to preexisting plans while students were still engaged in literature circles. As I observed and listened to my students in their literature circles each day, I began to theme and code my observational field notes and audio-tape transcriptions, which detailed the students' actions and interactions. I did this continually as I collected data. At the conclusion of literature circles, I administered a post-literature circles questionnaire to all the students, which was also themed and coded. A group of nine students, one from each literature circle, was then selected to participate in a follow-

up interview based on their questionnaire responses. My notes from this interview were also themed and coded.

Because of my interest in democratic participation, I examined and coded my data paying particular attention to instances when the students allowed all voices and viewpoints to be represented and heard (Powell, 1992), negotiated goals and decisions (Edelsky, 1994, Shannon, 2004), engaged in discussion and inquiry (Dewey, 1916), engaged with their novel (Edelsky, 1994; Goodlad, 2004), and showed industriousness (Pohan, 2003). Any additional behaviors, interactions, and observations were also themed and coded as they emerged (Johnson & Christensen, 2004) to allow for the most accurate representation of events and actions that took place during literature circles as well as instances where individuals did not allow others to engage democratically.

Looking for these actions and interactions, I coded my data according to thirty-two narrow codes (see Appendix M) and then established four broad codes: communication, cooperation, industriousness, and engagement. Included within each of these broad codes was a list of actions and interactions observed during literature circle sessions. I then met with five other English teachers at my school to discuss the accuracy of certain behaviors within the codes I had established. For example, we all agreed that examples of discussion and inquiry fit in the code communication. There were no major objections to any of the codes I had established or the actions and interactions I associated with them.

After I themed and coded my data according to the four broad codes of communication, cooperation, industriousness, and engagement with the novel, I gave another English teacher who has her master's degree and has been teaching English for

twelve years one of my audio-tape transcriptions and three of my twelve days of observational field notes to establish inter-rater reliability. She and I coded the audio-tape transcript with 94 percent consistency and the observational field notes with 80 percent consistency. The disagreement between codes was consistent in all cases and was a matter of better defining the code. For example, where I thought students sharing their roles and being busy with literature circle tasks showed industriousness, the other teacher thought it showed engagement. Upon further discussion of the terms and their implications, we agreed on what constituted engagement and what constituted industriousness.

Once I had determined the results of my study, I did a member check with the students who participated in literature circles to determine how accurate my perception of their actions and interactions was. I provided each student with a list of fourteen statements which outlined my observations during literature circles. I then read through each statement to further explain and clarify what I observed. Then they reread each statement and checked if they agreed or disagreed. If the students disagreed with the statement, I asked them to explain why. Though all students responded to the fourteen statements, I was particularly interested in the responses from the focal group as the statements were based largely on my observations of their group and their audio tape transcriptions. The students in the focal group felt that 83 percent of my observations were accurate and reflected their experience in literature circles. There were only two discrepancies between their perceptions of their time in literature circles and my observations of their time in literature circles. First, while all the students agreed that some members talked more than others, three of the five students felt that did not lessen

other group members' participation in the discussion. The data show that this was not the case. Second, one student believed that everyone took responsibility for beginning the daily reading, which was also not supported by the data. These discrepancies may be due partially to the amount of time that passed between participation in literature circles and the member check. Overall, the member check supported my data analysis and my findings.

### *Limitations*

This study of the nature of interactions that took place as students engaged in literature circles has several limitations. First, limitations to this study result from the chosen design. As is true of all descriptive studies, reporting data accurately may be questionable. Of greater consideration, however, is due to the nature of the design, one cannot conclude causation. Descriptive design provides researchers with opportunities to observe behaviors, body language, tone of voice, attitudes, beliefs, opinions, and interactions among participants and while those may be found to be democratic in nature, they do not indicate that literature circles cause democratic participation. It is important for readers to consider other factors which may contribute to such classroom behaviors, such as the age of participants and the teacher/researcher involved.

Second, the duration of the study may be a limitation. Students participated in literature circles for four weeks, which may be too brief a time period to accurately determine what consistent interactions would be. Future research may investigate the same teacher and the same students over the course of an entire year to better determine the behaviors and interactions that take place during literature circles.

Third, my own ability to be objective about and self-critical of my practice and the effects of my teaching on democratic participation may also be a limitation. Fourth, students' responses to the questionnaire and follow-up interview may be affected by my position as their teacher. These three limitations may affect the results of the research.



## CHAPTER 4

### RESULTS

#### *Introduction*

This chapter will present the results of this study of 37 eighth grade language arts students as they participated in literature circles over a six week period. Each week students met in their literature circles, which were assigned based on their choice of a novel, to read together and complete weekly role assignments (see Appendix A). At the end of each week, the students again met together to share their ideas and insights into that week's reading. First, I will present my observations of the group as they met to read their novel aloud together, and then I will present my observations of the group as they met to share and discuss their weekly role assignments.

#### *Group Reading*

For four out of five days each week, the students had 40 minutes to meet in their literature circles and read their novels together. During the four week observation period, I noticed that the students in the focal group developed patterns of routines and interactions as they read together during the week.

*Focal group.* Five students were in the focal group, four girls and one boy. Rebecca, Diane, and Catherine all read on grade level, while Gary read on a seventh grade level, and Whitney read on a twelfth grade level. Though Whitney, Catherine, and Rebecca tended to be the most studious members of their group in that they rarely missed any homework assignments and rarely performed poorly on class assessments, Whitney was by far the most outspoken of the three. Rebecca was always much more reserved than the others. Diane's participation and performance in class and in her group never

seemed more or less than average, and Gary, who often had a lot to say, was usually making jokes and being kind of silly. These five students were placed together in a literature circle because *Esperanza Rising* (Ryan, 2000) was each of their first choices.

At the conclusion of literature circles, all members of the focal group reported having had a positive experience with literature circles. They felt that all members of their group participated and contributed to the discussions. When asked if anyone in the group dominated the conversations while others remained quiet, Diane said, “No, we all participated equally.” (Questionnaire, 11/14/07) Similarly Catherine responded by saying, “Not at all. Everyone had some opinion about the book.” (Questionnaire, 11/14/07) Additionally, during the follow-up interview, Rebecca expressed her feelings that it was easy to bring up questions and issues during discussions (Follow-up Interview, 11/28/07). Despite their agreement that literature circles was a positive experience and that everyone participated and contributed equally to their discussions with ease, a closer examination showed that this was not actually the case.

*Routines.* Over the course of the four weeks that my eighth grade language arts students participated in literature circles, the students and I quickly established a new class routine. Some aspects of the usual routine remained unchanged, and we simply added literature circle activities to them. Other aspects of the class routine were discontinued until literature circles were over to allow as much time as possible for literature circle activities.

One aspect of the class routine that did not change for any of the students was their warm-up at the beginning of class. Their daily warm-up consists of two sentences which the students edit for surface corrections, like punctuation and grammar.

Additionally, they may rearrange the order of ideas to add variety to the sentence structure or to present the ideas in a more coherent and cohesive manner. Though the warm-up is not directly connected to literature circles, I decided not to eliminate it from the class activities during literature circles for two reasons. First, I believe it strengthens their writing skills and serves as a springboard into a variety of writing activities. Second, it settles them down after lunch and passing time between classes, so they are ready to focus on our class work for the day. After their warm-up, the students moved their desks into group formation and gathered in their literature circles.

As I observed the focal group reading in its literature circle, I noticed many things happening on a daily basis. They began by figuring out where they had left off the day before (Field Notes, 11/07/07). Whitney was usually the one who took the initiative to figure out where they left off. Often she and Catherine looked back over the pages they thought they had read the day before and determined a beginning page for the day. Whitney and Catherine are both diligent, high achieving students, so I was not surprised to see them take the lead in this matter. I was surprised though that Rebecca, who is also one of my top students, did not play a bigger role in this process. I noticed that often she had something to say about the pages or where to begin, but either spoke so quietly that no one heard her, or just smiled and let Whitney and Catherine decide (Field Notes, 11/07/07). Diane and Gary both let the others decide (Field Notes, 11/07/07).

Once they had determined where to begin their reading for the day, they usually talked about who would be the first reader and in what order they would read. Again, Whitney usually took the lead in these decisions. She volunteered to be the first reader so often that eventually there was no discussion about it and she just began the reading each

day (Field Notes, 10/22/07; Field Notes 11/07/07). The reader to her left read next, and so on. Each student took a turn reading into the microphone, and then passed it to the next person. Each of the students had the opportunity to read several times during one day of reading, and I never observed any of them refuse to read (Field Notes, 10/22/07).

As one student read aloud, which happened on Mondays, Tuesdays, Wednesdays, and Thursdays, often the others marked passages or took notes on their role assignments for their Friday role sharing (Field Notes, 10/22/07; Field Notes 11/07/07). Though Gary and Diane were less involved in making some of the decisions for their group, I noticed they both worked on their role sheets consistently when the others were reading. As Gary tended to be the one in the group who had the hardest time staying focused and participating seriously, I was surprised to see him paying particularly close attention and taking careful notes as the others read (Field Notes, 11/07/07).

The students usually followed along as someone was reading aloud and were ready when it was their turn to read. Gary surprised me again in this. Often his head was down on the desk or turned into his arm, and it appeared to me that he was not paying any attention at all to the reading. When it was his turn to read, though, he picked his head up and began in the right place with no hesitation (Field Notes, 10/22/07).

During the last five minutes of class, the students returned their desks to their usual places and waited for announcements or reminders. They also returned their books and their microphones and were dismissed when the bell rang.

