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A Reader's Experience: How Teachers Can Utilize Literature Circles and Reader Response Theory in an All-Male Environment to Evaluate Reader Engagement, Motivation, and Identifying with a Text

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A READER'S EXPERIENCE: HOW TEACHERS CAN UTILIZE LITERATURE CIRCLES
AND READER RESPONSE THEORY IN AN ALL-MALE ENVIRONMENT TO
EVALUATE READER ENGAGEMENT, MOTIVATION, AND IDENTIFYING WITH A
TEXT

A Thesis

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Abstract

      This teacher-research project was implemented in an all-male eighth grade English Language Arts classroom in order to identify reader motivation, engagement, and identifying with a text through literature circles; utilizing reader response theory. The researcher wanted to discover if the pedagogical practice of literature circles was effective in motivating and engaging readers so that they could better identify with a text and their peers in a classroom setting. The researcher is defining reader response theory as an examination of the transaction between a reader and a text. To determine the effectiveness of these strategies, the researcher introduced a unit that incorporated literature circle roles and meetings three times a week for four weeks. During the unit, the researcher collected beginning, middle, and end-of unit surveys; semi structured interviews from the five groups, student writing assignments, and took observation notes. This study was conducted for approximately one month in an 8$^{\text{th}}$ grade English class in the southern region of the United States. This qualitative project's approach was to examine if a student's cultural background affected how they identified with a text and intrinsic motivation, particularly with a text of their choice; utilizing the reader response theory. This study also evaluated the practices of literature circles in the all-male environment and its effects on reader engagement and collaboration.

Chapter 1: Introduction

Dating back to the early seventies, bell hooks, an African American woman at Stanford University, found that "a black women's history in America, was a subject sorely neglected in classrooms, textbooks, scholarly works and journals" (Sheftall & Ikerionwu, 1983). As an African American female, I too found when reading that it was difficult to "see myself" specifically when reading literature. Growing up, my school library was filled with books that consisted of white men and women that did not look or act like me, or so I thought. African Americans were portrayed as criminals, servants and subpar in society, which served as a misrepresentation of the African American men and women that I saw in my everyday life. Eventually, I found myself picking books with animal protagonists. At one point in my reading practices, I was more comfortable making an animal sassy, fierce, and friendly, like myself, instead of reading a text with a white female protagonist. At this point in time, I thought that I couldn't identify with a white protagonist, specifically female, because of the differences in skin color. As a result, throughout my early years as a reader, my inability to identify with a text directly correlated with a lower motivation to read.

There were many times that teachers told me that I didn't have to look like the characters to relate to them. However, I continued to reject these characters in school because I felt forced. Once again, I thought that these characters were nothing like me. I needed someone who had my skin color, my hair, and shared my life experiences. There were very few African American characters that came from a middle class background (like myself) and told a story of the struggles of fitting in at a school where you are the minority. Ultimately, in my early reading practices I didn't feel like I could relate to a character that was of another race.

Conversely, there was a turning point in my reading practice when I stumbled upon a section in my school's library that was different from the others. While walking through the aisles of the library I found an African American literature section. It was not labeled and didn't look any different from any other section, but it was full of books about people who "looked like me." I was overjoyed and excited at what was going to rekindle my love for reading. However, over the years, the section began to decimate slowly and eventually, was removed. The librarian said that the "books were old and that we needed new ones." But, the section was never replenished. As a child, I was confused, angry, and offended from the book removal. What could I do? Why was it that she did not remove any other sections where books were just as old? This occurrence in my school's library made me feel uncomfortable and uneasy. Eventually, I stopped asking about African American authored books.

As I progressed throughout my schooling, I realized that this experience and many others shaped how I related to novels and ultimately, my motivation to read. Initially, I felt that I couldn't relate to the novel because the characters weren't black females, but as I matured in my reading, I realized that there were other ways to relate to a character. I began reading books about kids in high school that were going through similar situations such as bullying, drama with friends, teenage angst, and teenage love. I slowly began to see that I could have a deeper connection with a book besides black female protagonists. One book in which I felt a deep connection was *The Divine Secrets of the Ya-Ya of Sisterhood* by Rebecca Wells. This story, even though based on four white women in the south, still had struggles, complex family dynamics, and triumphs of which I could relate to. I was proud to say that I felt a connection with this novel.

At the close of my high school academics, my teacher, Mrs. Ally introduced me to *The Color Purple* by Alice Walker. This book rekindled my interest in African American Literature, this centered on a strong black female protagonist. Celie's character's progression throughout the novel showed her strength, perseverance, and determination to leave her harsh surroundings and home life. This reading of *The Color Purple* was soon followed by novels such as *Sula, The Bluest Eye, I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings, A Raisin in the Sun, Tears of the Tiger*, and so much more. This one book that Mrs. Ally gave me changed my life as a reader and eventually progressed into my love for the English Language which led me to become a teacher.

As I embarked on my journey to becoming a teacher, I was again faced with the concept of motivation, identifying with characters, and choice in literature (or lack thereof), this time, with my focus being on my students. As I discovered the harsh realities of school curriculums, most with a rigid setup, students were resisting literature books. These books were disengaging and unrelatable to their specific age group and/or cultural dynamics.

In my present classroom teaching 8th and 9th grade at an all-boys school, our curriculum consists mainly of texts centered on white male protagonists (this being the majority population of the school). In the 8th grade curriculum, I am allowed to assign a few texts of my choice throughout the school year based on approval from the department head but many books have been pre-selected from previous 8th grade teachers. However, in my 9th grade class, the texts have already been pre-selected with little room to add to the class load. With this being said, subtracting from the already existing curriculum is not always well received by peer teachers.

The scarce visibilities of characters that are women, people of color, and individuals with disabilities limit the curriculum and the student's reading experiences. I want to show my students that there is value in reading texts where the characters might not look like you thus

allowing you a way to create a connection in other ways. In this study, I will also record these experiences through literature circles and use this practice as a way to evaluate student collaboration and reader motivation. Overall, this study examined if group collaborations influenced reader engagement, motivation, and identification with text while looking through the lens of reader response theory. These experiences will be recorded while students are participating in literature circles.

Purpose

The purpose of this qualitative study was to examine if a student's cultural background affected how they identified with a text and overall intrinsic motivation in the classroom, particularly with a text of their choice; utilizing the reader response theory. In regards to this study, cultural background refers to the gender, race/ethnicity, and socioeconomic status of the students involved. For this study, there was an emphasis on the individual's experience with the text and the individuals experience with others while also looking at group responses.

This study evaluated the reading community of an all-male environment through the practice of literature circles and its effects on reader engagement and collaboration. The study also addressed the many complexities that can be presented in an all-male classroom such as student collaboration around a text and the possible connect and/or disconnect that students can have while reading because of past experiences with reading and literature.

Overall, there are numerous factors that play a role in the English classroom such as the teaching style of the instructor (Brown, 1995), the student's, attitude, self-esteem, past experiences in regard to reading, as well as the curriculum outlined in the classroom (Hidi, 1990; Probst 2004). All of these components affect the intrinsic motivation of the students (Guthrie,

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Wigfield, Vonsecker, 2000). In order to evaluate the aforementioned topics, this study will examine the following research questions:

1. How does a student's past experience with literature and reading impact their response to a text of their choice as well as their motivation to read?

2. How does the use of reader-response theory serve to influence the students with different cultural backgrounds the ability to identify with the characters and/or novel as a whole?

3. How does the facilitation of literature circles conducted in an all-male middle school classroom have a positive or negative effect on student responses to literature?

Theoretical Framework: Reader Response Theory

The theoretical framework of reader response theory guided this study. Rosenblatt's (1938/1995) reader response theory on human presence, transference of knowledge, free choice of a text, and the general/social factors that influence readers were examined during the study. Rosenblatt's ideas of what the student brings to literature is the primary focus of this study and how what the student brings in (culturally and emotionally) affects both what they choose and how they relate or do not relate to the characters. Overall, this study examined the personal factors that affect the reader and how his past experiences affect his response (full and balanced versus limited or misconstrued). Rosenblatt also speaks on the student experience when reading a novel and "using literature as the springboard for discussions of human nature and society" (p.21). According to Rosenblatt, it is possible for students to experience a series of reactions throughout a novel and that there is complexity in student reading.

When reading, each student will have their own reaction and new experience. Reader response theory focuses on the impact that literature can have on an adolescent such as revealing the diversity of possible ways of life, patterns of relationships, and philosophies from which

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he/she is free to choose in a heterogeneous, rapidly changing democratic society (p.212). Rosenblatt stresses the importance of the reader having a personal connection and choice in what they are reading. Giving students the option to choose their reaction is a big part of reading. Letting them have this freedom can show that we care about their learning while using what they like as a platform for our own lessons. With this being said, I was fully prepared for the possible rejection of some novels based on students past experiences with literature and reading. However, according to Rosenblatt, there is always a chance that a student will have a "series of experiences" when reading such as a connection, dislike, like, or realization from something that they have read to the real world.

Robert Probst (2004) speaks of the importance of choosing a text that will appeal to student readers and how "student significance when reading" should always be considered. As a teacher, presenting texts with different time periods, life experiences, emotions and stages of development (adolescent literature) is critical to the young reader experience. Both Probst and Rosenblatt want students to bring in their own experiences and use the teacher as an aid in student negotiations of a text in order to help the student evaluate their own assumptions. Probst also says that students are "unlikely to come to literature class with a scholarly passion for information…they nonetheless bring with them experiences, interests, and a lengthy agenda of ideas, problems, worries, and attitudes, all of which concern and preoccupy them" (p.29). He then focuses on the main component of student reader motivation: self- indulgence. In this sense, self-indulgence means that the reader is brought to another place when reading. The reader uses reading as a way to distract themselves, enrich their intellect and experiences, and possibly escape from realities (p.30). This idea of self-indulgence is accompanied with the discussion of the reading process and how reading "integrates the reader into the culture, inviting her to define

herself against the background of cultural expectations and to modify that background" (p.25). Furthermore, the process of reading can lead to seeing literature as a reflection of their own attitudes, beliefs, or a new perception of things.

Finally, Wolfgang Iser (1978) furthers these ideas in reader response theory when he speaks on the reading process and the uniqueness of each reader's mind. He says,

> Whatever we have read sinks into our memory and is foreshortened. It may later be evoked again and set against a different background with the result that the reader is enabled to develop hitherto unforeseeable connections. The memory evoked, however, can never reassume its original shape, for this would mean that memory and perception were identical, which is manifestly not so (p.384).

These reading memories play a role in current text that students read and are applied each time they engage with a text (whether positive or negative). This study reiterated the idea that reading can be used as a way to reshape or make aware of the cultural differences and similarities between a reader and a text. In this study, various aspects of reader response theory will be presented and evaluated.

Study Description

This qualitative research study employed the practice of literature circles. Upon implementing the literature circle unit, I selected approximately six young adult literature novels that ranged in setting, ethnicity, and date published (meaning that there are some dated books and recently released books). The finalized lists of texts were selected by myself, the team of school librarians, and the English department head. All possible books went through the vetting process based on future readings after 8th grade in English class, grade appropriate topics, and the summer reading list by the English department head.

As a teacher, we must be aware of our student's anxieties and emotional needs. In order to address these anxieties and needs, surveys and book descriptions were given before the

literature circle group formations. By giving these surveys and descriptions, these needs and interests of the students can be addressed. This personal attention was also made when assigning groups. When grouping students together, teachers must be aware of students getting their first choice (or not) and behavioral concerns and/or considerations when placing specific children in a group. The teacher must also provide ongoing support with reader engagement when dealing with assigning task and roles to students.

Ultimately, my goal was to incorporate both literary elements and personal connections with the text through literature circle roles. Rosenblatt states, "The instructor's job is to help them maintain that personal sense of the work and yet react to it in rational terms" (p.222). I wanted to give my students a chance to connect with a text with the hope that they see its' personal value while also taking note of its literary value (academically).

