

**LITERATURE CIRCLES IN THE MULTICULTURAL CLASSROOM:
WHO'S LEARNING WHAT?**

by

Elyse R. Lulkin

**A thesis submitted in conformity with the requirements
for the degree of Master of Arts
Department of Curriculum, Teaching and Learning
The Ontario Institute for Studies in Education of the
University of Toronto**

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Abstract

In this case study, I take an in-depth look at what learning occurred when an innovative literacy unit featuring semi-structured small group literature discussions was implemented in a multicultural seventh-grade classroom in Southern Ontario. Specifically, I use “think description” (Denzin, 1989) to give the reader a sense of how each of the four literature circle groups featured in the study interacted during their literature discussions, and I present data from student interviews indicating how students themselves perceived the literature circles. I then analyze the data in order to draw tentative conclusions regarding the literary learning opportunities and the affective benefits afforded to each focal group. Additionally, I examine the nature of peer discourse in each group and highlight the problematic aspects of students’ verbal interactions. Concluding the study, I explore the numerous contextual factors that impacted on students’ learning and speculate on how learning with literature circles can be optimized.

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INTRODUCTION

Background

As a volunteer in a grade 4/5 classroom, one of my primary responsibilities was facilitating reading groups. In accordance with the teacher's instructions, each child would read a page aloud in a round-robin fashion, and I would intermittently question the students to ensure that they were properly comprehending the text. I felt somehow dissatisfied with the structure. Everything I had been taught in graduate school had convinced me that students, especially second-language students, need opportunities to express themselves in meaningful ways, and to connect their existing knowledge with the academic knowledge acquired in schools. The existing reading group structure, in my eyes, was seriously flawed because there was no opportunity for the students to engage in dialogue, raise questions, or share relevant personal experiences. So, as a quiet revolutionary, I began discreetly, if not surreptitiously, to ask the students to relate their personal experiences to the book.

The kids responded enthusiastically. In particular, after reading a passage about butterflies, I remember one recent immigrant telling me excitedly about his experiences collecting butterflies with a cousin. Though gratified to hear him speak so passionately and fluently, at the same time, I felt conflicted. Was I distracting the kids by letting them bring up "extraneous" topics? Wasn't getting through the chapter what I should be focusing on? Not knowing what to do, I summarily put an end to the boy's story, and hastily returned to the task at hand.

After the reading group was over, many questions lingered. I began to wonder how reading could be effectively taught to students? How could a teacher make reading

groups more student centered and more interactive? And if there were to be discussion around the literature, what would constitute a good discussion anyway? One question led to others, and I soon realized that I wanted to study reading and discourse in multicultural classrooms, but I was still far from knowing the shape my research would take.

Soon after that incident, I encountered the book, *Crossroads: Literature and Language in Linguistically Diverse Classrooms* written by Carole Cox and Paul Boyd-Batstone (1997). In this captivating and eminently readable work, Cox and Boyd-Batstone tell the story of how Boyd-Batstone successfully introduced student-led literature discussion groups into his third-grade bilingual class. Specifically, he found that when he gave students the autonomy to conduct their own discussions, the children, many native Spanish speakers, enthusiastically engaged in English-language discourse, expressed sophisticated and imaginative ideas and were more motivated than they had been during more traditional reading groups. Reflecting on what I had read, I wrote the following impressions:

The dynamics of the classroom described...are truly phenomenal. Talk about cooperative learning! Talk about communicative language teaching! Talk about empowering! However as much of the research in the book takes place in a bilingual classroom with Latino students, one wonders what type of interaction would take place in a truly multicultural classroom (emphasis added) (journal, May, 2000).

Through the summer, as I continued to read, I became increasingly intrigued by issues related to classroom discourse, literary learning and ethnic diversity. I began to familiarize myself with the writings of neo-Vygotskian researchers, as well as the works of reader response theorists like Louise Rosenblatt (1983) and second-language educators like Jim Cummins (1996). Poring over the educational literature, I was, I believed,

preparing myself to enter a classroom in which I could comfortably scrutinize, analyze and comprehensively evaluate literature discussions among diverse students. I foresaw myself essentially being an observer, passively absorbing and critically interpreting all I witnessed.

This was not to be. Through the vagaries of the research process, I found that the one teacher who seemed amenable to participating in my research was Linda Hill, a relatively new teacher who, while interested in cooperative learning, had never before used small-group literature discussions, nor had any knowledge of how to implement such groups in her classroom! Thus in the blink of an eye, I was no longer the passive observer/critic. Instead, I was cast in the role of “expert.” It was an ironic situation, considering that I had never before taught in a public school classroom and had no experience implementing or facilitating literature discussion groups.

Nevertheless, I was very much excited about the prospect of participating in the planning and implementation of literature discussion groups. I had so many questions about how the groups would work and what sort of learning would take place during the discussions that I immediately jumped at the chance to work with Linda.

It was that in the fall of 2000 that I began collaborating with Linda in her seventh-grade classroom in a multicultural middle school in Southern Ontario. Linda was open-minded, enthusiastic and very accommodating. After some preliminary discussion, she and I decided to implement “literature circles,” small-group student-led literature discussions, which require students to assume prescribed roles on a rotating basis in accordance with the principles of cooperative learning (Daniels, 1994).

CHAPTER 1: LITERATURE REVIEW

Literature circles have essentially three primary aspects. They are collaborative in nature; they involve peer discourse; and their *raison d'être* is the study of literature. Therefore, in my review of the pertinent literature, I begin by giving a brief overview of research and theory involving collaborative learning and peer discourse, and I subsequently look more specifically at studies undertaken by researchers who have studied small-group literature discussions. Due to the nature of my research context, throughout this review, I highlight research involving second-language and minority students in particular.

Cooperative Learning

A primary reason that Linda and I chose to implement literature circles in her multicultural classroom is that literature circles are a form of cooperative learning, and much research indicates that cooperative learning techniques employed in the classroom may be beneficial to all students, and to minority students in particular (Gay, 2000; Kagan, 1986; Coelho, 1991; Johnson & Johnson, 1994). The purported advantages of cooperative learning are cognitive, social and psychological. It has been argued that through collaborating with their peers on meaningful tasks, students develop higher-level thinking skills, learn the skills needed to effectively interact with others and develop greater self-esteem (Johnson & Johnson, 1994). According to Johnson and Johnson (1994), there is substantial evidence indicating that cooperative learning fosters positive, caring relationships “regardless of ethnic, language, social class, gender, ability or any other difference” (p. 72).

Another argument for cooperative learning is that the alternative, competitive, individualistic learning environments can have an extremely detrimental effect on under-achieving minorities. In her book on Caribbean students in Canada, Coelho (1991) asserts that in an atmosphere in which students are constantly competing for the teacher's attention and only a few get rewarded, less successful students quickly become demoralized. They can't compete with their more academically inclined peers, and consequently, they become increasingly disengaged and disaffected. In addition, Coelho points out that for many black and Caribbean students, the overt demonstration of individual knowledge, so prized in traditional classrooms, is antithetical to their peer culture. Therefore, students who are seen as trying to impress the teacher in competitive classrooms may become alienated from their peer group. In contrast, cooperative learning involves peers helping one another to succeed. In the mutually supportive environment of the cooperative learning classroom, the gap between the school culture and the peer culture becomes less problematic.

Another compelling reason for using cooperative learning techniques with diverse learners has to do with cultural congruity (Coelho, 1991; Gay, 2000). Many people of color, including those of African and Asian heritage, value interpersonal connectivity and collaborative problem solving (Gay, 2000). Also, cooperative learning environments are often more suitable than traditional learning environments to the learning styles of minority students. In particular, certain minority students, including Black and Caribbean students, often work better in highly stimulating, interactive and dynamic classrooms than in more sedate traditional classrooms (Coelho, 1991).

Based on the overwhelming empirical evidence demonstrating the usefulness of cooperative learning techniques (see Gay, 2000 for a comprehensive overview of relevant studies), Kagan (1986) suggests that to not employ collaborative learning strategies is tantamount to disempowering minority students. Emphasizing the detrimental nature of traditional teaching methods, Kagan writes, "...the gap in achievement between majority and minority students is best not attributed to personal deficiencies of minority students, but rather to the relatively exclusive reliance in public schools on competitive and individualistic classroom structures" (Kagan, 1986, quoted in Cummins, 1989, p.247).

