

**The Influence of Gender and Literature Forms on
Literature Circle Engagement**

By

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Abstract

This is an extension of an action research project conducted in a rural high school in western Wisconsin over the course of three months. The original project looked at literature circles and the roles that gender may play in influencing the dynamics and discussions of the groups. Specifically, the focus was whether literature circles would work more effectively in single gender or multi-gender groupings. The extension of the research evolved from an observation that graphic novels were influencing male engagement more than any other literature form introduced to the literature circles. A class of juniors and seniors who took the elective literature class titled Novels was used in the study. They were given a choice of novel to read as a literature circle and were then given specific roles inside that circle. Observations were made on meeting days and data was collected through recordings of group discussions, written evaluations by students and a student survey at the end of the unit. Evidence pointed to the conclusion that there was higher engagement and efficacy with the novel if the literature circle was comprised of single gender students as well as graphic novels being the literature form with the highest engagement level for males.

Introduction

In school districts across the country, literature circles are becoming an increasingly popular method of instruction in English/Language Arts classrooms. Growing up and going through school myself, I had never experienced a literature circle. When I went to college, they still weren't too popular and I had no formal instruction on how they worked or operated. Now, 15 years later, my own children participate in literature circles on a regular basis. When I had the opportunity to revise one of my high school literature classes, I jumped at the chance to add literature circles to my own classroom.

My literature class is called Novels. It is designed to be a class that focuses on reading, first and foremost. My high school functions on a block schedule. We have 4 blocks of time during the day, and the blocks are 90 minutes long. Novels was designed to be a class to foster the love of reading while still maintaining a structure of a focused literature learning. In order to

keep to both of these criteria, I added literature circles with novels focused on young adult interests. I gave presentations on all the novels and allowed students to choose their top three choices. They were all given a lesson on how literature circles functioned; a binder was provided with all the different roles and a planner for them to decide a reading schedule on their own terms. It turned out I had a couple groups that were single gender and a couple that were mixed gender. I discovered through observations at literature circle time, the single gender groups were having longer and more meaningful discussions. It struck me as surprising which led me to dig deeper to understand whether the gender makeup of the group matters in literature circles.

Within my initial study into literature circles, it was proven that the gender makeup of the group influenced group function as well as engagement. This led me to question whether the form of the novel would influence the groups as well. The all-male group, which had the greatest engagement, read a graphic novel and the all-female group read a non-fiction novel about a female struggling with bullying issues. The new study adds a new novel format, *graphica*, as a choice for each group, and measures whether that affects active engagement. It also seeks to discover if an all-female group would have the same level of engagement with a graphic novel that the all-male group had.

Literature Review

Purposes for Literature Circles

In the 1990s, a reading strategy known as literature circles was introduced to English Language Arts classrooms across the country. The strategy was the first of its kind to suggest that student choice could impact engagement in the classroom. Harvey Daniels was a leader in this movement. When he wrote his book, *Literature Circles: Voice and Choice in Book Clubs and Reading Groups* (2002), he explained that students should be allowed to choose their own literature within small discussion groups and be led by a teacher who would function as a facilitator, and not as an instructor. The idea was for students to be grouped not by reading ability as some had suggested, but by interest groups. He thought this would bring the fun back into studying literature and allow the students to make personal connections by responding to literature in social group discussion. As a result, he noted that students would be more engaged and pass that engagement on to other members of the class.

Over the years, literature circles have been used as a primary strategy for different types of readers. Some research suggests that literature circles are valuable tools for struggling readers. Stabile (2009) looked at whether or not literature circles could be beneficial to students who were struggling readers. She concluded that students with reading struggles made more progress in their reading when they had the option of choice in what book or genre to read. She also concluded that literature circles provided students with a method to connect with the text, and helped students to become more engaged and reflective readers (p. 58). This led to the question of whether or not it would be beneficial for students to be grouped by abilities.

Poole (2008) performed a study for the National Middle School Association which examined whether or not students benefit from ability grouping. In his study, he found that

students should be joined together in heterogeneous groups rather than homogenous groups because it allows for all students to function at a higher level of thinking. This was particularly true for students with special needs. Larry proved in his study that when students were put in mixed group abilities, they performed at a higher level than homogenous groups where they didn't feel the need to try to push themselves in order to perform better (p. 245).

It has been suggested that literature groups should be used to help non-motivated readers become life-long readers. Brozo and Flynt (2008) place significance on making sure readers at a very young age become engaged in the content they are reading. In order for teachers to help motivate readers, they offer six evidence-based principles for teachers to use. Some of the principles include connecting “outside literacies with inside school literacies” (p. 173), using multi-media approaches to teaching rather than just textbooks, and providing a wide range of interesting texts for the students to read (p. 174). Two of the principles fit right into the structure of literature circles, and those are expanding student choice and options, and structuring the students in collaborative groups in order to enhance motivation (p. 175).

The final rationale for using literature circles in the secondary classroom is to allow students to take more of an ownership of their own learning. Clarke (2007) suggests literature circles allow students to discern meaning of a text on their own rather than the teacher giving them meaning. She also makes the point that literature circles provide students with an opportunity for social interaction centering about a common text (p. 59)

When Harvey Daniels re-examined literature circles in 2006, he made several conclusions about their benefits. He has determined there are four main benefits: engagement, choice, responsibility, and research (p.10). He found that when students are placed in smaller groups, they have more opportunity to express themselves positively and cooperatively than

when groups are run by the teacher (p. 11). He also found that when students are allowed to choose their own books, they tend to experience more successes rather than frustration as compared to reading a book which is forced upon them by the teacher (p. 11). His ideas for ways teachers can use literature circles in the secondary classroom are: responding through written conversation, different forms of assessments, and extensions of reading into not just fiction, but non-fiction (p. 13).

What are the gender differences in reading?

Gender differences in reading have been documented in many studies over the years. In Margaret Ferrara's (2005) research, she explored how each gender learns differently. She explains how "females tend to express themselves verbally while males tend to express themselves through graphic representations" (p. 2). She found in her study, that in single gender groups, girls tended to move through information more quickly and earned higher scores on tests. The girls also reported on surveys that they felt stronger and more like a leader in single gender groups (p. 5). The girls also answered that they felt more comfortable in the single gender classroom answering questions, not being afraid to make a mistake, working together was easier, and they didn't have to compete with the boys (p. 6). Boys did not have the same results. The boys in the study reported that they wanted to go back to mixed groups because "the girls were smarter and they wouldn't have to give as many answers as they had to in the all boy classroom" (p. 5).

