Literature Circles and the Use of Comprehension Strategies within a Fifth Grade Classroom

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Literature Circles and the Use of Comprehension Strategies within a Fifth Grade Classroom

A Project Presented to
The Graduate Faculty of
Minnesota State University Moorhead
By
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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to research the effect of literature circles on the use of comprehension strategies during reading discussions. Example comprehension strategies that students used are based on visualizing, questioning, connections, and summarizing. The participants were 25 fifth graders within a suburb of Minneapolis, Minnesota. Three types of data sets were used which consisted of observations, student work, and a final survey. Students formed literature circles using a book of their choice from a given list provided by the researcher. Students had four weeks to read their novel and hold weekly discussions. During the literature circle discussions, the researcher recorded observations based on comprehension strategies. Students filled out guided role sheets as needed. Once the literature circles concluded, the researcher administered a final survey to students. The researcher analyzed the results and found that literature circles have a positive effect on the use and practice of comprehension strategies.
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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Introduction

In elementary schools today, many classrooms are focusing on direct skill instruction during structured literacy blocks. Many curriculums emphasize teaching a specific skill for about a month using mini-lessons that contain short reading passages. This is beneficial direct skill practice for students. However, since students are used to having such direct instruction, they struggle with application in real-world situations. When students are presented with questions that revolve around a novel discussion or informational text, many students become overwhelmed and do not know how to break apart the text to analyze specific parts. Providing comprehension strategies and practice with real-world situations allows students to use what they have learned from the direct instruction within their literacy blocks. Literature circles provide that time and space to have those needed discussions and apply the comprehension skills they have learned. This study was done to find the effect of literature circles on comprehension strategies.

Brief Literature Review

Literature circles are a beneficial way to increase student discussion and allows students to practice what they have learned during their literacy blocks. Daniels (2002) said, “Literature circles are small peer-led discussion groups whose members have chosen to read the same story, poem, article or book” (p. 2). Literature circles normally have group members take on different roles to help guide the discussion and allows every student to participate. However, if students are not given an assigned role, they may focus more on the book itself instead of fulling the obligations of their given role (Brownlie, 2019). Overall, literature
circles allow students the opportunity to have deeper discussions of texts and grow off each other’s strategies and thinking.

A comprehension strategy is defined as “a cognitive or behavioral action that is enacted under particular contextual conditions, with the goal of improving some aspect of comprehension” (McNamara, 2007, p. 6). Students use comprehension strategies to better understand the text they are reading and to analyze it further. Many different comprehension strategies are used within literacy blocks. However, main comprehension strategies focus on previewing, questioning, summarizing, inferring, connecting, and visualizing (Blachowicz & Ogle, 2008; Daniels, 2006). They allow students to focus on specific parts within a text to help analyze and understand what the text is saying. Using comprehension strategies allows students to break a text apart to understand it on a deeper level. If students do not have strategies to help comprehend what they are reading, many students are not truly reading.

Introducing literature circles as a way for students to practice their comprehension strategies is very beneficial. Literature circles help improve students’ reading achievements as well as their writing and language skills (Anderson & Corbett, 2008). Literature circles help all students, not just general education students. Gifted students benefit from literature circles because they can help encourage students to read more as well as increase their comprehension and vocabulary skills (Feng & Smith, 2018). Literature circles also help students with learning disabilities by improving their oral and written language (Feng & Smith, 2018). Additionally, literature circles can allow English Language Learners to practice comprehension strategies which can help improve their reading ability. Overall, using literature circles as a way to practice comprehension strategies is beneficial for students.

Statement of the Problem
The purpose of this study was to research the use of comprehension strategies within literature circle discussions. Many times, students are given comprehension strategies to use while reading, but the only time they practice the skills is during their literacy block using small paragraphs with direct instruction on the skill. Students are not given time to practice their comprehension strategies organically with real-world texts while reading. This direct skill practice does not allow students to be flexible with their thinking and apply what they have learned to outside work. Using literature circles allows students to have space to practice those strategies with their peers and take part in discussions that revolve around specific comprehension strategies.

Purpose of the Study

This study was conducted because students need to know how to use comprehension strategies in real-world discussions and be able to apply what they have learned outside of their 90-minute literacy block. Literature circles provide students with the opportunity to fully discuss literature and analyze the author’s writing. Comprehension strategies are used throughout a person’s life and many students struggle to apply them to real writing. Allowing students to practice those strategies in an organic natural way provides them with the skills needed later in life when analyzing more complex texts.

Research Question

How do literature circles affect the use of student comprehension strategies (i.e. summarizing, visualizing, questioning, making connections) during reading discussions?

Definition of Variables

The following were the variables of study:
Independent Variable: The independent variable in this study was the students’ literature circle discussions. Implementing literature circles allowed students to discuss and analyze a story, hopefully using comprehension strategies they learned during their literacy block.

Dependent Variable: The dependent variable in this study was the number of comprehension strategies that are used during discussions within student literature circles. Data will be collected by listening to student discussions during their literature circles. Once students have finished their book and after the last literature circle, students will also take a reflective survey identifying what comprehension strategies were used by their group during past discussions. This will be additional data to determine if literature circles affected the use of comprehension strategies.

Significance of the Study

This study was important for participants because it helped discover what is beneficial for students and what is useful for practicing comprehension strategies. This study helped determine what students need to fully understand and apply their comprehension strategies to real-world situations.

This study was also important for the practitioner because it showed how literature circles affected the use and practice of comprehension strategies. Many times, practitioners know multiple ways to help students apply strategies they know; however, they do not know what is the most effective. This study allowed the practitioner to determine if literature circles are an effective way for students to practice comprehension strategies.

Additionally, this study was important for my field because it revealed if literature circles are a beneficial way for students to practice comprehension strategies that have been
taught during their literacy block. Many educators use it as a normal practice within their teaching so studying the benefits of this practice will guide future classroom decisions.