Reading these studies, I was deeply impressed but somewhat skeptical. I knew from personal experience with cooperative learning that collaboration was more beneficial in certain circumstances than in others. Yet, it seemed that many studies on cooperative learning focused almost exclusively on the successful instances of cooperative learning and did not frequently address the potentially problematic aspects of students working together.

I found a notable exception to be Jacob's (1999) case study of cooperative learning in a mathematics classroom and in a social studies classroom in a single school. In the study, Jacob takes a balanced look at the actualization of cooperative learning techniques in specific contexts and discusses why in the classrooms she observed, the progressive techniques implemented were only partially successful. Jacob not only reports on learning outcomes, but also discusses the relevant contextual factors in a manner that sheds light on why the cooperative activities did not always afford students maximum opportunities for learning. Jacob's (1999) study is particularly valuable

because it gives educators a sense of how to take the nature of specific contexts into consideration in order to implement innovations in the most effective manner possible.

Classroom Discourse

While the researchers cited above looked at the general benefits of students cooperating on tasks, others researchers have looked more specifically at the discursive practices of students in the classroom and the benefits of allowing students to communicate in meaningful ways. Much of the research and writing on peer talk in schools has been done by researchers with a social constructivist theoretical orientation. Social constructivism refers essentially to the application of the theories of the Soviet educator and psychologist, Lev Vygotsky, to education (Wells, 2000). Social constructivists in the Vygotskian and neo-Vygotskian tradition conceptualize learning as the construction of knowledge through interaction with others. They see learning not as the passive acquisition of discrete bits of information from a text or from a more knowledgeable individual, but as a complex process in which learners actively link existing and new knowledge, transform their understandings and learn to think in increasingly sophisticated ways (Barnes, 1992). Social constructivists contend that dialogue is, for a number of reasons to be discussed below, a critical part of the learning process.

One pioneer in the study of peer discourse in classrooms was the British researcher, Douglas Barnes (1992; Barnes & Todd, 1977). Barnes and his colleagues, conducting research at a time when there was very little authentic peer collaboration taking place in schools, audio taped small groups of students working outside of their

regular classrooms on various academic tasks. While Barnes found that some groups were able to accomplish the tasks more successfully than other groups and that the task and the group makeup impacted on the performance of each group, overall he concluded that students were, in fact, very capable of communicating with one another in sophisticated ways and that they should be given more opportunities to develop and demonstrate the communicative skills they possess. In his seminal book, *From Communication to Curriculum*, Barnes (1992) adroitly synthesizes the work of thinkers such as Vygotsky and Bruner to make a compelling argument for giving students abundant opportunities to speak in the classroom.

More recently, educators in North America (e.g., Wells, 2000; Wells & Chang-Wells, 1992) have also done much work on student discourse in the classroom. In their study of elementary school students, Wells and Chang-Wells (1992) studied classrooms in which collaborative inquiry was taking place, and like Barnes, they too concluded that dialogue among peers, as well as between students and teachers, fosters intellectual development. For Wells and Chang-Wells (1992), the verbal give and take necessitated by engagement in such tasks is critical. They argue:

Conversation can...provide a forum in which individuals calibrate their representations of events and states of affairs against those of other people, and realign and extend their existing mental models to assimilate or accommodate to new or alternative information (p. 94).

In arguing for the importance of group work, Barnes (1992) Wells and Chang-Wells (1992) and other literacy researchers with a Vygotskian orientation (see for example, Lee and Smagorinsky, 2000), emphasize the importance of letting students express themselves in the classroom. They contend that language plays an important role

in the learning process for a number of reasons. One reason language is so critical to learning is that when individuals are given the opportunity to express their thoughts in speech or writing, they are better able to reflect on the ideas they hold and to subsequently shape and modify those ideas (Barnes, 1992; Wells, 2000). In the same way that individuals can respond to the speech of others, they can respond to their own utterances in a critical and reflective manner (Barnes, 1992).

Moreover, giving students the opportunity to explain what they're thinking to others forces them to clarify and shape their own understandings (Barnes, 1992; John-Steiner & Meehan, 2000; Wells, 2000). Inchoate thoughts and half-formed ideas become increasingly well defined as students voice these ideas to one another and are prodded by the responses of teachers and peers to elaborate on and refine the ideas they are expressing. While some may argue that even in traditional classrooms, students have opportunities to explain concepts when they are queried by a teacher conducting a question and answer session, Barnes (1992) points out that for a child, explaining a concept to a peer who legitimately lacks the knowledge in question, is very different from explaining a concept to a teacher who, in most instances, already possesses the knowledge she or he is requesting. In the former case, the student realizes that he is in a position to elucidate another and will have to be as explicit as possible in order to convey the information he possesses. In the latter instance, however, the student knows that he is being questioned simply for assessment purposes and does not have an authentic reason, to put great effort into explicating his thoughts. Barnes (1992) also asserts that students benefit from discussion with peers because such interaction enables them to articulate

their current understandings and link their existing knowledge with the new knowledge they are acquiring in the classroom.

While many studies have primarily looked at the benefits and challenges of peer discussions from the perspectives of the teachers and researchers involved, Alvermann and her colleagues (Alvermann et al., 1996; Alvermann, 1996) focused on peer-led discussions from the perspective of students. After extensively interviewing students to understand how they perceive text-based discussions, Alvermann (1996) concluded that task and topic had a significant effect on the quality of the discussion and that students themselves found the discussions helpful. Alvermann also found that in the right environment, if students are given the chance to engage in purposive talk with one another, they can learn how to communicate more effectively. Specifically, they can begin to understand how to negotiate complex cognitive and social relationships and how to stay focused on a topic. In addition, she found that group work teaches students the importance of listening and contributing to a group effort.

Many educators (e.g., Au, 1993; Cummins, 1994,1996; Gutierrez and Meyer, 1995 and Corson, 1998) have made the case that for second language and minority students to achieve academic success, they must be given opportunities to engage in academic discourse and to work cooperatively with their peers. Much research has shown that teacher-centered classrooms in which students are given minimal opportunities to engage in extended meaningful academic discourse are particularly harmful for minority students and for low SES (socioeconomic) students (Au, 1993; Cummins, 1994; Gutierrez and Meyer, 1995, Corson, 1998). One reason for this is that students who are culturally different or economically disadvantaged may not have opportunities outside of

school to converse in ways that will give them the linguistic and sociocultural knowledge so highly prized in North American society. Passively listening to their teachers use academic discourse is terribly insufficient. Such students need to have the opportunity to themselves participate in the “discourse of the literate culture” (Corson, 1998) in order to learn to speak in ways that will enable them to achieve academic success.

Another reason that teacher-centered transmission-oriented instruction is so ineffective for minority and low SES students is that such teaching is likely to reflect the values, ideas and experiences of the mainstream (Au, 1993). Also, if the teacher predominately lectures, and the students simply listen passively, the classroom becomes what Corson (1998) terms “a site for intellectual indoctrination.” When students recognize that their perspectives and voices are not being heard, they often “tune out” (Corson, 1998). And while students of all ethnic backgrounds may be turned off by such traditional teaching methods, the danger of diverse students becoming disengaged is particularly acute. This is because even if schoolwork is not particularly engaging, white middle-class students may be motivated to succeed just because they know academic success will lead to career opportunities and increased social status. However, other students, whose families may have encountered racism and been thwarted in their efforts to get ahead despite hard work, may not see academic success as the key to the good life. Such students will not be motivated to do work just for the sake of future rewards, and therefore, for these students particularly, schoolwork must be intrinsically meaningful and motivating (Au, 1993).

Another problem with transmission-oriented teaching is that such teaching does not allow students from diverse backgrounds to demonstrate the skills they do have. To

emphasize the importance of giving students the opportunity to talk in the classroom, Henson (1993) cites an important study by Gordon Wells (1985). In the study, Wells (1985) discovered that when a teacher asked a low SES student questions that were decontextualized and irrelevant to her life, the student did not articulate complete responses. In contrast, when the same student was engaged in conversations that were relevant and meaningful to her, the girl spoke fluently and in a sophisticated manner. Henson (1985) uses this study to make the point that educators need to allow students to communicate in schools in ways that will allow them to demonstrate the knowledge and abilities they do possess.

