Literature Circles Effect on Overall Achievement

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to measure the effects of participating in literature circles on overall achievement of 10th grade Honors English students at a high school in Maryland. The measurement tool that was used was student achievement on Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC) practice pre-and post-tests. The hypothesis of the study was that there would be no difference in the scores of the pre and posttests over a six week period. The data that was collected was significant and showed that there was a decrease in overall achievement after participating in the literature circles for both males and females. Therefore, the null hypothesis was rejected. Research on students participating in literature circles should continue to look at individual overall achievement before, during, and after participating in literature circles. This research should include a longer study with more students that is measured frequently.

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Overview

It is a common saying that teaching is one profession that teaches all other professions. That is true with one revision: teaching children how to read is giving them the freedom to learn anything else they want to learn. There are instruction manuals to teach people skills. Life lessons are taught through the lessons of characters. Children learn how to interact with the entire world around them by mimicking characters they read about in books. If students feel empowered to read about a subject they care about, they can teach themselves anything they want to know. Teaching students to read well is giving them the freedom to choose their path in life.

Teachers first help students learn how to read in the early years of education. Students start with learning the sounds each letter makes individually, then the sounds the letters make together, and eventually how to read words of every size. This is not where learning to read stops. Teachers then have the task of associating meaning to the words that eventually allow students to understand the depth of the words they are reading.

Once students get to high school, they sometimes feels as though they have mastered the skill of reading, but what they do not realize is that, at the high school level, the stakes are much higher. Knowing what the words mean, and a general idea of what the author is trying to get across, are not the only skills needed to read. Students need to be able to deeply analyze, and connect to the text they are reading. Students need to be able to ask meaningful questions about a text, and look at what specific effects each word has on the overall effect on the reader. For many students who are not strong readers, this can be an incredibly daunting task.

In the past, reading comprehension was measured only in English class, but it has become increasingly important in all subjects. In addition to reading to understand and connecting to the author's point, students must learn to read as a scientist, a mathematician, and a historian. Literature circles are a way for teachers to help reinforce skills that strong readers incorporate into their work naturally. Literature circles mimic smaller book clubs with more focus. These groups give time to students to prepare their individual analysis, and then students in the group compare what they found to a group of their peers. This study breaks down the skills that students need to be successful later in their careers, and to practice how to have meaningful interactions with others.

Statement of Problem

The purpose of this study was to examine the impact on reading skills outlined in the state standards as a result of participating in a group analysis and discussion strategy called literature circles.

Hypothesis

There will be no difference between the pre-test and post-test scores of students who participated in literature circles.

Operational Definitions

Independent Variable

The Independent Variable was reading strategies. It was operationalized via literature circles while reading.

Dependent Variable

The dependent variable was reading comprehension. Reading comprehension was measured through the students' score on an activity that mimicked a standardized test.

CHAPTER II

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

This literature review seeks to explain the impact of the reading strategy, literature circles, on the students' achievement in the classroom. Section one summarizes why reading and educational reading strategies are important to incorporate in the classroom. Section two describes how literature circles are structured and the different student roles within a literature circle. Section three discusses the challenges some studies found when implementing literature circles. Section four describes the success past studies have found when implementing literature circles. Section five describes the PARCC test and its importance. Section six explains what the Common Core State Standards are and how they are represented in PARCC. Section seven summarizes the major points of this chapter.

Reading Strategies

Reading comprehension is one of the most important skills that students develop throughout their time in school. Being able to read and interact with text is important in every subject that students study. The effectiveness of different types of reading instruction has been a controversial topic of research since 1955, when Rudolf Flesch wrote the book "Why Johnny Can't Read and What You Can Do About It". Since that time, the best way to teach students how to read has been under question. Educators are past the point where fluency, or being able to read and understand the words, is the only goal. Now, the goal is to teach skilled readers who read works accurately, rapidly, and effectively (Report of the National Reading Panel, 2000).

