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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to determine the effectiveness of using Literature Circles to improve reading comprehension skills of eighth-grade students in a middle school located in middle Georgia. A quasi-experiment was used with a random assignment to the experimental or control group. One reading class received traditional drill and classroom practice, while the other group was placed in literature circles according to the novel they chose to read. Both groups were pre-tested and post-tested. Both groups were equal at the time of the pretest. During this first experiment, the results were mixed. Significant gains were made by the experimental group. Then the groups swapped instructional methods for the next reading unit. This second experiment yielded opposite results. The group that was initially introduced to Literature Circles did better on the pre-test for experiment 2, as well as on the post-test, even though this time they received traditional instruction. Both groups were heterogeneous for high, medium, and low reading abilities. The results of this research support the use of both literature circles and traditional drill and practice to improve reading comprehension skills. (Author/RS)

Running head: LITERATURE CIRCLES

Literature Circles in Action in the Middle School Classroom

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to determine the effectiveness of using Literature Circles to improve reading comprehension skills of eighth grade students in a middle school located in middle Georgia. A quasi-experiment was used with a random assignment to the experimental or control group. There were two experiments. A coin was flipped to determine which of the two reading classes would receive the Literature Circle reading strategy for experiment one. One group received traditional drill and classroom practice, while the other group was placed in literature circles according to the novel they chose to read. Both groups were pre-tested and post-tested for experiment one and experiment two. Statistically, both groups were equal at the time of the pretest for the first experiment [t (43) = -.48, p = .63]. The results were mixed. During Experiment one, significant gains were made by the experimental group. Their posttest score revealed they had achieved a higher score on the end of the unit reading test when the pretest was used as a covariate to adjust for pre-existing differences in the students reading ability, F(2, 42) = 27.3, p<.03. Then the groups were swapped for the next reading unit. This was experiment two. However, experiment two yielded the opposite results. The group that was initially introduced to Literature Circles did better on the pretest for experiment two than the then control group, [t (43) = 2.2, p = .03]. They also did better on the posttest when the pretest was used as a covariate to regulate differences in students reading ability, [F (2, 42) = 37.3, p = .001] even though this time they received traditional instruction. Both groups were heterogeneous for high, medium, and low reading abilities. The results of this research support the use of both literature circles and traditional drill and practice to help improve reading comprehension skills.

Literature Circles in Action in the Middle School Classroom

Literature circles can play a key role in helping students improve their literacy skills and become proficient readers. Organization skills are important for obtaining successful reading comprehension techniques. Some students are struggling to understand how information in the text fits together in a meaningful way, because some students have difficulties in finding an interest in reading material, whether it is for pleasure or informational purposes, they lack the ability to concentrate on the text. It is helpful for students to be familiar with a number of reading comprehension strategies in order to deal effectively with different situations, such as reading for a variety of purposes.

Literature Circles are small, temporary discussion groups of students who have chosen to read the same work of literature (Daniels, 1994). The students can reveal their perceptions of the book, clarify concepts, make predictions and respond to text. They understand what they have read at a much deeper level and can relate their reading to their personal lives and the prior knowledge they already have.

The purpose of Literature Circles is to promote reading and encourage response to literature through discussions, and provide opportunities for children to work in small groups that are child centered (Pembroke Press, 1998). Literature Circles give students a choice in what they read and an opportunity to talk to each other on a weekly basis about a particular book. This encourages free expression of the readers' opinion, and the opportunity to share ideas that students normally would not in a whole group classroom setting. Research indicates not only have literature circles increased reading comprehension skills, but also this activity has encouraged students to become active listeners and risks takers while increasing their communication skills, and developing more of their thinking abilities.