Giving students of all backgrounds the opportunity to demonstrate their communicative skills is critical, not only because it allows the teacher to better assess students' abilities, but because it gives teachers a sense of each student's existing knowledge base and current level of understanding (Wells and Chang-Wells, 1992). Such information is important for a teacher, because only when the teacher is aware of what her students know can she consciously attempt to link the new knowledge she wants to impart to the knowledge the students already possess (Barnes, 1992). In addition, being aware of a student's level of understanding and capabilities during any given activity enables teachers to scaffold learners within their zone of proximal development (ZPD). That is, teachers who are cognizant of what a student is able to achieve and understand on his own will be able to expertly assist the student to achieve at a level just beyond what he could achieve independently (Wells and Chang-Wells, 1992).

Literature Discussions

The term literature discussion, as it is used in this thesis refers to any discussion in which students are given the opportunity to discuss issues in a text in an authentic and meaningful manner. Literature discussions can be teacher-led or student-led, can involve small groups of students, dyads or the whole class, and can be relatively structured or relatively unstructured. In this section, I first look at the literary theory that underlies much of the work done on literature discussions. After laying the theoretical framework, I look at what the research has to say about the potential benefits of literature discussions, the difficulties of implementing successful literature discussions and the factors that may impact on the overall quality of text-based discussions.

The Benefits of Literature Discussions

The virtues of give and take among students with diverse perspectives who are given the opportunity to dialogue with one another have long been extolled by language arts educators who adhere to the belief that students' experiences with literature learning can be immeasurably enhanced by the opportunity to engage in meaningful discussions around the texts they are reading. Already in 1938, Louise Rosenblatt (1983) put forth the idea that students should be encouraged to respond to texts in a personal manner. Rosenblatt believed adamantly that prior to having to analyze literary works or answer superficial questions about the literature they read, students should first be encouraged to express openly the subjective thoughts and feelings that arise in them as they read and reflect on a literary text. Rosenblatt's advice to teachers was grounded in her "transactional theory of reading." Rosenblatt's theory of reading, which spawned

numerous reader response theories, is based on the idea that the essence of reading is a transaction between the reader and a text in which the individual reader experiences and makes sense of the text in a unique way based on his or her own personality, beliefs and background. For Rosenblatt (1983), “free-flowing discussions” around literature could benefit students by exposing them to divergent opinions and thereby prompting them to reflect critically on their own views. Arguing for the importance of literature discussions, Rosenblatt (1983) writes:

During group discussion [of a literary work], the students in a spirit of friendly challenge can lead one another to work out the implications of the positions they have taken.... By bringing their own generalizations into the open, students may feel the need of putting their mental house in order. They will develop a more critical, questioning attitude and will see the need of a more reasoned foundation for their thoughts and judgments, a more consistent system of values (p. 120).

Since Rosenblatt first exhorted teachers to use literature discussions over 60 years ago, educators in a variety of contexts have been heralding the advantages of talk around text in the classroom. The benefits attributed to literature discussions are manifold. In multicultural contexts, a number of researchers and teachers (i.e. Miller, 1993; Klassen, 1993; Cox and Boyd-Batstone, 1997) found that literature discussions can foster cross-cultural understanding, as literature discussions provide a forum for students to share experiences and beliefs. Specifically, Suzanne Miller (1993) conducted a number of studies in diverse high school classrooms with a focus on how discussions of multicultural literature could “help students learn to respect and value the differences in our richly diverse society and world” (p. 247). What she found in the course of her research was that in certain classrooms, where teachers were able to create environments in which mutual respect prevailed and students felt secure enough to honestly voice their

opinions, that students were in fact able to achieve “dialogic thinking.” Such thinking entails being able to reflect consciously and to see issues from multiple perspectives (Miller, 1993). While Miller’s studies were done in classrooms with teacher-led whole-class discussions, her findings are significant in that they reveal the enormous potential of discussions around literary works in multicultural classrooms.

Similarly, Klassen (1993), an elementary-school teacher in a community with palpable ethnic tensions, found that discussing topics raised in multicultural literature provided her students with a much-needed opportunity to talk about critical and highly relevant issues and also to share stories from their own lives. In the course of their dialogue, students were exposed to various opinions and began to realize that there is more than one “right” way of looking at things. Describing the role of literature discussions in her multicultural classroom, Klassen (1993) writes:

Literature, talk and diversity were critical elements for learning in our classroom. Literature provided new insights students could explore as they constructed knowledge for their own purposes. Talk with other learners enabled first and second language learners to reflect on their current thinking and consider other points of view. Diversity of perspective offered multiple viewpoints to examine for potential growth (p. 240).

Another benefit of literature discussions, specifically small-group literature discussions, is that they provide a forum for students to use language in meaningful and motivating ways. For English language learners, small-group literature discussions may have several benefits. Perhaps most significantly, small-group literature discussions provide a forum for second-language students, even those who are not fully proficient in English, to engage with sophisticated, yet contextually embedded concepts, while they are simultaneously acquiring linguistic skills (Brock, 1997a). This is particularly

important as English language learners need material that is both cognitively demanding and context embedded in order to effectively acquire the necessary linguistic and academic skills to succeed in school (Cummins, 1996). Another advantage of small groups is that second-language students may feel more comfortable asking questions and interacting with their peers in a small group than they would in a whole-class setting (Cox and Boyd-Batstone, 1997; Brock, 1997a; Saunders et al., 1999).

The importance of giving English language learners opportunities to participate in small-group discussions was exemplified in a recent case study conducted by Cynthia Brock (1997b). Brock's case study focused on Deng, a fifth-grade Hmong boy, who had been living in the United States for only two years at the time the study took place. After spending a great deal of time observing and videotaping Deng during both whole-class and small-group literature discussions, Brock (1997b) found that during teacher-led discussions involving the entire class, Deng never voluntarily participated. When Brock subsequently questioned Deng about his silence during the class discussions, it was revealed that his lack of participation was due to the fact that he had difficulty comprehending the whole-class discussions, and he did not feel comfortable admitting his confusion or asking questions in front of the entire class. In contrast, in the peer-led small-group literature discussions in which he participated, Deng was much more vocal, and would frequently take the initiative in asking his peers for clarification of particular points.

Conducting research in a very different context, Cox and Boyd-Batstone (1997) found that student-led small-group literature discussions in Boyd-Batstone's third grade bilingual Spanish-English classroom were immensely successful on several levels.

Specifically, they found that as students made connections with literature and were prompted to reveal the stories of their own lives, students learned not just from the literature, but also from one another. As a result, not only did students experience the satisfaction of having the wealth of experiences and knowledge they brought with them from their homes and communities validated, but students became increasingly motivated to speak English. From their research experiences, Cox and Boyd-Batstone (1997) conclude that when studying literature, “the more students connect the story to their lives, the more receptive they will be to language development” (124).

Additionally, literature discussions can enhance students’ vocabularies. In Daniels’ (1994) literature circles program, vocabulary learning is explicit, with one student specifically responsible for selecting, defining and sharing vocabulary words with the group. However, it has been found that even in literature discussion groups in which vocabulary learning is not explicitly emphasized, second language students will take the liberty of asking their peers (Brock, 1997a) or their teacher (Klassen, 1993) to explain the meanings of words that are unfamiliar to them.

In addition to the cognitive and social benefits of having students engage in literature discussions, perhaps a particularly compelling reason for using small-group literature discussions is that there is substantial evidence that middle school students (Daniels, 1994; Fried, 1993) as well as elementary school students (Vance, Ross, Davis & Brock, 1997; Daniels, 1994) find such discussions engaging and enjoyable. For instance, Sharon Weiner a seventh-grade teacher in Illinois who used the literature circle format found that her students engaged enthusiastically in literature circles (Daniels, 1994). Specifically, she discovered that they liked being able to make their own

connections with the literature and discuss topics that had significance for them. Students also liked the fact that the rotating roles provided them with structure while allowing them an opportunity to take on various responsibilities. Similarly, Camille Fried (1993), a middle-school teacher who used a slightly different literature discussion format, found that her students were more cooperative, more focused and more joyful in small-group literature discussions than they were when she conducted whole-class discussions.

