1-1-2017

Evaluating Student Responses to Young Adult Literature Based on Group Dynamic Within the Literature Circle Setting

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This research is a product of the graduate program in Elementary Education at Eastern Illinois University. Find out more about the program.

Recommended Citation
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Evaluating Student Responses to Young Adult Literature

Based on Group Dynamic Within the Literature Circle Setting

(TITLE)

BY

Abigail J Schmitz

THESIS

SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF

Master of Science in Education in Elementary Education

IN THE GRADUATE SCHOOL, EASTERN ILLINOIS UNIVERSITY

CHARLESTON, ILLINOIS

2017

YEAR

I HEREBY RECOMMEND THAT THIS THESIS BE ACCEPTED AS FULFILLING THIS PART OF THE GRADUATE DEGREE CITED ABOVE

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Evaluating Student Responses to Young Adult Literature Based on Group Dynamic Within the Literature Circle Setting

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Abstract

The push of the Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) standards encourages teachers to assist students with overcoming personal obstacles in the classroom. In the middle grades, young adult literature can be an outlet for students by allowing them to connect with characters similar to themselves and their life experiences. Within the middle level classroom, literature circles can address SEL needs and state standards while allowing students to work closely with their peers sharing in a discussion format in response to the same young adult novel. This research analyzed two groups of students and their oral and written responses to the young adult novel, *The Outsiders*. Students were given the opportunity to choose the book they wanted to read and to select the peers they wanted to make up their group. This study explored how the group dynamic can impact the manner in which students respond within the group setting. The study also examined the ways in which students’ ideas varied from the oral group discussion to a personal journal response. Students participated in literature circles for three weeks; their group discussions were recorded using an open coding system based on complexity level and text connections. Personal journal responses were completed and analyzed in comparison to discussion responses. The findings showed that students who worked with peers of their choice were more willing to open up and divulge personal information and connections to text. The research also showed that students’ oral and written responses varied based on their group dynamic.

Keywords: Social and Emotional Learning (SEL), young adult literature, literature circles, grouping, homogenous, heterogeneous, written response, *The Outsiders*
Acknowledgements

Thank you Dr. Bickford for your endless patience and encouragement throughout this process. Thank you Dr. Kory, Dr. Okrasinski, and Dr. Eberly for answering my questions and sharing your knowledge with me. Thank you Brenda Foster for supporting me in my teaching and introducing me to the literature circle concept. Finally, thank you to my parents, Dina and Karl, for their endless love and support.
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Introduction

Students of all ages have challenges, obstacles, and difficulties to overcome within their lives. From fights with friends, to divorce of parents and more, students experience difficulties throughout their academic career. Therefore, students need not only an outlet for their emotions, they need the tools and strategies to cope with the them. Young adult literature provides students with an opportunity to connect with characters, observe coping strategies, and see a reflection of their own life. Teachers can help by incorporating literature into the classroom in as many ways as possible, allowing students to connect with and discuss what they read. The literature circle concept is a popular tool, which allows students to discuss the text in order to learn from their peers. Reading can be an effective technique for intervention and can also be a catalyst for reflection and discussion.

Literature Review

In the middle school classroom, students discuss, challenge, and engage with their peers on a regular basis. Their conversations are often within a social setting and can be restricted within the whole class dynamic. Literature circles can be implemented to assist students in engaging with their peers, discussing concepts that matter to them, and harnessing that energy for pedagogical purposes. Literature circles allow students to read a common text with their peers and work cohesively in a group setting. Students participating in literature circles meet on a regular basis to discuss the text they are reading. During this group discussion, students can challenge each other, can question not only the text but their peer’s thoughts and opinions, and are given the opportunity to expand on their own beliefs and understandings. At the middle level, literature circles use young adult literature that encompasses various genres and topics.
The group dynamic operating among participants within the literature circle can positively or negatively impact the discussions that occur within the group. There are students who take the chance to discuss literature with their peers as an opportunity, while others will shy away. Because there are students who do not see group discussions as a place to share their thoughts, written responses can be incorporated to allow all students to express themselves and connect to the text. Written responses can vary in format from journal writing, to content based questions, to narratives. Journals or narratives can be used to supplement the group discussion or as stand-alone assignments. This research will explore how the group dynamic can impact the manner in which students respond within the group setting. The research will also examine the ways in which a student’s ideas may vary from the oral group discussion to a personal journal response.

Social and Emotional Learning

As times are changing, students in the middle grades are becoming more and more independent with their thinking. However, it goes against the nature of a middle school child to work, think, and create alone. Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) supports the idea that students do not learn alone, but rather in collaboration with their teachers, in the company of their peers, and with the support of their families (Durlak, Weissberg, Dymnicki, Taylor, & Schellinger, 2011). Within the middle school classroom, there needs to be a shift from individualized learning to collaborative learning to allow students to work together. In order for teachers to effectively include activities that address Social and Emotional Learning Standards (hereafter, SEL), one must understand their components. SEL standards are based on five competencies that allow students to deal appropriately with common challenges and tasks. The
The SEL framework can be taught and implemented through various lessons and activities. To increase communication, teachers can place students in groups or with partners to complete work, students can practice goal setting with goal cards placed on their desks, and teachers can have students complete an interest inventory to identify what kind of strengths and weaknesses they have to best use their skills (Ruppert, n.d.). However, schools often have limited resources to address all of these areas and teachers are pressured into implementing evidence-based approaches that cross various content areas and produce multiple outcomes (Durlak et al., 2011). Within the middle school classroom, literature is a simple resource which can help pave the way for SEL that can sometimes be difficult to do. The SEL standards often cross over into content that is challenging, difficult, and sometimes uncomfortable. Young adult literature can help to teach components of literary analysis while also allowing students the chance to gain an understanding of themselves (Hebert & Kent, 2000). With literature, the content is given; therefore, the doors for discussion and exploration simply must be opened.

