Literature Circle and Gifted Students:

Boosting Reading Motivation and Performance

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Abstract
The purpose of this study was to investigate the effect of literature circles on the reading comprehension and attitudes toward reading of gifted students in an elementary school. Using a quasi-experimental design, this action research compared two groups of gifted fourth grade students in the reading programs. The experimental group included twenty gifted/high-achieving students that participated in weekly literature circles for four weeks. The control group had nineteen gifted students that received the traditional, skill-based reading instruction. Pre- and post-assessments in reading performance of both groups were taken to compare growth. A survey was also conducted at end of the intervention to examine participant attitudes toward literature circles versus skill-based reading. The results indicate that the literature-circle group showed positive attitudes towards reading and also slightly more progress in reading than the skill-based group. The findings of this study support the potential benefits of incorporating literature circles into reading instruction for gifted students in elementary schools.

Key Words: Literature Circle, Gifted Students, Reading Instruction, Skill-based Reading

Introduction

Literacy is the foundation of education. Being able to read, comprehend, and produce written language spans all content areas throughout a student's academic career (Stutz, Schaffner & Schiefele, 2016). With a greater emphasis on reading and writing even in the mathematical portions of standardized testing, literacy has become more important than ever. While there is great emphasis placed on helping struggling readers improve their comprehension and fluency skills, gifted students are often overlooked in the classroom (Rambo-Hernandez & McCoach, 2015). Typically, these children perform well enough to need little attention from the teacher. Research suggests that these children will show growth in reading ability without explicit instruction from the teacher. One study even indicates that gifted and high achieving students show as much growth in reading over the summer as during the school year while typical students show little-to-no growth during the summer (Rambo-Hernandez & McCoach, 2015). If these children are able to improve on their own, the question arises, with meaningful instruction in the classroom that also fosters a love for reading, could these gifted students show even more growth?

Since it seems many of these gifted students are already motivated to read at home, the challenge is posed to teachers of how to take this motivation, increase it, and improve reading comprehension and achievement even more. At home, reading occurs organically with students selecting books that are of interest to them and reading at their leisure. At school, typically, the teacher selects the novel and leads students through a guided study. Reading lessons are usually very teacher-driven and focus on skills dictated by state standards. Literature circles could help break this mold and possibly appeal to gifted learners. Literature circles were popularized by Harvey Daniels (1994) in his book, *Voice and Choice in the Student-Centered Classroom.*

Daniels describes literature circles as "small, temporary discussion groups who have chosen to read the same story, poem, article, or book" (1994, p.13). Bringing this model into the gifted classroom could potentially mirror reading experiences at home and enhance the academic experience for these gifted children thus causing them to show growth and increased interest in reading instruction. Can literature circles help to improve the attitude of gifted learners in the classroom thus improving their reading achievement? The purpose of this study is to examine whether using literature circles improves reading comprehension and attitudes toward reading in a fourth grade gifted classroom.

Definition of Terms Used in this Study

Literature circles – small groups of students who are grouped based on book choice. Students will determine the amount of the book to be read prior to each meeting and will be assigned a role to participate in weekly discussion centered around the selected literature (Daniels, 1994).

Discussion Director – Within the literature circle, this student will come up with open-ended questions for the group to discuss

Literary Luminary – Within the literature circle, this student will choose and share passages with the group that they consider to be of great importance or that he or she would like to discuss further with the group.

Summarizer – Within the literature circle, this student will summarize the weekly reading.

Connector – Within the literature circle, this student will make connections to other texts, to everyday life, or to other content areas to share with the group.

Standards-based instruction: This type of instruction is teacher-created and focuses on teaching the skills detailed in the Common-Core Standards for fourth grade students in Georgia.

Gifted Student: A student who has been identified as gifted through a formal assessment process

Reading Comprehension: The ability to make meaning out of what one has read.

Attitude towards Reading: The outlook and opinion of a student regarding the type of instruction they receive in reading.

Review of the Literature

Literature circles are small groups of students who meet to discuss a book, story, or poem that they have all chosen to read (Daniels, 1994). Throughout the reading, each member of the group has an assigned or chosen job which he must complete prior to the regular meeting. Jobs can include things such as a discussion director, literary luminary, summarizer, or connector (Daniels, 1994). In his book on literature circles, Daniels argues that literature circles "have the potential to transform power relationships in the classroom, to make kids both more responsible for and more in control of their own education, to unleash lifelong readers, and to nurture a critical personal stance toward idea." (1994, p. 31)

Literature Circles

Literature circles can be implemented in many ways in a classroom, but the most popular method seems to be the framework suggested by Harvey Daniels. Daniels suggests that while

there are different approaches, one of the key elements are the roles assigned to students. The four primary roles Daniels introduces are Discussion Director, Literary Luminary, Connector, and the Illustrator; however other roles are suggested for larger groups as well (Daniels, 1994). As students become more proficient in conducting meetings, the roles are eventually absorbed into group discussion and not explicitly assigned. In a study of the role sheets conducted by Lenters (2014), she suggests that the role sheets serve to give guidance to the students and can almost "replace the teacher" as students assume responsibility for their role or job (p. 63).

