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**UTILIZING SERIES BOOKS AS A VEHICLE TO CULTIVATE MOTIVATION
AND READING DEVELOPMENT IN LITERATURE CIRCLES**

by

Heather E. Guerci

A Thesis

Submitted to the
Department of Language, Literacy, and Sociocultural Education
College of Education
In partial fulfillment of the requirement
For the degree of
Master of Arts in Reading Education
at
Rowan University
December 6, 2017

Thesis Chair: Dr. Stephanie Abraham

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Dedication

I would like to dedicate this manuscript to my incredible husband, Daniel. This work would not have been possible without your love, support, and encouragement.

Acknowledgements

I would like to express my gratitude to the students and administration at the study site for allowing this study to take place. Also, thanks to my colleagues in my MA in Reading program and my colleagues at my school for your support. Thank you to my parents, Jay and Eileen, and my brother, Christopher.

Abstract

Heather Guerci

UTILIZING SERIES BOOKS AS A VEHICLE TO CULTIVATE MOTIVATION AND READING DEVELOPMENT IN LITERATURE CIRCLES

2017-2018

Dr. Stephanie Abraham

Master of Arts in Reading Education

The purpose of this study is to document the changes in student achievement, motivation, and engagement. The specific aim is to see what happens when series books are discussed in literature circles. Engagement during literature circles, growth in reading level, and behaviors exhibited during the literature circle discussions are analyzed. The focus group of students demonstrated changes in their reading preferences and level of motivation to read texts. Implications for utilizing series books in literature circles are discussed.

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Chapter 1

Introduction

“Meaning doesn’t arrive because we have highlighted text or used sticky notes or written the right words on a comprehension worksheet. Meaning arrives because we are purposefully engaged in thinking while we read”

(Tovani, 2004, p. 9).

“Mrs. Guerci, do you have any more *Poppleton* books?” Arianna asked me urgently. With widened eyes, I replied, “Of course, Arianna! Let me get them out of my closet.” Arianna had struggled with reading all school year. As a late second grader, she continued to have difficulty reading sight words and applying decoding strategies. In addition, she was not motivated to read and unenthusiastically trudged through literacy activities. Her eager request for more books was unprecedented and it took me by surprise. As I fervently searched through my closet to unearth more *Poppleton* books, I smiled to myself and realized that this was the perfect opportunity for Arianna to become an engaged reader.

Now a fourth grader, Arianna has visited my classroom countless times to greet me in the morning, share news of her academic success, and read books to my new classes. Recently, as I listened to Arianna read the Little Critter book, *Just Go To Bed*, with enthusiasm and expression to my first grade class, I wondered if the seismic shift she experienced as a reader was partially due to her zest for more adventures with Poppleton pig and his friends. With this question burning in my mind, I realized that I had to find out if series books supported student learning. If Poppleton pig provided Arianna with the incentive she needed to become a motivated reader, how would other

students change when they read series books and discussed them in a literature circle? As Tovani (2004) eloquently states, reading comprehension does not derive merely from the use of worksheets and sticky notes (p. 9). Engaging students with interest, motivation, and rich discussion is the manner in which meaning is solidified.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this research study is to examine shifts in student achievement, motivation, and engagement. The specific aim is to see what happens when series books are discussed in literature circles. First grade students are emergent readers and encouraging them to read copious amounts of texts can be challenging. After considering the enticement that series books have had on motivating former students, I decided to investigate the impact of using these books in literature circles. My study is significant because it explores the implications that the use of series books has on motivation and reading achievement.

When I first began my review of the literature, I noticed that there are very few empirical studies expounding on the benefits of using series books to bolster reading achievement. Truby (1999) acknowledges the beneficial nature of using these types of texts, as they promote stamina and incite curiosity about the new adventures of familiar characters. Another important facet of using series books in instruction is the ability for students to read for pleasure. Reading for pleasure develops students' cognition and aides their reading comprehension (Sullivan & Brown, 2013, p. 2). Though these studies supported the foundation of my research, they illuminated the need for further investigation on this topic.

To ensure that my research study would provide each student with the opportunity to read for pleasure and strengthen reading comprehension, I selected the works of Mo Willems, a well-known children’s book author, for my research study. Willems is responsible for the creation of the characters Gerald and Piggie, two likable and relatable figures in the *Elephant and Piggie* series. The *Elephant and Piggie* series feature many books detailing the adventures of Gerald and Piggie at different reading levels. This was an influential factor for the selection of this series, as I was able to use different leveled texts as the four students progressed in the research study.

Utilizing series books is an important facet of this research study but it does not fully encapsulate my overarching aim. While the *Elephant and Piggie* series books represent the content used in this research study, the strategy employed to help my students make meaning from these texts was literature circle discussions. Literature circles provide a platform for students to read using an efferent stance, while the series books used in the discussions allowed my students to read for pleasure from an aesthetic stance. Rosenblatt’s (1982) findings suggest that learning occurs when a balance between these two stances is maintained. This study examined the blend of literature circle discussion and series books, a combination that was not represented in prior research.

However, my examination of prior research did illuminate the multiple benefits of literature circle discussion. The conversation in a literature circle is student-centered and it allows children to develop and discuss their own unique perspectives about a text. Literature circles provoke a dialogic classroom, where “teachers and students act as co-inquirers, collaboratively engaging in a generation and evaluation of new interpretations of texts” (Reznitskaya, 2012, p. 446). Not only does this type of thinking enhance the

opportunity for students to question the text and collaborate with their peers, it also allows students to make personally meaningful connections to the text. Sanacore (2013) suggests that readers deliberately consider personal connections made from a text, to think critically about the content. Sharing viewpoints with others allows students the opportunity to express themselves and consider the perspectives of others.

In addition to promoting interactive discussion, literature circles create an autonomous environment. According to Parker, Novak, and Bartell (2017), an environment with engaging choices incorporates autonomy, competence, and relatedness in a group. Students feel autonomous “when they understand the value or relevance of a task, particularly if they believe that the task aligns with their values, interests, and goals” (Parker, Novak & Bartell, 2017, p. 3). The rich discussion of a literature circle allows students to craft meaningful connections to the text and share their opinions and conclusions with their peers.

The combination of series books and literature circles create an autonomous, academically rigorous environment that permits students to read for pleasure. Though the *Elephant and Piggie* texts were pre-selected, the conversation was student-centered and collaborative. These conditions promote engagement, which leads to academic achievement (Froiland & Oros, 2014, p. 121-122). In addition, the fusion of series books and literature circles couples “skill and will” as students are held accountable through their literature circle discussion and maintain motivation by reading series books (Guthrie, 2010, p. 16). The unique blend of these two elements represents a novel topic for research.

Statement of Research Problem and Question

The purpose of this research study is to examine shifts in student achievement, motivation, and engagement. This study will analyze the impact of series books, observe changes in reading level, and detail conversations held in literature circles. How do series books impact small group expressive talk and engagement in a literature circle? How do students see themselves reflected in the books that they read in school? How motivated are student to read the series texts? How does the scaffold of series books impact reading growth? How do boys and girls respond differently to series books?