**Bibliotherapy**

Literature can be used to successfully open the door for SEL instruction throughout all grade levels and content areas. Bibliotherapy is a tool that many middle school teachers use and find beneficial when trying to tackle the tough stuff that arises during the adolescent years, such as divorce, bullying, identity concerns, relationships and more. Bibliotherapy is the use of different literature and materials to assist students in making therapeutic gains (Pehrsson, Allen, Folger, McMillen, & Lowe, 2007). Bibliotherapy can assist young people to understand
themselves and work through problems by providing literature applicable to their personal situations and developmental needs at relevant times (Cook, Earles-Vollrath, & Ganz, 2006). Bibliotherapy allows teachers to use literature as a bridge between difficult conversations on sensitive topics and student self-exploration. When adolescents are working through a difficult time in their lives, having something to connect to or relate to can be a major turning point in their coping process. Bibliotherapy and young adult literature provide students of all ability levels the opportunity to understand various adolescent experiences (Hebert & Kent, 2000). Literature in the classroom allows SEL standards to be implemented and discussed to help students become successful, independent, and empathetic individuals.

**SEL Integration**

Within classrooms, SEL topics can be difficult to incorporate. Many educators see SEL as an addition to their curriculum, whereas the SEL standards should be intertwined within the curriculum. Educators believe that teaching these nontraditional skills, such as managing behavior and building relationship skills, can take time away from core subjects and academic skills (Kress, Norris, Schoenholz, Elias & Seigle, 2004). However, SEL competencies support most state standards and should be taught alongside traditional, academic skills. Many classroom activities that are implemented in order to meet the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) reveal that SEL skills are embedded within the standards. When students are collaborating on a project, working together on an interdisciplinary unit, and effectively communicating with one another, they are showing their competence with SEL skills (Weissberg & Cascarino, 2013). Although SEL related skills can be found within many state standards,
educators need to make an effort to continually encourage and support the use of the competencies within their classrooms.

Within the reading content area, literature circles allow teachers and students to engage in material while also addressing various SEL competencies. Literature circles are a dynamic way for students to work with literature in a nontraditional setting. Literature circles allow students a chance to work closely with their peers in an environment where their ideas can be heard and also be challenged. Literature circles allow students to work together towards a common goal, which can improve their engagement (Batchelor, 2012). Middle school students have become used to the routine of teacher centered instruction in the elementary grades and with a shift to student led instruction in the middle school, students are motivated and excited to learn. When students are excited about the work they are doing, they are more likely to devote time and effort towards completing the task (Sanacore, 2013).

**Literature Circles**

Literature circles allow for freedom and creativity; teachers can use literature circles to aid in providing a positive and safe environment for students, as well as providing opportunities to make meaning of new literacy concepts (Clarke & Holwadel, 2007). Literature circles let the teacher to take a traditional assignment such as reading a text, and make it engaging and relatable. Students can and should be involved in the literature circle process to take ownership of the assignment. Student can select the text they are interested in reading which helps to foster engagement with the task (Kiefer, Alley, & Ellerbrock, 2105). With literature circles, the teacher brings together students in groups of four to six students based on the novel being read. Students each select or assign a specific role within their group to efficiently move through the text and
discussion. Roles can be based on specific work sheets, where every week each student completes and then shares a specific sheet focused on a text element. These roles can change and or be modified for each individual group, allowing for differentiation and support for every student.

Literature circles need to be well planned and thought out; students can easily lose interest when there is too much going on within the framework. Students need specific routines to assist them in engaging in genuine and thought out discussions about the text (Mills & Jennings, 2011). Within literature circles comes room for raw discussions that allow for students to connect, question and engage with the text. Students work together to not only make connections to the text but also to each other (Sanacore, 2013). Students need to feel comfortable with one another to be able to explore a text of difficult content. Literature circles allow for this type of community where students feel safe with their responses and can challenge not only the text, but also each other. Many of the components within the five SEL competencies, such as forming new relationships, managing time and solving problems, can be practiced and worked on through group work within the literature circle dynamic (Kress, Norris, Schoenholz, Elias, & Seigle, 2004).

**Grouping**

The group dynamic operating within literature circles can play a vital role in the success or failure of the group discussion. Students need to feel as though their opinions will be well received and will go unjudged. Students also need to feel as though they can respond to each other, challenge each other, and overall engage in difficult conversations. The foundation for the groups should always lie in the material that is being read. All members of a group read, respond
to, and discuss the same text. The students within each group may be of different or similar reading levels and abilities. Groups can be created heterogeneously or homogeneously. With heterogeneous grouping, students of different reading levels work together towards one common goal; the students then assist each other to reach that goal, all while helping to create a sense of community (Batchelor, 2012). Students can be grouped solely on the piece of text they choose to read, with no other determining factors. This allows for all personality types and opinions to come together to explore one text. However, with heterogeneous grouping comes the challenge of different opinions and personalities clashing over content and students holding firm in their individual beliefs (Sanacore, 2013).

The group dynamic is one of the key components of the literature circle framework. Students go outside of their traditional learning environment to engage with their peers in ways they are seldom able to do. Students must honor the qualities they view as honorable and helpful such as trust, respect, and equality; each student’s specific actions are a key piece of the group dynamic (Dressel, 2005). The opportunity for peer led group discussions opens the door for SEL because students are working so closely with one another on sometimes very difficult topics. Grouping for literature circles does not always have to be heterogeneous, groups can be homogenous based on multiple factors. Students can be grouped based on their reading levels, their interests, even on their personalities. One vital piece of the group dynamic is that students feel safe and feel as though their opinions are valued (Clarke & Holwadel, 2007). If students are given the opportunity to work with peers of similar mindsets and personalities, they may find themselves confident enough to open up and engage in the material.
Discussion Responses

Discussing topics within a group can be difficult for students because in many ways it challenges the traditional learning environment in which students are raised. In the classroom setting, students are taught to raise their hand, wait to be called on, and be considerate of others comments and opinions. Whereas within the literature circles, students are given much more freedom to speak spontaneously, engage with, and challenge one another. Students must be given the opportunity to respectfully voice their own opinions while also listening to and receiving their peer’s opinions (Groenke, Maples, & Henderson, 2010). The routine of the literature circle conversation can challenge that of their norm in many ways. However, the discussions within literature circles open the door for students to gain understanding, increase comprehension and reflect. With oral discussions, students are able to build their comprehension through clarifying their own thinking and also that of their peers’ (Wiggins, 2000). This back and forth between peers enables students to not only increase their own comprehension, but also build their peers’ comprehension as well.