**Research Ethics**

*Permission and IRB Approval*

In order to conduct this study, the researcher sought the approval of the MSUM’s Institutional Review Board (IRB) to ensure the ethical conduct of research involving human subjects (Mills & Gay, 2019). Likewise, authorization to conduct this study will be sought from the school district where the research project will take place (see Appendix A).

*Informed Consent*

Protection of human subjects participating in this research will be assured. Participant minors will be informed of the purpose of the study via the Method of Assent (see Appendix B) that the researcher will read to participants before the beginning of the study. Participants will be aware that this study is conducted as part of the researcher’s master’s degree program and that it will benefit her teaching practice. Informed consent means that the parents of participants have been fully informed of the purpose and procedures of the study for which consent is sought and that parents understood and agreed, in writing, to their child participating in the study (Rothstein & Johnson, 2014). Confidentiality will be protected through the use of pseudonyms (e.g., Student 1) without the utilization of any identifying information. The choice to participate or withdraw at any time will be outlined both verbally and in writing.

**Limitations**
The first limitation of this study was the ability of students to converse with each other and their comfort level with their peers. Students have a hard time conversing academically especially when they are analyzing larger texts.

The second limitation of this study was students’ dependability to follow the reading schedule for their group. Many times, students do not keep up with the reading they are assigned which causes literature circle discussions to lack depth. If students do not read, they are not able to fully contribute to the discussions causing comprehension strategies and the practice of analyzing texts to not be as beneficial for students.

A third limitation of this study was allowing students to pick their groups and books. Giving students a large amount of choice might make them not take the literature circles as seriously because they are grouped with peers with whom they are comfortable.

A fourth limitation was the time of year that this study took place. It was implemented within the first months of the school year, which did not give students much time to practice and learn different comprehension strategies. For future studies, it should be done close to the end of the year as a review for the comprehension strategies they learned.

**Conclusions**

In conclusion, students need time to practice their comprehension strategies organically within literature circle discussions. It allows them to discuss with their peers and analyze novels by using the strategies that have been taught within their literacy block. This study aimed to find the effect of literature circles on the use of comprehension strategies. It is beneficial for the researcher because it gives information on comprehension strategies and if literature circles are an effective way for students to practice their skills. Overall, literature circles provide the time and space for comprehension strategies to be utilized by students.
naturally. Many studies have been done around these topics and the next chapter focuses on that beneficial research.
CHAPTER 2
LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

This study was conducted to help determine if literature circles are beneficial for students to practice comprehension strategies that have been taught during their literacy blocks. Many times, students are able to use comprehension strategies after their direct instruction, however, they tend to struggle with real-world applications when using novels they have read. This research helped discover if literature circles improve student comprehension strategies while reading. Literature circles allow students to have in-depth discussions about a book they are reading to help deepen their understanding of the text (Castro, 2019). Often, students are taught comprehension strategies directly but do not have the opportunity to engage with the text naturally. According to McElvain (2010), “Successful reading comprehension instructional practices include…instruction that engages children in rich interpretive discussion during the reading of a text” (p. 181). Literature circles allow space and time for these small group discussions. Students must take part in literature circles because it provides the opportunity to converse with peers and use the comprehension strategies they have learned organically. This chapter analyzes and reviews literature presented on comprehension strategies and literature circle use within classrooms.

Body of the Review

Context

Literature circles have a big role in providing authentic student practice of comprehension strategies while they read. During literature circles, students hold discussions and work together to use the comprehension strategies they have learned during their instruction
Through literature circles, students can formulate their thoughts and justify their thinking (Day & Primary Teaching Association, 2003) which has roots in the comprehension strategies they are using while reading. Educators can expect that literature circles will improve student writing, reading achievement, and language skills (Anderson & Corbett, 2008). Overall, literature circles allow students “to ponder confusing aspects of a text, to challenge a text, interact with and challenge peers, and explore personally relevant issues” (Certo et al., 2010, p. 253).

Using comprehension strategies during literature circles benefits more than general education students. Many times, gifted students benefit from literature circles because they generate higher-level discussions using different comprehension strategies, which may be lacking in whole group instruction (Feng & Smith, 2018). Overall, literature circles can encourage gifted students to read more which affects their comprehension and vocabulary skills (Feng & Smith, 2018).

Equally important, literature circles help improve comprehension strategies of English Language Learners (ELLs). Students who are working on learning a second language, do not read word-for-word (McElvain, 2010). They rely on different strategies to acquire comprehension; for example, activating background knowledge and predicting (McElvain, 2010). Having English Language Learners participate in literature circles allows them to practice these strategies and also learn from their peers.

Additionally, literature circles benefit students with learning disabilities. They allow students to participate in ways they probably would not have in a whole group setting. Daniels (2002) stated that literature circles allow for diverse groups of students to successfully work together because “the various comprehension tools we use can help different kinds of kids
contribute successfully” (p. 26). Also, literature circles help students with learning disabilities increase their oral and written language (Smith & Feng, 2018). Overall, literature circles improve students reading comprehension and desire to read (Parker et al., 1999).

**Literature Circles**

Daniels (2002) stated that “literature circles are small peer-led discussion groups whose members have chosen to read the same story, poem, article or book” (p. 2). Based on data from Young and Mohr (2018), if literature circles are too big, those groups will start to divide into smaller sub-groups. The main goal of a literature circle is to have rich discussions around a common text (Brownie, 2019). If groups have an average of three to four students, discussions tend to stay more focused and have a higher unified task completion, unlike groups with more students (Young & Mohr, 2018). Group members take notes individually during reading so they are prepared to contribute to the upcoming group discussion (Daniels, 2002). Literature circles allow students to work with their peers and collaborate to understand a book on a deeper level. The group chooses a book and discusses it regularly. Literature circles allow students to become engaged with each other and work collaboratively (Briggs, 2010).