Additionally, the concept of using literature circles in my study correlates with promoting student interest and a sense of reader community. The students were able to discuss the novel, read at the pace of the group, and collaborate on projects/assessments. The Harvey Daniels Method of Literature Circles (2002) focuses on learning by doing amongst students. The key ingredients deal with student choice of literature, groups meeting on a regular and predictable schedule, using notes to guide their readings and discussion while formulating their own topics. Daniels states, "Each group meeting is aimed to be open, natural conversations so personal connections, digressions, and open-ended questions are welcome" (p.17). The roles however, were revised to tailor to my specific 8th grade classroom, past class discussions, and the overall abilities of the students.

The study began with two assignments: reading practices inventory and a brief description of the ten books. The first survey focused on student-centered questions about their

reading background and motivation when reading a text. This inventory gives me a familiarization with individual student's motivations (or lack thereof) when reading which later helped when placing and assigning roles in literature groups. The second assignment gave students a description of potential book titles, a summary of each text, and a chance to rank their favorites from 1-10.

After a decision was made on the novels, the students divided into groups of five to six and each group was assigned their book of choice. The novels varied in topic. The groups met three to four times a week for 30-45 min class periods. The students started the unit with light research (individually then as a group) on the author and time period of their book. After the individual and group research, students began the unit with their role sheets. By the end of the introduction process, the students had shared their interests, how they felt about reading in the past, as well as author information and setting of the text. This research served as a way for the students to familiarize themselves with the novel's author and time period/setting of the novel. In the end, taking this time to look into the background of the text aided in a better understanding of how the setting contributed to character's actions and understandings of the world around him or her.

The classroom was set up into five small groups. The chairs were situated in circles so that the students can see both their peers and the teacher from each spot in the room. Together, they decided on the reading schedule/calendar, and discussed topics for each day. Each member of the group had a specific task throughout the literature circle activities. The teacher acted as the observer during the group's discussions and activities while recording general responses.

This study evaluated literature circles as a class practice and the possibility of a positive influence on a student's intrinsic motivation to read as well giving students a way to interact with

peers academically and socially. This specific practice evaluated the efficacy of literature circles in the all-male environment with the possibility of implementation across English classrooms and cross curricular. In this sense, the study aimed to investigate the strengths and weaknesses of literature circles on reader engagement and collaboration amongst individuals.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

In the past decades, researchers have conducted studies on the same-sex educational environment and the factors that it has on student growth and motivation both academically and socially. However, with these same studies, the subject of the male dominated classroom and its efficacy of overall student development have been constantly in comparison with the coeducational school systems. Numerous classrooms (both national and international) have called into question the aforementioned topics and have utilized the same sex setting as a way to evaluate its influence on the overall learning experience. While many researchers evaluate the effects of sex grouping on the enrollment process (Baker, Riordan, Schaub, 1995) and classroom experiences (Brodie et al. 2000; Strietmatter, 2002;) between males and females, others focused on the methodology behind what motivates students in the classroom (Meyer, 2000) and using single-sex classes to address the social needs of the student (Martino, Mills, Lingard, 2005).

Overall, the topic of the single sex male environment in regard to motivation and the social/academic factors need further evaluation, specifically in the English classroom and when reading a text. Even though there is literature that focuses on the male experience when encountering literacies outside of the classroom (Newkirk, 2002; Smith & Wilhelm, 2002) there is a lack of focus on their literature lives in the classroom. Additionally, another problem that needs to be addressed is the lack of literature that focuses on males, with numerous literatures focusing on females and their environment (Gilson, 2002; Gallagher, 2002; Heather, 2002). Aside from this study's focus, there is also a gap in the literature in regard to minorities (Singh, Vaught, Mitchell, 1998) and people of lower socioeconomic status (Lloyd, 2006; Morris, 1997) that focuses on the single-sex classroom.

Furthermore, there are vast gaps in recent research that address the U.S. region of schooling in regard to the same sex environment, its effect on male students, specifically, in the English content area. Contrary to the pervasive beliefs about the all-male setting, there are many *other* factors that play a role in the English classroom such as pedagogical practices (Bishop and Pflaum, 2004), past reading experiences, and classroom curriculums that can affect the intrinsic motivation of the students (Guthrie, Wigfield, Vonsecker, 2000; Guthrie et al 2007).

With this being said, there is a belief in the U.S. that same sex schooling could possibly fare better in the long run than a coeducational or traditional public school, despite this claim not holding true for all cases (Mael, et al, 2005). There are multiple factors that must be taken into account when measuring such as the classroom setting, strategies, student motivation, and social interactions within groups (Burns, 1998). Each component plays a role when evaluating the classroom.

Formal experimental studies existed that explored reader response practices in the high school setting, but no formal studies existed on these practices in an all-male English classroom. In this study, the terms "same sex schooling" and "all male environments" were used interchangeably while searching. The terms "student relatability with a text" and "student identifying with a text" was also used interchangeably while searching and throughout this research study.

Same sex schooling and its effects on the classroom environment

Searching through past literature, there was a dominant focus on studies that centered on the same sex versus co-educational environment debate. These pieces of literature focused on the effects that the same sex environment had on individuals and if they benefitted more from a mixed class versus a single sex class. Additionally, there was little to no emphasis on content

specific classes but instead general classroom interactions across multiple subjects. While there were numerous studies that focused on comparing males in the same sex environment to females there were few that gave insight distinctively to the all-male environment in the English classroom. Although there are fewer recent studies on the effect of the same sex environment, the exploration into past literature yielded findings on the same sex environment and its effect on males of all ages in schooling. In regard to this study, the literature review focused on the middle and high school setting as well as briefly touching on Catholic schools (per the environment involved in this study) as well as the same sex environment.

Overall, this literature is relevant to the study because it gives background and insight to the classroom space involved as well as providing possible classroom situations that can occur (instructively, academically, emotionally), interactions between groups, and reader response theory which focuses on looking at past experiences, background, and how your environment can affect how and what you read.

Morris (1997) directed a quantitative study that focused on evaluating the effectiveness of various Catholic schools and their involvement with helping pupils achieve examination success. This study used a multi-level analysis through field work observations, interviews, and school documentation to interpret if there is a relationship between academic effectiveness and religious values, attitudes, and practices. Researchers found that student achievements were directly related to intellectual ability and socio-economic background in different school environments. In the end, the greater level of social cohesion between home and school the more likely it is that there will be a high degree of social harmony and of educational purposed within the school community thus leading to high levels of academic effectiveness and productivity.

Riordan (1990) conducted a quantitative analysis that compared the structures of two different types of Catholic schools (single sex and mixed schools of different socioeconomic status and race) and the different educational outcomes of each in regard to males and females. Riordan also looked at the positives and negatives of single sex and mixed sex schools from cognitive to social and short to long term effects. Through his research, Riordan found that there was little difference in cognitive achievement between boys in single sex and mixed schools (although it was still apparent). However, the adolescent subculture in single-sex schools is more widespread where physical attractiveness and heterosexual popularity is favored over academic achievement amongst peer groups. Riordan also found that in the minority school sample that both boys and girls (Hispanics and Blacks) perform better in same sex schools. Males specifically, develop a greater sense of environmental control than students in mixed-sex schools. His evaluation of the long term effects of single sex schooling shows that this type of schooling works in the favor of the male population in regard to achievement both educational and occupationally.

Baker, Riordan and Schaub (1995) led a meta-analysis study that looked at the effects of sex grouping and the likelihood and reasons that people enroll in same sex schooling. The research focused on four international schools (Belgium, Japan, New Zealand, and Thailand) and found that face to face interaction patterns in single sex classrooms influence achievement. They also explored the effects that single sex groupings had on the classroom and how they may be enhanced or muffled by the context in which sex groupings are used within the countries system of schooling.

Singh, Vaught, and Mitchell (1998) researched single sex classes in two inner city schools with an emphasis on how school organization effects low SES students' academic

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achievement. This quantitative study explored the effects of two variables of class organization and gender on attendance and measurements of achievement. The authors also examined gender-based differences in attendance and achievement. The overall findings concluded that class arrangement is more likely to influence grades in class performance than standardized test scores, class grades were consistently higher in single sex classrooms, and that class organization and environment exert stronger influence on class grades but not necessarily standardized testing scores. The study yielded that the single sex organization had a positive effect on attendance of African American students in inner city schools while also exploring the possibility that single sex setting may not enhance the educational environment for white males in the same way that it affects females and students of non-white minority groups.

Strietmatter (2002) employed a study that focused on the perceptions of a single sex class experiences between males and females. Through the qualitative study practices of interviews and observation data, the research found that all students viewed their single sex class as being beneficial to them. However, the perceptions of *why* differenced by sex. For the context of this study, the male findings indicated that the setting was less distracting while not caring as much in comparison to the female population.

Martino, Mills, and Lingard (2005) questioned single sex classes as a strategy for addressing the educational and social needs of the students. The study focused on the creation of a boys only class in a co-educational school. The findings concluded that the single sex classrooms enhanced the boys emotional literacy and lead to a reduction in behavior management problems. The researchers also found that the teacher plays a key role in success and that single sex classrooms need a tailored curriculum and pedagogy that address a student's

specific needs. Overall, the study addressed the need for teacher knowledge within the context where connecting to real world experiences provides a supportive framework in the classroom.

Frances Spielhagen (2008) conducted extensive research that contributed to the effects of the single sex environment on the individual (particularly when they have choice in taking single or mixed sex classes). He utilized surveys, interviews, and classroom observations while also looking at standardized test scores in several schools located in rural and urban areas across the Unites States. Spielhagen performed both qualitative and quantitative studies throughout the middle school grades (6th through 12) while evaluating the single sex classrooms of males and females ranging from traditional to honors classes.

In one study, titled "Having it Our Way: Students Speak Out on Single-Sex Classes," Spielhagen focused on the cognitive and academic benefits of the single sex classroom. He found that in voluntary single sex classes that even though students had satisfaction with academic benefits, they reinforced the needs for social interaction in a mixed gender environment. In this classroom, students appeared livelier, focused, and on task in single sex classrooms which allowed teachers to teach more effectively. In this study he concluded that single sex class arrangements seem to the most effective when related to the developmental needs of the students and provided cognitive benefits to students that participated. However, in the 8th grade classroom that he observed, many male students reported bullying amongst peers and wanting to return to an environment with girls that would bring attention to the girls instead of one another. Students of all grades reinforced the importance of emotional, intellectual, and physical safety in the middle school grades.

In his second study, titled "Does it All Add Up? Single-Sex Schools and Achievement," Spielhagen used this same class and evaluated standardized test scores from the previous years

and compared them to the current year (2008). He found that there were no declines overall in any content area from the previous year's test scores. In fact, students in the single sex classroom made the greatest gains in the language subset (especially from honors classrooms). Additionally, he noticed positive patterns of achievement in reading and language arts in same sex classes and that these classes helped boys and girls become more comfortable with each other in the class environment, respectively. Through the qualitative practices of parent and teacher surveys the study showed that single sex classes created a safe and positive learning environment for some students but not all.

Peter and Margaret Ferrera (2008) evaluated data that explored the differences among students in co-educational classrooms compared to students in single-gender classrooms in terms of discipline and daily school attendance. In this quantitative study of a small school in a rural area the researchers discovered that the single sex environment students learn with fewer disciplinary issues than when they are in a traditional school. Ultimately, they found that discipline and attendance had an effect on academic learning. Single sex classrooms had 22% reduction in overall behavioral infractions (tardy, disruptions, being uncooperative, insubordination to teachers, etc). This 22% reduction showed a positive outcome academically with the decrease of infractions that lead to learning such as tardiness, incomplete assignments, being unprepared, and disrespecting peers.

Salamone (2003) reinforced previous studies in her review of past literature in regard to the positives and negatives of the all-male environment. She speaks on the all-male environment and how it provides a protective space where boys can pursue "their own path to self-fulfillment free from the distraction of girls" (242). She furthers this idea by saying that with the absence of girls, boys can be more willing to explore and openly discuss a broader range of literature

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beyond the typical male concepts that they might reject in a co-ed environment (such as the humanities). Conversely, she states that although this environment can be an effective tool it can also "perpetuate stereotypes that can produce feelings of inadequacy" (243). She ends her review with a final discussion on how administrators, teachers, and schools should make sure not to regress and always promote gender equality throughout the educational system.