The impact of literature circles on learning is far reaching. Studies indicate that literature circles can impact achievement, motivation and self-efficacy, and social interaction among students. One case study conducted on fourth grade students indicated that growth in reading comprehension was shown among students of various reading levels after participating in literature circles (Avci & Yuksel, 2011). Another study noted that students even notice the improvement conveying that, "Critical thinking was encouraged and supported by their peers and teachers," (Falter-Thomas, 2014). Literature circle reading can also help readers to slow down and read carefully so that they are able to competently discuss the book with their peers. Helping students to slow down can create a better understanding of the literature (Sanacore, 2013). Ragland and Palace (2017) state that, "Students learn how to be purposeful readers, recognizing that good readers apply a wide range of strategies to unpack a text," (p. 36). In these book discussions, students get a chance to participate in authentic dialogue which can potentially increase reading comprehension (McLaren & Ericson, 1995).

Additionally, literature circles motivate students to read independently and can improve self-efficacy (Blum, Lipsett, & Yocom, 2002). Students are motivated to read so that they may effectively participate in discussion with their peers; moreover, motivation is furthered because

students are allowed to choose their own text (Ragland & Palace, 2017). During these meetings, students are motivated and encouraged to share ideas and opinions with their peers thus supporting the development of the skill of being able to respond to literature (Long & Gove, 2003). According to Blum (2002), because they are collaboratively involved in discussion, problem solving, and decision making, "readers are empowered" in their learning (p. 100).

When students are intrinsically motivated to read, growth and positive impacts on reading comprehension can be seen (Stutz, Schaffner, & Schiefele, 2016). The study conducted by Stutz (2016) goes further to reveal that as comprehension increases, motivation is further increased causing a cyclical effect. With improved motivation to read and comprehend, several benefits can be seen: students will demonstrate increased reading comprehension and will likely exert more effort in future reading (Logan, Medford, & Hughes 2011). Students will begin to develop higher-order thinking skills as they pursue more in-depth conversation with their peers (Fabrikant, 1999). More importantly, students will begin to develop a strong sense of self-efficacy which will help the increased reading comprehension skills transfer into future readings and grade levels (Lee & Johnson-Reid, 2016). The majority of students studied by Certo with regard to literature circles seem to truly enjoy the experience (Certo, Moxley, Reffitt, & Miller, 2010). Most students conveyed that they preferred literature circles to simply reading a book and seemed motivated to continue participating in literature circles (Certo, et al, 2010).

Another key element of literature circles is the collaborative, social aspect of the groups. Impacts of participating in literature circles can be seen in the social development of students. Certo (2010) quotes a student as saying, "I learned how to talk in a group…I realize how to talk with a group of people, and how they can help me with the book…" (p. 252). Students are able to learn from one another in these groups instead of relying solely on the teacher. As they work

to construct meaning from the text, they are able to share diverse background information, ideas, and opinions thus creating a community of learners (Cumming-Potvin, 2007). As students work together they are also developing problem-solving skills. A study that compared student-led literature circles to teacher-led literature circles in a fourth grade classroom concluded that when students are allowed to lead the discussions, they often work together to incorporate one another's ideas as they strive to settle conflict. Problems were discussed more meaningfully and with more relation to the text (Almasi, 1995). It was also noted that in the peer led groups, conflict was often unresolved and the students learned that disagreeing was sometimes acceptable in friendly discourse (Almasi, 1995). Students also tended to socialize more in the peer led groups by asking more questions, using more academic language, and participating more often as compared to the teacher led groups (Almasi, 1995). Some researchers suggest that the increase in student participation when the groups are student led is due to the authentic and organic nature of the discussions. These authentic discussions are demanding of the students as they require them to share personal thoughts, ideas, and opinions (Hadjioannou, 2007). In effect, students are sharing who they are with their classmates which can foster the development of "interpersonal relationships" among students (Hadjioannou, 2007, p. 371). Hadjioannou (2007) goes further to say that these types of social interactions prepare students for participation in a democratic society at large.