Story of the Question

The foundation of my research question arose from my earliest childhood memories. As a young girl, I remember being excited to read books in the series of *Nancy Drew*, *Clue Jr.*, and *Harry Potter*. These books engaged and excited me, instilling a lifelong love of reading from an early age. As an educator, I noticed that series books had a similar impact on my students. Students who struggled to find something to read became hooked on the stories in *Poppleton*, *Puppy Mudge*, *Biscuit*, and *Magic Tree House*. The impact that series books have on student learning has always piqued my curiosity. Exploring this subject in my research study gave me the opportunity to bring my investigation to fruition.

While the importance of series books has always been at the forefront of my mind, the inception for including literature circle discussions came from an experience I had with my students during the previous school year. At the end of the school year, I used a literature circle with my strongest students. Their discussions were provocative and thought provoking and they illustrated their understanding of the book in a highly

individualized manner. My students exceeded my expectations and they responded well to the independence and individualization provided by the literature circle. After reflecting on this experience, I decided to infuse this strategy with the content of series books, as the subject of my research study.

Teacher research is a “natural extension of good teaching” and it requires thoughtful reflection of best teaching practices and implications for student success. After considering the influential literary factors that have impacted me as an educator, I decided to base my teacher research on the benefits of combining series books and literature circles. Both have shown positive implications in my past practice and using qualitative research to analyze their use in detail helps “create the best possible learning environment for students” (Shagoury & Power, 2012, p. 3). The conclusions I assembled were based upon the close observations I made during the research process and the careful dissection of data sources I analyzed when the research was completed.

The rest of this thesis is a qualitative analysis of my research question. Chapter Two will review the research on motivation and engagement, literature circles, and series books. Chapter Three provides the context of the study, the research design and methodology, and background information on the four students in this research study. Chapter Four is a review and analysis of the information gleaned from the data sources. Lastly, Chapter Five provides a summary of conclusions, limitations, and implications.

Chapter 2

Literature Review

“A thematic unit across time has the benefit of nurturing students' confidence in reading. When the students see the topics, key questions, and essential portions of text linked together, they gain a sense that they can read” (Guthrie, 2010, p. 22).

Introduction

Early elementary teachers are always looking for effective ways to motivate young children to read. Burgeoning readers benefit from motivating factors that help cement their reading engagement. Literature circles and series books have been documented as two effective means to accomplish this overarching goal; however, the research on the benefit of using series books is minimal. Also, the literature does not include a discussion of the impact that these two strategies have on engaging young readers when they are used in conjunction. Chapter two presents a discussion of the theoretical framework associated with reading engagement and motivation, as well as a review of the literature documenting the use of literature circles and series books in classroom instruction. Section one discusses the factors that motivate young readers. The next two sections describe the purpose and benefits of using literature circles and series books in the classroom. Finally, the chapter concludes with an analysis of the ways that literature circles and series books bolster the literary abilities of early elementary students and ways that this study synthesizes the use of both strategies.

What Motivates Children to Read?

The cornerstone of successful readers at the primary level comes from a blend of motivation and reading ability. Guthrie's theory of motivation and engagement (2010)

explains that good readers have both “skill and will,” as “students with skill may be capable,” but they cannot become successful readers without ample motivation to read (p. 16). The combination of reading ability and motivation to read are the underpinnings of student engagement. Guthrie cites interest, dedication, and confidence as the three elements that cultivate motivation in students and, he attributes the development of these elements to classroom teachers (Guthrie, 2010, p. 16). Interest, dedication, and confidence work together to create motivated readers and promote the acquisition of literacy skills. Guthrie (2010) finds that “motivated first graders gain rapidly in reading achievement” and student achievement was reached “when teachers were sensitive to student interests, invited student input into classroom decisions, and avoided harsh criticism” (p. 21-23). Based on Guthrie’s findings, reading ability and motivation to read work together to create engagement and reading achievement in the primary grades.

After considering the theoretical framework gleaned from Guthrie’s theory, it is evident that motivation to read is an integral part of reading success. In a review of the research, Schiefele, Schaffner, Moller, and Wigfield (2012) analyze the relationship between reading motivation and reading competence. Through the analysis of studies gathered from a twenty-year span, the authors discovered that interest, choice, and involvement are predictors of comprehension growth (Schiefele, Schaffner, Moller, and Wigfield, 2012). When these aspects are used in instructional practice, students become more motivated to read. Additionally, the analysis of these studies shows that reading motivation and reading comprehension are linked (p. 453). This linkage is noteworthy, as motivation may encourage literacy skill development.

The correlation between reading motivation and reading achievement is a multifaceted connection. In an empirical study, Ho and Guthrie (2013) analyzed the changes in seventh grade students to examine the linkages between motivation and achievement. In this ten-month study, Ho and Guthrie (2013) studied the changes these students experienced in reading comprehension, fluency, and motivation. After examining the data, they analyzed the correlation between motivation and reading achievement. The results of the study show that “students’ intrinsic motivation (enjoyment of reading) and positive peer valuing of reading were correlated positively with grades and fluent reading” (Ho & Guthrie, 2013, p. 132). These findings demonstrate the interconnectedness of reading motivation and achievement. Additionally, the authors (2013) found that aversion and attraction were major sources of motivation and predictors of reading achievement (p. 141). The maintenance of motivation occurs through the comprehension of the text and the independence to explore the content. Although students enjoy learning, “social contexts can either support or stifle that natural basis for learning” (Ryan & Deci, 2009, p. 174). Using texts that are both interesting and accessible supports student learning and creates a baseline of intrinsic motivation. Ryan and Deci (2009) find that autonomy, competence, and positive feedback are key factors for intrinsic motivation. Literature circles create an autonomous learning environment that enhances student learning and provides immediate feedback from peers and teachers.

How does a Culturally Responsive Environment Support Motivation?

A learning environment that supports social consciousness will also benefit student learning. Ladson-Billings (2014) postulated that “by focusing on student learning and academic achievement” and sociocultural awareness, students cultivate “both

responsibility for and deep interest in their education” (p. 76-77). The coexistence of cultural awareness and academic attainment creates a foundation for deep understanding. Rather than just teaching content, educators can motivate students by selecting materials and activities that are personally engaging for students. By considering sociocultural factors, teachers “take on the dual responsibility of external performance assessments as well as community- and student-driven learning” (Ladson-Billings, 2014, p. 83). This provides a harmonious balance of learning and student interest.

Harnessing student interest is an important way to further reading engagement. Promoting autonomy and accentuating students’ values creates “intrinsic motivation and classroom engagement” which leads to reading achievement (Froiland & Oros, 2014, p. 121-122). Reflecting students’ ethnical culture and familial dynamic in the classroom produces a culturally responsive environment that promotes intrinsic motivation. In this classroom environment, students “learn to love learning, develop meaningful skills, and gain transformative knowledge, so that they are better prepared to contribute to the betterment of the world they live in” (Froiland & Oros, 2014, p. 122-123). The implications for teaching practice requires educators to be cognizant of the interests, values, culture, and ethnicity of students when selecting reading materials and strategies. The literature confirms that student interest is a key factor of motivation and, in turn, student motivation is an indicator of reading achievement.

How do Literature Circles Benefit Early Readers?

Another influential component of this study’s theoretical framework is Louise Rosenblatt’s Transactional Theory of Reader Response. Rosenblatt’s theory defines reading as “a two-way process, involving a reader and a text at a particular time under

particular circumstances” (Rosenblatt, 1982, p. 268). Readers come to an understanding of the text based on past experiences, schema, and knowledge of the topic. Rosenblatt (1982) postulates that the most important component of reading is the stance, or “expression of purpose,” that a reader chooses to take when reading a text (p. 268). She goes on to explain that there are two major stances: efferent, or reading to seek information, and aesthetic, or focusing on what is being created during the reading experience (p. 269). Oftentimes, reading comprehension occurs in the middle of these two stances.

