Using Literature Circles to Increase Reading Comprehension

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Abstract

This study was completed to determine if there is a significant difference in students’ reading comprehension growth based on students using small group literature circles and students that are not using small group literature circles. Students’ personal attitude toward reading and current achievement levels were considered during this study.

After compiling and reviewing the findings of this study, current research and literature, and the statistical data collected from assessments, it is found that there is a significant difference in reading comprehension scores when literature circles are used.
Introduction

*Background, Issues and Concerns*

This study was conducted at a rural school in the Northwest Missouri area. The school district is a Title 1 school with 429 students in grades k-12, and has a free and reduced lunch percent of 60%. This study took place in a 5th grade classroom with 18 students, 9 male and 9 female. Overall, this class has great parent involvement, and parents have positive attitudes towards school and what goes on in the classroom. The classroom teacher has a balanced literacy approach to teaching English Language Arts in her classroom and uses reader’s workshop to deliver classroom instruction. 75% of the classroom teachers in the elementary building use a basal resource to for reading instructions, whereas the remaining 25% use reader’s workshop.

The overall concern is finding a way to increase students’ ability to comprehend literature and informational text that they read. This study will help determine if there is a significant difference in students’ reading comprehension growth based on students using small group literature circles and students that are not using small group literature circles.

*Practice under Investigation*

The practice under investigation is the use of literature circles with 5th grade students to increase reading comprehension. The study will be comparing the level of comprehension growth among students that participate in literature circles and students that do not participate in literature circles.
School Policy to be Informed by Study

The school policy to be informed by this study is whether using literature circles has a significant increase in reading achievement. Literature circles allow peer conversations about a text that is being read among a group. A literature circle group is guided by the teacher, but led by the students’ questions and points of discussion about their book. This leads to higher student engagement, which may result in better comprehension. This study will be looking at the district’s reading assessment result’s data to determine if there is a significant difference in reading achievement.

Conceptual Underpinning

Literature circles will improve student comprehension achievement. Students’ reading comprehension will increase due to having choice when choosing which book to read.

Students’ reading comprehension will increase because they will participate in peer discussions about the book they are reading.

Students’ reading comprehension will increase due to the teacher meeting with smaller groups.

Students’ reading comprehension will increase because they are reading books that are on their reading level.

Students’ reading comprehension will increase because they are using specific reading strategies as they read.
Statement of the Problem

Teachers need to use effective teaching methods to increase our students’ reading achievement and our students’ ability to comprehend text they read.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of my study is to determine the impact that literature circles have on students’ reading comprehension. I want to determine how student led discussions increase and deepen comprehension when reading grade level text.

Research Question

Is there a significant difference in reading comprehension among 5th grade students using literature circles compared to 5th grade students who did not use literature circles?

Null Hypothesis

There is not a significant difference in reading comprehension between 5th grade students using literature circles compared to 5th grade students who did not use literature circles?

Anticipated Benefits of the Study

The anticipated benefit of conducting this study is to help students use reading strategies to increases their reading comprehension when reading text in
all content areas. Finally, this study will help others become better teachers by differentiating instruction to meet the needs of different leveled readers.

Definition of Terms

Literature Circle – a collaborative group reading the same text and contributing to a discussion about the text.

Grand Conversation – The (deep) conversations among a group about a common text being read.

Roles - A specific job that each group member is responsibility for in their literature circle.

Balanced Literacy - a comprehensive program of English Language Arts acquisition. It contains all of the components necessary for students to master written and oral communication.

Reader’s Workshop - a teaching model to improve reading.