Gifted Students

Gifted and advanced students have very different needs from average students. With the focus on reluctant and struggling readers, our gifted students are often relegated to independent reading with little-to-no instruction while the teacher's efforts are placed elsewhere (Rambo-Hernandez & McCoach, 2015). Catron (1986) goes even further to say that typical instruction

which focuses on basic decoding and comprehension skills from a basal reader can often "squelch excitement and enthusiasm for reading" among gifted students (p. 137). By using texts that are often too easy for gifted students for instruction, teachers do not allow gifted students the opportunity to develop the necessary skills to read more difficult text thus allowing them to become lazy readers who are unwilling to attempt a challenging text (Garces-Bascal & Yeo, 2017). In order to reach these students and foster their natural reading abilities, the classroom must be structured to meet the educational needs of these readers (Catron, 1986). Gifted readers do not typically need the teacher-driven, skill-based instruction that developing readers need. Many of these gifted children have surpassed these basic skills and yearn to dig more deeply into a text while moving beyond "yes and no" questions (Catron, 1986). Catron (1986) argues that in order to engage gifted readers, the teacher must relinquish some control of the classroom and allow the students the opportunity to learn more independently.

Because gifted readers are often able to function a bit more independently than other students, literature circles seem to be very well suited to their needs. By allowing the students to choose their own books, they will be able to make selections that are more appropriate for their reading level thus providing the challenge they so desperately need. Additionally, the independent nature of literature circles will allow the students to focus on the literature and discuss it more in depth while still following the guidelines set forth by the teacher. The independence coupled with the meaningful discussion could potentially impact the reading comprehension and Lexile scores of these already advanced readers.

Attitude towards Reading

Studies show that when students have a positive attitude toward reading, reading achievement increases. According to Fives (2016), there is a "positive association between attitudes toward reading and reading achievement" (p. 45-46). If the incorporation of literature circles can improve the attitude of the students toward reading and reading instruction, it is possible that reading comprehension will increase as a result. Five (2016) goes on to say that "as children's attitudes toward reading became more positive, there were statistically significant gains in scores for reading achievement" (p. 48). Another study focused on children's attitudes towards reading states that attitudes and achievement in reading are very closely aligned (Fletcher, 2012, p. 5)

Moreover, positive attitudes toward reading can motivate children to read more often. When students are motivated to read, they will read more often causing comprehension skills to develop more naturally. Fletcher (2012) states that positive attitudes toward reading create "intrinsic motivation in the form of a positive self-concept as a reader, a desire and tendency to read and a reported enjoyment of or interest in reading" (p. 2). Motivated learners tend to work harder and with more tenacity than students who are unmotivated. Helping the students become motivated will encourage them to work harder and achieve at a higher level.

Reading First Initiative and Gifted Readers

In the district in which this school is located, the gifted model for education is different. In all other schools that offer gifted services, students are pulled out of their regular classroom to attend a gifted class that focuses on enrichment projects. The content of these projects are not typically related to the grade level state standards. In the experimental classroom school, gifted students are grouped together in a self-contained classroom and receive services all day in every

content area. In an attempt to gather research on small group instructional strategies for this type

of classroom, it became evident that little research is available regarding small group reading

instruction for gifted and advanced students. In a study on the effect of No Child Left Behind on

advanced readers, it is noted that "little research attention has been given to the advanced reader

population, especially in schools targeted for their low academic achievement' (Brighton, Moon,

& Huang, 2015, p. 259). The majority of the research focuses on reading intervention and small

group strategies for struggling readers or English language learners. It is commonplace for

gifted readers to be left to read independently or serve as tutors to struggling readers instead of

receiving the differentiated instruction they need (Rambo-Hernandez & McCoach, 2015).

Under the No Child Left Behind Act passed in 2001, the Reading First (RF) initiative was

established. Under this act, underperforming schools were eligible to receive grants and

instructional materials to implement reading interventions (Brighton, Moon, & Huang, 2015).

RF caused the use of basal style readers and small group guided reading to become

commonplace in many classrooms. These commercially available programs often come with

leveled readers that are below grade level and a script for the teacher to use (Brighton, Moon, &

Huang, 2015). These small group guided reading sessions can be detrimental to gifted and

advanced readers. Brighton (2015) notes that these advanced students can lose focus and

motivation in reading as they will easily become bored without proper reading materials and

instruction. Many teachers in the study of Reading First conducted by Brighton et. al reported

that "core basal programs were a poor fit for their advanced readers in K-3 classrooms"

(Brighton, Moon, & Huang, 2015, p. 275). The strategies that gifted readers so often need such

as curriculum compacting, questions that demand higher order thinking, and advanced reading

material are typically omitted in the RF classroom (Brighton, Moon, & Huang, 2015).