Conversations between students of all ages are a platform for inquiry and investigation. Students often challenge one another and question their peers in and out of the academic setting. With literature circle discussions, students can dig deep and explore not only the content within the text but also other views and opinions, by studying their own responses and those of their peers (Mills & Jennings, 2011). When students can hear each other’s responses to a text, they can reflect on the various perspectives and can use them to guide their own response (Wiggins, 2000). Students need to experience disagreements and need to hear opinions different than their own. The process of reconciling these disagreements and differing opinions allows them to
grow. Within literature circle discussions there are between four and six students, all of whom have different prior experiences that help to mold their perceptions of the text (Wiggins, 2000). The different experiences of group members can give students a chance to see into a lifestyle different than their own, which without the discussion they may not be able to get. However, with discussion comes judgement and scrutiny that can sometimes influence students into withholding their opinions and beliefs.

**Written Responses**

Written responses are a beneficial way for students to engage with the text and reflect in a safe way, without judgment and or criticism from peers. Writing and talking should go hand-in-hand when it comes to literature circles and text discussions. Students should write before and after they discuss the text with their group, providing them an opportunity to prepare for the discussion and reflect on it (Wiggins, 2000). Within the literature circle students often discuss components from their written response. This allows students to connect to and reflect on the text before hearing the opinions of their peers. It is beneficial for students to identify their own beliefs and ways of thinking before hearing the ideas of others around them. Students can then reflect on their own ideas and compare and contrast them to those of their peers, allowing students to change or reinforce their opinions.

**Young Adult Literature**

Social and Emotional Learning standards are driving a need to encourage student discussion, communication, and collaboration within the classroom. To do this, teachers can use literature circles to allow room for open discussions, peer collaboration, and group communication. However, the question arises, what content material should be used to elicit
conversations and disagreements, while highlighting student’s unique ideas? Young adult literature is written specifically for the age group and targeted at the challenges, obstacles, and issues adolescents have to overcome. This medium allows teachers to bring tough topics to the surface in hopes of helping students navigate through the obstacles. Groenke, Maples, and Henderson (2010) address the facts, “We believe adolescents like young adult literature because it doesn’t shy away from real world problems or complex issues like drug abuse, racism, or the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan” (p. 29). Students want to talk about their challenges and they want to feel as though someone else has dealt with the same challenge. With literature circles, students are able to hear the opinions of other students while also identifying with the story’s characters, helping them to cope with and resolve personal conflicts (Regan & Page, 2008). Young adult literature covers diverse topics allowing students to connect in multiple ways.

Methods

The Outsiders

To get students talking, they must have something to talk about. Within the framework of literature circles, students work in small groups to discuss one common text. To elicit conversations, the students need to read a text that they can relate to and also will challenge what they think and believe. The Outsiders by S.E. Hinton, was originally published in 1967 and is a model text for literature circles for many reasons. Hinton wrote the novel when she was only 16 and had it first published when she was 18, so she wrote the novel as a young adult, for young adults (Rosenthal, 2014). The novel follows Ponyboy, his brothers, and their “greaser” friends through various challenges experienced as a result of living on the East side of town (Hinton, 1989, p. 6). Within this story, readers witness the division in social class based on
socioeconomic status between the Socs (The Socials) who live on the West side and the Greasers who live on the East side. Hinton takes the opportunity to highlight the hardships that Ponyboy and his friends encounter on a daily basis, which can be relatable to young adults of any generation.

_The Outsiders_ has been banned in many schools across the country because of its honesty and portrayal of controversial topics. Baldassarro (2011) wrote:

The novel is ranked #43 on the American Library Association’s Top 100 Most Challenged Books of 1990-2000 and has been banned from some schools and libraries because of its portrayal of gang violence, underage smoking and drinking, strong language, slang usage, and exposé on family dysfunction. (p. 1)

Although some disagree with the tough topics that are discussed throughout the novel, as evidenced by its frequency of being challenged and/or banned, those topics are what will get middle school students talking with one another within the literature circle setting. Students of any generation and age group can relate in some way to feeling left out, feeling as though the social groups in their lives are somehow divisive, and feeling frustrated with their circumstances. _The Outsiders_ finds its way into the hands of middle school students less and less as time passes, whether that is because some may see it as outdated or because its content is unknown, but this allows for the text to be used now without students having already read it. For this research, I used _The Outsiders_ because of the social issues addressed, its relatable themes, and because it is an older book with which students do not have much prior exposure or experience.
Grouping