The Transactional Theory of Reader Response also has implications for classroom instruction. During reading instruction, the discussion of texts should balance both efferent and aesthetic stances. Rosenblatt (1982) suggests that teachers adopt a “receptive attitude” to provide children with the opportunity to recall the events of a text and discuss their reflections through verbal and non-verbal responses (p. 276). This allows children to glean information from a text, while still permitting them to experience a personal connection to the content. Teachers can guide the conversation to lead to “further reflection on what in the experienced story or poem had triggered the reactions” and coach students to “enable the young readers to select concrete details or parts of the text that had struck them most forcibly” (p. 276). Rosenblatt’s theory illustrates the importance of incorporating rich discussion in reading experiences. This theory has implications for literature circles, as student-led discussion helps to cement literary understanding.

In addition to the Transactional Theory of Reader Response, Guthrie’s Engagement Model of Reading Development supports the use of literature circles. Social

interactions, strategy usage, and interesting texts are all key components of literature circles (Guthrie & Cambria, 2010). Literature circles help students grow to become “self-sustaining, lifelong readers” (Daniels, 2006, p. 10). Daniels (2006) explains that literature circles are a research-based strategy that promotes engagement, as students can share their ideas in a student-centered space, and fosters responsibility, as students lead the discussion and take ownership of their own learning (p. 11). In order to effectively use literature circles, there must be explicit instruction used in conjunction with student-led discussion. Through the use of explicit skill instruction and, mini-lessons on social skill development, literature circles create valuable learning opportunities for students (p. 13).

Not only do literature circles promote skill acquisition, reading comprehension is improved as well. Avci and Yuksel (2011) discuss the impact that literature circles have on literacy comprehension and reading habits. The authors find that students comprehend books read in literature circles well by “meticulously internalizing it” and discussing “even the smallest details” (p. 1297-1298). These discussions provide students with the opportunity to correct misunderstandings about the text. Using conversation to process literature promotes a dialogic environment that allows students to collaboratively engage in new interpretations of texts (Reznitskaya, 2012, p. 446). Reznitskaya (2012) suggests that teachers create opportunities for students to share the “flow of discussion,” posit questions that do not have one specific answer, and provide “meaningful and specific feedback” (p. 446). This allows students to attain understanding of a text through meaningful conversations with their peers.

Sanacore (2013) highlights the importance of slowing down the process of reading and allowing students to take time to discuss personal responses to literature.

Using these discussions in literature circles can “support both personal and critical responses” and can help learners “consider a broader range of viewpoints” (Sanacore, 2013, p. 120). This helps learners think critically about texts and develop a deeper understanding of the content. Meaningful discussions can help build different interpretations of student understanding and “aid development of children’s understanding of themselves as readers” (Pearson, 2010, p. 3). King and Briggs (2005) find that discussion in literature circles can help with the application of literary strategies, the development of reading skills, and share their experience of the text through the social interaction in the group (Pearson, 2010, p. 3-4).

Literature circles provide students with the opportunity to discuss texts in the primary grades. The conversations about the text are student-centered and they give primary students ample choice, as they decide what to discuss. In addition, literature circle discussions provide students with accountability, as they are responsible for the content of the conversation. Through these discussions, students are better equipped to comprehend the content of a text.

What is the Advantage of Using Series Books in the Classroom?

Based on these findings, the impact of reading motivation, enhanced by rich discussion, promises academic enrichment for young children. In order to cultivate the necessary elements of motivation and meaningful discussion, children must be enthusiastic about the material they read in school. In addition, the material must provide a hook, to ensure continuous engagement, and the books must be read for pleasure. These conditions promote excitement, engagement, and entertainment for students. Based on their analysis of the data collected from the British Cohort Study, Sullivan and Brown

(2013) find that reading for pleasure has a “powerful influence on children’s cognitive development, especially in terms of their vocabulary” (p. 2). These conditions are an influential force for reading achievement and offer reasoning for the use of series books in the classroom.

Series books are motivating and they permit students to read for pleasure, generating an atmosphere of academic enrichment. Truby (1999) argues that series books offer children reading practice and the experience of reading for pleasure (p. 21). This intrinsic motivation allows children to read from an aesthetic stance, while still using an efferent stance to learn about literary elements found in series texts (Rosenblatt, 1985). In addition, Truby (1999) explains that series books are motivating to reluctant readers, as they allow promote stamina, enjoyment, and consistency through their familiar characters and textual patterns (p. 21-22). Using series books in instruction at the primary level creates a safety net that benefits the learning progression of early readers.

Concurring with Truby, Ward and Young (2007) find that series books provide children with “a sense of normality and security” since they are “familiar and predictable, and the characters rarely surprise them” (p. 71). This formulaic pattern assists with reading comprehension, as these story elements remain the same and the only variable is the plot progression. The authors (2007) state that once children find an interesting series they “read on and on, intrigued by the literary family they’ve discovered” (p. 71). They are motivated to read more books in the series and look for additional opportunities to get to know a familiar character. In addition, series books provide cultural engagement and help students develop “positive attitudes towards reading” and improve their reading skills (Jones, 2015, p. 6). In her study, Jones (2015) noted that children discussed their

book choices with each other and recommended books to their peers, creating a climate of active literary exchange (p. 23). Clearly, using series books provides a platform for children to expound on their literary development.

One series, in particular, encapsulates the benefits of using series books in literature circles with primary students. In Mo Willems's *Elephant and Piggie* series, early readers are the target audience. Willems's books feature "limited vocabulary and many repeated phrases" (Galchen, 2017, p. 28). Not only do Willems's books cultivate reading strategies and stamina, they also garner the interest of children. The fifty books in Willems's *Elephant and Piggie* series "have sold many millions of copies" and, "more than half of which have appeared on the Times best-seller list" (Galchen, 2017, p. 28). This statistical data shows the popularity of these books and the predominance of their usage in modern culture. In addition, the content is engaging for students as "Willems's humor depends on word choice, on timing, on getting repetitions just right" (Galchen, 2017, p. 28). The *Elephant and Piggie* series is an appropriate choice for primary students and the entertainment value is engaging for young children.

Though there is a limited amount research on the benefit of using series books, there is much support for employing these types of texts. Reading for pleasure is a way to both engage students and encourage academic achievement. Series books provide a scaffold for children to read texts, as they include the same character but each book describes a different adventure. In this study, the *Elephant and Piggie* series will be used, as it is appropriate for primary students and the books are entertaining to read.

Conclusion

After reviewing the literature, the research shows that motivation enhances engagement during reading. Fostering intrinsic motivation occurs through text selection, interest, and student involvement in a culturally responsive environment. In this study, motivation is nurtured through the implementation of series books in literature circles. Literature circles create a student-centered environment that allows children to craft a unique perspective about the text. Since discussion is student-led but facilitated by a teacher, misconceptions about the text can be clarified, to ensure full comprehension. The literature circle discussion in this study will center on the use of *Elephant and Piggie* series books. These books serve as the vehicle through which motivation and comprehension were monitored.