*Interactions.* Occasionally the students would pause in their reading to ask a question about something in the book, to make a comment on something someone had read, to reread for clarification, or to keep the group focused and on task. One day during

reading, Catherine read, “we have little money and Hortensia and Alfonso are no longer our servants. We are indebted to them for our finances and our future. And that trunk of clothes for the poor? Esperanza, it is for us.” All the students in this group live in upper-class neighborhoods, and in response to that passage Whitney exclaimed, “Oh, sad! They’re poor.” (Transcript, 10/26/07) Shortly after that point in the book they came across another section that shocked all of them. Earlier they had been discussing whether Mama, the widow of a wealthy Mexican land-owner, would marry Tio Luis, her late husband’s corrupt and money-seeking brother, in an attempt to keep her estate. Catherine asked if they thought Mama would marry Tio Luis. The others answered, “No. Heck no,” “Um, no. That’s a negative,” and “Probably no.” On one of Catherine’s turns to read, she read, “[Mama] held her head high and looked beautiful even dressed in old clothes from the poor box. ‘Tio Luis, I have considered your proposal, and in the interest of the servants and Esperanza, I will marry you.’” As Catherine read this passage, the rest of the students gasped in unison. They were shocked by what she had read and by what Mama had consented to do. In fact, Catherine went on to say, “Okay, it says, okay, we’ll read that again, kay guys?” and they did (Transcript, 10/26/07) Though there was not a discussion of what this could mean or what Mama’s motives may have been, the students were affected enough by what they had read to reread it to make sure they had read it right.

### *Group Role Sharing*

On role sharing days, the students had 30 minutes to discuss their insights and ideas from the week’s reading. At first glance, all looked like it was going as I had hoped it would. I could see students talking to one another, reading from their role assignments

and their novels, and allowing everyone a turn to speak. Upon careful examination, however, I noticed the tendency of some group members to silence other students' voices, to simply go through the motions of completing and sharing their role assignments, and to stick very closely to the suggested framework of their role assignments with little discussion or inquiry.

*Silencing voices.* Though there were ample opportunities for all students to voice their opinions and ideas with regard to the novel being read, some students dominated the group conversation to such a degree that other students' voices were silenced. In one 25 minute discussion, Whitney spoke 70 times while Rebecca spoke only 8 times. In addition to sharing her role assignment, Whitney also asked questions, answered others' questions, commented on other role assignments when they were shared, and praised group members for doing a good job. In contrast, of the eight times Rebecca spoke, six were strictly reporting her role assignment as word wizard, one was to agree to share her role after Diane, and one comment, "Not really," was in response to Whitney asking if she had anything to contribute (Transcript, 11/02/07).

The week that Rebecca was the word wizard, she was the third to share her role assignment. Whitney went first, followed by Diane, and then Rebecca began.

Rebecca: I am Rebecca, and I am the word wizard. I chose *shrubs* on page 88 paragraph three because it was new to me, and I had never seen it.

Catherine: What are shrubs?

Whitney: They're bushes.

Catherine: Oh! Yah!

Whitney: Shrubs . . . sh-er-ubs.

Diane: Member how I said they were sher-ubs?

Whitney: Oh, yah, what are those?

Diane: I don't know. We should look it up some time.

Rebecca: There's a dictionary back there if anyone wants to look it up.

Catherine: I'll look it up.

Whitney: Ok [laughs]

Rebecca: And then, another word was staccato.

Whitney: What?

Rebecca: Staccato.

Whitney: Oh, I like that word.

Catherine: I like that word. It's funny.

Diane: What's it mean?

Whitney: Well, it's usually like on music. Like if you're playing a note you're just barely tapping it.

Catherine: It's a dot

Whitney: It's kind of jumpy.

Catherine: It's a dot over the note.

Hannah: Kay, sorry, keep going.

Diane: Found it!

Whitney: Kay, what's it mean?

Diane: There's a couple of definitions. The first definition is an angel. The second one is a picture or statue of a child with wings.

Catherine: It's pretty much an angel, guys.

Whitney: What did they use it -- what page was that on?

Gary: My turn.

Whitney: We're not done. We're discussing, we're trying to figure out -- oh, 'The babies Lupe and Pepe a girl and a boy were little dark eyed cherubs with mops of black hair.' I think it means like little innocent kids, like innocent little babies.

They're innocent little babies. They're babies. Babies are innocent. Kay go!

Rebecca: Kay. And then anxious cause it's descriptive.

Diane: I love that word!

Whitney: What a good choice!

Rebecca: And then rickety.

Catherine: Rickety.

Whitney: I love that word. That was such a good idea.

Diane: Rickety, chickety

Whitney: Thank you for contributing to our conversation. Here's Gary.

(Transcript, 11/02/07)

Though it was Rebecca's turn to lead a discussion about words she found meaningful in their novel, the other students, particularly Whitney, Catherine, and Diane, basically had the discussion without her. Of the four words Rebecca shared, she was only able to explain why she chose two of them, and barely at that. Whitney, Catherine, and Diane carried on a conversation about the meaning of cherub, which wasn't even one of Rebecca's words, just one they were reminded of. Similarly, when Diane asked what staccato meant, before Rebecca could answer, Whitney and Catherine explained the word to the group. Rebecca is an outstanding student. Her assignments are always thoroughly



completed, and I had no doubt that given the opportunity, she would have been able to answer the group's questions about her words, but because other members of her group dominated the conversation, she never had the chance, and her voice was drowned out.

*Going through the motions.* Each week the students were responsible for completing a role assignment which included tasks such as finding new vocabulary, making text connections, questioning the text and author, and selecting meaningful passages for discussion. I had hoped that the students would extend their conversations beyond the suggested framework, but instead I found that the students stuck very closely to the discussion suggestions and in some cases completed their role assignments with seemingly little thought, consideration, or contemplation. During the first week of role sharing, Gary was the word wizard. As he shared his words, I realized that he, and likely others, were merely going through the motions of sharing their roles and not fully engaging in what they were sharing.

Gary: I picked Abuelita, and it's on page 14. It's weird. Crocheting, page 14, it's funny. It's really funny. Yah. It's really weird how it is spelled. Um, strand, page 14. It's interesting.

Whitney: [giggles]

Gary: Hortensia, page 14. Um, it's a cool name. Alfonso, page 14. It's an awesome name.

Catherine: Why did you pick those words?

Diane: I know. You have to –

Gary: They're awesome.

Whitney: Well, Gary, let's discuss that. [giggles]

Catherine: Wait, why did you pick them besides they were cool?

Whitney: Why did you pick them? Just because they were cool? You have to have a better reason --

Catherine: Are they words you didn't know?

Gary: They're words that are cool, and yah. And I had no clue where they were.

In the words, and --

Catherine: Okay, Gary. You're done.

Gary: Get the microphone out of my face. (Transcript, 10/26/07)

Granted, vocabulary may not be the most fascinating topic of discussion for eighth grade students, but I had hoped that the students would find words that brought the book to life for them and that the students would talk about how those words had done that. I even went so far as to hope that they would actually choose and look up words they didn't know to share with their group members. Unfortunately, as Gary demonstrated, this was not to be. Not only had Gary deprived his group of any kind of discussion about the words he chose, it was clear that he had simply done the assignment that I had given him and, to the smallest degree possible, fulfilled his responsibility to his group members rather than fully engage with his reading.

*Lacking discussion and inquiry.* I also noticed that frequently the students simply reported their role assignments with very little discussion and inquiry and very few self-generated insights. Often questions or comments were introduced into the conversations, but the students continued on without acknowledging or discussing the issue.

The focal group chose to read a novel in which the main character is a young girl about their age, though I suspect the similarities end there for most of them. I was pleased

with what I had seen them do throughout the first week of literature circles. They kept up with their reading, stayed on schedule, took turns reading, and stopped to make sense of what they were reading. Having watched them read together and interact with each other so successfully throughout the first week of literature circles, I was curious to see what they would choose to focus on and if their role sharing discussions would go as smoothly as when they read together. I was especially interested to hear their discussion after Whitney shared her summary.

Whitney: Ok. I am the summarizer, and the main key points I thought were um, Esperanza's thirteenth birthday, Esperanza's dad dies, her uncle wants her mom to marry him, her mom says no, the uncle burns her house down, her mom accepts to think about her uncle's proposal. Then they decide to cross the border to go live in the US. What do you think about that? (Transcript, 10/26/07)

I could only imagine what they thought about that. How many of them had ever even considered such things happening to them? What would they do if their dad died? Though unlikely, what if their uncle wanted to marry their mother for money? What would they do if their house burned down, or if they had no choice but to move to a foreign country? Surely these were things they could talk about, and they almost did. To Whitney's summary, Gary said, "I think illegal immigrants shouldn't come to America." (Transcript, 10/26/07) As Whitney, Catherine, and Diane are fairly outspoken students, I imagined that Gary's one short statement would launch them into a discussion on a very controversial subject. To my great disappointment, the only comments that were made before they moved on to Rebecca's turn to share her role were from Catherine who said, "I think those key points were good" (Transcript, 10/26/07) and from Whitney who said,

“Okay. So, that’s the discussion.” (Transcript, 10/26/07) I tried to understand why they had not pursued at least the topic of illegal immigration by supposing that the students were not practiced enough in their groups to have meaningful discussion of such issues, but imagined that they would not miss opportunities to do so in the future. Unfortunately, not much changed over the course of the four weeks.

During the last week of literature circles, on the last day of role sharing, Whitney began the discussion as the word wizard. Whitney is one of my top students and is generally an analytical thinker and reader. I was disappointed when she shared the words she had found that week and missed an opportunity to discuss a serious issue based on one of the words.

Whitney: Kay. I’m gonna go first, and I am, this is Whitney, and I am the word wizard. And I picked, the words I picked were deportation. It was new and interesting. Uh, burlap sac. There, that’s odd. Does anyone even know what burlap sacs are?

Catherine: No.

Whitney: Ok. I picked swarms cause it’s very descriptive. Trusting eyes cause that’s descriptive. Exotic cause I like that word, and grassy bank cause that’s kind of descriptive.

Catherine: I have a question.

Whitney: Yah.

Catherine: What does deportation mean?

Whitney: Deportation was like, when, uh, they made them leave or something.

Yah! Deportation was when they made them leave. They put those people on the

bus even if they were citizens. They made them leave. Uh, does anyone know what burlap sac is?

Diane: Isn't it like a potato sack?