Riordan (2002) who played a huge role in investigating the single sex education environment focused much of his research on the effectiveness of the single sex school in the private sector and public sectors. Overall, he found that single sex schools "provide an avenue for students to make a proacademic choice" (28). Additionally, Woody (2002) found in her study of school sites in rural California that single sex schoolings does assist in addressing the needs of the boy through the context of masculinity and how it can affect them both academically and socially.

These studies give a small glimpse into how important it is that researchers continue to study the all-male environment and gain research on the complexities that it brings to the classroom. This literature also stresses the importance of how any classroom, same sex or mixed, can shape young boys into men. As can be seen in this literature review, it is generally found that most articles conclude that there are positive and negatives to single sex education.

Reader motivation, collaboration, and identifying with a text

Examining the literature classroom through the lens of reader response theory brings forth unique ideas and practices that center around reader motivation, collaboration, and identifying with a text. This literature review will address the individual aspects that are involved in an English classroom when students are having a transference (reading) with a text. This includes free choice of text, what students bring to literature, classroom collaboration, and the

overall student experience. It is critical in an English classroom that educators analyze past literature to examine what has been done and what can be applied and adapted into their own classroom to promote reader motivation and engagement, both academically and socially.

Guthrie, Wigfield, and Vonsecker (2000) examined the effects of integrated instruction on motivation and strategy use in reading. A quasi-experimental study was conducted through CORI (concept oriented reading instruction) which is associated with self-determination theory. The study used a reading motivation questionnaire as well as collecting student's data on self-determination, autonomy, competence, and collaboration. This study was performed in a mixed sex classroom in the mid-Atlantic metropolitan area. The results indicated that classroom contexts can be constructed to influence motivational outcomes. Moreover, students who perceived the classroom as autonomy (independence) supportive were more likely to be intrinsically motivated for reading than students who did not receive autonomy support in the classroom.

Meyer (2000) conducted a study that investigated academic motivation using different theories and approaches in a multi-method/multi-level approach. The researchers utilized surveys and interview statements to evaluate why students approach or avoid different types of achievement. The results showed that understanding how positive classroom environments develop and are sustained is essential in improving educational opportunities through the quality of instructional interactions, which have relationships and emotions at their core. Furthermore, the study focused on the complex ways that emotions play in a classroom, especially in regard to the teacher's emotions which are also vital to a student's motivation, cognition, and effectiveness.

Bishop and Pflaum (2004) investigated the ways that middle schoolers in the U.S. perceive school and reading experiences. In this ethnographic study, students spoke on classroom social structures, reading practices, and methods through semi-structured interview and drawing images about school experiences. Twenty, teacher nominated students, from five schools in Vermont were included and the study's results highlighted the importance of different students' perspectives. In addition to these findings, the researchers found that choice, pursuing personal preferences, quiet, and not having to write were conditions that lead to engagement in reading. Moreover, if classrooms were open to talking about how new ideas and experiences were perceived, students could learn from one another, provide limited confusion, and the teacher could use these strategies to meet the student's needs.

Lloyd (2006) questioned how older adolescents practiced literacy within the context of a peer reading group as well as how gender impacted those roles by examining one 12th grade English class in a Midwestern school. They found that a majority of students choose to read texts in which the protagonist resembled themselves in terms of race and gender. The researchers concluded that a narrative from an alternative gender (male or female) or racial position might access a critical response more readily. The researchers then pointed out that socio-cultural factors did affect the males when corresponding with critical discourse on femininity.

Additionally, Guthrie et al (2007) evaluated the multiplicity of children's reading motivation, reading comprehension, and collaboration when reading with others. The authors in this qualitative study examined the students using pre and post interview questions, teacher ratings, motivation self-reports, and reading comprehension scores with a sampling of students from eight classrooms in two mid Atlantic schools. The study expanded on internal reading motivation, collaboration, and past reading experiences. It was found that many students who

had high interests, substantial involvement, and well-formed self-efficacy were relatively solitary readers. Students also responded that their own reading efficacy was based on their ability to figure out hard words and difficult passages. The findings concluded that while interacting socially and collaborating around reading occurred for some students, others it did not.

For the sake of this topic in the literature review, it is essential to briefly touch on past studies where literature circle activities were put into practice in real life classrooms. Burns (1998) observed in her classroom environment during the practice of literature circles that social interaction is a key component of its pedagogical success. When students can verbalize content, listen to others ways of thinking, and hear other perspectives it helps their overall comprehension and understandings. In her classroom, by putting students into small groups it allowed for more active involvement amongst peers. The study concluded that students enjoyed the more relaxed environment throughout each day which in turn changed the classroom climate.

Scott (1994) evaluated her 7th grade ELA classroom engage in the practice of literature circles and took note of the positive and negative effects that this practice had on her students reading practices. She found that literature circles assisted in helping her students develop reading strategies, promote acceptance of others' abilities, and responsibility while also developing a response to a text. As an instructor she concluded that even if the literature circle didn't work out (because of group complications, students reading the text, etc) the students still took risks and found that the most beneficial part of the unit was the personal approach taken by the students. In the end, students learned to actively with the book and characters throughout the unit. Noll (1994) focused on the social issues involved in literature circles and found that when it came to identifying with characters, adolescents began to develop personal understandings about

social issues. Specifically, when using non-fiction, Noll discovered that it is equally as effective as fiction at involving students and helping them develop sensitivity towards social issues.

Finally, Peterson and Belizaire (2006) looked into their culturally diverse 8th grade that consisted of total of twenty-seven low income students that were practicing literature circles. They found through evaluating students responses that each group had collected different responses based on the text of choice. They all found that it is the classroom context that contributes to student success and satisfaction within each group. Some groups were more open while others were closed off, which teachers need to take into consideration when assigning groups. They also found that there was group distress when some students read ahead or didn't read at all.

Overall the aforementioned studies provide insight into real life literature circle and reading practices done by teachers and researchers. These studies show the effects that this practice has on reader motivation, engagement, and identifying with a text in various classroom settings. This literature also brings to light how important it is that other students listen and formulate opinions in peer discussion in order to grow.

Conclusion

This literature review is significant to the study because it focuses on the student, the text, and the classroom environment. The role of the all-male environment is also imperative to this study because it discusses the positive and negative effects that can occur in this particular setting. It is important that we know the effects that the single sex environment has on its students in order to better accommodate current students and their learning practices. This literature brings different opinions, situations, and outcomes of the single sex environment, specifically males, and their interactions both academically and socially.

It is also equally as valuable as an educator, English specifically, to know the various struggles and triumphs that can occur in regard to engaging and motivating students. Being aware of the positive and negative effects that occur when a student transacts with a text is vital for teacher practices, implementations, and learning in a classroom setting. Gaining insight into what teachers and researchers have done in the past in regard to reader motivation, collaboration, and identifying with a text is also beneficial. By providing insight about classroom teachers, this research can give teachers, principals, and future researchers a chance to see implementations of pedagogical strategies geared towards student motivation, engagement, to use in the future and the positive and negative effects over time.

Chapter 3: Methodology

This study reinforces the importance of active participation when reading literature, reader motivation, and reader identifying with a text. This study is also rooted in reader response theory and the results are categorized into the themes associated with the theory. Rosenblatt (1934/1995) states, "When there is active participation in literature—the reader living through, reflecting on, and criticizing his own responses to the text—there will be many kinds of benefits" (276). During literature circles, the teacher serves as a facilitator which can give students a chance to take charge of their learning in a cooperative environment. In reference to reader response theory, the teacher must play a role in context, and insert themselves when needed. The researcher evaluated how the students talked about literature and how it could help or hinder their reading practices (both academically and socially). A qualitative research design that consisted of analyzing interviews, field notes, and student responses to teacher led questions best fit this study. The research questions were centered on the student experience as a reader and as an active member in the class environment throughout the literature circle unit. The research questions consisted of the following:

1. How does a student's past experience with literature and reading impact their response to a text of their choice as well as their motivation to read?

2. How does the use of reader-response theory serve to influence the students with different cultural backgrounds the ability to identify with the characters and/or novel as a whole?

3. How does the facilitation of literature circles conducted in an all-male middle school classroom have a positive or negative effect on student responses to literature?

Setting/Context

The students that participated in the study were eighth grade English students at a high school in the southern region of the U.S. We will call the school St. Paul's (SPHS). St. Paul's is a religious school that focuses on evangelization through education. This private school population consists of an all-male environment. At this school there is a stress on God, discipline, stewardship, academics, and molding each student into a man of God.

The high school ranges from 9th-12th grade with each grade (9-12) ranging from 230-240 students per grade. There are 1,010 total students in the school. Sixty 8th graders are admitted a year early into the high school setting and 30 of these students are in the research study. The overall school demographics are as follows: 89.6 % are Catholic, 10.4 % Non-Catholic, 89.3% White, 7.8% Black, and 2% Asian. Every class period is 50 minutes long and English is considered a core subject where classes meet every day of the school year. The high school curriculum is made up of Academic Track, Honors, as well as AP subjects. The school is not bound to the states standardized testing, but requires that the students take an assortment of College Readiness tests such as the ACT, Plan, and Explore Tests throughout course of their high school career at St. Pauls.

In regard to this study, the classroom desks were organized in circular shapes around the room. The classroom technology consisted of a dry erase board, ELMO doc, and file cabinets. Daily instructions, homework, and tasks were posted on the dry erase board while literature circle "clip boards" were moved to and from the file cabinet each day by the group's task master. Each day, the class started with the basic day to day work (vocabulary notecards) along journals, worksheets, and lessons that pertained to the literature circle unit. On the dry erase board there is also an agenda that gives day to day details and homework.

Participants

The researcher in this study was an 8th grade English Language Arts teacher. The participants of the study were thirty, academic track, male, 8th grade students. The students were placed in groups by their current preference of novels while taking into account reading levels and behavioral interactions amongst classmates. This 8th grade class consisted of sixty students, thirty in 9th grade honors English and thirty in academic track (regular English). All students were given the opportunity to participate in the research study pending a signed waiver from the student and parent. Each student was required to participate and there were 28 students included in the study. The class of twenty eight consisted of one Asian student, five African American students, and twenty two Caucasian students. Only five students were chosen for individual interviews, one from each of the five groups used in literature circles. Interviews were conducted at the end of the research study and the students chosen were (1) African American and (4) Caucasian students. These students were chosen based on their cooperation and openness to sharing their experiences, class attendance (being present for every day of the unit), and race/ethnicity. Pseudonyms were used in place of real names for all students involved in this study. Below table 1 explains the background of the students as it pertains to this study.

Table 1: Students in Interviews

Name	Race/Ethnicity	Gender
Carter	Caucasian	Male
Kyle	Caucasian	Male
Cody	Caucasian	Male
Ben	African American	Male
Nolan	Caucasian	Male

Furthermore, all students' participation was taken into consideration when evaluating surveys, assessments, and observations given throughout the unit. Students were put into literature circle groups based on book preference in a ranking of #1-6. Originally, there were six books in the literature circles but one was thrown out due to low interest. Only two students in were put into a book group that was not their first or second choice. Students were also placed based on low, middle, and high academic standing of their current class grades and participation. Class behaviors were also considered when placing students into groups in terms of students that did not get along or became off task when grouped with friends. All 28 students came from previous co-educational school backgrounds with one student saying that he previously took a literature circles elective in middle school.

Data Collection and Instrumentation

The sampling methods in this study consisted of literature circle groups based on book choice. The collection of data was sorted into each group respectively and individual semi structured interviews were conducted at the end of the unit (one person per group). A reading inventory was distributed in the beginning of the unit along with surveys before, during, and at the end of the unit. There was also a combination of worksheet, journals, and writing assignments throughout the unit. Classroom observations were also conducted throughout the research study and field notes were used to collect data of each group.

The researcher used four methods to gather data in this study that focused on how teachers utilize literature circles and reader response theory to evaluate reader engagement, motivation, and identification with a text. Qualitative data were collected in the form of surveys administered at the beginning, mid, and end of the study, class worksheets, observations/field notes, and semi-structured interviews. The beginning, mid, and end surveys varied in open-ended

questions asked and style of response (complete sentences or listing). These surveys were presented as the following: a reading inventory, guide sheet for literature circles, reading questionnaire, and reading assessment. Each worksheet was given at different stages of the process to record possible changes in attitudes and behaviors over time. Observations were done during class time and taken before and during the unit. Semi-structured interviews were taken at the end of the literature circles and consisted of the purposeful sampling of five student interviews after data collection began (one to represent each book group).

