HOW LITERATURE DISCUSSION GROUPS AFFECT STRUGGLING MIDDLE SCHOOL READERS

Pamela K. Pittman

A Thesis Submitted to the
University of North Carolina Wilmington in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree of
Master of Education

Department of Elementary, Middle Level, and Literacy Education

University of North Carolina Wilmington

2011

Approved by

Advisory Committee

Rajni Shankar-Brown
Kathleen Schlichting

Barbara Honchell
Chair

Accepted by

Dean, Graduate School
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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this qualitative research study was to explore how literature discussion groups affect struggling middle school readers. In particular, the study focused on 16 middle school struggling readers in a classroom in Southeastern North Carolina. Data was gathered from student-made booklets, personal interviews, teacher observations, and student audio-recorded conversations. Findings indicate that literature discussion groups increase student enjoyment of reading, that students’ reading interest increases when they are given choice of texts and topics for discussion, and that students understand a text better during literature discussion when they use reading strategies such as text-to-self, text-to-text, and text-to-world connections along with schema, or prior knowledge, to make connections between a text and their own lives. This study is important because it gives insights into the practice of literature discussion and how it positively affects student learning and the classroom environment. Data can be used to support the implementation of literature discussion groups in middle school classrooms and especially with struggling readers.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

My thanks go to the professors in the Language and Literacy program at the University of North Carolina Wilmington whose knowledge, passion, and love for literacy, learning, and research sparked the same interest in me. I am especially grateful to Dr. Barbara Honchell for introducing me to action research as a viable option for my endless reflections and inquiries about teaching in my classroom. Thank you, Dr. Honchell, for seeing me through this project to the very end.

Special thanks go to my Thesis Committee for their invaluable counsel and guidance on this research project – to Dr. Kathleen Schlichting for helping me choose those “just right” words and for being a stickler for details, to Dr. Rajni Shankar-Brown for making the process enjoyable even during the difficult times, and to Dr. Barbara Honchell for patiently and faithfully guiding me to those discoveries that must happen in research.

My research would not have been possible without the participation and input of the middle school students, colleagues, and administration at my school. I would especially like to thank my students for their enthusiasm and hard work involved in this project.

A special thanks goes to Joshua Hunter for his passionate enthusiasm for teaching, which has inspired me, and for his valuable input in this project, which helped me continue on when I was discouraged.

Thanks to my parents, family, and friends for their support, love, and understanding throughout these past months of writing, writing, and more writing. I could not have done it without them.
DEDICATION

First, I would like to dedicate this Master’s Thesis to Betty Watson, an exceptional teacher who made a phenomenal impact on me in elementary school. I learned everything I needed for school in her fourth, fifth, and sixth grade classes.

I would also like to dedicate this first professional work to Dr. Kathleen Schlichting who encouraged me to pursue a doctorate. That dream will be realized this fall as I begin a Ph. D. program in Curriculum and Instruction at North Carolina State University. Her loving dedication to family, school, and community and her incessant hard work inspire me to be a better person and a better professional.

To Carolyn Pope: You would be so proud! I wish you could be here to see the progress I’ve made. I love and miss you more than I ever knew was possible.

To Melba Harrell: Thank you for telling me to go for it all those years ago. I’ve never regretted any decision I’ve made to pursue higher education.

And to Linda Rief: Thank you for showing me how to engage my students in real learning, for real purposes, and with real reading experiences. And thank you for supporting me when I was a new teacher.

Finally, I would like to dedicate this work to Mom; Dad; my stepmom, Dianne; my wonderful sister, Alicia; my amazing nephew, Marco; and my “Gramma” Birte. I love all of you more than you can imagine!
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Chapter 1: Introduction

Background

Because National and State standards for proficient reading are changing (Allington, 2001; Common Core State Standards, 2010), alongside our student population, teachers need to consider how to adapt their teaching practices to help diverse learners become proficient in the types of reading behaviors that the information age demands, such as gathering information from various sources and, analyzing, evaluating, summarizing, and synthesizing that information. Teachers need to be equipped to differentiate instruction in order to meet the individual needs of all students. One way to differentiate instruction for all learners is through collaborative talk, or literature discussion groups, because this provides a learning environment that capitalizes on the differences in students rather than requiring all learners to think alike. In the words of Richard Allington (2001), “schools must work for all children” (p. 7) and though the American education system has been successful in the past at teaching students basic literacy skills, the information age has demanded higher order skills of all students, from searching and sorting through information to analyzing and synthesizing information, and summarizing and evaluating information (Allington, 2001; Keene & Zimmerman, 2006) and then creatively using this information to solve challenging new problems presented by our changing world.

Add to these challenges the federal No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act of 2001 – a glaring reality in my school since it hasn’t met federal standards for student learning progress in five years. NCLB demands that every teacher be highly qualified to teach his or her content area, certainly an important consideration, and that schools and local education agencies be accountable for student learning according to standardized testing guidelines. Accountability is a
serious consideration. These are not bad standards at all until the focus of the school becomes
standardized testing outcomes rather than individual learners and their needs.

Finally, consider the diversity of students in every classroom, not just racial and ethnic
diversity, but other languages, various learning styles, and the wide range of learning abilities.
When considering my own classroom experiences, I have taught students who come from a
variety of situations:

- Students from low socio-economic homes
- Students with various disabilities
- Students who are gifted ball players but who can’t read on grade level, and
- Students who for various reasons have fallen behind their peers but are in classrooms
  with academically gifted students.

Such student diversity is a compelling reason to implement innovative, collaborative practices
such as literature discussion groups, which capitalize on student diversity to encourage thinking
in varied ways to extend understanding of reading material.

Statement of the Problem

Visit any public school classroom today and you will likely see teachers teaching and
children “learning” from state and locally adopted textbooks used only in the prescribed ways.
This seems especially true in the school where I teach because many of the teachers are tenured
veterans in the field of education who seem comfortable with their four-year degree and previous
years’ lesson plans. Their years of teaching experience did not include teaching students who are
more different than alike. Many have their Master’s degree, but got it ten or more years ago and
have not kept up with recent trends and research in education in part due to the rural nature of the
community. In my Master’s study in language and literacy over the past four years, I’ve realized
the need to sharpen my skills as a teacher and to stay abreast of current research to provide my students with the best learning engagements I possibly can.

I am a middle school educator, and this year I had an unusually large population, half of one of my classes, of struggling readers who cannot read on grade level nor are proficient readers by federal and state standards. Another issue of particular importance for me to consider is the very nature of the middle school learners whom I teach. By the time students reach the middle grades, they are becoming more social individuals (Atwell, 1998; Manning & Bucher, 2005) and need more collaborative learning engagements (NMSA, 2003) to build proficient reading skills. Through my Masters’ level study, I learned that literature discussion groups are one way to teach these skills. Not only does literature discussion build a sense of community in a classroom (Peterson & Eeds, 2007), but it also benefits diverse learners, especially struggling readers, by engaging them in collaborative learning opportunities, by helping them cooperatively create meaning from texts, by increasing their interest in and enjoyment of reading, and by assisting them in negotiating different viewpoints and thoughts on text (Allington, 2001; Allington & Cunningham, 2007; Clay, 1991; Routman, 1991).

**Research Questions**

The purpose of this study was to explore how literature discussion groups affect struggling middle school readers. The study was guided by the following key question: *How does engaging in literature discussion affect struggling middle school readers?* Guiding sub-questions related to implementation were:

1) How will I introduce literature discussion to my seventh grade students?

2) Will I allow student choice of reading material?

Guiding sub-questions related to a particular student group were:
1) What behaviors do I observe within LDGs, especially in struggling readers?

2) Do struggling readers enjoy literature discussion, or are they apprehensive about participating?

The data collected to answer my key question may well prove valuable to schools and teachers who are seeking to differentiate instruction in order to meet the unique learning needs of individual learners in the classroom. Teachers will find that the data supports literature discussion as a viable practice that accommodates a wide range of learning abilities from academically gifted to struggling readers, while at the same time engaging all learners in a classroom.

Definition of Terms

For the purpose of this study, I applied the following terms and definitions:

Young Adolescents and Middle School Students – Children between the ages of 10-15 years old who are in grades 6-8 (Atwell, 1991; Manning & Bucher, 2005).

Struggling Readers – Those children who have difficulty in their daily reading, process text much more slowly than average, exhibit predictable behaviors (i.e. finger reading, rereading, reading each word rather than in chunks) that signal reading difficulty, and have slipped behind their peers in learning how to read (Allington, 2001; Clay, 1991).

Literature Discussion Groups – Groups of students who meet together to discuss a piece of literature or other text which they have read (Schlick Noe, 2004). Henceforth, literature discussion groups will be referred to as LDGs.

Qualitative Research or Action Research - Teacher research (Hubbard & Power, 1999) that accommodates the natural unfolding of events in a study, (Gerdes & Conn, 2001) based mainly on observing students at work in the classroom (Hubbard & Power, 1999). Qualitative
research allows the participants to direct the events and allows the researcher to be immersed in
the research setting to make necessary, viable observations (Gerdes & Conn, 2001).

This chapter laid the groundwork for the research study. The following chapter discusses
research that is relevant to this study.
Chapter 2: Literature Review

This study closely and critically examines how literature discussion groups affect struggling middle school readers. Struggling readers are those children who have difficulty in their daily reading, process text much more slowly than average, exhibit predictable behaviors (i.e. finger reading, rereading, reading each word rather than in chunks) that signal reading difficulty, and have slipped behind their peers in learning how to read (Allington, 2001; Clay, 1991). Discussion of young adolescent characteristics follows to familiarize the reader with the type of students involved in this study. A description of middle school is presented to enhance the reader’s understanding of the middle school student’s everyday learning environment. The concept of literature discussion, the benefits and supportive research, is explored in this section, as is the issue of middle school students’ declining interest in reading. Research on reading comprehension is also intertwined in the section about literature discussion to inform the reader about how LDGs can aid student understanding of texts.

Young Adolescents’ Characteristics

Young adolescents are by definition hard-wired for extremes – extremes in attitude, behavior, physical attributes, mood, thoughts, feelings, maturity level, you name it. Their characteristics include but are not limited to a changing allegiance from parents/adults toward peers, the need for independence and freedom to make their own choices, and increased social activity. In her own middle grades classroom, teacher and researcher Nancy Atwell (1998) observes that while one group of young adolescent boys may be playing tag on the playground, another group is growing moustaches. In my own classroom I’ve noticed that some middle school-aged girls wear adult clothes and shoes while others cuddle stuffed animals and haven’t grown out of the girls’ department of JCPenney. They hate each other one minute, and the next
minute, they’re planning sleepovers and movie nights as best friends. Such extremes aren’t unusual, they’re normal, and the one constant of this age group is change (Atwell, 1998; Manning and Bucher, 2005; Steinberg, 2011).

