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Literature Discussion: Encouraging Reading Interest and Comprehension in Struggling Middle School Readers

Pamela Pittman
Barbara Honchell

ABSTRACT: The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore how literature discussion affects middle school struggling readers. The focus was on 16 middle school struggling readers in a rural Title I school in the southeastern United States. Findings indicated that (a) literature discussion increased student enjoyment of reading, and (b) students understood a text better during literature discussion when they used reading strategies along with prior knowledge to make connections between a text and their own lives. The discussion focused on the practice of literature discussion. The authors explored how this learning activity positively influenced middle school students' learning, particularly among struggling readers.

Key words: Middle School, Struggling Readers, Reading Strategies, Literature Discussion

Pamela Pittman, M.Ed**.** is currently a doctoral candidate at North Carolina State University writing her dissertation on the development of novice middle school English language arts teachers through participation in professional learning communities. Her research interests include teacher development and adolescent literacy with a particular focus on middle school struggling readers. She can be contacted at pkpittma@ncsu.edu

Barbara Honchell, PhD. (University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill) is an Associate Professor of Language and Literacy and the Director of Reading Recovery at the University of North Carolina Wilmington's Watson College of Education. Research interests include: early literacy, effective classroom instruction, and diverse literacy learners. She can be contacted at honchellb@uncw.edu

Because national and state reading standards are changing through the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) (National Governors Association Center for Best Practices & Council of Chief State School Officers [NGA Center], 2010) alongside a more heterogeneous student population than ever before, teachers must adapt their teaching repertoire to help diverse learners become proficient readers. The information age demands critical skills such as gathering information from various sources and analyzing, evaluating, summarizing, and synthesizing that information (Allington, 2001; Keene & Zimmerman, 2007). As teachers, we know that students must extend these skills by creatively using the information to solve challenging new problems presented by our changing world. Teachers must differentiate instruction in order to meet the individual needs of the students they teach; one way to accomplish this task is through literature discussion groups (LDGs) utilized with diverse student groups. We prefer the term *LDGs* over other terms for talking about books such as book clubs or literature circles because we consider the *talk* or *discussion* to be the important element, with the text as the venue for the talk.

For the purposes of this article, we define LDGs as small discussion groups who meet together to talk about literature in which they have a common interest (Short & Pierce, 1990). These conversations can be about book content, specific strategies used to comprehend the text (Allington, 2001), personal stories about real-life connections, or any combination of these (Keene & Zimmerman, 2007; Daniels, 2006). Students guide these discussions in response to literature they have read. They might also talk about plot, characters, and the author's craft, but the significant outcome is that students collaborate in order to make meaning from the reading (Schlick-Noe, 2004).

Additionally, research shows that literature discussion, through this collaboration, affords students opportunities to

- think critically about text;
- reflect as they read, discuss, and respond to books and other reading materials (Keene & Zimmerman, 2007);
- deepen their comprehension and restructure their understanding of the text (Schlick-Noe, 2004); and
- speak and be heard (Routman, 2000).

LDGs promote community in our diverse classrooms (Short & Pierce, 1990), establishing a culture of cooperation and collaboration (Allington & Cunningham, 2007) and building an atmosphere of trust, an important factor in the sharing of thoughts, ideas, and feelings during discussion (Bowers-Campbell, 2011).

Consider the diversity of students in every classroom. Teachers manage a wide array of racial and ethnic differences, other languages, various learning styles, and a broad range of learning abilities. Students come from a variety of situations, including

- students from low socio-economic homes;
- students with various disabilities;
- students who are gifted athletes and artists but who do not read on grade level; and
- students who, for various reasons, have fallen behind their peers but are in classrooms with academically gifted students.

This diversity creates an environment for collaborative practices such as literature discussion groups, which capitalize on student diversity, encourage varied thinking, and extend understanding of reading material in a socio-cultural context.

Vygotsky's (1978) socio-cultural learning theory promotes collaborative learning practices, recognizing that people learn from each other, not in a vacuum, and that they learn from more knowledgeable others such as teachers, other adults, or even peers. Since young adolescents, students between ages 10-15 who are in grades 6-8, are becoming more social individuals (Atwell, 1998; Manning & Bucher, 2012), and because they benefit from more collaborative learning engagements in which to build proficient reading skills (Association for Middle Level Education [AMLE], 2010), LDGs can be used to customize individual learning for this age group. In LDGs, the group constructs meaning from the text they read together so that the individuals in

the group learn and benefit from the collaborative talk promoted by Vygotsky. Not only does literature discussion build a sense of community in a classroom (Peterson & Eeds, 2007; Short & Pierce, 1998), but it also benefits diverse learners, especially struggling readers (Routman, 1991; Clay, 1991). Through LDGs, students

- engage in collaborative learning opportunities (Allington & Cunningham, 2007; Bowers-Campbell, 2011; Clay, 1991; Vygotsky, 1978);
- cooperatively create meaning from texts (Bowers-Campbell, 2011; Peterson & Eeds, 2007; Rosenblatt, 1995);
- increase their interest in and enjoyment of reading (Allington & Cunningham, 2007); and
- negotiate different viewpoints and thoughts on text (Routman, 1991; Short & Pierce, 1998).