Hand analysis of qualitative data (Creswell, 2015) was used to read, mark, and divide the data into parts. Materials were organized by type such as groups, interviews, whole class observations, and surveys (Strauss & Corbin, 2007). In order to evaluate the effectiveness of literature circles, I compared pre, mid and post assessments of individual students based on their attitudes towards reading and group members throughout the literature circle process. Semi-structured interviews, surveys and field notes were coded through the in vivo coding process. Data were divided into beginning, middle, and end parts throughout the unit. Major themes emerged from the coding process and the findings were interpreted within the context of reader response theory. Student relatability and intrinsic motivation in the classroom was observed through observations and field notes as well as provided written surveys and assessments throughout the unit.

Findings in this study are divided into major and minor themes as well as two charts. The overall findings will yield results collected from each instrument used throughout the unit (surveys, worksheets, etc). Each theme will then be addressed in relation to the five groups involved, respectively. The five novels are Sharon Draper's *Tears of the Tiger* and *Out of My*

Mind, S.E. Hinton's *The Outsiders*, Kathryn Erskine *Mockingbird*, Caroline Cooney's *Code Orange* (SEE APPENDIX G for novel descriptions).

Week 1

  The first week consisted of gaining familiarity with the unit objectives and practice of literature circles. The first day consisted of an original teacher created reading inventory (APPENDIX A) that asked students an array of questions. The first set of questions asked about past reading experiences, attitudes, current reading practices, and identifying with a text. The second half of questions focused on reader motivation (i.e what makes a novel appealing, how they go about finding novels to read, and what in the novel creates enjoyment in them as a reader). These questions focused specifically on the readers past and current perceptions of reading (practices and methods) along with how they feel when reading and identifying with a text.

  After students completed the reading inventory, there was in introductory lesson on each role that the students will play in their group. I used Harvey Daniel's *Literature Circles: Voice and Choice in the Student-Centered Classroom* (2002) as a guide when creating roles for students in each literature circle which was then adapted to the 8th grade level in regard to questions asked, overall content needed to complete tasks, and rigor. Each student in the group was assigned a different role which consisted of summarizer, discussion director, connector, illustrator, and literary luminary/passage chief, and task master. In a group of six, all of these roles are done individually. If there was a group of five then the illustrator was also the task master in that group with a dual role.

  The *Summarizer* prepared a brief summary of the night's readings with key points and examined how the current setting of the novel influenced the characters (actions, reactions, etc.). The *Discussion Director's* job was to develop a list of questions that the group might want to

discuss as well as helping people tackle big ideas in the reading while sharing their reactions. The *Connector*'s job is to find connections between the book and the outside world. Furthermore, the connector looks at the night's readings and finds connections to their own life, happenings at school or in the community, similar events at other times and places, or other people or problems. The *Illustrator* created a picture of something significant that happened during the readings. This role gives students a chance to share some of their own images and visions. Most importantly, the picture must reflect a true effort in conveying a picture and/or message which meant that it could not be thrown together at the last minute. The *Literary Luminary/Passage Chief*'s job was to locate a few special selections or quotations in the text for the group to talk over. The main objective was to help members of the group go back to interesting, powerful, funny, puzzling, or important sections of the reading and think about them more carefully. Finally, the *Task Master* was in charge of keeping track of each group member staying on task during class discussions as well as marking if students brought in their reading materials and had completed role sheets.

Once roles were explained, the students proceeded to practice literature circles through the readings of two short stories over the course of the first two days of the lit circles unit from *Read, Share, Teacher Workshops: Literature Circles, 2ⁿᵈ edition* by Harvey Daniels. During these story readings, the groups were picked at random (proximity of desks around them). These first two groups were picked at random (proximity of desks around them). Each short story served as a way to ease students into the process of getting into circles, choosing roles, and collectively reading a text together.

The first short story was two pages front and back (single spaced) titled "One, Two, Buy Velcro Shoes: What Greg Taught Me" by Barry Lane. Students randomly assigned roles to one

another, read the stories individually in a circle, then filled out their role sheets and discussed as a small group. After the activity was finished, the discussion was open to the class about what they liked and didn't like about literature circles, what they found difficult and easy, and what they would do next time they practiced literature circles in a group.

The next day, students got into different literature groups and read a second short story titled "An Incorrect Correction" by Cynthia McCallister. This short story was one page front and back (single spaced). This second time around, the students had to choose a different role (one that they did not have the previous day) and repeat the process. The short stories were picked with consideration of reading levels and overall reading comprehension of an 8th grade student with time constraints on class time (50 minutes). Week 1 continued with students reading summaries of their novels, ranking them from 1-5, getting into their groups, and starting background research on the author and setting of the novel that was chosen.

Week 2

At the beginning of week 2, students were given a survey adapted from Guthrie et al. (2007) research study that centered on the types of books that peaked students interests (APPENDIX B). This survey was adapted to my classroom and forced students to evaluate how they viewed themselves as a reader as well as look into the texts that they choose to read. The questions in this survey give students the opportunity for self-reflection on why they pick the books that they do (personal interests, genres, mediums of text), what they like best about reading and if they see importance in reading (reader motivation). The survey also asked students how they see themselves as a reader (comprehension, good or bad), as well as an evaluation about the beginning of literature circles. The remainder of the week consisted of putting students into their official groups and created an organized calendar, assigned roles, and began reading

their novel. The students chose their own reading schedule and roles (each person had to perform a role at least twice throughout the lit circle unit).

Week 3

Week three consisted of meeting with groups on a daily basis and performing observations while gathering field notes. Each day the group met for 25-30 minutes with silent reading at the beginning or end of the class period. At the end of week 3, the students took a second survey that dealt with character revelations since they began reading, predicting what would happen next in the novel, similarities between the reader and the character as well as looking in the theme of the novel (APPENDIX C). The final question focused on literature circles and there like or dislike of the method in week three. This sheet was adapted from a teacher (Beth Salyers) study of literature circles in her middle school classroom. In this study, the survey served as a way to track reader progress and identifying with the text as different students are at different points in their novel.

Week 4

Week four concludes the research study and is filled with culminating activities to end the unit. At the beginning of the week students participated in mini projects that consisted of writing a diary entry from the characters perspective reflecting on a significant event in the classroom, a timeline of major events that have occurred in the novel thus far, and creating questions for the group that put themselves in the characters shoes. Each activity dealt with character relation and major plot points in the novel. On Friday, the last day of the unit, the students completed the final survey on the literature circle unit. This survey served as the summative assessment that asked about overall novel comprehension (APPENDIX D). Was it hard to read? Easy to read? Why and why not? This survey also asked questions about the student's identifying to the character and to discuss their literature circle experience. Overall,

each survey served as a way to track the progression of the student's personal connection to the text, comprehension of the novel, and interactions with peers during literature circles. Overall, each piece of data gave me, the researcher, an idea of how students felt in the beginning, middle, and end of the unit in regard to motivation, collaboration, and comprehension with the text of their choice.

Difficulties Encountered

The main issue during literature circles was keeping students engaged during meeting times. There were several occurrences where students became "bored, too loud, and off task." This resulted in adjusting meeting times and incorporating silent reading throughout the unit. This silent reading occurred either before or after literature circle group meetings. I wish that I had made more time to incorporate outside activities into the groups as well as whole class instruction. I decided to add a final project in each group where the group members created a product that focused on theme, main characters, and conflict to reflect their overall experience with the novel. These projects consisted of projects that involved painting a picture, creating soundtrack, writing newspaper articles, poems, etc.

Another difficulty encountered was the recordings of group discussions. Because the discussions during class time were too loud, I was unable to successfully record group interactions and transcribe them. Unfortunately, after recording the group interactions on the recorder then cell phone, the voices were still too garbled for transcription. This was disappointing and next time, groups will need to be moved to another room to record interactions. With this being said, as the unit went along, adjustments were made to class meeting times, silent reading times, and the overall duration of the unit (the original time frame being five weeks). Because the students became antsy and impatient with one another during

group discussions, the unit was only four weeks. This was a major change in my study that had to be done to ensure student engagement and overall positive experience with literature circles. Next time around, I would like to increase my level of active participation in the circles, instead of being an outsider during discussions.

Ethics

In regard to grades during the literature unit, the students were graded on participation throughout the unit, class activities, and completion of surveys. One of the issues with literature circles is finding ways to tie concrete grades to participation in the circles (I cannot be at all groups at all times to ensure active participation). Students did treat the circles more seriously when I came around to observe. IRB consent forms were distributed and signed by the 28 participating students. Pseudonyms were also used in place of real names.

Chapter 4: Findings

The purpose of this qualitative study was to evaluate the reading community of an all-male environment through the practice of literature circles and its effects on reader engagement and collaboration. This study also addressed if a student's cultural background affected how they identified with a text and overall intrinsic motivation, particularly with a text of their choice; utilizing the reader response theory. The research questions are as follows:

1. How does a student's past experience with literature and reading impact their response to a text of their choice as well as their motivation to read?

2. How does the use of reader-response theory serve to influence the students with different cultural backgrounds the ability to identify with the characters and/or novel as a whole?

3. How does the facilitation of literature circles conducted in an all-male middle school classroom have a positive or negative effect on student responses to literature?

The findings will consider the (1) personal connections and experiences between the reader and the text (2) past and present experiences and its effects on *how* they interact with a text and *what* they choose (3) social factors that influence readers and contribute to their experience (in regard to the all-male environment). There are also smaller themes that will be considered throughout Chapter 4 such as:

- Transference of knowledge dealing with the topic of human nature and society

- Free choice of text which speaks on student significance in regard to texts

- Personal responsibility

- What students bring to literature

- The student experience

- Freedom when choosing a text

- Reading memory (with an emphasis on reshaping and making aware of cultural differences)

These themes are grounded in the components of reader response theory that focuses on multiple components in regard to reading and student responses to literature. Each component serves as a puzzle piece in reader response theory and how to interpret student experiences in regard to reading and their progression emotionally, academically, etc (or lack thereof) when interacting with a text. Each section of the findings will consider a theme that was addressed during the study as it relates to reader response theory, specifically the student experience, personal connections, influences (past and present), reader motivation, social interactions, and what the student brings to literature and its effects on how and what they read (Rosenblatt, 1935/1995).

While coding interviews, I noted that the five interviewed students shared multiple themes in common in regard to reader motivation and literature circles in the all-male classroom. The common words that were picked from the interviews consisted of the following: "reading before," "good book," "interests," "genre," "good or not so good," "finding time to read," "off and on topic," and "real life" (in regard to character relation), and "getting to know others."

When analyzing my classroom data I quickly discovered that I had too many students to analyze the answers for the beginning, middle, end surveys, and class worksheets. In order to make my data more manageable, data was coded and themed then created into a general findings based off of the data. I also created two charts: (1) a chart of whole group instruction observations and (2) student responses about performing literature circles in an all-male environment. The remainder of the chapter consists of analyses of group observations and individual interviews. Additionally, during the literature unit, students were aware that all work

relating to this research study was for a grade. In this chapter, each group will have their own

titled section that will consist of whole group interactions and group reaction and individual

interviews (one interviewed student per group). Below is table 2 that explains the observations of

week one to week four which consisted of whole group and small group instruction time.