It is said that educators may choose to include student roles within their literature circles to help guide student discussions but it is not needed. Brownlie (2019) said that if students do not have specific roles, they may focus more of their attention on the discussion of the book instead of micromanaging the roles and allotted time for each. Additionally, Brownlie (2019) stated that to have a genuine discussion, all students need to feel included and respected, voices need to be shared or heard, and discussions need to lead to new understandings. Depending on the style of the literature circle an educator is trying to implement, group members may change roles, keep a constant role in each meeting, or forgo the option all together. If educators choose to implement
roles, they focus on skills such as theme, vocabulary, discussion, summarizing, connections, and time management.

Literature circles are often used to analyze fiction texts and work on comprehension strategies used within fiction. However, educators are starting to use literature circles as a way of analyzing nonfiction texts as well. Using nonfiction texts allows students to practice finding proof and support for their thinking (Barone & Barone, 2016). It also meets teacher expectations as well as shows how much students enjoy learning factual information (Barone & Barone, 2016). Overall, literature circles are a positive way to practice comprehension strategies, not only in fiction but in nonfiction as well (Whitworth, 2017).

Comprehension Strategies

Comprehension of a text is not always simple and easy. Many times, comprehension of a complex text can be difficult. Teachers have implemented comprehension strategies into their literacy blocks to help overcome different reading obstacles (McNamara, 2007). McNamara (2007) stated that comprehension of a text refers to the “interpretation of the information in a text, the use of prior knowledge to interpret this information and… the construction of a coherent representation or picture in the reader’s mind” (p. 28). That being said, “a reading comprehension strategy is a cognitive or behavioral action that is enacted under particular contextual conditions, with the goal of improving some aspect of comprehension” (McNamara, 2007, p. 6).

Additionally, Ogle and Blachowicz (2008) stated that teachers should “introduce new strategies that can be effective alternatives and to discuss when a preferred strategy may not be useful in a particular instance” (p. 24). Comprehension strategies can vary, depending on curriculum, school, and teacher. However, there are core strategies that can help students
succeed in reading programs. Main comprehension strategies focus on previewing, questioning, summarizing, inferring, connecting, and visualizing (Ogle & Blachowicz, 2008; Daniels, 2006).

Educators teach students comprehension strategies by providing direct instruction as well as modeling the strategy multiple times. Educators must scaffold their instruction to allow students to practice strategies in manageable chunks (Ogle & Blachowicz, 2008). Educators will demonstrate a “think-aloud” to students to teach a comprehension strategy. When an educator uses the think-aloud process, they model what they are thinking to students while they read. This allows students to hear proper questioning and different thought processes that go into understanding a text. Using the Think-Aloud strategy helps improve students' “reading competency and comprehension methods” (Al-Qahtani, 2020, p. 58). Comprehension strategies are learned through a gradual release of practice. By doing this, students can have direct modeling and practice with each strategy they are taught.

Theoretical Framework

The constructivist theory is based on many different constructivism perspectives and John Dewey's work (Woolfolk, 2019). The constructivism theory states that individuals create their understanding. While individuals are working to create their understanding, they move beyond this search-for-meaning and focus on three main assumptions: the reader’s goal, coherence, and explanation (Graesser et al., 1994). While working, each individual focuses on the reader’s goal. They are reading to discover, and normally that discovery is based on deeper levels of processing (Graesser et al., 1994). Additionally, individuals focus on coherence. They are working to understand the global and local connections. Individuals are also actively working to understand the explanation. They are discovering “why actions, events, and states are mentioned in the text” (Graesser et al., 1994, p. 372). This theory is one basis that
Comprehension strategies are built on. Students use comprehension strategies to build understanding of texts and analyze them on a deeper level. Students are actively constructing their understanding of a text during literature circles while using and practicing comprehension strategies that are taught during reading blocks within schools.

**Research Question**

How do literature circles affect the use of student comprehension strategies (i.e. summarizing, visualizing, questioning, making connections) during reading discussions?

**Conclusions**

Literature circles help improve the use of comprehension strategies and increase the desire to read among students. Literature circles are small groups of students reading and analyzing the same text to create a richer understanding. Students use comprehension strategies that focus on predicting, visualizing, questioning, and inferring to guide their discussions about a text. Overall, literature circles foster group discussions and analysis of texts at a deeper level. Using the constructivist theory, students create their understanding while actively engaging in learning. Literature circles allow students to construct this understanding by using comprehension strategies that have been taught during a literacy block. Literature circles allow for diverse groups of students, such as English Language Learners, gifted students, and students with learning disabilities, to participate which helps form richer comprehension for all students (Daniels, 2002).
CHAPTER 3
METHODS

Introduction

This study applied literature circles in a fifth grade classroom during a five week period to see how it affected the use and practice of comprehension strategies that were taught throughout the year. Comprehension is important for students because it helps improve students’ academics throughout many areas (Marcotte et al., 2018). Many students are taught comprehension strategies however, do not have the time to apply it authentically to real-world experiences. They often are taught strategies directly and then are given time to practice specific strategies using short texts that are made specifically for the strategy. It is important for students to learn how to apply a strategy they have learned, outside of their direct instruction. Literature circles are important because they provide space and time for students to practice these strategies using a novel of their choosing. It allows them to hold discussions about the text and analyze on a deeper level using what they have learned from the classroom.

This being said, the researcher chose literature circles as the topic because students need real world practice with the skills that are being taught each year. Literature circles were implemented and observations were recorded to determine how well they foster comprehension strategy development. Observations were chosen because many different discussions were had during literature circles so those provided the best data of student discussions. Qualitative and quantitative data was the best fit for this study because it allowed the researcher to look at all aspects of student discussion and reflection on their comprehension strategy usage.

Research Question
How do literature circles affect the use of student comprehension strategies (i.e. summarizing, visualizing, questioning, making connections) during reading discussions?