Whitney: Oh, yah! I bet that's what it is. They talked about it when they were doing potatoes. I bet that's it. (Transcript, 11/14/07)

As I listened to this discussion, I was excited to hear what they thought about this issue. Gary had already expressed his opinion that illegal immigrants shouldn't come to America. I was curious what they would think and how they would feel about U.S. citizens, with as many rights as they have, being sent out of the country, perhaps even to a country they had never been to. I had hoped they would see the injustice of this and the way many Americans view and treat people who speak and look different than them. I had hoped they would consider the implications for the people who were sent away and for the families left behind. Where would they live? Where would they work? Would they ever be reunited with their loved ones? Rather than engaging in any sort of inquiry about any of these issues, Whitney continued with her next word, and then Catherine immediately began to share her connections. Focused on following the directions I had given, that each person should share her role, Whitney and her group missed a prime opportunity to engage in discussion and inquiry and moved on to the next person's turn. Though they were physically doing what I expected them to do, they missed that the point was to discuss issues and ideas together and simply reported their assignments to each other.

In a similar instance near the end of literature circles, Catherine took her turn to share her role as the connector.

Catherine: Kay. I'm Catherine, and I'm the connector. Um. I have a lot of connections. When the strikers were chanting and yelling, it reminds me of when that little black girl went to a white school and she was getting curses. Yah, I learned it in third grade. Yes, yes. It reminds me of her too cause she's sad. And um, when the guard sends some of the family members back to Mexico. It reminds me of Ellis Island or the Island of Tears.

Whitney: Oh, Ellis Island. I know what that is. Do you guys know what Ellis Island is? It's the place, yah, like where people came to get into America.

Catherine: Kay. My connection was like when the guards send some of the family members home and like in Ellis Island when they didn't pass the medical exam they had to send them back to where they came from. So, the family was split. And, ok. When Miguel took the money from Esperanza my sister took money from me to go to the mall, and I was really mad at her. And yes. And I tried to hide it in different places, but she always found it. (Transcript, 11/14/07)

Again, as in weeks past, I was thrilled by some of the issues Catherine had picked out of the book and brought up for discussion. Though they may not yet have a full understanding of the complexity of issues such as immigration, segregation, and integration and may not be able to have a deep and meaningful discussion about them, these ideas should not be wholly unfamiliar to them, and even if they did know too little to discuss such topics, they all have families. I thought at the very least they could talk together about what it would be like to be separated from their families. How would they manage without a parent, without both parents, or without a sibling? Rather than talk about these issues in any degree of depth, they spent the next few minutes talking about

the places they hide their money from their siblings, and then Catherine continued with her last connection.

Catherine: Yah. Um, that's it. Oh oh oh. Ok. The rose trellis in Papa's garden reminds me of my mom's dad's hutch that she has. He died in a car accident when she was eleven. So, she's had that forever. So, yah. Those are my connections.

Any questions? (Transcript, 11/14/07)

There were no questions, and there was no discussion. How, I wondered, could they have missed yet another opportunity to talk about such serious subjects? At the very least, why did they not even consider what the death of a parent would mean to them? In Catherine's own life, her mother has experienced this. I couldn't imagine that Catherine's mother had never spoken of this, or that Catherine had no idea the kind of impact this had had on her mother. Hadn't Catherine then thought about how this would affect her? Why didn't she talk about it? Why did they only talk about places to hide their money? Does losing their money mean more to them than losing their parents? I was not able to come up with any answers to these questions and was saddened that yet another opportunity to discuss and inquire together had been missed.

It seemed that the death of a parent was a topic that came up frequently, and yet each time the students seemed to gloss casually over the surface of it and move on. During one of the role sharing days, Rebecca, as the connector, reported about her friend whose father had died.

Rebecca: I was the connector and this book reminded me of the Zoro, or whatever it's called, because they also lived in Mexico, and, um, you know how

Esperanza's dad died? I have a friend whose dad died too, and it was sad.

(Transcript, 10/26/07)

Not only had Rebecca brought death into the conversation again, she also expressed that it was a sad experience. I thought for sure this would be the catalyst for the discussion they seemed to be dancing around but never having, so I was pleased when Catherine asked, "How did he die?" (Transcript, 10/26/07) Unfortunately, much to my disappointment, Gary began chanting "Overdose, overdose," (Transcript, 10/26/07) to which the others encouraged him to, "Be nice!" until finally Diane spoke up saying, "Okay. This is Diane speaking. So, I was the passage picker." (Transcript, 10/26/07)

Rebecca was not the only student in her group to have indirectly experienced a parent's death, yet no one seemed to feel the urge to talk about it. Perhaps they could not even fathom such a thing happening to them, and therefore it never occurred to them to talk more about it, or perhaps they were not comfortable sharing such personal thoughts and feelings with their group members. If I had been leading a class discussion, would they have engaged in a more thoughtful discussion and inquired with the class and with me? I'm not sure, but their literature circle did not appear to be invitation enough.

During the third week of role sharing, Catherine shared two passages. The first was about Esperanza's father.

Catherine: Kay, I am Catherine Timmons, and I was the passage picker. Um, let's go to page, uh, 123. Gary. Open your book . . . 'Our Lady of Guadalupe. Someone had built a grotto of rocks around the base of the tub. Around it, a large pot of earth had been fenced in by sticks and roses and planted with thorny stems. Each



was only a few branches.’ Um, I picked this because it is a descriptive part of what they did to bring Papa back to their home. (Transcript, 11/09/07)

After all the times they had brought up a parent dying, I was expecting them to take some sort of comfort in and discuss the characters’ efforts to hold on to Papa’s memory, but as with all the other issues raised, the group again moved on with no discussion of or follow-up to the passage.

The second passage Catherine shared was about labor strikes. She said, “Um, and page 147. ‘So many Mexicans have revolution still in their blood. I am sympathetic to those that are striking and sympathetic to those who want to keep working. We all want the same things, to eat and feed our children.’ Um. That was some good writing.”

(Transcript, 11/09/07) Whitney responded by saying, “Good job, Catherine. Way to pick those passages. I love how you picked 123. That really showed me just like I really thought about it. That was a great way to have a great conversation and a great discussion.” (Transcript, 11/09/07)

Later, during the same day of role sharing, Rebecca, as the question asker, asked, “Why does Marta want everyone to go on strike?” (Transcript, 11/09/07) to which Whitney responded, “Because she is sick of working under the conditions she is working under. And she wants everyone to strike so they can get more money and better jobs, but no one is wanting to strike, so she is having a bit of a difficulty. Do you have anything to add, Catherine?” (Transcript, 11/09/07) Catherine had nothing to add, and Rebecca went on to her next question.

While I agreed with Catherine that her second passage was indeed good writing, I was disappointed that that was the only reason she chose the passage. What about the fact

that it is heart wrenching to think that some people, American or otherwise, may have no choice but to work under such deplorable conditions for no other luxury than a meal. And as Rebecca's question addressed some of the same issues, how was it that no one in their group could feel the injustice of such terrible working conditions or the burden of having to make such a difficult choice enough so to talk about it? Perhaps this was another instance where they didn't understand the complexity of the issues, but I couldn't imagine that they themselves had never been faced with a difficult choice that held both positive and negative consequences. And even if they hadn't, why didn't they speculate about what they would do if they found themselves in a situation like that? Yet again, they missed a chance to involve themselves in a meaningful conversation about issues of great significance.

### *Summary*

Over the four-week period the students were involved in literature circles, the focal group read a beautifully written novel that touches on issues such as the death of a parent, wealth, poverty, selfishness, selflessness, and immigration among other things. I expected their discussions to explore deep and meaningful ideas and insights, and I expected them to come away from the novel with a greater appreciation and understanding of these issues. Instead, I observed students' voices to be silenced, literature circle reading and discussing to be simply another classroom routine, and students' discussions to be flat and rather shallow. It looked as if literature circles taught them specific practices conducive to group literature study like being prepared with their role assignments and taking turns during role sharing. It did not appear, however, that

literature circles contributed to, strengthened, or developed their abilities to communicate their ideas and personal insights through discussion and inquiry.

## CHAPTER 5

### CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The breakdown of discussion and inquiry during my students' literature circle discussions could be due to a number of factors: the lack of experience in and preparation for literature discussions, confusion about what it means to discuss and communicate with their peers, various social pressures, and the content and use of the weekly role sheets. All of these possible causes of discussion failure may be resolved if adjustments are made to the role of the teacher prior to and during literature circles and if modifications are made to the content and use of the weekly role assignments.

#### *Conclusions*

One possible explanation for the lack of discussion and inquiry during literature circles may be that my students were lacking experiences in and practice with student-led, text-based discussions. Though my students had participated in a variety of collaborative activities such as completing projects, planning presentations, and helping each other with in class assignments and were likely comfortable and well acquainted with the process of working together to complete a task, they may not have been as familiar with peer-led literature discussions. In traditional classrooms, text-based discussions are often teacher-led with few opportunities for the students to lead those discussions. In literature discussions led by the teacher, the teacher sets the focus of the discussion by choosing the topics worth discussing and determining specific questions and probes (Maloch, 2002). The teacher selects which students respond and which answers are correct and incorrect (Fielding & Pearson, 1994). What results are conversations in which the teacher talks at least as much, if not more, than all the students

combined, and the students become dependent on the teacher for literary insight and direction (Fielding & Pearson, 1994).

In contrast, however, literature circles are meant to decentralize the instructional role of the teacher. Rather than the teacher directing, leading, or advising literature activities, the responsibilities of discussing a book, understanding it, and finding personal meaning within it are transferred to the student. Peer-led discussions often offer more equitable dialogue and increased student talk time which encourages exploratory talk (Maloch, 2002). Though transferring some of the responsibilities from the teacher to the students is meant to promote independent thought and student autonomy, many students may need numerous opportunities to practice leading literature conversations with their peers before they can be expected to successfully carry on deep, text-based discussions about personal ideas and opinions during literature circles.

My failure, and perhaps the failure of other teachers in the past, to provide explicit instruction about what a discussion is may also have caused a break down in the students' discussions. Because many students may never have had the concept of a discussion explicitly taught to them, it is possible that they have misconceptions about what discussions actually are and what they look like. A discussion is much more than the exchange of questions and answers typically seen in classrooms. To discuss means to talk over, to examine, explore, and debate. A discussion should be engaging and carry meaning and relevance for those involved (Goldenberg, 1992). It should have a high and equal level of participation; statements and contributions should build upon, challenge, or extend the previous one; and the topics should be developed and elaborated by those engaged in it (Goldenberg, 1992). Without purposeful, explicit instruction about what a

discussion is, it is no wonder that students are unsure of how to do that. Alvermann (1996) describes what I had hoped would emerge from the students' discussions:

a new way of seeing, an uncomfortable sense that the world may not be quite as one had always assumed, a flash of insight into personal attitudes and beliefs, or just a sense of having worked well together. Whatever form it takes, something more than the simple sum of each reader's separate experience. (p. 258)

Without explicitly explaining the kinds of conversations that allow the exchange of ideas, opinions, insights, and beliefs to take place, students are not likely to engage in them no matter what kind of reading supports are in place.