Star Reading Test - online reading assessment program

Summary

This study was completed to determine if there is a significant difference in students’ reading comprehension growth based on students using small group literature circles and students that are not using small group literature circles. Data will be collected from the students’ assessments taken at the beginning of the school year and the middle of the school year. The students’ assessment results will be compared among the group of students that used literature circles and the group that did not. If the T-test shows a significant difference between
the students that use literature circles and the students that do not use literature circles, the district could provide professional development on using literatures circles in classrooms to promote reading comprehension.
Review of Literature

To be a proficient reader, a reader must be able to decode words accurately, and simultaneously gain an understanding of the text that is being read. Students must be able to synthesize, explain, and analyze what they read. Reading comprehension is most often discussed in the educational context. However, reading comprehension is essential for lifelong learning as well (Strickland, Ganske, & Monroe, 2002).

Literacy discussion groups are one tool to support reading comprehension among all student, even struggling students. Literacy discussion groups have been called many names such as Book Clubs, Collaborative Reading Groups, Grand Conversations, Literature Circles, Literature Study, and Literacy Clubs. All these different names refer to the same concept defined as, “a group of connected, competent readers who read for a personally meaningful purpose” (Möller, 2004, p.420). Most literature resources defined grand conversations as a group as small as two to a group and as large as an entire class. The grand conversation group is intended to facilitate engagement in a student-led dialogue about literature that each child has read. The groups can consist of a variety of students. They can be grouped by ability level, gender, or based upon the choice of book chosen by the student. “In the last decade, peer led-discussion groups have garnered considerable attention and have become recommended components of balanced literacy programs” (Clark, 2009, pg. 95).

Grand conversations can be used to help individual students become better readers and better at comprehending what they read. Students gain a
deeper understanding of the text when they are given the opportunity to discuss the text with peers. Struggling readers can benefit from being in a group that has grand conversations about the text they are reading because it encourages them to be more active and they are somewhat held accountable for reading the text.

Grand conversations can also encourage struggling readers to challenge themselves as readers. Although grade-level text may be too difficult for a struggling reader, they sometimes need to be challenged in the zone of proximal development. Some students consistently read books below their ability level or become stuck reading the same genre (Kelley & Clausen-Grace, 2006). If students are grouped with their more experienced peers in a discussion group, the more experienced peers can model what it looks like to read a challenging text. The less experienced students learn from the more experienced (Möller, 2004).

Peer-led discussions are grounded in Vygotsky’s (1978) sociocultural theory of learning. According to Vygotsky, all learning occurs as a function of collaboration with more knowledgeable others (Clark, 2009, pg. 95).

Using grand conversations with struggling readers will help them become better readers and increase their reading comprehension. Grand conversation will lead to deeper thinking and understanding among all students, including struggling readers.

Skillful readers make predictions, construct visual images, create connections to personal experiences and other texts, monitor their reading and whether it makes sense, solve word and text level problems in flexible ways, summarize
as they go, argue with the author, and evaluate content and writing style. In short, skillful readers take ownership of their reading and construct meaning in active and careful ways. Literature circles are important because they promote these active and thoughtful stances toward reading (Brabham & Villaume, 2000).

Not everyone is a believer in literature circles. In the article From skeptic to believer: one teacher’s journey to implementing literature circles (Day & Ainley, 2008), a teacher named Glenna is not sure they are the best tool for teaching struggling readers. She felt they were more intended to use with advanced readers, and certainly not for her English Language Learners. She decided to try starting small when implementing literature circles. She began with picture books, then moved to a class chapter book, then was able to scaffold her readers to using the literature circle on independent reading levels. She became a believer in literature circles through this journey.
Research Methods

*Research Design*

When conducting research, two groups were created within a classroom of 18 students. One group was a control group, which received the teacher’s everyday whole group instruction. This included a mini-lesson over 5th grade standards, time for independent reading, and individual conferring time with the teacher. There was also an experimental group that participated in literature circles. This group also received the mini-lesson over 5th grade standards, time for independent reading, and individual conferring time with the teacher, just like the controlled group. In addition to the regular classroom instruction, the experimental group also participated in literature circles. The literature circles consisted of small groups, usually 3-4 students, reading the same book. Students were able to choose their book, and it was a book on their instructional reading level. The groups would meet 1-2 times per week to have conversations and discussions about their book. Students were assigned jobs to complete between each group meeting. The jobs included discussion leader, vocabulary enricher, literary luminary, and connector. Data was collected on both groups of students to compare the growth of both groups. If a difference is found between the controlled group and the experimental group, this information will be shared and other teachers will be encouraged to use literature circles in their classrooms.