Young adolescents are changing every day, and one key to working with these 10-15 year olds is recognizing and accepting those changes (Manning & Bucher, 2005; NMSA, 2003; Wormelli, 2011). Middle school students, those in grades 6 – 8, are changing physically, socially, emotionally, and psychologically (Steinberg, 2011; Wormelli, 2011), and their development is being influenced by their families, neighborhoods, ethnic/racial/religious communities, and peers (Manning & Bucher, 2005; NMSA, 2003). Because these communities’ beliefs and expectations are sometimes conflicting, young adolescents experience formidable pressure that is often unique to this age group (Manning & Bucher, 2005), as they swing “back and forth between naïveté and world-weariness” (Atwell, 1998, p. 56).

Physically, young adolescents experience a tremendous growth spurt and undergo the physiological changes of puberty and gender-specific physical developments (Manning & Bucher, 2005; NMSA, 2003). Their social behaviors are changing, too, and middle schoolers become more dependent on friends and less dependent on family, especially adults, as they desire more freedom and independence (NMSA, 2003). These peer relationships and friendships build self-esteem, establish self-identity, and help young adolescents understand the changes taking place in their minds, emotions, and bodies (Atwell, 1998; Manning & Bucher, 2005; Wormelli, 2011). As a direct result of the numerous changes, young adolescents experience extreme and deep mood swings (NMSA, 2003). “When they like something they love it; when they dislike something they hate it” (Atwell, p. 58). Cognitively, some young adolescents can think abstractly, but others still think concretely. Additionally, they can think inductively,
analyze and synthesize information and data, use various learning strategies and find solutions for problems, and develop higher order thinking skills (Chall, 1983; Ivey & Broaddus, 2001; Manning & Bucher, 2005; Wormelli, 2011). Young adolescents also begin to develop their own ethical reasoning (NMSA, 2003), personal attitudes, and perspectives toward the ideas of social justice and equality (Atwell, 1998; Chall, 1983; Manning & Bucher, 2005; Wormelli, 2011). Atwell (1998) believes that adolescents begin to go deeper into political, moral, and artistic ideas and develop their own humor (NMSA, 2003), in which they can understand double-meanings and metaphorical language. With the broad array of changes occurring in young adolescents, middle school students need a learning environment that is responsive to their unique developmental needs (NMSA, 2003). That place would be the middle school.

**The Middle School Environment**

Middle schools were introduced in the mid-1960’s and grew rapidly through the 1980’s with an emphasis on learner-centered environments which would meet the developmental needs of young adolescents, those students in grades 6 - 8 (Manning & Bucher, 2005; NMSA, 2003). Wormelli (2011) asserts that middle schools should be designed with middle school students’ interests in mind and promote a sense of belonging since acceptance is a foremost priority among this age group. Historically middle school educators have not recognized the developmental characteristics and needs of these students because there was “no single comprehensive statement” (NMSA, 2003, p. ix) that addressed “the educational beliefs inherent in this emerging educational reform effort” (NMSA, 2003, p. ix). Because young adolescents’ needs are not recognized and met in many middle schools, Atwell (1998) is concerned that the middle school status quo causes schools to function as “holding tanks” (p. 66), places where students spend their days reviewing old skills while passively waiting for high school. She argues that rather
than challenging young adolescents to be involved and excited about school and learning, the status quo “presents a bleak picture, revealing little evidence of the collaboration, involvement, and excitement in acquiring knowledge that our students crave – that all humans crave” (p. 66). Atwell (1998) is adamant that middle schools should harness the social and cognitive capacity of young adolescents and channel those energies into meaningful learning engagements rather than try to stifle them. Manning and Bucher (2005), the National Middle School Association (2003), Wormelli (2011), Ivey and Broaddus, (2001) and other researchers agree. Referring to John Goodlad’s (1984) study in his book *A Place Called School*, Atwell (1998) states, “Students choose as favorites the classes in which they routinely collaborate with other students and the teacher, have some say about the product, and take an active stance, classes in which whole-group listening and busywork are minor components” (p. 69). Ivey and Broaddus (2001) contend that many middle schools promote a disinterest in reading amongst young adolescents, especially struggling readers, by ignoring their developmental needs of independence, collaboration, and socialization.

**Literature Discussion Groups**

Because young adolescents’ cognitive development is directly impacted by socialization, and because they naturally are changing their allegiance from parents and other adults toward peers, Manning and Bucher (2005) suggest that middle level educators involve these students in cooperative learning experiences, allowing students to work with friends so that “one learner can help another or one’s strength can complement another’s weakness” (p. 57). The National Middle School Association (NMSA) (2003) also asserts that teachers should emphasize collaboration and cooperation in varying forms of group work. One ideal cooperative learning engagement for young adolescents would be LDGs.
LDGs go by many names – literature circles, book clubs, conversations surrounding text – but all involve the reading of text, discussing that text with others who are reading it, and exploring their ideas in small groups (Bowers-Campbell, 2011; Daniels, 2006). Katherine Schlick Noe (2004), Professor of Education and Director of Literacy in the College of Education at Seattle University, defines LDGs as “small groups of students [which] gather together to discuss a piece of literature in depth” (What Are Literature Circles, para. 1), while Allington (2001) calls this literate conversation thoughtful literacy. Schlick Noe (2004) explains that students guide the discussion in response to what they have read, and that they may talk about the plot and characters in a piece of literature, the author's craft, or make personal connections to the literature. Literature discussion affords students an opportunity to think critically about text and to reflect as they read, discuss, and respond to books and other reading materials (Keene & Zimmerman, 2007). Schlick Noe (2004) points out that students construct meaning, deepen their comprehension, and even restructure their understanding through literature discussion and maintains that “collaboration is at the heart of this approach” (What Are Literature Circles, para. 1). Therefore, LDGs align with the NMSA’s (2003) emphasis on young adolescents’ needs for collaboration.

Researchers Ellin Oliver Keene and Susan Zimmerman (2007) agree with Schlick Noe (2004) stating that when students have bountiful opportunities for discussion, comprehension improves. They also contend that “instruction that actively engages students in asking questions, summarizing and synthesizing text, and identifying important ideas improves [reading] comprehension” (p. 27). Keene and Zimmerman (2007), Allington (2001), Gilles (1990), and Daniels (2006) acknowledge that literature discussion conversations can be about book content,
My interest in LDG’s, and my desire to implement them in my classroom, began while reading *Grand Conversations: Literature Groups in Action* (2007) by Ralph Peterson and Maryann Eeds. Their note in the foreword of their book instantly engaged me because they truly believe that “dialogue is the best method for teaching and learning about literature” (p. xi). Because Peterson and Eeds (2007) also believe that children are “born makers of meaning” (p. 4) and that “adults, teenagers, and children use the elements of literature naturally” (p. 5) when they tell stories, it stands to reason that young adolescents will talk about those elements when engaging in literature discussion about shared readings (Gilles, 1990). Bowers-Campbell (2011) found that students readily discussed the elements of fiction when participating in LDGs. I saw LDGs as a way to enhance my pedagogy and truly meet the literacy and developmental needs of my middle school students.

As part of literature discussion, Peterson and Eeds (2007) suggest reading aloud in the classroom to “promote pleasure and enjoyment” (p. 8) because enjoying a well-read story is universal. Galda and Cullinan (2006) agree that when children are read to, they understand that “books carry meaning and provide fun” (p. 321), and Allington (2007) affirms that “reading aloud matters to motivation” (p. 14). Clay (1991) says that the love of books is a precursor to learning to read. As well, Rief (1992) suggests that reading aloud in the classroom promotes enjoyment among students. Peterson and Eeds (2007) reiterate that children will assume what their parents and other significant adults in their lives find enjoyable, and for struggling readers, what could promote enjoyment more than an imaginary world, an adventure, exploring life, and feeling connected through shared story?
Literature creates community in a classroom setting by building trust, an important factor in the sharing of thoughts, ideas, and feelings during literature discussion (Bowers-Campbell, 2011; Cunningham & Allington, 2007; Peterson & Eeds, 2005; Short, 1990). Young adolescents are learning to build new social relationships with peers, so the sense of community and trust are important to them in the classroom setting. Because readers bring their own background, experiences, culture, and knowledge to a reading (Clay, 1991), the text creates more meaning in literature discussion because it is shared through many lenses, unlike individual reading which is interpreted through a single lens, and the shared knowledge and shared experiences of the group contribute even further to the literate community. Peterson and Eeds (2007) credit this “meaning making” to the transactional process described by theorist Louise Rosenblatt, who believed “that reading is a transaction, a bringing meaning to and taking meaning from the written text” (p. 12). The idea that LDGs complement Rosenblatt’s theory (Rosenblatt, 1995) is affirmed by Bowers-Campbell (2011). In fact, Peterson and Eeds (2007) use the term Intensive Reading (p. 12) to describe “the mindful reading that makes up a deeper kind of meaning-making” (p. 12) in literature discussion while Allington (2001) labels it thoughtful literacy. Insisting that “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), as affirmed by Schlick Noe (2004), Peterson and Eeds (2007) further note that it is through this critical interpretation of text, the comprehension or understanding of the text, that students and teachers alike broaden the potential for creating meaning by sharing their insights and connections. They recognize that some students and adults are more proficient at interpreting the meaning of a text, and say that by practicing alongside more experienced others, such as teachers or peers, collaborating with them, asking questions, and sharing interpretations, students learn more about making meaning from
text, an idea endorsed by Bowers-Campbell (2011) and Vygotsky (1978). In addition, dialogue is the best way to share meaning because it is the natural way that people learn (Allington & Cunningham, 2007) and construct meaning in their daily lives and because dialogue “requires initiative, inquiry, and critical thinking” (p. 28) from everyone involved (Peterson & Eeds, 2007).

Teacher and researcher Regie Routman (1991) believes that “a literature discussion group gives every student the opportunity to speak and be heard” (p. 123), an idea affirmed by Short (1990) and Daniels (2006), and I believe that since young adolescents are establishing self-identity (Atwell, 1998; Manning & Bucher, 2005), literature discussion strategically impacts this part of their development because of these opportunities to share their thoughts, ideas, and connections. Routman (1991) suggests that some of the benefits of literature discussion include: improved listening skills, improved reading comprehension, at-risk and low-ability students’ success, and students taking ownership of their learning. Cunningham and Allington (2007) echo these benefits, adding that improved comprehension occurs in readers because there are more opportunities for children to talk. They advocate discussion groups as a more natural context for conversation than the closed-ended, scripted questioning so familiar in the basal texts that many teachers are comfortable using. They also assert that there is a greater likelihood that groups can find texts that they want to read and can enjoy together and that LDGs afford greater book choice for students.