Discussions during literature circles may also have been stifled because of various social factors. Dewey (1938) explained that the social set-up in which a person is engaged is most important in understanding and interpreting her experiences. Though the students chose their own books, they did not choose their own groups. The group arrangements could have affected the way the students participated (Alvermann, 1996; Evans, 2002). Some students may have felt intimidated around other students who they were not good friends with and did not know well (Alvermann, 1996). In the focal group, Whitney and Catherine are good friends, but otherwise there were no close friendships that I was aware of. This may explain why Diane and Rebecca were less vocal and participated less than Whitney and Catherine. Some students, like Rebecca, may just be shy and uncomfortable around more outspoken students, like Whitney (Alvermann, 1996). The gender make-up of the group may also have influenced how students participated in the discussions (Evans, 2002). Again, this may explain some of the patterns I observed in the focal group on the discussion days. Gary was the only boy in

the focal group. His seemingly off-base comments may have been done in an effort to be funny and impress the girls in his group, especially considering that his comments and participation were not always consistent with the way he acts in whole-class activities. These social factors and group dynamics may have affected the depth of my students' discussions.

Perhaps one of the greatest reasons discussion and inquiry were lacking from my students' discussions was due to the implementation of the traditional role sheets. Daniels (2002) suggests that their use be limited to a single novel or four weeks, at which time students should need less guidance and can engage in spontaneous and free flowing conversation. However, in my study, the length of time was not the real culprit. The trouble was due to the content and use of the role sheets. Though each role embodies a specific kind of thinking strategic readers do (Daniels, 2002; NCTE, 1996; Trabasso & Bouchard, 2002), ultimately the role sheets encouraged students to think about and consider the text in a very limited way. Instead of reading and thinking about the books on multiple levels, the students' discussions and my observations showed that they focused only on their particular role. Rather than paying attention to the things that stood out as personally meaningful or significant as they read, the students' attention was confined to one single role each week. They focused on choosing new words, selecting important passages, summarizing what happened in their books, making connections, or generating questions in isolation, and it may have been the role sheets that prevented them from thinking about and discussing all of those things at once. Additionally, having to complete one role each week may have led the students to view the role sheets as just another homework assignment rather than as a tool for understanding and a springboard

for discussion. What was originally meant as a framework to encourage discussion and inquiry may have stifled those conversations instead.

### *Recommendations*

The difficulties my students ran into as they attempted to engage in meaningful discussions about their books can be addressed through two general modifications to literature circles. The first adjustment to literature circles that may improve my students' discussions is to change the teacher's role. The second change is to what is contained on the role sheets and how they are used during literature circles.

*Role of the teacher.* One way teachers might improve the discussions and conversations their students have about literature is to provide more opportunities for practice and experience in peer-led literature activities. Transferring responsibility for literature-based discussions from the teacher to the student often entails altering patterns of interactions that have been firmly established and repeatedly practiced over a period of years, and teaching and learning new ways of knowing and doing in schools requires a great investment of time and effort (Maloch et al., 2004). To prepare students to make this change and to become responsible for creating meaning, gaining understanding from a text, and discussing it with their peers, teachers should provide enough preparatory experiences for students prior to the implementation of literature circles. Teachers might consider providing time for students to work in pairs and generate response topics based on short texts such as poems, short stories, or a chapter from a novel that would lead to productive and sustained discussions (Maloch, 2004). Teachers might also providing time for the students to meet in small groups to practice sharing idea based on the response topics. During this time students would practice interpersonal skills such as learning how



to cooperate and negotiate with others (Maloch, 2004). These peer-led literature activities should come early in a student's education and should be implemented regularly and continually as she progresses through school. Though the time invested in such preparation will be great, it may promote thoughtful and extended peer discussions of topics and form stronger connections between speakers.

Another way teachers might improve their students' text-based discussions is to provide explicit instruction about what discussions are and how to engage in them. To prepare students for the kind of discussions in which they can come to appreciate new ways of thinking about and seeing the world and where insights into personal perspectives and beliefs are formed, teachers should deliberately demonstrate through explicit instruction what a discussion is and how to engage in one (Cambourne, 1999; Pearson & Dole, 1988). As teachers provide explicit instruction, they do more than mention skills, they model what that skill is, and explain how, why, and when to do it (Pearson & Dole, 1988). Teachers also provide guided practice in which they gradually release the responsibility of completing a task until the students are able to do it independently (Pearson & Dole, 1988). Finally, rather than merely assessing whether students are capable of performing a task, the teacher asks the students to apply what they have learned to new and different situations (Pearson & Dole, 1988). This kind of explicit instruction is necessary for many students before they can engage in a specified task.

Though I was careful to scaffold the process my students would go through during literature circles, I did not explicitly define and demonstrate the process of engaging in a discussion. To help my students have more meaningful text-based conversations, I may need to explicitly tell them what my goals are for their discussions.

Maloch et al. (2004) suggest teachers more directly explain that during their discussions all members should be involved and included, their discussions should be cohesive and interconnected, they should generate meaningful topics to talk about, and they should support their comments and responses by sharing their reasoning. In addition to explaining what I expect their discussions to be like, I may also need to explicitly teach and model strategies that will enable them to have discussions of that nature. For example, the students may ask questions to invite participation, ask follow-up questions to continue or expand a line of thought or when group members provide one word or vague responses, or use responsive phrases such as I agree or disagree because to connect to another group members' comment. The students may also refer to the book for topics to discuss or to support their responses and reasoning.

To encourage deeper, more meaningful discussion and inquiry among group members, it may be necessary to modify the role the teacher plays in literature circles. In traditional literature circles, the teacher's role is mostly preparing and organizing the activity. After that, the teacher is very separate from the group's discussions. Instead of being removed from what is happening within each group, the teacher's role could be redefined as a facilitator and participant. Instead of orchestrating the discussion, she and the students would be responsive to the discussion the students have generated and encourage a participation style that goes back and forth and allows members to move in and out of the discussion (Goldenberg, 1992/1993; Maloch, 2002). She would elicit more speaking by asking the students to elaborate on comments they have already made and would ask questions which could have multiple answers, and she would encourage multiple and connected turns of speaking (Goldenberg, 1992/1993). Maloch et al. (2004)

state that as a facilitator and participant, the teacher would encourage student interaction and talk, ask them to expand and extend their answers, aid in conversation maintenance, challenge students' comments, push students to consider new perspectives, share her own connections and related experiences, and ask questions about things that were genuinely puzzling to her. By playing the role of facilitator and participant instead of observer, the teacher also takes on the role of a more knowledgeable other and works within the students' zone of proximal development. As the more knowledgeable other, the teacher works within a student's zone of proximal development to support him as he attempts new tasks and build on his competencies (Beliavsky, 2006, Miller, 2002). As the more knowledgeable, the teacher other enables a novice to solve a problem, carry out a task, or achieve a goal that would otherwise be beyond his efforts (Beliavsky, 2006; Miller 2002).

Changing the role of the teacher to be a facilitator and participant may also attend to some of the social issues that may have affected the students' discussions. Maloch et al. (2004) assert that as the teacher participates in the discussions, she may be able to balance the contributions of the very outspoken and the very quiet students. The presence of the teacher in the group may also address some of the gender issues that seemed to be present during literature circles. The students may not be as prone to trying to impress each other in front of the teacher.

*Content and use of the role sheets.* To provide better opportunities for democratic expression of ideas and opinions through discussion and inquiry, the content of the role sheets could be revised. Rather than each member of a literature circle focusing on a single aspect of reading each week by completing one role sheet per week, all members might instead receive a handout that contains a description of all the roles and could

consider all the roles at the same time and apply multiple reading strategies to their reading. For example, during a four week literature circle period, instead of only looking for vocabulary on week one, choosing meaningful passages on week two, summarizing the text on week three, and making connections on week four, the students should do all of those things on a daily basis for the entire time they meet as a literature circle. As students engage in all of the traditional literature circle roles at the same time, they will simultaneously practice active listening, constructing images, generating questions, summarizing, understanding vocabulary, making connections, and selecting meaningful passages. Engaging in these cognitive processes at the same time enables students to increase their participation in discussions, offer more thoughtful responses to questions, increase retention of information read, and integrate and identify main ideas (Pressley, 2000; Trabasso & Bouchard, 2002). Consolidating the traditional roles and having the students engage in multiple processes of reading may allow more opportunities for students to share their insights and viewpoints through discussion and inquiry.

Another modification to the role sheet may include suggested topics for the students to consider as they read. These topics should be broad and open-ended, such as questions about the characters in the book, their actions, motivations and decisions. Students may also consider how they would act if they were in the same situation as the character. These kinds of character prompts may encourage deep consideration about key people and events in their books. As the students ponder these key aspects of their book, they may bring those up for discussion. These prompts may help to broaden students' thinking as well as help them acknowledge and understand various backgrounds and cultures, which may add depth to their discussions.

The students' discussions may also improve by using the new role sheet differently. The new role sheet would leave no space for writing so as not to give the impression that specific answers are required. Rather, the handout would be a framework within which to read a book instead of an assignment to complete. Instead of completing an assignment specific to one role and using that as a spring board for discussion, which for my students resulted in reporting rather than discussing, students would spend each week reading and thinking about their books in terms of all the roles and the character questions. Rather than using the role papers as a form of assessment, the teacher might assess the students' understanding of the book as she participates with them in their discussions.

There are a variety of reasons my students' discussions were not as deep and meaningful as I had hoped they would be. With a few modifications to the way the teacher participates and interacts with the students and the way the teacher uses the role sheets, the students' discussions may become more exploratory and may allow for democratic expression of ideas and opinions.