Research Methods

Overview of the Project

This was an action research project in which the researcher is also the teacher. The experimental group was composed of twenty-one fourth graders in a self-contained gifted classroom. The sample was of twenty students, but before the study began, a new student joined the class increasing the sample size. All students in this group participated in weekly literature circles for four weeks. Students were grouped based upon book selection in groups of four students per group. Students selected a different job each week for the literature circle meetings. Jobs included discussion director, literary luminary, summarizer, word wizard and connector. Over the course of four weeks, students rotated through jobs so that they have completed every job for one week by the end of the four week session. Students completed a "role sheet" to demonstrate the work they completed for the week. Assessment of reading comprehension was conducted through the use of the schoolwide Easy CBM testing (easyCBM, 2017). Students took a pre-test to assess reading levels and a posttest after participating in literature circles. The results were compared to a control group. The control group was composed of the teacher's previous class of twenty gifted fourth graders. This control group did not participate in literature circles. They received skill based reading instruction coupled with weekly reading comprehension passages that allowed them to practice the focus skill. Scores were compared to determine the impact of literature circles on the students reading comprehension and Lexile scores as determined by Easy CBM.

In addition to assessing comprehension and Lexile scores, a teacher created survey (see Appendix) was used with the experimental group to determine the effect of literature circles on

students' attitudes toward reading and reading instruction via literature circles.   The survey

focused on the students' opinions and attitudes toward literature circles. Students evaluated

several statements regarding their experience with literature circles such as, "Reading is fun

when I am in literature circles." Students indicated their level of agreement by selecting a scaled

answer by choosing a number 1 through 5.   An answer choice of 1 indicated the student strongly

disagreed with the statement, while a 5 indicated strong agreement.

Research Questions

Do literature circles improve the reading comprehension and Lexile scores of gifted

readers?   Do literature circles improve gifted students' attitudes toward reading and reading

instruction?

Hypothesis

Literature circles improve the reading comprehension and Lexile scores of gifted

students. Literature circles improve the attitudes of gifted students toward reading instruction.

Description of Participants

The participants in this study were chosen for convenience and ease of access. The

students in the experimental group were in the researcher's fourth grade class, and the students in

the control group were in the researcher's class the previous year. The school is a charter school

which focuses on classical education. It is located in an economically disadvantaged district

with a population of approximately 1,500 students in kindergarten through eleventh grade. Since

the entire county in which the school is located is considered economically disadvantaged, all

students receive free and reduced lunch. Of the student population, approximately 70% of the

students are white, 15% are black, 7% are Asian or Pacific Islander. The remaining 8% is comprised of Hispanic and Multi-racial students. 30% of the students are identified as gifted while 3% receive special education services and less than 2% receive ESOL services. Students who are identified as gifted receive services in a self-contained classroom from gifted-endorsed teachers. Gifted students are identified through a series of tests which asses their mental ability, achievement, creativity, and motivation. A student can qualify by either demonstrating criteria in any three of the four categories or by scoring in the 99th percentile in mental ability (Cognitive Abilities Test or CogAT) and achievement (Iowa Test of Basic Skills). There are two to three gifted classrooms per grade level in the Grammar school with seven total classes per grade level in grades kindergarten through fifth. Each classroom has approximately twenty students with no class larger than twenty-five.

In the experimental group, the sample included twenty-one students, nine boys, and twelve girls. Fifteen students have been identified as gifted with the remaining six being considered high-achieving students as indicated by grades, Milestones scores (Georgia Milestones Assessment System, 2017), and Easy CBM testing. All students were provided gifted services in the classroom from the classroom teacher. The demographics of the class were: two Asian students, one African-American student, two Hispanic/multi-racial students, and fifteen white students. Students in the experimental group were put into small groups based upon book selection. Since the students were similarly abled, skill level was not considered for grouping.

The control group was composed of nineteen students: ten boys and nine girls. Of the nineteen, all were identified as gifted. There were fifteen white students, two Asian/Pacific Islanders, one multi-racial student, and one African-American student. The control group was

the researcher's previous class and received skill and standard based reading instruction and were used for comparison with the experimental group.