Routman (1991) suggests that one of the greatest benefits of literature discussion is that struggling readers enjoy the opportunity to share their thoughts and opinions on a text and have them acknowledged. This affirms Cunningham and Allington’s (2007) assertion that LDGs
establish a culture of cooperation and collaboration, which the NMSA (2003) establishes as very important for young adolescent development as discussed previously.

Of her own classroom Routman (1991) admits that it is interesting to see students come to the discussion without a clear understanding of what they have read, but as they engage in discussion, those students begin to make connections. Then what was not understood becomes clear to them. Bowers-Campbell (2011) also found that students in LDGs worked together to create collective meaning and increase their understanding of text. In addition, Routman (1991) says that social relationships change and struggling readers are afforded the same respect for their ideas and opinions as others in the group, an idea also affirmed by Short (1990), not to mention that students discover that others may have differing opinions from their own, and they learn to accept those viewpoints as just that – different. I have observed that perhaps this sharing of one’s thoughts and being accepted in a discussion group leads to increased self-confidence, which in turn produces a feeling of enjoyment that can make reading a fun activity for struggling readers.

**Engaging Middle School Struggling Readers**

Various research studies support the idea that young adolescents have lost interest in reading by the time they reach middle school age. Ivey and Broaddus (2001) found that middle school students’ disinterest in reading stems from the inconsistency of middle school classroom instruction. They explain that in middle school, teachers recognize the individuality of students, yet rarely differentiate instruction to meet individual needs; that students are assigned increasingly complex materials, yet are given no strategic skills for that reading; that students are expected to read a wide variety of texts, yet are given a very narrow selection of texts from which to read – usually famous fiction novels or non-fiction content area texts (Common Core
Standards, 2010); that teachers want students to be critical thinkers, yet never allow students to initiate conversations around text. Perhaps worst of all, teachers want students to become independent readers, yet never allow them voice, choice, or time to read independently (Allington, 2001; Atwell, 1998; Rief, 1992; Worthy, 1998). Ivey and Broaddus (2001) assert that middle schools are missing the mark when it comes to strategically teaching adolescents to read, in turn, stifling their motivation to read. Keene and Zimmerman (2007) concur, reiterating that teaching students the reading comprehension strategies of “using background knowledge, inferring, creating mental images, and monitoring comprehension [also] contribute to active and engaged reading” (p. 28). What Ivey and Broaddus (2001) found in their study were adolescents who were eager to engage in literate activities, such as book clubs and literature discussion, but who were not supported or motivated by traditional school frameworks and curricula (Atwell, 1998). About book discussion groups, they found that students enjoyed after-school book clubs more than classroom discussions of books because the after-school book clubs focused on personal rather than academic purposes for reading. In other words, students had choice of reading materials and topics of discussion in the after-school book clubs, both highly valued commodities among young adolescents (Worthy, 1998).

Teacher educator, reading specialist, and former elementary and middle school teacher, Jo Worthy’s (1998) study of disinterested, struggling readers began one summer evening when she overheard her son and a friend discussing books they were reading. Both sixth-grade boys had been labeled by their language arts teachers as reluctant readers, yet Worthy was witnessing their spontaneous, self-directed discussion, which she labeled “renegade book discussion” (p. 509) because it was student-initiated rather than teacher-initiated. Worthy (1998) was quite surprised at the discrepancy between the boys’ in-school reading experiences and their outside-
school reading experiences because, even though neither enjoyed in-school reading, both were avid readers and enthusiastic talkers outside school. The difference? Choice, good books, and talk. Her study showed that even two years after the initial conversation, both boys were still disinterested in reading in school but read many texts they personally chose outside of school and discussed them regularly during lunch and free time at school. Worthy (1998) supports teacher-selected materials and teacher-led discussion in the classroom, but argues that many times, student choices of reading material are much more complex than teacher selected materials. She suggests that educators give students personal choice of reading materials during free time to motivate them to read in school, an act that is advocated by Atwell (1998), Rief (1992), and Short (1990). Worthy (1998) further recommends allowing students to engage in renegade book discussions in the classroom, and using student personal choices as a bridge to teacher-selected, academically accepted texts for direct instruction.

Ann Powell-Brown (2006) affirms the phenomena that I have witnessed countless times – that nearly every student loves story, that sometimes teachers wonder how students can avoid reading altogether when they are so involved in the discussion about the story, and that students are all too delighted when someone else reads to them instead of them having to read for themselves. She goes on to say that because of reading difficulties of all sorts, children develop ways “around” reading – avoiding reading directly and preferring ways that help “hide” their insufficiencies because “for them, reading is like trying to hike through quicksand” (p. 85). Building on Vygotsky’s (1962) social theory of learning and his research on children’s motivation to learn language as being a social activity, Powell-Brown (2006) describes literature circles as a way that teachers can engage children as readers and motivate them to read, an idea also affirmed by Bowers-Campbell (2011). Powell-Brown (2006) explains that literature circles
easily lend themselves to children interacting with each other and with text, thus building interest in reading.

Allington (2001) asserts that struggling readers need a wide variety of texts and large blocks of uninterrupted time to read in order to become proficient readers. He also states that they need books that they can read “accurately and fluently” (p. 110) and that are interesting to them. Finally, he says that educators need to help struggling readers “become more thoughtfully literate” (p. 110), or give them opportunities to engage collaboratively in literate talk that promotes reflection and creative meaning-making using reading strategies supported by Keene and Zimmerman (2007).

Because I have taught middle school language arts for ten years and recognize through my teaching experience the remarkable decline in reading interest in this age group, I wanted to explore literature discussion as a way to pique my students’ interest, particularly my struggling readers, and to help them view reading as a pleasurable and enjoyable activity. As a direct result of my graduate school studies in language and literacy, and my extensive study of effective literacy strategies to meet the unique needs of young adolescents, I wanted to further explore how literature discussion could affect struggling middle school readers in the two seventh grade classes that I taught. This school year, I identified approximately half of the students in one of my classes as struggling readers. This realization inspired me to intently research how literature discussion could be used to help motivate them to read, and enhance their reading comprehension skills, while building their self-esteem, increasing their independence, and channeling their social energy into a meaningful literate activity.
This section included research that supports LDGs and their benefits in the middle school classroom. The next chapter will discuss the process I used to implement them in my classroom for this study.
Chapter 3: Methodology

Introduction

This research study sought to explore how literature discussion affects struggling middle school readers. This chapter describes the research methodology and design, setting, and participants. This section also addresses the guiding research questions and describes the data collection instruments and procedures used to ensure validity and reliability.

Ethical Considerations

I followed the Institutional Review Board’s (IRB) protocols for research by securing written consent from the school’s principal and parents, and verbal assent of the students in the two classes involved in this study. All objectives of the study were clearly stated, and participants, their parents, and the school’s administration were assured of complete confidentiality of individual student and school identities.

Research Method and Design

A qualitative research method best suited the purpose of this study because I am a teacher and conducted this study in my classroom. Hubbard and Power (1999) define qualitative research as “teacher research” (p. 198) with the purpose of understanding that students improve a teacher’s practice “in specific, concrete ways” (p. 3) and that “there is no real boundary between teaching and research within the real world of classrooms” (p. 3).

Hubbard and Power (1999) assert that teacher research is based mainly on observing students at work in the classroom. Because a specific design of qualitative research emerges from the data that is collected (Gerdes & Conn, 2001), I chose this method so that I would be empowered to observe my students at work, document observations, write field notes, and interview students.
The qualitative approach allowed the participants to direct the research and allowed me to be immersed in the research setting to make necessary, viable observations (Gerdes & Conn, 2001). Qualitative research also allowed me to write detailed description so that the reader may also be immersed in the research setting and thus decide how meaningful the research was within the context of the investigation (Gerdes & Conn, 2001).

This research study involved gathering data from student pre- and post-surveys, student-made research booklets, classroom observations, audio-recorded student conversations, and student interviews. I analyzed the data in order to determine how literature discussion affected these struggling middle school readers. First, I tallied responses on the student surveys and created spreadsheets, color-coding various themes. Open-ended student responses that were written on the surveys were typed on the spreadsheet and color-coded. Then I analyzed each student-made booklet, specifically, targeted journal entries asking whether or not students like reading, whether or not they like literature discussion, and how literature discussion affects them as readers. The same color-coded themes from the surveys were coded in the booklets. Finally, I listened to student audiotape-recorded conversations and transcribed portions of them. These were analyzed to identify schema connections the students made with the text, which were evident from their discussions. Through these various research tactics, themes emerged about these middle school readers based on their opinions, responses, and participation.

Setting

The setting for this research study was a rural, K-8 school in Southeastern North Carolina. The school was chosen for this study because of access for the researcher. Particularly, the study was implemented in the two seventh grade regular education language arts classes that I taught. Approximately 930 students are served at this Title I school, of which, approximately
61% qualify for free and/or reduced lunch (NCDPI, 2009, Facts and Figures section). Student demographics are approximately 67.4% White, 12.4% Black, 19.1% Hispanic, and <1% Other (NCDPI, 2010, Grade, Race, Sex section). Similar demographics were present in the classroom where the research study took place.

The school has not met federal Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) standards in five years and, consequently, has been under state sanctions for the past three years. These sanctions have resulted in a school day extended by 30 minutes, so school begins at 7:45 instead of 8:00 and ends at 3:00 rather than 2:45 as in the past. Also, a 30-minute remediation/enrichment period called Plus has been incorporated into the schedule for the past two years.

The middle school within this K-8 school is not a true middle school as defined in the literature review; there is no teaming amongst students and teachers. Students even call their school a junior high. The “middle school” consists of approximately 315 sixth, seventh, and eighth grade students who are in classrooms on one of the four educational wings of the school. Thirteen math, language arts, social studies, science, and computer teachers teach on a block schedule that resembles a junior high schedule. Resultantly, core content classes (math and language arts) are 90 minutes long, and non-tested content (science and social studies), resource (art, music, band, and health), and physical education classes are 45-minute periods. Middle school students share a gymnasium, cafeteria, media center, computer lab, resource teachers (i.e. band, music, health, physical education, and art), and one English as a Second Language (ESL) teacher with approximately 615 K-5 students, which means the entire school schedule must accommodate all 930 students at once.