Although there is much research on the benefit of engaging primary students through literature circles and series books, there is a gap in the literature surrounding their collaborative usage. This study aims to highlight the linkages between the two and the benefit of using them in tandem. After reviewing the literature, it is evident that there is a stark gap pertaining to the beneficial contributors of using series books with primary students. In this study, data was collected to determine the impact that expressive talk in literature circles and the motivation to read series books have on children's engagement and reading achievement.

Chapter 3

Context

Community

The study site is one of six elementary schools in a South Jersey school district. The community that houses the study site has a population of nearly fifty thousand people. The 2010 United States Census counts 48,599 people, 17,287 households, and 13,332 families in the community. The racial composition of the community includes 87.7% White, 5.8% African American, 0.1% American Indian, 3.8% Asian, 3.7% Hispanic or Latino, and 1.7% two or more races. The median household income is \$85,892 and 3.7% of individuals in the population are living below the poverty line. In addition, 93.6% of the population is a high school graduate or higher, according to the census.

School

The study site was built in 1980 and it holds 500 students in grades Kindergarten through fifth. The racial breakdown of the school includes 68.4% White, 16% African American, 0.3% American Indian, 4.1% Asian, 7.1% Hispanic or Latino, and 4.1% two or more races. Within the student population, 26% of students have a disability and 39% of students are economically disadvantaged. The average class size is 20 students and there is ratio of 9 students per full-time faculty member. When considering academic achievement, the study site performs similarly to district-wide academic achievement and slightly above statewide academic achievement in both English Language Arts Literacy and Mathematics.

The mission of the district is to create an environment that prepares all students for college and career readiness, so that they can become fully participating members of society. To support this mission, the district created goals that directly support their aims. The district goals include the advancement of student achievement, the infusion of technology in the classroom, the increasing communication between teachers, parents, and students, and the maintenance of fiscal stability. The mission of the school promotes an environment of academic skill acquisition, a climate of positive interactions, and a commitment to the community. The school has goals to increase reading and math proficiency, support the use of differentiated instruction, and increase the use of technology in the classroom.

Classroom

The study took place in my first grade classroom. The classroom setting was a large space that contained five tables for student seating, a teacher station, two tables for small group work, an iPad cart, a carpet for students to gather, and shelves with teacher materials. There were reading materials, mathematics workbooks, writing paper and folders, book boxes for independent reading, as well as a classroom library. The bulletin boards contained instructional information, grouping arrangements for small group instruction, and student work. The classroom environment was warm and inviting for the students.

As part of the balanced literacy design, the English Language Arts Literacy block in the primary grades includes whole group reading, guided reading, independent reading, phonics instruction, and writing. The guided reading component of the literacy block is integral to literary development. Students are placed into guided reading groups

homogenously, as each group is instructed at their specific guided reading level. The goal of these groups is the explicit instruction of literacy skills in a small group setting. During a standard guided reading lesson, students preview the content of the text, read the text, and discuss their findings in a written or oral response.

This study substituted the teacher directed guided reading lessons with student-centered literature circles. In a literature circle, the formula is more fluid, as students respond to a general question about the text in their reading response journal and discuss their findings in an open discussion. While the students in the research study discussed texts in a literature circle, the remainder of the class participates in reading centers. These reading centers provided additional literacy practice and they functioned as a classroom management strategy, as all of the students had a specific task.

Students

The students selected for this study were chosen because they were reading slightly above grade level. The grade level expectation for November of grade one is *Fountas and Pinnell* guided reading level E. The students selected were reading at guided reading level F/G at the beginning of the study, based on the Developmental Reading Assessment 2 (DRA-2). This reading level was ideal for this study, as there are many series texts authored by Mo Willems at this level, and the books have enough plot progression to provoke discussion in a literature circle.

Due to the nature of small group instruction in reading centers, the size of each reading center group did not exceed five children. For this case study, I selected four students; this number was conducive to small group instruction and it was beneficial for discussion in a literature circle. The group of four students consisted of two girls and two

boys: Alexa, Robin, Aidan and Joey. Before I conducted my research, I administered interviews to determine the interests, reading motivation, and book preference of these four children.

Alexa is a first grade girl who enjoys spending time with her family when she is not in school. She loves to read at home with her family, as well. At school, Alexa's favorite subject is Library and she enjoys reading books. She does not read many series books. Alexa's favorite books are fiction and she enjoys reading books that feature animals as the main characters, like *The Long Dog*.

Robin is a first grade girl who loves to play with friends when she is not in school. She loves to read books at home. Robin's favorite school subject is Art and she loves to read books in school, also. Robin will occasionally look to read series books that feature familiar characters. She loves to read both non-fiction and fiction books and *Biscuit* is a favorite.

Aidan is a first grade boy who loves to play games when he is not in school. He also enjoys reading books at home. Aidan's favorite school subject is Computer class and he also enjoys reading in school. He does not seek out series books with familiar characters. Aidan's favorite books feature animals as the main characters and he enjoys the book, *Tiny the Snow Dog*.

Joey is a first grade boy who loves to play outside and roller skate. He sometimes likes to read at home. During the school day, Reading is Joey's favorite subject and he loves to read in school. He does not read series books often at home and at school. His favorite books are fiction books and he especially likes *Grizzwold*.

Research Design/Methodology

This research study is qualitative in nature, as the data collected favored words and observations over numbers (Taylor-Powell & Renner, 2003, p. 1). This type of data collection behooved my research, as much of the data I collected was based on human interaction and required me to gather narrative data. The research paradigm of this qualitative study aligned with the teacher research framework. Teacher research is “a process of discovering essential questions, gathering data, and analyzing it to answer those questions” (Shagoury & Power, 2012, p. 3). Educators craft studies of inquiry by seeking to answer questions that organically derive from their classrooms.

Teacher research is a “natural extension of good teaching,” as it evolves from classroom observations and strives to create “the best possible learning environment for students” (Shagoury & Power, 2012, p. 3). This type of research best suited my study, as I collected data to answer my research question: How do series books impact small group expressive talk and engagement in a literature circle? Throughout the research process, I critiqued my teaching practice and I evaluated the data through careful analysis. My findings informed my practice, benefited my students, and allowed me to share the conclusions I gleaned with my colleagues.

Procedure of Study

This study examined the impact that the discussion of series books in literature circles have on student engagement and reading achievement. After seeing positive correlations between students reading series books and becoming more motivated readers, I was curious to study the impact that series books have on academic achievement. Series books have always been a staple of my literary repertoire, as they

provide a hook for reluctant readers. The well-known characters create a sense of familiarity and comfort as children explore new adventures in each book. While this is a familiar teaching move, I have never used these texts in conjunction with a literature circle. Literature circles require collaboration, independence, and autonomy from students, necessitating them to construct meaning in an individualized manner. Using series books and literature circles together is a novel blend of scaffolding, from series books, and independence, from literature circles.

My research analyzed the connections that series books and literature circles have, when used collaboratively. The data captured the progression in the students' guided reading levels, as well as changes in their engagement level during reading. The qualitative data collection included a teacher research journal, cataloging my thoughts, ideas, and observations during the research. Additionally, the data sources included reading response journals from the students, interviews, and video recordings. Before starting my research, I met with each student to explain the procedure for the research sessions. I also explained the manner in which I would begin my study, with an explanatory newsletter and a letter that sought parental permission. All four students seemed excited to be selected and eager to begin the research process.