These activities compliment Rosenblatt's (1995) reader response theory, which states that readers bring their own experiences and knowledge to texts while reading. As researchers, we assert that the meaning that is created through individual reading experiences becomes richer when shared with others in the group because of the individual background, experiences, culture, and knowledge students bring to a text (Clay, 1991; Rosenblatt, 1995). They collaboratively create more meaning during literature discussion because the shared knowledge and shared experiences of the group contribute even further to the literate community (Vygotsky, 1978). This collaboration is especially valuable to struggling readers because they have the opportunity to share their thoughts and opinions on a text and be heard by others (Routman, 1991).

Method

This study developed as a result of the lead author teaching two language arts classes of middle school students, some of whom were struggling readers—students who were not proficient or on grade level in reading according to state and national standards. We knew other professionals who had implemented literature discussion in their classrooms, and we had read research about the positive effects of their implementation (Daniels, 2006; Peterson & Eeds, 2007). We wanted to explore how literature discussion groups would affect these middle school struggling readers.

A qualitative research method best suited the purpose of this study because we as researchers wanted to understand how struggling middle school readers experienced literature discussion groups. This action research was conducted in a classroom setting in order to assess student learning in a new context—LDGs—while observing students at work (Hubbard & Power, 1999). The qualitative approach also allowed the participants' interactions to direct the research study and allowed the teacher-researcher to be immersed in the research setting in order to observe those interactions (Gerdes & Conn, 2001). Participatory action research involves varying levels of collaboration between the teacher-researcher and the student-participants in order to bring about a desired change (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2011). Through the process, the teacher-researcher is directly involved in the research setting, interacting with participants in order to understand more about her own practice and how it affects students. In this way, teacher research differs from traditional research because the teacher becomes a participant in her own research process rather than acting as an outside observer (McNiff & Whitehead, 2010).

In this study, we were interested in implementing a teaching-learning methodology (LDGs) and in how a particular group of students would respond to and learn from the method. We decided that if student experiences with LDGs were positive and if students felt they could learn by participating in LDGs, then teachers could implement the method as a form of instruction that could benefit both struggling readers and proficient readers. The primary focus of this study, however, was on the struggling readers.

Setting and Participants

This research study was conducted at the school and in the classroom of the lead researcher who is a middle grades English language arts teacher. Therefore, the setting for this research was a rural, K-8, Title I school in the southeastern United States, which served approximately 930 students; 61% of the students qualified for free and/or reduced lunch

(Public Schools of North Carolina, 2009). The school had not met Federal Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) standards in five years and, consequently, had been under state sanctions for the past three years. School demographics included: 67.4% White, 12.4% Black, 19.1% Hispanic, and <1% Other (Public Schools of North Carolina, 2010) with similar demographics present in the classroom where the research study took place. The three subgroups of students consistently falling short of AYP standards were: Limited English Proficient (LEP), Black, and Students with Disabilities (SWD).

Participants in the study were a diverse group of 45 seventh graders who were in two class sections that the lead researcher taught. They were from varying socio-economic levels, racial backgrounds, and academic abilities, reflecting the overall population of the school.

> Teachers must differentiate instruction in order to meet the individual needs of the students they teach; one way to accomplish this task is through literature discussion groups (LDGs) utilized with diverse student groups.

The first class section was an ethnically diverse class of eight Caucasian males and nine Caucasian females, five African American males and three African American females, one Hispanic male and one Hispanic female (both LEP), and one male from the Philippines, also LEP, who entered the study at week two. They were also academically diverse with six students on Individual Education Plans (IEPs) including various modifications for reading disabilities, nine students in the National Junior Beta Club because they had high academic standing although they were not identified as academically gifted, and 13 regular education students. Overall, this was an academically low-achieving group with only 43% of them passing the 2009-2010 End-Of-Grade (EOG) test in reading according to school EOG data.

The second class section was specifically grouped by the principal to participate in the school's Algebra I class based on previous EOG math scores and results from the Algebra placement exam. They were six Caucasian males and 10 Caucasian females all of whom were identified as academically gifted, and one African American female who was not identified as academically gifted. This was an academically high-achieving group with 100% of them passing the 2009-2010 EOG tests in reading according to school EOG data. Even within the context of this homogeneously grouped class, variations in areas of strength still existed.