In contrast to Ferrara's study, a study by Lane Clarke (2006) gives an opposite picture of gender grouping. She notes an early study by Cherland (1994) which showed literature circles of mixed groups having boys speaking for longer turns, teasing girls, and taking the power of the

group (p. 58). Clarke's study followed a class of students over a two-year period. She noted that when boys were younger, they tended to dominate the groups and be more vocal. As they aged, they regressed and didn't engage with literature. At this point the girls tended to start taking over the groups (p. 72). One of her theories for this shift is that, early on in their lives, boys like school and over time they change and spend their time wanting to be out of school (p. 73). She refers to this theory as "positioning" for power. When bringing in literature circles to this mix, she concluded that they are necessary for the discussion of books as well as helping students learn about themselves and the lives of others (p. 76).

Another aspect of gender differences is focused on the type of text used in most schools. Lloyd discovered most texts in schools aren't geared toward male preferences (2006). In her study she found texts used in schools were focused more on the interests of girls. It was also noted that boys have a stronger preference for non-fiction books or books having a male hero. Another point highlighted in Lloyd's study found that most books in schools are those considered "classics" or realistic fiction and those novels may be the cause of boys being turned off by reading: no engagement (p. 31).

Why does engagement matter?

To have a successful reader, there needs to be engagement with the literature. Godinho and Shrimpton studied students from primary to middle-level grades and followed their engagement in literature through "talk-turns" (2010). They discovered that, early in school, boys were actively talking in small-group literature discussions; then, as they got older, they started talking less and girls started taking over discussions (p. 6). They noted also that as the boys aged and their discussion decreased, so did their engagement. The boys began talking out of turn and

became more of a discipline problem (p. 8). This leads to the assumption that keeping boys engaged in the literature helps them stay focused as well as helps the teacher keep control of her class.

David Booth's (2002) study suggests one of the reasons boys don't get in engaged in English Language Arts (ELA) classes is because they don't feel an ownership with the literature most classes require them to read. He comments, "In English classes, adolescent males must handle a curriculum where the focus is on narrative genre...boys may be unwilling to discuss some kinds of text" (Booth, 2002, p. 17). He wondered if the activities traditionally performed in ELA classrooms were demeaning to the type of texts boys tend to value (Booth 2002). He also makes the point that if students don't relate to the text, or comprehend it, they aren't engaged (Booth 2002).

In order to keep students engaged in their reading, Brozo suggests teachers must allow for students to make their own choices in ELA classrooms (2002). Using this theory, Booth (2002) designed his own study to make literature circles work within his classroom. When the group of boys was reading a memoir about a young boy, he found them actively engaging in discussions about the book without prompting (p. 9). In his survey at the end of the unit, he found more boys liked the literature circles, but a large minority liked the whole-group book because they didn't have to work as hard as they did in the group (p. 10). He found at the end of his study that boys liked going to his class, he had fewer discipline problems, and they had meaningful discussions of the literature (p. 11). It seems clear that, in this study, choice equates to engagement.

A study conducted by the Scottish government began with the premise that reading for enjoyment was associated with performing better in school, stronger writing ability, and wider

cultural awareness (Allan, Ellis & Pearson 2005). At the end of their study, they concluded engagement was a big factor in whether the students were successful. The study indicated that the boys who were engaged with their books, and brought them home to read on their own, showed a greater increase in attitude toward reading in general (p. 9). The girls seemed to maintain the status they started with at the beginning of the study. Thus, by using literature circles with only boys in the group, the engagement with the literature increased as well as vocabulary scores (p. 9).

The Scottish study also discovered that being in a literature circle helped to heighten this engagement. Some groups took their interest in their novel and did outside research to find out more about the book and the author who wrote it (p. 19). This activity served to widen their engagement and their connection to the text. One boy noted “you can discuss deeper” with the people in the group because “you began and went along together” (p. 20). This wider connection, within their group, led to a deeper engagement with the literature.

Taylor and Parsons (2011) conducted a study specifically aimed at improving student engagement. In a survey of students, they found three indicators of successful interaction which led to engagement: learning from each other; connecting with experts; and having more opportunities to talk and converse with their peers (p. 9). An added caveat to these items was that the learning needed to be relevant and current to their lives (p. 13). In order to achieve these goals of learning and connecting, they state that teachers need to create an environment which allows students to feel safe, as well as to be able to engage with each other, and share thoughts about the literature (p. 19). The students also noted that they wanted to be engaged and when they were, they felt more successful and able to explore new ideas (p. 20). This was true of both males and females.

Overall, the literature suggests boys have more trouble engaging with literature in which they don't have a specific interest. Choice and engagement seem to be a large factor in making sure literature circles work effectively. Studies have shown over time that teachers who make decisions to actively include student interests, and provide opportunity for student choice, have a higher chance of having successful learners, with fewer discipline problems, in their classrooms.

Where do graphic novels fit into engagement?

According to Brozo, the gap between female and male readers on the literacy scale is increasing as students get older (2010). He goes on to assert that by the time most male readers get to high school, almost half of them will think of themselves as non-readers (2010). In a study by Smith and Wilhelm, it was discovered that graphic novels were a literary form that most often increased engagement in young male readers (2002). The key factor in this newfound engagement is that the illustrations blend with the text and makes the text not as intimidating as a traditional novel and allows the reader to examine the illustrations and make inferences through them rather than relying on the written word alone (Ivey 2008).

Because engagement is often the key to helping reluctant readers, graphic novels have become a literary form which has grown over the years. "Graphic novels are book-length, high-quality comic books that introduce children and adults to a wide range of literary fiction and non-fiction subjects. Graphic novels stand alone as complete works, as opposed to comic books, which are usually short serials" (Burdge, 2006, p. 124). The appeal of graphic novels is becoming more widely accepted with book sales growing exponentially over the years. Librarians use professional journals to develop their collections and those journals are now

including reviews of more and more graphic novels and making them legitimate in the literary world (Ching, 2005, p. 20).

For many students, graphic novels offer a new form of reading to explore. Coming from a visual age of video games and instant gratification, graphic novels give students a more visual way to read a novel. The panels help give the reader a visual passage of time that they don't get through traditional literature (Seyfried 2008). Seyfried used graphic novels with a group of students in an experimental, or new sort of book group. He found students craved books they can "relate to, written in a language they can understand, with jokes they can get and metaphors that are clear to them" (2008). His experimental book club ended up being a jumping off point for a lot of his reluctant readers. By starting off engaging students in graphic novels, those students became more avid readers and eventually branched off into more traditional literature with a newfound sense of accomplishment at being able to successfully navigate more and more complex texts. This came with a starting to use graphic novels in literature circles (2008). The allure of graphic novels has begun and are they widely becoming more accepted in classrooms.

Methodology

This research study was broken into two parts. The pilot study was conducted in the spring of 2013. The results of that study spawned new questions which led to the extended study conducted in the fall of 2013. Both studies were performed in the same school, using the same elective class, only using different participants for each study in two separate semesters.