Teacher's Role in Literature Circles

A group of teachers spent time observing literature circles (Short, Kaufman, Kaser, Kahn, and Crawford, 1999). They turned the camera on themselves as they examined teachers' talk in literature circles. As these teachers examined their data, new understandings and questions emerged from their discussions. One issue was the importance of the demonstrations that occurred during class read-aloud time. The students did not have direct instruction or training on how to do literature circles, nor did they practice particular roles. However, it was clear that the discussions taught them about their roles through teacher demonstrations during class read aloud time. The most important benefit gained from the research was not an answer to what roles teachers should take in literature circles, but an awareness of the decisions that were made of how to implement circles in the classroom. The effect of this study on the group of teachers was essential to helping students grow as thinkers and readers.

In constructing Literature Circles, the teacher and students work collaboratively, in which they construct the curriculum together. Once Literature Circles get off to a good start and students understand their roles, the teacher can become a back seat driver and allow students to be responsible for their own learning. If the group or a student gets off task, the teacher can step in and intervene at her discretion. Literature Circles is a way for students and teachers to explore literature together (Noll, 1994). If the teacher would like to get in on a discussion, then she should do so as a participant and not as a group leader. An adult should not control the discussion.

Student's Roles

When introducing Literature Circles, students should expect to fulfill a predefined role they will interchange as the book or group changes. The roles that students may assume are:

- **Literary Luminary** points out interesting or important passages within the reading.
- **Illustrator** uses some form of artwork to represent a significant scene or idea from the reading.

- **Discussion Director** writes questions that lead to discussion by the group.
- **Connector** finds connections between the reading material and something outside the text, such as a personal experience, a topic studied in another class, or a different work of literature.
- **Vocabulary Builder** discusses words in the text that are unusual, interesting, or difficult to understand. Students find the roles are important to make the group function properly.

The key to Literature Circles is to get the students comfortable with group-discussions, and then the formal use of the roles can be discontinued and discontinue as the circles progress (Daniels, 1994).

Academic Benefits of Elementary School Learners

In Baron's (2000) study of Literature Circles second grade teachers found that students were reading, writing, and creating a variety of texts, and were listening, speaking, and communicating in different ways. Their group discussions helped develop literacy skills. In the end, students identified the link between their audience and what they read, wrote, drew, and said. They also understood the reason for the development of their literacy skills.

Zieger (2002) contends literature circles have had a positive impact on her students. They chose books that engaged them, interested them, and challenged them. By participating in literature circles, children have a chance to analyze what they have read with a group of peers. These discussions enhance their understanding and appreciation of the story. Students develop time-management skills that will help them in the future. This approach gives students the opportunity to develop skills they need to be successful readers as they play one of the five roles (discussion director, word wizard, literary luminary, connector, and reporter) each week. By mastering the five roles of literature circles, the students learn to summarize, to make connections, to increase their vocabulary, and to appreciate literature while reading a selection.

Daniels (2002) research has linked literature circles to improving student achievement. Chicago City Schools received a grant to support the development of instruction in a group of struggling schools.

As part of the intervention, teachers were given training to implement literature circles. After using Literature Circles for a year, test scores were encouraging. In reading, the school topped citywide test score gains by fourteen percent in third grade, nine percent in sixth grade, and ten percent in eighth grade.

Teachers were convinced their Literature Circles were working, not just to help kids become readers, but also to prove they are readers on the mandated measures of proficiency.

Other researchers have been finding similarly promising outcomes. A 1998 study of fourth graders by Klinger, Vaugn, and Schumm found that students in peer-led groups made greater gains than controls in reading comprehension and equal gains in content knowledge after reading and discussing social studies material in peer-led groups. This effect was confirmed through a standardized reading test, a social studies unit test, and audiotapes of group work.

The researchers found that students' small group talk was sixty-five percent academic and content-related, twenty-five percent procedural, eight percent feedback, with only two percent off task.

Academic Benefits of Middle School Learners

Anne Simpson (1995) conducted research with similar findings. This study on literature circles among secondary students was carried out in Australia. The students that were involved in the literature circles learned a number of useful reading strategies and developed language they needed to talk about texts and gained confidence in communicating their ideas to others. The class bonded together through the novels they shared.

