LITERATURE DISCUSSION GROUPS AND READING COMPREHENSION

by

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Abstract

With the passing of No Child Left Behind (2002), teachers need to use research-based instructional strategies to improve reading comprehension in all content areas. The purpose of this investigation is to determine the impact literature discussion groups have on reading comprehension targeting upper elementary grades levels. Literature reviewed illustrated literature discussion groups change student dialog, move from teacher-led instruction to student-led instruction, allow students to connect to the text during small group interaction, and develop cognitive comprehension strategies to deepen internal links with the text. Implementing literature discussion groups in classrooms enhanced reading comprehension strategies for 4th through 8th grade students. Further research is needed on a long-term scale to determine the how effective literature discussion group interaction has on comprehension over time.
Chapter I – Introduction

The practice of using literature discussion groups as a teaching strategy can be traced as far back as England in the 1720s (Rufle, 2008). Only the wealthy and literate society had access to books and used books clubs as a way to socialize. The goal of the groups changed as access to books no longer became a privilege of the elite with the introduction of libraries and public education. Currently, one might argue that reading comprehension is the most important function of schools because understanding what is read provides the foundation for learning regardless of the content. In a recent What’s Hot Survey by The Reading Teacher, all respondents were in agreement that the topic of comprehension is what should be hot and over 75% replied that comprehension is “what’s hot” (Cassidy, Valadez, & Garret, 2010). With the passing of No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) on January 8, 2002, the federal government’s priority for reading comprehension achievement increased. Specifically, NCLB required all students to be proficient in math and reading by 2014 (Woolfolk, 2007). Reading proficiency included reading comprehension. Teachers, in effect, needed to use researched-based instructional strategies to give students’ techniques with which to improve reading comprehension in all content areas. However Ketch (2005) argued that teachers often have little time to repeat thinking or cognitive strategies to check for student development in reading comprehension. With this impending problem, implementing an instructional framework to support these strategies beyond teacher input is now a necessity.

One strategy that could offer teachers a viable solution to the dilemma would be to construct a reading program in which students become the source of their own learning; specifically in this case, increasing their literacy skills. Student-centered, or
constructivist, classrooms require careful planning on the part of the teacher. To implement this approach, good classroom management is essential. Group and individual assignments/projects must be clearly explained to students and accountability made clear. In the process, critical thinking skills need to be promoted, including developmental imagery, making inferences, and determining the importance of different aspects of the text. For this approach to increase student reading comprehension, teachers must apply principles of sound educational psychology to enhance intellectual development in students (Sternberg & Williams, 2002).

**Statement of the Problem**

The purpose of this investigation is to determine the impact literature discussion groups have on reading comprehension targeting upper elementary grades levels. Specifically, the literature review analyzes the data and conclusions from research on literature discussion groups and the effect on reading comprehension at the 4th to 8th grade levels.

**Research Question**

The following research question guided the literature review: What are the characteristics of effective literature group discussions for improving reading comprehension in 4th through 8th grades?
Chapter II- Review of Literature

Theoretical Framework

Lev Semenovich Vygotsky was a Russian psychologist who founded in the sociocultural theory. According to this theory, social interaction plays a fundamental role in cognitive development, children learn from a superior person, and learning occurs in the zone of proximal development in which the student can perform a task and solve a problem independently. According to Vygotsky, the zone of proximal development is “the distance between the actual developmental level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance, or in collaboration with more capable peers” (p. 34). Goatley, Brock, & Raphael (1995) describe Vygotsky’s underlying theoretical construct as “individual mental functioning can only be understood as it is situated in a broader social, historical, and evolutionary context, higher mental processes such as those involved in reading, writing, and academic discourse are social and cultural in nature, and learning is facilitated through the assistance of more knowledgeable members of the community and culture” (p. 355). The factors that influence cognitive development must move from the outside environment to the inside person.

According to this theory, knowledge from the social interaction becomes internalized. For example, by observing other students playing a game, a student can learn, understand, and implement the rules of the observed game. The more social interaction students are exposed to, the more knowledge students’ gain. Vygotsky believed this thinking process is strongly related to the development of language (Sternberg & Williams, 2002).
In the zone of proximal development (ZPD), the student is able to solve problems dependently with the help of an adult or a peer. In this scenario, the less experienced students learn from the more experienced (Möller, 2004/2005). Initial assessment of a student is usually made through observation. Students’ academic performance is based on prior experiences, and how this interaction with others has affected the student’s inherited traits (Sternberg & Williams, 2002). The ZPD lies between information being too hard to learn and information already learned. Vygotsky believed the higher mental processes are occurring first during a shared activity with an adult. The process of acquiring knowledge is internalized to become a part of the student’s cognitive development. According to Vygotsky, the development of children’s knowledge and understanding is formed through communications and associations with both adults and peers (Molach, 2002). Research suggests the type of learning in peer collaboration in ZPD can be impacted by how students’ interact, how involved the interaction is, external incentive, and the students’ level of certainty with the knowledge (Evans, 2002).

Strongly related to Vygotsky’s ZPD, scaffolding “refers to adults or more capable peers helping and supporting children’s attempts to achieve a task/goal (with their ZPD) that they would not be able to attain alone” (Christ & Wang, 2008, p. 198). Teachers are moving from teacher-led or direct instruction, to peer-led discussions. The teacher makes a gradual adjustment from teacher-led scaffolding to teacher-student scaffolding to student-led scaffolding. In this process, students model for each other. An example of scaffolding in peer-led groups is having the less experienced students who are not exposed to group discussion observe the modeling from the more experienced group members and assimilate the information.
Vygotsky’s discovery helps to explain the social character of learning. He draws attention to the role of conversation in sharing information and developing understanding. Teachers who accept this theory now recognize the need for more talking among students in the classroom. When students discuss information together, the dialogue is on an equal level as opposed to dialogue with a teacher. Thus, the conversation becomes investigative as the amount of classroom talk increases (Molach, 2002). With increased talking and understanding, students’ knowledge and comprehension expand. Ideas tend to build on each other as students scaffold from prior knowledge to new information.