One reason students give for being so enthusiastic about small-group literature discussions is that these discussions allow them to express what is important and relevant to them (Vance, Ross, Davis & Brock, 1997). In contrast to traditional methods of teaching literature in which teachers dominate classroom “discussions,” in literature circles, the students get an opportunity to discuss their questions and ideas regarding what they have read (Daniels, 1994). Instead of having to come up with the “correct” answer to impress the teacher, they can use language to explore ideas, engaging in what Douglas Barnes (1992) calls “exploratory talk.”

Factors That Impact on the Quality of Literature Discussions

Numerous studies indicate that not all literature discussions are of the same high quality, nor do all such discussions have the same educational value (Beers and Probst, 1998; Almasi et al., 2001; Barnes, 1992). There are many factors that may impact upon the quality/efficacy of a literature discussion or any cooperative learning task (Jacobs, 1999). Surveying the extant literature, however, it is clear that literacy researchers have generally focused on the importance of classroom-specific factors that are most frequently studied and cited as critical by educators are the text and topic to be discussed,

the task structure, the role of the teacher in the discussion, and the group dynamics in any given small group. Yet researchers who study the broader field of education reform remind us that when looking at why innovations, such as literature circles, succeed or fail, it is imperative to take into account not only classroom factors, but larger factors, including the conditions in which teachers work, the amount of support the reforms are given by administrators, and the educational policies put forth by government agencies (Fullan, 2001).

Text Choice

Much has been written about how the choice of a text influences the nature of literature discussions (Galda, 1998; Alvermann, et al., 1996; Cox and Boyd-Batstone, 1997; Pardo, 1998). Many educators (i.e. Pardo, 1998; Cox and Boyd-Batstone, 1997) who advocate small-group discussions suggest that students be given the opportunity to choose their own books from a number of texts deemed appropriate by the classroom teacher. They believe that by giving students the opportunity to choose their own reading material, teachers send a clear message that the students themselves are active participants in the learning process and can be entrusted with making important decisions about the direction their learning will take (Cox and Boyd-Batstone, 1997). In addition, it is argued that it is important to provide students with a large selection of books from which to choose because, unsurprisingly, it has been observed that students are more motivated and engaged in literature discussions when they have an affinity for the books they are discussing (Alvermann, et al., 1996; Cox and Boyd-Batstone, 1997; Pardo, 1998).

While much of the research on small-group literature discussions alludes to the fact that there is a relationship between the literary text read and the quality of students' literature discussions, many of the studies do not specify what makes a literary work particularly suitable (or unsuitable) for small-group discussions. The dearth of research on this issue is unfortunate, because the question of how to select books for literature discussions is of great import to classroom teachers. It is clear that a need exists for studies that look explicitly at how the nature of specific literary works impact on students' literature discussions.

Task Structure/ Teacher's Role in the Discussion

Another major factor impacting on how a literature discussion evolves is the structure of the discussion activity (Almasi et al., 2001). A comprehensive review of all the different types of literature discussion groups and an analysis of the pros and cons of each type is beyond the scope of this paper (see Almasi et al., 2001 for a more complete discussion of various types of literature groups). However, as a basis for later analysis of the task structures used in this study, I give a brief overview of basic features of various types of literature discussions.

Literature circles, a particular form of literature discussion groups, created by a team of educators in Chicago (Daniels, 1994) are based on the principle of cooperative learning. That is, in literature circles, students are assigned prescribed tasks on a rotating basis. Responsibilities include summarizing the text read, making intertextual connections and leading the discussion by asking thought-provoking questions (Daniels, 1994).

In contrast to literature circles which are relatively structured, in some small-group literature discussions, students are given significant freedom to shape their discussions as they see fit based on what group members have written in journals or reading logs (Kooy and Wells, 1996; McMahon, 1997). For instance, in *book clubs*, a type of peer-led literature discussions developed by McMahon, Raphael and colleagues (McMahon and Raphael, 1997), while the teacher may circulate and occasionally scaffold students, the students themselves negotiate with one another to determine who gets the floor and which topics that will be taken up for discussion (Almasi et al., 2001).

Whether it is better to assign roles as Daniels (1994) suggests or to have students interact in a less structured manner is a question that is still up for debate. Proponents of assigning cooperative roles to students in literature circles maintain that such roles may allow for more equity in terms of students' participation and ensure that even the less vocal students are given opportunities to speak (Evans, 1996). On the other hand, some educators argue that proscribing particular responsibilities to literature group members can serve to prevent dialogism because "the operative assigning of roles creates an artificial power structure in which certain individuals are granted power by virtue of their assigned role" (Almasi et al., 2001, p. 102).

While students essentially run literature circles and book clubs, in other types of literature discussion groups, the teacher more tightly controls the discussion's agenda. Those who tout the benefits of teacher-led discussions (i.e. Langer, 1995; Miller, 1993; Lewis, 1999) emphasize the importance of the teacher's role, not just as a facilitator, but as a professional and expert who is in a position to skillfully support and guide students

as they critically examine the issues at hand and learn more about themselves, the text and one another.

In particular, Lewis (1999), in her study of small-group literature discussions in the elementary school context, found that the teacher's role in the literature discussion group could be pivotal. Specifically, she suggests that when the teacher's voice is decentered and students are left to their own devices to conduct a discussion, the possibility exists that the inequalities of the larger culture will be reproduced in the classroom, and the conventional discourse around critical issues will not be challenged. Lewis also expresses concern that unless a teacher explicitly "revoices" a student's comment, comments uttered in low voices or in a less-than-articulate manner may not be heard or responded to.

Likewise, Rueda and colleagues (1992) assert that in "instructional conversations" (Tharp and Gallimore, 1988), a teacher is needed to skillfully facilitate discussions to insure that the conversations are focused and engaging, and that students have sufficiently comprehended the text. While Rueda et al. (1992) emphasize to teachers that they should not "unduly dominate" *instructional conversations*, they do advise teachers to clarify and explicitly teach skills and concepts when necessary, activate students' background knowledge and respond to students in such a way as to promote extended speech and substantiation of ideas put forth.

Others (Almasi et al, 2001; McMahon and Raphael, 1997), however, argue that despite the drawbacks of student-led groups, they are still superior to teacher-led groups. Specifically, Almasi and her colleagues (2001) found that in literature discussions in which the teacher's role was substantial, students never learned how to manage their own

conversations. Similarly, McMahon and Raphael (1997) maintain that if teachers tightly control small-group discussions, students will not be afforded the full linguistic and cognitive benefits of peer discourse, and teachers will not have sufficient opportunities to simply listen to students interact and get a sense of their thinking.

The conflicting views in the literature regarding the role of the teacher in literature discussions points to the fact that there more research needs to be done on the subject. Specifically lacking are studies that focus on how students themselves perceive the impact of an adult intervention on literature discussions.

Group Dynamics

When students are placed in pairs or small groups, those students begin to form what can be referred to as a “community of practice” (Gee and Green, 1998). That is, over time, group members begin to negotiate with one another ways of interacting and accomplishing given tasks (Floriani, 1994). Consequently, how group members relate to one another necessarily impacts on and is in fact inextricably related to what transpires during their collaboration (Floriani, 1994). While I am unaware of any research that looks at literature discussion groups specifically as “communities of practice,” recent research on literature circles (Alvermann et al., 1996; Evans, 1996) has begun to address the issue of the importance of interpersonal relationships and “positioning” (Evans, 1996) in literature discussion groups. Specifically, Alvermann has found that students are more likely to speak their minds when they are in groups with peers whom they perceive as supportive and respectful (Alvermann, 1996). While supportive groups can be wonderful environments for students, some researchers have begun to warn that in some cases, in

small-discussions, students can be marginalized, disempowered and effectively silenced (Evans, 1997; Smagorinsky and O'Donnell, 2000).

Challenges of Implementing Literature Discussion Groups

While there is much evidence to suggest that discussion groups benefit students in a variety of ways, small-group discussions, are extremely complex and can be difficult to implement successfully (Almasi et al. 2001; Beers and Probst, 1998; McMahon, 1997; Daniels, 1994). The potential problems with using literature discussions groups are numerous. Difficulties teachers face when implementing literature discussion groups include students who seem unable or unwilling to discuss a topic substantively (McMahon, 1997, Barnes, 1992), disinterested students (Barnes, 1992; Hauschildt & McMahon, 1996; Barnes, 1992), students engaging in disruptive or off-task behavior (McMahon, 1997; Evans, 1996) and conflicts among group members (Smagorinsky, 2000; Evans, 1996).