Participants for Spring 2013 Pilot Study

The participants of this original study were members of a junior/senior elective Novels class that met daily for one quarter in the spring of the 2012-2013 school year. There were 16 males and 8 females. The class was a 90 minute block class. All data in the pilot study pertains to these 24 students.

The novel choices and makeup of the groups were as follows:

Please Stop Laughing at Me: 5 girls (memoir)

Maus: 5 boys (graphic novel)

Man in the High Castle: 5 boys (fantasy)

House of the Scorpion: 4 boys (science fiction)

Paper Towns: 3 girls, 2 boys (mystery)

Participants of Fall 2013 Study

The participants of this study were members of a junior/senior elective Novels class in the same high school as the pilot study. They were comprised of 9 males and 17 females who were all of various reading levels and interest levels. The class was also a 90 minute block class.

The students were given a permission slip at the start of the quarter. All data in this follow up study pertains to 26 students.

The novel choices and makeup of the groups were as follows:

Please Stop Laughing at Me: 4 girls (memoir)

Stitches: 5 boys (graphic novel)

Anya's Ghost: 5 girls (graphic novel)

House of the Scorpion: 4 boys (science fiction)

Paper Towns: 4 girls (mystery)

This Dark Endeavor: 4 girls (fantasy)

Materials

All of the groups in each study were given surveys three times during the course of the unit (Appendix A). At the beginning of the class, students were given a pre-survey to ascertain their reading interest and background. Students were given a book talk detailing the different novels, listed in the Participants section, at the start of the literature circle unit and were asked to choose their top three choices of novels to read. Once in their literature circles, all groups were provided with a binder containing role sheets (Appendix A) they were to fill out for each of literature circle meeting. During the third literature circle meeting, all students were given a self-evaluation sheet on their literature circle performance for that day. At the end of the literature circle unit, students were given a post-survey to gauge how they thought they and their circle performed.

Procedures

Once literature circles were assigned, students met in their groups and discussed the rules they wished to follow in their circles. They determined what would happen at each meeting and what would be the consequence of not having reading for an assigned role completed at any of the literature circle meetings. They planned their own reading schedule and assigned chapters for each of the six meetings. The dates of the meetings were set by the teacher so they remained consistent for all groups within the block class. Students were told they could meet outside of class if they chose. Only one group of girls reading *This Dark Endeavor* chose to meet outside of class as well during Homeroom, which occurred right after this class period.

At the beginning of the block, role sheets were provided within each literature circle binder. The roles were to rotate each meeting so each student would perform each role once. Each group met a total of six times during a two-week period. During the last meeting, there were no roles assigned, but the students were directed to have notes ready for their discussion. The literature circles were conducted in the first 30 minutes of each class and silent sustained reading followed for the remainder of each class. The teacher/researcher picked one group each meeting time and recorded their discussion. The teacher also took notes on all the groups' length of time for discussion, in addition to which groups had absences, the levels of discussion and whether groups were on task during discussion time. Students ran the groups themselves with no direction from the teacher. The teacher's role in the literature circles was only to get the discussion time started at the beginning of the block and once all group discussion seemed to be over, to get them back on the task of reading individually. Once group time was finished, the class resumed silent reading for the remainder of the block. Some students chose to use the time to read for their next meeting, others chose to read a different novel.

Findings and Results

Interpretations of Results of Pilot Study

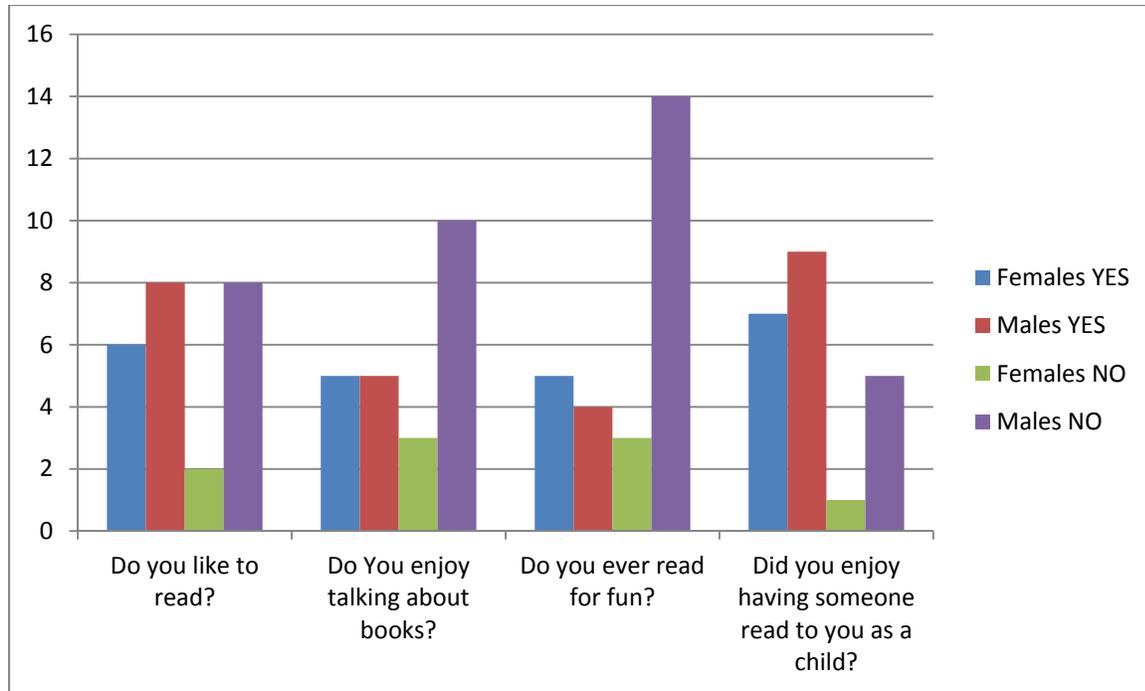


Table 1

In the pre-reading survey (Table 1) given to the students at the beginning of the quarter in the pilot study, the results show that only 14 students responded positively to the question of whether they liked to read. Of those 14, four students responded they only liked reading if they were reading something that interested them and the other ten openly said they didn't like to read at all. These results were counterintuitive to the fact the entire elective class is focused around reading for a sustained amount of time. Another question on the pre-reading survey asked whether the student enjoyed talking about books. Of the 24 participants, only 10 said they enjoyed it. The other 13 said they didn't like it or they left the question blank. The 10 who said they liked talking about books are not all the same students who said they enjoyed reading. In each of the literature circles, there were members who stated they didn't like to read. Another

question asked was whether students enjoyed having someone read to them as a child. Most of the boys answered this question positively, and this opens the question of when their enjoyment of reading stopped. The last question asked if the student ever read a book for fun and 17 of them said they did not. At the outset of the study, these were not positive results.