Scott (1994) used literature circles to link reading, writing, and classroom talk in an authentic manner and to create a community of learners who help each other learn and grow. The literature circles allowed students to self-select books and the literature circles allowed members to change as books are completed and new ones are chosen.

The circles met on a regular basis, and students agreed on how much to read independently by the next circle meeting. Students benefited from literature circles by first helping each other converse about literature through student led discussions.

Secondly, they encouraged students to share their feelings about the text with each other and ask questions of one another. Third, literature circles use the social nature of middle school students to invite reading, extend thinking, and prolong involvement with text.
Fourth, there is no ability grouping involved in the circles, which promotes acceptance of others abilities, strengths and responses. Overall, Scott said literature circles helped her students become more proficient in responding to text in different ways and more creative (Scott). The most significant advantage in using group discussions in the classroom was the students' personal approach and how involved they became with the books and characters.

King (2001) draws research into the use of Literature Circles carried out at the University of Brighton. This article discusses the role of talk as a way of developing children's meaningful interactions with literary text, which contribute to a richer understanding both of the text they read and themselves as readers. The use of Literature Circles has proved that guided reading can provide an ideal opportunity for the development of text related talk. The teachers role is to scaffold guided reading to enable children to learn how to respond and secondly, to transfer control of the talk to the group. The teacher should not be seen as the expert reader having all the right answers, but should be an active participant in the group. In conclusion, King stresses the way guided reading can encourage children as an active and desirable social process rather than as an essentially private activity.

Noll (1994, p.90) also stated "literature circles gave the students an opportunity to sustain dialogue reading". In groups, students were able to raise questions, argue, reflect, negotiate, and make new meanings together. The social issues students were reading about and debating, inspired them to go out into the community to seek answers to their questions, which caused them to raise new questions about the issues of concern.

Students were also able to direct their own learning from the initial selection of books and formation of the literature circles through their discussions, investigations, and final presentations. As a result of reading a variety of novels, students found that real life experiences are sometimes found in the real-life context of literature.

Burns (1998), looked at changing the classroom climate with literature circles. She concluded that in order to have successful literature circles much preparation was needed. At least six sets of related books should be available to students in sufficient quantities. The role sheets should be ready for students to pick their jobs and teachers must give expectations for students' responsibility. Also, Burns concluded that student choice, social interaction in heterogeneous groups, and a substantial amount of time to read during the school day lead to motivation, which had a very powerful effect on achievement.

The purpose of this study was to investigate whether or not using Literature Circles in the middle school classroom would encourage students to become better readers, thinkers, and writers. By having a choice in what they read and discussed, students will be more likely to become life long readers. Specifically this study investigated the effects of using Literature Circles to improve reading comprehension skills among eighth grade students. It was expected that the experimental group using Literature Circles would improve their reading comprehension skills more than the control group of students who received traditional reading instruction for the same instructional unit. The Literature Circles group used pre-selected novels by the teacher while the control group used the basal reader series in isolation.

Method

Participants

The sample for this study was from my eighth grade reading classes, from a small public middle school in rural Georgia. The population is composed primarily of African-American students of low socio-economic status; 80% of the students receive free or reduced lunch. The participants in this study were two classes of heterogeneously grouped eight graders. Class A had 15 boys and 8 girls. Class B had 16 boys and 5 girls. A coin was flipped to determine which class would do the Literature Circles (be the experimental group for the first six-weeks); and for experiment two the classes swapped positions for the Literature Circles (experimental group) and the control group the second six-weeks.

Instrumentation

Test Ready Plus Reading – Level 8 created by The Curriculum Associates, Inc, (153 Rangeway Road, North Billerica, MA 01862) was used to determine the effectiveness of the two methods of teaching reading. This informal test was utilized as a data gathering instrument to access students' accuracy in reading comprehension. Students were given a pretest and posttest to measure progress between testing cycles.