Problems seem to arise even in the best of circumstances. For instance, when McMahon (1997) and her colleagues began to work with teachers to implement student-led small-group literature discussions, they found that despite substantial preparation, classroom teachers inevitably encountered difficulties in getting the groups to run smoothly. McMahon (1997) attributes many of the difficulties teachers encounter to the fact that students are often not accustomed to being given autonomy in classes. She describes the difficulties as falling into two categories: behavior-related problems and problems related to the discussion content. To address these problems, McMahon suggests providing extensive modeling and scaffolding for students.

More pointedly, Beers and Probst (1998) enumerate, in disheartening detail, the range of potential problems that can plague literature discussions. They observe:

Discussions of literature wither away because no focus is found, or the agenda is set by one aggressive participant. Controlled discussions get somewhere, but may sacrifice many of the diverse interests of the various students. Free discussions are organic and flowing, but may be dominated by the interests of one or two or be unsatisfyingly chaotic (p. 20).

A Rationale for This Study

From this literature review, it is apparent that we know much about the benefits of literature discussion groups and are gradually realizing that despite the glowing reviews of such groups in much of the literature, discussion groups are extremely complex and difficult to implement and maintain. Yet according to Almasi and colleagues (2001), we still know relatively little about why some literature groups are very successful while other groups fail to progress and end up engaging in discussions that are “inconclusive, inexplicit or superficial” (Barnes, 1992:77).

By engaging in a comprehensive analysis of the factors that impacted on small-group literature discussions in a single multicultural classroom, I therefore seek to contribute to greater understanding of how classroom teachers can use literature discussions groups in the most effective manner possible. In doing so I am responding to the invitation of leaders in the literacy field (Almasi et al., 2001; Beers and Probst, 1998) who have exhorted educators to seek to illuminate “factors that contribute to successful and less successful peer discussions... [in order to] enable teachers and researchers to design effective instruction for students so that they may enjoy the cognitive, social,

affective, and cultural benefits derived from participating in them” (Almasi et al., 2001, p. 99).

CHAPTER 2: AN OVERVIEW OF THE CASE STUDY

Setting the Scene

The School

South Lake Middle School is an unassuming brick building located in a suburb of a moderate-sized city in Southern Ontario. The neighborhood around the school consists of rows of small, neatly kept houses. Often in each single family dwelling, several families reside. Down the road from the school is a row of small stores, including a convenience store and a pizza parlor where many of the students eat at lunchtime. The stores are unremarkable except for the ominous-looking bars on the windows that speak of a neighborhood troubled by crime.

Inside the school, there were students from many different linguistic and cultural backgrounds. In particular, there was a large percentage of South Asian students of various religious backgrounds, and it was not unusual to see students with Sikh headdresses or turbans. In addition, there were a number of Black students of both African and Caribbean descent, and a small number of East Asian and Caucasian students of various cultural backgrounds. Many of the students who attend the school were from immigrant families and were economically disadvantaged.

Like many schools in Ontario, South Lake Middle School had been affected by fiscal cutbacks and was severely under resourced. Children were routinely forced to share textbooks and decent quality white paper was in such short supply that it was rationed out to teachers who had to use flimsy paper made from old newsprint once they had used up their quota of white paper. As a result of such difficulties and a myriad of

internal problems, in recent years, South Lake Middle School had been plagued by high rates of staff turnover.

The Classroom

In Linda's classroom, students sat in pairs or groups of varying sizes. Clustering desks works for her, Linda told me, as she does a lot of cooperative learning activities in which the students have to sit together to collaborate. What didn't work for her, however, was the fact that her room was essentially "open." That is, the room was enclosed by only three walls, and in front of her room and the adjacent room, there was a passageway connected to the wider corridor. There was no door to shut, no barrier to obliterate noise from the hallway or to prevent intrusive and rambunctious passersby from popping their heads in and making distracting gestures or comments. What the openness of the room meant was that Linda had to constantly be concerned about excessive noise coming from her room and disrupting other classes.

Despite the structural idiosyncrasies of her classroom, Linda had managed to make the room look relatively cheerful. She had several colorful wall hangings with inspirational sayings to encourage the kids, some historical posters, and a wall devoted to materials related to language arts.

The Participants

The Teacher

Linda Hill is a Caucasian woman in her early 30's, who had only been teaching for two years when she agreed to work with me. I first met Linda in the spring of 2000 when we were both involved in a large-scale research project on effective teaching practices for multicultural students, and I had an opportunity to observe her class. At that time, I was struck by her warm rapport with the students and the enthusiasm in her voice when she talked about various lessons she'd done with her class. Since then, I have come to know Linda as a teacher who is very committed to her job and is concerned for the children she teaches, despite her daily struggles related to the less than ideal conditions in her working environment.

One of the greatest hardships facing Linda during the time we worked together was that she taught not only language arts, but history, geography, computer science and visual arts to several different classes at various times during the day. Because of the number of different subjects she taught, practically speaking, the time Linda could devote to preparing for any one subject was minimal. In addition, since for financial reasons supply teachers are rarely called at South Lake Middle, Linda was often required to give up her planning time without warning to cover classes for absent colleagues. The lack of time for adequate preparation coupled with her enormous workload was a cause of great frustration for Linda who, during our work together, frequently remarked that she felt exhausted and overwhelmed by her various responsibilities.

Adding to her difficulties, Linda had a number of learning disabled students in her class for whom she has to modify materials and assignments. While there was supposed to be an aide working with the students, during the time I was in Linda's class, the aide was there only very sporadically, as she was often called away at the last minute to cover the classes of other teachers. This left Linda to contend with the needs of these students in addition to the needs of her 25 other students.

Linda's teaching style could best be described as responsive/collaborative (Gutierrez and Meyer, 1995). Instead of lecturing to the students, Linda preferred keeping teacher talk to a minimum and having the students work on assignments in groups. Also, I observed that Linda was open to negotiating the parameters of tasks with students and giving them relative freedom in choosing whom to work with and how to accomplish their assignments. Linda herself was aware of her tendency to accommodate students' individual needs and in fact, mentioned to me that although some of the teachers believed that she was "too flexible," she herself felt that flexibility, not rigidity was needed to get the students to produce good work. Linda's flexibility and willingness to negotiate both with me and with the students was readily apparent throughout our collaboration.

Students

In total, there were thirty students in Linda's class, 13 boys and 17 girls. Approximately one third of the students were of South Asian ancestry. Specifically, all but one of the South Asian students were Indo-Canadians whose families immigrated to Canada from the Punjab region of India. These students were primarily Sikhs who spoke Punjabi as their home language. Another one quarter of the students were of Caribbean

descent. These students' families primarily came from Jamaica and Trinidad, and racially, they were either Black or South Asian. The remainder of the students were of European, East Asian and African descent.

In terms of academic level, the students were heterogeneously grouped so that ability levels in the class ranged widely. Five students were designated as needing special education, and these students, as indicated above, were periodically attended to by a teacher who would work with them in the mainstream classroom. The remainder of the students, from what I could observe, varied greatly in terms of reading skills, academic language proficiency and motivation to achieve academically.

The Collaboration Begins

Choosing Materials

When I first contacted Linda about my research, I explained to her that I was particularly interested in literature discussions in multicultural classrooms, and I wondered how she facilitated such discussions. At that time, she told me that she was hoping to have her class read a multicultural novel and to explore the issue of what it means to be different, ethnically, racially or otherwise. Because I too was eager to explore such themes and anxious to establish our relationship as a mutually beneficial one, I quickly volunteered to help her find some multicultural literature with protagonists that would reflect the ethnic makeup of her classroom. After discussing a number of options, Linda and I selected and planned to purchase some multicultural novels with

contemporary themes, which we hoped would pique the interest of her students, many of whom were reluctant readers.

Unfortunately, a week after we had excitedly chosen the books we would buy, Linda called with bad news. There was absolutely no money in the budget to purchase new books. “In a wealthy country like Canada, a school has no money to buy books. That’s completely ludicrous!” I thought to myself. I was disappointed and incensed on behalf of the students, but I knew that such outrages were not uncommon at a time when, ironically, supplying basic resources (such as books) to develop students’ literacy abilities too often seemed to take a back seat to the developing and administering of standardized exams to test such abilities.