General observations

Table 2: Whole group responses and observation Week 1 to Week 4

Week 1: Intro to lit circles through short stories	- First Reading: - Majority of the class did not like how the story ended - Went well - Deep discussion - Talking about how you shouldn't make fun of kids - Roles: - Student A: Disliked his role-- wanted to be illustrator and task masker—likes to draw - Student B:Liked because he got to draw - Student C: Didn't like role—passage chief—read it over and over - Student D: Connector—was neat—make a solution to a problem—group came up with it - Second Reading: Different - Many groups didn't have a connection - Staying on task was hard (distractions, class volume)
Week 2: Starting with official groups	- Start of Circles: - Discussions about chapter and pages- counting through to set the schedule - Gave students a range of dates - Some wanted to speed through when reading some wanted to take their time - School break in between - Some students were concerned about how much they were reading every night "*Go to sleep after reading*"— one student to another - Teacher Self Reflection: - Keeping kids on task was challenging - Some wanted to speed through the activity and make the process go faster - Chaos in the middle of the literature circles—calm in the beginning and ending

(Table 2 continued)

	• Groups: • Personal connections—sister, brother, other books, etc o Task master—can get rude

Week 3:
 	
 Beginning
 	
 to Mid-Way
	▪ Teacher Self Reflection:
	 ▪ Took class vote—decided to incorporate silent reading at end of class after meeting in groups
	 ▪ Beginning to see a lot of frustrations between group members—arguing, focused more on tasks, roles, and calendar then content and talking about story
	     o Decided to incorporate individual activities and then meet in groups on findings as a group
	     o Trying to find a balance—timeline, questions on conflicts, identity journal, etc
	     o Adjusted the end time to the next week
	         ▪ Give more time in class to read—took a vote and they said yes
	     o When move to more individual task kids looked forward to being in their groups again

Beginning, Middle, and End Surveys

The beginning, middle, and end of the unit surveys consisted of a reading inventory, reading questionnaire, guide sheet for literature circles, and reading assessment (in that order). According to the reading practices inventory given at the beginning of the unit, 15 of 28 (54%) students used negative adjectives such as boring, hard, not fun, and time consuming when speaking on their past experiences with reading. Students who did not consider themselves readers found it easier to relate to a text when it appealed to their interests while others found it difficult because they do not like to read or do not read often.

From this same survey, it was found that students who found reading easy stated that it depends on the subject and whether they feel like they can put themselves in the character's

shoes. Additionally, seven students said that reading can be difficult or easy depending on the character and the situations presented in the novel. This survey served as an initial introduction to the unit as well as assisting me in knowing the past reading experiences of each student. The overwhelming amount of students who did not enjoy reading in the class served as motivation for me as a teacher, to find ways to make reading more enjoyable and relatable for students during the literature circle unit. Their honest, personal responses opened my eyes to my own teaching practices and how novels that engage students can aid in student growth.

The second survey given was the reading questionnaire that centered on book interest, reading comprehension, and how they see themselves as readers. Of 26 students that took the survey, 10 students saw themselves as readers, while 15 did not and only one said that he "sort of" considered himself a reader. Each student was then asked how do you know you are a good reader. Generally, both students who considered themselves readers or non-reader defined a good reader as someone who reads a lot of books, reads fluently, remembers what they just read (reading comprehension), and reads fast. Most students acknowledged that reading helps vocabulary and that you need it in the future.

It is interesting to note that when asked about what other things that they liked to read besides books, all 15 non-readers mentioned that they read at least one of the following: sports articles, lyrics, video games, comic books, and magazines compared to readers. As a teacher, we can use these types of surveys as a way to see what mediums of texts peak student interests and use these as a way to create reader motivation. In this day and age, technologies play a huge role in my student's everyday lives and interactions with reading. They are constantly scrolling, liking, and retweet texts, words, and images on a daily basis. Reading on the screen and reading a novel in the classroom creates intertextuality in regard to reading processes. Addressing the

realities of the way that students read is crucial in planning and executing lessons plans in the reading classroom.

Guide Sheet

The *Guide Sheet for Literature Circles* served as a half way survey point for the readers and as an update to how they were moving along with the text. This survey asked a question about literature circles where students listed two things that they liked and disliked about literature circles. In this worksheet, students were also asked to relate the novel to themselves and discuss similarities that they found between their life and the lives presented in the story. A majority (82%) of the students said that they could discuss the similarities between themselves and the characters in the novel. These similarities consisted of sports, family, and friends. While some students related to what the characters looked like and personality traits, others centered on things such as relating to conflicts that happen in the novel. For example, Bobby said, "I feel her [the character's] sadness because just like her brother died, my dad died." Through this question asked on the survey, the student was able to see himself in a character and open up about a past trauma. This question alone opened up a dialogue which in turn created a conversation where the student felt more comfortable discussing the death of his father with his teacher and classmates.

Billy in a different group made a connection with the text and said that the characters death reminded him of a friend that he had whose mother had recently passed away. Even though both students were reading different books, they were each able to relate the tragic event from each respective novel (*Mockingbird* and *Tears of the Tiger*) to their own life. John who was also reading *Mockingbird* stated that he related to the protagonist, Andy, because they "both dealt with things in their own way." John struggles with ADD/ADHD and finds it hard to make friends just like Caitlin who finds it hard to make friends because she has Asperger's. At this

mid-way point in the unit, it was good to see students relating to the characters on both small and large scale ways. Additionally, Students had mixed reviews about literature circles ranging from liking the interactions with peers and hearing what other people had to say to not liking their group because it gets loud and they are sometimes off topic.

End Survey

The last survey given was a reading assessment. This assessment focused on overall novel comprehension, character relation, and literature circles. When it came down to discussing literature circles over 75% of the students had positive experiences with the practice. These students stated that literature circles helped them talk and interact with peers, better understand the text, effectively envision the story, helped them put themselves in the story, and they enjoyed having someone to talk to about the text. Even though some students had complaints about being off task periodically and room noise, the reviews were positive and support my use of literature circles in the future.

Conversely, one group in particular experienced several problems throughout the unit with students not reading, being off task and rude to one another. On the reading assessment, each member of this group (*Code Orange*) answered the literature circle question with negative reviews, respectively. For example, Easton said, "I do not like them very much," while Sean and Michael said, "Some people are mean and micromanage our group and it makes it boring," and that "Other members of the group bring the group down." Larry was mad that he got points deducted for being off task. Lastly, Perry, who was also in the Code Orange group, said the following,

> I thought that the people in my group were bad and off task and one was a control freak. Most people didn't read the book and just looked up a summary of the book. The books that we had to choose from were bad. This book needs to be longer.

Through the analysis of the reading assessment, one can see that during the literature circles, the class environment affected the overall experience in a positive or negative way depending on the group collaborations and student dynamics. The groups with personality issues had a more negative attitude towards the novel and their overall experience with literature circles. In the end, the social aspect of the literature circles had an effect on the overall motivational outcome.

Group Observations and Individual Interviews

Out of My Mind: "I'd kind of need to talk and somehow find a way to walk, too."

  Observations. Throughout the literature circles unit, the *Out of My Mind* (OOMM) group appeared to be on task throughout class conversations and gatherings. In the beginning, the group showed limited sympathy to the African American protagonist, Melody's disability and found her narrative negative, naggy, and that she "complained a lot." As the students progressed through the novel and encountered scenes where Melody was bullied and one particular instance where she fell out of her walker and onto her face one student said, "That was messed up when she fell on her face." Additionally, students identified with Melody saying that they "would feel like a burden while having Melody and then her siser the "perfect child." Half way through the book, various students began to be off task, reading ahead, and not following directions as far as their roles in the group (illustrator, task master, etc). However, when faced with deadlines and time towards the end of the unit (this book having the highest page count in lit circles) the group stayed on task and engaged. On one day in particular, the group chose to go straight to silent reading after a class activity (leaning more towards forgetting to participate in literature circles) which showed that when dealing with deadlines, they prioritized getting the book finished over discussing. Through analyzing multiple student surveys in this group the following words and

phrases were used to describe literature circles: fun sometimes, too loud, and crazy. In regard to events that happen in the book, the group agreed that there were many times were Melody was treated unfairly and that even though bullying in school was wrong, it did happen all of the time.

Student Story. *Personal Connections and Experiences*. During his interview, Carter shared a personal connection with the text and its emphasis on family. Carter says, "I can relate my family to Melody's because both my mom and dad get stressed out sometimes a lot, and having two kids is really stressful. I guess you could say it's kind of a burden sometimes with some of the kids." This quote shows that he saw a reflection of his own life in the character.

Carter's mother influenced his decision to read *Out of My Mind.* His mother brought to his attention that he once went to school with people that had cerebral palsy and advocated towards him choosing and reading this text. Additionally, Carter's familiarity with the disability extrinsically motivated him to choose and read *Out of My Mind* for literature circles. This previous experience with a student like Melody helped him to better identify with the main character and other characters in the story. He says, "You're going to have kids that make fun of them, and you're going to have kids that are nice to them." This connection that Carter made with the text falls under the student experience aspect of reader response theory as well as promoting social awareness in the individual. His beliefs and attitudes towards family and students with disabilities were reinforced in his readings. His awareness of how students around him react to students with disabilities showed how his lived experiences contributed to his social awareness. Carter recognizes that the things that happen in this book happen in real life. Even though he doesn't think that characters in the book are exactly like him and sometimes finds it difficult to relate to them because they are "made up," Carter was able to put himself in the character's shoes and relate the character's *family* to his own. This response can show that he did

find a way to identify with Melody (a female and with a disability) even though he is a male without cerebral palsy.

Influences and motivations. *Past and Present.* Although Carter's mom influenced his choice to read *Out of My Mind,* Carter's brother, Paul who likes sports, action, and sometimes romance novels, is the person that he looks to when trying to find a good book. Carter's family dynamic plays a key role in his reading practices. This family influence is one of the influences that Carter brought to his literature practices thus effecting his reading motivation when reading *Out of My Mind.* When asked if he would read the book for pleasure if it wasn't assigned for school purposes he had the following response:

> If I didn't know what it was about, I would really be hesitant, but when you gave us the option of books and I look at it, I thought, oh this could be a good book, so I had that as my first one. Without knowing what it's really about, I'm kind of hesitant to do it. Knowing a little bit helps.
> Prior to participating in literature circles, Carter said that his reading consisted of ESPN

headlines and sometimes the news. Before literature he says that his reading habits "went up a little" after reading *The Crossover* (Alexander, 2014) in class because it was a "really good book" and those practices transferred over to *Out of My Mind* even though there were some "good parts and not so good parts." Following the literature unit, Carter has become more interested in reading and has even started to take more time to sit down and read instead of going outside and playing sports. Now, he sets aside time to read, which he did not do before. Carter's past experiences with cerebral palsy and a positive attitude from previous class readings contributed to his ongoing intrinsic motivation while reading thus furthering a positive reading experience with the text.

Socially, Carter thought that literature circles were "quite interesting at first and that it's good for social reasons, getting to know people." Carter enjoyed talking to others in a group and

felt that it paved a way to understand what others were interested in. He also brought up that he enjoyed how the group readings are based off of the entire group, how slow they read, how fast they read, and if they comprehend it. He also liked the fact that he got the chance to get to know the people in his group. Based on his response about others in his group and his positive learning experience socially it can be said that this social experience added a positive contribution to his overall experience. Furthermore, the group produced more honest reactions because they did not feel like they had to impress one another while working together. Carter then goes on to write that he does feel more comfortable about his group members now that he has done literature circles.

Tears of the Tiger: "Yeah, because once I start reading, if it's a good book, I want to finish it."

Observations. At the beginning of the literature circles unit, the *Tears of the Tiger (TTT)* group formed a connection amongst one another. Because the main conflict was presented in the first few chapters, the students labeled it an "emotional read" in the beginning. The first reactions made by several students in the survey were positive with them agreeing that they "really liked it." One student even commented that he was glad that he got to read it with others because then he "won't feel lonely." In the beginning, the students were enthusiastic about the style in which the story was presented such as newspaper articles, journal entries, letters, etc. They found this style of writing unique and made it a "good book." Half way through the novel, the students came up on a few slow parts which in turn made them less motivated to read. However, when the ending came, which had a huge plot twist, many students were upset and devastated by the death of the main character. I even observed one student sitting in his chair with his mouth hanging open for a few minutes after finishing. In this group specifically, there was an issue where some students would read ahead of the scheduled calendar and "spoil" certain parts of the book for

others. This conflict came to head on the last day of reading when two people in the group had read the ending while the others hadn't. All in all, the students found the book to be sad, unpredictable, and good. Even though the story is centered on African American characters, I did not observe conversations centered on the topic of race. My presence as an African American teacher could have affected the discussions (or lack thereof) about race in the group interactions and individual interviews. A majority of the conversations centered on the main conflicts and themes of the novel. Sharon Draper's (the author) writing style and delivery really captivated the students and kept them engagement throughout the novel. The student's bond while reading also helped maintain reader motivation, even throughout the slow parts of the book. This group was constantly reasserting the notions that drinking and driving, peer pressure, and sports was a social norm and things that they interact with (or that effects them) in their daily lives. It seemed interesting that each group member could relate to the trauma that happened to Andy in their own way.