Procedures

The Test Ready plus Reading test was administered to both eighth grade classes. The test was not timed; all students had an opportunity to complete the battery. The reading class chosen to the experimental group and control group was done at the flip of a coin. The whole study lasted approximately thirteen weeks. The first half of the semester was used for Experiment 1 and the second half was used for Experiment 2. The teacher pre-selected seven sets of novels for students to choose from. These were books that displayed people and actions of their heritage and were expected to motivate their desire to read independently. The experimental group was comprised of groups depending on the novel students choose to read. The groups consisted of 4 to 5 students per circle. They were heterogeneous in terms of student's literacy levels and skills and psychosocial development levels and skills. Students assumed the roles of the discussion director, literary luminary, illustrator, connector, or vocabulary builder. The circles met at least three times per week, 30-45 minutes each meeting to discuss the section they read. During the meetings, students took notes and jotted down questions they developed as they read each section of the novel to aid in their weekly discussion. They had the privilege of reading weekly written responses aloud before the discussion started in order to review where the discussion ended the last meeting. Weekly written responses were reflections of what students thought about the novel thus far. The control group was confined to reading the basal textbook designed for eighth grade students. They were limited to classroom oral readings and individual tasks for six-weeks.

The basal series used for the control group was *Worlds Beyond*, publisher Silver Burdett & Ginn, copyright 1995. Both groups received the same amount of reading assignments, which were reviewed in class the following day. The Georgia Quality Core Curriculum (QCC) objectives were the same for both groups and all tests measuring achievement were identical. For example, Students answered literal, inferential, and critical questions about literature and students used literary elements and techniques such as plot, setting, theme, character, characterization, conflict, figurative language, and point of view to analyze literature.

Design and Data Analysis

This study was a quasi-experimental design with a random assignment to the experimental or control group. There were two experiments with a reversal of the classes for the second experiment. Analysis of covariance was used to test for differences on the posttest scores using the pretest scores as a covariate. The alpha level was set at .05.

Results

Experiment I

The expected outcome was that the experimental group using Literature Circles would improve students reading comprehension skills more than students who received traditional drill and practice in isolation. Inclusively, the experimental and control group both made gains in their grade equivalent score during this one semester. The students using the Literature Circles strategy, pretest mean score was ($M = 48.5$, $SD = 17.0$). The mean score for the control group pretest was ($M = 50.9$, $SD = 16.4$). Nonetheless there was no significant difference between the means of the pretest for experiment I, [$t\,(43) = -.48$, $p = .63$]. There was a difference found in the posttests scores, even though the experimental group mean was only a little higher. The ANCOVA results (using the pretests as the covariate to remove the variation due to individual differences at pretest) showed a statistically significant difference in the means in favor of the experimental group, $F\,(2, 42) = 27.3$, $p < 001$. See Table 1. Effect as measured by Partial Eta Squared was .56; observed power (using alpha = .05) was 1.00.

Experiment 2

This experiment did not support the hypothesis. The new control group, which was the first group to do the Literature Circles, did better than the new experimental group on the pre-test in this experiment, [t (43 = 2.2, p =.03]. After now twelve weeks of reading instruction, the mean for the new control group posttest score, (M = 61.3, SD = 16.7) still surpassed the new experimental group's posttest score (M = 45.2, SD = 14.8). The ANCOVA results, were opposite than we originally thought because the first group (now the control group) did significantly better on both posttests one and two. F (2, 42) = 37.3, p<.001. Effect size as measured by Partial Eta Squared was .64; observed power (using alpha = .05) was 1.00.