The focus of this study was on 16 struggling readers from the two classes described—14 from the first class and two from the second class—because of the challenges they were facing in becoming successful readers. The 14 students from the first class were identified by the school as having learning disabilities, and the two from the second class were selected for participation in the study based on teacher observations of their classroom reading practices. We were particularly interested in how these struggling readers would be impacted by LDGs.

Research Questions

With an unusually high number of struggling readers embedded heterogeneously in one class, we wondered how engaging in literature discussion would affect these students. In addition, we wondered how the two academically gifted students observed as struggling readers in the other class would be affected as well. Therefore, the key guiding question became:

- How does engaging in literature discussion affect struggling middle school readers?

Other questions we developed as researchers addressed implementation issues:

- How will we introduce literature discussion to these seventh grade students?
- How will the students monitor their behavior?
- What will the students read?

Guiding sub-questions related particularly to the focus group included:

- What will the teacher observe during literature discussion, especially among the struggling readers?
- Will students engage in the discussions or will they be apprehensive?

Data Collection

In qualitative research, primary data collection tools can include interviews, observations, and document analysis (Merriam, 2002). Therefore, the primary tools used by the researchers were pre- and post-reading interest surveys, student-made booklets, audio recordings of student conversations, and student interviews (to clarify responses on the surveys). Researcher observations were used as well but became secondary, as we were interested in student responses of their experience with LDGs.

To begin, the students answered a teacher-made reading interest pre-survey (see Appendix A) about concepts related to literature discussion. The questions were designed to assess student prior knowledge, experience, understanding, and thoughts about LDGs via true-false questions such as "I spend time reading outside class," "I would spend time reading my choice of books outside of class, if I could talk with my peers in class about what I have read," and "I would like reading the same book as my peers in my class, if we could talk about the book." Other open-ended questions were included such as "What could happen to help you more enjoy reading," "Where do you prefer to read? (What location?)," and "What has influenced your reading pleasure up until this point in your life?" Follow-up interviews were conducted with some students in order to clarify meaning for some of the open-ended questions. The initial data revealed that the students had no knowledge of LDGs per se but were familiar with the term *book club*, a variation of LDGs.

Introducing Literature Discussion Groups. During one 90-minute class period the next day, the teacher-researcher introduced the concept of literature discussion through practice sessions and created heterogeneous student groups based on reading EOG scores, individual education plans (i.e. modifications, learning disabilities, etc.) and teacher-observed social behaviors. In the first class section, there were seven groups of four students each, with a mix of learning abilities and diverse language and ethnicity. The students who had trouble working together were not placed in groups together. In the second class section, there were three groups of four students and one group of five students. In this gregarious group, social butterflies were mixed with reluctant talkers. The teacher-researcher solicited student input on behavior protocols and group discussion protocols. The student-generated list of behavior protocols included

- Everyone participates.
- Be kind, helpful, and respectful to everyone.
- Listen to others.
- Take care of the novels.
- Stay on task.

The students decided their groups should talk about

- the novel;
- characters, setting, plot;
- questions that we have about the reading;
- our favorite parts and our not favorite parts;
- words we don't know; and
- what the characters do and how we connect with what they do.

The following four days, students engaged in two practice sessions, the first one (three days) guided and the second one (one day) independent, in order to help them understand the concept of LDGs and to give them working knowledge of how groups should operate. The students created booklets made of four 8.5 x 11 in. (215.9 x 279.4 mm) sheets of copy paper, folded in half and stapled down the middle in which to write thoughts, questions, feedback, new vocabulary, connections, and other observations they made while reading so they could use the booklets as a springboard for discussion. The booklets had construction paper covers decorated by the students. Since these booklets would be primary data tools, we included them in order to gather primary data directly from the students about their experience with LDGs.

The guided practice session lasted three days so the students could learn how to conduct literature discussion. The students listened to the short story "Rikki-Tikki-Tavi" by Rudyard Kipling (2006) on CD. The story was broken down into six 10-minute sessions so that the students could stop after each

reading section and write thoughts, ideas, and questions for discussion in their booklets. After each 10-minute reading session, the students engaged in 10 minutes of talk about what they had read so they could practice both the content of literature discussion and their behavior during LDGs. On the fourth practice day, the students conducted independent literature discussion groups with the short story "Aunty Misery" by Judith Ortiz Cofer (2006) and said they felt confident to try the process with a novel.