At each meeting, the teacher recorded the length of time the groups spent talking about their novel. During the first meeting, four groups talked for about 15 minutes. The group reading *Maus* only talked for about 6 minutes. During the next 3 meetings, each group continued to discuss for about 15 minutes, though the group reading *Please Stop Laughing at Me*, the all girl group, averaged 19 minutes. During the last meeting for all groups, discussion was very short averaging 10 minutes, most likely as a result of having the novel finished.

While observing the groups during each meeting, the teacher noted that the *House of the Scorpion* group didn't talk about the novel much and got very easily distracted. The group reading *Man in the High Castle* had some heated discussions about the controversies of the novel, and most of the boys were actively engaged in the discussion. The group reading *Paper Towns*, the mixed group, stayed on task, but the boys rarely contributed to the discussion. In fact, it was noted that the physical proximity to each other wasn't conducive to a group discussion. The girls formed a mini circle, sometimes a line, and the boys were always on the outskirts.

When examining the finished binders at the end of the unit, the teacher noted that most of the Daily Group Record Sheets had all the participants evaluated as (4) exemplary in their status for the discussions. This wasn't observed by the teacher. The role sheets for each group had great disparity among the members also. It was observed that some of the students would finish their role sheets when they came into class before the bell rang to start the block. Some finished

them as they were in discussions. This was observed throughout the groups and not just one in particular.

It was also noted through taped discussions and teacher observations that the level of discussion varied greatly. The *Maus* group of 5 boys had two members who tried to keep the group on task and were active participants, but the other three tended to talk about other matters and didn't take the whole process seriously as noted by the lack of discussion and poor quality of role sheet activity. The *Man in the High Castle* group of all boys had members who all participated in various levels. The *Please Stop Laughing at Me* group of all girls also had all members actively participating. The *Paper Towns* mixed group had 2 girls who dominated the discussion, 2 boys who rarely participated, and one girl who listened and commented as she was assigned a role. The *House of the Scorpion* had one boy who rarely participated, 2 boys who lead most of any discussion and one boy who participated according to his assigned role. The teacher also noted on days the groups had a tape recorder present, the discussion stayed on task and was lively, and on the days with no tape recorder some of the groups rarely stayed on task.

During the third literature circle, 75% of the surveys that asked "For the next meeting, I'd like to work on," the students responded with the idea of being more focused and talking more in discussion. They all seemed to note that they weren't doing a lot of discussing. In contrast to this observation by the students, most of the results of the performance ratings were recorded at either a 4 or 5 score, with 5 being the best.

In the post survey on the last day of the unit of the pilot study, the results were fairly consistent. In the first question, 85% of the students expressed they enjoyed reading a book in a literature circle rather than a whole class. The only students who said they didn't like the literature circles were 4 boys (see Table 2). Their responses explained why this was because they

indicated that they had to work too hard in a literature circle and when reading the whole class novel, it was easier to cheat. Those surveys also indicated the students thought they had become better readers as a result of the experience for various reasons which will be discussed in the next section. For the most part members from each group preferred the concept of the literature circle because expressing opinions was easier in a smaller setting. When asked if they thought their literature circles were more effective with a single gender or a mixed gender, the results came back overwhelmingly for having a single gender group (Table 2).

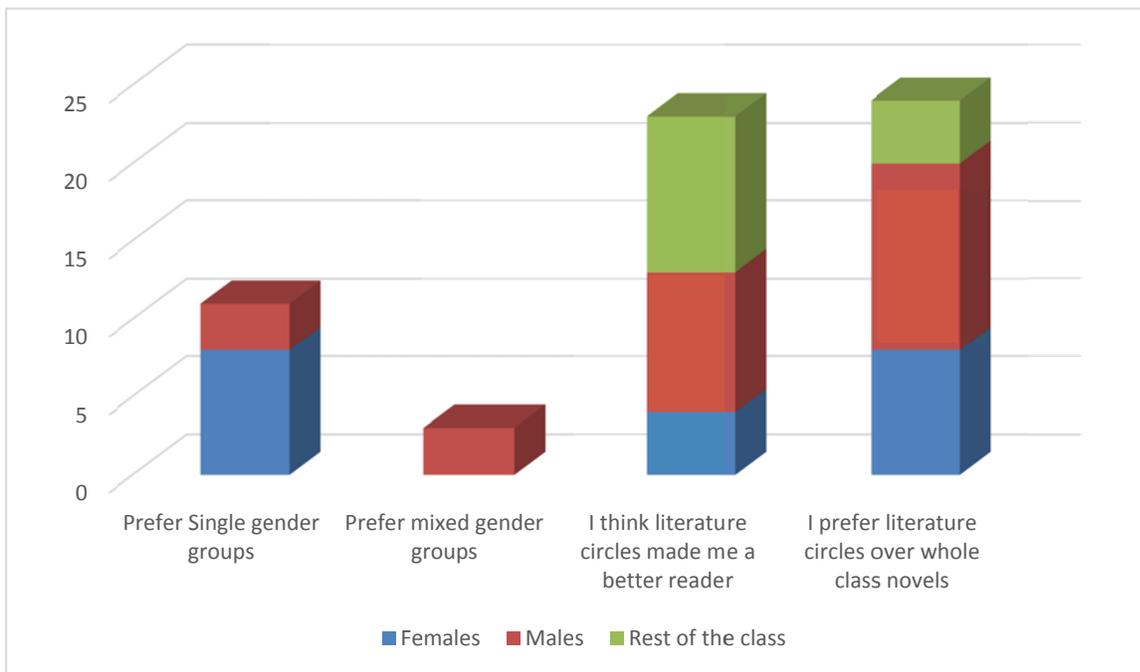


Table 2

Results of comprehension quizzes given at the end of the unit revealed that the groups who were single gender had higher comprehension scores than the groups who were single gender. As a whole, 18 out of 23 students passed the test with an 80% comprehension score or better. The five students who failed did so with less than 50% of the questions correct. In two cases, they didn't answer a single question correctly. Both of these students were boys: one in a single gender group, the other in a mixed gender group. The single gender groups had a

combined score of 86% correct and the mixed gender group had a score of 70%. In the mixed gender group, all three girls scored 100%, one boy scored 50% and one boy scored 0%.