### *Implications*

As educators set out to prepare students for both classroom and real-world success, it is important that they have tried and tested strategies and techniques that will develop and enhance the characteristics and skills students will need to fully engage in both classroom and real-world environments. While learning school curriculum, students should also be learning how to express their thoughts and ideas through discussion and inquiry, cooperate with others, communicate, negotiate, respect others, resolve conflicts, and be productive with their resources. Literature circles may have many curricular

benefits, and while this study shows that they help students learn to better converse, cooperate, and be productive with their time, they did not encourage students to communicate their own thoughts and ideas through discussion and inquiry or negotiate their ideas and opinions. Advocates of democratic education may argue that literature circles, as traditionally implemented, are actually counter-productive to fostering democratic discussions within classrooms.

There appear to be benefits to implementing literature circles into a classroom curriculum and literature circles seemed to have taught my students specific practices conducive to group literature study, however, in order to best support democratic participation, careful consideration should be given and thorough planning should be done before utilizing literature circles in the classroom. Adjustments to the role the teacher plays during literature circles and adjustments to the literature circle roles may encourage democratic expression of thoughts, ideas, and opinions as students discuss literature.

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## APPENDICES

Appendix A

Literature Circle Role Sheets

**Passage Picker**

**Book:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Pages:** \_\_\_\_\_

Passage Picker: Your job is to pick parts of the story that you want to read aloud and talk about in your groups. These can be

- a good part
- an interesting part
- a funny part
- a scary part
- a good description
- a part that confronted or supported an existing opinion or belief

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

**Parts to read out loud:**

**Page number and paragraph**

**Why I picked it**

1.

2.

3.

**After Thoughts (before sharing and after sharing):**

Take a moment to reflect on the process of completing your role assignment and record your thoughts on the back of this page.

**Before sharing:** What choices did you have to make in determining how to complete your role sheet? How did your decisions about what to focus on affect your group's discussion?

**After sharing:** If you had to complete this role sheet again, based on your group's discussion, what would you add, subtract, or leave the same (base this on the way your group's discussion went). How would those changes affect your group's discussion?

Adapted from Daniels, H. (2002). *Literature circles: Voice and choice in book clubs and reading groups* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.). Ontario: Stenhouse.

## Connector

**Book:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Pages:** \_\_\_\_\_

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

- your own life
- happenings at school or in the neighborhood
- similar events at other times and places
- stories in the news
- other people or problems
- other books or stories
- other writings on the same topic

**Some things this week's reading reminded me of were**

### **After Thoughts (before sharing and after sharing):**

Take a moment to reflect on the process of completing your role assignment and record your thoughts on the back of this page.

**Before sharing:** What choices did you have to make in determining how to complete your role sheet? How did your decisions about what to focus on affect your group's discussion?

**After sharing:** If you had to complete this role sheet again, based on your group's discussion, what would you add, subtract, or leave the same (base this on the way your group's discussion went). How would those changes affect your group's discussion?

# Summarizer

**Book:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Pages:** \_\_\_\_\_

Summarizer: Your job is to prepare a brief summary of this week's reading. The other members of your group will be counting on you to give a quick (one- or two-minute) statement that conveys the gist – the key points, the main highlights, the essence – of this week's reading assignment. If there are several main ideas of events to remember, you can use the bullets below.

**Summary:**

**Key points or events:**

- 
- 
- 
- 
- 

**After Thoughts (before sharing and after sharing):**

Take a moment to reflect on the process of completing your role assignment and record your thoughts on the back of this page.

**Before sharing:** What choices did you have to make in determining how to complete your role sheet? How did your decisions about what to focus on affect your group's discussion?

**After sharing:** If you had to complete this role sheet again, based on your group's discussion, what would you add, subtract, or leave the same (base this on the way your group's discussion went). How would those changes affect your group's discussion?

Adapted from Daniels, H. (2002). *Literature circles: Voice and choice in book clubs and reading groups* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.). Ontario: Stenhouse.

# Word Wizard

Book: \_\_\_\_\_

Pages: \_\_\_\_\_

Word Wizard: Your job is to look for at least five special words in the story. Words that are:

new  
strange

funny  
interesting

important  
hard

When you find a word that you want to talk about write it down here:

Word	Page # and paragraph	Why I picked it
------	----------------------	-----------------

When your group meets, here are some things you can discuss:

- How does this word fit in the story?
- Does anyone know what this word means?
- What connotations does this word have?
- How does this word make you feel?
- Can you draw the word?

### **After Thoughts (before sharing and after sharing):**

Take a moment to reflect on the process of completing your role assignment and record your thoughts on the back of this page.

**Before sharing:** What choices did you have to make in determining how to complete your role sheet? How did your decisions about what to focus on affect your group's discussion?

**After sharing:** If you had to complete this role sheet again, based on your group's discussion, what would you add, subtract, or leave the same (base this on the way your group's discussion went). How would those changes affect your group's discussion?

Adapted from Daniels, H. (2002). *Literature circles: Voice and choice in book clubs and reading groups* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.). Ontario: Stenhouse.

## Question Asker

**Book:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Pages:** \_\_\_\_\_

Question Asker: Your job is to write down some good questions for your group to talk about. These could be questions

- you had while you were reading
- about a character
- about the story
- about a word
- you'd like to ask the author
- about how one part of the book ties in with things you already know
- about how ideas from the book connect to each other and to the world

**Write your questions here:**

### **After Thoughts (before sharing and after sharing):**

Take a moment to reflect on the process of completing your role assignment and record your thoughts on the back of this page.

**Before sharing:** What choices did you have to make in determining how to complete your role sheet? How did your decisions about what to focus on affect your group's discussion?

**After sharing:** If you had to complete this role sheet again, based on your group's discussion, what would you add, subtract, or leave the same (base this on the way your group's discussion went). How would those changes affect your group's discussion?

Adapted from Daniels, H. (2002). *Literature circles: Voice and choice in book clubs and reading groups* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.). Ontario: Stenhouse.



## Appendix B Participant Consent and Assent Forms

### Consent to be a Research Subject

#### **Introduction**

This research study is being conducted by Rachel Smith as a part of her master's thesis to examine the behaviors, interactions, and experiences of 8<sup>th</sup> grade language arts students as they participate in literature circles. Particularly, the researcher is interested in the nature of interactions that take place as students participate in literature circles. Your child was selected to participate because he/she is enrolled in Rachel Smith's 8<sup>th</sup> grade language arts classes and because your child's class meets immediately before Rachel Smith's preparation period. The research study will be supervised by Roni Jo Draper, Associate Professor in Teacher Education in the David O. McKay School of Education.

#### **Procedures**

Your child will participate in this research study while he/she participates in literature circles during the 2007-2008 school year. He/she will discuss issues related to coming of age, identity, and peer and family relationships as related to the novel he/she will read. Your child will complete one assignment and one journal entry per week. At the conclusion of literature circles your child will respond to a questionnaire regarding his/her experiences during literature circles and may be selected to participate in a non-taped follow-up interview. Literature circles discussions will be observed and audio-taped and the tapes will be transcribed. Direct quotes from those transcriptions may appear in research publications and presentations. Artifacts created for and during literature circles (e.g., weekly literature circle assignments, journal writing, questionnaires) will be collected, photocopied, and returned to your child.

#### **Risks/Discomforts**

There are minimal risks for participating in this study. However, your child may feel uncomfortable being observed and audio-taped.

#### **Benefits**

It is not anticipated that your child will receive any direct benefits from participating in the study. It is possible that he/she will experience indirect benefits from participating in a collaborative learning environment.

#### **Confidentiality**

All information provided will remain confidential and will be reported with no identifying information. All data, including weekly assignments, journal responses, observational notes, questionnaires, follow up interview notes, tapes, and transcriptions will be kept in a secure location. Only those directly involved in the research will have access to them.

#### **Compensation**

Your child will not be compensated for his/her participation in this literature circles study.

#### **Participation**

Students who choose not to participate in the study will participate in literature circles as a regular part of instruction. However, their work will not be copied, audio tapes of their discussions will be erased and not used for the study, and observational notes of the child will be excluded from the study. The student will not be identified as a participant or non-participant by the researcher.

You have the right to excuse or withdraw your child from participating in the study at anytime without jeopardy to your child's class status or grade.

**Questions about the Research**

If you have questions regarding this study, you may contact Rachel Smith at 412-2550, [rachel.smith2@jordan.k12.ut.us](mailto:rachel.smith2@jordan.k12.ut.us) or Roni Jo Draper at 422-4960, [roni\\_jo\\_draper@byu.edu](mailto:roni_jo_draper@byu.edu).

**Questions about your Child's Rights as a Research Participant**

If you have questions you do not feel comfortable asking the researcher, you may contact Dr. Renea Beckstrand, IRB Chair, 422-3873, 422 SWKT, [renea\\_beckstrand@byu.edu](mailto:renea_beckstrand@byu.edu)

I have read, understood, and received a copy of the above consent and desire of my own free will that my child participate in this study.

Signature: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Assent to be a Research Subject

**Introduction**

This research study is being conducted by Rachel Smith as a part of her master's thesis to examine the behaviors, interactions, and experiences of 8<sup>th</sup> grade language arts students as they participate in literature circles. Particularly, the researcher is interested in the nature of interactions that take place as students participate in literature circles. You have been selected to participate because you are enrolled in Rachel Smith's 8<sup>th</sup> grade language arts classes and because your class meets immediately before Rachel Smith's preparation period. The research study will be supervised by Roni Jo Draper, Associate Professor in Teacher Education in the David O. McKay School of Education.

**Procedures**

You will participate in this research study while you participate in literature circles during the 2007-2008 school year. You will discuss issues related to coming of age, identity, and peer and family relationships as related to the novel you will read. You will complete one assignment and one journal entry per week. At the conclusion of literature circles you will respond to a questionnaire regarding your experiences during literature circles and may be selected to participate in a non-taped follow-up interview. Literature circles discussions will be observed and audio-taped and the tapes will be transcribed. Direct quotes from those transcriptions may appear in research publications and presentations. Artifacts created for and during literature circles (e.g., weekly literature circle assignments, journal writing, questionnaires) will be collected, photocopied, and returned to you.