**Implementing Literature Discussion Groups**

Literature discussion groups, in their pure form, were created based on the reader’s choice of books (Daniels & Zemelman, 2004). Literature discussion groups have been called by many names. Book clubs (Daniels & Zemelman, 2004), collaborative reading groups (O’Brien, 2007), grand conversations (Brabham & Villaume, 2000), literature circles (Brabham & Villaume, 2000), literature study (Fountas & Pinnell, 2001), and literacy clubs (Möller, 2004/2005) have all been used to describe this instructional strategy. The concept has been defined as, “a group of connected, competent readers who read for a personally meaningful purpose” (Möller, 2004/2005, p. 420) or a group which, “brings students together for an in depth discussion on a work of fiction or nonfiction” (Fountas & Pinnell, 2001, p. 252). Most of the literature reviewed defined a literature discussion group as a small group of four to eleven students designed to facilitate engagement in a student-led dialogue about literature. The groups can be chosen based on ability grouping, (either homogeneous or heterogeneous), gender, or book
choice. Other factors to take into consideration are language, personality, and behavior or social skills.

A literature discussion group involves independent reading. When choosing a high-quality book, many factors need to be taken into consideration (Raphael, Pardo, & Highfield, 2002). The book should provoke the students to discuss and form opinions about the content. The discussion group should have the basic reading skills required for reading the book. When presenting the book, the instructor should motivate students and persuade the group of the enjoyment that will come from reading the book. The discussion group should have some prior knowledge of the subject matter. The instructor may choose a book with cross-curriculum possibilities to integrate and connect to other disciplines. When selecting a book for the literature discussion group, the instructor should consider a wide variety of books for the wide range of interests and abilities of the group.

Grouping students for a literature discussion group differs depending on the composition of the groups. Factors to consider are heterogeneity or homogeneity, personality, student book choice, and special needs students. Heterogeneous grouping can include gender, race, or ability. Several studies advocate a mixed gender grouping since one dominating student can control the whole discussion. Gardener’s theory of multiple intelligences is one way of separating a class into groups. Groups can be arranged with strengths as a factor, but individuals should eventually move to a group that might be out of her or his comfort zone (Gallavan & Kottler, 2002).

The timing and schedule needed in order to implement a literature discussion group varies depending on the size of the book and the ability of the group. One research
study suggested the book club meet once a week over a three-week period as a starting point (Daniels & Zemelman, 2004). The reading of the text and the literacy group preparation all take place before the group meet to discuss the content.

The physical arrangement of the classroom can have affect on the discussion group either positively or negatively. Some classrooms already have desks or tables arranged for easy grouping. Some researchers have discovered groups enjoy literature circles when the students are allowed to gather on the floor (Raphael, Pardo, & Highfield, 2002). Giving the group a comfortable area would encourage literature discussions.

Assessing for comprehension is a serious concern for many teachers who contemplate implementing collaborative grouping and should take place during and after the literature discussion groups. During the literature discussion a group, the teacher’s role is to circulate around the room, listen, and observe the discussions (Daniels, 2003). The teacher needs to assess the level of engagement being displayed by each student of the group. The readers should be clarifying the text with each other and discovering deeper meanings. Readers should be prepared for the discussion with notes or journals displaying quality cognitive questions or responses to the text being discussed.

Each discussion group can also be evaluated through summative assessment of reading comprehension with tests, projects, and presentations. The projects and presentations can be assessed as a group, on an individual basis, or a combination of both. Peer evaluation using a rubric can also be an effective method of completing the picture of student progress. Throughout the literature reviewed, students have been assessed using many methods including by researcher-made tests, through videotape transcripts, and interviews.
Talk about the text

Researchers have often tried to study the effects of talking about a text to understand the text. Kucan and Beck (2003) conducted a study in which 27 seventh grade students, 26 Caucasian and one African-American, from two West Virginian parochial schools were divided into two groups within each classroom to determine the impact on comprehension of nonfiction texts by students’ use of talk. The study consisted of a preliminary phase (enlist participants and administer questionnaire), pretest phase, intervention phase, and posttest phase. Students, of average –income households, were chosen based on standardized comprehension scores, teacher recommendation, and results of a questionnaire which detected prior knowledge of the text to be used. Students in one classroom were matched in ability groups to match students in the other classroom. Within each classroom, two groups, one exposed to group interaction and one in which students work individually, were administered a pretest, intervention, and posttest session. In the pretest, students met with the researcher individually and were asked to read the text and stop after segments to think aloud about what was read. After the text was read, students recalled what they remembered and answered three open-ended questions. The posttest consisted of the same procedure. During the three interventions, students in the individual cohort read the text aloud and stopped at prompted places to respond to the investigator. Individual students were asked to read the text again silently. Students in the group cohort took turns reading aloud and discussed prompts by the investigator with the group.

Data was collected through student recall, responses to questions, and transcripts from the audiotapes. Of the 99 transcripts examined, 54 were individual pretest/posttest,
6 were group discussions, and 39 were individual discussions. Pretest recalls and question-response scores indicated no significant differences which are a sign of groups being equally matched. Pretest and posttest scores were examined with a two-way mixed-model of variance. The results discovered no statistically significant condition-related dissimilarities in posttest recall or question-response scores when groups were divided. However, posttests were analyzed for the whole group. Results indicated that talking about the text improved the comprehension of all of the students. Researchers next examined the type of talk on the transcripts and divided it into three categories: personal (relating to individual occurrence to text), textual (text information), and intellectual (connecting, questioning, or making inference to text). Student follow-up responses that occurred during inventions were analyzed and categorized as added information, gave alternative explanations, improved or amended information or repeated information.