Interpretations/Discussion of the new study

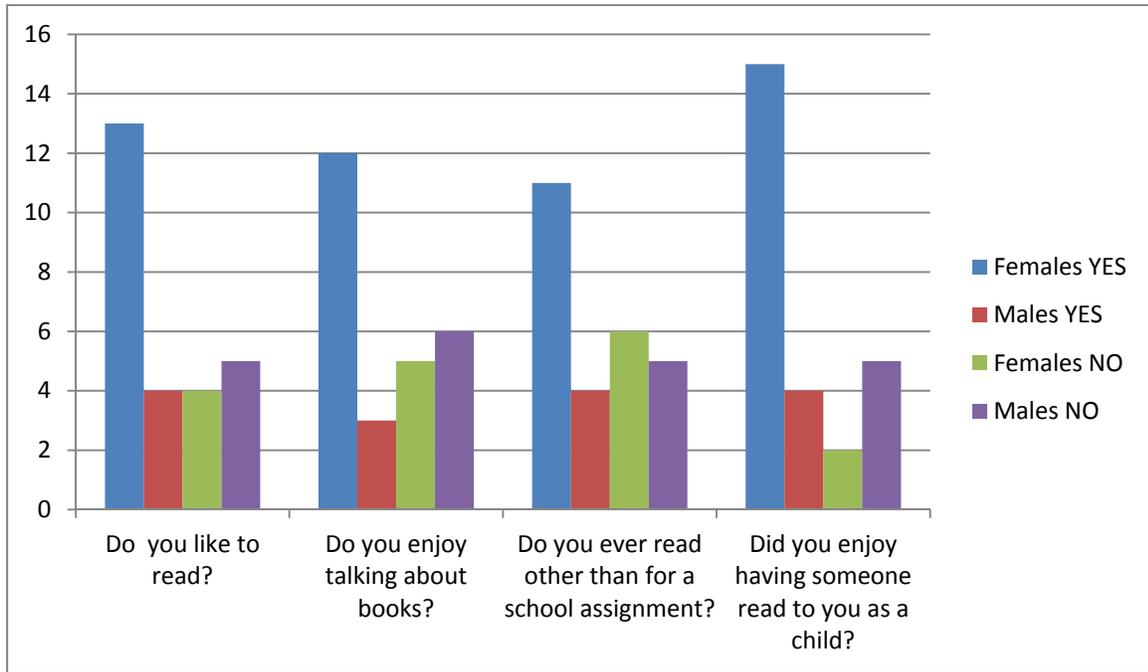


Table 3

As in the pilot study, the students in the new study were given a pre-reading survey on the first day of class. The results (Table 3) show that only 17 students responded that they liked to read. Of those students, only 15 of them responded that they read outside of school assignments. Of those 15, 11 of them were girls and only four of them were boys. Those same four boys also indicated that they liked to read in the first question. The intent of the class is to provide students silent sustained reading time to help them engage with literature. They are also allowed to read whatever they choose, for the majority of the class. They had a choice of literature circle novel and they read a whole class novel as well. The rest of their reading was self-chosen.

Another question posed by the pre-survey was whether the student enjoyed talking about books. Only 15 of 26 responded positively to the question. In each of the literature circles, there were members who stated they didn't like to talk about books as well as at least one member who responded that they did enjoy talking about books. For the final question, they were asked if they enjoyed having someone read to them as a child. Overwhelmingly, the girls responded positively to this question with 15 saying yes and only two saying no. Only four boys responded with a yes, and five of them responded with a no.

During each literature circle meeting, the teacher/researcher recorded the length of time each group spent talking. There was no way to record how much time was specifically spent talking about the novel rather than personal talking, though it was observed on several occasions that a group would only start talking about the novel if the teacher/researcher appeared to be watching them.

For the first two meetings, most groups averaged about 15 minutes of discussion. The group of boys reading the graphic novel, *Stitches*, tended to have the longest discussion times at around 18 minutes. They were actively engaged in the novel and their discussions. It was a group comprised mostly of boys who expressed at the beginning that they weren't readers, and only one of them had indicated that he liked to talk about books. The group of girls reading the graphic novel, *Anya's Ghost*, had the shortest discussions, averaging about 11 minutes. They also tended to be the most distracted and easily got off topic. On several occasions, they were heard responding with "I don't know what to talk about."

Depending on the amount of reading each group had assigned themselves, the discussion times varied through the next three meetings. The group reading *This Dark Endeavor* had two extra discussions outside of class. Their discussions in class were limited. A couple of times

they chose not to meet during class time, but when they were observed meeting in Homeroom, the discussions lasted almost 20 minutes. The group of girls reading *Please Stop Laughing at Me* was also observed as highly engaged and had prolonged discussions about their novel. They averaged 16 minutes per discussion. The group of girls reading *Paper Towns* had a hard time staying focused for the last two discussions. Prior to that, their discussions lasted about 12 minutes. The group of boys reading *House of the Scorpion* had discussions also lasting about 12 minutes on average.

Upon reviewing the final binders for each of the groups, the teacher noted that all of the Daily Group Record Sheets had all participants rated as exemplary for their discussions. Again, this was not supported by observations from the teacher/researcher. A small percentage of students weren't fulfilling their roles as assigned and this contributed to some of the shorter group discussions. The teacher/researcher observed students at various times working on their sheets during discussion or trying to fill them out before their meeting time. Others just refused to fill them out at all. This occurred in all groups except *Please Stop Laughing at Me*. That group of girls had everyone fill out their sheets on time.

It was also noted through observation and taped discussions that the level of discussion varied greatly from group to group. The *Stitches* group did a fair amount of discussion, despite the fact that their book had few words. The boys in this group seemed to take the pictures very seriously and were in deep discussions about the character David and what an unfair life he had. "I can't believe he managed to survive since his family was so screwed up" was an observation made by one student. The discussion after that connected back to their own experiences and people they knew who had difficult home lives. "But even that was nothing compared to what David lived through." "Man, that is one messed up family! Even the grandma!"

The group of girls who read *Anya's Ghost* did not have as easy of a time. Even though there were words and dialogue happening within the book, they didn't have very deep discussions. Recorded discussions basically followed their role sheets and didn't deviate much off of them. There wasn't any spontaneous conversation. Two girls tried to keep the discussion going, and seemed to like the novel, but couldn't engage the other three.

House of the Scorpion was a book that seemed to engage most of the boys in the group. They kept discussions going with three of the members. One member decided early on that he didn't like the book and wasn't going to read it. He just sat in the group and doodled on his role sheets. This was partly the case for *Paper Towns* also. There was one girl who had a hard time keeping up with the reading schedule they had made, and she was absent for two of the meeting days. The other days were hit or miss for her participation.

The girls in *This Dark Endeavor* group were highly involved in their novel. In fact, they took it upon themselves to read the sequel, *Such Wicked Intent*, during Homeroom. Their discussions ranged from comparisons of *Twilight* to their knowledge of the original Frankenstein story by Mary Shelley. This novel has a young Viktor Frankenstein as the main character along with his twin brother Konrad.