Data Sources

In order to collect a well-rounded depiction of my research findings, I decided to use numerous data sources. The first data source I used was a pre-assessment of the DRA-2, to gauge the guided reading levels of the four students in the group. Next, I administered an interview to determine the interests, reading habits, and book preferences of the students. This baseline data was incorporated into my data collection on November

3, 2017, the first day of the research study. After five weeks of data collection, I reassessed the guided reading levels of the students and administered exit interviews on December 1, 2017 at the conclusion of the study.

To supplement this data, I maintained a teacher research journal and took observational data during each session. I wrote my observations, thoughts, feelings, and reflections from the sessions in my journal. To bolster this data source, I video recorded our sessions together and transcribed the conversations. This supported the data collection and allowed me to review the specifics of the conversations in the literature circle. During each lesson, the students wrote their reflections and responses to questions in a reading response journal. This data source kept track of the students' understanding of the texts and it provided them with a written narrative to discuss in the literature circle.

Data Analysis

The data collected during this research study provided insight on the impact of using series books in literature circles. Selecting four students with the same guided reading level provided a baseline for me to compare the reading growth made during the course of the study. Using the DRA-2 as a post-assessment allowed me to compare the change in guided reading level among the four students. The interview was a source of personal information about the four students as they delineated their interests, reading habits, and book preferences. The comparison between the initial interview and the exit interview allowed me to analyze the change in the students' reading habits and book preferences.

The data collected during the literature circles centered on the reading behaviors of the students and their level of text comprehension. Keeping notes in my teacher

research journal was a way for me to outline the manner in which the students interacted, interesting comments that they made, and considerations for future lessons. Additionally, video recording the sessions allowed me to keep track of the conversations in greater detail, as I could watch the session more than once. This data collection illuminated the manner in which the students conversed and allowed me to be receptive to the students' interests and needs.

Finally, the students' reading response journals tracked the reading comprehension of the four students, as reflections and responses were catalogued in this data source. Also, to strengthen reading comprehension, I tasked each student with a specific reading goal, and strategies to enhance reading achievement, in bi-weekly reading conferences. These data sources inspired me to meet the needs of my students and challenge them to expand their knowledge and craft new understanding. In order to make sense of my findings, I inductively coded the data I collected during the research study. I pored over the responses in the reading response journals, I reviewed my notes in my teacher observation journal, and I revisited the recorded sessions. In addition, I graphed the changes in guided reading level, text preference, and interests, as I compared the pre-assessment data with the post-assessment data. This helped me discover thematic elements, which, in turn, allowed me to triangulate my data to support my data analysis.

Chapter 4

Introduction

Due to the multifaceted nature of my research, I included many different types of data collection into the study. After poring over the copious amount of information I gathered, I was able to unveil patterns in my data. As I considered the patterns, I returned back to my initial questions: How do series books impact small group expressive talk and engagement in a literature circle? How do students see themselves reflected in the books that they read in school? How motivated are student to read the series texts? How does the scaffold of series books impact reading growth? How do boys and girls respond differently to series books? Synthesizing the patterns in my data lead to major findings that informed my research questions.

During my research study, I worked with the students twice a week for five weeks. Once I gathered the four students together, I began each session by introducing them to the text with little frontloading.

Table 1

Texts Used in Research Study

<u><i>Elephant and Piggie</i> Texts Used in Literature Circle Discussion</u>	<u>Duration</u>
<i>Are You Ready to Play Outside?</i> by Mo Willems	2 sessions
<i>Waiting is Not Easy</i> by Mo Willems	2 sessions
<i>A Big Guy Took My Ball</i> by Mo Willems	2 sessions
<i>My Friend is Sad</i> by Mo Willems	2 sessions
<i>Can I Play Too?</i> by Mo Willems	2 sessions

After the students read each *Elephant and Piggie* text, they wrote a response in their Reading Response Journal. This response was used as a springboard for the literature circle discussion and it served as an opening for the conversation. Table 1 depicts the titles and timeframe of each text. The data that I gleaned during the course of my study illuminated the following findings: the students were motivated to read series books, scaffolding was necessary to foster collaborative discussions, and using literature circle and series books together promoted a less literal understanding of the text.

Motivation to Read Series Books

Prior to the start of my data analysis, I interviewed the four students to determine their familiarity with series books, as well as their book preference and interest in reading at home. At the conclusion of the research study, I re-administered the interviews to determine variances in the four students' reading interests. Table 1 delineates the responses the four students gave before and after the research study.

Table 2

Student Interviews

Name	Do you like reading at home?		Do you like to read series books?		What types of books do you like to read?	
	Before Study	After Study	Before Study	After Study	Before Study	After Study
Aidan	Yes	Yes	No	Yes, Mo Willems books	<i>Tiny the Snow Dog</i>	<i>Pete the Cat</i> books
Alexa	Yes	Yes	Sometimes	Yes, Mo Willems books	<i>The Long Dog</i>	<i>Beauty and the Beast</i>

Table 2 (Continued)

Name	Do you like reading at home?		Do you like to read series books?		What types of books do you like to read?	
	Before Study	After Study	Before Study	Before Study	After Study	Before Study
Joey	Sometimes	Sometimes	No	Yes, Mo Willems books and <i>Pete the Cat</i>	<i>Grizzwold</i>	<i>Can I Play Too?</i>
Robin	Yes	Yes	Sometimes	Yes, <i>Elephant and Piggie</i> and <i>Pigeon</i> books	<i>Biscuit</i>	<i>Waiting is Not Easy</i>

After considering the results of the interview, the data shows that the students' opinions on series books have changed. Before the research study, the students responded with either "No" or "Sometimes" when asked if they read series books. During the exit interview, all four students responded that they did enjoy reading series books and they all cited the works of Mo Willems as series books that they enjoyed to read. In addition, three out of the four students referenced series books as books they like to read. The data showed that all of the students enjoyed reading series books after the completion of the research study

During the progression of the research study, the observational data collected examined the level of motivation and engagement of the four students.

Observational Notes

Student: Aidan

Date: 11/27/17

	No	Sometimes	Yes
Shows understanding of books read through accountable talk.		✓	
Reflections in Reader's Response Journal illustrate understanding of books read.			✓
Shows engagement by remaining motivated throughout the literature circle.			✓

Student: Alexa

Date: 11/27/17

	No	Sometimes	Yes
Shows understanding of books read through accountable talk.			✓
Reflections in Reader's Response Journal illustrate understanding of books read.			✓
Shows engagement by remaining motivated throughout the literature circle.			✓

Creation/Revision Date: 10/10/2017

Observational Notes

Student: Joey

Date: 11/27/17

	No	Sometimes	Yes
Shows understanding of books read through accountable talk.			✓
Reflections in Reader's Response Journal illustrate understanding of books read.			✓
Shows engagement by remaining motivated throughout the literature circle.			✓

Student: Robin

Date: 11/27/17

	No	Sometimes	Yes
Shows understanding of books read through accountable talk.			✓
Reflections in Reader's Response Journal illustrate understanding of books read.		✓	
Shows engagement by remaining motivated throughout the literature circle.			✓

Creation/Revision Date: 10/10/2017

Figure 1. Observational Notes, 11/27/2017.