During the first semester, the seventh grade teachers decided amongst themselves to maximize instruction time rather than incorporate the separate Plus period since seventh grade
students would lose 30 minutes of classroom instructional time in their first block class each day. The first block class ended early as well because of the lunch schedule. During the second semester, administration asked seventh grade teachers to implement the Plus period. Therefore, because of Plus, my first class, rife with struggling readers, met for less than an hour compared to 90-minute blocks for the other two language arts classes that I taught – one academically gifted class and an eighth grade class.

Because the school has consistently failed to meet federal AYP standards, this year the administration’s focus shifted dramatically away from teacher autonomy toward more intense EOG test preparation and data-driven instruction. All teachers met at least once weekly in Professional Learning Communities (PLCs), implemented Common Formative Assessments (CFAs) of content taught in each class, analyzed data from the CFAs to form remediation/enrichment groups for Plus period and to reorganize within the classroom, restructured weekly remediation/enrichment groups, and began the process again.

The following three sub-groups of children consistently fall short of AYP targets at this school: Limited English Proficient (LEP), Black, and Students with Disabilities (SWD). This school has the highest enrollment in the district, and thus has the highest sub-group population with a ratio of 3:1 compared to other schools in the district, yet operates with the same number of personnel, including principal and assistant principal. Lack of personnel has long been argued by school administration as a major reason for the AYP shortfall year after year.

Participants

Participants in the study were a diverse group of 45 seventh grade students divided into two class sections. They were from various socio-economic and racial backgrounds and varying academic abilities, and they reflected the subgroups that are present in the school. Sixteen
struggling readers were the focus of this study because of the challenges they face becoming successful readers. I was particularly interested to discover how these students would be impacted by literature discussion. I have described both the two classes in which the study is embedded as well as the target group for the study in order to clearly present the context in which the LDGs occurred.

Table 1.1 (below) describes these sixteen students:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Class</th>
<th>Race/Gender</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ayesha</td>
<td>C1</td>
<td>Black Female</td>
<td>Ayesha has severe focusing issues, has difficulty comprehending text, and is extremely vocal. She enjoys reading but chooses picture books as her primary reading material. She takes medication for attention deficit disorder (ADHD) and is highly confrontational. She is pulled out of class by the Exceptional Children's teacher for reading intervention for 30 minutes each school day. She consistently scores well below average on the end-of-grade reading test.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brayden</td>
<td>C1</td>
<td>White Male</td>
<td>Brayden is an extremely shy student who has significant difficulty with reading comprehension. He does not like to read because he processes text so slowly, and he consistently scores well below average on the end-of-grade reading test.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Carlos</td>
<td>C1</td>
<td>Hispanic Male</td>
<td>Carlos is an English language learner whose primary language is Spanish. He has difficulty with reading comprehension because of the language barrier but has excellent listening comprehension skills. He consistently scores well below average on the end-of-grade reading test but has made significant gains (growth) in reading.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Carol Ann</td>
<td>C1</td>
<td>White Female</td>
<td>Carol Ann has severe reading comprehension difficulties and is pulled out of the regular classroom setting for intensive reading intervention by the Exceptional Children's teacher for a half-hour each school day. She consistently scores well below the proficient level on the end-of-grade reading test.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Colt</td>
<td>C2</td>
<td>White Male</td>
<td>Colt is an academically gifted math student who has difficulty with reading comprehension. He reads at a moderately slow pace and has difficulty understanding new vocabulary words in context. He consistently scores well above average on the reading end-of-grade test.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dameon</td>
<td>C1</td>
<td>Black Male</td>
<td>Dameon is a highly disinterested student who dozes in class most of the time. He has difficulty processing text and has moderate reading comprehension issues. He consistently scores well below average on the end-of-grade reading test.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Name</td>
<td>Grade</td>
<td>Race</td>
<td>Gender</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-----------</td>
<td>-------</td>
<td>---------</td>
<td>----------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dillan</td>
<td>C2</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Male</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DJ</td>
<td>C1</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Male</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Donnie</td>
<td>C1</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Male</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dusty</td>
<td>C1</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Male</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jania</td>
<td>C1</td>
<td>Hispanic</td>
<td>Female</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jennifer</td>
<td>C1</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Female</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kanesha</td>
<td>C1</td>
<td>Black</td>
<td>Female</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kristi</td>
<td>C1</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Female</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 1.1 cont.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Tammy</th>
<th>C1</th>
<th>White Female</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Tammy is a struggling reader who has Dyslexia. She is pulled from classes for intensive reading intervention with the Exceptional Children's teacher for 30 minutes each school day. In previous years, she has not passed the end-of-grade reading test, but this school year, she made significant gains and passed with average reading proficiency.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The first class, labeled C1 for this study, was a heterogeneous, ethnically diverse class with 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. The students in C1 were also academically diverse with six students on Individual Education Plans (IEPs) with various modifications for reading disabilities, nine students in the National Junior Beta Club because they had high academic standing although they were not academically gifted, and thirteen regular education students. From my observations as teacher, fourteen students in this class were struggling readers and were part of the target group for the study (Table 1.1). Six of them were identified with various reading disabilities. 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, labeled C2 for this study, was not as diverse as C1, when using traditional labels used by the state for AYP purposes. Originally, they were specifically grouped by the principal so that they could enroll in the school’s Algebra I class based on previous EOG math scores and results from the Orleans-Hannah Algebra Prognosis Test. They were six Caucasian males and ten Caucasian females all of whom were academically gifted, and one African-American female who was not academically gifted but who came to this class from another middle grade language arts class in this school two weeks into the study. From my
viewpoint as teacher, two of the male students in this class were struggling readers, though not identified with any reading disability, and were included in the target group for the study (Table 1.1). Overall, this was an academically high-achieving group with 100% of them passing the 2009-2010 EOG test in reading according to school EOG data. Even within the context of this homogeneously grouped class, variations in areas of strength still existed.

**Research Questions**

The key guiding question for this study was: *How does engaging in literature discussion affect struggling middle school readers?* Guiding sub-questions related to implementation were:

How will I introduce literature discussion to these seventh grade students? Will I allow student choice of reading material? Guiding sub-questions related to a particular student group were:

What behaviors do I observe within literature discussion groups, especially in struggling readers? Do struggling readers seem to enjoy the literature discussion, or are they apprehensive about participating?

**Data Collection Instruments and Procedures**

In order to answer the primary question of how literature discussion affects struggling middle school readers, I chose to administer a survey (Appendix A) before beginning the study. The survey included questions about student interest in reading, student interest in using technology while reading, and student interest in discussing with peers what has been read. Based on answers to the questions on the survey, I conducted individual interviews to clarify some student responses on the survey.

I explained the concept of literature discussion to both seventh grade classes, telling them that literature discussion groups are like book clubs in that students would read a book together and then meet in groups to discuss what they had read. Students seemed open and interested in
the idea, so Class C1 was heterogeneously divided into groups of four according to end-of-grade test data and learning abilities. This ensured an even balance of racial and ability levels in each group throughout the study in their class. Students in Class C2 were not allowed to be in a group with close friends to minimize distractions within groups since it was a gregarious class. Students were asked to decide what they should talk about when conducting literature discussion and what protocols they thought they should follow in their groups to manage behavior and discussion. Both classes had similar lists (Appendix B). My intent was to encourage students to feel that they had ownership in their group and choice of what to discuss. Students created research booklets in which to write thoughts, ideas, unknown vocabulary words, questions, and anything they wanted to talk about in the groups. Then they personalized and decorated their booklets.

**The practice sessions.**

With protocols (Appendix B) in place for behavior and for discussion, the two classes explored, practiced, and modeled literature discussion using two teacher-selected short stories from the basal reader: “Rikki-tikki-tavi” by Rudyard Kipling (2006) and “Aunty Misery” by Judith Ortiz Cofer (2006). In this way, students had more than one reading experience using literature discussion to strengthen their familiarity with the procedure. The practice sessions lasted three days, and students in both classes learned rather quickly how to conduct literature discussion. After practicing, they felt confident that they were ready to try LDGs while reading a novel.

To begin the practice sessions, I explained to the students that LDGs are much like book clubs in that they would read a book and then meet together to discuss what they had read. We talked whole-group about their protocols for discussion (Appendix B), and I asked them what
they thought they should talk about in their individual groups if this was to be literature discussion. They responded with topics such as literary elements like plot, character, and setting; their thoughts about what they had read; unknown vocabulary words; and any parts of the text that they didn’t understand. In addition, we discussed the fact that there was always the opportunity to talk about anything that anyone wanted to discuss that pertained to the reading.

Then we began reading “Rikki-tikki-tavi” (Kipling, 2006) by listening to the story on CD. I chose to have students listen to the story on CD so that they would be free to focus on what they wanted to discuss rather than struggling through the text with different readers on different levels.

I had divided the story into six scenes prior to beginning the practice sessions to make it easier for the students to stop at strategic places to discuss the text. After each scene, I stopped the CD to give students the opportunity to write in their booklets what they wanted to discuss in their groups. They were welcome to write in their booklets as they listened to the story as well. When all had finished writing what they wanted to talk about, I reiterated that each person in the group must have a turn contributing meaningfully to the discussion, that everyone in the group must listen when someone else was sharing in the group, that it was okay to disagree but they must respect others’ opinions, and that they should talk until they felt they were finished. This had been decided previously when students created their protocols (Appendix B) for discussion groups. Then groups began their discussions.

On average, discussion sessions lasted approximately ten minutes after each scene, and I visited each group to make sure they understood how to conduct the literature discussion, to answer any questions they had about implementation, to nudge their thinking when they were stuck, and to help if I was needed. I observed student interactions, facial expressions and body
language, and listened to discussions while taking notes on what I was seeing and hearing. If there was an issue that each group had in common, I called the class to order and we discussed it whole-group. We also reviewed whole-group the kinds of responses that students were writing in their booklets so that everyone would have an idea of what to discuss. The practice session with “Rikki-tikki-tavi” (Kipling, 2006) took two days because it is a long story, but students quickly learned how to conduct literature discussion together. By the end of the story, students needed less of my direct support and were able to conduct their discussion groups independently.

On the third day of practice, students read “Aunty Misery” (Cofer, 2006), a very short folk tale, and were confident about how to discuss the story in their groups. Again, I visited each group taking notes and interacting with them, so that by the end of this session, they were able to conduct their discussions independently and were ready to begin the actual LDGs.