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<th>Results of Study</th>
<th>Type of Talk During Intervention</th>
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<td>Personal talk</td>
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<td>First Reading</td>
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<td>Silent Reading</td>
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<td>Group Conditions</td>
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<tr>
<th>Categorized Follow-up Talk During Intervention</th>
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<tr>
<td>Add information</td>
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<tr>
<td>Individual Conditions</td>
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<tr>
<td>Group Conditions</td>
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As a result of this study, researchers found that talking about a text improved all the students’ comprehension of the text. Upon further analysis of the finds, the kind of conditions the students were exposed to affected the kind of dialogue that the student presented. The students in collaborative groups displayed a deeper meaning and made
connection beyond the text. The students working individually comment on the information being presented in the text.

The results of this study showed that all students increased comprehension about the text by talking aloud either to themselves or to other members of a group. Discussion dialogs of students in the group were more complex and elaborate than the responses in the individual control group. Simply talking about the text out loud did increase the comprehension mean posttests scores for the group.

In an action research study, Wilfong (2009) observed a fifth grade classroom that was implementing a Textmasters strategy for the first time. In this study, the students in a science class used a literature circle strategy to further their knowledge of a science textbook. Of the seventy-three students, 60% had used some type of literature discussion group in another class. During Textmasters, students read for 20 minutes, discussed the text in groups for 20 minutes and filled out a self-reflection sheet during the last 10 minutes of class. For the period of group discussion, students were assigned a job or role of discussion director, summarizer, vocabulary enricher, or webmaster. After the month-long study, students expressed an interest in listening to other students’ opinions about the text and learning from each other. Talking about the science text showed a positive increase of three points from the pretest to the posttest. Students commented on exit tickets that teaching and learning in small groups provided motivation to support the groups and not disappoint each other. Interacting with the text was an easier way to learn science.

Discussing the text improved the understanding of the science material in a fifth grade classroom. Textmasters was a comprehension program that was designed to help
student “Master the Text.” Talking about science and looking at the material through different roles, helped the student understand the content and motivated them to engage in the activity.

**Students can learn in student-led discussion**

Teacher’s reciting information and questioning students as a whole group has been a long standing practice in many classrooms. Advocates for small group instruction and whole group instruction have long been at odds. In a comparative study organized by Galton, Hargreaves, and Pell (2009), forty-two English, Science, and Mathematics teachers in England who teach 11- to 14-year-old students volunteered to participate in an analysis of group work instruction and whole-class instruction on academic performance and classroom behavior. Initially, the first years’ participants of the study were fourteen English teachers and 16 science teachers. During the second year, twelve mathematics teachers were added to the study. With the input of the teachers, small-group or whole-class instruction would be compared during the introduction of a new concept or when expanding brainstorming or problem solving. Teachers insisted that all instructors be taught how to implement collaborative small group instruction, thereby promoting the use of this technique in each class. Sixty-nine English and 53 mathematics and science lessons were observed by trained observers during the first year of the study. Observers documented a total of 96 lessons from all three classes in the second year.

In the initial study, English lessons were determined to be narrative writing, response to text, persuasive writing, and descriptive writing. Science lessons were broken down into particles, electric circuits, forces, and living cells units. Mathematics lessons were numbers patterns, interpreting data, ratio, and areas & volumes. The observers were
trained and record students’ behavior such as on-task, unfocused, waiting, cooperating and partially distracted, and responding to internal stimuli. Observers also scrutinized the level of teachers’ interaction (group, individual, or class) and the nature of the interaction (performing a task, monitoring, or routine activity). Observers also documented the nature of the student interaction such as questioning, proposing, concurring, looking for help, giving details, and disputing.

Results of the study for the English lessons were simplified from the four categories to two categories. Text and persuasive writing were called imaginative and descriptive and narrative writing were called discursive. From the pretest to the posttest, students taught in the collaborative small groups in English made significant gains in both the imaginative and discursive topics. In the imaginative topics, students moved from 5- (age 11) to 5+ (age 14) with an effect size of 0.43. Whole class instruction students moved from 29.32 to 31.19 (both are between 4+ and 5- ). In the discursive topic, the effect size, 0.37, is nearly double for group instruction versus whole class instruction, 0.18. In gender, the boys had gains in both types of instruction, but had nearly double, .038, in the group instruction versus whole class instruction, .018. For girls, only group instruction showed statistical significance with an effect size of 0.42.

Mathematics was reduced from four categories to two. Ratio and area and volume were called low level demand for low level cognitive demand. Pattern and interpreting data were called high level demand for high level cognitive demand. Students learning in low cognitive demand made no considerable progress in either group or whole classroom instruction with an effect size of 0.0. For the high level demand lessons, group and whole class instruction make improvements with an effect size of 0.70 and 0.48 respectively.
When gender is analyzed, boys perform better in group instruction whereas girls show improvement in whole class instruction.

For science lessons, since no teacher taught living cells, this category was excluded. During electricity, students made significant progress in both group and class instruction with an effect size of 0.71 and .073 respectively. In both forces and particles lessons, students taught using group instruction made academic improvements with and effect size of 0.98 and .048 respectively. For gender, boys and girls made improvements in both types of instructions.

For behavior, the results were mixed. A lesson was observed during the spring and summer. For time on task, mathematics teachers showed the most significant change in behavior. Time on task changed from 70% for group work and 80% during class instruction in the spring term to 80% and 58% respectively for the summer term. English teachers showed a 5 % decrease in whole class instruction from spring to summer. Science improved group instructions time on task from 76% to 84%.

Data for the partial distraction was more difficult for the observers to
record for class discussion than in groups. As a result, the number of distractions is higher for whole class.

Open dialogue for English and Mathematics groups is greater than in science groups. English groups and class dialogue show minimal change from spring to summer. Mathematics showed a great improvement in group dialogue from spring to summer. Science showed a reduction of overall dialogue from spring to summer.