Conducting the Study. For the actual LDG experience, the students read the novel *Jeremy Fink and the Meaning of Life* (Mass, 2006) because the teacher felt that these particular students would connect with the characters and enjoy the plot. This is a novel about 12-year-old Jeremy Fink and his same-age friend Lizzy Muldoun who live in New York City: Jeremy with his widowed mom and Lizzy with her single, divorced dad. Jeremy is quite eccentric, eating only peanut butter sandwiches and collecting mutant candy, while staying close to his neighborhood and familiar surroundings. Lizzy, on the other hand, is adventurous and free-spirited, but has a naughty habit of stealing things. The conflict in the novel is that Jeremy's dad died when Jeremy was eight years old, and Lizzy and Jeremy honestly believe his dad's death was the result of an amusement park gypsy's curse on him when he was 13 years old. Prior to his own thirteenth birthday, Jeremy receives a wooden box in the mail from his dad. The box has four intricate locks that require four different, unique keys in order to open it. On the bottom of the box, Jeremy's dad inscribed, "To Jeremy Fink. The Meaning of Life." The box cannot be destroyed or altered in any way without destroying the contents, and to make matters worse, the Dad's lawyer-friend who sent the box, also lost the keys that open it. This sends Jeremy and Lizzy on an adventure around New York City to find the keys that will open the mysterious box, and for Jeremy, reveal the meaning of life to him.

We decided the students would all read this same text as a part of the control for the research, knowing that choice of text is typically a part of LDGs. Audio tape recorders were placed in each group to record student conversations about the literature because the recorded conversations would capture the students' experiences in LDGs as they occurred. Again, the students wrote in their booklets. After two days, the first class section asked the teacher-researcher to read the novel to them because they had difficulty reading and did not have time to discuss the book afterwards. This occurred in the class in which half of the students (14) were identified as struggling readers. The second class section of academically gifted students preferred to read the book alone and then engage in discussion without the teacher's help with the actual reading.

At the end of the three-week study, the students answered a teacher-made post-survey (see Appendix B) with questions designed to solicit information about their reading interest, motivation to read, and their interest in literature discussion now that they had experienced LDGs. Questions such as "Literature discussion has changed how I feel about reading. (a lot, a little or not at all)" and "If I could read social studies, science or math and talk about it with my friends like in literature discussion, I would enjoy reading in those subjects more. (a lot, a little or not at all" were used to understand students' thinking about LDGs. Questions were always followed up with "Why?" to understand more about the students' thinking. Because of the nature of the research design, topics that were not relevant at the beginning became so as the study evolved. Therefore, the post-survey was not identical to the pre-survey because the explicit purpose of the research was to understand these struggling readers' experience with LDGs.

Data Analysis and Results

We collected data from three primary sources: surveys, student-made booklets, and audio-recorded conversations. Because the study focused on struggling readers, we used only the data for the 16 struggling readers, even though data was collected from all participants in the LDGs. For this analysis, we organized the data starting with the initial survey, color-coded any topic that was noted more than once in the three data sources, identified the patterns that emerged as each data source was studied, and examined them to address the research question (Hubbard & Power, 1999). Organizing data

and then coding themes allowed us to see patterns that surfaced in more than one data source, which is important for triangulation. Upon analysis, the following two themes emerged:
1. Students enjoyed reading more when they engaged in LDGs.
2. Students understood the text better through the use of LDGs when they used their prior knowledge and experiences to make connections between the story and their own lives.

We will now discuss each theme that emerged from the data analysis.

Student Enjoyment of Reading

The first identified theme was that the students enjoyed reading more when they were engaged in literature discussion. The reading interest surveys and student-created booklets provided valuable insight into the students' enjoyment of reading and best informed this part of the analysis. On the pre-survey, 12 of the 16 struggling readers reported that they neither liked to read nor enjoyed reading. They wrote statements like, "I hate reading. Reading is boring." and "My interest has gone down in middle school." Researcher observations in the classroom confirmed that during reading time, these students were often disengaged from reading, choosing to either skim the text pictures and captions or spend large amounts of time "finding" a book. Guthrie, Alao, and Rinehart (1997) confirmed, "Less motivated students avoid the effort of complex thinking. They simply read the information over and over again, if they read at all" (p. 439).

After the practice sessions in which the students were introduced to literature discussion, they were asked to respond in their booklet to the question: "Now that you know what literature discussion is and now that you have participated in a literature discussion group, how do you feel about it?" After writing their responses, the students answered an additional question: "If you could engage in literature discussion in your other classes, how would you feel about reading?" Eleven of the struggling readers wrote that literature discussion was fun and that if they could engage in the practice in other classes, reading would be much more enjoyable.