The girls in the group reading *Please Stop Laughing at Me* had lively discussions too. They kept on task during their discussions and found personal connections as the book is about a young woman's personal story of bullying in high school. They quickly made connections to either themselves or people they knew. "I can't believe someone would do that to her!" "She was so brave to fight back and not just kill herself like she wanted." "It makes me want to finally stand up to people I see bullying others in the hall" were all quotes from taped discussions.

In the post survey at the end of the unit, the results were consistent throughout the groups. In the first question, 85% percent of students replied they would rather read a literature circle book than a whole class novel. There were two boys and two girls who said they'd rather read a whole class novel. Responses to this ranged from "it's too hard to cheat," "I have a better understanding when the teacher leads discussion rather than the students," and "people didn't take literature circles seriously."

Students were asked if they'd ever read their literary form before this literature circle experience. Ten students had read their form previously. When asked if they'd pick up another novel of that same literary form again, the answers varied. Fifteen of 17 girls said they would read their form again. Only the two girls who read *Anya's Ghost*, the graphic novel, said they wouldn't want to read another one. Their responses indicated "it was too easy to read and didn't challenge me," and "I didn't like having to look all over the place to figure out what was going on. I like regular books." The boys who read *Stitches* had the opposite reactions. They responded with "it almost felt like we were cheating because it wasn't really reading." Another said he loved looking at the art and trying to figure out what was going on in each of the frames. "I can't believe so much was said in a frame and no words were used!"

Of all the boys, seven said they'd read the same form again. Two of them said they wouldn't, and those boys both read the science fiction book *House of the Scorpion*. One of those boys didn't actually read it, and the other said he prefers to read sports books only (Table 4).

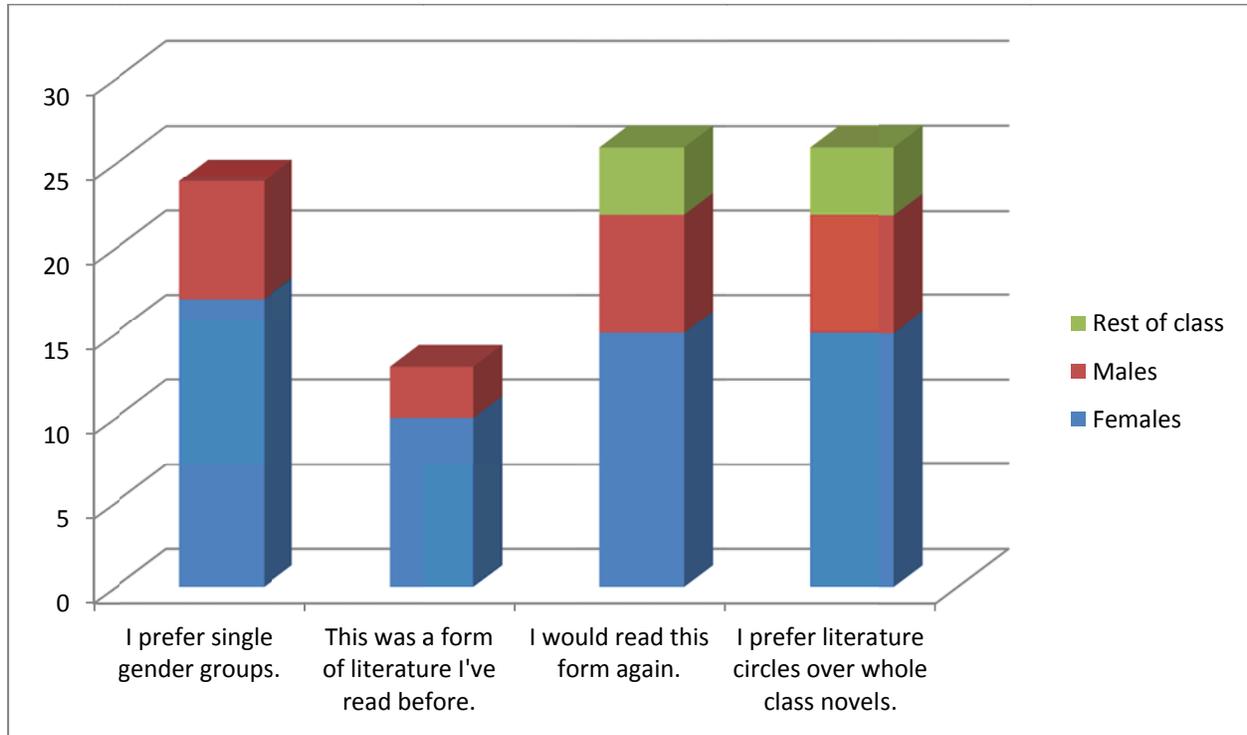


Table 4

Analysis of Results

Initially the process of the literature circles was burdened by snow days, absences, and a student dropping the class, and another member being suspended from school, but the action research supported the initial hypothesis that literature circles worked more effectively in single gender groups. The groups which were single gender did work better as a group; they had a more positive experience overall, and the results indicated they felt like they became better readers as a result of reading their novel in a single gender group. In the mixed gender group, the girls seemed to enjoy the experience, but the boys did not. This was a result of the girls “boxing out” the boys and not really allowing them to participate in the discussions. The boys also didn’t seem to take their roles seriously, at times didn’t have their reading done, and this just made the girls tune them out more. Unfortunately, the class only had a limited number of girls and there

was only enough to make one single gender group and one mixed gender group. The boys ended up with three single gender groups. In each of those groups, they did their jobs and got through the discussions.

When analyzing the results of the final comprehension scores, there are several factors which influence the outcome. With the boys who scored 0% on their tests, they openly admitted to the teacher that they hadn't read the book at all. One of those boys was in a single gender group and relied on his friends to give him all the answers. In all the discussion times, he never had his role sheet completed and just filled it in as he heard people talking within the group. The other boy who failed the test was in the mixed group. He, too, relied on the girls to do the work for him. It seemed the students who passed had a much better discussion engagement within the group than the ones who failed. In each case where the student failed, he didn't actively participate in his literature circle.

Each student in the class commented that he or she would rather work in a single gender group. Some of the comments included "I liked working with other girls because I didn't have to worry about being made fun of," "it was nice to not have girls taking over the group and being able to talk," and "not having girls made it easier to talk because I didn't have to worry about looking dumb." This further emphasized the results found in the Scotland study (Allen, Ellis and Pearson 2005).

The action research in the new study did support the hypothesis that literary form had an impact on the engagement of the readers. In both genders, the majority indicated they would pick up another book of the same literary form. One of the main focuses of this study was whether graphic novels as a literary form were more engaging than another. Through interpretation of the results, it can be said that for the males in the class, it was a large factor. All

of the boys indicated they would read another graphic novel. Their group also had the longest discussions and the most varied and personal. However, it wasn't the case with the girls reading the graphic novel. Though they all said they liked it, only three of the five said they'd read another one. Their group had a hard time finding things to talk about during discussion time, too.