Flynn (2014) compared teaching students to read to being able to perform magic because it is teaching students how to look at text on both an analytical and evaluative level. Reading

instruction teaches students to demonstrate "their interaction with written texts" and effectively use strategies that "improve their reading efficiency and text comprehension" (Wang, 2016, p. 1790).

Teachers should pick strategies that facilitate "mental activities in order to construct meaning from the text" and "these mental activities involve the use of reading strategies" (McElvain, 2010, p. 180) Research on reading fluency and comprehension is concerned with explaining different types of reading strategies and the effectiveness of those strategies. Research on literature circles has shown that, when correctly implemented, this strategy can be beneficial to students. In order to be beneficial, literature circles must encourage students take ownership of their thinking and discussion, with a teacher who is constant coaching and training (Daniels, 2006, p. 13).

However, there is a gap in the research concerning literature circles. The research only compares how students do with the work assigned to them, but it does not measure if the students' mastery of the skill has increased after participating in literature circles.

Creating Literature Circles

Literature circles are a reading instruction method that is supposed to increase reading fluency in students. "Literature circles are discussion groups of students who have chosen to read the same text" where students are "provided with prompts called roles" (Calmer & Straits, 2014, p. 622). The length and type of text selected does not matter as much as the student interest level, and that the text can stimulate meaningful discussion (Blanton, Wood, & Taylor, 2007).

The literature circle method puts the students in the leadership position. Blanton et al., (2007) suggest, "students should play a significant role in the text selection and collaborative discussions" (p. 88). In literature circles, teachers should help monitor and facilitate, but make

sure that the focus stays on the students. "Teacher directed instruction did not focus on extensive collaboration between peers" (Ragland & Palace, 2017, p. 39).

The topics prompted in the literature circles should mimic the skills or topics being taught in class at the time. The roles of the literature circle can be adjusted to mirror the goals for the class. Teachers can differentiate the discussion by assigning a different role to each member of the group (Whittaker, 2011). "In each circle session, students perform a different role, which represent the multiple perspectives that experienced readers naturally take" (Levy, 2011, p. 61). After students become more comfortable with the roles, and discussing the text with each other, Levy says they can be given multiple roles to complete which requires "students to engage with the text from a variety of perspectives" (p. 65).

The roles can be adjusted for different purposes, but many literature circles have similar roles. Although names may be different, these types of roles are present in many of the studies. "Discussion Director" is a student who prepared higher level, open-ended questions to present to the group. After asking questions, the director facilitates impromptu questions that the group members have, and discussion of the information gathered by other roles. The role of the "Word Wizard" is someone who picks significant words and phrases, repeated throughout the text, and present the impact on the work as a whole. A "Word Wizard" also analyzes author's choices regarding structure of the text. A "Literary Luminary" has a similar job of picking important passages in the text, but they discuss why it stands out in the text, and what makes that particular passage meaningful thematically. A "Connector" finds connections to the world outside of the text. Everything from current events, to other texts, to the students' personal life is acceptable in the connections. It is important to make sure that the connections add meaning to the group's understanding of both the text, and the concept with which it is compared. A "Character

Coordinator" chooses two characters that are meaningful to the story, and find excerpts that provide insight into that character's personality, beliefs, etc. The "Summarizer" gives a brief summary of the section that the group is discussing, and makes sure that the group is clear about the important plot events that happen in that section of the text. The "Summarizer" should also prepare subjects that the group should discuss to understand the theme of the text.

The goal of literature circles is for students to analyze and find meaning in the texts while working with peers through organic discussion. It is important that the literature circles "result in the same or higher effects for all students" (Whittaker, 2011, p. 215). To achieve this goal, literature circles should be offered with an instructional schedule that gives the teacher time to reflect with students and help them to elevate responses (Day & Kroon, 2010).