**The actual LDGs.**

For expediency, the researcher chose the novel *Jeremy Fink and the Meaning of Life* by Wendy Mass (2006) for the classes to read. Knowing the students so well, I chose this novel because I felt both classes would enjoy it and make connections with the characters and plot. The plan was to read one chapter per day until the novel was finished (20 chapters in 20 days). A 90-minute class period would more than accommodate the reading time and discussion time for Class C2, but I felt that the first block class of 60 minutes for Class C1 might not accommodate the struggling readers. Since I knew that many of them were extremely slow readers, I felt that they might not have enough time to read, meet in groups, and discuss the reading. After two days, Class C1 asked me to read the chapters to them and let them discuss afterwards, reasoning that they were slow readers and were hindered by their time restraint. Through democratic vote, this procedure was implemented in Class C1 for the remainder of the study and allowed them
sufficient time to conduct their literature discussion. Class C2, on the other hand, told me that they wanted to read silently by themselves and conduct literature discussion independently.

Throughout the study, students wrote in their research booklets, except for three days when they wrote on a teacher-created wiki using the same type of format as in their research booklets. Using four audio-tape recorders among seven literature discussion groups in Class C1, groups rotated each day, allowing all of them to be recorded at least every other day. Class C2 had only four literature discussion groups and thus had enough recorders for each group to be recorded every day.

At the end of the study I administered a post-survey (Appendix C) of questions to which students could respond with a lot, a little, or not at all. The post-survey included questions about student interest in reading, student interest in using technology while reading, and student interest in discussing with peers what had been read like the pre-survey, but because I had more insights into student reading interests by the end of the study, the post-survey was arranged a bit differently and included more specific questions than the pre-survey. Also, by the end of the study, topics that were not relevant at the beginning of the study became so as the research evolved.

This chapter described the research methodology and design, setting, and participants; addressed the guiding research questions; and described the data collection instruments and procedures to ensure validity and reliability. The next chapter will discuss the data results.
Chapter 4: Results

This study utilized data from four primary sources: student-made booklets, student surveys, audio-recorded student conversations, and anecdotal notes. Because the focus was on struggling readers, this analysis includes only the data from the 16 struggling readers. I used the Qualitative Research Methodology for this study because I wanted to be immersed in the research setting, my classroom, and actively engaged with my students (Gerdes & Conn, 2001; Miles & Huberman, 1984). For the analysis I organized the data; coded themes; identified categories and patterns; and examined the themes to address the following research question:

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

**Qualitative Research Method and Resulting Analysis**

By actively participating with the middle school students whom I taught, I was afforded numerous opportunities to observe their actions and interactions throughout the research study. Students wrote personal responses to their reading and to some of my questions in booklets, and I audio-taped student conversations for future analysis and conducted individual interviews with students to better understand their responses on the reading interest surveys. Therefore, the Qualitative Research Method was the natural choice for analyzing the data (Miles & Huberman, 1984). The process that I used to ask questions of what I saw and heard, coupled with my own perceptions and interpretations of what happened throughout the study, confirmed the use of the Qualitative Research Method. Additionally, organizing the data into categories and then coding or labeling themes, provided me with a way to readily identify strands that surfaced in more than one data source (Peshkin, 2000). This was important for triangulation of information from multiple data sources.
When I analyzed the data, I identified the following three strands: 1) Students enjoyed reading more when they engaged in LDGs; 2) Students’ interest in reading increased when they had choice of both reading material and topics of discussion; and, 3) 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. Discussion of each strand follows which will provide documentation of insights and discoveries from each data source.

**Students’ Reading Enjoyment**

The first strand I identified was that students enjoyed reading more when they engaged in LDGs. This data analysis indicates that when middle school students engage in literature discussion, they can enjoy reading more because young adolescents are becoming more social individuals and need cooperative learning experiences, as Manning and Bucher (2005) suggest. I administered a reading interest survey (Appendix A) before beginning the study because I believed it was important to know student interest in and enjoyment of reading so I could document changes that occurred over time. Students responded to both True/False statements and to open-ended Why? questions on Survey One (Appendix A). Henceforth, all student responses to the surveys and journals were written comments, not spoken ones. At the end of the study, the data allowed me to determine if students were impacted and how they were impacted after engaging in LDGs by analyzing responses from pre- and post-surveys (Appendices A and C) and by reading student responses written in targeted journal entries. Both reading interest surveys were the most useful for informing this strand.

**Survey one results.**

According to the results of Survey One (Table 2.1), twelve of the sixteen struggling readers said they did not like to read nor did they enjoy reading. I was not surprised by their
responses because I have observed their reading disengagement in my language arts class.

During class times when students were given opportunities to read their choice of materials on their own, the struggling readers mainly skimmed books for pictures and captions or said they couldn’t find a book they were interested in reading. As Guthrie, Alao, and Rinehart (1997) observed, “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). Table 2.1 summarizes the data from relevant questions in Survey One (Appendix A).

Table 2.1 Struggling Readers’ Responses to Reading Interest Survey 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>True</th>
<th>False</th>
<th>No response</th>
<th>Sometimes</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I like to read just because I enjoy reading.</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>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.</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I would like reading the same book as my peers in my class if we could talk about the book.</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I am sometimes overwhelmed when I read ss/science/and some other non-fiction text.</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I like reading materials that my teachers select for me.</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I like reading if I can choose what I read.</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

When asked if they would spend time reading their choice of books outside of class if they could talk with their peers in class about what they had read, again, twelve students said no. Through this survey question I hoped to discover whether students might read and discuss a text if they could choose what they were reading. Since this survey was implemented prior to beginning the study, students didn't know "literature discussion" by that term, so I used “talk with peers” on the survey. Half of the students indicated that they would like reading the same book as their peers in their class if they could talk about the book. This question differs from the previous one because I wanted to know how students would feel about reading the same book.
together in class, which in the case of my study was *Jeremy Fink and the Meaning of Life* (Mass, 2006) in class if they could discuss it together.

Nine students indicated that they are overwhelmed when they read content area text such as text commonly used in social studies, science, and math. Ten did not like the idea of the teacher selecting reading materials for them, and eleven indicated that they like reading when they can choose their own texts.

When asked what could happen to make them enjoy reading more, there were three main written responses among the twelve struggling readers who said they don’t enjoy it. Their comments were: “Reading is boring”; “I don’t like reading”; and “My interest has gone down in middle school.” One student indicated that reading might be fun if she didn’t have to write about what she had read. This was a particularly troubling statement for me as a teacher because my students’ standing homework assignment was to read their choice of material each night and write at least two journal entries per week about their thoughts on what they had read.

After learning about what literature discussion groups are, students read two short stories in class, “Rikki-Tikki-Tavi” by Rudyard Kipling (2006) and “Aunty Misery” by Judith Ortiz Coffer (2006) over the course of three days and participated in literature discussion groups for practice. I asked students in both classes to write in their booklets their response 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 students finished their responses, I asked: *If you could engage in literature discussion in your other classes, how would you feel about reading?* Eleven of the struggling readers expressed in their booklets that literature discussion was fun, and said that if they could engage in the practice in other classes, reading would be much more enjoyable. According to Jania, a student with limited English proficiency,
“I don't like reading, but if we could do literature discussion in other classes, I could hear other people's thinking, and it would be more fun.” Colt, an academically gifted math student who struggles with reading, said, “Literature discussion would make me feel good about reading because it's better to talk about what we read. I would enjoy reading more if we could do LD more often in our other classes.” His father is a teacher at this school and alerted me at the beginning of the school year that Colt had trouble reading and didn’t like it very much. Ayesha, a student who struggles with Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) and has behavior issues, said, “I like reading and I would enjoy reading more if we did literature discussion in all my classes because reading is fun.”

Jennifer, who has never passed her reading end-of-grade test said, “Reading is a lot funner now. I failed first grade because I didn’t like to read.” Mary Ann, who has severe difficulty with comprehension, is pulled from class for reading intervention, and Kamesha is a very active student with limited ability to focus. Both said, “Now that we know how to discuss what we read to our group, we can talk about what we read and learned from reading the stories, and now we know what literature discussion means. We can have fun with reading.” Dillan, an academically gifted math student who reads at an extremely slow pace, wrote, “I like reading because it's fun to read books and discuss with my peers.” Only Dameon, an extremely disinterested student who adamantly opposes reading, disagreed, “I don't like reading because there's no excitement.” His comment was not surprising as he has consistently dozed in class and has generally been non-participatory throughout this school year.

These struggling readers understood the concept of LDGs and enjoyed participating in them. They also thought that reading was more enjoyable, as a result of engaging in LDG’s and expressed a desire to participate in them in other classes.
In keeping with Class C1’s request for me to read *Jeremy Fink* (Mass, 2006) to them, Kristi, a student who is a very weak reader, wrote, “I like reading if someone else reads to me, and if we could do literature discussion in all my classes, I would like reading even more because it would be fun.” Dusty, a struggling reader who is candid about his negative feelings toward reading, echoed Kristi’s thoughts, “I don't really like reading unless someone reads to me, but I think literature discussion has been a good experience. Reading is really not fun. It might change my mind if we could listen to someone reading instead of having to read it myself.” Carlos, a student with limited English proficiency, agreed, “I like reading because it's interesting, but it depends on who's reading it.”

**Survey two results.**

Survey Two (Appendix C), administered at the end of the study, revealed that eleven of the sixteen struggling readers enjoyed reading more as a result of engaging in literature discussion while they read (Table 3.1). In fact, thirteen students indicated on Survey Two that they liked reading, compared with twelve who said on Survey One (Appendix A) that they did not like reading. Table 3.1 summarizes the relevant data in Survey Two (Appendix C).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>a lot</th>
<th>a little</th>
<th>not at all</th>
<th>total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I enjoy reading more since I learned about literature discussion.</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I like reading.</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I like literature discussion.</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Literature discussion has changed how I feel about reading.</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

When I did a subject-by-subject response comparison from Survey One (Appendix A) and Survey Two (Appendix C) on whether or not students liked reading, I found that of the sixteen responses, ten indicated a “high change” in reading enjoyment when they participated in
literature discussion, while four indicated “some change” in enjoyment, and only one indicated “no change”. One student did not participate in the survey because he was absent. Of the four who indicated on Survey Two (Appendix C) that they like reading a lot, two said on Survey One (Appendix A) that they did not like reading at all. Of the nine who said on Survey Two (Appendix C) that they enjoyed reading a little, eight had said on Survey One (Appendix A) that they did not like reading at all. The results of this comparison indicate that literature discussion made a positive impact on those students.