**Research Design**

The design for this study was the mixed-methods exploratory sequential design, also known as a QUALquan Design. In this design, the purpose “is to build on the synergy and strength that exist between quantitative and qualitative research methods to understand a phenomenon more fully” (Mills, 2018, p. 7). It also focuses on “weighing more heavily” on the qualitative data than the quantitative data (Mills, 2018, p. 7). This study used three types of data sets including observations, student work, and a final survey. This type of design was selected because the data will consist of written observations and student work that was turned in after each literature circle. Using qualitative data like those listed provided insight if comprehension strategies were used during the study. However, quantitative data was also used which derived from the final survey. This survey provided useful information that helped strengthen the qualitative data gathered during the literature circles. Observations, student work, and the survey led to the decision to formulate this study using this design.

**Setting**

This study took place in a city that is a growing suburb which is south of Minneapolis, Minnesota. It currently is growing at a high rate causing the school district to build a new elementary school in the upcoming years. The overall population is over 64,000 and still growing. The city is known for its outdoor recreation and community involvement.

The school is in the northern part of the city and currently has about 525 students. The school services students from kindergarten to the 5th grade. The school has about 75% Caucasian
students and 25% minority students. Additionally, the district has about 15% of students that qualify for special education services from birth to age 21. The district also has an overall average of 14% of students who qualify for Free/Reduced lunch.

**Participants**

The participants in this study were approximately 25 fifth graders that are either ten or eleven years old. About 50% of them were male and 50% of them were female. Within the class, there were about 75% Caucasian students, and 25% minority students, that are African American, Latinx and Indian. About 12% of the class were part of special education programs. Most students came from a two-parent household, however about 10% came from a single-parent home.

**Sampling**

Students were selected for this study using a convenience sample. A convenience sample is a group of individuals who were chosen for a study because they were accessible for the researcher (Lavrakas, 2008). The students within the study were in the researcher’s 5th grade class. The research of literature circles and comprehension strategies relate directly to the students within the fifth grade class.

**Instrumentation**

There were three different instruments used for this study. One was the researcher’s guideline sheet that included observations of student discussions during literature circles (see Appendix D). Observations that were recorded revolved around comments that students made during discussions which correlate to comprehension strategies. For example, as students discussed, they used clue words such as “I wonder…” for a question, “This reminds me of…” for
connections, and “I pictured… when that happened” for visualization. The second instrument that was used during the study was the students’ role sheets from their literature circle group discussions (see Appendix C). If students chose to utilize roles during their discussions, they were instructed to fill out the corresponding sheet while discussing. These sheets acted as a guide for their discussions that revolved around different comprehension strategies for reading. The last instrument that was used was the final survey after the last literature circle meeting (see Appendix E). This survey provided space for students to take part in self-reflection. It asked students to describe the comprehension strategies that were used throughout their literature circle meetings. It also allowed students to reflect on their ability to use comprehension strategies and if it helped them comprehend their novel.

**Data Collection**

Data was collected by observation, student role sheets, and a final survey. The researcher listened to students discuss their novels during their literature circles. The researcher then recorded observations on a guideline sheet to be analyzed once all literature circles ended. The researcher recorded observations from each group that focused on comprehension strategies and how students found their information for each discussion.

Additionally, the researcher analyzed student role sheets that were completed during literature circles. Using roles was an optional activity for groups after the week one meeting. The researcher identified what comprehension strategies were recorded by students during their discussions.

A final survey was also administered to all students after the literature circles concluded and their novels were finished. It was given during class and students had time to complete it to
the best of their ability. Students reflected on what comprehension strategies they used during their literature circles. They also reflected on how much it helped them during their literature circle discussions and their ability to comprehend the novel they read.

Data Analysis

After the literature circles concluded, data was analyzed by recording noticeable themes throughout the researcher’s observation notes. After themes were identified, the researcher worked to sort them into specific comprehension strategies groups. Additionally, student work was analyzed with the same process. Themes were identified and then sorted according to specific comprehension strategies. Finally, the surveys were analyzed. To make it simple for students, they were asked yes or no questions. These answers were tallied and a percentage of Yes and No were found for each question.

Research Question and System Alignment

Table 3.1 provides a description of the alignment between the study’s research question and the methods used in this study to ensure that all variables of study have been accounted for adequately.

Table 3.1.

Research Question Alignment
How do literature circles affect the use of student comprehension strategies (i.e. summarizing, visualizing, questioning, making connections) during reading discussions?

IV: Students’ literature circle discussions. DV: The amount of comprehension strategies used during literature circle discussions.

Mixed-Methods Explanatory Sequential Design

This study used observations recorded in a journal, student role sheets from literature circle discussions as well as a final survey that students was given.

For the purpose of this study, all students had the option to continue group roles for literature circles. All students filled out the same survey at the end of the study. Three data sets were used to provide multiple sources.

Observations, student work and final survey

5th Grade About 25 students

Procedures

This study took place during the fall semester of the school year. For the first month of school, students reviewed comprehension strategies that they learned in fourth grade were briefly introduced to ways to strengthen those strategies using the fifth grade curriculum, Benchmark Literacy. The Benchmark Literacy curriculum focuses on comprehension strategies monthly with weekly assessments given on Fridays. Strategies that were reviewed before literature circles were questioning, summarizing using main ideas, making connections, and visualizing. After taking the time to review previous strategies and briefly introduce ways to strengthen those, literature circles were introduced.

Literature circles were introduced slowly so students could practice each of the roles before using them in their literature circles. For one week, students practiced different group roles individually, based on the current whole group read-aloud that was read by the researcher.
The group roles were Questioner, Illustrator, Summarizer, and Connector (Daniels, 2002; See Appendix C). After that initial week ended and students understood how to complete each role, they were guided to form their own literature circle. It was beneficial for students to pick the group they were working with so they were comfortable having academic discussions. Students met with their group that day and choose a book that they would all like to read from a preselected list created by the researcher. After students had chosen their book, students were directed to create a reading schedule for their group. Students had four weeks to complete their book. Once their schedule was created and all group members had agreed to it, they assigned group roles for the first discussion the following week. After that first week discussion, groups were given the option to continue using the roles to guide their discussions or not.