**Risks/Discomforts**

There are minimal risks for participating in this study. However, you may feel uncomfortable being observed and audio-taped.

**Benefits**

There are no direct benefits to subjects. However, it is possible that you will experience indirect benefits from participating in a collaborative learning environment.

**Confidentiality**

All information provided will remain confidential and will be reported with no identifying information. All data, including weekly assignments, journal responses, observational notes, questionnaires, follow-up interview notes, tapes, and transcriptions will be kept in a secure location. Only those directly involved in the research will have access to them.

**Compensation**

You will not be compensated for your participation in this literature circles study.

**Participation**

If you choose not to participate in the study you will still participate in literature circles as a regular part of instruction. However, your work will not be copied, audio tapes of your discussions will be erased and not used for the study, and observational notes of the child will be excluded from the study. You will not be identified as a participant or non-participant by the researcher. You have the right to withdraw at anytime or refuse to participate in the study without jeopardy to your class status or grade.

**Questions about the Research**

If you have questions regarding this study, you may contact Rachel Smith at 412-2550, [rachel.smith2@jordan.k12.ut.us](mailto:rachel.smith2@jordan.k12.ut.us) or Roni Jo Draper at 422-4960, [roni\\_jo\\_draper@byu.edu](mailto:roni_jo_draper@byu.edu).

**Questions about your Child's Rights as a Research Participant**

If you have questions you do not feel comfortable asking the researcher, you may contact Dr. Renea Beckstrand, IRB Chair, 422-3873, 422 SWKT, [renea\\_beckstrand@byu.edu](mailto:renea_beckstrand@byu.edu)

I have read, understood, and received a copy of the above consent and desire of my own free will to participate in this study.

Signature: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

## Appendix C

### Researcher Procedure Log

<b>Phase I – Initial/Modified Plans</b>	<b>Phase II – Actions and Observations</b>	<b>Phase III – Reflections and Evaluations</b>
Presented students with the “Books I’ve Read” checklist.	Students answered without knowing the reason behind the survey, so it’s likely they answered truthfully.	Several books many students had read, so I decided to take them off the list, so no one would be able to give away the ending of another persons book.
I tallied up the number of students who had read each book and then eliminated any book that more than 10 students had read and any book that has been made into a movie.	Nothing	This will open the reading pool and help to make sure the students actually read the book and don’t just hear about it from a friend.
Gathered information about each book and gave a small book talk to the students about each one. The students had a list of the books in front of them so they could take notes. Then they chose their top three books to read.	I got information about the books I hadn’t read from Barnes and Noble.com  The students knew they were going to rank them, but not that they would be reading them as a part of a group, so hopefully that means they chose books they wanted to read instead of arranging it with their friends.	Students didn’t plan on what their friends were ranking because they thought it would be an independent project.
Based on the student choices I placed the students into groups of 3, 4 or 5. Most students got their first, second, or third choice.	Most got one of their top three choices, and the few who did not were okay with the books they were assigned. No one in any group complained or asked to be in a different group.	Even though they weren’t necessarily with their friends, they seemed content to read a book they were interested in with a group.
One student could not be given his top three choices because the groups had already been filled. Another was absent and also got a	These two students got to choose the book that still had openings in the group. Each chose what he wanted and they were fine with it.	It worked out fine. They still had some choice.

<p>left over pick, but I gave each of them their choice of the books that were left. Both were fine with the choice.</p>		
<p>Organized the students for role sheet practice according to their book choice, though their book assignment was not given until later.</p>	<p>Students got to practice interacting with the people who would actually be in their groups.</p>	<p>I didn't want them to know right away that this would be their literature circle because I didn't want them to figure out their books and start reading too early.</p>
<p>I changed the seating chart so that the students were sitting near or very close to the members of their group.</p>	<p>Nothing really.</p>	<p>This allowed students to move in and out of groups quickly and efficiently.</p>
<p>I gave the students several seating charts. One was totally blank but showed how the desks needed to be arranged to have enough room for all the groups. The second one had their names filled in and showed where they would need to move their desks in order to form the groups. The last one showed what group of desks they would be sitting at and what their seat assignment within that group would be.</p>	<p>The students needed it explained while they looked at it, but then got the hang of it.</p>	<p>For the sake of the classes next door (one on each side), that can hear EVERYTHING, this needed to be really structured and organized. If I had a better room situation, I would have let them be more casual in the seating arrangement.</p>
<p>I introduced each of the role sheets briefly and then looked closely at each one over a week's time. For the word wizard and the Connector I read a picture book to them and modeled</p>	<p>The students read their books and started filling out their roles. They didn't have enough time to finish their practice books though.</p>	<p>Next time I will try to allow more time and students will also have time to share their findings.</p>

<p>how I would complete the role assignment. Then they each got a picture book and practiced individually.</p>		
<p>For the question asker and the passage picker I again modeled the process by reading two more picture books. When it was time for the students to practice they each completed their own role sheets and then practiced moving into groups to share what they wrote.</p>	<p>There was still not enough time – but there isn’t really extra time to build in. The schedule is really tight. I think the students had enough time though to get it.</p>	<p>I think it was good practice in groups – kind of a glimpse of not only their roles, but how they would share their roles as well.</p>
<p>For the last role, the summarizer I again modeled by reading a picture book and walking step by step through the process. Then the students read one book as a group and worked together on the role sheet. Then they shared.</p>	<p>The timing was better this time because the group had to read just one book and didn’t have to wait for everyone with varying lengths of books to finish. The students took turns reading their one story book.</p>	<p>For students who struggled with the process had help from group members.</p>
<p>The students practiced with the tape recorders for the first time on the last day of role practice.</p>	<p>This went surprisingly well. I made kind of a big deal, so it was smooth.</p>	<p>The recording went fine, but I will need to talk about how to use the microphones.</p>
<p>I met with one group to prepare them to model for the class how they share their roles. They based the role sheets on the class novel – a book that everyone was familiar with.</p>	<p>The group did great. The class offered comments about what was done well and what would need to be incorporated into their own discussions when the time came.</p>	<p>They seemed to understand that it is about having a conversation and not just reporting to their group.</p>
<p>On the 22<sup>nd</sup> I gave a mini-lesson on questioning. It was a little too in isolation to be as productive as I had hoped.</p>	<p>The kids got it, but it was pretty dull.</p>	<p>I think rather than having mini-lessons in isolation like this, I will work it into class discussions as we talk about their journal responses.</p>
<p>On the 23<sup>rd</sup> students moved into groups to plan the</p>	<p>I gave the kids suggestions on how to do this and they</p>	<p>Some groups have a lot of reading each day, and I</p>

number of pages they would need to read each week and determine a reading schedule.	all did it that way.	doubt they will be able to get through it all. I will probably have to work with a few groups to refigure their reading schedules.
Suggestions for using the microphone.	Practiced holding the microphones near their mouths or at least in front of them so their voices would be picked up.	This worked well even though the classroom was really noisy. It was kind of hard to tell what other people in the group were saying sometimes, but overall it was ok.
At the end of the first week changed the reading schedule.	Students did not have enough time to get their reading done with the original schedule. Worked better with adjusted schedule.	Most groups were able to get through their weekly reading. Two groups had extra time, but they were fine with it. They didn't get too wild or bug other groups.
Students responded to and shared their roles and then responded to journal prompt. Each group had to share insights from their book. I called on students at random for participation in the journal sharing.	<p>The students took turns sharing their roles. It was kind of a combination between discussing and reporting.</p> <p>One student from each group shared their journal entry and talked about their book.</p>	<p>I think they will just need some practice. This is kind of a new way of studying novels for most of them. I think I will need to remind them again though of the differences between having a discussion about their books and reporting their roles.</p> <p>It was good to get a lot of people involved and to give the other groups ideas of how to think about their books and just what some of the other books were.</p>
I themed and coded the first week of observations and the first audio-tape transcription.	Some students seem to take the lead right away and others are really quiet. They are not actually discussing their books as much as just talking to each other.	Will talk with the students about the differences between just talking and having a conversation.
We talked about discussions vs. talking.	They seem to understand that discussing is going back and forth and sharing	During their Friday role sharing they did a better job of "discussing," but it still

<p>I themed and coded the first week of observations and the first audio-tape transcription.</p>	<p>Some students seem to take the lead right away and others are really quiet. They are not actually discussing their books as much as just talking to each other.</p>	<p>Will talk with the students about the differences between just talking and having a conversation.</p>
<p>We talked about discussions vs. talking.</p>	<p>They seem to understand that discussing is going back and forth and sharing their ideas and thoughts. It should be more than one person talking and the others listening.</p>	<p>During their Friday role sharing they did a better job of “discussing,” but it still didn’t include their own thoughts and ideas, mostly it was the others congratulating each other on a good job.</p>
<p>No major changes after this point. Schedule seems to work and run smoothly.</p>	<p>Things seem to be running pretty smoothly.</p>	<p>The kids are pretty much running the show and have established a good routine.</p>
<p>Students participated in their final role share and journal share on Thursday November 14.</p>	<p>Smooth sailing.</p>	<p>One group did not finish their book.</p>
<p>Students responded to post lit circle questionnaire on the 15<sup>th</sup>.</p>	<p>Students had as much time as they needed to respond to the questionnaire.</p> <p>I coded their responses. The biggest theme in their responses was regarding how they resolved differences and worked together. Some of their comments were interesting because it wasn’t always what I had observed during</p>	<p>The students knew that only I would be reading their answers so they could be totally honest, and I think they mostly were. The discrepancies between what they wrote and what I observed may have been due to the fact that I was acting as both the researcher and teacher and trying to manage a large, loud, unenclosed classroom while</p>
<p>Inter-rater reliability</p>	<p>I gave twenty percent of my data to another English teacher here.</p>	<p>Our codes on the observations matched eighty percent of the time and our codes for the transcripts matched ninety-four percent of the time. The codes that did not match were for engagement and industriousness (I</p>



		thought simply doing to work counted as being industrious or productive; she viewed it as being engaged). After we talked about what was implied by those two words she agreed that certain actions showed industriousness rather than engagement.
Conducted a member check with my students.	I gave the students a list of fourteen statements that they had to check agree or disagree next to. I talked with them about what each one meant and told them to write a reason why they disagreed in the places where they disagreed.	After looking over their responses, according to the whole class seventy-nine percent of my statements were accurate and according to just the focal group eighty-three percent of my statements were accurate.