Data Collection

In order to collect baseline data for the experimental group, the teacher administered testing via Easy Curriculum Based Measure (Easy CBM) which assesses reading comprehension, vocabulary, fluency (words read per minute), and Lexile scores. Easy CBM is the school wide Benchmark testing program (easyCBM, 2017). This computer based testing is used to monitor student progress and assesses reading comprehension, fluency and accuracy, assigns Lexile scores based on testing results, and measures vocabulary. During the computer based Easy CBM testing, students read a passage and answered basic comprehension questions; they were scored based on the accuracy of the answers, and this information is reported in a variety of ways such as percentage of questions answered correctly and percentile scores. The percentiles are calculated using a nationally representative stratified norm sample, with 500 students drawn from each of four regions (West, Midwest, Northeast, Southeast), for a total sample of 2000 students per measure. (easyCBM, 2017). Lexile scores were also assigned from Easy CBM testing. Lexile scores help to determine a student's reading level so that the reader can select books appropriate for his level of comprehension

In addition to reading comprehension, Easy CBM also monitors fluency and accuracy. For this assessment, students read aloud to the teacher for one minute. During this time, the teacher recorded the number of words read and any mistakes made by the student. These tests were given again at the end of four weeks for comparison.

To assess the attitudes of the students, a teacher created survey was used. The survey consisted of a series statements such as, "Reading is fun when I am in literature circles," and "I prefer reading instruction to traditional reading instruction." The students were given a scale from one to five with one indicating they strongly disagree with the statement and five indicating that they strongly agree with the statement. Students were also given several open ended questions so that they might include any additional opinions not addressed by the statements such as their favorite and least favorite part of literature circles.

Data Analysis and Results

The independent variable in this research is the instructional method used with each group. The control group used the traditional skill-based method, and the experimental group used literature circles. The dependent variables are reading comprehension, Lexile scores, and student attitudes toward reading instruction. For group comparison and pretest-posttest comparison, a series of t-tests was performed.

The data from the surveys was analyzed by compiling answers from each survey. The answers were used to determine trends and attitudes toward reading. Due to the design of the survey, higher scores indicate better attitudes toward reading instruction while lower scores indicate indicate either worse attitudes or no change in attitude.

The following set of tables shows the results of several tests. For each group, control and experimental, three tests were administered. Students were given fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension tests. These tests yielded the Lexile scores.   Tables 1 through 4 display the results of the pretest and posttest results of the experimental group. Tables 5 through 8 show the

results of the pretest and posttest of the control group. The remaining tables, Tables 9-16

compare the results of the two groups for the pre and posttests.

Table 1: Results of fluency pretest and posttest of the experimental group

GROUP	EXPERIMENTAL: FLUENCY PRETEST	EXPERIMENTAL: FLUENCY POSTTEST
MEAN	186	190.57
SD	33.32	35.67
SEM	7.27	7.78
N	21	21
	t (20)=1.6818, P=0.1082 > 0.05	

Table 2: Results of the vocabulary pretest and posttest of the experimental group

GROUP	EXPERIMENTAL: VOCABULARY PRETEST	EXPERIMENTAL: VOCABULARY POSTTEST
MEAN	19.29	19.33
SD	0.90	1.20
SEM	0.20	0.26
N	21	21
	t (20)=0.4909, P=0.6289 > 0.05	

Table 3: Results of the reading comprehension pretest and posttest of the experimental group

GROUP	EXPERIMENTAL: COMPREHENSION PRETEST	EXPERIMENTAL: COMPREHENSION POSTTEST
MEAN	16.67	16.86
SD	2.18	1.93
SEM	0.47	0.42
N	21	21
	t (20)=0.4909, P=0.6289 > 0.05	

Table 4: Lexile scores of the experimental groups before and after literature circles

GROUP	EXPERIMENTAL: LEXILE SCORES PRETEST	EXPERIMENTAL: LEXILE SCORES POSTTEST
MEAN	982.14	992.86
SD	120.20	107.17
SEM	26.23	23.39
N	21	21
	t (20) = 0.4999, P=0.6226 > 0.05	

Table 5: Results of fluency pretest and posttest of the control group

GROUP	CONTROL: FLUENCY PRETEST	CONTROL: FLUENCY POSTTEST
MEAN	192.58	190.63
SD	28.32	28.74
SEM	6.5	6.59
N	19	19
	t (18)=0.4945, P=0.6269 > 0.05	

Table 6: Results of the vocabulary pretest and posttest of the control group

GROUP	CONTROL: VOCABULARY PRETEST	CONTROL: VOCABULARY POSTTEST
MEAN	18.68	19.00
SD	1.67	1.56
SEM	0.38	0.36
N	19	19
	t (18)=0.7939, P=0.4376 > 0.05	

Table 7: Results of the reading comprehension pretest and posttest of the control group

GROUP	CONTROL: COMPREHENSION PRETEST	CONTROL: COMPREHENSION POSTTEST
MEAN	15.89	16.00
SD	2.71	2.03
SEM	0.62	0.47
N	19	19
	t (18)=0.1929, P=0.8492 > 0.05	