Within the traditional literature circle model, students are able to pick the book they want to read and as a result are placed in a group with other students reading the same text. In order to analyze student responses to text, I allowed my 8th grade students to select not only the books they wanted to read but also their own discussion groups. By allowing students to select their own discussion groups, students would most likely choose students of similar social groups, backgrounds, and interests as themselves. Middle school students focus their time and attention on building friendships, being accepted by and talking with those friends, therefore when they are given time to engage with peers in the classroom their motivation increases (Batchelor, 2012). There were three total groups of students for this research, two of the groups were made up homogenously of students who chose their own group and one group was made up heterogeneously of students based on their book preference. These groups stretched across three different class periods. With the heterogeneous group, students were allowed to rate the books they would like to read and were then assigned to their book of choice, regardless of which other students selected the same text. All three groups read the same book, *The Outsiders*. Students within the homogenous groups were predicted to most likely have more in common with each other than the students within the heterogeneous group. Flex grouping was used in which there was not a set number of students per group or a number of groups per class. Student selection dictated the group sizes. However, it was prefaced to all classes that students may not have more than six members within their group and that I (the teacher) would have final say over group compositions.
This instructional procedure of allowing students to work with peers of their choice was implemented to enable students to open up more in their discussion and engage in deeper conversations throughout the literature circle meeting. One downfall of the literature circle concept is that it is often difficult for the teacher to create a safe environment where students feel comfortable sharing their thoughts and beliefs while also challenging each other. Clarke and Holwadel (2007) described how social differences based on race and gender can impact the literature circle dynamic even with the teacher working to create a safe environment (p.22). When students are mixed heterogeneously, they each bring a different background, belief system, and personality to the group. These differences are beneficial and add to the discussion; however, significant student differences such as backgrounds, family dynamics and more can make a discussion very difficult. When student backgrounds vary too much, the result can often find students forcing their point of view on others or defensively holding on to their personal opinions without taking the time to consider others’ perspectives (Sanacore, 2013). This research allowed room to investigate how student grouping impacted the individual nature of student’s responses to a text.

**Literature Circle Discussions**

Literature circles highlight two components: student text selection and group discussion. With teacher-centered instruction, students are guided by the teacher’s thoughts and opinions of the text, leaving little room for the student’s individual thoughts and opinions. Also, with teacher-centered instruction there is little room for students to question the text and the teacher’s interpretation of the text. Literature circle group discussions change the way students participate with the text by allowing them to challenge what they are reading by engaging with their peers in
an open discussion. When students are able to analyze themselves, their own work, and the work of their peers, they are able to deepen their understanding of the material through exploration (Mills & Jennings, 2011). During this research, a coding system was used to record student responses within the literature circle discussion. This information was used to compare student responses between the two homogeneous groups and the control group. It also compared student’s discussion responses to their personal written responses.

In an effort to protect the privacy of all students involved, pseudonyms have been used. During the discussion, student responses were marked with four codes. Each code was marked in one of three categories, text-to-self connection, text-to-text connection, or text-to-world connection. The codes used were: C for complex, I for inferential, S for simplistic, and R for random. The first code shared was used to represent a complex answer. This code was used for students who could make a complex text connection, going beyond the inferential level. The second code used was I for inferential, which included inferences made about the text and about peers’ comments. The various themes within *The Outsiders* were more identifiable and relatable for some students more than others; students’ connections to the text helped to highlight this. The third code used was an S for simplistic. This encompassed general comments about the text, and about peer’s comments, but comments that were not beyond surface level comprehension or were not heavily supported. The fourth code was an R for random. This code helped to record any responses that were simply off-task or outside of the general group discussion. Complex or inferential responses that were profound or promoted deep conversations about the text were recorded during the discussion. After each meeting, the coding from the discussion was expanded on and explained creating logical and legible notes of the conversations.
Written Responses

Working with peers can be a stressful experience for students, one that students shy away from initially. In literature circles, a major component of the framework relies on group discussion, where some students excel and others do not. In order to see how the social dynamic can influence student responses, students were allowed to choose their groups. This option allowed students to work with compatible peers that they were comfortable with. However, some students still had a difficult time with group discussion, therefore, in order to combat this potential limitation students’ written responses were included in research. “Readers first need an opportunity to respond privately to a text; then an opportunity to share reactions and interpretations within small, supportive peer groups” (Dressel, 2005, p.752). Student responses in the group discussion were then compared to their responses in their writing. This research explored how the group discussion could impact a student’s written response, and also how a student’s written response may prepare them for the discussion.

To see how the written response is connected to discussion, students were given time before and after their literature circle meeting to journal. Students were given twenty minutes the day before the meeting to journal and were then given the last ten to fifteen minutes of class to journal immediately after their meeting. Students were told to draw a line between their pre-meeting journals and their post-meeting journals. The writing that students are encouraged to do in school has a direct influence on their thinking (Matsumura, Correnti, & Wang, 2015). The journals allowed for me to see what the student thoughts were before and after their group discussion. I was able to look at what trends emerged from students’ written responses, such as how a student’s preliminary journal may prepare them for their group discussion or how a peer’s
comments may change their original views adding to their post discussion. I paid specific
attention to complex and inferential responses in students’ initial writing, but also looked at how
often students referenced comments made by their peers in their secondary responses. The
students’ journal prompts focused on text connections coinciding with the group discussions.
Students were asked to make specific connections between the text and themselves (as they felt
comfortable), the text and other texts and the text and their peer’s comments or ideas.

Findings

After posing the question: How will group dynamics impact the manner in which
students respond within the group setting, various results were observed. As outlined in the
Methods section, students were given the freedom to select their own literature circle groups. By
doing so, students chose to work with peers of similar backgrounds, social groups, and
personality; students chose to work with their friends. This freedom to choose their own group
changed the typical group dynamic for literature circle meetings. Students in this research had
been working with the literature circle concept for almost six months and were very familiar with
group discussion and collaboration. However, students had not yet been given the opportunity to
choose their groups, whereas the groups they had been with throughout the year were not
necessarily made up of friends or students with many similarities. This freedom allowed students
to express themselves more and feel as though they could share their honest ideas and opinions
without fear of offending group members or being judged for their comments. Two groups will
be highlighted in regards to their responses, writing, and ability to connect with the selected text,
The Outsiders.
In Group One, there were five male, eighth grade students ranging from ages 13-14. All students in this group were members of at least two school athletic teams, none of which received free or reduced lunch, and all but one student were above average intelligence for the eighth grade level. Students will be discussed using pseudonyms to protect their privacy. The outlier for this group was Cole, who has a lower reading level than the other four boys. This was evident in not only the level of complexity in his responses, but also in the frequency of his responses.