Linda searched around her school until she discovered several sets of multicultural texts, hidden in the back of a storage closet behind a bunch of music stands, old desks and other assorted pieces of furniture. The books we found and eventually used included *Underground to Canada*, a novel by Barbara Smucker (1978) about two slave girls and their escape to freedom via the Underground Railroad; *Dogsong*, Gary Paulsen’s (1985) novel about the adventures of an Inuit adolescent coming of age; *The Star Fisher*, a novel by Lawrence Yep (1991) featuring a Chinese-American family struggling to be accepted in a rural community in the Southern U.S. during the 1920’s; and *Freedom Train: The Story of Harriet Tubman*, a biography written by Dorothy Sterling (1954).

Adopting the Literature Circle Framework

After sorting out the issue of what novels to use, I began to inquire as to how Linda wanted to proceed with the novel study. However, as we talked, I realized that beyond a preference for using multicultural literature and a vague interest in small-group literature discussions, Linda had no specific agenda that she was anxious to pursue. And although according to district-wide regulations, she was supposed to meet with her language arts colleagues to collaboratively plan a grade-wide language arts unit, because of a lack of interest and scheduling difficulties, that collaboration never materialized.

Thus, at the urging of my academic supervisor, I took the initiative and began giving Linda some articles on using reading logs and a book (Langer, 1995) on engaging students in meaningful dialogue around literature. However, it rapidly became apparent that the resources I was lending Linda were not entirely useful to her. With a seemingly endless amount of paperwork to deal with and numerous other responsibilities, Linda had no time to read academic books or articles extolling the virtues of progressive literacy teaching methods, no matter how insightful or fascinating. What she needed, it seemed, was a specific plan of action, some concrete ideas that would be readily applicable to her situation.

Consequently, I gave Linda a copy of *Literature Circles: Voice and Choice in the Student-Centered Classroom* (Daniels, 1994). In part, I chose this book because a colleague recommended it. More importantly though, the appeal of the book was that Daniels' methodology seemed so accessible, so non-threatening. Basically, Daniels suggests that at least in the initial stages of implementing literature circles, the teacher

distribute “role sheets” that include explicit instructions regarding what they ought to write in preparation for their roles. The inclusion of role sheet templates in the book made the whole literature circle structure seem so well organized, so simple to implement. The role sheets were user friendly and could be easily modified. I think that for both Linda and me, having the role sheets gave the whole project an air of legitimacy. We had concrete, *professionally designed* pedagogical materials to distribute, and this made us feel somewhat confident and organized despite our lack of experience.

Implementing Literature Circles

Getting Started

Prior to my beginning the study, Linda had briefly reviewed the roles with the students and had given them a small amount of practice using the role sheets with a short story they had previously read. Consequently, students were not totally unfamiliar with the literature circle procedures.

On the first official day of the literature circle unit, Linda briefly introduced the novels to the students. She instructed them to choose whichever book they wanted and gave them the freedom to form their own groups of 3-5 students each. After groups were formed, Linda led the whole class in collectively creating a “discussion web,” showing the characteristics of a good discussion (see below).

Table 2.1 Discussion Web Content

Discussion Content	Behavior
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Try to use new words. ● Support your opinions with details from the novel. ● Use interesting and appropriate expression when speaking ● Encourage others to give detail (elaboration) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Stay on topic and stay with your group ● Cooperate with group ● Everyone must participate ● Take turns speaking ● Be a good listener ● Be attentive to the work ● Disagree with ideas, not with /people.

The Original Task Structure

After the initial class in which the novel study was introduced, students generally spent each class period discussing one chapter of their chosen novel. Students were expected to read the novel at home, but sometimes ended up reading aloud to one another during class time. In addition students were each told to prepare for discussions by selecting one or two role sheets for a given chapter and filling out those role sheets at home prior to discussing the chapter in literature circles. During the early weeks of the literature circle unit, the following eight role sheets were used.

Table 2.2 Role Sheet Requirements

Role Sheet Title	Sheet Requirements
1. Discussion Director	To list thought-provoking questions or topics to discuss with group members.
2. Passage Picker	To list noteworthy passages to share with group and indicate why you chose the passages you did
3. Illustrator	To illustrate a scene from the reading
4. Connector	To write connections between the text and the outside world
5. Summarizer	To list the key points and write a summary of the chapter
6. Vocabulary Enricher	To write definitions of “important” words
7. Travel Tracer	To write down the setting of the chapter
8. Investigator	To do research and report on background information relevant to the chapter

Implementing Changes

After the first three literature circles, Linda and I decided to implement a number of changes due to concerns with how the students were interacting in literature circles. Specifically, due to concerns that students did not have enough incentive to share ideas and engage in substantive dialogue, we decided to change the literature circle format in order that students would have to work together to fulfill role responsibilities during the discussions. For instance, instead of having just one person responsible for asking thought-provoking questions, we instructed all students to write “good questions” in their journals to share during the literature circle. Similarly, we told all students to list three vocabulary words in their journals to share during the literature circle and instructed

students that during the discussion, they were all required to collaboratively summarize the chapter and share intertextual connections.

We opted to have students continue completing all the role sheets except for the “investigator” and “travel tracer” role sheets, which Linda felt were too time consuming for students to complete on a regular basis. However, instead of having students fill out the role sheets independently prior to their discussions, we asked students to begin filling out role sheets collaboratively, after the discussion.

In addition, we had students engage in “fishbowl discussions.” Fishbowl discussions were discussions that students engaged in while sitting in the center of the classroom being and being observed by all the other students and the teacher. After each fishbowl discussion, Linda and I would invite the students to critique the discussion, and the entire class would talk about positive and negative aspects of the discussion the chosen group had modeled. We hoped that this type of peer modeling would enable the students to better understand what a dynamic literature discussion looked like.

Research Questions

As I participated in, observed and documented the planning, implementation and enactment of literature circles, my initial questions regarding what transpires during literature discussions and how students benefit from discussing literature slowly changed shape. It became quickly apparent to me that these questions were too simplistic to capture the complex reality I was witnessing in the classroom. How literature circles “worked” (and indeed if they worked at all) was a question of infinite complexity, because literally every circle was different. Groups of students interacted differently,

carried out tasks differently and discussed different topics. As a result, the learning that took place varied from group to group. In addition, I began to see that overall, often what I witnessed in the classroom did not compare with the glowing accounts of literature discussion groups I had read about in the literature. To my dismay, at times, students did not seem to be benefiting from literature circles in the ways that I had hoped or expected.

The variations in learning among groups in Linda's class and the discrepancy between the seemingly ideal accounts of literature discussions groups and the less-than-ideal discussions I often witnessed fueled my desire to delve into the factors that impact on such discussions. Why was it that certain groups of students seemed to thrive during literature discussions, while other groups of students seemed to receive only minimal benefits from talking with their peers? My focus thus broadened, and I began to look at not only the benefits various students were afforded, but at the factors that impact on students' learning opportunities. Specifically, my reading and classroom observations led me to focus on the following questions that eventually came to guide my study:

1. What were the cognitive, social and affective benefits afforded to the students in each of the literature circle groups?
2. What learning opportunities did not arise, and what were the problematic aspects of each group's interactions?
3. How were the learning opportunities in each group impacted by:
 - the book the group discussed?
 - the structure of the literature circles and the assigned tasks?
 - interpersonal interactions and social relationships in the group?
 - institutional and classroom factors?

CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

Choosing the Case Study Tradition

Although I used ethnographic methods such as prolonged participant observation while carrying out my research, this study was essentially done in the case study tradition. That is, I looked at the implementation process of literature circles as a bounded system (Stake, 1995) beginning with the planning stages and ending when the literature circle unit was completed. I chose this tradition because I wanted to gain a sense of the complexities of the implementation process, and case study research, with its emphasis on acquiring multiple perspectives and triangulating data, seemed particularly suited to the type of research I wished to pursue. In keeping with the case study tradition, I used “thick description” (Denzin, 1989) to enable readers to get a sense of the context, the people and the events which give the study its unique flavor and character.