Table 8: Lexile scores of the control groups before and after literature circles

GROUP	CONTROL: LEXILE SCORES PRETEST	CONTROL: LEXILE SCORES POSTTEST
MEAN	1057.63	1065.00
SD	197.11	147.97
SEM	45.22	33.95
N	19	19
	t (18) = 0.1855, P = 0.8549 > .05	

Table 9: Comparison of control and experimental groups pretest fluency scores

GROUP	CONTROL: FLUENCY PRETEST	EXPERIMENTAL: FLUENCY PRETEST
MEAN	192.58	186.00
SD	28.32	33.32
SEM	6.50	7.27
N	19	21
	$t(38) = 0.6692$, $P = 0.5074 > .05$	

Table 10: Comparison of control and experimental groups pretest vocabulary scores

GROUP	CONTROL: VOCABULARY PRETEST	EXPERIMENTAL: VOCABULARY PRETEST
MEAN	18.65	19.29
SD	1.67	0.90
SEM	0.38	0.20
N	19	21
	$t(38) = 0.419$, $P = 0.1588 > .05$	

Table 11: Comparison of control and experimental groups pretest comprehension scores

GROUP	CONTROL: COMPREHENSION PRETEST	EXPERIMENTAL: COMPREHENSION PRETEST
MEAN	15.89	16.67
SD	2.71	2.18
SEM	0.62	0.47
N	19	21
	$t(38) = 0.9987$, $P = 0.3243 > .05$	

Table 12: Comparison of control and experimental groups pretest Lexile scores

GROUP	CONTROL: LEXILE PRETEST	EXPERIMENTAL: LEXILE PRETEST
MEAN	1057.63	982.14
SD	197.11	120.20
SEM	45.22	26.23
N	19	21
	t (38) =1.4783, P = 0.1476 > .05	

Table 13: Comparison of control and experimental groups' posttest fluency scores

GROUP	CONTROL: FLUENCY POSTTEST	EXPERIMENTAL: FLUENCY POSTTEST
MEAN	190.63	190.57
SD	28.74	35.67
SEM	6.59	7.78
N	19	21
	t(38)=0.0058, P=0.9954>.05	

Table 14: Comparison of control and experimental groups' posttest vocabulary scores

GROUP	CONTROL: VOCABULARY POSTTEST	EXPERIMENTAL: VOCABULARY POSTEST
MEAN	19.00	19.33
SD	1.56	1.20
SEM	0.36	0.26
N	19	21
	t(38)=0.7613,P=0.4512>.05	

Table 15: Comparison of control and experimental groups' posttest comprehension scores

GROUP	CONTROL: COMPREHENSION POSTTEST	EXPERIMENTAL: COMPREHENSION POSTTEST
MEAN	16.00	16.86
SD	2.03	1.93
SEM	0.47	0.42
N	19	21
	t(38)=1.3691, P=0.1791>.05	

Table 16: Comparison of control and experimental groups' posttest Lexile scores

GROUP	CONTROL: LEXILE POSTTEST	EXPERIMENTAL: LEXILE POSTTEST
MEAN	1065.00	992.86
SD	147.97	107.17
SEM	33.95	23.39
N	19	21
	t(38)=1.7783,P=0.0834>.05	

As seen in each table above, all p values are greater than .05. This indicates that there is no statistical difference between the pretest and posttests of either group, nor is there a statistical difference between the two groups. Both groups displayed little growth between the pre and posttests. One reason for the lack of growth is the limitation of the testing that was administered. The Benchmarking system used to test these students assesses knowledge of fourth grade content and skills. Since these students are gifted and advanced, many of them score very highly from the beginning leaving little room for improvement. Since there is little difference in scores, this

would indicate that there was no impact on reading ability from the inclusion of literature circles.

The students who received traditional skill based instruction scored similarly to students who

participated in literature circles. The lack of statistical differences could also be due to the small

sample size and the short duration of the experiment.

Although little statistical difference is seen, the experimental group did show

improvement in some areas. Table 1 shows that the experimental group showed slight growth in

fluency. When compared to the fluency of the control group as seen in Table 5, it appears that

the experimental group grew by 4.57 words while the control group decreased by 1.95 words in

fluency. While the growth in fluency is not statistically different, when analyzed in comparison

to the control group, it seems that the increase in independent reading caused by literature circles

helped to improve fluency slightly.

Tables 2 and 3 show a slight improvement in vocabulary and comprehension for the

experimental group. The small impact to vocabulary and comprehension growth is likely due to

two factors. First, the students scored very highly on the pretest for each of these tests meaning

it would have been difficult to show significant growth. Additionally, the books chosen for

literature circles by the teachers were suited to a comfortable Lexile level for the students.