During each literature circle meeting, which was for thirty minutes, students met and discussed their book using the given roles as a guide if they chose. While the literature circles were running, the researcher moved around the room and observed each group. The researcher recorded observations that identified when a comprehension strategy was used or discussed by a student or group. The researcher needed to question students on how they came to an answer to help identify if a comprehension strategy was utilized. Each group turned in their group role sheets, if used, after each meeting. The researcher also used this student work when the analyzing data to determine if the literature circles affect the use of comprehension strategies while reading.

Literature circles progressed the same way, one day a week for four weeks while students read their novel. Once all novels were finished and the literature circles have concluded, the researcher administered a reflective survey to students. This survey allowed students to identify if they used any comprehension strategies while reading or discussing their novel. It asked
students to reflect on the literature circle group process itself and if it helped them comprehend their book on a deeper level. The survey was distributed right after the last literature circle meeting had ended. Students worked on the survey in class for roughly 10 minutes and then it was collected.

**Ethical Considerations**

Protecting students and their individual mental and physical wellbeing is a top priority, however, ethical considerations still need to be made. The risk of harming a student may come from the aspect of allowing students to choose their literature circle groups. If a child does not feel like they have a place within the classroom or peers that they connect to, they may feel isolated and not wanted in a group by their other peers.

Another risk of harming a student may come from the topics within their novels. A certain topic or event within a novel may trigger a student to remember a past bad memory or event. The researcher will remind students daily that if there is anything that is bothering them about their literature circle group, to notify the researcher and they may opt-out at any time. The researcher has read every book that is an option for students to read, to help minimalize any harmful content.

**Conclusions**

This chapter discussed implementation, data collection and data analysis for this study. Three different types of instruments were used to collect data. All three were used to have access to as much data as possible to help determine if literature circles are a beneficial way to practice comprehension strategies. The next chapter will include the results of this study and overall findings.
Chapter 4

DATA ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATION

Many teachers use comprehension strategies within their classrooms daily to help improve the reading ability of all students. Students are taught directly and indirectly throughout the year. However, many students lack the ability to take what was taught in a lesson and transfer their knowledge to a real-life situation, like discussing a novel. Students do not have the skills to transfer information and think critically. Some teachers find including literature circles into their weekly schedule benefits their students to practice these skills. The purpose of this study is to determine if literature circles affect the use and practice of comprehension strategies within classrooms. Many curriculums do not include literature circles within their literacy instruction. However, many teachers use them. This researcher will work to discover if literature circles help improve the use of comprehension strategies when students are reading.

Data Collection

Data was collected by observation, student role sheets, and a final survey. The researcher listened to students discuss their novels during their literature circles. The researcher then recorded observations on a guideline sheet to be analyzed once all literature circles ended. The researcher recorded observations from each group that focused on comprehension strategies and how students found their information for each discussion.

Additionally, the researcher analyzed student role sheets that were completed during literature circles. Using roles was an optional activity for groups after the week one meeting. The researcher identified what comprehension strategies were recorded by students during their discussions.
A final survey was also administered to all students after the literature circles concluded and their novels were finished. It was given during class and students had time to complete it to the best of their ability. Students reflected on what comprehension strategies they used during their literature circles. They also reflected on how much the comprehension strategies helped them during their literature circle discussions and their ability to comprehend the novel they read.

During the first week of the study, students were engaged and willing to talk about their book. They did well at filling out their role sheets and had beneficial discussions. During that first week, students were required to fill out their role sheet to help lead their discussions. Students were able to stay on task and talk about their book the entire thirty minutes.

As the weeks went on and students became more comfortable with the routine of their literature circles, they became more distracted and off topic during discussions. The number of students who chose to continue recording their discussions on their optional role sheets also decreased. As the researcher observed, their discussions became shorter and not as focused. During the last week of literature circles, students had a hard time discussing for the full thirty minutes. However, students had more than a week to finish their last section of their book because a holiday fell within the schedule creating non-school days which pushed the last meeting back a week. This additional week between meetings caused students to forget what they had discussed and read from the last meeting. However, students were still able to apply their comprehension strategies during their discussions.

Results
RQ 1: How do literature circles affect the use of student comprehension strategies (i.e. summarizing, visualizing, questioning, making connections) during reading discussions?

There were five literature circles. One group chose to read The City of Ember by Jeanne DuPrau (2003). Another group chose to read Number the Stars by Lois Lowry (1989). The last three groups chose to read Bridge to Terabithia by Katherine Paterson (1977). This study had three data sets: two qualitative sets, observation and student role sheets, and one quantitative set, a final student survey.

Observations

When analyzing the first set of qualitative data, the observations, it is shown that literature circles did help students practice their comprehension strategies. First, students were able to ask questions about their novel throughout the literature circle process. One student who was reading Bridge to Terabithia asked, “Do you think it will become a real place?” Another student asked, “Why do you think Leslie moved in?” During week two of discussions, a student who was reading The City of Ember asked, “Why do you think the blackouts happen so often?” After asking that question another student in the group answered, “I think it is because there is not enough energy to power the whole city all of the time.” These questions helped foster a discussion between group members. During week three of discussions, a student who was reading Number the Stars asked, “What do you think will happen to the Rosen’s now?” Lastly, during week four of discussions some remaining questions that occurred after the novels had ended came from a student who was reading Bridge to Terabithia. The student asked, “Why did everyone move on so quickly after Leslie died?” Another student asked “Do you think PT will grow up to be a good guard dog for Terabithia?”
Additionally, students were able to make successful connections with the book. One student stated that they had attended a funeral “just like he did when Leslie died.” After this connection, another student in that group stated, “That is a good connection but it is not a deep one. Everyone has been to a funeral so we should be thinking of deeper connections like Ms. Mrak taught us.” This discussion between peers showed those students understood how to make a connection and were able to hold a discussion about it which helped improve their comprehension skills.