When asked at the end of the study why they enjoyed reading, four of the struggling readers wrote, “Because it is fun.” DJ, a student with limited focus and attention, wrote, “My teacher helped make reading fun.” I was pleasantly surprised when the assistant principal at our school shared with me that DJ told her he enjoys reading more now than he did in primary school because reading in our language arts class is fun. Donnie, a struggling reader who dislikes school reading but reads a variety of texts at home, said, “It’s [reading] gotten funner.” I suspect that both DJ and Donnie became engaged readers because both were part of literature discussion groups, learning communities if you will, and found that “their ideas about literature and literacy mattered to their peers” (Casey, 2008, p. 291) and to their teacher, and as a result of their engagement in both the group and the reading, they found the experience to be “fun.”

Twelve students indicated on the survey that they liked and enjoyed literature discussion (Table 3.1), and when asked why, they answered with various responses. Ayesha said, “It’s fun to talk about the book and learn about what your group wrote.” Eleven students wrote that literature discussion had changed how they felt about reading, saying “Literature discussion has made reading more fun” (Colt), “I want to read a little bit more now” (Dusty), and “Since we
read this book, I like discussion” (Jennifer). DJ and Donnie agreed that literature discussion had made reading “more fun” as well.

When asked if they liked reading more, less, or the same since engaging in literature discussion, fifteen of the sixteen struggling readers responded that reading was more fun. A few student remarks were: “I love it, and I hope we do it more” (Kristi); “Because it makes reading fun” (DJ); “I didn’t enjoy it less” (Jennifer); “Reading is fun now” (Dusty); “It encouraged me to want to read more” (Tammy); “I like to read more now” (Kamesha); “I used to not like to read, but now I do.” (Colt) It appears that literature discussion made a considerable, positive impact on these middle school struggling readers and how they feel about reading because “Readers learn, through social interaction with other Readers, that reading is entertaining and stimulating” (Strommen & Mates, 2004, p. 199) and because 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 as Routman (1991) has suggested.

The Power of Student Choice

The second strand I identified through my data analysis was that students’ interest in reading increased when they had choice of both reading material and topics of discussion. Both reading interest surveys were the most informative sources for this strand. Though student choice of reading materials is typically part of literature discussion, students did not have a choice of what they read for this study as a matter of convenience for me. However, students did have choice of the topics they wanted to talk about in their LDGs and created their own protocols for governing student behavior for effective LDGs.
Survey one results.

According to the data, students responded that they would enjoy reading more if they could choose their reading materials. Eleven of the sixteen struggling readers indicated on Survey One (Appendix A) that they liked reading if they could choose what to read, while ten indicated that they did not like reading materials the teacher selects for them (Table 2.2). This affirms what I found in the research informing this study, that students are more engaged readers when they choose the texts they want to read. Table 2.2 summarizes the data from relevant questions in Survey One (Appendix A).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>True</th>
<th>False</th>
<th>Sometimes</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I like reading if I can choose what I read.</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I like reading materials that my teachers select for me.</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

When asked on Survey One (Appendix A) what other things affect how they feel about reading, students responded with answers related to the importance of choice. Dillan wrote, “Why am I reading this? Do I have to? Is it my choice?” while Colt echoed that he doesn’t like “Teachers picking what I read.” Ayesha and Kristi were quick to say what types of reading materials they like – “interesting stories” (Ayesha) – and what they don’t like – “I don’t really like that much factual stuff” (Kristi), while DJ succinctly wrote, “EOG [end-of-grade] passages.” Dusty was clear that he doesn’t like it “when my teacher gives us too much to read,” indicating that he doesn’t have choice when it comes to what and how much he has to read. I feel certain that there is a correlation between his response and his already negative feelings toward having to read for himself.

In response to the question, What could happen to make you enjoy reading more?, several struggling readers responded with statements about their desire for choice. “Let me pick what I
want to read,” (DJ); “[Reading] what I like to read,” (Carlos); “Reading the kind of books that I enjoy,” (Kristi); and, “By choosing a book that looks good to read,” (Kamesha) were the more general statements. A few others were more specific about their reading choices: “Reading about famous people,” (Brayden); “I just like reading comics,” (Dameon); and, “Letting me read magazines about video games, hunting, and fishing,” (Colt). Clearly, students value having choice about what they read, and they know what kinds of reading materials they like, enjoy, and learn from.

Students responded with many written statements about choice when asked on Survey One (Appendix A) what had influenced their reading pleasure up to this point in their lives. “I make my own self read; they [teachers] don’t push me,” said Jania, while Colt said that he was willing to let teachers choose for him, IF they chose good books, as is shown in his response, “The AG [academically gifted] books Ms. Jackson assigns for us to read! I love those books!” Dillan, DJ, and Kamesha gave specific insight into how choice makes them happy readers: “The things that I’ve always been curious about or interested in,” (Dillan); “Wanting to read non-fiction books and learn more about animals. I want to learn more and more,” (DJ); “The action in some books” (Kamesha).

On Survey One (Appendix A), students were given the opportunity to discuss whether or not anything had caused them to lose interest in reading since they had begun middle school. Boring books and teacher-selected materials topped the list of responses. When students shared their thoughts on reading, again, their desire for choice came through loud and clear. “I like reading when it’s an interesting book, but when we have EOG’s (end-of-grade tests), there are boring stories on it. I’ve just learned to deal with it,” said Kristi. “I like Diary of a Wimpy Kid. I like to read different books,” said Carlos. “I enjoy books that really catch my attention and where
the words are instantly turned to images in my head. The kind of book I like to read is the kind that is so interesting and entertaining that I absolutely have to read more,” said Dillan. It seems that although these struggling readers indicated that they don’t enjoy reading, the opposite is true; they really do enjoy reading if they have choice about what they read. Burns (1998) said that student choice “is motivating to many reluctant readers and gives students a feeling of control over a part of their learning” (p. 125).

Survey two results.

Though questions on Survey Two (Appendix C) were a bit different from those on Survey One (Appendix A) and yielded a wide array of answers, the second most cited reason on Survey Two for reading enjoyment was the desire for choice. “If it’s a good book, I’m going to read it. If it’s a boring book, I’m not going to read it,” said Dillan. Jania said, “I only like to read if it’s a good book and I’m reading it or a teacher that has a lot of enthusiasm [is reading it].” Tammy agreed, “I’ve gotten used to it [reading], and when I read an interesting book, I want to read more.”

In response to another question on Survey Two (Appendix C) about why they enjoy reading the same book as their friends since learning about literature discussion, students said: “Only if the book is good and what kind of book that they [my friends] are reading? I like non-fiction books,” (Jennifer); “It matters what we are reading,” (Carlos); and, “Sometimes it may be a book I am completely bored with and sometimes it introduces me to a new book, one that I like,” (Dillan).

Booklet response.

Only one booklet response, Dillan’s, dealt with the desire for choice. He summed it up nicely when he said, “If I could choose what I read, LD [literature discussion] would be fun in all
my classes. I enjoy reading when I'm interested in what I'm reading. LD by itself wouldn't affect how I feel about reading because I enjoy reading already.” Obviously, struggling readers are motivated to read when given their choice of reading materials and would engage in literature discussion with texts that matter to them as evidenced by Jo Worthy’s (1998) research.

**Personal Connections Yield Better Understanding of Text**

The third strand that evolved from the data analysis was that 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. Survey One (Appendix A), the audio-recorded student conversations, and my anecdotal notes best informed this strand.

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 schema aid readers’ understanding of new reading material (Keene & Zimmerman, 2007).
Survey one results.

In this study, though students don’t appreciate teachers choosing their reading materials, they do value teachers facilitating students’ understanding of texts, talking with them about what a text means and explaining difficult vocabulary words. When asked on Survey One (Appendix A) to elaborate on what other things affect how they feel about reading, one of the most cited answers was “the hard words.” In personal interviews, several students clarified their responses, saying that some library books, textbooks, and non-fiction reading materials are harder to comprehend because there are “too many big, informational words.” However, the same students said that they understand more when they can talk about a text either with each other or with a teacher. “When my teacher talks it out I can understand it more,” said Kristi, and according to Tammy, “I don't understand words. It's hard for me to read things, and when we talk it out or read out loud, I can understand it.” Tammy has Dyslexia and, in her words, she sees “a bunch of letters on the page” when she reads. This year, Tammy has found a new love of reading because the students and I engage in talk in our classroom. In a private conversation with the Exceptional Children’s teacher after a parent/teacher conference with Tammy’s mother earlier this school year, I learned that Tammy stated that this discussion, both classroom discussion and literature discussion, has helped her understand more about reading and gaining meaning from texts. For the first time in her school career, Tammy has not had testing accommodations (i.e. extended time, testing in a separate room, modified shorter test, etc.) on her end-of-grade reading test, yet scored above average in reading proficiency. In the parent-teacher conference she said to her mother, “I love language arts and reading this year because we get to talk about what we’re reading and learning about!” These students’ responses confirm Peterson and Eeds’ (2007) assertion that by practicing alongside more knowledgeable others, teachers or peers, students
learn more about making meaning from a text. Burns (1998) agrees that it is the “social interaction that takes place in a literature circle [that] is a key component of its success.”

Other students also indicated on Survey One (Appendix A) that their understanding of text is impacted by talk. Colt wrote, “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.” Brayden is an introverted, struggling reader who said he did not like literature discussion because he never knows what to say, but even he replied, “It [reading] has gotten better b/c [because] when we work as a class, I can understand what I read.”

Students noted that difficulty understanding what they read has contributed to their loss of interest in reading in middle grades. “Some of the books confuse me,” said Ayesha, and Mary Ann admitted, “I would forget about what I read and I would lose focus.” Donnie, too, expressed his frustration, “Reading got harder for me to understand so I don't like to read.” 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.

By far, content area reading was cited by students as being the most difficult text to read. Donnie said, “B/c [because] sometimes you don't learn anything or the section gets more complex,” and DJ said quite simply, “It’s hard.” Further, students said that they are “confused by it [content area text]” (Kristi), that they “don’t get it” (Carlos), that they “get to the point that I barely understand it” (Dusty), and that “some of the words are hard” (Jania). When asked if literature discussion could impact their enjoyment of reading in their content classes, students responded with a resounding “Yes.” Ayesha quite happily said, “Friends can help you,” while DJ
agreed, “If you don't know what a problem means, your friends might.” Both Brayden and Donnie answered, “It [literature discussion] would help me [understand] more.”

Survey two results.

Survey Two (Appendix C) also revealed that students value talk because discussion aids their understanding of reading materials. In fact, when students were asked why they enjoyed literature discussion, many of their written responses linked to better understanding of the text. Some of their comments were: “Sometimes I realize something” (Kamesha); “’Cause I find out things I didn’t know” (Colt); “You can express ideas and find out what others are thinking” (Ayesha); and, “We get to talk about what happened” (Mary Ann). Perhaps Dusty and Dillan best expressed why talk is valuable to enhancing their understanding of what they read when they said, “I like to talk with my group members to see and hear their thoughts on what they read and how they take it” (Dusty), 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” (Dillan).