The post-survey revealed that 11 of the 16 struggling readers enjoyed reading more as a result of LDGs than at the beginning of the study. In fact, on the post-survey 13 students said they liked reading, whereas on the pre-survey 12 indicated they did *not* like reading. In a subject-by-subject response analysis from pre- to post-survey, we found that of the 16 struggling readers, 10 indicated a "high change" in reading enjoyment, while four indicated "some change" in reading enjoyment, and only one indicated "no change" in reading enjoyment. One student did not participate in the post-survey because he was absent.

It appears that literature discussion made a considerable, positive impact on these middle school struggling readers and their feelings about reading. Strommen and Mates (2004) said, "Readers learn, through social interaction with other readers, that reading is entertaining and stimulating" (p. 199). Routman (1991) has suggested that students' social relationships change when struggling readers are given the same respect as others in their group when they engage in discussion about the text, which in turn boosts their self-confidence.

Increased Comprehension

The second theme that evolved from the data analysis was that the students understood the text better during LDGs when they used their prior knowledge and experiences to make text-to-self connections and then shared those connections and understandings with the group during discussion about the reading. The surveys and the audio-recorded student conversations best informed this theme.

Peterson and Eeds (2007) called this type of reading *Intensive Reading* (p. 12), "the mindful reading that makes up a deeper kind of meaning-making" (p. 12). Keene and Zimmerman (2007) called these *schema connections* (*text-to-self*, *text-to-world*, and *text-to-text* connections) and affirmed that proficient readers use schema, or their relevant prior knowledge, to understand new information, linking

it to related information in memory in order to remember and apply the new information. They define text-to-self connections as memories and emotions from specific experiences that illuminate events, characters, and other elements of a story or text. Text-to-world connections are made when readers have specific knowledge about a topic, or general world knowledge they have gathered through other reading or life experiences. Text-to-text connections use specific knowledge about text structure, themes, content, and organization of information. The three types of schemata aid readers' understanding of new reading material (Keene & Zimmerman, 2007) as asserted by Rosenblatt's (1995) reader response theory.

The power of a more knowledgeable other in increasing comprehension. One of the students in this study is dyslexic, and, in her words, she sees "a bunch of letters on the page" when she reads. Through literature discussion, this student found a new love of reading because of the focus on meaningful talk in the teacher-researcher's classroom. In a private conversation with the exceptional children's teacher after a parent-teacher conference with the student's mother earlier in the school year, the student stated that this discussion, both classroom discussion and literature discussion, helped her understand more about reading and gaining meaning from texts. For the first time in her school career, she did not have testing accommodations (i.e. extended time, testing in a separate room, modified shorter test, etc.) on her end-of-grade reading test, yet she scored above average in reading proficiency. This confirms Vygotsky's (1978) assertion that by practicing alongside more knowledgeable others, teachers or peers, students learn more about making meaning from a text. Burns (1998) agreed that it is the "social interaction that takes place in a literature circle [that] is a key component of its success" (p. 125).

The power of conversation in increasing comprehension. Other students indicated on the pre-survey that their understanding of text was impacted by talk. Two responses were: "If we did more group work, I would enjoy reading more because sometimes I find out things from other students that I didn't know" and "It [reading] has gotten better b/c [because] when we work as a class, I can understand what I read."

By far, content area reading of nonfiction text was cited by the students as being the most difficult text to read. When asked if literature discussion could impact their enjoyment of reading in their content classes, the students responded with a resounding "Yes." The students seemed to blame the complexity of texts and unfamiliar vocabulary as their main reasons for disliking reading in middle grades compared to reading in primary grades, but agreed that when they could discuss the text and the unfamiliar words, they liked reading more and understood more about the meaning of the text. The students said that they are "confused by it [content area text]," that they "don't get it," that they "get to the point that I barely understand it," and that "some of the words are hard."

The postsurvey revealed that the students valued talk because discussion aided their understanding of reading materials. In fact, when the students were asked why they enjoyed literature discussion, many of their written responses linked to better understanding of the text. Some responses were: "'Cause I find out things I didn't know," "You

can express ideas and find out what others are thinking," and "b/c [because] it cleans my head out because if we don't do it [literature discussion] then I have a lot of stuff in my head that I don't know what it means." Even the students who said their interest in reading was the same as before learning about literature discussion indicated that they understood more and enjoyed reading better because they understood what the books were about. These young adolescents are typical of their age group because they enjoy social interaction with their peers, but discussing the books they read contributed to their understanding of what they had read and enhanced their enjoyment of the reading experience.

From audio recordings of conversations while the students were in the LDGs, we discovered that the students had meaningful engagements with each other about the novel. Earlier in the school year, the teacher-researcher had explicitly taught the students how to use reading comprehension strategies to help them understand what they read, and we were pleasantly surprised to discover that these struggling readers had internalized these strategies and used them to get meaning from the novel they read together. Specifically, the transcripts that follow show that the students used prior knowledge, or schema, and made important text-to-self and text-to-world connections in order to aid their understanding of and gain meaning from the novel.