Data Collection

The following data sources were used in this study:

1. Field notes
2. Electronic mail communication between the teacher and researcher
3. Audio-taped small-group literature discussions
4. Audio-taped interviews
 - a. Focal interviews with literature circles groups
 - b. In-depth interview with teacher
5. Students' writing
 - a. A paragraph on their cultural background
 - b. A paragraph on strengths and weaknesses in language arts and attitudes towards the subject
 - c. A paragraph on attitudes towards reading
 - d. A web indicating positive and negative experiences with literature circles

Field Notes

Field notes were one primary data source compiled in a virtual “research journal” on my computer. In my computerized journal, I kept detailed notes on all my interactions with Linda and her students. In the beginning of my study, when I would meet with Linda periodically to discuss how we would go about implementing a unit involving literature discussions, my journal entries generally included summaries of what had been said during our meetings or phone conversations, as well as analytic memos consisting of questions, speculations and musings about the data being collected (Morrow & Smith, 1995). In addition, I maintained a chronological record of all electronic mail exchanges between Linda and myself that touched on substantive (as opposed to purely logistical) issues related to the research.

Once Linda began implementing literature circles, I tried to attend as many classes in which she did literature circles as possible. In total, over a period of ten weeks, I conducted data collection in Linda’s classroom 18 times. Each time, I stayed for the duration of the language arts block (60 minutes). During the first few sessions, I circulated among the groups, trying to observe and interact with as many students as possible. However, after a while, I realized that jumping from group to group, I was not able to sufficiently get a sense of the flow of any one group’s discussion. Therefore, after the first few classes, I began to spend more time with individual groups, often spending an entire period with only one or two groups. During my time with the groups, I found note taking detracted from my ability to focus on the interactions taking place. Therefore, I rarely took any written notes during the group discussions. Instead, I would make a

mental note of who was saying what to whom and record my observations upon returning home in the afternoon.

While occasionally I would have an opportunity to observe Linda's interactions with the students, such opportunities were infrequent because generally we were not with the same group at the same time. However, after the class ended, Linda would often make time to talk with me briefly. During those discussions, we would generally give one another our impressions of how things had gone that day, mention any particularly problematic or positive behavior we had observed, and bring up ideas as to how we might improve the literature circle program.

At home, I recorded my field notes in two columns as suggested by Creswell (1998). In the column on the left, I described in detail what I had seen and heard that day, and in the column on the right, titled "my reflections," I recorded subjective impressions, interpretations and speculations related to my observations.

Audio Taped Small Group Discussions

During the tenth session, after the students had become sufficiently comfortable with the literature circle routine and my presence in the classroom, I began to audio tape students' discussions. At times, I would sit with a group while I recorded their discussions. At other times, however, I would leave the recorder with the group being taped and go and sit with another group for all or part of the period. My rationale for taping discussions under two conditions (during my presence and during my absence) was to be able to compare students' interactions with and without adult intervention. Throughout the study, each of the four focal groups was recorded at least two times.

Each of the recordings was subsequently transcribed in full and analyzed as described in the analysis section below.

Interviews

After the students completed their novels, I conducted focus group interviews, interviewing all students in a particular literature circle group together. I chose to conduct group interviews rather than individual interviews for several reasons. One reason had to do with the fact that in focus group interviews, the interviewees are generally less self-conscious than they would be in one-on-one interviews, and they are often energized by the dynamic nature of the group dialogue. Consequently, focus group participants are apt to play with novel ideas and explore ideas in an in-depth manner (Gaskell, 2000). An additional advantage of using focus group interviews was that by interviewing the students in their literature circle groups, I could gain greater insight into how the students in each group related to one another. As group dynamics was a key focus of the case study, I determined that an interview forum that would enable me to witness students interacting with one another could prove to be enlightening.

I designed my interview protocol (Appendix A) based on my desire to know students' perceptions on the benefits and flaws of the literature circles, as well as on the contextual factors that impacted on their experience with literature circles. In an attempt to get the students' input on as broad a range of contextual factors as possible, I created my interview questions pertaining to context using categories of contextual factors identified in previous research on cooperative learning as being potentially significant (Jacob, 1999). The broad categories which guided my questioning on context included:

(1) task structure and material resources (2) interpersonal interactions and social relationships (3) personal/group meanings attributed to various tasks and (4) the classroom and school environment.

At the conclusion of the study, I conducted an in-depth interview with Linda at her home. While I used an interview guide, the interview with Linda, like that conducted with the students, was semi-structured, and therefore I had sufficient flexibility to ask for elaborations and clarifications as necessary. In designing the interview questions, I again referred back to my research questions and focused on Linda's perspectives on the dynamics of literature circles, as well as on various factors that impacted on the literature circle unit as a whole and on each individual group. In this manner, I sought to gain a thorough understanding of the way Linda had constructed reality in the classroom. I felt that gaining such an understanding was important because in the qualitative paradigm, "reality is not an unproblematic given" (Gaskell, 2000), but is "subjective and multiple as seen by participants in a study" (Creswell, 1997, p.8). The interview with Linda lasted approximately seventy-five minutes.

Written Assignments

While the field notes, interviews and transcripts constituted my primary sources of data, I also referred to students' written assignments in an effort to enhance my knowledge of individual students. In particular, in conducting my analysis, I referred to three written pieces that students had submitted to Linda during the course of the research. Students' writings covered the following topics: (1) their cultural background and their feelings about language arts, (2) their views on reading, as well as (3) their

positive and negative experiences during literature circles. The data in these written artifacts were used in conjunction with my field notes and audio recordings as the basis of my descriptions of individual students.

Data Analysis

In order to analyze the data I had collected in a meaningful way, I had to reflect back on the research questions driving my study, namely what benefits were afforded to students during literature circles and how contextual factors affected the learning that took place in each group. To explore the first question, I looked at four major sources of data: the transcripts, my field notes, the interviews with the groups of students and the in-depth interview with Linda.

However, because I wanted to take an in-depth look at students' interactions, I realized that it would be unwieldy to use data collected from every student in the class. I therefore decided to focus primarily on the data collected on four of the seven literature circle groups. The groups were selected because, for the most part, they were the groups whom I had worked with most closely, and they consisted of "regular education" students, as opposed to students designated as having "special needs." Also important in my decision to choose the four groups I did was the fact that the four groups included a mixed-gender group, an all-male group and two all-female groups. I deemed looking at grouping with varying gender compositions critical because doing so allowed me to speculate about how the gender makeup of the literature circle may have impacted on literature discussions.

Analysis of the Transcripts

I analyzed the transcripts first, because they provided the richest source of information on the students' moment-by-moment interactions. Specifically, I chose to use two transcripts for each of the four focal groups¹. However, I quickly realized that I needed a way of parsing and categorizing transcript data that would allow me to gain the understandings that I sought. Consequently, I decided to adapt an analytical framework based on Leon-tev's tri-level concept of activity (Jacob, 1999). This framework calls for the classification of data in terms of three levels: activities, actions and operations. To clarify, activities are events with a socially constructed goal towards which one is working. In this case, the activity in question is engaging in literature discussions. The second level, actions, refers to that which needs to be done in order to successfully accomplish the overarching activity. In this case, the actions included summarizing, questioning, making intertextual connections, discussing vocabulary words, discussing specific textual passages and reflecting on the discussion itself. Operations are even smaller components of which the actions are comprised. Specifically, in my analysis, operations are the individual utterances students make during the literature discussions.

Following the analytical techniques employed by Jacob (1999), I conducted my analysis at the level of the actions in which students engaged. That is, in going over the transcripts, I focused not on individuals' utterances, but on the interactions among students as they endeavored to carry out the various components of their discussions. For instance, I put all exchanges related to summarizing the story in one category, all exchanges that related to asking and answering questions in a separate category and so in.

¹ Unfortunately, due to technical problems with audio taping, I was only able to transcribe one discussion for the AM Underground Group.

These categories made intuitive sense, as students generally broke down their discussions in this manner.

After determining how to categorize the data, I created a chart to record the learning that occurred during each “action.” In my chart, I also included a column to indicate any affective benefits that were evident from students’ interactions. In addition, I added a column titled “critique” in which I recorded subjective comments on the groups’ interactions and made notes as to why I believed particular types of learning were or were not taking place during given interactions. (See sample analytic chart below.)