Challenges of Literature Circles

There is a period of time when students begin the process of participating in literature circles, but they may not completely engage with the strategy at first. Levy (2011) found that

> The first few times, students sat in their reading circles, fidgeted with their papers, and waited for someone else to begin. When they spoke, they robotically read their responses, making no eye contact with one another. When I stood near a group, the student speaking would look up from the face-in-the-paper position, looking for approval as if I, all-knowing grade- giver, had the only eyes and ears in the classroom. After their quick, somewhat mechanical exchanges, usually completed in significantly less than thirty minutes, students would shout, "We're done. Miss." (p. 64)

Levy (2011) went on to say that although the conversations seemed less successful at first, the students' reflections showed that students were enthusiastic about the work in which they were participating. Eventually, her class found success with the strategy.

One troublesome aspect of literature circles is a lack of control over student conversations. Teachers are forced to take a step away from facilitating the discussion, and rely on the structures they put into place to help the students self-monitor. Students lead the discussions, and they can sometimes be "superficial" (Ragland & Palace, 2017). There was not data to support this finding in the study, and was only listed as a limitation of the instructional strategy. A problem that Thomas' study (2014) found was that students reported that there was a lack of "spontaneous, informal discussions" (p. 51). This happens because students are required to work with prompts with high level questioning and the due dates that schools require. This problem may adversely affect motivation created by working with peers, but does not change the increase in student fluency.

There is a need for additional research to measure the increase in student fluency on individual assignments after participating in literature circles. "In individual reading, the student reads a page and passes on, often not understanding it" (Avci &Yuksel, 2011, p. 1299). These studies point out that there may be limitations in how students perform individually after seeing academic progress in the literature circles because students are encouraged to rely on their peers during this activity.

Success with Literature Circles

The research about literature circles reported many different types of favorable outcomes. In Calmer and Strait's (2014) study, it was reported that after incorporating literature circles in their biology classes, students learned "how to crucially analyze and discuss science text, helping them become better consumers of science information" (p. 50). Avci and Yuksel (2011) concluded that literature circles show students how to "acquire reading comprehension skills and [adopt] a reading habit," and that this reading habit they describe can "endear them to reading

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and improve reading and comprehension skills" (p. 1299). This was apparent from a pretest and posttest they created to measure student growth.

One benefit that is unique to literature circles is that students who were silent during whole group instruction thrived while participating in face-to-face and online literature circles. Much like Avci and Yuksel's (2011) study, Ragland and Palace (2017) saw significant progress in students who traditionally do not participate in class discussions. "The small-group discussions are a way for students to participate more confidently without the stress of a whole class watching and listening" (p. 39). Thomas' (2014) study of online literature circles, boasts the same findings; students "who are often reluctant to participate because they are too shy or otherwise marginalized in the classroom" benefit from literature circles (p. 50). Students reported that while participating in online literature circles they felt more motivated because they had never talked about books online, and that motivated them to actively participate (Day & Kroon, 2010).

Some studies found that students achieved more success in areas researchers did not originally set out to measure. In addition to discussion skills, literature circles open students up to a "metacognitive awareness that prompts students to think critically about their role" (Ragland & Palace, 2017, p. 39). Sanacore (2013) says that a literature circle features "reflection and reflexivity; that is, reflective dialogue is used to promote reflexivity" and that "students learn to study themselves so that they can outgrow themselves as individuals in a community of learners" (p. 119). This helps the students take ownership of their learning because they get accustomed to actively thinking about their learning processes.

PARCC

In the studies discussed, the measurement of reading fluency improvement or lack of improvement was defined by different operational dependent variables. For this study, the reading fluency is measured by the difference of Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC) practice exam scores. In the State of Maryland, students enrolled in English 10 take the PARCC English exam. For many, passing this test will be a graduation requirement. In order to be successful on PARCC, which is defined as scoring on a level 4 or 5, students must be able to "demonstrate comprehension and draw evidence from readings of grade-level, complex literary text" ("Grade 10 Performance Level Descriptors", 2015). Reading fluency as defined in this literature review prepares students to meet the goal as outlined by the PARCC test.

Common Core State Standards

The PARCC test was created as a way for school systems to measure the students' proficiency of the Common Core State Standards. The Common Core State Standards outline "consistent guidelines for what every student should know and be able to do in math and English language arts from kindergarten through 12th grade" (Common Core State Standards Initiative, 2018).