## Appendix D

### Literature Circles Schedule

Sun.	Mon.	Tues.	Wed.	Thurs.	Fri.	Sat.
<b>14</b>	<b>15</b> Literature circle role introductions. Practice <b>word wizard</b>	<b>16</b> Practice <b>connector</b>	<b>17</b> Practice <b>question asker</b>	<b>18</b> Practice <b>passage picker</b>	<b>19</b> Practice <b>Summarizer</b>	<b>20</b>
<b>21</b>	<b>22</b> Mini-lesson: Questioning Meet with your literature circle to decide reading schedule	<b>23</b> Meet with your literature circle to read your novel and work on weekly role assignments	<b>24</b> Meet with your literature circle to read your novel and work on weekly role assignments	<b>25</b> Meet with your literature circle to read your novel and work on weekly role assignments	<b>26</b> Meet in groups to share and discuss weekly assignments  Journal response and whole class discussion	<b>27</b>  <b>Read assigned pages over the weekend – be ready to meet in groups on Wednesday!</b>
<b>28</b>	<b>29</b>  <b>UEA – NO SCHOOL</b>	<b>30</b>  <b>UEA – NO SCHOOL</b>	<b>31</b> Meet with your literature circle to read your novel and work on weekly role assignments	<b>1</b> Meet with your literature circle to read your novel and work on weekly role assignments	<b>2</b> Meet in groups to share and discuss weekly assignments  Journal response and whole class discussion	<b>3</b>
<b>4</b>	<b>5</b> Meet with your literature circle to read your novel and work on weekly role assignments	<b>6</b> Meet with your literature circle to read your novel and work on weekly role assignments	<b>7</b> Meet with your literature circle to read your novel and work on weekly role assignments	<b>8</b> Meet with your literature circle to read your novel and work on weekly role assignments	<b>9</b> Meet in groups to share and discuss weekly assignments  Journal response and whole class discussion	<b>10</b>
<b>11</b>	<b>12</b> Meet with your literature circle to read your novel and work on weekly role assignments	<b>13</b> Meet with your literature circle to read your novel and work on weekly role assignments	<b>14</b> Meet with your literature circle to read your novel and work on weekly role assignments	<b>15</b> Meet with your literature circle to read your novel and work on weekly role assignments	<b>16</b> Meet in groups to share and discuss weekly assignments  Journal response and whole class discussion	<b>17</b>
<b>18</b>	<b>19</b>	<b>20</b> Follow up interview with small group of students	<b>21</b>	<b>22</b> <b>THANKSGIVING BREAK – NO SCHOOL</b>	<b>23</b> <b>THANKSGIVING BREAK – NO SCHOOL</b>	<b>24</b>

## Appendix E

### Example Week of Literature Circles

#### Justification

The following lesson plan supports both the Utah core. It supports Intended Learning Outcome 2b (Demonstrate Appreciation for the Role of Language Arts – Use language arts skills and strategies to think critically, communicate with others, and understand our culture and heritage) and Intended Learning Outcome 5c (Use the Skills, Strategies, and Processes of Reading – Use metacognitive strategies during reading to monitor comprehension). It also supports Standard 3 (Inquiry/Research/Oral Presentation), Objective 1a (Processes of Inquiry – Formulate text-supported, open-ended questions for inquiry such as literal, interpretive, inferential, and evaluative). This lesson also supports democratic participation. Individuals living and participating in a democracy should engage in inquiry rather than accepting bias (Dewey, 1916). This lesson provides students with the strategies to do this.

<p><b>Monday</b> Mini-lesson (25 minutes)</p>	<p>1. Class will begin with a discussion about using questioning for comprehending reading. I will ask the students why they think we ask questions before, during, and after reading, what do they force us to do in connection with reading, how they help our reading...</p> <p>* Composing effective questions focuses attention on content, involves concentrating on main ideas, requires students to play an active, initiating role in learning, identifies and resolves problems with comprehension, aids in clarifying and establishing the hypothesis, requires students to monitor their comprehension and be sensitive to important points (Rosenshine, Meister, &amp; Chapman, 1996).</p> <p>2. Next we will discuss the purposes of questioning for critical literacy. I will ask students what it means to be critical thinker and reader and how questioning helps them become critical thinkers and readers.</p> <p>* Critical thinkers and readers place texts within a larger social and cultural context, consider bias, assumptions, and suggestive language, and question the author's intentions and interests (Luke, 1995; Huckin, 1995)</p> <p>3. I will read a few pages from the class novel (a student-selected novel I read at the start of each class period). As I read, students will generate a list of questions they might ask. Then, as a class, we will generate a class list of questions they asked. On the board, one column will say "questions," and one column will say "effective questions." We will then sort their questions based on the characteristics of effective questions listed above.</p>
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	<p>4. I will then introduce three types of questions that will aid students in reading comprehension (a) signal words (who, what, where, when, why, and how), (b) generic question stems (How are ... and ... alike? What is the main idea of ...? What are the strengths and weaknesses of ...? How does ... affect ...? How does ... tie in with what we have learned before? How is ... related to ...? What is a new example of ...? What conclusions can you draw about ...? Why is it important that ...?), and (c) story grammar (questions about the setting, main character, character's goals, or obstacles) (Rosenshine, Meister, &amp; Chapman, 1996).</p> <p>5. I will also introduce a list of questions that will help students be critical thinkers and readers (How does this text fit with what I already know? What assumptions does the author make with this text? As a reader, what assumptions do I bring to this text? How do the ideas represented in the text connect together? How does knowing who the author of the text is affect my interaction with the text? Why did the author create the text? What perspective is the author taking? Whose values are represented in the text? What is the author of the text trying to make me feel? Are there words and phrases with significant connotations?) (Luke, 1995 Huckin, 1995).</p> <p>6. After we have discussed the three types of questions and what makes them effective questions, I will read a few more pages from the class novel and students will generate another list of questions.</p> <p>7. Students will then share their questions with a partner, discussing questions that would be considered effective and non-effective. Each pair will then be responsible for writing two effective and one non-effective question on the board. Then as a class we will go through the list of effective and non-effective questions.</p>
<p><b>Tuesday</b> Students meet to read, discuss, and work on role assignments (40 minutes)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Students will meet in their literature circles for 40 minutes. They may use this time to read sections of their books together, to informally discuss parts of their books, or to work on their weekly role assignments.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Wednesday</b> Students meet to read, discuss, and work on role assignments (40 minutes)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Students will meet in their literature circles for 40 minutes. They may use this time to read sections of their books together, to informally discuss parts of their books, or to work on their weekly role assignments.</li> </ul>

<p><b>Thursday</b>  Students meet to discuss completed role sheets and thoughts about the reading  30 minutes</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Students will meet in their literature circles for 30 minutes. They will use this time to take turns sharing and discussing their weekly role assignments.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Friday</b>  Student response journals   Whole class discussion  30 minutes</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Students will begin class by doing reflective writing. They may choose to respond to a provided prompt regarding their experiences during literature circles that week, or they may write about something that was significant to them that week.</li> <li>• Students will participate in a whole class discussion. During this time, connections will be made among many of the books and students can share insights from their books as they relate to other books.</li> </ul>

## Appendix F

### Books I've Read Checklist

Place a checkmark next to any of the following books you have ever read, have had read to you, or are in the process of reading right now.

- \_\_\_\_\_ *Lightening Thief* – Rick Riordan
- \_\_\_\_\_ *Eragon* – Christopher Paolini
- \_\_\_\_\_ *Esperanza Rising* – Pam Muñoz Ryan
- \_\_\_\_\_ *Fever 1793* – Laurie Halse Anderson
- \_\_\_\_\_ *Touching Spirit Bear* – Ben Mikaelson
- \_\_\_\_\_ *The Alliance* – Gerald Lund
- \_\_\_\_\_ *A Child Called It* – Dave Pelzer
- \_\_\_\_\_ *A Single Shard* – Linda Sue Park
- \_\_\_\_\_ *A Wrinkle in Time* – Madeline L. Engle
- \_\_\_\_\_ *Among the Hidden* – Margaret P. Haddix
- \_\_\_\_\_ *Coraline* – Neil Gaiman
- \_\_\_\_\_ *Crash* – Jerry Spinelli
- \_\_\_\_\_ *Downsiders* – Neal Ashusterman
- \_\_\_\_\_ *Fablehaven* – Brandon Mull
- \_\_\_\_\_ *Twilight* – Stephanie Meyer
- \_\_\_\_\_ *Uglies* – Scott Westerfeld
- \_\_\_\_\_ *Crispin: The Cross of Lead* – Avi
- \_\_\_\_\_ *Bud, Not Buddy* – Christopher Paul Curtis
- \_\_\_\_\_ *Maniac Magee* – Jerry Spinelli
- \_\_\_\_\_ *Number the Stars* – Lois Lowry
- \_\_\_\_\_ *The Westing Game* – Ellen Raskin
- \_\_\_\_\_ *Hatchet* – Gary Paulsen

Appendix G

Researcher Observation Log

<p>Specific actions and behaviors that will be included in my observation of students participating in literature circles: voices and viewpoints being heard and recognized (Powell, 1992), communication of thoughts and ideas through discussion and inquiry (Dewey, 1916; Powell, 1992), cooperation and negotiation (Edelsky, 1994; Pohan, 2003; Shannon, 2004), industriousness (Pohan, 2003).</p>	
<p><b>How did the students interact and participate before, during, and after reading?</b></p>	
<p><b>What general topics did the group discuss</b></p>	
<p><b>How did the group use its time?</b></p>	
<p><b>How did the students share their weekly role assignments?</b></p>	

Appendix H

**My Book Preference Checklist**

**After all of the following books have been presented to you, choose the top four you would like to read. Rank them 1-4 where 1 is the book you would *most* like to read. Don't choose any books you have ever read, have had read to you, or are in the process of reading.**

- \_\_\_\_\_ *Number the Stars* – Lois Lowry
- \_\_\_\_\_ *Lightning Thief* – Rick Riordan
- \_\_\_\_\_ *Esperanza Rising* – Pam Muñoz Ryan
- \_\_\_\_\_ *Touching Spirit Bear* – Ben Mikaelson
- \_\_\_\_\_ *A Wrinkle in Time* – Madeline L'Engle
- \_\_\_\_\_ *Among the Hidden* – Margaret P. Haddix
- \_\_\_\_\_ *Crash* – Jerry Spinelli
- \_\_\_\_\_ *Fablehaven* – Brandon Mull
- \_\_\_\_\_ *Twilight* – Stephanie Meyer
- \_\_\_\_\_ *Uglies* – Scott Westerfeld
- \_\_\_\_\_ *Crispin: The Cross of Lead* – Avi
- \_\_\_\_\_ *Bud, Not Buddy* – Christopher Paul Curtis
- \_\_\_\_\_ *The Westing Game* – Ellen Raskin
- \_\_\_\_\_ *Fever 1793* – Laurie Halse Anderson
- \_\_\_\_\_ *Cirque du Freak: A Living Nightmare* – Darren Shan



## Appendix I

### Picture Books Used for Role Instruction

#### **Summarizer**

Collicott, S. (1999). *Toe Stomper*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin.