Group One was a very talkative group and one that required little to no prompting during discussions. As the teacher, I was able to compare student responses to those of other literature circle meetings where students were not able to select their group. Outside of Cole, the members in Group One commented equally and shared consistently throughout group meetings. Bryan, often a group leader, made inferential text-to-text connections in each meeting and was able to make complex text connections as well. In meeting two Bryan stated, “I think the reason this was a good meeting is because we’re all comfortable around each other.” The boys were able to acknowledge that their comfort assisted them in their conversations. When the group was discussing the difference in personalities of the characters in the text, Ryan made a text-to-self connection with the group, “We are just like the brothers, two of us are introverts, two of us are extroverts and one is in between, which can really help and hurt our discussions.” Both boys were able to identify qualities of the group dynamic that they liked and that helped their conversations.

The members in Group One were able to make comments about their group dynamic and had much deeper conversations for many reasons. One factor that influenced the group
conversation is that the members of Group One are bright and have demonstrated higher competency levels within English Language Arts and they are also motivated. The students’ competency levels within English achievement are an immediate cause of why their conversations were deep, complex, and rich. The boys were able to read and analyze the text on many levels. They were able to comprehend what was happening throughout the book and then make complex and inferential text connections. Bryan made a complex connection with the text stating, “It is easier to identify with people that you are similar with, which is why the Greasers stick together and why the Socs stick together. This happens throughout society with popular groups, athletic groups, and even unpopular groups.”

The members of Group One were comfortable around each other because they are friends, and also because they are popular students and have higher confidence levels. It is difficult to measure popularity; however, based on their spoken words, written thoughts, and observable behaviors the boys in Group One appeared to fit in. The groups’ friendships and social standing influenced discussions because even in moments of uncertainty, the boys’ confidence filled in their lack of knowledge. Whereas in some groups, students who were unsure of an answer with lower confidence levels rarely volunteered their thoughts and ideas. These Group One students very comfortable talking with one another and sharing their thoughts and opinions. The popularity could be due to athletic participation, which often in middle school helps to determine social standing. It could also be linked to the boys’ socio economic status (SES), where each member was from a wealthy family. The high SES can influence popularity because of opportunity, family connection, and appearance. This similarity between group members allowed them to converse freely and comfortably without fear of offending one
another. Scott mentioned towards the end of the book, “If we had to compare, we would
definitely be Socs instead of Greasers.” Although he had a difficult time acknowledging why
exactly they would fit the Soc standard instead of Greaser, he might not have easily shared that
thought if he had been working with students less similar to him. After acknowledging the
talkative conversation within Group One, the potential causes can be attributed to intelligence
levels, motivation, confidence, and popularity. However, there will always be undetermined
variables that can lead to different behaviors within a group setting.

The literature circle for this research was made up of two parts, an oral group discussion
and an individual written response. The members of Group One demonstrated excellent
conversations for many reasons, specifically because of their ability to work with friends. When
these students worked on their independent journals, their group dynamic had much less of an
effect. Students in Group One produced journals of varying levels of quality.

Three of the five members in Group One produced lengthy, complex journals for all three
weeks of the literature circle. Cole and Trevor produced journals of much lower quality for
varying reasons. Motivation was the key factor in response to the student’s production of quality
journals. When the boys were in their group discussion they were engaged and interested in the
material, which helped them to produce complex connections and comments. However, when
they were journaling, they did not have anyone to prompt them or engage them. Therefore, the
effort put forth for the journals needed to come from the boys individually. Bryan, Scott and
Ryan each produced journals that answered each prompt at length, they cited evidence from the
text for support and they not only made connections to the book, but to each other’s comments
from the group discussion.
Bryan stated in his week two journal:

I can connect this passage to the world because the real world is separated in to social and economic groups, like the lower class and the upper class and very often different classes do not get along, like the Socs and Greasers.

Motivation encouraged Bryan, Scott and Ryan to produce complex writing. All three boys were very concerned with their academic grade in each class. Scott had said on multiple occasions that he worked hard on his journal because he wanted the grade of an A. Bryan had become easily frustrated after receiving a B on his first journal because it was below his usual average grade of an A. Bryan adjusted his work ethic for his week two and three journals because he was concerned with his grades. Trevor and Cole were the opposite when it came to their journals. Cole’s journals were consistent with his participation in the group discussions. He has lower reading and math scores than the other boys and is used to receiving average grades instead of above average grades. Trevor had the competency to be an A student; however, he was not consumed with his grades like the other three boys were. Therefore, Trevor put much less effort into his journals throughout all three weeks. The other boys often made comments trying to encourage him to work harder on his journals because it bothered them that he was scoring lower, but Trevor was simply not as motivated to work hard just to achieve a specific grade.

The final trend in observable behavior with Group One was that the boys did not readily, personally connect with the book. However, they were able to reflectively identify through their own disconnect to the book. The boys within this group did not connect with the text on a personal level. Because of their higher intelligence, the boys were able to comprehend and digest the text but were unable to personally connect. The boys in this group had a privilege that other
students did not have because of their higher SES. It was difficult for the boys to expand on an early thought that they were more similar to the Socs than the Greasers. The boys in the group had a difficult time acknowledging their privilege which may have been due to the fact that they spent minimal time with peers outside of their social group. It may also have been due to the fact that the boys had not yet experienced any significant trauma to make them aware of their lifestyle. Ryan stated in the week three discussion, “We haven’t experienced any hardships like the Greasers have, so it’s hard for us to relate to them.” The boys were able to identify their own disconnect with the book because of their higher level of intelligence. Cole shared, “The Greasers are so much closer, like family almost, than any of us are with each other. So, the Greasers are more upset by the loss of their friends than we probably would be.” After three weeks of literature circle discussions and written work, three trends emerged for Group One: the group was incredibly talkative, the group had complex, lengthy writing, and the group was not able to personally connect with the text. These behaviors could be contributed to the level of intelligence of group members, their level of motivation, and the popularity and confidence of each member.