The independent variable is a group of 18 5th grade students that live in a rural area. The dependent variable is the STAR reading assessment.
Study Group Description

This study was conducted at a rural school in the Northwest Missouri area. The school district is a Title 1 school with 429 students in grades k-12, and has a free and reduced lunch percent of 60%. The actual study took place in a 5th grade classroom with 18 students, 9 male and 9 female. Demographically, all the students that participated in the study are Caucasians. Six of the students participate in the free and reduced lunch program. The students in the study are all on similar academic levels, and only one is currently on an Individualized Education Program (IEP), however, he is in the process of being released from his IEP completely. The classroom teacher has a balanced literacy approach to teaching English Language Arts in her classroom and uses reader's workshop to deliver classroom instruction.

Data Collection and Instrumentation

Data was collected on each of the 18 students participating in this study. Data was collected from the STAR reading. Data from this assessment tools was collected at the beginning of the study and again at the end of the study. Data was also collected at the beginning of the study to determine students’ reading attitudes. Scores from the assessment given at the beginning of the study are compared the scores obtained at the end of the study.
Statistical Analysis Methods

A T-Test was conducted to determine if there is a significant difference in students’ reading comprehension growth based on students using small group literature circles and students that are not using small group literature circles. The assessment data from the beginning of the study was compared to the reading assessments from the end of the study and survey to determine the impact that literature circles have on students’ reading achievement.
Findings

A t-test was conducted to interpret whether there was a difference in reading comprehension growth among students that participated in literature circles and students that did not participate in literature circles. The following graphs and tables will represent the organized findings based on the pretest and posttest results of the Star Reading Test.

### t-Test Analysis for Star Reading Test Results From Students That Participated In Literature Circles

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Source</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Mean D</th>
<th>t-Test</th>
<th>df</th>
<th>p-value</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Pretest</td>
<td>753.33</td>
<td>Mean D</td>
<td>-4.76</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>0.0007</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Posttest</td>
<td>944.44</td>
<td>191.11</td>
<td>-4.76</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>0.0007</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: significant when \( p \leq 0.25 \)

According to the data collected from the Star Reading pretests and posttests, the 9 students that participated in literature circles in the classroom showed a significant increase on their reading comprehension scores. The mean of the students that participated in literature circles Star Reading pretest is 753.33 and their posttest mean is 944.44. This gives a mean difference of 191.11. The t-Test showed a -4.76 and the degree of freedom was 8. The t-Test analysis computes a p-value of 0.0007. The p-value is less than the Alpha, so the null hypothesis is rejected. Since this p-value is less than the Alpha 0.25, there is a significant difference in reading comprehension test result for students that participate in literature circles.
t-Test Analysis for Star Reading Test Results From Students That Did Not Participated In Literature Circles

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Source</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Mean D</th>
<th>t-Test</th>
<th>df</th>
<th>p-value</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Pretest</td>
<td>696.11</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Posttest</td>
<td>673.89</td>
<td>22.22</td>
<td>0.693</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>0.254</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: significant when p <= 0.25

According to the data collected from the Star Reading pretests and posttests the 9 students that did not participated in literature circles in the classroom did not show a significant increase on their reading comprehension scores. The mean of the students that did not participated in literature circles Star Reading pretest is 696.11 and their posttest mean is 673.89. This gives a mean difference of 22.22. The t-Test showed a .693 and the degree of freedom was 8. The t-Test analysis computes a p-value of 0.254. Since this p-value is more than the Alpha 0.25, there is not a significant difference in reading comprehension test result for students that participate in literature circles.