The Common Core State Standards are broken into two main subject areas for grades 9 to 12. The categories are Mathematics standards and English Language Arts/Literacy Standards. Within the English Language Arts/ Literacy Standards, there are subcategories of standards. The subcategories of standards are: anchor standards, reading literature, reading informational text, reading foundational skills, writing, speaking and listening, and language. Literature circles can

cover many of these standards, but the units of PARCC that were used for the dependent

variable, included standards:

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.9-10.1

Cite strong and thorough textual evidence to support analysis of what the text says

explicitly as well as inferences drawn from the text.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.9-10.2

Determine a theme or central idea of a text and analyze in detail its development over the

course of the text, including how it emerges and is shaped and refined by specific details;

provide an objective summary of the text.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.9-10.3

Analyze how complex characters (e.g., those with multiple or conflicting motivations)

develop over the course of a text, interact with other characters, and advance the plot or

develop the theme.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.9-10.4

Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in the text, including

figurative and connotative meanings; analyze the cumulative impact of specific word

choices on meaning and tone (e.g., how the language evokes a sense of time and place;

how it sets a formal or informal tone).

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.9-10.5

Analyze how an author's choices concerning how to structure a text, order events within

it (e.g., parallel plots), and manipulate time (e.g., pacing, flashbacks) create such effects

as mystery, tension, or surprise.

(Common Core State Standards Initiative 2018)

Summary

Literature circles are an effective way to improve students' ability to read, analyze, and discuss texts. Although students may struggle at the beginning to find meaningful discussions that are natural, eventually students usually find success. The roles students take in a literature circle can be connected to Common Core State Standards. These standards are measured by the PARCC test.

CHAPTER III

METHODS

The goal of this research was to determine the impact of the reading strategy, literature circles, on overall achievement in the first six Common Core State Standards as measured by the PARCC practice test.

Design

This study used a quasi-experimental pretest and a posttest design. The independent variable was the students' participation in the reading strategy literature circles. The dependent variable was student performance on the PARCC practice exam, units 1 and 3. The study was implemented for six weeks, spanning February and March of 2018.

Participants

This research was conducted at a suburban high school in Harford County, Maryland. This high school has an enrollment of 1469 students with 343 of those students enrolled in the 10th grade. The 25 students involved in this research were 10th grade students taking Honors English II. Of these 25 students, 11 are male and 14 are female. Of the total 25 students, 18 of the students are Caucasian, 4 students are Asian, and 3 are from other racial/ethnic groups. This class consisted of highly motivated students, and the expectation was that the course moves quickly through the curriculum.

Instrument

Two instruments were used in this study, both were units of the PARCC practice test releases. Students completed unit 1 as a pretest, and unit 3 as a posttest.

For each unit students answered multiple-choice questions while reading three excerpts. The tests measured student's ability to perform the following skills from the Common Core State Standards Initiative (2018):

1. Cite strong and thorough textual evidence to support analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences drawn from the text.

2. Determine a theme or central idea of a text and analyze in detail its development over the course of the text, including how it emerges and is shaped and refined by specific details; provide an objective summary of the text.

3. Analyze how complex characters (e.g., those with multiple or conflicting motivations) develop over the course of a text, interact with other characters, and advance the plot or develop the theme.

4. Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in the text, including figurative and connotative meanings; analyze the cumulative impact of specific word choices on meaning and tone (e.g., how the language evokes a sense of time and place; how it sets a formal or informal tone).

5. Analyze how an author's choices concerning how to structure a text, order events within it (e.g., parallel plots), and manipulate time (e.g., pacing, flashbacks) create such effects as mystery, tension, or surprise.

6. Analyze a particular point of view or cultural experience reflected in a work of literature from outside the United States, drawing on a wide reading of world literature.

The reliability coefficient of the test scored between a .89 and a .94 for the paper version of the test, which was used in this study, according to Pearson (2015). This overall shows that the

test scores are reliable. The validity of the test is supported through "high total group internal consistencies as well as similar reliabilities across subgroups" (p. 117).