Sustained interaction was measured over 30-second time units. English and especially mathematics revealed an increase in sustained interaction from spring and summer. Science class showed no observations of sustained interaction.

The researcher did not intend for this study to show that whole class instruction needed to be eliminated. The purpose was to argue that group instructions should
complement any subject to enhance behavior and learning. Group work also encouraged improved peer behavior.

In small discussion groups, the group is collaboratively smarter, more energetic, engaged in interactive learning, and uses the diversity of the members as an asset. Expert collaborators are active listeners, speak up, encourage others to speak, support other’s opinions, and show tolerance and respect (Harvey & Daniels, 2009).

**Students can learn from each other**

Reading comprehension instruction is a time-consuming practice, which focuses on appropriately through calculated skills (Diehl, 2005). These skills are first modeled by the instructor. The instructor can demonstrate what a literature discussion group may look like. One example modeling a discussion group is the “Fish Bowl” technique (Young, 2007, Gallavan & Kottler, 2002; Raphael, Pardo, & Highfield, 2002). A group of instructors could demonstrate how a literature discussion group is conducted while the students look on. Teachers need to model or “fish-bowl” acceptable dialogue and behavior in peer-led groups and give the students the opportunity to learn from each other. In order for dialogue to foster critical thinking, the environment of the students promotes student comprehension through conversation and collaboration (Kendrick, 2010). As in Vygotsky’s sociocultural theory, the students learn by watching the example.

In a quantitative study with quasi-experimental methods, ninety-seven fourth graders and six classroom teachers over an 11-week period participated in an investigation to explain the nature of sociocognitive controversy in student-led and teacher-led literature discussion (Almasi, 1995). During the first two weeks, the teachers
modeled the new group techniques. The students, from a suburban middle-class area elementary school in the eastern United States were chosen within a classroom that complemented another student in reading comprehension and sociocognitive conflict recognizing and solving skills which was determined by a pretest-posttest cognitive conflict task scenario. Each teacher’s classroom compared two groups, comparable in size but ranging from five to ten students, with a teacher-led discussion group and a peer-led discussion group. Both groups were exposed to a 3-day instructional series with the third day used for discussion groups. The discussion groups, which were videotaped, met for 30 minutes with a 5-minute introduction and 5-minute debriefing which were both teacher-led. A teacher’s role in the student-led discussion group was to scaffold information and to keep the group on task when necessary. During the teacher-led discussion, the role of the teacher was to direct the discourse with questions.

The data was collected through the pretest-posttest scenarios, transcriptions from the videos, and semi-structured interviews with four students. Of the 11-week study, the first two weeks were a baseline phase, which introduced the participants to the study and the following 9-weeks were the intervention phase. During the 9-week intervention, 108 discussions were recorded on video and two semi-structured interviews were conducted with four students, two from peer-led groups and two from teacher-led groups. Ten percent of the data was scored by two independent coders. Thirty-six discussions were randomly chosen and transcribed. On these 36 tapes, 306 occurrences of sociocognitive conflict were identified by the researcher.
The data from the study showed that each group had strengths and weaknesses. In comparing the pretest and post test results, the data analyzed three areas of the cognitive conflict: recognition of the person in conflict, recognition of the conflict event, and ability to resolve conflict.

In the peer-led group, students showed gains from the pretest to posttest in their ability to recognize the event and their ability to resolve the conflict and a slight loss in their ability to recognize the person in conflict. In the ability to recognize the person in conflict, the teacher-led group showed a slight increase. The peer-led group also displayed superiority in the number of medium and high complex student responses 916 and 387 respectively and the teacher-led group responses were 510 and 134. In the number of questions asked by participants, the student-led group had 368 student-asked questions and 68 teacher-asked questions, while the teacher-led group at 61 student-asked questions and 821 teacher-asked questions. In the student-led groups, the utterances for students were 2, 966 and 197 for teachers.

Of the three types of conflicts found in literature, student-led groups tended to display conflicts within self that was represented through shared opinions and personal background information shared with the group. Students were able to convey their uneasiness with portions of the text. In the teacher-led group, the focus was on conflicts with text. When students incorrectly answered a question posed by the teacher, the
teacher directed the students to the correct answer from the text. The teacher became the group member that identified the uneasiness in the text. Student-led groups consisted of more multifaceted responses and language. Students in the student-led group made more comments and asked more questions that in the teacher-led group. Students in the peer-led groups were better able to find and settle incidence of sociocognitive conflict than the teacher-led group. Student-led groups were more verbal and able to work through most of the conflicts presented in the text.

The researcher discovered three major results for the study. The first result showed that during literature discussions, three types of sociocognitive conflict (conflict within self, conflict with others, and conflict with text) can be found. In the peer-led groups, students were able to identify and express conflict while concentrating on their own uneasiness.

In the teacher-led groups, students were not taking part in an external activity that would allow them to distinguish and solve the conflicts. Secondly, the researcher concluded that the discourse within the different type of groups varied. Student-led groups used more sophisticated language which enabled them to communicate thoughts and uncertainties about the text. The final result of the study showed that on the posttest, student-led groups were better able to internalize how to identify and solve conflict.
Literature Discussion Group Effects on Comprehension

Comprehension is “the degree to which students understand the text they can read with accuracy, ease, and fluency” (Fountas & Pinnell, 2001, p. 492). Reading comprehension is the building of understanding from a text. Reading is an ongoing, productive process (Daniels & Zemelman, 2004). When reading a text, the reader makes a connection to prior knowledge, evaluates what is important information, adjusts prior knowledge to include and building on the new information, and develops a deeper understanding for the subject matter. After comprehending the text, the reader evaluates and judges the information to form new ideas. Over the years, a number of literature discussion group methods have been studied to improve reading comprehension (Fall, Webb & Chudowsky, 2000).