Student Story. *Personal Connections and Experiences.* While sharing about his personal experiences with the novel *Tears of the Tiger*, Kyle related to the main character, Andy, because he liked basketball. His connection with the sport made it easier to connect with the character while the emotional events that occur in the novel help Kyle relate to Andy in a deeper way. Kyle says, "I feel guilty sometimes for stuff that I've done, and I felt bad for friends because I might have done something to them. Stuff like that." Kyle's connection with the events that occurred in the novel was a driving force behind why he liked the book. The topic of peer pressure, suicide, and feeling guilty are the main themes that resonated with him while reading. He continues to process his feelings while reading and bonding with his groups members

throughout the course of the unit. In the end, he connects with his peers. When asked if this book related to real life he says,

> Yeah, because kids feel guilty every day for anything that they do. Sometimes kids even commit suicide every day. Peer pressure is definitely a thing. That's probably why some of them (characters in the book) were drinking. One of them wasn't drinking, because he doesn't drink. I think that if I was him. I would have asked to drive. Maybe that would have caused him to not have the accident because he would have been sober and would have been driving.

When speaking on the idea of Andy's family versus his own, Kyle said that his parents were more involved and "good" compared to Andy's.

> During the interview, Kyle is asked to describe the novel. He states,

> I read Tears of the Tiger and it was about a group of kids who played basketball and they were really good. One night after a win, they went out to celebrate and they had alcohol. They were drinking and driving and they were underage too. They got into a wreck, and the captain of the basketball team, the star, he was killed in the accident. The other 3 boys survived. One of the ones that survived, Andy, he always felt guilty because he thought that it was his fault that Rob died. He thought that it should be him that should have died since he was driving. He just feels a lot of depression and eventually he just ... At the end he skips school one day, and he just has his dad's gun and he kills himself.

In the novel *Tears of the Tiger,* there is an underlying message that focuses on Andy's daily struggles of living life as an African American male. It is interesting that Kyle does not mention Andy's African American race in relation to his reading and what he got out of it, with Kyle being a Caucasian reader. There are a few possibilities that one can get from this omission. (1) Kyle's connection to the novel proves bigger than the race of the character. He connected more to the characters actions, personality, and events that occurred in the novel (2) because the struggles of being an African American male were something of which Kyle could not identify, he didn't see it as pertinent to the novels theme or story line (3) the presence of an African American teacher could have made the student leery to mention race. Both conclusions prove the complexity involved when dealing with identity and character relation when reading a text.

When asked a follow up question about race and if it ever occurred to him that Andy was black, Kyle replied, "I realized it, but it wasn't a big deal to me." In this sense, reading is seen as a reflection of his attitudes and beliefs, with Kyle's being centered on things other than race. One could still question the absence of social awareness during this reading in regard to Kyle's reading experience on the topic of race and the male protagonist, Andy.

Past influences and motivation. *What student brings in and how it affects their reading practices*. Kyle has always enjoyed a good book, specifically suspense and mystery. He calls himself a reader of "books that are interesting." When evaluated on his past reading experiences, he speaks on reading being easy, boring, and sometimes having a hard time concentrating because of the topics. He says, "If it's not a good then I don't enjoy reading, but if it's a good book and its interesting, then I want to read it." Through the experience of literature circles, Kyle was intrinsically motivated during his reading and his reading practices changed from boring and uninteresting to motivated.

His repetition of the "book was good" and it "made him enjoy reading." In this end, this change tells us that what the student brings to the literature does affect their practices but can become altered based on the reader's experience with texts of their choice. This attitude can also be affected by the presence of peers and a social circle around a text.

Socially. When asked if literature circles affected him socially, Kyle said that even though he didn't feel like it changed him individually, it helped him bond with his fellow classmates. He enjoyed how everyone brought up different perspectives and that it helped his understanding. He also used the book as an opportunity to talk with Adam. According to Kyle, he and Adam discussed the book outside of class in regard to how "good the book was" and about what they thought would happen next at certain points in the book.

In this case, the practice of literature circles helped Kyle interact with his peers and brought to light the social influences that occur in reading practices. He says, "I feel like I understand my group members better because I now know how they feel about certain things." Overall, the friendly conversation with the novel as the backdrop, allowed Kyle to better interact with his peers which ultimately motivated his reading practices.

The Outsiders: "I don't get in fights. I don't make fun of other people. That's pretty much it."

Observations. At the start of the literature circle unit, *The Outsider's (TOS)* group enjoyed literature circles saying that they enjoyed the interactions and were 95% on task during the class meetings (according to the group members). As the literature circles progressed, students in the group failed to keep up with their reading schedule and became off task during class discussion. As I walked around and listened to their group discussions, the conversations centered on the setting, time period, and peer interactions that occur throughout the novel. The difference in time period sparked many conversations, for example the way that people talked, dressed, and the values of their society in 1965 versus present day 2016. The conflict between the Socs and the Greasers also brought up the conflicts of class and what the students would do in certain situations that were presented by the characters. For example, when speaking about the fight scene that occurred in the novel one student said "I would fight with them if it was for a good cause, not just to fight." While another said, "I might have just done it just to do it." The students saw value in their interactions as a group and when they were on task, had meaningful conversations about the novel and conflicts that occurred.

Student Story. *Personal Connections and Experiences.* Cody found a limited connection to his book *The Outsiders* by S.E. Hinton. Throughout his interview, there was a fixation on the socioeconomic status of the characters and how that did not relate to him in various ways.

Through his life, Cody has been able to find limited connections, yet he finds a way to connect with this text. This connection shows that he is capable of seeing himself in the characters in which in reads. This emphasis on the character's socioeconomic status can briefly be seen in his description of *The Outsiders*. Cody says,

> The Outsiders by S.E. Hinton. It started out with this boy named Ponyboy. He's like poor, pretty poor. He's like low class tier. He's part of this gang with his friends and his brothers. Ponyboy ran away with one of his friends from the gang. They got in a fight with these Socs, I don't know how to say it. Those are pretty much the high tier people. Johnny, the boy he ran away. with, accidentally stabbed, not accidentally, he stabbed somebody to keep Ponyboy from dying. They ran away scared from the police.

In this introduction of the book, Cody sets up the ideas of lower and upper class, an underlying theme in the novel. Once he introduces the themes he talks about the main events of the novel and was then asked about how these events seem true or untrue to real life. Cody provided an undeveloped conclusion in regard to the book and his life situations. He says,

> There are some poor people who really don't act the way they should in real life, and they begin fights with rich people because rich people sometimes feel like they get mad at the parents for not getting it the way they want it and they go beat up somebody. Accidents could happen and poor people can accidentally kill somebody.

Based on the answer above, it is hard to say if Cody made a genuine connection with the conflicts in the novel and his life experiences. It seems that he tried to make a connection to real life and interpreted what happened in the novel literally and applied it to real life, literally. Conversely, Cody did make a more coherent and understandable connection to the novel when it came to his identity and what he was *not* in relation to the characters. He says, "I don't think so because they got into fights" and he did not. He also says, "I'm not either poor or rich, so I'm middle class. I don't get in fights. I don't make fun of other people. That's pretty much it." Looking through the lens of reader response theory, Cody's reading memory which involves

making aware of cultural differences through reading experiences was somewhat limited. Because Cody's socioeconomic status of the main character was different, his current life experiences limited him in making a connection.

Additionally, his age and development could have also played a factor in that he has not been made fully aware of the socioeconomic surroundings of others in a way where he can show empathy thus connecting with others that are not like him. Cody also says that he finds it difficult to relate to his characters because his "life is pretty plain. Nothing really goes on in my life. I haven't killed anybody and I'm not poor. Also I change clothes every day and have short hair." Even though Cody thinks that he cannot relate to the characters and/or events that occur in a novel, this reading of *The Outsiders* provided him with a way to reflect on human nature and society. This novel also made Cody realize things about himself and what he is not.

Past Influences. *What student brings in and how it affects their reading practices and interpretations*. When asked about the family of Ponyboy and Darry being like his own, Cody does make the connection to the characters family and his own in regard to the sibling dynamics. Cody responds,

> Yes. My brother he likes to boss me around sometimes like Darry bossed around Ponyboy. I usually respect him, but sometimes I don't. When I don't, he gets mad just like Darry got mad at Pony. If I got slapped by my brother, I wouldn't run away. I would just go to my room, maybe cry about it

Once again, Cody is aware of the decisions that are made by the characters in the novel, makes a small connection, but then reinforces how he would change the situation if it were presented to him. This same response occurs when asked how he would react to similar problems that the characters faced in the novel.

When talking about the killings, Cody says, "Back to the stabbing, I would turn myself in because if I run away and get caught I'll be in more trouble." If we look deeper into these

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responses made by Cody, they can be valuable because it shows that the novel is causing him to reflect on what he should and should not do. Whether it is presenting new ideas or building on existing ones in regard to morality and decision making, the reader composed inner reflection and rationalization on past, current, and possibly future decision making based on the novel. Ultimately, the novel challenged (and reinforced) the ideals that he had about himself.

Additionally, what Cody brought in to the text as a reader also effected how he interacted with a text. Cody states, "I like reading overall, but sometimes some books don't interest me. It depends what kind of genre would interest me. I like more realistic fiction like I can picture it happening in my head." Cody says that literature circles made reading harder because he had to read every day with a set amount of pages and sometimes he didn't have time. Before literature circles, he would read a lot then stop for a few hours or a day. Because literature circles forced Cody to read on a consistent basis versus his past experiences of pacing himself through a book a little at a time (and on his own terms) time management became an issue. This transaction with a text presented a conflict of personal responsibility and time management for the student.

Socially. He has also found that during literature circles he was the student who was excessively reading versus the others in his group. Unlike some of the peers in his group, he liked to read. He admired the students who were "go-getters and read the whole book in one session." In his group experiences he came to the following conclusions

> Some of us are off task and they talk with each other and don't participate in the discussions about the book, and then some do. They participate. They ask different questions and comprehend and read the book.

Through these conclusions, one can see that his peers did not have a direct influence on his reading practices. Because he liked to read before literature circles, he brought those experiences to his group. Additionally, he did enjoy the people in his group that chose to

participate during the literature circles. According to him, his direct interest in a book lies with what the book is about but he did enjoy discussing what happened and what might happen. Mockingbird: "She just doesn't like to show her emotions and I love emotions."

Observations. The Mockingbird (MB) group was a group that showed emotions and frequently collaborated on the topic of the novel. When observing this group I noticed that they were rarely off task and when they did venture away from the book, the chatter usually stemmed from something that occurred in the novel. Unlike other groups, this group was composed of students from different friend circles thus creating an unfamiliar social space. Even though the objectives of this study focused on the connection with the book and social circles, this group leaned more towards solely making literary connections. With this being said, the social awkwardness and differences outside of the classroom could contribute to why they were rarely off task and focused on the book's contents.

Because the novel is centered on a student with Asperger's Syndrome who has gone through the trauma of losing her brother in a school shooting there is ample room for conversation about the syndrome, trauma, and the school setting. Throughout the collaborations, the students commented on how they were enjoying the book and were "learning a lot." On one occasion a group member did not understand one part of the book and asked for help. When this student explained what he didn't understand (an interaction between two characters) another member explained the situation. These types of interactions that involved asking questions, solving them, and instances that involved critical thinking happened throughout the unit. The students actively commented about topics such as school shootings and characters as well as the structure of the novel (font size, word choice, and the overall language of the book).

Student Story. *Personal Connections and Experiences.* As a reader, Ben identified with the problems and choices that the character faced, specifically, the protagonist dealing with the sudden death of her brother. Ben says, "I'd be miserable, really, because my brother is, like, sometimes he's my only friend. I'd be absolutely terrified of life without my brother and the rest of my family." Ben acknowledges the severity of the situation and uses this to make a personal connection. This connection Ben speaks to his character and attitudes himself as well as his relationship with his brother. Ultimately, this event gave Ben a chance to reflect on his own life. He also recognized that the events that occur in the novel do happen in real life such as school shootings. One of the things that he said he learned from this book was that "life without a family member can be very hard." Ben's family dynamic sparked his connection to events that occurred in the novel.