Based on the observational notes in Figure 1, collected from one of the final research sessions, all four students remained motivated during the literature circle discussion.

While this data point was the same for all of the students, the other two types of observational notation varied. Both Alexa and Joey showed understanding of the books read by using accountable talk in literature circles. In a session with the text, *My Friend is Sad*, Alexa used accountable talking stems to stimulate a more critical response from Joey.

- 1 Joey: I liked when there he was like “eh”
- 2 Alexa: Why do you think that?
- 3 Joey: Because he looks like he’s in pain

In addition to the benefit of accountable talk, their Reading Response Journals also illustrated their understanding of the texts. In one entry, Alexa wrote, “Wen they lord (learned) that Big guys are not sgare (scary). Becus they lord (learned) sumthing” in response to the text, *A Big Guy Took My Ball*. This entry was not prompted or coaxed and it illustrates Alexa’s understanding of character change in the text. However, Aidan “Sometimes” showed understanding of books read by using accountable talk and Robin “Sometimes” wrote reflections in her Reading Response Journal illustrating her understanding of the texts she read. The observational data showed that all of the students were motivated to discuss series books but two students, a boy and a girl, did not fully demonstrate their understanding of the text in the conversation and written response. Looking across the interviews, excerpts from the literature circle discussions, and observational notes, a pattern of increased motivation to read series books emerged. The alteration in the students’ drive to read series books points to their “interest, dedication, and confidence” in the *Elephant and Piggie* books explored during the research study

(Guthrie, 2010, p. 16). The four students were more cognizant of series books in general and more engaged in the discussion of each *Elephant and Piggie* book during the literature circle.

Scaffolding During Literature Circles

As the students examined each Mo Willems text in the literature circle discussions, scaffolding became necessary to help produce collaborative discussions. The students were able to share their entries from their Reading Response Journals but they required additional scaffolding to discuss the text in more detail. To enhance this objective, I employed cognitive coaching techniques in the literature circle conversations, to generate independent thinking. I utilized strategies to display empathy so that the students could communicate without feeling judged (Costa & Garmston, 2003). Using paraphrasing and probing questions were two effective strategies used in lines 1-3 of the literature circle transcript seen below.

- 1 Teacher: So Joey thought the problem was when it was raining and Alexa
- 2 thought the problem was when the rain stopped. So what is this telling me
- 3 about the book?
- 4 Robin: There's two problems!

The data shows that the use of these strategies elicited a critical response to the text. After using cognitive coaching, Robin was able to consider variances in the text, as exemplified in line 4. Throughout the research study, I used other cognitive coaching strategies, like wait time and the use of carefully constructed questions, to encourage the four students to exchange ideas collaboratively.

After reflecting on the students' collaborative discussions in my teacher response journal, I chose to enhance the amount of scaffolding used in the literature circle

discussions. Figure 2 depicts a journal entry, wherein I decide to incorporate accountable talk sentence stems (see Figure 3) into the literature circle discussions.

11 / 15 / 2017

I am noticing that the students are eager to get started in our sessions. They want to read right away and they can think of a response for their journals without being prompted. However, they continue to need support in their conversational exchange. In addition to the cognitive coaching techniques, I have added "Accountable Talk Stems." Hopefully, this addition will support their independence in the conversations.

Figure 2. Teacher Research Journal Entry, 11/15/2017.




 <p>Explain</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> o I have a question about... o Can you tell me more about... o Can you explain..... o Why do you think that?
<p>Summarize</p> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> o The most important part of the text is... o I think (author) is saying...
 <p>Prove</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> o The author wrote... o The picture shows... o For example...

Figure 3. Accountable Talking Stems, from SchoolWide, Inc. (2017). Reader's Workshop: Teacher Toolkit.

After the inclusion of the accountable talk stems, the dynamic of the conversation progressed in a more collaborative manner. The scaffolding used to support discussion in literature circles allowed the students to enhance the quality of collaborative conversation, which benefited their comprehension of the texts. Prior to this addition, the conversation between the four students required consistent prompting. The excerpt below depicts a conversation from the first research session.

- 1 Robin: And when the rain stopped, they got sad because they really wanted rain
- 2 again and Gerald had water in his trunk and he blew it out on Piggie.
- 3 Teacher: So Robin really liked when Piggie was playing in the rain. Does anyone
- 4 have a question or comment about what Robin said? [silence] Let's
- 5 comment on what Robin said first. Now, you have your own conversation.
- 6 I'm just going to listen. [silence] Alexa, what did you think about what
- 7 Robin said?
- 8 Alexa: I think that um that I liked what Riley said.
- 9 Aidan: I liked when the rain stopped.
- 10 Teacher: Ok, who has a question about what Aidan said?
- 11 Alexa: Why do you like when the rain stopped?

The literature circle discussion on *Are You Ready to Play Outside?* exemplifies the lack of collaboration between the four students. In lines 4 and 6, wait time is used in order to give the students time to think about their responses. Using this cognitive coaching strategy had some benefit but it did not extend the responses of the students. In line 8, Alexa merely comments that she likes what her classmate said. This superficial reflection does not show a critical interpretation of the text.

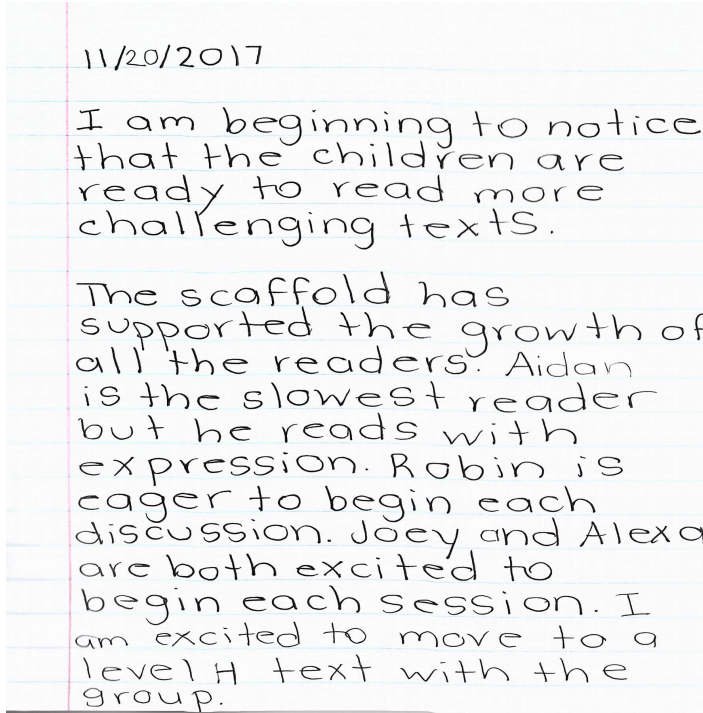
After the inclusion of both cognitive coaching and accountable talking stems, the tenor of the discussion altered. The data collected from a later session in the research study indicates the receptive manner in which the accountable talk stems were applied.