When asked on Survey Two (Appendix C) why they liked reading the same book and talking about the book with peers now that they know about literature discussion, a few students replied, “So they can help me if I don't know what the words mean so they can tell it to me” (Brayden), “So we can share ideas and discuss what we are thinking” (Donnie), and “b/c [because] we can talk to each other about the same book” (DJ).

Students expounded on why literature discussion has changed how they feel about reading, too. “B/c [because] if it wasn't for this, I will still hate reading b/c I can understand it better if I read with my peers” (Carlos), and “B/c [because] of talking I get more background thinking” (Jania). Even students who said their interest in reading was the same as before
learning about literature discussion commented, “B/c [because] I understand more” (Kristi), and “I love reading now ‘cause I understand the books and what they are mostly about” (Jennifer). These young adolescents are typical of their age group because they enjoy social interaction with their peers, but discussing the books they read obviously contributed to their understanding of what they had read and enhanced their enjoyment of the reading experience.

**Booklet responses.**

When asked to respond in their booklets about how literature discussion might help them in language arts classes and in content area classes, students wrote rich answers and gave powerful insights into their thinking. They said, “LD [literature discussion] would help me because I can hear other people's thinking to help improve my thinking in many different ways. Hearing other thinking makes me see the books in different ways and how the book means to others” (Kristi); “LD makes me understand more about the reading. I enjoy reading to a point. Doing LD would make me like reading more because I can find out what I don't understand in the text” (Dillan); “I like reading in groups because everyone learns more well that is what I think” (Brayden); “I like reading a little bit more when we do LD because it makes it funner. It makes reading better because when we read it and talk about it, it makes it where I can learn it better” (Donnie); and, “I would like it if we did LD in other classes because I understand the reading better and I could discuss it with my peers” (Colt). Clearly, students confirmed that engaging in literature discussion aids their comprehension of a wide variety of texts. Peterson and Eeds (2007) affirm these students’ responses when they note that by sharing their insights and connections, students broaden their potential for creating meaning from the text.
Audio-recorded conversations.

Students were eager to get started in their LDGs once they learned how to engage in talk with each other about literature. In audio recordings of conversations while students were in the LDGs, I discovered that students had meaningful engagements with each other about the novel they all were reading. 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. Earlier in the school year, I had explicitly taught students how to use these and other reading comprehension strategies to help them understand what they read, and I was pleasantly surprised to discover that these struggling readers had internalized them and used them to get meaning from the novel they read together.

Students read *Jeremy Fink and the Meaning of Life* by Wendy Mass (2006). It 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 thirteen 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 can’t 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.

As students discussed what they had read in the novel, they tape-recorded their conversations. During the data analysis of this study, I listened to the tapes of the recorded conversations to learn what students talked about and to discover how they created meaning from the text. In the following discussion, I chose specific examples of conversations from those LDGs containing at least one struggling reader since they were the focus of this study.

In one discussion group, 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 (Figure 1.1):

“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 Beulaville, 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)

“Yes, 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 looks 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)

*Figure 1.1 Conversation between Charlie, Ashley, and Dillan*

In this conversation, Charlie began with his question about something he didn’t 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 wouldn’t 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. Students worked together, using reading strategies to create an understanding of the text they had read. Peterson and Eeds (2007) confirm 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” (pg. 12).

In another literature discussion group, Kamesha, Carlos, and Jania, all struggling readers, talked with Alecia, who is not a struggling reader, about the significance of the keys that Jeremy and Lizzy were on a quest to find. In the chapter these students read, Lizzy and Jeremy broke
into an office complex where they thought Jeremy’s dad’s lawyer-friend worked, searching for the keys to the box. They got into trouble for breaking and entering, and as a result, had to perform community service. In discussing the keys’ significance, students went from the concrete idea of why the author gave such importance to the keys – to open the box, to a more abstract and meaningful reason that the keys exist – to help Jeremy and Lizzy discover the meaning of life and how people learn life lessons through their experiences. An excerpt of their conversation follows (Figure 1.2):

“I’m glad that the policeman guard took them to community service because I’m glad that they’re learning their lesson, but then I think that Jeremy’s mom and Lizzy’s dad know where the keys are, they just don’t wanna tell’em.” (Kamesha)

“When they go to community service, Lizzy and Jeremy might find the keys there and then it would be worth all getting in trouble.” (Alecia)

“I think that the mom, the guard, AND the dad had something to do with the keys, but like, I think the old man at the shop…what’s his name? The man that…well, the old man that’s got the keys.” (Kamesha)

“His name is…” (Carlos, searching in the novel)

“He could have keys to another box but it might work for that box, too.” (Alecia)

“How many boxes does he have to open?” (Kamesha)

“I think it’s one box, but I think he has to have four different keys. The man’s name is Mr. Oswald.” (Carlos)

“Mr. Oswald could have the keys. But maybe Jeremy’s dad did it where he would have to search for the keys to learn a lesson.” (Alecia)
“I still think that before Jeremy’s dad died he gave the keys to the mom so they could learn a lesson.” (Kamesha)

“I still think he didn’t want her to have the keys to give to them so they could learn a lesson…looking for the keys.” (Alecia)

“‘Cause like the book says, ‘Four keys, two friends, and one answer.’ So…the one answer gots to mean the box…about the box, right?” (Kamesha)

“What’s in the box is the answer.” (Alecia)

“I don’t think there’s nothing in there, I think they’re just gonna learn a lesson.” (Kamesha)

“I think what they’re [the author is] doing is…I don’t think there’s anything in the box either, but maybe they’re [the author is] doing that so everywhere they look, they’ll learn something about the meaning of life, and every time they look for a key, they’re learning something, and that’s the meaning of life.” (Alecia)

“I don’t think they’re gonna find the keys until they learn a lesson, ‘cause they learn a lesson every day or every chapter.” (Kamesha)

“They learned a lesson in this one…about life…about…” (Jania)

“About life ain’t gonna get you…money ain’t gonna do you any good.” (Kamesha)

**Figure 1.2 Conversation between Jania, Kamesha, Carlos, and Alecia**

At the beginning of this conversation, Kamesha conjectured about where the keys were and stated her feelings about what Lizzy and Jeremy did. She was glad they had community service so that they could “learn a lesson.” Alecia added her prediction of where the keys might be found, and Kamesha continued building their predictions by analyzing characters and their motives, saying that the adults knew where the keys were. After some discussion about how
many boxes Lizzy and Jeremy had to open and how many keys they needed to open it, both Alecia and Kamesha infer that the main characters will “learn a lesson,” and Kamesha connected that idea back to the text, establishing validity for the girls’ predictions. Once Alecia turned the conversation toward the author’s purpose, the life lessons, Kamesha and Jania readily identified the particular lesson they believed Jeremy and Lizzy learned in the chapter, recognizing the text structure (text-to-text connection) that Lizzy and Jeremy learn a lesson in every chapter. Clearly these children used schema to support their understanding of the text through their conversation as Allington and Cunningham (2007) confirmed when they said, “Readers construct meaning by understanding what the author is saying, figuring out what the author means, and forming opinions based on the author’s meaning and what the reader already knows” (p. 118).

In another chapter of Jeremy Fink and the Meaning of Life (Mass, 2006), Jeremy and Lizzy had to perform in a talent show at the State Fair for Jeremy’s grandmother because they lost a bet with her. Brayden, a struggling reader who is extremely shy, readily shared in his group that he’s never been to the State Fair. Ja’que, a leader in the group, used the text-to-self connection to explain the experience to him. An excerpt of their conversation follows (Figure 1.3):

| “I’ve never been to the State Fair, but I bet it would be fun.” (Brayden) |
| “Ok, the State Fair is like…” (Ja’que) |
| “It’s bigger.” (Ayesha) |
| “It’s like a regular fair, but it’s in the capital of your state and it’s just bigger than the original fair, and you get to do more stuff out there and ride stuff and eat…more stuff.” (Ja’que) |
| “Really?” (Brayden) |
| “Yeah.” (Ja’que) |

*Figure 1.3 Conversation between Brayden, Ja’que, and Ayesha*
Historically, Brayden has not spoken aloud in class nor shared his thoughts or feelings about any topic in the larger class discussions we frequently have. However, in his LDG he ventured to share something from the text that he had no experience with, the State Fair, and Ja’que quickly intervened to help build his background knowledge by offering her own experience of the State Fair with him. Ja’que’s role as more knowledgeable other helped Brayden build his own schema in order to understand an entire chapter in the novel they were reading. Routman (1991) said that one of the greatest benefits of LDG’s has been “increased participation by and improved self-esteem of at-risk and low-ability students” (p. 129), and Allington (2001) confirmed that when readers talk, they help each other understand through that talk what has been read.

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) didn’t 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 (Figure 1.4), 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 [the mailman could] be sneaky about [Jeremy] trying to find out what it [the box] was.” (Jennifer)

**Figure 1.4 Conversation between Jennifer, Ray, and Donnie**

In this discussion students had just found out that all 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 mom’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). Cunningham and Allington (2007) explain, “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).

Discussion

In summary, data from this study provided insights into why students enjoy reading more when they engage in LDGs and how students’ reading interest increases when they have choice of both reading material and topics of discussion. Pleasurable experiences generate enjoyment, and if the pleasurable experiences include reading, then student interest can be impacted. When students choose their own reading materials and topics of discussion during literate talk sessions, both enjoyment and understanding of texts can be positively impacted.

The data also 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.

In the final chapter, I will present the implications of these findings, discuss limitations to this study, and make recommendations for further research.
Chapter 5: Conclusions and Recommendations

Introduction

Chapter four presented my research study’s findings on how LDGs affect struggling middle school readers. The findings presented show benefits of engaging middle school students, particularly struggling readers, in literature discussion. This chapter will discuss the study’s implications and limitations, recommendations, and suggestions for future research.

Implications of the Findings

The findings presented in Chapter 4 have implications for schools and for both 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 non-fiction texts of various kinds. There is not one kind of text that is more 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 individuals and need more collaborative engagements as the NMSA (2003), Atwell (1998), Manning and Bucher (2005) and other researchers have suggested.

Because students in this study cited content area text as the most difficult to understand, using LDGs in the content areas could have substantial positive consequences for students, particularly struggling readers. LDGs could potentially increase reading engagement and enhance learning of non-fiction materials such as science and social studies magazines, world news articles, health pamphlets and brochures, and current event articles from local newspapers. Since some of the struggling readers in this study said they like and understand non-fiction 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 on topics they have explored, studied, and read as Routman (1991), Short (1991), and Daniels (2006) have suggested. This could boost their self-esteem and make reading a more enjoyable experience for them.