In Bloom’s taxonomy of learning domain, comprehension (now understanding) is the second level of cognitive learning (Gallavan & Kottler, 2002). For most students, dialogue along with concurrent reflection is a vital component of comprehension.
Discussion gives the students an opportunity to rehearse the thinking process, allow teachers to assess a student’s thinking process, and strengthen understanding of the text (Ketch, 2005).

Möller (2004/2005) conducted an interpretive, generative, inductive qualitative field study of a fourth grade girl, “Ashley,” who participated in a heterogeneous literature discussion group. Ashley was a struggling reader who was included in a group of regular readers. At first, Ashley is an outsider who struggles to make conversation and attends the discussion group unprepared. The teacher implements social interaction as a way to increase bonding among the students. After Ashley is given the text on audio, she starts to reach her ZPD. Her interaction and discussion in the group changed Ashley from a less capable peer, needing teacher support to a more capable peer, leading and developing discussion.

Teachers are the most important element of the literature circle. Literature circles take time, research, planning, modeling, and patience to implement (Young, 2007). The goal of the literature discussion group is to give students active reading strategies to improve comprehension. Comprehension is an ongoing process and requires constant monitoring and assessment by the teacher.

In a study in Connecticut public schools, 500 students were tested using Response to Literature, a 90-minutes language arts tests designed to assess comprehension. The students were divided into groups. Some groups were allowed to form literature discussion groups with varying discussion time while others were no discussion time. The results showed that even the smallest amount of discussion time improved the protest comprehension of the students (Fall, Webb, & Chudowsky, 2000).
**Comprehension strategies influence understanding**

Proficient reading skills are an intricate part of learning (Buehl, 2009). For students to be successful in all content areas of learning, students need to develop comprehension strategies used by proficient readers. Seven types of comprehension strategies are simultaneously operating in order for the reader to understand the text. Metacognition, schema, inferring, questioning, determining importance, visualizing, and synthesizing are all important strategies that students need to be able to deploy when determining the meaning of a text (McGregor, 2007; Mills, 2009).

In a nine-week study conducted by Clark (2009), nineteen fifth-grade students from an Upper Midwest K-8 elementary school, participated in an analysis to determine the character and effects of comprehension strategies in a student-led literature group. Students were Caucasian, middle-class, and had been classmates since pre-school. Student were placed in four reading groups of four to five members which consisted of mixed reading abilities and genders students. During the first week, the researcher provided students with most favorable purpose of peer-led discussion groups, common boundary for talk and behavior within the groups, discussed ways to provoke conversation, and modeled a discussion group with the teacher and research assistant. Each group participated in discussions once a week for nine weeks. Discussions lasted roughly 12 minutes and were audio taped. The short stories to be read were *Charles, The Ghost Cat*, and *Lenny’s Red Letter Day*.

Data was collected through discussion audiotapes, field notes, and pre-discussion and post-discussion retellings of three short stories. Transcripts were divided into student speaking turns. Turns were categorized by: (1) talk connected to a comprehension
strategy, (2) talk connected to a comprehension but not a strategy, (3) talk connected to
the group procedure, and (4) talk that is not on task. One student’s turn could contain
more than one category. An independent coder was trained with a final outcome of 95%
reliability. ANOVA was used to explore patterns of discourse between the students with
of varying reading levels. Pre-discussion and post-discussion retellings were scored by
idea units, a checklist of story ideas or elements for each book. Tapes were transcribed
verbatim from nine discernible group discussion tapes, 48 pre-discussion retelling, and 45
post-discussion retellings.

Analysis from the data discovered the majority of talk within the groups showed
comprehension strategy use varied from 52% to 64% of the talk segments. Off-task talk
ranged for 0% to 19%. The bulk of the strategies used were interpreting (15.3%),
evaluating (26.96%) and questioning (27.69%). The remaining nine strategies varied
from .73% to 8.56%.

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<th>Charles</th>
<th>The ghost cat</th>
<th>Lenny’s R. L. Day</th>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Grp 2 (n = 208)</td>
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<td>Grp 4 (n = 103)</td>
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<td>0 (1%)</td>
<td>0 (0%)</td>
<td>0 (0%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Clark, 2009
Percent of Comprehension Strategy Used

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strategy Type</th>
<th>Percent Used</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Compare/contract</td>
<td>8.56%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Contextual</td>
<td>2.55%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Question</td>
<td>27.69%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Evaluate</td>
<td>26.96%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prior Knowledge</td>
<td>2.37%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Confusion</td>
<td>1.27%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Author’s Craft</td>
<td>6.74%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Meaning</td>
<td>1.46%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interpret</td>
<td>15.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Retrospection</td>
<td>4.73%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Summarize</td>
<td>1.64%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Putting self in text</td>
<td>0.73%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

For each story, the transcripts were analyzed to determine the three most used strategies by reading level: above average, average, or below average. Data showed minimal variations in the arrangement of strategy usage. For example, the questioning strategy was most used by the above average readers in the *Charles* and *Lenny’s Red Letter Day* groups and by the lowest level readers in *The Ghost Cat* group. The researcher further broke down evaluations and interpretations by coding high and low quality talk. The results again reveal no significant variation in the mean of low and high quality talk with the reading level of the student. In the pre-discussion groups, *Charles* group had 84 new idea units, *The Ghost Cat* group had 68 new idea units, and *Lenny’s Red Letter Day* had 120 new idea units. During the post-discussion retelling, the *Charles* group incorporated 45 new idea units; of those, 43 (96%) had been discussed in the group. *The Ghost Cat* group incorporated 12 new idea units; of those, 5 (42%) had been discussed in the group. In the *Lenny’s Red Letter Day* group, the group included 89 new idea units in the post-discussion retelling; of those 35 (39%) had been previously discussed in the group.