Students were able to summarize what they read to everyone each week during their discussion time. In week one, a student who was reading Number the Stars was able to recall “The girls were running down the sidewalk and then got stopped by two guards. After they ran home to their families and the families were not happy that they got stopped. They told the girls to take a different way next time.” During week two discussions, a student who was reading The City of Ember recalled, “The blackout happened all around the city. They also lost their colored pencils during it.” During week three of discussions, a student who was also reading The City of Ember summarized what they read by stating, “They finally found the generator underground in the sewer. After, they went to the boat down there and got on to see where it went.” Finally, during week four discussions, a student who was summarizing Bridge to Terabithia stated, “They all went to Leslie’s funeral after she died. Jess decided to rebuild the bridge that goes to Terabithia. They also replace Leslie as queen of Terabithia with Jess’s little sister.”

During all observation times, it was observed that students were able to use other comprehension strategies that we not originally discussed at the beginning of the study. In the first week of discussions, a student who was reading Bridge to Terabithia, made an inference and stated, “Fletcher likes to be the best. He argues with people about how he is right.” It does not
say that Fletcher likes to be the best in the story but the student was able to understand that while reading based on events that happened. Additionally, during week two discussions, it was observed that a student was making a prediction after reading The City of Ember. The student stated, “I think it was the boy who unlocked the box.” During week three of discussions, it was observed that a student reading Number the Stars also made a prediction. The student stated, “I think the family will get away.” Finally, during week four discussions, one student who was reading Bridge to Terabithia stated, “I would have changed the ending. I would not have had them replace Leslie after she died.” This discussion shows that the student understands the plot of the story enough to want to change the ending.

**Student Role Sheets**

Students were able to successfully record their comprehension strategy usage on the correct role sheet each week. For example, in week one discussions, a student who was reading Number the Stars wrote four full sentences on their summarizer role sheet. It read, “There are two girls and they are best friends. They were running and then got stopped by guards. They got home and realized that the Nazis were taking the Jews away. They realized their friend is Jewish and became scared.”

Additionally, in week two discussions, one student who was reading Bridge to Terabithia drew a house in a forest and wrote that it was his visualization of Terabithia. Another student during week two who was reading Number the Stars drew two girls walking down a path as well as two girls laying in a bed.

Another student who was reading Bridge to Terabithia in week three discussions, was able to make a connection and explain it with detail. The student role sheet said, “I also go to
church on Easter like they did. When I go to church it is in the morning and then my grandma and grandpa come over to eat after. It is my favorite part of Easter.” This connection from the book allowed the student to expand their thinking and relate to what was happening in the novel.

Finally, in week four of discussions, a student who was reading The City of Ember was able to continue to ask questions as well as make an inference. The student role sheet read, “How is the key hole on the cover of the book related to the story? Why were the guards on the mayor’s side? I wonder if it was because they were being given food.”

Survey

After looking at the quantitative final survey that students took once literature circles had finished, it is shown that overall, students practiced their comprehension strategies. From the survey, 65% of students, 15 out of 23, said they completed their required reading every week. However, by the end of the literature circles, 78% of students, 18 out of 23, said they finished their book. Overall, 78% of students, 18 out of 23, marked “yes”, literature circles helped them understand their novel better. 21 out of 23 students marked “yes” when asked if they discussed questions during their literature circle discussions, which was 91% of students. 16 out of 23 students marked “yes” when asked if they made connections during their literature circle discussions, which was 70% of students. 12 out of 23 students marked “yes” when asked if they summarized chapters during their literature circle discussions, which was 52% of students. 17 out of 23 students said they visualized while reading, which was 74% of students.

Data Analysis

These were results I expected, however, I was surprised at the quantitative results for summarizing. It does not match the qualitative results that were determined from observations
and the student role sheets. While observing students, many were able to discuss what occurred in their past week’s reading without problems, as long as they read the required part.

According to Anderson and Corbett (2008), literature circles help improve the reading achievement in students as well as their language and writing skills. After analyzing observation notes and student role sheets, students were successfully able to improve their comprehension strategies and illustrate what was happening in their novels.

I did encounter some problems during my data collection that can help explain my results. As stated, one limitation in this study was the reliability in students to complete their reading every week. While I was collecting observations, some students would admit to not finishing the required reading. They were not able to take part in that week’s discussion to the fullest because they were not at the same spot as the rest of their group.

I do believe the three types of instruments I used for data collection were appropriate. It was beneficial to use observation and student work. Observations allowed myself to hear firsthand what students were discussing. Student work allowed for examination of discussions I may have missed while observing other groups. Finally, the survey was beneficial because it allowed students to reflect on their literature circle and determine for themselves if it was a useful process.

**Recommendations for Future Research**

Overall, I believe this study would be beneficial for future research. However, I understand that the results of action research are relative only to my setting and that is a limitation to the generalizability of this study.
This study helped bring to light what students were thinking while they were reading their novels which shines a light on their comprehension. Literature circles allowed students to discuss their novel which in turn allowed them to use and practice their comprehension strategies with their peers. Based on that and the provided data, it can be concluded that literature circles had a positive effect on the use of comprehension strategies. However, future research needs to incorporate concrete data that shows the effect of literature circles instead of relying heavily on researcher observations.

The first way this study should be changed for future research is by implementing a control group during the study. This study focused solely on researcher observations and a reflection survey, as well as relying heavily on personal knowledge of individual students. Throughout the study, the researcher observed struggling readers use comprehension strategies during their discussions. However, since there was not a control group, there is no quantitative way to determine if literature circles had an effect on comprehension strategies use during discussions. The control group would focus on reading their novel in sections each week similar to the literature circle groups. However, after each week, they would not discuss their novel. This should be implemented in the future to gain a quantitative data set that examines student growth.

To gain quantitative data from the control group and literature circles to examine the effect of them on the use of comprehension strategies, a weekly survey for the control group and literature circles would be needed. This survey would ask each student if they asked questions, summarized what they read, made connections, and created visualizations in their head while reading each week. The researcher then could compare the data from the control group, to the data of the literature circles to determine if literature circles had a positive effect on the use of comprehension strategies.
Also, future research should include data that focuses on the growth of struggling readers. Based on researcher observations, struggling readers were participating in discussions and were able to use their comprehension strategies well. Prior quotes within this study are from all reading levels of students, including struggling readers. However, the given data does not concretely prove that. It is recommended that student reading levels are noted and comprehension strategy use is tracked for each individual student to show the comprehension usage growth from implementing literature circles. This would then be compared to the reading levels and comprehension usage growth from the students within the control group discussed above.