LDGs should not be the only reading activity in the classroom because there are young adolescents, as shown in this study, who don’t enjoy the collaboration and socialization that guides LDGs, perhaps due to different learning styles or introverted temperaments. Teachers should acquaint themselves with their students in order to determine if LDGs could be a useful tool in their classrooms and in which learning engagements literature discussion could be used.

The data presented in this study coincides with data from other studies (Cunningham & Allington, 2007; Ivey & Broaddus, 2001; Worthy, 1998), showing that students’ interest in reading increases when they have choice about the materials that they read and the topics they discuss. When students are interested in what they read, they are more engaged in the reading and will learn much more from the text. LDGs could prove especially beneficial for struggling readers in content classes, where text is the most difficult for them to read. For teachers, this may mean giving up control in their classrooms and embracing a more progressive view of teaching and learning, making students more responsible for their choice of texts and for their own learning. It could mean using authentic literature for teaching rather than relying on scripted, basal readers used in the prescribed way as the only means for teaching, for example. It is important to note that it is not the basal reader or textbook that is the issue, rather it is the manner in which the materials are used. Or it may mean having a more democratic atmosphere in the classroom, one in which students are free to choose their own reading materials at times while
giving equal attention to teacher-selected materials as suggested by Worthy (1998). Either way, LDGs can build a community of readers and learners as Peterson and Eeds (2005), Allington and Cunningham (2007), and Bowers-Campbell (2011) have found, and 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 (1991) and Peterson and Eeds (2005).

Perhaps the most compelling finding of this study was that 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 Routman (1991) said of her own classroom, it was interesting to see students come to the conversations with little understanding of the reading, but through their collaborative talk, they made connections and created meaning so that the text became clear to them. My students said they understood more about text when they could talk about it with their teacher and with each other. Therefore, teachers would 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). Clay (1991) discusses the concept of building from what is known as the way that learning occurs whether the learning involves the development of reading strategies or the construction of meaning of
text. Not only would learning about and using these reading comprehension strategies improve comprehension during LDGs, but those connections could increase the participation and boost the self-esteem of struggling readers who might be viewed as experts on certain topics of discussion. More positive engagements with reading and literature discussion could lead to more interest in reading, promote self-efficacy, increase reading comprehension, and even foster positive classroom behaviors.

Schools and administrators can and should offer professional development opportunities for teachers to learn how to implement LDGs in their classrooms. Resources are available from Schlick Noe (2004), Keene and Zimmerman (2007), Atwell (1998), Peterson and Eeds (2007), Cunningham and Allington (2007), Routman (1991) and others about how to conduct literature discussion in various ways. The variety of ways to conduct LDGs is not as important as understanding the theory of learning that guides the practice. An important learning theory that guides LDGs is Vygotsky’s (1978) social context of learning in which he asserts that learning happens when there is a social construction of knowledge. In other words, when people talk about what they are learning, they construct meaning together that benefits each other. In LDGs the group would construct meaning from the text they read together so that everyone in the group would learn and benefit from the collaborative talk. Another important learning theory that guides LDGs is Rosenblatt’s (1995) reading transaction theory in which she affirms that readers bring personal meaning to a text and take personal meaning from a text because of their unique backgrounds, culture, and experiences. By sharing personal meaning in LDGs, students would gain insights and viewpoints from other readers and reflect on their own thinking, possibly recreating or restructuring their own understanding of a text. Because there is no one right way to conduct literature discussion, schools and administrators should give teachers time to share their
own experiences using LDG’s across grade levels and content areas. Teachers would benefit from learning various ways to engage students in LDGs so that they wouldn’t get bored with repetition, students would benefit by taking charge of their learning, and schools might benefit from increased test scores in the area of reading comprehension.

**Limitations**

This section addresses the limitations of this study and why the limitations impact the study. Recommendations for further research in order to overcome the limitations will be discussed in the next section.

There are limitations to this study because it was conducted in two classes taught by the same teacher at one school, and data was collected from a small group of 16 struggling readers. Therefore, this was not a large-scale study. As stated previously, there is no one right way to conduct literature discussion, so this study would look differently in other teachers’ classrooms in other schools and even in other districts or geographical areas.

Because data was collected from student-made booklets, surveys, personal interviews, and audio-taped conversations, these responses were individual in nature and would be different in larger and more diverse populations. Additionally, other data sources could be used to expand the data collection and analysis process.

Another limitation of this study was time. Because the Plus period in this school severely limited the time students spent in LDGs after reading, Class C1, rife with struggling readers, did not have enough time to thoroughly discuss the text. When students don’t have enough time to explore their thinking and discuss the meaning of the text, LDGs feel rushed, severely limiting the creative, meaning-making process that naturally occurs through collaborative talk.
Additionally, for expediency in this study, students’ reading materials and group members were chosen for them. Ideally, LDGs revolve around student choice of text, topics of discussion, and group members, all of which could be planned for and implemented.

One other limitation to discuss about this study is the inconsistency of the two reading interest surveys. Ideally, a research study would administer the same survey at the beginning and end of the study. Before beginning my study, Survey One (Appendix A) was created as I was exploring a different topic for LDGs – how literature discussion could change middle school students’ attitudes toward reading. As well, my students did not have knowledge of LDGs, so the language on Survey One (Appendix A) is quite different than the language on Survey Two (Appendix C). Additionally, Survey One was intended to be a general survey of reading interest. By the end of the study as the research evolved, I realized that I needed to ask more specific questions of my students, thus, Survey Two (Appendix C) was written differently. Because the original intent of Survey One (Appendix A) was to find out general interest in reading, and because the focus of the study changed based on its qualitative nature, Survey Two (Appendix C) was created to address those changes, even the wording and order of questions.

Nevertheless, many research studies (Atwell, 1998; Cunningham & Allington, 2007; Ivey & Broaddus, 2001; Routman, 1991) support literature discussion as a beneficial practice no matter the school, participants, or setting, and this study supports those findings in spite of the limitations. It is through replications of studies using LDGs that the overwhelming value of the practice will be firmly established.

The following section will make recommendations to overcome the limitations of this study.
Recommendations for Further Research

This study should be replicated using a larger number of student participants in several schools across the district. It would also be beneficial for future research to include a more diverse teacher population than presented here, including teachers from different grade levels, content areas, and philosophical backgrounds.

Student learning styles, their backgrounds, their home cultures, and their experiences are all unique, so any given LDG will be different from other LDGs, even in the same classroom. An LDG in an academically gifted population may produce different outcomes than an LDG in a struggling reader population though some aspects such as reading material or procedure might be the same. Students in this study are from rural Southeastern North Carolina and have much different experiences from students in other geographical regions. Even students within the same district can have divergent thinking because of the community culture in which they live and how that community influences them. These diversities in experience and knowledge significantly change the meaning that students bring to and take away from text, so LDGs can have different outcomes in these instances as well. Additionally, students in other grade levels have different developmental characteristics and needs than young adolescents, and LDGs in those grade levels would be different because of their unique qualities.

Teachers have differing teaching philosophies and pedagogies, therefore, they have diverse beliefs about the best ways to teach and the best ways that students learn. LDGs would be conducted in various ways by different teachers, so the outcomes would be affected and may not be the same as the ones in this study. In my own experience using LDGs with another class, the strands that emerged were not exactly the same because the student population was different. As well, teachers in different subject areas have varying foci depending on the content that they
teach, so for example, the literature and other materials used in LDGs in a math class would be far different than those used in a social studies class. Additionally, teachers in other grade levels have different state mandated standards to teach and their students’ developmental characteristics will be different than those represented in this study. However, LDGs are equally beneficial across grade levels and subject areas as evidenced in studies by Daniels (2006), Short (1990), Routman (1991), Bowers-Campbell (2011) and other researchers.

Further studies could benefit from a larger collection of data sources to include field notes, teacher observations, electronic sources such as wikis or social networks, and other sources. Collecting data from a wide and varied array of sources would give even more insight into the dynamics of LDGs, additional information could uncover additional strands or themes that would bring more meaning to the research, and multiple sources would give more validity to the research.

Because time was a limiting factor in this study, teachers on similar schedules with time limitations would need to think creatively about how to overcome those impediments. A study could be extended over a longer period of time, days or weeks, to allow for more student collaboration. Additionally, teachers across content areas could have students explore similar topics to maximize time and resources. There are inventive ways to manipulate limited schedules.

This study would be more comprehensive if students were given true choice of reading materials and given autonomy in choosing their group mates because choice promotes greater enjoyment of text and piques reading interest as suggested by Worthy (1998), Daniels (2006), Rief (2006), Atwell (1998), and other researchers. Additionally, LDGs could center around student-generated topics of interest or books and other reading materials that students wanted to
read. The topics and books chosen by students would lead to more flexible LDGs, more dynamic conversations, and more varied groupings endorsed by Worthy (1998), Daniels (2006), Clay (1991) and other researchers.

Summary

This research study allowed me to explore how engaging in LDGs could affect struggling middle school readers in my classroom. My study identified three themes/strands that demonstrate positive learning outcomes for students: 1) Students enjoyed reading more when they engaged in LDGs; 2) Students’ interest in reading increased when they had choice of both reading material and topics of discussion; and, 3) 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. 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. In conclusion, literature discussion is a valuable classroom practice that can be implemented by any teacher in any subject area or grade level and, as my study indicates, is especially beneficial for middle grades struggling readers.
References


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

Rules That We Should Follow in Our Literature Discussion Groups (Class C1)
1. Everyone participates.
2. Be kind, helpful, and respectful to everyone.
3. Listen to others.
4. Take care of the novels.
5. Stay on task.

What We Think We Should Talk about in LDG’s (Class C1)
1. The novel.
2. Characters, setting, plot.
3. Questions that we have about the reading.
4. Our favorite parts and our not favorite parts.
5. Words we don’t know.
6. What the characters do and how we connect with what they do.

Rules That We Should Follow in Our Literature Discussion Groups (Class C2)
1. Stay focused and on task.
2. Everyone participates.
3. Be kind and helpful to everyone.
4. Listen to others’ opinions without judging.
5. Be prepared.

What We Think We Should Talk about in LDG’s (Class C 2)
1. The book.
2. Characters, setting, plot.
3. Important ideas from the book.
4. How we connect to what’s happening in the book.
5. Questions that we have and our favorite parts.
6. Vocabulary words we don’t know.
Appendix C

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?