Conversely, when asked about the similarities between his family and Caitlin's, Ben shared no connection and said that his family was very crazy and hers was not. He also felt that he could not connect to the main character because "she doesn't like to show emotion and I love emotions." It is interesting to note that in his reading practice inventory (one of the first surveys given), Ben writes, "It is easy for me to relate to something that I read because all that it takes to relate to someone is something in common." Then in a later writing assessment, Ben says that he did not feel a connection with his character saying, "No, I don't feel that I could relate to anything other than having a single parent. I have lost relatives before but I was not as close to them as Caitlin and Devin." These responses call into question what Ben really defines as truly connecting with a novel and what kind of things have to happen in order for him to identify with what he is reading.

Later on in the semi structured interview, Ben is finally able to immerse himself in a situation in regard to the potential situation of losing his brother. These varied responses bring forth an issue in the style of questioning used and how a different response is yielded based on the way that a question is phrased and in what point the researcher is asking the question to the student..

Past Influences. *What student brings in and how it affects their reading practices and interpretations.* Ben defines himself as someone who "loves to read" but he sometimes struggles to find the time because sports have affected his reading schedule. He says, I read a lot last year but this year, it's just sports and everything have taken up most of my time." Throughout the literature circle process he felt that his reading practices did not really change but that he enjoyed the book overall.

Ben brought in a different perspective to the group being that he had read the novel prior to participating in literature circles. This gave him familiarity with the language, style, and word choices used by the author. When asked if the novel was easy to comprehend Ben states, "The book was easy to comprehend because I had previously read it." Additionally, Ben did not believe that there were any hard parts. This previous reading of the text put Ben at an advantage over his peers which could be a reason as to why he chose to read this particular text. Where others struggled with the author's curt sentence structure and sometimes awkward language usage, Ben did not. Additionally, what he brought in gave him a chance to have more individualized experience which could have created a barrier between him and his classmates with which he felt little connection with during the circles.

Socially. When asked if he felt as if he connected with the people in his group, Ben replied, "not really." He comments that his peers got "off topic easily" which frustrated Ben throughout the process. He speaks on one specific incident and says,

> "Well, in our book, Caitlin's favorite video game is Mario Kart. One day whenever we were talking about Mario Kart, we just went way off topic and that seems to happen sometimes."

The social barrier within his group and his already familiarity with the novel effected his response to the novel as a whole. Ben says, "I would like literature circles more if I had more respectful and attentive classmates in the circle. I do, however, enjoy being able to ask others questions as well as answer them about the book." This reaction shows that he did see value in the literature circles; however, his interactions with his peers were inconsistent which resulted in mixed reviews in regard to his group members. Ben's independency while reading was also reinforced throughout the project. When asked how he felt about the people in his group Ben writes, "I feel like some of my peers showed to be more mature than I had thought before, and others, less mature around certain people." Ben's final realization about his peers shows social growth from the beginning of the unit to the end. Even though he was constantly frustrated with his groups, he did see value in the interactions and as getting to know another side of his peers in the classroom setting.

Code Orange: "I was frustrated just because they weren't really contributing to the discussion on a deeper level."

Observations. As stated earlier, the Code Orange group had the most difficulty collaborating during the literature circles unit. In the beginning of the unit, the students did not like the male protagonist, Mitty. The group was in agreement that he was "dumb" and didn't make wise decisions throughout the novel. They also complained in week one that their group was having trouble staying on topic. When picking their reading schedule, they mistakenly

picked too few pages to read a night which in turn caused boredom and a stall in their discussions. This problem was only temporary, in that they added more pages for the next weeks. By the middle of the unit, there were clear and defined roles of each individuals in the group: micro manager (also the self- proclaimed leader of the group), slacker (did not turn in worksheets or read), quiet student, and constant talker (usually off task), and a student that hated the book (constantly trashing it and labeling it "propaganda"). The lack of dialogue that was book centered and the chaotic nature of the group eventually shaped a few group members reading experiences in negative light. Because the literature circle was dysfunctional and many came unprepared, their interactions with the text also suffered. When asked how they felt about the students in their group, Michael said, "I feel like Sean and Perry should not work together again." Perry said, "I don't like working with Nolan or Perry because Nolan is mean and Perry gets off topic a lot." However, Jeff said, I feel that sometimes they can be hard workers, but they also can be off task" while Beau said that some did work while others didn't.

Even though this book was the first choice for each member in the group, it did not reinforce a commitment or satisfaction to the novel throughout the unit. The group collectively agreed that the main character was "stupid" and the contents of the novel, unrealistic. Additionally, a majority of their interactions were spent arguing over events that occurred in the novel. Because the group had to spend time trying to legitimize the events that were occurring in the book to real life the overall "fun" factor that drew them to choosing the book was lost, thus affecting their motivation and enjoyment with the text and group members.

Student Story. *Personal Connections and Experiences***.** Nolan was labeled by his peers as the self-proclaimed group leader and micromanager. Nolan felt a connection to this book because it was science fiction, his favorite genre. He came into the unit with a positive attitude

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with an excitement to read and get a chance to know others around him. Even though Nolan found it easy to relate to the characters that he reads in the past, he found it difficult to identify with the protagonist, Mitty. Nolan says,

> He's a procrastinator, basically. I feel like I'm really not. He seems kind of stupid in some parts of the book. I feel like I would have made better decisions than he did." If I found an envelope that said, "Epidemic" on it, I probably wouldn't have even opened it. Just because epidemic has a bad ring to it. I probably wouldn't have gone on the internet asking people about it, because you never know who people are on the internet. Just stuff like that.

The only way that Nolan really connected with Mitty is that they both go to expensive schools, take biology, and write a research paper in school. Nolan even added that Mitty's family does not even remind him of his own. Even though Nolan felt that he couldn't relate to the character, he did say that he enjoyed the plot of the story. He says, "It is kind of interesting. There's some action in it and it's just really interesting, the whole plot of it." This connection with the plot could be contributed to his past interactions with texts as well as his love for the science fiction genre. Unlike the other students who participated in semi structured interviews, Nolan did not think that the events that occurred in his novel could happen in real life. He says, "I think it's really unlikely for someone to find scabs in an old envelope, and then accidentally market them on the internet, and then get found by terrorists and then get kidnapped by terrorists."

Past influences. *Past and present.* As a reader, Nolan is very confident in his reading practices. He defines a good reader as someone that can read quickly, accurately while also comprehending and remembering it once you are finished. He loves to read in his free time and labels himself as a good reader because he enjoys it. He says, "I like reading. I read for fun, just because. It's just a way to kill time, basically." Throughout the literature circles, Nolan's love for reading was reinforced as he continued through the novel. When asked if his reading practices

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changed throughout the unit he responds, "I think they've stayed the same for the most part. I liked reading going in, so I don't think more reading is going to really change that." In this sense, the book did not have an effect on his reading practices but instead reinforced them. He continued to enjoy reading even after the difficulties with his group members.

Socially. At the beginning of the literature circle unit, Nolan was excited about the process, as he had participated in literature circles at his previous middle school as an elective course. He says, "I look forward to have the opportunity to discuss with others my experiences with a certain book." However, as the unit progressed, Nolan's opinion changed. By the end of the unit he said the following,

> I was frustrated just because they weren't really contributing to the discussion on a deeper level. It was like, we would ask the questions and two people would answer and I would be one of them. Nobody else really participated in the discussions. The questions they came up with as discussion director weren't very good, or they just copied down those suggestion questions on the bottom. They just didn't really lead to a good discussion as a group about what we read.

He also goes on to say that a few people in the group "brought the group down" thus making it harder for them to accomplish tasks on a day to day basis. In the end, this negative collaboration in his circles made him more aware of the people in his class. These interactions also helped him learn a lesson for the future and to avoid these students in any upcoming projects during the remainder of the school year. Nolan says,

> I did not realize that some of the people in my group were procrastinators and that they didn't care about our discussions. I don't want to be in the same group as some of them in the future.

Nolan then goes on to say, "I learned that some people don't really absorb the information when they read. They don't remember what they read very well. It's just different." Nolan's constant disapproval of his peers' work ethic (this was very obvious during my observations) affected the group and formed a division (Nolan versus the other people in the group). If we look

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through the lens of reader response theory, this interaction with his group members brought

Nolan to the realization that others are not like him socially and academically. Even though it did

not affect his transaction with the text, it did have an effect on him socially while making him

realize that other students' and their reading practices differ from his own. The conclusion

(Chapter 5) of this study will further explain how each student in the class had an individual

transference with a text during the literature circle unit, whether positive or negative

Chapter 5: Discussion

Implications for Teaching and Research

Through this research study, it is evident that giving student's choice when choosing a text is a decision that gives them both power and confidence over their reading practices. As an educator, I have found that giving students novels that they can relate to in turn motivate and invigorate their reading habits. Through my classroom teachings during literature circles, I recognize that there is a dire need for more diverse texts (centered on people of different sex, race, socioeconomic status, disability, etc) and social gatherings around literature in the classroom curriculum so that students are able to gain different perspectives and experiences on lives other than their own. This study has also opened my eyes to my own practices and how presenting students with more appealing novels to their age group and allowing them to choose their own text can aid in student growth not only academically, but also socially and emotionally.

This study contributes to the fieldwork of English classrooms, specifically all-male classrooms because it focuses on the same sex environment, social readings and interactions, as well as examining how students identify with a text. This study can also serve as a guide as to what motivates students to read both intrinsically and extrinsically in a classroom environment. As an educator, it helped me to realize how important it is that students collaborate with one another on a text as a way to gain new experiences with peers and with a novel, simultaneously.

Research Questions

How does a student's past experience with literature and reading impact their response to a text of their choice as well as their motivation to read?

Because the classroom was of all-males, choosing to read texts in which the protagonists resembled themselves in terms of gender, race, and socioeconomic status, might have seemed limited at first but in the end, connections were made. Many students identified with the texts,

connected with the characters in the stories, and/or had positive experiences with their literature circle groups. As a teacher, it is also reasonable to expect students to read outside of their own subjectivities, but these connections require motivation from the students. Furthermore, in the case of this study, reader motivation was based on past experiences with literature as well as reading in the social environments of literature circles. From reading novels that give alternative gender, racial positions, and socioeconomic status, the students were able to identify and transact with a text where character's lives seemed different from their own but in fact, they were able to form a connection. According to the data collected in this study, the past experiences of each reader did affect them based on their like or dislike of reading before the unit. In regard to students who liked to read before the unit, their reading practices were reinforced but not changed. Conversely, students who did not like reading before the unit said that literature circles helped them to connect more with the book and their peers. Being able to talk through their problems and relate the book to real life with their peers gave students a chance to see literature in a different way, thus affecting their practices in a positive light.

> How does the facilitation of literature circles conducted in an all-male middle school classroom have a positive or negative effect on student responses to literature?

The group environment yielded both positive and negative reactions from students. If we look at the data presented, this classroom environment of all-males served to the benefit of the students. Students felt that they could express themselves, connect, and gain insight from one another through the all-male environment interactions. This collaborative environment allowed students to engage one another in a small, safe space where the teacher was only an observer and facilitator. Without directly inserting myself into their conversation during the circles, the students were allowed to be themselves while interacting with their peers. The students valued one another's opinions while also using their classmates as a vessel for question asking,

answering, and predicting on content presented in the novels. It was also particularly important as the outside observer to make sure to constantly assist in solving group problems such as unequal distributions of power in groups, being off task, and getting behind on class readings.

The discussion roles created by Daniels (2002) were a useful frame to help students get started discussing and analyzing their books. Ideally, it required each student to think specifically about the text and vary their responses. At the same time, these worksheets eventually became a backdrop in the conversations that occurred towards the end of the unit. As the unit progressed, students did not have to lean more on the role sheets and could conduct conversations on their own. I did not want the conversations to sound like procedures but instead fluid conversations. Additionally, as they moved into week three and four, the role sheets were used less and activities were implemented. At the end of the unit, the students created a project that reflected their views on the novel through different mediums. This project was not a part of the research student but a way to assess the student's knowledge and feelings about the books once the literature circles concluded. Ultimately, the interactions, whether positive or negative, depended on the student and their openness (or lack thereof) to participate in literature circles.