- 1 Teacher: Ok, who wants to go next? Robin?
- 2 Robin: I think the most important part to have friends beside you because they can
- 3 help you if you get hurt. Or if there's a friend by you you don't really

- 4 know they can help you too.
- 5 Teacher: Who has a question about what Robin said?
- 6 Aidan: Why do you think that?
- 7 Robin: Because friends are always around. Because if you're on the playground
- 8 and another class comes outside, they can help you outside and maybe
- 9 children can be around you and they can help you.
- 10 Teacher: And Alexa, what were your thoughts today?
- 11 Alexa: In My Friend is Sad, the most important part is when Piggie and
- 12 Gerald are happy when she took off her costume.
- 13 Teacher: Ok who has a question?
- 14 Alexa: Can I call on somebody? Ok, Robin.
- 15 Robin: Why do you think that?
- 16 Alexa: Because he really just wanted to see Piggie because he kept seeing
- 17 other things.

The integration of cognitive coaching strategies and accountable talk stems created enough scaffolding for the four students to participate in more collaborative conversations using higher level texts. In lines 6 and 15, Aidan and Robin used the accountable talk stems to prompt their classmates to think more critically about the content of the text. The prompts encouraged the students to explain their initial responses and justify their thinking.

During the research study, I reflected on the students' growth and adjusted the reading level of the texts from a *Fountas and Pinnell* level G to a level H.



11/20/2017

I am beginning to notice that the children are ready to read more challenging texts.

The scaffold has supported the growth of all the readers. Aidan is the slowest reader but he reads with expression. Robin is eager to begin each discussion. Joey and Alexa are both excited to begin each session. I am excited to move to a level H text with the group.

Figure 4. Teacher Research Journal Entry, 11/20/2017.

After I made this instructional choice, I reflected that the predictable characters, familiar setting, and plot anticipation functioned as an additional scaffold to support comprehension of the text (Ward and Young, 2007). The entries from my teacher research journal and the excerpts from the literature circle discussions convey the benefit of including these supports. In addition, the series books functioned as a scaffold on their own, as the predictable plot progression and familiar characters created a foreseeable pattern in the texts.

Less Literal Understanding of the Text

With these supports in place, the students explored inferential and critical examinations of the series books. When reviewing the Reading Response Journals, I noticed that the students' responses reflected a literal understanding of the text. Figures 5 and 6 display student journal entries during a session with the text, *My Friend is Sad*.

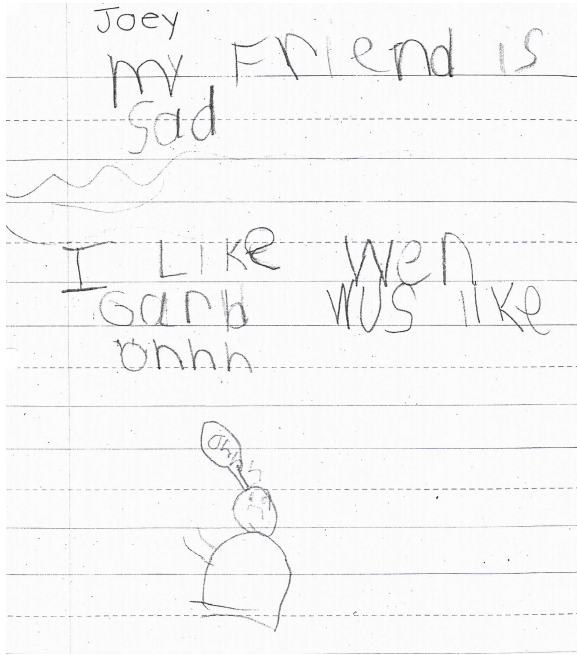


Figure 5. Joey's Reading Response Journal Entry.

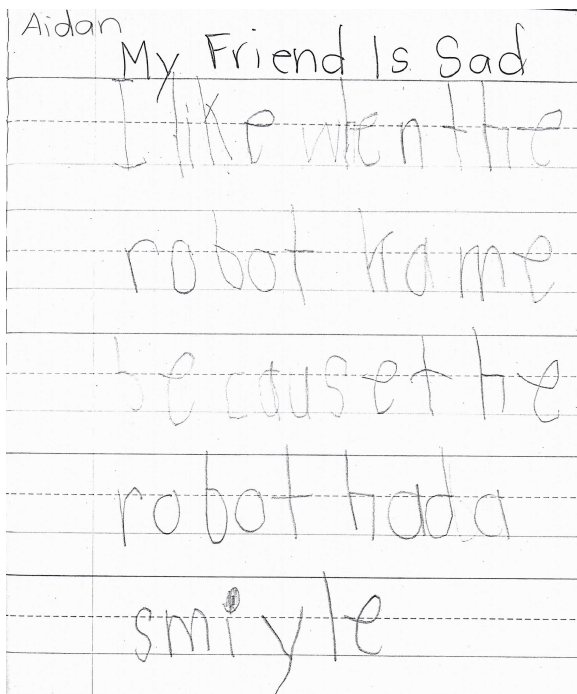


Figure 6. Aidan's Reading Response Journal Entry.

Both of these responses indicate a lack of critical thinking about the text. Joey’s entry describes a fondness for Gerald the elephant sitting down saying “Oh,” while Aidan’s entry portrays partiality to the robot with a smile. These journal entries highlight the autonomy of the Reading Response Journal task, as the students authored self-selected topics in their journals. However, the literature circle discussion that followed this literal understanding depicts a more critical analysis of the text.

- 1 Teacher: Let me ask you a question, if you were Gerald how would you feel if
- 2 you saw all of those characters?
- 3 Joey: I would feel happy but I would want my friend there with me.
- 4 Aidan: Me too!
- 5 Teacher: How else would we feel?
- 6 Alexa: If I saw the cowboy and the robot, I would be like “wow!” but I would
- 7 also feel sad. But clowns are scary to me so I would be like “ahh!”
- 8 Teacher: So you would be a little nervous. What do you think, Robin?
- 9 Robin: I would think I would be happy but I really wanted my friend to be with
- 10 because I wanted them to see it.
- 11 Teacher: And share the experience with you? Aidan, I noticed your hand was
- 12 raised; do you have something you want to share too? [pause] You said
- 13 you like the robot, so would you feel happy?
- 14 Aidan: Yes, but I would be sad too because my friend wasn’t with me.
- 15 Teacher: So we all understand how Gerald is feeling. Why do you
- 16 think Piggie dressed up in so many costumes?
- 17 Aidan: Ooh! Trying to make Gerald happy.
- 18 Teacher: Robin, can you say more?
- 19 Robin: That’s why Piggie wasn’t there because he was dressing up and trying to
- 20 make him happy. Then, he finally was happy but then he was sad
- 21 because Piggie wasn’t there. And Piggie can’t be there and dressed up a
- 22 the same time as being in a costume and being there for Gerald.
- 23 Teacher: What might have solved everyone’s problem?
- 24 Alexa: When Piggie took the costume off and she was glad because Gerald was
- 25 happy. And Gerald was happy when Piggie took off her costume.

In this exchange, the journal responses are not discounted or discredited; however, they are expounded upon in the discussion that followed. In line 4, Joey is able to analyze Gerald’s response to his friend’s absence. This characterization illustrates a deeper understanding of *My Friend is Sad* than the journal entry depicted. Also, Aidan’s

understanding of the text is deepened, based on his response in lines 14 and 17. He concurred with Joey’s characterization and surmised that Piggie was “Trying to make Gerald happy.” The exchange of ideas in the literature circle fostered richer comprehension of the text.

After analyzing the types of responses that each student made in the literature circle discussion, I uncovered patterns in the data. Most of the students were able to move away from a literal understanding of the text and, instead, use personal and textual connections and inferences about the content of the series books. To gain a full perspective of the types of comprehension the students made during the literature circle conversations, I coded each discussion to identify patterns in the data.