Group Two showed behaviors that were almost the complete opposite from the behaviors and potential causes of behaviors for Group One. Group One students and Group Two students were from two separate classes. The students in Group Two were in a co-taught reading class that was made up of eleven special education students and seventeen general education students. Group Two was made up of five eighth grade boys, however three of these boys were classified as special education and had Individualized Education Plans (IEPs). The three boys with special
education classifications, Brayden, Colton, and Jack, showed slightly different behaviors than the other two group members, Damian and Richard.

The first behavior observed for Group Two was that they were not talkative and were often quiet in group discussions. Although these students were allowed to pick their group, they selected their group because of the book they wanted to read instead of by friendship. Damian and Richard are friends and Brayden, Colton, and Jack are friends. This disconnect in friendship really separated the group members in the first week. During the first discussion, Damian and Richard were talkative with one another while the other three group members were often almost silent. In the first week’s meeting, Brayden made one comment, Colton made two comments and Jack made none. This trend was consistent for Brayden and Colton through all three weeks of conversation. For various reasons these three group members were much more reserved in the discussion setting. However, in the week two meeting, Jack found his voice and made multiple inferential text connections. Damian and Richard worked hard in meetings two and three to include the other three group members, often asking them what they thought about the book or offering for them to pose a question or comment.

The lack of conversation had to do with the group dynamic. Damian and Richard had a blind confidence, they were either unaware or unconcerned with their social standing and personality that they spoke often and said what they thought. Whereas the other three boys were very aware of who they were and where they fell in the social rankings. This awareness limited their contributions to the conversation because unless they knew for sure they were correct, they were not going to risk sharing and being incorrect. Brayden often only commented when he could agree with someone or he could support an already shared point.
The group needs to be divided in order to understand some of why the conversation didn’t flow like it should have. First, the attention should be placed on Brayden, Colton, and Jack. These three boys had been in the special education environment their entire academic career. With various special education labels, the boys had received countless levels of instruction. During this research, the boys were often classified as having emotional disorders, which was often seen in their behaviors. The special education label had adverse effects on the boys. They exhibited behavior in their group meetings that showed a learned helplessness. When I would try to prompt them or ask questions, they sat silent unwilling to engage in the conversation. These three boys had worked with the special education teacher in previous literature circle groups. Although the boys are in the general education setting almost all day, this was their first time working in a literature circle group with myself and general education students. The boys were used to their lack of involvement being accepted and tolerated. They were challenged and pushed in this group setting more than they were used to.

A second theme that emerged from Group Two was that their journals were less complex and much shorter in length. The members of Group One completed and submitted a journal for each week of their literature circle meetings. Not one member of Group Two completed all three of their journals per the requirement. The Group One journals ranged from three paragraphs to four pages. The Group Two journals ranged from three sentences to four paragraphs. Damian and Richard submitted longer journals, however, they were not very complex. Damian stated in one journal “Ponyboy is like me because I have two brothers, they would help me too if I got jumped.” The statements in Group Two’s journals were much more surface level than inferential or complex. While Richard was connecting Ponyboy to himself he said they were very different
because of literal facts such as “He is fourteen and skipped a grade in school, I did not. His parents are dead and he is in a gang, my parents are alive and I have friends but am not in a gang.” Instead of looking deeper to make personal connections with behaviors, decisions and personalities, Richard was only able to look at the surface level similarities between himself and the main character. Brayden, Colton, and Jack turned in journals only a few sentences long and unless I stood and prompted them consistently, they would not turn in a journal at all.

Group One showed increased motivation to not only complete their work, but complete their work well. One significant difference between Group One and Two was their motivation. All five members of Group Two showed consistent negative or neutral attitudes towards completing their work not only on time, but also with high quality. As noted earlier, all five boys in Group Two received free or reduced lunch, which identified them as have a lower SES. The free and reduced lunch list is an easy indicator for teachers to identify students of lower income households. There is not always a direct correlation between low SES and motivation, but in this research it shows true. The boys in Group Two do not have an internal drive to achieve high grades and scores on assignments. This lack of desire to score well then lowered their drive to submit assignments on time. It was very evident when completing and turning in journals for this literature circle. Another significant factor is that the members of Group Two had much less of a consequence if and/or when they scored low or did not submit an assignment. The Group One members often shared that they would be in trouble or would lose a privilege if they received bad grades or had missing work. Whereas the members of Group Two did not have consequences for missing work from their parents, which unfortunately only encouraged them to continue not completing their work. Finally, the level of complexity could have been the result of
multiple factors. For Brayden, Colton, and Jack, their special education placement and differing labels may have contributed to their short and simplistic journals. Although Damian and Richard were general education students without special education labels, they were lower scoring students which contributed to the quality of their journals.

The final trend that arose from Group Two is that they were able to relate to and personally connect with the book. Although the boys chose their group based on the book and not necessarily friendship, all the boys had a lot in common. These commonalities allowed the boys to relate and connect to not only the book but also each other. Their home lives, interests, and feelings towards school allowed the boys in this group to connect on various topics. In the week two discussion, Jack found his voice and shared more than any of the other boys. Jack made multiple text connections, one in particular about Charleston and the lifestyles within the book.

Jack stated:

There are differences in social class and groups in Charleston based on where you live, the worse part of town is up near the square and the nicer part of town is by the college. Which is just like the Greasers living on the East side of town and the Socs on the West side of town.

This was a strong text-to-world connection for Jack to make. This connection invited a diverse conversation between the group and it allowed the others to see how their lives were connected to the text. Damian connected with the characters sharing that, “I am not one of the popular kids in school so I understand how the Greasers feel.” All the other boys in Group Two then agreed with Damian, that they were not in the popular group. However, the boys were all comfortable
admitting that they weren’t in the popular group because it was a similarity between all of them. If the boys were in a group with students who might be considered popular, they might not have had the confidence to share their thoughts. Their classification of being unpopular has also given the boys an opportunity to see life differently than the members of Group One. The members of Group Two more readily identified with loss, depression, illness, law enforcement, bullying and more. Group Two had a unique group dynamic, but it was one that really worked in the end. The boys were able to let their guards down around each other and shared comments they might not have in other group settings. The members of Group Two showed three trends in behaviors: they were not talkative, they had less complex and lengthy writing, and they were able to personally connect with the text. These behaviors were due in part to special education labels and placements, learned behaviors due to specific placements, low SES, low motivation, and social standing.