#### **Passage Picker**

Sutherland, M. (2001). *MacMurtrey's Wall*. New York: HNA Books.

#### **Question Asker**

Van Allsburg, C. (1985). *Polar Express*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin.

#### **Word Wizard**

Van Allsburg, C. (1991). *Just a Dream*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin.

#### **Connector**

Wisniewski, G. (2007). *Golem*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin.

## Appendix J

### Weekly Response Journals

1. Choose a character from your book. Discuss how he or she gets along with other characters in the book (friends, family, acquaintances, strangers...). Consider if he is friendly, hostile, suspicious, or generous toward other characters. What do you think makes him or her act in this way? What is the effect of such behaviors on various relationships? Now think about yourself. How are you alike or different from the character? How do you get along with friends, family, classmates, and strangers? How do you act with them, around them, or toward them? Why do you think you act this way? How does the way you act affect your relationships?

**Connection to the Utah core** – These response prompts address one aspect of Standard 1 (Reading Comprehension), Objective 3b (Comprehension of Literary Text – Describe a character’s traits...). They also address one aspect of Standard 1 (Reading Comprehension), Objective 1c (Writing to Learn – Connect text to self).

**Connection to democratic participation** - Part of participating in a democracy requires cooperation and communication with diverse groups of people (Pohan, 2003). These response questions should prompt students to think about the ways fictional characters cooperate and communicate with other people and then extend that thinking to their personal lives. They will also begin to ponder the consequences of their interactions with other people in both positive and negative ways.

2. Choose a character from your book. What obstacles did he or she have to overcome? How did he or she overcome that difficulty? What affect do you think the choices your character made to resolve certain problems had on him or her and other people? What are some obstacles you have had to overcome in your life? How did the choices you made to overcome those obstacles affect you and people in your life?

**Connection to the Utah core** – These response prompts address one aspect of Standard 1 (Reading Comprehension), Objective 1c (Writing to Learn – Connect text to self).

**Connection to democratic participation** – Obstacles and trials are a natural part of life. These response questions should prompt students to see that overcoming difficulties in their own lives is part of human progression and that in the process of working through these trials they receive support from their communities (Dewey, 1916). Additionally, their success in resolving these problems holds value for their societies and communities as it hopefully develops responsibility and integrity (Dewey, 1916).

3. Describe an instance this week when you and your literature circle group members disagreed about something from your book. What did you disagree on? How did you resolve the issue?

**Connection to the Utah core** – These response prompts address Standard 3 (Inquiry/Research/Oral Presentation), Objective 3c (Oral Communication of Inquiry – Respond appropriately to group members’ questions and contributions).

**Connection to democratic participation** – To democratically engage in discussions when all members do not agree requires learning to trust, to listen with care and empathy, and, at times, to respectfully disagree with people (Mantle-Bromley & Foster, 2005). Ideally this will be the experience of my students as they discuss issues and don’t all agree with each other.

4. Choose a character from your book. From this character's perspective (you will be using first person narration) describe a scene when he or she had a conflict with another character in terms of where they were, what the conflict was about, who was involved, what happened, how it ended, and any other details you feel are appropriate. Now choose a different character from the same scene and describe what happened from this character's perspective. How are the two perspectives similar or different? What is the value in thinking about other people's perspectives and viewpoints?

**Connection to the Utah core** - These response prompts address one aspect of Intended Learning Outcome 2b (Demonstrate Appreciation for the Role of Language Arts – Use language arts skills and strategies to think critically...).

**Connection to democratic participation** – In a democracy, all citizens have equal opportunities for their voices and viewpoints to be heard (Powell, 1992). Because we cannot always hear other peoples' viewpoints, it is at least important to be aware of them. These response prompts will encourage students to consider alternate viewpoints and the value of doing so.

## Appendix K

### Post-Literature Circles Questionnaire

**Consider your experience in literature circles the last four weeks. Carefully and thoughtfully respond to the following questions. Please be sure to be detailed and thorough in your answers.**

1. Did all members of your group participate equally?
2. Do you think no one person dominated the conversation while others remained quiet? \
3. Why might some people have participated more or less than others?
4. What could have been done differently in your discussions to involve everyone equally?
5. How did your group decide on a reading schedule?
6. How did your group decide who would begin Friday group discussions?
7. Describe a normal class period on a Friday discussion day.
8. Who initiated Friday discussions?
9. How did you make sure everyone get a turn to talk?
10. What did you do when someone had a question about something from the reading or role sheets?
11. How on task and productive was your group with your time for reading, completing role sheets, and discussing your book?
12. What did you do to make sure you used your time well and stayed focused on the tasks?
13. What could you do differently next time to manage your time and focus better?
14. What were other group members doing while someone was reading aloud, sharing a role assignment, asking questions, making comments, or expressing an opinion or belief?
15. Did everyone in your group always agree on everything?
16. What things did you tend to agree on?
17. What things did you tend to disagree about?
18. What happened in your group if you didn't agree about something from your discussion or from the book?
19. How did your group handle disagreements?

20. How did you resolve your differences as individual students so that you could work together as a group?

21. If you weren't able to work well as a group, what were the reasons?

22. What could you have done to work together better?

## Appendix L

### Post-Literature Circle Follow-Up Interview Questions

1. How easy or difficult was it for you to share your opinions and thoughts about the book or role sheets?
2. How easy or difficult was it to raise questions about things from the book or role sheets that you didn't understand or understood differently than was presented in the book or in discussion?
3. Did anyone have a plan for how to determine the reading schedule or discussion time that was not accepted? How did you negotiate and compromise within your group to come to a consensus?
4. Was a leader established in your group? Who took that role and why? Were all members comfortable with that person being the leader?
5. Whose voice and viewpoints were over or under represented? What do you think were the reasons for this?
6. What strategies did you use to resolve any conflicts or problems that arose in your group?
7. What factors affected how you approached and completed your role assignments (your interests, your group members' interests, your group members' personalities or abilities...)?

## Appendix M

### Data Analysis Codes

#### **Communication (comm.)**

QAAT – questions about the assignment – to the teacher  
QAAG – questions about the assignment – to the group  
ITR – interrupting the reader  
VRH – voices recognized and heard  
TGD – telling goals and decisions  
NGD – negotiating goals and decisions  
ND – no discussion or follow-up  
DI – discussion and inquiry  
CR – correcting the reader

#### **Cooperation (coop.)**

TTR – taking turns reading  
L – leadership  
TW – teamwork  
CRP – conflict resolution – positive/democratic  
CRN – conflict resolution – negative/nondemocratic  
EP – encouraging participation  
PR – positive reinforcement/feedback  
SE – Supportive and encouraging

#### **Engagement (eng.)**

ER – expressive reading  
UT – understanding text  
RR – response/reaction to reading

#### **Industrious/productive (ind.)**

WOR – working on role sheet  
FR – following along in the reading  
LOP – lack of preparation  
NFR – not following along in the reading  
SCO – side conversations with people outside the group  
SCG – side conversations with group members  
OTC – off topic conversations  
D – distracted  
RRS – Reporting role assignments  
P – using time productively  
FA – focusing the attention of group members

## Appendix N

### Modified Role Sheets

### What to Do During Reading...

<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Make Connections</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What connections are you making between the book and the outside world? How are you connecting your reading to your own life, happenings at school or in your neighborhood, similar events in other times and places, stories in the news, other people or problems, other books or stories, or other writing on the same topic?</li> </ul>	<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Create Summaries</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• How could you summarize your reading? What would you include in a one-or two- minute statement to convey the key points, the main highlights, or the essence of your reading?</li> </ul>
<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Notice Vocabulary</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What special words are you noticing in the book? Are there any words that are new, strange, funny, interesting, important, or hard? How do these words fit in the story? How do these words make you feel? Do you know what they mean? Can you draw them? Should you look them up in the dictionary? Why did you notice them?</li> </ul>	<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Select Passages</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What passages from the book stand out to you? Are you noticing any particularly interesting parts, funny parts, or scary parts? Are you noticing good descriptions or passages that sound nice as you read them aloud and to yourself?</li> </ul>
<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Ask Questions</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What questions do you have about the book? Do you have questions about a character, what is happening in the story, or why certain things are happening? Are there questions you would like to ask the author?</li> </ul>	<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Visualize the Book</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Are there parts of the book that you can picture in your mind? What characters are you visualizing? Can you see in your mind the setting, a problem in the book, or an exciting part of the book? Can you picture something you are surprised by?</li> </ul>

### Other Things to Think About...

- Who are the characters in the book?
- What do they do in the book? What are their actions?
- Why do you think they do certain things? What is their motivation?
- Are there consequences to their actions, choices, or decisions?
- What kind of issues do the characters face and deal with?



- How do you think you would act and feel if you were faced with similar circumstances?
- What choices or decisions would you make?
- How are the characters affected by discrimination, immigration, and family loss? (These would change depending on the book)