Second, future research revolving around literature circles should be completed later in a school year once students have had time to review all comprehension strategies fully. It should also be conducted later to allow students to get back into the habit of reading nightly. Many of the students stated that they were not keeping up with their weekly reading, leaving them ill prepared for their discussions.

Third, I would recommend that students pick their groups but not their books as openly. The researcher should give a specific book list based on reading level to each group. Students were able to pick any book they wanted off of the researcher’s original list, causing some of the books to be easy for certain students, and very difficult for others. This caused some discussion issues. Students who found the book more difficult were not able to comprehend the plot of the book as much as they should have. They were then not able to fully discuss the book with peers.

Now that this research has concluded, I will continue to use literature circles within my classroom to help students improve their comprehension strategies in real-life situations. I will continue to work on demonstrating discussions to help students understand what a quality
literature circle looks like. This study opened up more questions that would benefit from additional research. For example: How do literature circles increase the summarization skills of students? Or How do nonfiction texts within literature circles affect the use of comprehension strategies?

Conclusion

Based on the results that were obtained from this study, it can be concluded that literature circles do have a positive effect on comprehension strategy practice. During all weeks of discussions, students were able to make connections, ask questions, summarize and illustrate what they read. It was observed multiple times each week and recorded on student role sheets as well. Based on that information and student reflections from the survey, literature circles do help increase the comprehension strategy use of students when reading.
Chapter 5

IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

This study focused on the affect literature circles had on the use of comprehension strategies while fifth grade students read novels. Many times, students are able to use comprehension strategies when practicing directly in the classroom. However, students then can have a hard time transferring that skill to a real-life situation, like literature circle discussions. Students have a hard time thinking critically and applying strategies to reading without being directly told to do so. This study was created to determine if literature circles help students practice how to use their comprehension strategies organically in conversation.

After the study had concluded, it was determined that literature circles do positively affect student’s ability to use comprehension strategies. While having literature circle discussions, students successfully practiced using their comprehension strategies which in turn helped them understand their novel on a deeper level.

Action Plan

This study was beneficial to myself and my colleagues. I use literature circles yearly within my classroom with the idea that they benefit students, however there was no concrete evidence to support this. Our curriculum does not include literature circles so I was implementing them based on my own knowledge and research. My colleagues have also been implementing them based on their own knowledge as well. This research solidified the work that has been done with literature circles and has confirmed that it should continue into the future. It showed that it is beneficial for students when implemented. I have learned that novel discussions allow students the time to practice and work with the comprehension strategies they learn daily.
My students became more confident and faster at using their comprehension strategies to discuss their book. This study will impact my current and future students, as well as the students of my colleagues, because it showed that literature circles are a beneficial way for students to practice the skills they have learned so I will continue to use them during my literacy block.

I would like future training on literature circles to help increase the effectiveness of them within my classroom. I believe that training would be beneficial for myself and my colleagues because we all use literature circles on a yearly basis. I would like to partner with my administrator and school district to have this professional development be available to myself and other to continue to improve our teaching. Overall, this study has solidified my thinking and practice of literature circles within my classroom and I will continue to use it in the future.

**Plan for Sharing**

This research will be shared with colleagues and the administrator within the school. It is important that all know about the positive affect literature circles have on the comprehension strategies students are learning within their literacy blocks. The school curriculum does not incorporate literature circles into its schedule. This study is important to share because it was found to be beneficial for students with their comprehension strategies. The positive effects of literature circles include: positive peer interaction, group discussions, plot summarization, improvement in questioning and connecting strategies, and strong visualization skills. Many students struggle to practice these strategies in a concrete way and this study proved that literature circles allow the space and time for students to practice. It will be important to share and continue this work and research to better benefit all students within the school community.
REFERENCES


Appendix A: IRB Approval

Institutional Review Board

DATE: September 30, 2021

TO: Tiffany Bockelmann
    Allison Mrak

FROM: Lisa Karch, Chair
      Minnesota State University Moorhead IRB

ACTION: APPROVED

PROJECT TITLE: [1808325-1] Literature Circles and the Use of Comprehension Strategies within a Fifth Grade Classroom

SUBMISSION TYPE: New Project

APPROVAL DATE: September 30, 2021

EXPIRATION DATE: September 30, 2022

REVIEW TYPE: Exempt Review

Thank you for your submission of New Project materials for this project. The Minnesota State University Moorhead IRB has APPROVED your submission. This approval is based on an appropriate risk/benefit ratio and a project design wherein the risks have been minimized. All research must be conducted in accordance with this approved submission.

This submission has received Exempt Review based on the applicable federal regulation.

Please remember that informed consent is a process beginning with a description of the project and insurance of participant understanding followed by a signed consent form. Informed consent must continue throughout the project via a dialogue between the researcher and research participant. Federal regulations require that each participant receives a copy of the consent document.

Please note that any revision to previously approved materials must be approved by this committee prior to initiation. Please use the appropriate revision forms for this procedure.

All UNANTICIPATED PROBLEMS involving risks to subjects or others and SERIOUS and UNEXPECTED adverse events must be reported promptly to the Minnesota State University Moorhead IRB. Please use the appropriate reporting forms for this procedure. All FDA and sponsor reporting requirements should also be followed.

All NON-COMPLIANCE issues or COMPLAINTS regarding this project must be reported promptly to the Minnesota State University Moorhead IRB.

This project has been determined to be a project. Based on the risks, this project requires continuing review by this committee on an annual basis. Please use the appropriate forms for this procedure. Your documentation for continuing review must be received with sufficient time for review and continued approval before the expiration date of .