How does the use of reader-response theory serve to influence the students with different cultural backgrounds the ability to identify with the characters and/or novel as a whole?

According to reader response theory, through a student's transaction with a text, literature can have impact on an adolescent such as revealing the diversity of possible ways of life, patterns of relationships, and philosophies from which he/she is free to choose in a heterogeneous, rapidly changing democratic society (Rosenblatt, 1938/1995). Through this study, students were given a chance to discuss the discourses on gender, race, class, and students with disabilities. The possibility for students to experience a series of reactions as seen in reader response theory can was directly reflected in this study. The topics presented by the range of

novels selected gave the students a chance to mediate on texts that dealt with various themes and protagonists. Each student experienced their own reactions and ways of identifying with characters, their families, and themselves throughout the novels, whether negative or positive. While some students saw the characters as themselves in the decisions that they made and their family (*Out of My Mind* and *The Outsiders*), others identified with the events or conflicts that the characters went through (*Tears of the Tiger, Mockingbird,* and *Code Orange*). This selection of texts was purposeful to attempt to engage students on people and situations in which they thought they could not identify. The texts ranged from female characters, African American characters, and a child with cerebral palsy or Asperger's. Of all five novels selected, only one had a white, male protagonist (*Code Orange*).

After collecting data, it became evident that students "identified with a text" through numerous ways. These ways of connecting consisted of situational connections, personal connections, and cultural connections based on the student. When we look at the data through multiple levels of connecting with a text, we can see that a majority of students made a connection with the characters that they read in some way. While a majority of the males in the class identified with the protagonists, some could identify with the family situations and/or put themselves in the character's shoes. Based on the results of this study, being able to put oneself in another's shoes could be used interchangeably with identifying with a character. In this sense, both serve as a way to relate to a text and showing empathy when reading about another person.

Ultimately, Rosenblatt stresses the importance of the reader having a personal connection and choice in what they are reading. Overall, the study's student responses were positive when placed in groups of their first or second choice. Certainly, books such as *Code Orange*, a science fiction novel with a white male protagonist was popular, but surprisingly, this group had the

most problems with collaborating and sadly, over half of the students in the group ended up disliking the main character and their group members. Even though few students ended up disliking their book, each student in the class was initially excited about having the right to choose the text that they were going to read for four weeks. Giving students a chance to choose their text peaked student engagement and willingness to read the texts at hand. Even though the novels were selected by me through collaboration with the English department head, the texts were appealing to students. By presenting the summaries of books, students were able to preview their texts before choosing and felt more in charge of their own learning. This study also brought to light that if we give students texts that are based in the contexts of other people their age with similar life situations, they could still have intrinsic motivation and willingness to read the novel. This in turn gives us hope that they will enter more complicated and mature text with an open mind in the future.

Summary

As an educator, I do see a benefit in utilizing literature circles in an English classroom as well as across subjects (such as history and science). This study allowed a classroom of students to feel autonomy and motivation in their learning process. Looking back on the unit, there were a few things that I would change. In the future, I would like to increasingly insert myself more into the groups in the beginning and middle of the units, which will allow for more teacher involvement in the students processes at the initial start. Then, as the students gain more independence, I could simply add myself to the group for more enjoyment and collaboration with the students and their text. Furthermore, this teacher presence increase in the beginning could result in a more positive reader experience for the groups that struggle with behavior problems and a lack of cohesiveness. Additionally, next time I would decrease the amount of role sheets

that are used by students and instead incorporate more class activities. Giving the whole class a chance to see the books that their peer groups are reading could increase reader interests and motivate outside of the classroom that is not purely academic. Socially, I think that there are immense benefits to literature circles in the classroom because it allowed a relaxed setting and autonomy in the reading process. Overall, this study reinforced my dedication to choosing novels that will get students to read as well as getting them to realize that there can be academic merit in something that you read for fun.

Ideally, this study can open doors to how teachers choose and incorporate texts that are more relatable to students. Based on these results, teachers can see how implementing more engaging texts in school curriculums can possibly promote student relatability, comprehension, and transference with literature. The strategies used in this study can aid in educators pedagogical strategies when making abstract text more personal and relevant to young adults as well as implementing literature circles across subjects and grade levels.

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Appendix A-Reading Inventory

Directions: Answer the questions below in a short paragraph using as much detail as possible.

1. What words would you use to describe your experiences with reading up until now:
    _____, _____,
    _____

2. Describe these attitudes in detail and explain why you might possibly feel this way.

3. Do you find it easy or difficult to relate to something that you read? Why?

4. What about a novel makes you want to read it?

5. Describe your practices of finding a novel that you like? For example, looking at reviews online, friend recommendations, parents, movies, etc.

6. What is it inside the novel that creates enjoyment *while* reading?

Appendix B-Reading Questionnaire

Directions: Answer the following questions in complete sentences.

1. What kinds of books are interesting to you?

2. Why did you pick this book for literature circles?

3. How do you know whether you are a good reader?

4. What do you like best about reading?

5. Are there other things you like to read besides books?

6. Is reading important to you? What makes you think that?

7. Are you excited about literature circles? Why or why not?

Appendix C-Guide Sheet for Lit Circles

Directions: Answer the following questions in complete sentences and use textual evidence where appropriate.

1. Describe the three most important events or character revelations you've read about since last Tuesday. (Remember to tell why you've deemed these three as most important in your opinion.)

2. Predict will happen next with the main characters? Why do you say this? (Use textual evidence to support your idea….note page numbers too.)

3. Relate to the novel by discussing similarities that are you finding between your life and the lives presented in the story?

4. Select two lines from the text that make you think, intrigue you, or fall under the category of being wonderfully composed. Comment on why you choose each of the lines.

5. What if you were in the shoes of the main character right now? What would you do? Why?

6. Brainstorm two themes from the text to discuss and come up with two questions that will help get that discussion going

7. List two things that you like and do not like about literature circles
    a.
    b.
    c.
    d.

Appendix D- Reading Assessment

1. Do you think that the novel was easy to comprehend?

2. What made you think that? Why or why not?

3. Were there any hard parts in this book? What did you do when you came to those parts?

4. Did you feel as if you could relate to the characters in this book? Why or why not?

5. Describe how you feel about literature circles.

Appendix E-Interview Questions

1. Name the book that you read tell me a little bit about the book.

2. Do the things that occur in this book seem true to real life? Give details.

3. Do you think this character is like you? Why or why not?

4. Does the family in the story remind you of your own? Why?

5. If you were faced with the same kind of choice as the character, what would you do?

6. Describe your attitude towards reading?

7. What were your reading habits before this unit? Now? Did you see a change? Why or why not?

8. Have you discovered anything new about yourself as a reader since the literature circle unit? What about with your classmates?

9. Tell me about your experiences working in groups for this unit.

10. Would you read this story for pleasure in your free time if it wasn't assigned for school? Why or why not?

11. Did you talk to anyone about this book outside of class? Explain what you said and why.

Appendix F-Book Descriptions and Rankings

Code Orange:
Walking around New York City was what Mitty Blake did best. He loved the city, and even after 9/11, he always felt safe. Mitty was a carefree guy–he didn't worry about terrorists or blackouts or grades or anything, which is why he was late getting started on his Advanced Bio report. Mitty does feel a little pressure to hand something in–if he doesn't, he'll be switched out of Advanced Bio, which would be unfortunate since Olivia's in Advanced Bio. So he considers it good luck when he finds some old medical books in his family's weekend house that focus on something he could write about. But when he discovers an old envelope with two scabs in one of the books, the report is no longer about the grade–it's about life and death. His own. This edge-of-your-seat thriller will leave you breathless.

The Outsiders:
No one ever said life was easy. But Ponyboy is pretty sure that he's got things figured out. He knows that he can count on his brothers, Darry and Sodapop. And he knows that he can count on his friends—true friends who would do anything for him, like Johnny and Two-Bit. And when it comes to the Socs—a vicious gang of rich kids who enjoy beating up on "greasers" like him and his friends—he knows that he can count on them for trouble. But one night someone takes things too far, and Ponyboy's world is turned upside down... Written over forty-five years ago, *The Outsiders* is a dramatic and enduring work of fiction. S. E. Hinton's classic story of a boy who finds himself on the outskirts of regular society remains as powerful today as it was the day it was first published.

Mockingbird:
Caitlin has Asperger's. The world according to her is black and white; anything in between is confusing. Before, when things got confusing, Caitlin went to her older brother, Devon, for help. But Devon is now gone, and Caitlin's dad is so distraught that he is just not helpful. Caitlin wants everything to go back to the way things were, but she doesn't know how to do that. Then she comes across the word *closure*--and she realizes this is what she needs. And in her search for it, Caitlin discovers that the world may not be so black and white after all.

Out Of My Mind:
Eleven-year-old Melody has a photographic memory. Her head is like a video camera that is always recording. Always. And there's no delete button. She's the smartest kid in her whole school—but no one knows it. Most people—her teachers and doctors included—don't think she's capable of learning, and up until recently her school days consisted of listening to the same preschool-level alphabet lessons again and again and again. If only she could speak up, if only she could tell people what she thinks and knows . . . but she can't, because Melody can't talk. She can't walk. She can't write. Being stuck inside her head is making Melody go out of her mind—that is, until she discovers something that will allow her to speak for the first time ever. At last Melody has a voice . . . but not everyone around her is ready to hear it. From multiple Coretta Scott King Award winner, Sharon M. Draper comes a story full of heartache and hope. Get ready to meet a girl whose voice you'll never, ever forget.

Call Of The Wild:
Buck is the undisputed leader of all the dogs on Judge Miller's estate in California. A crossbreed of St. Bernard and Scottish shepherd, he inherited the size of the first and the intelligence of the latter. Buck cannot know that the lust for gold hit the human beings of the country and that dogs of his breed are much in demand as sled dogs in the frozen North. Consequently, he is not suspicious when a workman on the estate takes him for a walk one night. The man takes Buck to the railroad station, where the dog hears the exchange of money. Then a rope is placed around his neck. When he struggles to get loose, the rope draws so tight that it shuts off his breath, and he loses consciousness. Read more to find out what happens.

Tears of the Tiger:
Andy Jackson was driving the car that crashed one night after a game, killing Robert Washington, his best friend and the captain of the Hazelwood High Tigers. It was late, and they'd been drinking, and now, months later, Andy can't stop blaming himself. As he turns away from family, friends, and even his girlfriend, he finds he's losing the most precious thing of all -- his ability to face the future.

Ballot—Young Adult Literature Book Club:
January 2016

Name: _____

Directions: Rank your top FIVE novels, making your first choice #1, your second choice #2,

etc.

_____ Code Orange

_____ Mockingbird

_____ Call of the Wild

_____ Tears of the Tiger

_____ Out of My Mind

_____The Outsiders

Vita

Langley Pierre is a native of Baton Rouge, Louisiana. She enrolled in Louisiana State University and earned a Bachelor of Arts degree in English with a concentration in Secondary Education in May of 2013. She holds a teaching certificate in English Language Arts (Grades 6-12) and English as a Second Language. She has taught 8th and 9th grade English in the local Baton Rouge area for three years and is an alumna of LSU Laboratory School. Prior to entering the Master of Education degree program in the summer of 2014, Langley worked in the educational sector for six years as a tutor and mentor in grades ranging from Pre-K to 12th grade.

When not in the classroom, Langley works relentlessly to provide educational opportunities in her community through service, mentoring, and tutoring. She believes that every child has the right to an education and deserves to be challenged and embraced mentally, emotionally, and academically in the classroom regardless of a student's environment or upbringing. In addition to her professional membership in NCTE (National Council of Teachers of English), she also holds memberships in Phi Kappa Phi Graduate School Honor Society and Phi Sigma Theta National Honor Society. In the future, she plans to continue teaching English and remain dedicated to educational equity, and diversity in the school environment.