Because the students were reading at a comfortable level, it is unlikely that the words and

content in the books were challenging for the students.

In Table 4, the pre and posttest Lexile scores are compared. The average Lexile score

increased from 982.14 to 992.86. Since Lexile scores factor in comprehension, fluency, and

vocabulary, it does appear that improvement was made in this area. When compared to the

improvement of the Lexile scores of the control group as seen in Table 8, the control group

improved by 7.37 while the experimental group improved by 8.72. The experimental group

demonstrated slightly more growth in Lexile scores than the control group.

In addition to the testing that was administered, students also participated in a survey to

indicate their enjoyment level while participating in literature circles. Overwhelmingly, the

students all enjoyed literature circles and preferred them to traditional reading instruction. Of the

twenty-one students surveyed, twelve indicated that they strongly agree that reading is fun when

they participate in literature circles; the remaining nine agree that reading is fun when they

participate in literature circles. Eighteen students indicated that their favorite part of literature

circles is getting to discuss a book with their peers. One student said, "My favorite part is

sharing opinions with my group about the book and hearing other people's opinions." Another

said, "I like discussing the book and what I have read. It helps me to realize more about the

book." All students indicated that they would like to continue participating in literature circles

with fifteen strongly agreeing and six agreeing to this statement. Overall, the surveys indicate a

very high level of satisfaction with literature circles among the experimental group.

Discussion and Conclusion

Even though the data shows no statistical difference between using literature circles and

traditional reading instruction, the results of the survey are very promising. The students were

very motivated to read and participate in group discussions with their peers. These findings are

congruent with other studies that show literature circles motivate students to read independently

(Blum, Lipsett & Yocom, 2002). It stands to reason that literature circles could encourage

students to read more which would cause and increase in comprehension, fluency, and

vocabulary. Other studies have shown growth in reading comprehension due to participation in

literature circles (Avci & Yuksel, 2011). I think if students in this experiment had the opportunity to participate in literature circles longer, similar results would have been seen.

The tests used limited the opportunity for the students to demonstrate the growth that I observed them experience. This is typical of the academic experience of gifted students. Scoring so highly on any type of tests makes it nearly impossible for gifted students to demonstrate growth throughout the year. As such, teachers of gifted students often look for consistency instead of growth with regard to high achieving students. Further research which included testing the students at a higher level could have possibly indicated a difference in the instructional method. I do think the gifted nature of my students greatly contributed to their enjoyment of this experiment. While reading instruction from a basal can often cause gifted students to become bored, literature circles proved to be exciting and fun (Catron, 1986).

Even though the hypotheses were not supported by the results, it was evident that literature circles were greatly beneficial to the students. They learned to not only answer questions but to create their own questions. Students were making connections between the text and other texts we have read together. Often, they would check on one another to ensure that the reading for the week was being completed. They worked together cooperatively and respectfully. It was a wonderful to observe my students experience literature together.

Implications for Educators

The most important implication for teachers is that all students in the experimental group enjoyed literature circles. It is seldom that all students enjoy any one activity. Literature circles could certainly be used to motivate students to read. Instead of only being held accountable by the teacher, students hold each other accountable for completing the reading and assignments.

The students worked collaboratively to create meaning from the text. Furthermore, literature circles allow students to create their own questions. The ability to effectively question helps to develop higher order thinking and problem solving skills.

Moving forward, literature circles will continue to be used in the classroom. The students were so excited to participate in these meetings each week and often completed more work than was required. When students are eager and motivated to learn, the possibilities are endless. The skill-based instructional method for reading will be closely examined for revision as it produced little results or growth in the students over the years with this method. The students would often perform well on skill based assessments but were unable to utilize the skills in an authentic reading situation. The ability to apply reading skills was lacking. In fact, the inefficacy and lack of skill transfer this researcher has personally experienced is what prompted me to try literature circles. In addition to literature circles, I will use whole group novel studies to introduce comprehension skills in a more authentic setting. I will teach the students how to discuss literature using our group novel for initial literature circles meetings. As they learn to manage the meetings more independently, I will move them into true literature circles in which they choose the books. I think this scaffolding will help them to gain a deeper understanding as they progress through the year.

Limitations of the Study

Limitations of this study include sample size, testing level, and time constraints. Because the sample only includes twenty-one students, the implications are limited. Furthermore, the sample and the control group are already predetermined by existing classes. Random samples

might yield more reliable results. The data from the control group was used from a previous year instead of running concurrently to the experimental group.