Discussion

The result of this study does not support the rejection of the null hypothesis. After experimenting with Literature Circles for weeks, I got mixed results of which teaching method would increase reading comprehension skills. Experiment 1 supported my hypothesis in which the cooperative groups would improve their literacy skills more so than students just receiving traditional drill and practice. However, Experiment 2 did the opposite of what I thought the outcome would be. Class A, the class that did the Literature Circles first, scored better on the pretest and on the posttest in Experiment 2 when they received traditional reading instruction. Maybe the differences were due to a concept that they learned with doing the literature circles, and it could not be unlearned. Perhaps this may have given these students better literacy skills than the students in the Class B. Another factor could have been that the test content might have been something Class A might have been more familiar with from the start.

As other studies have indicated, several factors could have affected the outcomes of this study. The experimental group received their reading instruction early on in the semester, which might have given them a head start on improving comprehension and other literacy skills. Another factor was that when the classes used the basal reader, in most cases it was hard to keep students motivated and centered on what they were reading. This textbook did not hold their attention as well as the novels that were used in the literature circles. In addition, time played a factor in the results as well. Twelve weeks may have not been enough time to show a realistic

significant difference in reading scores. The results probably would have been more impressive if the study had gone on for an entire school term. Also, the Test Ready plus Reading test does not give a complete comprehensive scale of a student's reading ability. A comparison of standardized tests scores (in specific areas of reading comprehension and vocabulary) from the previous year and test scores from this school term might give way to more meaningful results.

The implications of this study are promising. Literature circles along with traditional drill and practice should be incorporated with other helpful reading strategies to ensure that students like those who participated in this study will learn literacy skills. Another bonus for the literature circle method was that these middle school students were eager to take on their roles (discussion director, literary luminary, illustrator, word wizard, and the connector) when reading their novels. In addition, they could make personal connections with these novels; whether it was the language, style, topic, etc.; because they could identify with books that displayed people and actions of their heritage. On the other hand, the basal reader had few stories about their personal culture and life experiences, which can thwart a student's growing interest in reading for pleasure (if they are not avid readers in the beginning). King (2001) discusses the role of talk as a way of developing children's meaningful interactions with literary text, which contribute to a richer understanding both of the text they read and themselves as readers. Literature Circles can be used to enhance the reading quality of students' literacy skills. Scott (1994) states that literature circles can be used to link reading, writing, and classroom talk in an authentic matter and to create a community of learners who help each other learn and grow.

In review, one group received pre-selected novels that were culturally relevant to read in their literature circles. The other group received traditional drill and practice techniques using the basal series text only. Both groups received the same amount of reading instruction. They both were pre-tested and post-tested using the Test Ready plus Reading test. Although this study gave mixed results when using literature circles method independently to teach reading comprehension skills, the basal reader series and activities did no better. The outcome indicates

that using literature circles is a great strategy for literacy instruction and motivation as the novels chosen can be tailored to their interests and needs. However, using other strategies for reading instruction along with the literature circles would be beneficial in helping students gain the knowledge they need to be better writers, listeners, speakers, and readers. The ANCOVA showed that both groups were at equal grade levels at the time of pre-testing. The groups were diverse as far as their reading abilities (high, middle, and low). However, there were mixed results in experiment II, this is when the group that initially did literature circles pre-tested better on experimental tests one and two. Maybe this phenomenon happened because they learned something early on that could not be untaught. The results do support the use of various teaching strategies for students to have effective reading comprehension and literacy skills.

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Table 1

Results of Experiment 1 & 2, Literature Circles in Action in the Middle School Classroom

Experiment I						
	Pretest			Posttest		
Group	M	SD	N	M	SD	N
*Experimental (A)	48.5	17.0	24	61.0	16.3	24
Control (B)	50.9	16.4	21	60.4	17.6	21

Experiment 2						
	Pretest			Posttest		
Group	M	SD	N	M	SD	N
Experimental (B)	34.3	18.3	21	45.2	14.8	21
**Control (A)	46.0	17.1	24	61.3	16.7	24

* $F(2, 42) = 27.3$, $p < .001$. Effect Size (Eta Squared = .56) Power =1.0

** $F(2, 42) = 37.3$, $p < .001$. Effect Size (Eta Squared = .64) Power = 1.0

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