As the students discussed what they had read in the novel, they tape-recorded their conversations. During the data analysis of this study, we listened to the tapes of the recorded conversations to learn what the students talked about and to discover how they experienced LDGs and created meaning from the text. Portions of the transcripts of the LDG conversations follow. These conversations include at least one struggling reader's responses.

In one discussion group, the students had read a chapter in the novel in which Jeremy and Lizzy experienced riding the city bus alone for the first time on one of their many quests to find the missing keys. These students used text-to-self/text-to-world connections and their own background knowledge to make meaning and understand how the tape on the wall of the bus made the bus stop for Jeremy and Lizzy. In this group, Charlie, Ashley, and Dillan are academically gifted students, but as a struggling reader, Dillan reads at an excruciatingly slow pace. An excerpt from their discussion follows.

> What was up with the tape thing on the wall 'cause like I've never heard of that before? (Charlie)
> What tape thing? (Ashley)
> Well, we live in Bellville, if you haven't noticed. <laughs> (Dillan)
> I know but, like, I've been to Baltimore before and like the big towns and all like Washington, DC, and I've rode the Metro like nine times. (Charlie)
> Yeah, maybe they only have it in New York City. (Dillan)
> What was it? Was it like…*tape*…on the wall…that you press? (Charlie)
> No, I guess…I think… (Dillan)
> Oh! No! Oh! I think I know! (Ashley)
> I think it was a bar… (Dillan)
> It was like…a strip that you press? (Charlie)
> I've seen movies before like these people…it was kind of like this yellow wire that hangs out from the ceiling, and people who stand up, like, there are these black lines that they hang on to so they don't fall down 'cause sometimes all the seats are taken up…and then when they want the bus to stop, they pull on the…it ooks like a rope, it's not really a piece of tape. (Ashley)
> Yeah, he [Jeremy] said it kinda looked like a piece of tape. (Charlie)

In this conversation, Charlie began with his question about something he did not understand in the reading—the tape on the wall of the city bus. Ashley asked for clarification of what he meant by "tape," and Dillan playfully interjected with his background knowledge about living in a rural community that has no city buses to remind the group that they would not see that where they live. Charlie continued to push for understanding of the particular bus he had read about by making the text-to-self and text-to-world connections of riding the Metro in big cities he had visited. After a slight lull in the conversation, Ashley suddenly remembered seeing movies in which people used the "tape" or

"rope" on the city bus, using her schema and text-to-world connections to create meaning for the group. The students worked together, using reading strategies to create an understanding of the text they had read. Peterson and Eeds (2007) confirmed this practice saying, "Comprehension of a text requires that the reader re-create its meaning, constructing in the light of his or her experience the author's intended meaning" (p. 12).

In another literature discussion group, Jennifer, a struggling reader, and Donnie, a student who dislikes school reading but reads a variety of texts at home, were discussing with Ray, an honors student, about characters' motives in the novel. At the beginning of the novel when the mailman delivered the box to Jeremy's house, he (the mailman) did not want to leave it since the package required a signature, and Jeremy's mom wasn't home. Later in the novel, students found out that Jeremy's quest to find the keys to the box was a "setup" by the significant adults in his life because Jeremy's dad wanted to make his thirteenth birthday memorable. In the excerpt that follows, students used information from the novel to draw a conclusion about characters' motives. By examining character motives, the reasons characters do what they do, students gained deeper meaning and understanding from the text.

> Did the mom really want Jeremy to have the box? (Jennifer)
> Yeah, they just wanted him to have it on his thirteenth birthday. (Ray)
> They're making him have a vision of his life. (Donnie)
> Yeah, but Oswald said that, um, that mail dude was following along with it because he… (Jennifer)
> So he could make sure that his mom wasn't home so Jeremy could be the one to get the box. (Ray)
> Oh, and he [the mailman] could be sneaky about him [Jeremy] trying to find out what it [the box] was. (Jennifer)