Table 3

Literature Circle Conversation Chart

<u>Student</u>	<u>Retelling</u>	<u>Personal Connection</u>	<u>Text Connection</u>	<u>Inference</u>
Aidan	9	5	4	0
Alexa	1	2	7	3
Joey	1	6	5	2
Robin	3	3	5	2

After analyzing the chart, I found that most of the students used critical and inferential thinking more than a simple literal response in their conversations. The frequency of personal and textual connections benefited the reading comprehension of the four students as their conversational exchange benefited their personal and critical responses to the text (Sanacore, 2013). The literature circle discussion grew from a merely literal

interpretation and progressed to a higher level of understanding. During the discussion on *Can I Play Too?* Aidan discussed the content of the text using both personal and critical analyses. He stated, “The part that made me happy was when they threw the snake” and “They wanted to play catch with him but he doesn't have arms. And he seems surprised.” This conversation shows a departure from an earlier discussion on *A Big Guy Took My Ball*.

- 1 Aidan: I liked when Piggie jumped in a puddle.
- 2 Teacher: Why do you think that?
- 3 Aidan: Because it was water.
- 4 Teacher: How did it make you feel?
- 5 Aidan: Happy.

All of the evidence I garnered provided conclusive support for the use of series books in literature circles. The students were motivated to read not only the *Elephant and Piggie* books, but other series books as well. Between the series books, and the support put in place during the literature circle conversations, scaffolding was a necessary factor throughout the duration of the research study. Finally, discussing the *Elephant and Piggie* texts in the literature circles fostered a less literal understanding of the texts.

Chapter 5

Conclusions

“The teacher-researcher as a “careful gardener” is the image we hold in our minds of the ideal teacher-researcher...a human being in the midst of teaching, carefully weighing the value of different ways of teaching and learning”

(Shagoury & Power, 2012, p. 5).

Summary of the Findings

After the conclusion of this research study, patterns emerged during my data analysis, which highlighted significant findings. After reading *Elephant and Piggie* books throughout the duration of the research study, the students were more motivated to read series books. Another significant finding in this research study was the necessity of scaffolded lessons. The series texts used in the study functioned as a literary scaffold, preparing students for a formulaic reading of the characters and plot progression. This sense of literary security allowed the students in the research study to internalize text structure (Ward & Young, 2007). Additional scaffolds were necessary to encourage rich discussion in the literature circles. Accountable talk stems and cognitive coaching techniques were necessary provisions to foster collaborative discussions between the students. Finally, when series books and literature circles were used in tandem, a less literal understanding of the text was procured. The conversation in literature circle expanded on the simplistic etchings in the students' Reading Response Journals. The accountability, collaboration, and careful questioning of the literature circle allowed the students to think critically about the texts.

Conclusions of the Study

As Shagoury and Power (2012) state “teacher research is based upon close observation of students at work” (p. 5). After carefully monitoring the four students in this study, the data shows that the combination of series books and literature circles was a beneficial blend. When considering the major findings of the study, I feel that all four students gained a better appreciation for series books and crafted more thought-provoking dialogue in collaborate conversations. The expressive talk in the literature circle discussion created a dialogic atmosphere that allowed students to share their thoughts and ideas in a safe space (Reznitskaya, 2012). The literature circle discussions allowed the students to exchange their ideas in a collaborate manner, which benefitted their ability to use critical and inferential thinking.

The collaborative conversations facilitated the students’ understanding of series texts and the use of *Elephant and Piggie* books kept them engaged throughout the research study. Not only do literature circles promote engagement, the data showed that the students were motivated to read *Elephant and Piggie* books and participate in the literature circle discussions (Daniels, 2006). In addition, the use of Mo Willems’ *Elephant and Piggie* series was a culturally responsive instructional choice, as the four students saw themselves reflected in the text. The interests and values of both the boys and girls were represented in the texts, as they connected to the topics of friendship, problem solving, and character development (Froiland & Oros, 2014). Additionally, the lighthearted humor provided entertainment value and kept the reading discussions lively. The amalgamation of the literature circle discussion and the culturally responsive series texts created an atmosphere that solidified the students’ comprehension of the texts.

Limitations of the Study

Though the findings of this research study have implications for best teaching practices, this qualitative study contained limitations. Teacher research is unique because “the research agenda of teachers can look nothing like the “Big R” research, with objective, large-scale, and distant analyses of issues (Shagoury & Power, 2012, p. 4). With this limitation in mind, it is important to note that this study was conducted over a short period of time. Due to the restrictions in the timeframe of the research study, the data collection period was only five weeks. Additionally, there were only four white students in this research study. The development of the four students may have unfolded differently over the course of a longer study with more students of varied racial background. A final limitation of this study was the use of Mo Willems’ *Elephant and Piggie* texts. While these texts were highly motivating to the four students in the research study, using different series books may have garnered different results in the motivation and engagement levels of the students.

Implications for the Findings

This brief study produced support for the rich conversation that is the hallmark of a literature circle. After analyzing the entries in the Reading Response Journals, many of the students began to model their writing after Mo Willems. Their use of text features, illustrations, and writing tone mirrored the writing style from the *Elephant and Piggie* books.

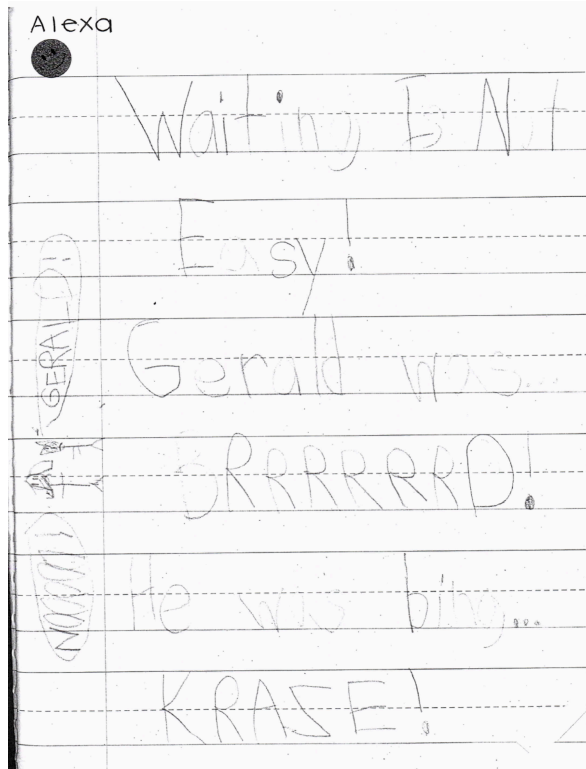


Figure 7. Alexa's Reading Response Journal Entry.

While some of the data reflected this implication, further research would be necessary, in order to provide conclusive support to this claim.

A long-term implication of this research study is the benefit of using series books and discussing them in literature circles. This is a combination that I plan on using in future classroom instruction, as there was a positive correlation between the two strategies and critical understanding. The students in the research study were motivated to discuss the series texts and they were engaged in the literature circle discussions. The Mo Willems series texts befitted the culture of the four first graders and the content was an impetus for beginning the discussion of each session. Coupling series books and rich discussion in literature circles will benefit the reading comprehension of future students.

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