Discussion

The findings of this research highlighted the positive impact of homogenous grouping and provided evidence to support the use of homogenous grouping in the literature circle setting. This research showed that students were more willing to talk because they were positioned to feel comfortable due to their ability to select their own groups. The students were given an open opportunity to work with peers of their choice and peers that were similar to them. This independence with group selection allowed students to enter more willingly into group conversations (Batchelor, 2007). Therefore, students were more confident in sharing with their group and talking openly and consistently during group meetings. With self-selected groups, students entered into group conversations with open minds about the book, the conversations, and about the discussion process. This was seen in the students’ body language and
encouragement of each other. Many of the students in Group One would lay down during their meetings; they would sprawl out to get physically comfortable in an effort to match their emotional comfort.

Because students were comfortable in their groups, they were more willing to divulge personal information and make connections on a deeper level. There is a significant difference between a student who comments in a group discussion and one who divulges. The degree of depth of the group discussion was enhanced because students were relaxed around their group members (Clarke and Holwadel, 2007). This method of grouping for literature circles provided novelty and variety for students in each class. Students had experience with the literature circle process, but they were always grouped by book and not by student selection. As previous research has found, having the opportunity to work with peers of their choice excited students and increased their motivation to work (Batchelor, 2012).

Although the findings from this research support homogenous grouping in the literature circle setting, the findings are incongruent with current and past research. Toepfer (1990) strongly urges against the use of homogenous or ability grouping, “The results of homogeneous grouping of students by ability do not warrant its continued use, particularly in middle level school programs” (p. 1). Toepfer’s (1990) research also shares that “ability grouping interferes with opportunities for students to learn from-and learn to accept- peers of different socioeconomic backgrounds, and may perpetuate notions of superior and inferior classes of citizens” (p. 2). With homogenous grouping, students are often with peers of similar backgrounds, therefore lowering their opportunities to work in diverse environments, allowing them the ability to increase their acceptance of others. However, with homogeneous grouping
students have the opportunity to work with peers of similar interests and backgrounds which allows students to relate to one another and explore topics of meaning on a deeper level. Clarke and Holwadel (2007) cited group differences as a limitation for their success with literature circles, “Sociocultural forces such as economic disparities, strong student animosity, and racial and gender tension had powerful influences on how these students discussed texts, despite the teacher’s best attempts to create a safe and trusting environment” (p. 22). With heterogeneous grouping, there is a risk of students being from backgrounds too diverse to work cohesively together in a group setting. In literature circle setting there are many goals, one of which is for students to be able to gain a better understanding of the text. If students cannot work together because of social differences, they will have a difficult time focusing on the academic concepts at hand.

Homogenous grouping allows students to find a space that allows them to share their ideas, opinions, and to have a voice. Students often retreat within a group setting because they are fearful of others’ opinions and criticism. Batchelor (2012) requires that students respond positively to their fellow group members, “To build solidarity, every student in the group must say something positive about the response” (p. 30). Students are required to model behavior that is positive, which helps to remove the threat that other students will be negative. However, when students are given the opportunity to work with peers of their choice, they are more aware of the personalities and group dynamics. This awareness allows students to speak more freely and confidently in the group setting. A group of students who choose to work together will more likely respect each other without a requirement to be kind and positive. Finally, many researches and teachers find that with homogenous or ability grouping, students in some groups may feel
poorly about whom they are working with and what that group label says about them. Chorzempa and Graham (2006) found that, “Those opposed to ability grouping argue that students in low-ability groups may experience social stigmatization, lowered academic expectations, and decreased motivation” (p.529). However, when students choose their own groups, they are selecting peers they are comfortable with, therefore accepting whatever view or opinions others may have of their group. Toepfer (1990) shared a positive claim that “No single pattern will fit all situations” (p. 2). The goal of this research was not to argue against heterogeneous groups, it was to highlight that there is room for both homogenous and heterogeneous grouping within the literature circle setting. Like Toepfer said, there is not one idea that will best fit all students. The findings in this research helped to show evidence of the value of allowing students to choose their groups and work with peers similar to themselves.

This research was one small study observing students from a low diversity population. The findings from this research therefore, cannot replace research of others or claims of others. It is simply adding to the collection of research on grouping and group dynamics in regards to literature circles. This study had many limitations which should be discussed to fully comprehend the research. This study followed many of the characteristics of an ethnography, in which the research highlighted and considered the student’s cultures and backgrounds when exploring the reasons for observed behaviors. One significant limitation of this study is that the population for the sample pull of students, is predominantly white. The school used for this study was Charleston Middle School, which is in the town of Charleston, Illinois. Charleston is a small farm town of about 20,000 people. The lack of diversity in race and ethnicity hurt the study because the sample of students were all very similar. Much of the research done on group
dynamics sampled classrooms with extreme ethnic and racial differences. The severe difference in race and/or ethnicity can impact a study because of its immediate impact on student tolerance. With this research, students had less obstacles to overcome in terms of differences. This allowed students to more easily find peers they viewed as suitable to work with.

One factor that should be noted as a significant difference with this population is SES and social class. All ten boys discussed in this research were white, with no racial or ethnic differences, however, the boys were on varying ends of the social spectrum. Charleston is also the home to Eastern Illinois University, a college of about 7,000 students. Using a school located in a college town affected the study because of social class. It is difficult to define class.