Also supported by this new study, students enjoyed reading in single gender groups rather than mixed gender groups. This study did not include a mixed gender group, but instead focused on single gender groups, though most students had worked in groups of mixed gender in the past. Some of the responses included, "it was nice not having to worry about doing all the work while the boys sit around," "I liked having just girls in my group. It made it easier to talk about personal things," and "not having bossy girls telling us what to think was great!"

Analyzing the final comprehension test results, all of the groups had success understanding their novel. The form of the novel didn't seem to have an impact on their comprehension. The only two people who failed with less than 50% were two students who didn't bother to read the novel. Form didn't influence them, they had previously indicated on the survey that they didn't like to read and vocally told the teacher/researcher that they hated reading and didn't really want to be in the class in the first place. Those students both ended up failing the course. The other groups all scored over 87% in their comprehension.

This Dark Endeavor was a historical fantasy novel and all four girls had a high level of engagement and took a further step to read the sequel on their own. *Please Stop Laughing at Me* was a memoir and those four girls said they would all read another book of the same form again. Two of those girls went on to read the sequel later in the quarter. *Paper Towns* was a mystery novel written by a popular young adult author John Green. All of the girls indicated they

enjoyed the book a great deal and it was observed by the teacher/researcher that they all read other books by Green later in the quarter. *House of the Scorpion* was a science fiction novel. Three of the four boys indicated they'd read another book of this type. The single boy didn't read the original book, therefore didn't want to read another one of the same type.

Of the graphic novels, all of the boys who read *Stitches* indicated they would read another graphic novel. Three of them did go to the IMC later in the quarter to check out more graphic novels. These were boys who had originally indicated they didn't enjoy reading and didn't read outside of school. The girls who read *Anya's Ghost* didn't seem to have that level of engagement. Three indicated they might try another graphic novel, but none of them read one during the remainder of the quarter. Two of them really didn't enjoy it and said they wouldn't read another one.

Implications and Conclusions

Conclusions

It was the conclusion of the teacher that literature circles were indeed influenced by the gender makeup of the group in the pilot study as well as the new study. It was observed that the single gender groups had more engagement, more discussion, and better comprehension than the group which was mixed gender. Even the group of boys who hated their novel all passed the comprehension test. It is the belief of this researcher that having the interaction with others and being accountable to peers for having read the material made the difference in their ability to comprehend the book. In the one mixed group it was clear that the girls were dominating the group and they at times physically shut out the boys from the discussion. This is where the question of whether the literary form of the book may have influenced that factor as well.

It is the conclusion of the teacher/researcher that literature circles are influenced by the gender make-up of the group as well as the literary form. It was originally thought that graphic novels would be highly engaging for any gender, but that proved not to be the case. The male group had far higher levels of engagement than the female group reading a graphic novel. This was indicated by length of discussion, variety of discussion, and ending survey results. If anything, I would say that the literary form of the graphic novel had a big impact on my results. The all female groups who read a traditional form of novel had higher engagement than those who read a graphic novel. For the males, however, the highest engagement came from the graphic novel and not the traditional form.

Applications

Clearly this study shows teachers should have the option of trying literature circles with single gender groups. Many times, teachers try to make sure everything is “equal and fair” and that usually means mixed groupings. If teachers are shown that they might have more success using this configuration, perhaps more will be willing to try it on a rotation basis. This study was not meant to prove this is the way all literature circles should be run, but there are times, and novels that might benefit from single gender groupings.

The secondary application of this study would be using graphic novels as a way to get those reluctant male readers to find something engaging to read. They find the ease and support of the pictures less intimidating and are still able to find theme, and other pieces of figurative language when asked. They think it’s not really reading, but it is. It’s a way to get those readers back to reading so that a novel isn’t as intimidating to them.

Limitations

This study was limited by several factors. One factor that limited the discussions for some groups was absences on meeting days. At times, the student playing the role of Discussion Director would be absent and the group dynamics didn't work because no one was willing to step up as temporary leader. The study was also limited by the size of the classroom. There were six groups talking for a total of 26 students and the noise level was high at times. This also led to some groups finishing more quickly and then talking for personal reasons resulting in a raised noise level and students getting off task more easily. In a perfect world, having a couple of groups being able to go out in the hallway or another area perhaps would have been more beneficial. Having several students in class who were openly defying the teacher and purposely not participating was also a factor in some of the answers on surveys and the lack of cooperation in one of the groups.

The other limitation was the constraint of time. I only have 9 weeks with this elective class and have to read a whole class novel first in order to teach them how to have good discussions. If I had more time to spend showing them how to work as a group, they may have had more success. Also, some of the students felt that we didn't have enough time to read and they felt rushed having to read a novel in two weeks. These all may have contributed to or influenced the results of this study.

Reflection on the Studies

When I first started this project in the spring of 2013, I was very excited for the opportunity to put my hypothesis into action. On day one of the quarter, when the new class of Novels came into my room, I was quite distraught. I thought my whole study was ruined due to

the student population I had and the results of that initial survey. It then became a mission for me to make it successful despite all the drama that started the quarter. I had one student drop out after three days, two students come in after I had already assigned literature circles, and then one of those two dropping again a day later.

A few of the comments on the final survey during the pilot study indicated students would have liked not having the role sheets to complete each time. I incorporated that request into the new study from the fall of 2013. It's something Harvey Daniels (2007) suggested for moving literature circles forward. One of the purposes of Novels class is to expose students to contemporary literature and allow them to enjoy literature in a less structured form than other traditional literature classes. It's my goal to continue to keep rotating my classroom library for literature circles.

The results of the second study weren't really what I was expecting. I thought everyone was going to like the graphic novel form. I thought that after the groups made their presentations, more students would try to read a graphic novel. That was true for the boys, but not the girls. I had three other boys ask if they could read *Stitches* once the literature circle groups were completed. None of the other girls indicated interest in *Anya's Ghost*. I found it interesting that they thought it was "too easy" to read and they didn't feel challenged. Also that they "didn't get the excitement the boys were having." One of the girls noted in class how the boys were really talking and her own group didn't seem to be. She couldn't figure out why. I couldn't help but be curious, too.

I tried not having role sheets for one of the meeting days. I think this worked out fine. I think in future studies I'll try to let them have more freedom within the groups. I worry that too much will result in nothing getting done and too much pressure being placed on those students

who actually care about the assignment. I've seen it happen in a lot of small group activities within my other elective classes. I think role sheets may be too much, but they need to be accountable for being something within the group discussion. Perhaps I'll work on reader response journals next.