Procedure

Prior to starting to work in literature circles, students had a ninety-minute class period to complete Unit 1 of the English 10 practice PARCC exam. This test was printed, and students wrote their answers on a printed answer sheet.

These students participated in literature circle groups for six weeks. In the first class, students were assigned to groups. These groups were heterogeneous ability levels. The students were given a worksheet with six roles that make up the literature circle strategy that mimicked the skills that were tested through the PARCC practice exam that was used as the instrument. Each group had four members.

Once the groups had been formed, each member of the group could pick their role for the first time when completing this assignment. This left two of the roles unfinished. After preparing for the role for the assigned section of the text, students participated in a small group discussion. The group was responsible for completing the remaining two roles together. During and after the discussion, students took notes on what information they discussed as a group. Within the two weeks, students were responsible for completing every role, either individually or with their group members. Once the group determined they were done with the literature circle discussion, and completing the notes, they submitted all of the notes to be reviewed. This ensured that students were completing each role accurately.

For the second and third week, students were responsible for preparing for two roles prior to the discussion, and discussing both of the roles. This meant that some group members completed the same role at times. The students completed notes during and after their group

discussions. In the fifth week, students were responsible for completing three roles prior to their discussion. For the sixth week, students were responsible for completing four roles prior to their discussion. The readings that were assigned to students changed each class, but were always from the novel *Fahrenheit 451* (Bradbury 1953). The selections that students read prior to preparing for their literature circle were read outside of class, and students were responsible for reviewing the reading, and analyzing it while in class.

After participating in the literature circles for six weeks, students had a ninety-minute class period to complete Unit 3 of the English 10 practice PARCC Exam.

CHAPTER IV

RESULTS

The goal of this research was to determine the impact of the reading strategy, literature circles, on overall achievement in the first six Common Core State Standards as measured by the PARCC practice test. Table 1 contains the results for the scores from practice test 1 and practice test 2.

Table 1

Mean, Pretest and Posttest scores

	Mean	Number of students	Std. Deviation
Pretest	15.4	25	3.329
Post test	11.6	25	2.81

The mean score of the posttest (M=11.6) was significantly lower than the score of the pretests (M= 15.4), t(24) = 8.14, p<.05. Consequently, the null hypothesis that there will be no difference between the pretest and posttest scores of students who participated in literature circles was rejected. Drilling down to examine the differences based on gender revealed a similar pattern t(13)≥7.04, p<.05 for females and males (Figure 1).

Figure 1
Results on Pre-and Post-test by Gender
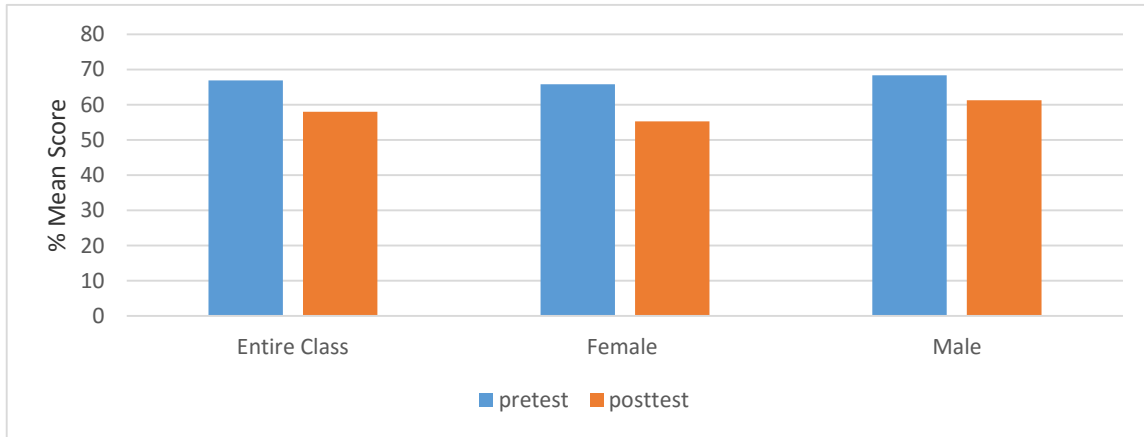
CHAPTER V

DISCUSSION

The hypothesis was not supported. The null hypothesis that there will be no difference between the pretest and posttest scores of students who participated in literature circles was rejected. Instead, the findings showed a decrease in achievement.