Thein, Guise, and Sloan (2012) stated, "definitions of social class are often contested among social scientists, with some researchers classifying families and individuals on the basis of income levels alone and others considering the influence of culture, educational levels and access to formal institutions such as schools, universities, and political parties" (p. 216). About 10% of the students in the sample had parents who worked at the university. Students with parents who have master's degrees, doctorate degrees or higher, are often held to a higher standard and have been introduced to academic skills earlier on in life. The higher education levels of parents can also lead to higher incomes. The most significant difference between Group One and Group Two from the research was their SES. Although English Language Arts achievement levels varied, all five members of Group One were from families with higher SES, which was observed by the members not receiving free or reduced-cost lunch at school. Whereas, all five members of Group Two did receive free or reduced-cost lunch at school. This gap in SES influenced
students in their choice of group, students wanted to work with peers who were similar to them and who were from similar backgrounds.

**Conclusion**

After spending three weeks observing student behaviors within literature circle group meetings, I have found evidence to support the use of homogenous grouping within the literature circle setting. Although research varies in the area of student grouping, there is support for and evidence against the use of homogenous grouping. This study helped to highlight the positive behaviors that were seen due to students working with peers of their choice, in a homogenous group setting. This research can help provide a foundation for changing or modifying the ways in which teachers group. There should be room for heterogeneous grouping and homogenous grouping within the reading classroom.

After completing this research, I found that I believe there should be an opportunity for my students to work with peers like them. Students in my classroom complete five to six literature circles throughout the school year. So far, my students have always worked in heterogeneous groups based on their book choice. However, after completing this research I believe it will be beneficial to include at least one literature circle where students can select their groups and work with classmates like them. I plan to implement homogenous grouping with the first literature circle of the year. I feel as though this will provide students with an opportunity to become comfortable with the literature circle process, without also worrying about the group dynamic. Students will also be more comfortable with the students they are working with, which will encourage them to participate and respond within their group. I do, however, plan to continue heterogeneous grouping, so that students are not only experiencing different genres and
styles of books but also different personalities within their groups. I found it beneficial to see the limitations and benefits of allowing students to work with peers of their choice. I was surprised and excited about the open community within each group and the engagements and excitement that the conversations brought. While there is evidence for heterogeneous grouping within the reading classroom, educators should also continue to provide students with opportunities for homogenous grouping.
References


Clarke, L. W., & Holwadej, J. (2007). Help! What is wrong with these literature circles and how can we fix them? Reading Teacher, 61(1), 20-29. doi: 10.1598/RT.61.1.3


EVALUATING STUDENT RESPONSES BASED ON GROUP DYNAMIC


Appendix A

Coding Chart for Group Discussion

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Student:</th>
<th>Self</th>
<th>World</th>
<th>Text</th>
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**Meeting Notes:**
Appendix B

Student Journal Response Prompts

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<tr>
<th>Literature Circle Journal Prompts Weeks 1-3</th>
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<tr>
<td>Each journal must be completed in two parts, a pre-discussion response and a post-discussion response. For your pre-discussion response, you must respond to the journal prompts making sure to cite evidence for support before your group meeting. After your group has their meeting, please return to your journal and draw a line after your pre-discussion response in a different color.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>For your post-discussion response, you must reflect on your initial response, did your opinion change after your group discussion, did any group members share anything worth documenting, are there any questions or comments you still want to share? Take this time to add to, change, or continue your initial response. Journal responses should be on a separate piece of paper. Responses may be typed or handwritten.</td>
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</table>

**Journal Prompt #1**

1. Which character(s) in the text do you like? Cite evidence from the text that support your opinion.
2. Which character(s) in the text don't you like? Cite evidence from the text that support your opinion.
3. How is the main character similar to you? How is the main character different from you? Explain the similarities and differences in detail. Cite evidence from the text that supports your thoughts.

**Journal Prompt #2**

1. What was a conflict or problem from the reading? How was it solved OR how do you think it will be solved? Cite evidence from the text.
2. Choose a situation from the text and tell how the character reacted (words, thoughts, actions). Would you have reacted in the same way? Cite evidence from the text that supports your thoughts.
3. Make a text-to-self, text-to-text, or text-to-world connection with what you read.

**Journal Prompt #3**

1. What character trait do you like the least about the main character? Cite evidence from the text.
2. If you could give the main character some advice, what would it be? Cite evidence from text.
3. If you could ask the main character three questions, what would they be? Explain why you chose those 3 questions. Cite evidence from the text.
A Representative Student Sample from Group One

In the Outsiders the problem is that Johnny killed a man. In the text, Johnny stabbed Bob at the park with a knife and know Pony and Johnny are on the run. The problem is not exactly solved yet, because Johnny may go to jail and Pony may be moved to a foster house. In the text, Johnny and Pony saved 10 little kids from a burning house, so I think that they will be left easy for being heroes. In the book, Pony and Johnny were in a major predicament. They saved 10 little kids or ran and take the risk of not being caught. During this situation, Pony acted in thoughts, actions, and words. Pony's thoughts were we got these kids into it, now, we have to get them out. He reacted by running up to the church breaking out a window and going into a death trap and getting evrey kid out alive. Along the way, Pony was cursing because of the smoke then trying not to talk so he didn't inhale the smoke and pass out. If this situation happened to me, I would have done the same thing.
that Pony and Johnny would have done because it would have been our fault for throwing a cigarette on the ground.

I think the whole world can connect to the message I read. In the text Johnny and Pony are on the run from the cops and that they are in a gang called the greasers. I think the world can connect to this because all around the world there is always murderers happening and always people on the run in the United States and all over the world. Also in the text an old church burns down and Pony and Johnny risk their lives to save others. I think the whole world can connect to this because there is always that one courageous person who saves or tries to save the day and that was Pony and Johnny.
Appendix D

A Representative Student Sample from Group Two

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**Journal prompt #2**

- A big problem was the Scoos V.S. professors and I think it will be solved by the big rumble and the Scoos are going to lose ponyboy and everyone alone.

- It wasn't about to go through that flaming door! Ponyboy and Johnny saved a bunch of little kids and I would never do that so I though that ponyboy was a good guy after long.

- Ponyboy to me because we both have two brothers and they both care about me and would help me if I got jumped.

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- Do you think Johnny is going to live?

- I want to know if they liked the book.

- My point of view didn't change toward any character.