In this discussion, the students had just found out that all of the adults in Jeremy's life knew about the box and the keys. They linked this discovery back to the beginning of the novel when Jeremy first received the box from the mailman, who also knew about the box and played his part in the scheme to give Jeremy an adventure for his thirteenth birthday. At first, Jennifer questioned Jeremy's mother's motives to be sure she understood what was happening in the chapter since her schema had to readjust and adapt to new information from this chapter. Ray and Donnie helped her adapt this new schema to the new information by explaining the characters' motives to her. In readjusting her thinking, Jennifer recalled a previous chapter they had read about Mr. Oswald, another character in the book who was friends with Jeremy's dad, and attempted to conjecture and possibly dispute Donnie and Ray's assertions. However, Ray helped her realize the impact of the chapter they had read by linking it to the beginning chapter in the book. Through this thinking process and talking with the boys, Jennifer understood the mailman's motives behind giving Jeremy the box at the beginning of the story, despite needing an adult's signature for the package, thus giving her insight into the author's purpose for setting the tone of the story. It is through these thoughtful interactions surrounding text that "literature study [moves] from an individual act of creating meaning to a social act of negotiating meaning among students" (Burns, 1998, p. 126). Allington and Cunningham (2007) explained, "The goal [of conversation about text] is to share understandings and through this to gain an even better understanding of the material read" (p. 116).

Summary

This study adds to the existing research on literature discussion and the importance of collaborative talk, especially for young adolescents and those who are struggling readers. LDGs are developmentally appropriate for middle school students, as they need social interaction, peer validation, and substantive ways to build identity (AMLE, 2010; Manning & Bucher, 2012).

Data from this study provided insights into why students enjoy reading more when they engage in LDGs. The data also indicate how students' reading enjoyment and understanding of texts can be positively influenced by the practice. Additionally, the data provided an understanding of the processes

that these students used to better understand text, including text-to-self, text-to-text, and text-to-world connections and schema, or prior knowledge. When students use these and other important reading strategies to make connections between story and their own lives while engaged in literature discussion, their understanding of text deepens and grows. As a result, students, especially struggling readers, can become more motivated readers and learners who can enjoy a text, engage in literate conversation with others about what they read, and gain deeper insights into a wider variety of reading materials.

Conclusion

The findings presented here have implications for schools and for both English language arts/reading teachers and content area teachers alike. Since many of the students in this study said directly that they found literature discussion to be fun and reading more enjoyable when they engaged in LDGs, teachers could use literature discussion as a motivational tool for reading both fiction and nonfiction texts of various kinds. Any type of text is appropriate to use for LDGs as long as the text has enough complexity to generate varied thought and ideas and is of interest to the reader. LDGs might prove especially useful in middle grades since students are becoming more social and need more collaborative engagements as the Association for Middle Level Education (2010), Atwell (1998), Manning and Bucher (2012) and other researchers have suggested.

Because the students in this study cited content area nonfiction text as the most difficult to understand due to the text complexity and vocabulary, using LDGs in the content areas could have substantial positive consequences for students, particularly struggling readers. The CCSS (NGA Center, 2010) English language arts document emphasizes key shifts from previous standards. These shifts include reading complex texts containing academic language, carefully analyzing both literary and informational texts, and building knowledge through content-rich nonfiction. The skills obtained in the English language arts classroom can and should be integrated into the content areas as well. The CCSS content area standards require students to read and comprehend nonfiction text independently and proficiently. Therefore, LDGs can segue from collaborative reading and comprehension to independent reading and comprehension, providing a scaffold for all students but perhaps most importantly for struggling readers.

Additionally, LDGs could potentially increase reading engagement and enhance learning of nonfiction materials such as science and social studies magazines, world news articles, health pamphlets and brochures, and current event articles from newspapers. Since some of the struggling readers in this study said they like and understand nonfiction text, they could help others in their groups understand this type of text through collaborative engagement. In turn, their social relationships would change because these struggling readers would be seen as more knowledgeable others (Vygotsky, 1978) on topics they have explored, studied, and read as Routman (1991), Short and Pierce (1998), and Daniels (2006) have suggested.

The data presented in this study coincides with data from other studies (Allington & Cunningham, 2007), showing that students' interest in reading increases when they have choice about the topics they discuss. For teachers, this may mean giving up control in their classrooms and embracing a more open-minded view of teaching and learning, making students more responsible for their choice of texts, for their choice of discussion topics, and for their own learning. Responsibility and choice reflect the skills and knowledge students need to succeed in college, careers, and in life (NGA Center, 2010). LDGs can build a community of readers and learners as Peterson and Eeds (2007), Allington and Cunningham (2007), and Bowers-Campbell (2011) have found. Teachers can and should capitalize on the benefits that will surely come from using LDGs in the classroom. Higher interest and more engagement will directly impact the classroom environment because engaged learners are on task, which inherently decreases behavior problems. Teachers certainly should teach students how to choose good books, how to engage in meaningful talk, and how to manage their own behavior in LDGs, but teachers should also provide support while students learn to

conduct literature discussion on their own. By building a trusting and open environment, teachers can foster positive reading experiences in the classroom using literature discussion as suggested by Short and Pierce (1998) and Peterson and Eeds (2007).