Students in this study primarily used questioning and evaluating comprehension strategies. Students use of these skills was exercised in implied conversation such as
“Let’s go through what happened.” instead of through precise talk like “The question I have is why?” There was no statistical significance in the strategies used by the different levels of readers.

**Changing student communication**

Teachers have often expressed their unwillingness to implement literature discussion groups because of their reluctance to train students to communicate effectively (Galton, Hargreaves, & Pell, 2009). In a quantitative empirical study conducted by Chinn, Anderson, and Waggoner (2001) in four fourth-grade classrooms in Illinois, two classrooms from a K-8 parochial school serving middle-income families and two classrooms from a public school in a social and economic diverse community participated in a study to determine the pattern of conversation in two types of literature discussion. Academically, the parochial school tested above-average when compared to the state achievement scores while the public school tested about average. In the two parochial school classrooms, now referred to as Class A and Class B, students were divided into three groups by ability and each consisted of 8-9 members. In the two public school classrooms, now referred to as Class C and Class D, students were divided into 2 groups. Class C groups, contained 5 and 8 members, consisted of all low proficient readers. Class D groups, contained 9 and 11 members all of which were high proficient readers. Researcher for this study advocated for heterogeneous groups, but elected to use the teachers’ current homogeneous reading groups. A total of 10 reading groups were used for this study.

During this study, each teacher guided 12 discussions over a 7-week period. Discussions 1, 2, 11, and 12 were to be videotaped. In the first and second discussion,
teachers employed their usual discussion methods, which later proved to be Recitations. Teachers then took part in a ½ day workshop which instructed them on how to implement Collaborative Reasoning, discussion. This type of approach to literature discussion involves student arguing key points or ideas from a story. In discussion 3-10, teachers used Collaborative Reasoning techniques 2 times a week for the next 4 weeks. Discussions 11 and 12 were then videotaped.

Of the data collected 16 of the 40 discussion were used for analyzed. Only the high and low proficiency groups were used in Class A and Class B to counterbalance the groups of Class C and Class D. The stories in the discussions were used in all 8 discussion groups. In the 16 discussion tapes, a total of 45,700 words were recorded over an estimated 4.9 hours of tape.

Data was analyzed and coded into three categories: (1) turns, (2) questions asked by teachers and students, and (3) process of student conversations. Turns, a student’s turn to speak expressing an idea, was divided into 4 types of turns: full turn, simultaneous turn, group turn, interjection and interruptions. Questions were coded by purpose of the question and topic of the question. The cognitive process of students’ talk was also coded. The cognitive process was subcategorized by connections, elaborations, predictions, explanation, coordinating positions, co-construction of ideas and articulation of other viewpoint. Coding was completed on 20% of the data with 94% agreement on turns, 92% agreement on questions, and 91% agreement on the cognitive process. The four dependent variables that were tested using the general linear model were words and turns, number and purpose of questions, topic of questions, and cognitive process.
Results of the study indicated that there is a statically significant difference in at least one variable between the two conditions. For turns, student talk increased from 66 words per minute in the Recitations to 111 words in Collaborative Reasoning, comparative ratio of word utterance diminished from 53% to 34% for teachers, comparative ratio of full turns by teachers decreased from 49% to 36%, student runs increased for 6% in Recitations to 45% in Collaborative Reasoning, student interjections increased from .15 to 1.5 per minute, and student interruptions rose from .20 to 1.8 per minute. For the number and purpose of questions, the data found that teachers-asked questioned changed from 2 per minute in Collaborative Reasoning to 4 per minute in Recitations, 71% of teacher turns involved asking a question in Collaborative Reasoning compared to 92% in Recitations, ratio of assessment questions fell from 53% to 9%, the percent of open-ended questions changed from 56% in Collaborative Reasoning to 30% in Recitations, and the percent of challenge questions increased from .2% to 13%. For the question topics, the results showed that throughout Collaborative Reasoning, teachers asked a smaller number of questions that required answers directly from the text, a smaller number of questions that needed evidence about the text, more questions searching for moral positions, and more clarifying questions. For the cognitive process, the results showed the Collaborative Reasoning groups made more elaborations, more predictions, provided more evidence, and articulated more than the Recitations groups. Each of the groups in the four classrooms displayed the same patterns of change, by and large, when moving from Recitations discussions to Collaborative Reasoning discussions.

During the Collaborative Reasoning discussion groups, the students displayed a critical/analytic stance which showed the students were trying to analyze the text. The
teachers gave students control over the interpretation of the text to the students during Collaborative Reasoning groups. Although students gained some control over the turns, ultimate control still rested with teachers. Students control expanded in the selection of the topic. Students were able to answer questions as they saw fit and expand the topic to what they wanted to talk about. Students were able to interact and respond to each other in order to deepen understanding of the text.

**Thinking about thinking**

Metacognition is “the core of strategic behavior and leads to control over learning,” (Diehl, 2005, p.59). The learner not only knows what is being learned, but is knowledgeable about the most effective learning strategies to apply to the learning situation. Metacognition involves thinking about thinking ((Sternber & Williams, 2002). The learner takes control of the learning process.

In literature groups, the readers think and discuss the information learned in the text through metacognition. Each reader applies his/her experience to the discussions and the less experienced readers take in this knowledge. Literature discussion groups allow readers to connect with the text, develop student-centered learning, encourage more talk about the text to engage the readers more, add essential social interaction between readers, and improve cognitive thinking and comprehension strategies (Clark & Holwadel, 2007)

In a comparative analysis of a descriptive study conducted by Alsami (2001), forty-nine fourth graders and their six teachers over an eight week period participated in as investigation to compare more proficient peer discussion groups with less proficient peer discussion groups. The groups were composed of one third of each teacher’s class
population, which varied from 6 groups members to 12 group members. Students in each group were of average and below average reading ability, which was determined by the comprehension subtest of the Comprehensive Test of Basic Skills. The discussion groups meet for 30 minutes, which consisted of a 5-minute introductory/review phase, a 20-minute discussion phase, and a 5-minute debriefing phase.