Implications of Results

This study implied that literature circles did not help students to improve on individual practice PARCC exams. Students saw significant losses in achievement after using literature circles for six weeks. It is widely accepted that literature circles improve how students can analyze the text in a group setting; it does not show overall improvement. This study showed that teachers could use the strategy as a quick fix to help students understand a topic, but it did not help the student develop their skills in the long term. This study did not look into the immediate improvement, but focused on the students' long-term success with these same skills. The results showed that this decrease in achievement was true for both male and female students.

Threats to Validity

The structure of the study was a threat to the external validity. The study spanned six weeks, and it may have been beneficial to run this study for a longer time. The study also involved one class of students, and if the study included more participants, the results would have had more validity. During the span of these six weeks, school closed two and a half days to accommodate for the weather. This took students' instructional time away. On the days that students anticipated getting out early, the instructional time was sometimes compromised because of the jittery, excited mood in the classroom.

The measurement of this test could have affected the internal validity of the results. Students' scores may have been compromised if they had taken these practice tests previously by themselves or as a class assignment. The students took the practice tests on a single day, and their scores could have been affected by their health, mental or physical. Students may have been preoccupied by important assignments in their other classes, which would have a negative impact on their scores. If students suffer from test anxiety, the testing format could have influenced how they performed on each assignment. Another threat came from the informal feedback on participation that many of the studies applauded. They noted that students were more outgoing, and more likely to participate. While this study did replicate many of the same social situations, it did not informally study students speaking and listening skills.

Connections to Previous Studies/ Existing Literature

This study was unlike many of the studies about literature circles because it did not find literature circles beneficial. Instead, it found that students did not do well individually after participating in the group assignments. This contradicts Daniel's findings (2006) where he found that participation helps readers mature and take ownership of their skills. Whittaker (2011) stressed that literature circles should result in the same results, or higher results, for all students involved. The study was unclear as to whether those results should be on that specific assignment, or if the improvement should last beyond when the literature circle assignment has ended.

The findings of this study contradicted the benefits found in studies done by Avci and Yuksel (2011); Ragland and Palace (2017); and Thomas (2014). All of these studies found positive change in their students, but did not specify if the positive change was short-term

success, or if the students' skills improved overall, individually, as a result of participating in literature circles.

This study did have similar findings to Levy (2011) because she reported that her class did not find success with the strategy at first. The students' conversations were robotic, and the discussion did not deviate from the work they had prepared. This could be a result of the conversations that Ragland and Palace (2017) labelled as superficial.

Avci and Yuksel (2011) called for additional research on student fluency measured individually throughout the process of doing literature circles.

Implications for Future Research

Future research should study whether participating in literature circles for a longer period of time makes a difference. This study was conducted over six weeks with a small sample size. Also, the data that represents the students' achievement should be taken throughout the longer span of time. Data taken on two separate individual days is not an accurate reflection on student achievement because student achievement is not linear.

Conclusions

This study will hopefully influence teachers to adjust literature circles to make sure they are supplementing with more individual work throughout the grouping process. Future research should go on for longer than six weeks, and include a large sample size. Students' ability to meet the standards should be measured more than twice in order to get a more accurate representation of their skills in these subject areas. Many other studies found that students improved during the process of completing literature circles. This study answered the gap in the literature that showed few studies measuring whether students are growing individually. The results contradicted the previous research because it found that students did not grow after participating in literature

circles. Although teachers always hope for improvement when testing their students, a decrease in overall scores can tell a teacher just as much about their teaching methods. The data resulting from this study shows that teachers, just like students, should always look closely at something that is widely accepted as fact before they believe it to be true for themselves.

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