Another item for future consideration is the selection of the novels themselves. I'd like to add more graphic novels to the mix in my literature circle library as well as my classroom library. It's my goal to continue to keep rotating my classroom library for literature circles. It is my hope that I continue this research each time I teach the class.

Future Questions

I'm curious as to why I got the results I did with the graphic novels. I was sure that having single gender groups was the best way to keep engagement, but I really thought *Anya's Ghost* was a good story that would excite some girls. For the future, I'll keep trying the graphic novel and try to find a few other titles to suggest to girls. I have a library of novels on my back wall in my classroom, and I plan to add more graphic novels. I'd like to keep trying different combinations each time I teach this elective.

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Appendix A

Discussion Director

Name: _____

Book: _____

Assignment: page _____ to page _____

Literature Circle's Name: _____

Your job is to develop a list of questions that your group can discuss about this part of the novel. Your questions should be ones which require *thought* and get everyone talking and sharing their opinions and reactions. The best discussion questions come from your own thoughts, feelings, and concerns as you read. Do NOT write questions that call for a simple "yes" or "no" answer or a factual detail !

Order for Leading Your Group Discussion

- Call on the Summarizer to read the summary.
- Pose each one of your questions to your group for discussion
- Ask for each member of your group to state their comment/questions about this section of the novel. *Lead your group* in response to what each person says.
- Call on the Passage Master.
- Call on the Vocabulary Reporter.
- You fill out the Group Record sheet, with input from your group members
- After discussion is completed, assign roles for your next reading and make sure everyone gets a new role sheet, including absent members.
- Call the teacher over. Be ready to discuss items on the Group Record sheet.

Discussion Questions or Topics for Our Lit Circle:

Types of Questions:

- What did you think about.....? (name a specific event, action, or character's action)
- Why do you think that.....?
- What do you think will happen.....? (ask for predictions of events and characters' actions)
- What is happening at the part where.....?
- What do you think _____ (event/incident) means?

Illustrator

Name: _____

Book: _____

Assignment: page _____ to page _____

Literature Circle's Name: _____

Your job is to create or find an image that relates to the assigned reading.

Consider drawing a picture, downloading images from the internet, creating a collage, etc. On the back of the image, write an explanation of how the image relates to the reading (one full paragraph) and devise a question for discussion relating to the image.

During the Literature Circle, show your group the image **without reading the explanation**. Ask your group to discuss how they think the image relates to the reading. Then, read your explanation and ask your discussion question.

Passage Master

Name: _____

Book: _____

Assignment: page _____ to page _____

Literature Circle's Name: _____

Locate 3 passages of the story that your group should reread, discuss, and think about.

- Passages should be important things for everyone to notice, remember, or think about.
- Choose a variety of passages, not all the same type--here are suggestions:
 - surprising/startling
 - confusing (something you wonder if other people "got")
 - descriptive writing: figurative language, strong verbs, etc. (identify literary devices)
 - important (maybe a clue? foreshadowing?)
 - controversial event (elicits different opinions from group members)

During Your Group Meeting, Do the Following:

- Make sure everyone opens to the right page and help them find where the passage begins.
- Either read it aloud yourself, have everyone read it silently, or ask someone to read it.
- Tell your reasons for selecting each passage; ask for comments. Do they agree with your choices?

Page _____ Paragraph(s) _____

The first 3 words of the paragraph are: _____

This is interesting (or puzzling) because:

An interpretation that can be made from ANOTHER PASSAGE, found on Page _____, Paragraph _____ because

In today's reading, a TIE-IN to my experience and/or knowledge appears on Page _____, Paragraph _____ and is

Summarizer

Name: _____

Book: _____

Assignment: page _____ **to page** _____

Literature Circle's Name: _____

Your job is to prepare a brief summary of today's reading. The other members of your group will be counting on you to give a summary that conveys the key points, the main highlights of today's reading assignment. It is a good idea to jot down the main events on scratch paper before you complete this form. Be sure to write your summary in complete sentences !

When you have finished your summary, give this section a short title--something that captures the main idea.

My Title for the Section: _____

Summary:

My group agreed that my summary was complete and accurate _____ **yes** _____ **no (if no, add what is missing on the back of the sheet)**

Word Reporter

Name: _____

Book: _____

Assignment: page _____ to page _____

Literature Circle's Name: _____

Your job is to look up definitions to the words you are given, (or find unknown words on your own if no vocabulary list is provided), and create an excellent sentence using each.

During the Lit Circle Meeting, Do the Following:

- **Make sure everyone in your group copies down each word and definition on their vocabulary sheet**
- **Together create a new sentence and write this on your vocabulary sheet**
- **Make sure the teacher checks the group's sentence for accuracy**

1. Word: _____ Page _____ Paragraph _____

Sentence from the book:

The definition is:

2. Word: _____ Page _____ Paragraph _____

Sentence from the book:

The definition is:

3. Word: _____ Page _____ Paragraph _____

Sentence from the book:

The definition is:

Appendix B

Literature Circle Survey

1. What did you like most about literature circles?
2. What did you like least about literature circles?
3. If you could change anything about literature circles, what would it be?
4. Would you recommend your book be on the list for next year's literature circles? Explain why or why not?
5. Do you think literature circles have helped you become more of a reader? In what way, if yes. (comprehension, making connections, becoming more aware of opinions) If no, why not?
6. Which do you prefer, reading a novel as a whole-class, or in a literature circle? Explain.
7. Was this type of book a genre or a literature form you'd read before this class? Would you read this type again? Why or why not?

READING SURVEY

Name: _____ Date: _____

Fill in the blanks.

1. Do you like to read? Explain yes/no. _____

2. How much time do you spend reading? Per day _____ per week _____
3. What are some of the books you have read lately? _____

4. When was the last time you read a book for fun? _____
5. How many books do you own? _____ Do you have books at home? ____ How many? ____
6. Do you read at home? _____ Howoften? _____
7. Where's your favorite place to read at home? _____ at school? _____
8. Besides books, what other types of materials do you read? _____

9. Do you own a library card? _____ How often do you visit the library? _____ IMC? _____
10. My favorite author is _____
11. The best book I've read is _____
12. A book I didn't think I'd like but I did was _____
13. The things I do well as a reader are _____
14. I struggle with reading because _____
15. What are the two best movies you've ever seen? _____
16. When you were little, did you enjoy having some read aloud to you? _____
Who was it? _____
17. I enjoy talking about books because _____
18. My favorite entertainers and/or movie stars are _____

Put a check mark next to the kind of reading genres you like best

- History travel plays sports science fiction
- adventure romance detective stories war stories poetry
- car stories true life biography supernatural stories astrology
- humor folktales how-to books mysteries art
- westerns mythology graphic novels autobiographies horror
- fantasy