The discussions were analyzed for the appearance of nine characteristics. Students must interact and translate charts, reference text, respond to others, draw from personal experiences, invite questions, scrutinize group procedures, expand comments, and analyze the text and author. The teacher must scaffold the communication of the group. The data showed the more proficient group shifted to old topics 85 times, made links to other topics 30 times, and extended topics 108 times during the study while the less proficient group shifted to old topics 33 times, made links to other topics 4 times, and extended topics 56 times. The less proficient peer discussion group had teacher involvement for all 8 weeks while the more proficient peer group’s teacher did not get involved after the first week. The more proficient peer discussion group used scaffolding to build comprehension and attach text to prior knowledge.

When students are given the right skills in order that encourage them to use critical thinking, students can question what they are reading. Gillies and Khan (2010) showed teachers how to model cognitive thinking to their students. Students who were trained by the teachers to question the text and each other’s thinking, displayed more problem solving behavior than those student who were not trained. The trained students offered more elaborate answers and provide justification and reasoning behind the answers.
Chapter III- Results and Analysis Relative to the Problem

A New Face on Comprehension Strategies

Proficient readers use comprehension strategies to self-check in determining the meaning of the text being read. These skills are essential for learning. For students to be successful in all content areas, mastery of comprehension strategies is critical. Most educational researchers discuss seven comprehension strategies that are important in developing reading comprehension (Daniels, 2009; Wilfong, 2009; Mills, 2009; McGregor, 2007; Kitch, 2005; Keene & Zimmerman, 2007). Current trends shows these comprehension strategies (schema, infer, questioning, determining importance, visualize, synthesizing, and monitoring for meaning) are being taught to student in literature groups as individual responsibilities. When using schema, students connect what is being learned to what has already been learned. Making inferences requires students to merge what they already know and to make a logical guess at what the text is implying. Questioning while reading allows readers to check their progress or make an internal inquiry to check understanding or investigate new ideas. Determining importance of ideas and events in the text helps the reader to differentiate between main ideas and supporting information. Visualizing the text brings to life the words from the page. In synthesizing the text, readers determine important information and build new ideas with existing schema. Proficient readers constantly monitor for meaning to make sure what is being reading fits with or expands on what is already known. Skillful readers are continually interchanging these strategies to determine if the text is being assimilated into existing schema and comprehended.
Teachers have begun to implement a new strategy to add structure and organization to group work and to further reading comprehension. Each student in a discussion group would be assigned a specific role with well-defined responsibilities. A student in a group who is assigned the role of Summarizer abridges the text pointing out important events and presents this information to the rest of the group. The Artist draws a visual representation of how the characters, setting, or events might look. Students change jobs with reading assignments to expose each student to different positions or roles. As in Wilfong, teachers can change the jobs given to the students depending on the appropriate tasks for a specific assignment. For example, Textmasters used a Discussion Director, Summarizer, Vocabulary Enricher, and Webmaster.

Not All Programs Work the Same

When conducting research studies, results can often produce data which is different from what researchers expect. Kucan & Beck (2002) and Galton, Hargreaves, & Pell (2009) discovered that talking about text may yield unexpected results. Murphy, Soter, Wilkinson, Hennessey, & Alexander, 2009) Researchers suggest that just talking about a text is not enough.

Discussing text in groups is not the only device that can aid in improving the understanding of content. In the Kucan & Beck (2002) study, researchers were surprised to find that talk about text, either in a group or to yourself, increased the level of knowledge about the text. Between the pretest and posttest recalls scores and question-response scores, the results showed no statically significant condition-related differences. Pretest and posttest scores for the individual and the groups were similar. For the individual, mean scores were 9.77 for pretest and 11.08 for posttest. For the group, mean
scores were 9.14 for pretest and 11.43 for posttest. Students just being able to talk about the text improved reading comprehension for all students. Results of the test varied when comparing low cognitive responses and higher cognitive responses. Data showed differences in the type of students engaged in during group discussions and on the posttest.

Literature discussion groups may not be useful for all subject matter in content area learning. In the Galton, Hargreaves, & Pell (2009) study, the data from science discussion groups deviated significantly from data collected from the other classes with unexpected results. When teachers taught electricity, the effect size for groups and whole class instruction were significant amounts of 0.71 and 0.73 respectively. This indicated almost the same effect occurred during both whole class instruction and group instruction. For the forces and particles lessons, the opposite occurred. Data from the forces and particles lessons revealed student effect size for group work were significantly larger than for whole class instruction. Difference in effect size that occurred during different science topics indicated that a positive result from group discussion in comprehension is influenced by subject matter.

Gender may also effect the optimal learning environment surrounding group discussion. Galton, Hargreaves, & Pell (2009) compared comprehension results from different subjects in whole class instruction and group instruction environments with gender as the observed factor. During English lessons, both boys and girls excelled in a group atmospheres. In mathematics, boys produced better results during group work while girls had a greater effect during whole class settings. For the science lessons, boys
and girls improved in both whole class and group instruction. Outcome from this study pointed to gender being subjective by subject material and type of instruction approach.

In a recent meta-analysis empirical study on the effects of classroom discussion on comprehension, Murphy, Soter, Wilkinson, Hennessey, & Alexander (2009) reviewed several selected types of discussion methods on students’ high-level comprehension of text. Major types of discussion approaches analyzed were Collaborative Reasoning, Paideia Seminar, Philosophy for Children, Instructional Conversations, Junior Great Books Shared Inquiry, Questioning the Author, Book Club, Grand Conversations, and Literature Circles. Many of these approaches were found to be extremely successful in advancing students’ basic and inferential comprehension. Although most approaches were helpful in increasing student talk and decreasing teacher talk, results did not automatically relate to an increase in student comprehension. Even though student talk increased, the type of talk was not necessarily conducive to increasing comprehension.