- 1 -
Appendix A2

Please note that all research records must be retained for a minimum of three years after the completion of the project.

If you have any questions, please contact the Minnesota State University Moorhead IRB. Please include your project title and reference number in all correspondence with this committee.

This letter has been issued in accordance with all applicable regulations, and a copy is retained within Minnesota State University Moorhead's records.
Appendix B: Informed Consent Letter

September 30th, 2021
Christina Huddleston Elementary
9569 175th St. W.
Lakeville, MN 55044

Dear Parent or Guardian,

Your child has been invited to participate in a study to see how literature circles affect the use of reading comprehension strategies.

Your child was selected because he/she is in my regular education classroom. If you decide to participate, please understand that your child will be asked to do the following, and these are typical classroom activities that involve no risk to your child.

1. Hold discussions with peers in a literature circle about a chosen text. This will take place during our regular scheduled literacy block time.
2. Students will take a survey after the final literature circle has completed to reflect on the use of their comprehension strategies. This survey will not affect their grades at all.
3. Although Principal Jill Kelly has granted me permission to conduct this study, since this information is being used to help me complete my master’s degree at Minnesota State University Moorhead, I need to have parental consent to use this information in my final paper that I am required to do as part of my degree. If I did not need this information to complete my master’s degree, I would be conducting this same type of research and lessons in my normal everyday teaching practices and I would not need signatures. If you sign this form, you are giving me consent to use the information I gather. All information that is used will be confidential, no names will be used. Please also note, that your child can choose to not participate at any time without any consequences.

Please get in touch at any time with questions about this study. You may contact myself, Allison Mrak, by email at Allison.Mrak@isd194.org, or by phone at 952-232-3147. You may also contact the Principal Investigator Dr. Tiffany Bockelmann at 218-780-0757, or by email at tiffany.bockelmann@mnstate.edu. Any questions about your rights may be directed to Dr. Lisa I. Karch, Chair of the MSUM Institutional Review Board, at 218-477-2699 or by email at irb@mnstate.edu.

You will be offered a copy of this form to keep. You are making a decision whether or not to participate. Your signature indicates that you have read the information provided above and have decided to participate. You may withdraw at any time without prejudice after signing this form should you choose to discontinue participation in this study.

_____________________________________       _________
Signature of Parent or Guardian                                Date
_____________________________________       ________________________________
Signature of Investigator                                        Date
APPENDIX C: Student Role Sheets

C1

Name

Group

Book

Assignment p ______ – p ______

Questioner: Your job is to write down a few questions that you have about this part of the book. What were you wondering about while you were reading? Did you have questions about what was happening? What a word meant? What a character did? What was going to happen next? Why the author used a certain style? Or what the whole thing meant? Just try to notice what you are wondering while you read, and jot down some of those questions either along the way or after you’re finished.

Questions about today’s reading:
Literature Circles

ILLUSTRATOR

Name

Group

Book

Assignment p _____ – p _____

Illustrator: Good readers make pictures in their minds as they read. This is a chance to share some of your own images and visions. Draw some kind of picture related to the reading you have just done. It can be a sketch, cartoon, diagram, flowchart, or stick-figure scene. You can draw a picture of something that happened in your book, or something that the reading reminded you of, or a picture that conveys any idea or feeling you got from the reading. Any kind of drawing or graphic is okay—you can even label things with words if that helps. Make your drawing on the other side of this sheet or on a separate sheet.

Presentation plan: Whenever it fits in the conversation, show your drawing to your group. You don’t necessarily have to explain it. You can let people speculate what your picture means, so they can connect your drawing to their own ideas about the reading. After everyone has had a say, you can always have the last word: tell them what your picture means, where it came from, or what it represents to you.

SUMMARIZER

Name

Group

Book

Assignment p _____ – p _____

Summarizer: Your job is to prepare a brief summary of today’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 today’s reading assignment. If there are several main ideas or events to remember, you can use the bullets below.

Summary:

Key points or events:

•

•

•

C4

Chapter 7: Books and Materials

CONNECTOR

Name

Group

Book

Assignment p ______ - p ______

**Connector:** Your job is to find connections between the book and you, and between the book and the wider world. This means connecting the reading to your own past experiences, to happenings at school or in the community, to stories in the news, to similar events at other times and places, to other people or problems that you are reminded of. You may also see connections between this book and other writings on the same topic, or by the same author.

**Some connections I made between this reading and my own experiences, the wider world, and other texts or authors:**

---

### APPENDIX D: Observation Guideline Sheet

Date: ______________  
Week: ______

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of Observation</th>
<th>Details or Comments from Students</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Visualization</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Observations</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inferencing Observations</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Summarizing Observations</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Questioning Observations</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Connection Observations</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prediction Observations</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other Comprehension Strategy</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Observations</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
APPENDIX E: Final Student Survey

Date: ________________________

Please answer the questions below by circling Yes or No.

Did you complete all of your reading every week? ____________________________Yes No

Did you finish your novel? ____________________________________________Yes No

Did you discuss questions in your literature circle discussions? .................Yes No

If yes, what is one question that you had?

Did you make any connections in your literature circle discussions? ..............Yes No

If yes, what is one connection you made?

Were you able to summarize chapters in your literature circle discussions? ......Yes No

If yes, what is one summary you made?

Did you visualize anything while reading? _________________________________Yes No

If yes, draw a simple sketch of something you visualized below.

Did literature circle discussions help you understand your novel better?..........Yes No
APPENDIX F: CITI Training Certificate

This is to certify that:

Allison Mrak

Has completed the following CITI Program course:

Social & Behavioral Research - Basic/Refresher
(Curriculum Group)
Social & Behavioral Research
(Course Learner Group)
1 - Basic Course
(Stage)

Under requirements set by:

Minnesota State University Moorhead

Completion Date 21-May-2021
Expiration Date 20-May-2024
Record ID 42619510

Not valid for renewal of certification through CME.

Verify at www.citiprogram.org/verify/?w03d0c8a2-431c-444d-968b-dd34f02e9862-42619510