The Null Hypothesis is not rejected because the p-value of .254 is greater than .25, which means there was not a significant difference in reading comprehension test results for students that did not participate in literature circles.
Posttest scores of students that participated in Literature Circles and posttest scores of students that did not participate in Literature Circles

According to the data collected on the posttests from the Star Reading test, the students that participated in literature circles showed more growth on their post tests than the students that did not participate in literature circles.
Pretest and posttest scores of students that participated in Literature Circles

![Bar chart showing pretest and posttest scores](chart.png)

According to the data collected on the pretests and posttests from the Star Reading test, 100% of the students that participated in the literature circles showed growth on their posttest.
Pretest and posttest scores of students that did not participated in Literature Circles

According to the data collected on the pretests and posttests from the Star Reading test, 33% of the students that participated in the literature circles showed growth on their posttest.

**t-Test Analysis for Star Reading Test Results of Posttest of All Students**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Source</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Mean D</th>
<th>t-Test</th>
<th>df</th>
<th>p-value</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Posttest - LC</td>
<td>944.44</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Posttest – No LC</td>
<td>673.89</td>
<td>270.55</td>
<td>3.19</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>0.006</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: significant when $p \leq 0.25$

According to the data collected from the Star Reading posttests comparing the 9 students that participated in literature circles and the 9 students that did not participated in literature circles in the classroom showed a significant difference in their reading comprehension scores. The mean of the students that participated in literature circles Star Reading posttest is 944.44 and the mean of
the students that did not participate in the literature circle Star Reading posttest mean is 944.44. This gives a mean difference of 270.55. The t-Test showed a -3.19 and the degree of freedom was 8. The t-Test analysis computes a p-value of 0.006. The p-value is less than the Alpha, so the null hypothesis is rejected. Since this p-value is less than the Alpha 0.25, there is a significant difference in reading comprehension test result for students that participate in literature circles.
Conclusions and Recommendations

The conclusions from this study suggest that students that use literature circles on top of their regular Tier 1 instruction show significant growth in the area of reading comprehension. The findings show that there is a significant difference in reading comprehension growth between students that participate in literature circles and students that do not participate in literature circles.

The data concludes that students that participate in literature circles show a significant difference in reading comprehension compared to students that do not participate in literature circles.

According to the data collected, there is a significant difference in reading comprehension among 5th grade students using literature circles compared to 5th grade students who did not use literature circles. The mean of the students that participated in literature circles Star Reading pretest is 753.33 and their posttest mean is 944.44. This gives a mean difference of 191.11. The t-Test showed a -4.76 and the degree of freedom was 8. The t-Test analysis computes a p-value of 0.0007. The p-value is less than the Alpha, so the null hypothesis is rejected. Since this p-value is less than the Alpha 0.25, there is a significant difference in reading comprehension test result for students that participate in literature circles. The mean of the students that did not participated in literature circles Star Reading pretest is 696.11 and their posttest mean is 673.89. This gives a mean difference of 22.22. The t-Test showed a .693 and the degree of freedom was 8. The t-Test analysis computes a p-value of 0.254. Since this p-value is more than the Alpha 0.25, there is not a significant difference in reading comprehension test
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The data collected supports the conceptual underpinnings, that literature circles will improve student comprehension achievement. The underpinning stated that students’ reading comprehension will increase due to having choice when choosing which book to read, participating in peer discussions about the book they are reading, meeting with the teacher in small groups, reading books on their level, and that students are focused on using specific reading strategies as they read.

The underpinning states ways to differentiate your instructions to fit the needs of your students. Looking at the findings of this study, it should be recommended that teachers differentiate their instruction to meet their learners’ needs. One way of doing this is to use small group skill focused groups. This could be done in any subject, but this study’s findings shows that it works when teaching reading.
After concluding this study, there were some further studies that could be conducted. A larger sample size would be more beneficial for collecting data. Also, using more ways to measure reading comprehension would help in the validity and reliability of the data collected.
References