**Implications of Literature Discussion Groups**

A number of inferences can be drawn concerning the use literature discussion groups. One important inference is that during literature group discussions, students are learning a wide range of strategies that influence how students comprehend the text (Kucan & Beck, 2003; Almasi, 1995; Clark, 2009; Alsami, 2001; Fall, Webb, & Chudowsky, 2002; Chinn, Anderson, & Waggoner, 2001). Literature discussion groups allow for a multitude of ways to help develop reading comprehension by manipulating group dynamics and reading material. Comprehension strategies can be taught by teacher-led or student-led activities, but literature discussion groups provide an opportunity for struggling readers to work with peers and be actively involved with the
text. An important advantage to the discussion group framework is that teachers have the time and opportunity to provide small group instruction while keeping the whole class on task. Literature circles allow for social interaction between classmates, which can lead to more culturally tolerant students.

When implementing literature discussion groups, researchers found that allowing students to interact the each other while discussing text with little to no training improved the discourse when compared to talking alone or having a teacher present (Kucan & Beck, 2002; Galton, Hargreaves, & Pell, 2009; Almasi, 1995). When students had the opportunity to converse independently in small groups, students exhibited more complex and elaborate dialog than compared to teacher directed talk or talking alone. Student-led discourse demonstrated Vygotsky’s theory that learning occurs during social interaction. Student responses in working together developed cognitive connection to the text. Responses synthesized the text making links to self and adding information beyond what is written deepening comprehension (Kucan & Beck, 2002; Almasi, 1995).

Researchers indicated that literature group discussion effect all levels of readers and can increase use of reading comprehension strategies during discussions. Clark (2009) and Chinn, Anderson, & Waggoner (2001) found low and high level readers engaged almost equally during discussion groups. As stated in Vygotsky’s ZPD, Clark (2009) found that students with higher reading ability strategic input during discussion groups inspired more group members’ post-discussion knowledge than the less capable readers. As a result, less capable readers comprehended more text by the influence of the more knowledgeable reader.
Teachers model what is expected from students both behaviorally and procedurally. As teachers scaffold, teacher-led discussions move to student-led discussion. Through this process, students learn how to effectively conduct a discussion and learn to take control of the comprehension process.

Literature discussion groups for the 4th through 8th grades affect comprehension by employing the use of comprehension strategies (Kucan & Beck, 2002; Galton, Hargreaves, & Pell, 2009; Almasi, 1995; Clark, 2009; Chinn, Anderson, & Waggoner, 2001; Almasi, O’Flahavan, & Arya, 2001). Students, conversing together in small groups in a sociocultural environment, make connection to schema by building what is already known about the text to what is new information. Development of metacognition is taking place. Students are thinking about what has been read and how the information relates to self. Students question together what does not make sense and what is might be implied. During literature discussions group, students learn from other and monitor the meaning of the text that is being discussed.

Literature discussion groups have commonly been employed in Language Arts or English class for use with fiction text. Newer studies such as Galton, Hargreaves, & Pell (2009) are exploring the impact on all content areas. Literature discussion groups when implemented in content area classrooms could increase comprehension of the content area being studied. Galton, Hargreaves, & Pell found that discussion groups may have an effect by topic and gender.
Chapter IV – Recommendations and Conclusion

Recommendation

Galton, Hargreaves, and Pell (2009) sighted that secondary teacher did not use literature discussion groups because the time required to implement, the loss of teacher control, and the necessary training of student communication. After the study, teachers admitted to not debriefing students after a lesson, not completing student training, not allowing student groups reporting information to rest of the class, and not giving students time to scaffold information as required guidelines for the study. Implementing literature discussion groups can give students to opportunity to interact and take control of the learning process. In group work, students are held accountable by each other to contribute to the discussion. This process takes time and patience on the teachers’ part, but the result can improve the reading comprehension for the entire class.

Areas for Further Research

With the new spins add to literature discussion groups, long term effects are still not known. The longevity of the cognitive connection of the literature discussion group should be examined. A five year observational study comparing students exploring literature discussion and direct instruction needs to be conducted. Two K-8 elementary schools in an urban setting, one using discussion groups and one using teacher directed instruction, are participants in the study. Students should be analyzed by as a group and individually. Teachers, starting in third grade, should start to expose students to discussion groups. Lessons should be observed, teachers’ should submit weekly journals, and have corresponding lessons videotaped. Data will be collected through observations, journals, videos, pretest, posttest and state tests. The results will be analyzed through
ANOVA in comparing the discussion groups students with the teacher directed
instruction students.

Conclusion

As Kucan and Beck (2002) discovered, just talking about text out loud and to
oneself can improve comprehension. Research has shown that implementing literature
discussion groups in a classroom can have a positive effect on comprehension. Students
exchange new ideas that build on schema. Through literature discussion groups, students
make deeper connection to the text and are trained to listen to each other. Students
develop on each other’s responses and listen to each other. Student-led responses that
come out of discussion groups are motivated by the group members themselves.
Comprehension strategies used in discussions encourage understanding that is reflective
of sociocultural environments.

Instruction moves from teacher-led to student/teacher-led to student-led.
Teachers, through social learning, allow students to take control of the learning process
empowering students to collaborate, personalize, and comprehend the content material.
Giving students’ opportunities to put into practice comprehension strategies allows
students to chance to internalize and reinforce comprehension. Teachers need to train and
follow the program to yield effective results.

Comprehension is an important part of the educational curriculum. Good readers
separate confusing information and devise a strategy to restore the meaning of the text.
Implementing literature discussion groups allow students to cognitively connect to the
content area matter and thus thrive in school. Literature discussion groups are
multifaceted which cause students to use a mixture of comprehension strategies in complicated and always changing ways.
References


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