Perhaps the most compelling finding of this study was that the students understood the text better during LDGs when they used their prior knowledge and experiences to make connections between the story and their own lives. As stated earlier, teachers must differentiate instruction in order to meet the individual needs of the students they teach; one way to accomplish this task is through literature discussion groups (LDGs) utilized with diverse student groups and thus providing a broader context for understanding of the text. The students said they understood more about text when they could talk about it with their teacher and with each other creating this broad context for thinking. Teachers would also find it beneficial to teach reading comprehension strategies, the thinking that facilitates the construction of text-to-self, text-to-text, and text-to-world connections, as well as help build students' schema through LDGs and other collaborative talk as suggested by Keene and Zimmerman (2007). Positive engagements with reading and literature discussion could lead to more interest in reading, increase reading comprehension, and even foster positive classroom behaviors. Further, these engagements reflect the college- and career-ready goals of the CCSS (NGA Center, 2010).

Schools and administrators can and should offer professional development opportunities for teachers to learn how to implement LDGs in their classrooms since the Speaking and Listening Strand of the Common Core State Standards explicitly addresses comprehension and collaboration through "a range of collaborative discussions" (NGA Center, 2010). Various resources are available about how to conduct literature discussion in different ways. As well, it is important to understand Vygotsky's (1978) theory of the social construction of knowledge and Rosenblatt's reader transaction theory as the driving forces behind LDGs.

This research study allowed us to explore how engaging in LDGs affected struggling middle school readers in one classroom. Two themes demonstrated positive experiences for the focus group of students:

1. Students enjoyed reading more when they engaged in LDGs.
2. Students understood the text better through LDGs when they used their prior knowledge and experiences to make connections between the story and their own lives.

The vast majority of students enjoyed the practice for various reasons, and all benefitted in some way from engaging in literature discussion during this study. This kind of positive literacy experience is not common for older struggling readers so for this reason alone teachers need to consider implementing LDGs in the classroom. In conclusion, literature discussion is a valuable classroom practice that fits with the goals of the CCSS (NGA Center, 2010). LDGs can be implemented by any teacher in any subject area or grade level and, as this study indicates, is especially beneficial for middle grades struggling readers.

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Appendix A
Reading Interest Survey One

1. I like reading if I can choose what I read. True False
2. I spend time reading outside class. True False
3. I would spend time reading my choice of books outside of class, if I could talk with my peers in class about what I have read. True False
4. I like reading materials that my teachers select for me. True False
5. I like reading the same book as my peers. True False
6. I would like reading the same book as my peers in my class, if we could talk about the book. True False
7. I have used an online wiki before. True False
8. I would like reading the same book as my peers in class, if we could use an online wiki to talk about the book. True False
9. I am sometimes overwhelmed when I read social studies, science, and some other non-fiction text. True False
10. Do the reading activities your teacher chooses for you during class affect how you feel about reading? Yes No
    How do these activities affect your feelings about reading?
11. What other things affect how you feel about reading? Please list.
12. What could happen to help you more enjoy reading?
13. What has influenced your reading pleasure up until this point in your life?
14. How has your interest or attitude toward reading changed since you first learned how to read?
15. Where do you prefer to read? (What location?)
16. How do you like to read? You may choose more than one.
    A. silently by myself
    B. with a partner
    C. in a small group
    D. in a classroom setting with the whole group
    E. when someone reads to me
    F. other, please explain
17. I like to read and then write about what I've read. True False
18. Since you've begun middle school, what, if anything, has caused you to lose interest in reading? Explain.
19. I like to read just because I enjoy reading. True False
20. Please write any other thoughts you have about your interest in reading.

Appendix B
Reading Interest Survey Two

1. I like reading. a lot a little not at all
   Why?

2. I like literature discussion. a lot a little not at all
   Why?

3. Now that I know about literature discussion, I like reading the same book as my friends.
   a lot a little not at all Why?

4. Literature discussion has changed how I feel about reading. a lot a little not at all
   Why?

5. I enjoy reading more since I learned about literature discussion. a lot a little not at all
   Why?

6. I enjoy reading less since I learned about literature discussion. a lot a little not at all
   Why?

7. I enjoy reading about the same since I learned about literature discussion. True False
   Why?

8. I enjoy literature discussion more when we can "talk" on the wiki. a lot a little not at all
   Why?

9. I like using the video camera to record our conversation during literature discussion.
   a lot a little not at all Why?

10. I like reading in social studies, science, and/or math. a lot a little not at all
    Why?

11. I am sometimes confused by what I read in social studies, science, and/or math.
    a lot a little not at all Why?

12. If I could read social studies, science, and/or math and talk about it with my friends like in literature discussion, I would enjoy reading in social studies, science, and/or math more.
    a lot a little not at all Why?