Because the students in both groups are gifted or advanced students, the benchmark testing used to collect data limited the potential for growth. Students were tested on grade level content. In order to provide more opportunity for growth, the students should have been tested at a higher level. Because pretest scores were so high, it was impossible to show more than slight growth. Finally, the length of the study was a limitation. The study lasted for eight weeks; however, students participated in literature circles for four weeks. A longer period of time in which the students could participate in literature circles would potentially have a greater impact on fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension.

Teacher Reflection

This was an exciting project to plan. Since I work with gifted students, I am always looking for ways to enrich our lessons. To introduce the novels that I selected for literature circles, I held a book tasting party for my students. I created menus and let the students "sample" each book reading the cover and looking inside for a few minutes. Each book was like the next course in the literary meal. This really set the tone for all of our future meetings. The party generated an infectious excitement in my students. They were eager to learn, and I was eager to teach.

The challenges I faced included time constraints and assessment methods. Once the preliminary work was done, I only had four weeks to let the students participate in literature circles. I think they were rushed. I would have liked to give them more time to read more carefully and dig more deeply. I think the limited amount of time greatly impacted the results of

the study. The assessment method was another challenge. After I began the study, I learned that

I had the capability to test my students at a higher grade level. Had I tested them on a fifth or

sixth grade level, it is more likely that I could have measured their growth more accurately.

I learned that when you can spend some time generating excitement and creating

anticipation, it is time well spent! I have spent the entire school year with these students, and

they were more excited about literature circles than any other activity we have done. When it

was over, they begged to do it again.   In fact, we have already started another round of literature

circles. My students are reading eagerly to finish the books before the end of the year. I really

believe with the excitement this project has generated, it will only be a matter of time before I

see the impact to achievement.

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Appendices

Appendix A: Student Survey

Answer the following by choosing an answer on the scale:
1- strongly disagree   2 – disagree   3 – no opinion   4 – agree   5-strongly agree

Reading is fun when I am in literature circles.	1 2 3 4 5
I prefer literature circles to traditional reading instruction.	1 2 3 4 5
I would like to continue participating in literature circles.	1 2 3 4 5
Literature circle meetings help me understand the book better.	1 2 3 4 5
Literature circles help me enjoy the book more.	1 2 3 4 5
Participating in literature circles motivates me to read more	1 2 3 4 5
Participating in literature circles motivates me to try to dig more deeply into the text.	1 2 3 4 5
I like that we have different jobs during literature circles.	1 2 3 4 5

What was your favorite part of literature circles?

_____

_____

What would you change about literature circles?

_____

_____

What would you keep the same about literature circles?

_____

_____

Appendix B: Role Sheets

Questioner/Discussion Director:

Your job is to develop a list of questions that your group might want to discuss about this part of the book. Don't worry about the small details; your task is to help people talk over the big ideas in the reading and share their reactions. Usually the best discussion questions come from your own thoughts, feelings, and concerns as you read. You can list them below during or after your reading. You may also use some of the general questions below to develop topics to your group.

Possible discussion questions or topics for today:

1. _____

2. _____

3. _____

4. _____

5. _____

Tips: Consider

- A discussion of a work's characters: are they realistic, symbolic, historically-based?

- What motivates the characters or leads them to make the choices they do?

- An in-depth discussion of the work's events

- A discussion of any confusing passage or event

- The historical context and/or events that occurred in a particular work

- Commentary on the social, political, or economic context in which a work was written –- how does the context influence the work?

- An analysis of a specific image, passage, phrase, etc.

- An analysis of a recurring image, phrase, event, etc.

*Remember to use open ended questions. These are questions that require more than just a yes or no answer and will start conversation.

Literary Luminary:

Your job is to locate a few special sections or quotations in the text for your group to talk over. The idea is to help people go back to some especially interesting, powerful, funny, puzzling, or important sections of the reading and think about them more carefully. Also look for literary devices and make connections to the six elements of fiction. As you decide which passages or paragraphs are worth going back to, make a note why you picked each one and consider some plans for how they should be shared. You can read passages aloud yourself, ask someone else to read them, or have people read them silently and then discuss. *Remember, the purpose is to suggest material for discussion*.

Page # and Paragraph	Reason for Picking	Plan for Discussion

Summarizer:

Your job is to prepare a brief summary of today's reading. Your group discussion will start with

your 1-2 minute statement that covers the key points, main highlights, and general idea of

today's reading assignment.

Summary:

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

Key Points:

1.   _____

2.   _____

3.   _____

4.   _____

5.   _____

Connector:

Your job is to find connections between the book and you, and between the book and the wider world. Consider the list below when you make your connections.

- Your own past experiences

- Happenings at school or in the community

- Stories in the news

- Similar events at other times and places

- Other people or problems that you are reminded of

    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:

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____