Table 3.1 Sample Analytic Chart

Action	Examples	Literary Learning	Students’ Discourse	Social/ Affective Impact	Critique
Summarizing					
Questioning					
Making Connections					
Discussing Vocabulary					
Discussing passages					
Making Reflective Comments					

The first category, opportunities for literary learning, included all interactions which indicated that students were responding to the literature and one another in ways that would increase the value they derived from their reading and foster enhanced literacy. To determine what specifically could be considered literary learning, I consulted the relevant literature and compiled a list of cognitive benefits that a range of leading literacy educators and researchers have attributed to students reading and

discussing literary works. Examples of literary learning are summarized in the box that follows.

Table 3.2 Literary Learning Taxonomy

- Learning about human behavior (Hynds, 1990).
- Learning about oneself (Beers and Probst, 1998; Purves, 1993; Rosenblatt, 1983; Miller, 1993)
- Learning about one's peers (Klassen, 1993)
- Learning to substantiate ideas using the text (Knoeller, 1994)
- Learning about the text itself (Klassen, 1993)
- Gaining cultural, social and historical awareness (Brock and Gavalek, 1998)
- Learning about other cultures (London, 1994; Fang, Fu and Lamme, 1999)
- Exploring peers' cultures (Purves, 1993;
- Learning about textual features and devices (Brock and Gavalek, 1998)
- Learning to make meaningful intertextual connections (Hynds, 1990; Langer, 1995; Short, 1992)
- Gaining insights into human behavior (Hynds, 1990; Rosenblatt, 1983)
- Learning to understand others' perspectives (Brock and Gavalek, 1998; Langer, 1995)
- Learning about the author's craft (Purves, 1993)
- Learning about the nature and use of language (Purves, 1993)

In the second column, I noted the nature of students' discourse. To assess the educational value of the students' verbal interactions, I looked to a number of educators whose research included evaluation and analysis of classroom discourse. One such researcher whose work I looked to was Neil Mercer (1995). Mercer categorized the talk students in small groups engaged in, into three types: cumulative, disputational, and exploratory. Cumulative talk is talk in which students simply express approbation of one

another's ideas, without challenging the opinions expressed. While harmonious, such talk, according to Mercer, does not lead to students having to clarify their ideas and modify their thinking. At the other extreme is disputational talk in which students disagree vehemently with one another, but do not substantiate their arguments with evidence and logical reasoning. Such talk is not ideal in that it does not generally lead to generation of new ideas. In contrast to these two types of less productive talk, Mercer contends that "exploratory talk" is the type of talk that is most valuable for thinking through various opinions, solving problems and reaching joint decisions. Such talk entails students listening attentively to one another, challenging one another's views in a logical manner, substantiating opinions with evidence and rational arguments and coming to a shared understanding.

In addition, I looked closely at the work of Douglas Barnes (1992) who also describes more and less beneficial types of verbal interaction. Specifically, Barnes suggests that for accomplishing academic tasks, it is most useful for students to engage in speech that reflects an "open approach" to the topic at hand. In particular, he believes that the best way for students to interact during collaborative tasks (including literature discussions) is to ask open-ended, thought-provoking questions of one another, to question their own assertions, and to make statements that are tentative, exploratory and invite elaboration. He suggests that students should address one another directly, ask for explanations, and modify or extend others' statements. In addition, Barnes believes that during a dialogue, students should articulate clearly any disagreements in order to reach a shared understanding of the various perspectives participants hold.

Like Mercer (1995), Barnes not only describes types of exemplary classroom discourse, but also describes less productive types of talk. In particular, Barnes argues that talk indicative of a “closed approach” to a task is particularly unhelpful, because it is characterized by dogmatic assertions, which do not lead to extensions or modifications. A closed approach may be taken by students who are not engaged in the assigned task, but are simply going through the motions of a discussion for form’s sake. For such students, “the activity amounts to ‘putting on a show’ for an outsider” (Barnes, 1992, p. 68).

Characteristics of educationally beneficial discourse identified by Mercer, Barnes and other educational researchers are summarized in the box that follows.

Table 3.3 Characteristics of Educationally Beneficial Discourse

- Ideas are extended, challenged and modified (Barnes, 1992; Mercer, 1995)
- Assertions are tentative (Barnes, 1992)
- Clarifications/elaborations are solicited (Barnes, 1992)
- Each speaker’s opinions are valued (Bahktin, 1986; Wells, 2000)
- Questions are open ended and thought provoking (Barnes, 1992)
- Differences in opinion are clearly articulated (Barnes, 1992; Mercer, 1995)
- New understandings are reached (Barnes, 1992; Mercer, 1995; Wells & Chang-Wells, 1992; Wells, 2000)
- Others’ ideas are accommodated or assimilated (Wells & Chang-Wells, 1992)
- Discussants come to a joint understanding (Mercer, 1995)
- Opinions are substantiated (Mercer, 1995)
- Opportunities exist for second language and lower SES students to engage in academic discourse (Au, 1993; Cummins, 1994; Gutierrez and Meyer, 1995; Corson, 1998)

Analysis of Field Notes

After analyzing the transcripts for a group in depth, I reviewed the field notes for the group during the early weeks of the literature circle unit, and I wrote comments on each note. In particular, I summarized those interactions and utterances that seemed particularly significant in terms of confirming, disconfirming or complementing the patterns that had emerged in my analysis of the transcripts. I also made additional analytic notes in which I speculated about contextual factors that may have impacted on the interactions I observed.

Analysis of Data from Group Interviews

After reviewing and making notes on my field notes, I began analysis on the group interviews. Although analytic categories varied somewhat from group to group depending on the responses of group members, in general, I coded students' comments in terms of the benefits of literature circles and contextual factors impacting on the group's performance. To facilitate the organization of the interview data, I created a chart (see Table 3.4 below) in which I listed students' comments in the appropriate categories. At the bottom of the chart, in the row titled "my comments," I noted the nature of students' interactions and any idiosyncratic features of the interview. I also used the space to record observations and emerging interpretations regarding differences among the nature of the responses of various groups.

Table 3.4 Analytic Chart for Interview data

Group Name		
Benefits of Literature Circles	Cognitive benefits	
	Affective benefits	
	Social benefits	
Contextual Factors Impacting on Group's Interactions	Task structure	
	Group dynamics	
	Novel	
	Learning environment	
	Presence/absence of teacher or researcher	
Critique	My comments	

Analysis of Interview with Linda

To analyze the interview with Linda, I coded the data in much the same way as I coded the data from the focal groups with the students. I classified her comments in terms of benefits and factors that impacted on the literature circle implementation both positively and negatively. However, because my research questions dealt with the differences among groups as well as the overall implementation and enactment of literature circles in the classroom, I recorded on a separate grid comments Linda made in regard to particular groups or individuals. Such data was then analyzed in conjunction with the other data I amassed for the individual groups.

Looking Ahead

Each of the four chapters that follow is devoted to a single literature circle group. In each chapter, I describe group members and present the data relevant to the featured

group. After presenting the data, I analyze and interpret it in order to determine the cognitive, affective and social benefits for students. Also, I discuss problematic aspects of the featured group that affected learning and otherwise impacted on the group's interactions.

I begin the chapters on the focal groups with a brief description of the individual group members. These characterizations are based on the students' self-descriptions, background information provided to me by Linda, and my own observations of the student in question. I discuss my observations of the group during the first month of the literature circle unit. The vignettes in this sub-section are intended to provide "snapshots" of each group's interactions during select literature discussions and are based solely on my field notes.

After describing my early observations, I provide detailed descriptions of complete literature circle discussions, which were audio taped and transcribed in full. These descriptions are intended to give the reader insight into the moment-by-moment interactions engaged in by group members, as well as an overall sense of how individual literature circle discussions progressed from start to finish.

The last two sections in each chapter are intended to foreground the perspectives of the students and the teacher, in an acknowledgement of the multiple realities that exist in the classroom. Specifically, in the interview sub-section, I discuss students' responses to questions posed during the focal group interviews conducted with each group at the conclusion of the study. I present students' comments under the following topic headings: 1) benefits, 2) task structure, 3) group dynamics and values, 4) the text, 5) adult

intervention, and 6) the physical environment. The final sub-section of the write-up on each group includes Linda's perceptions of that particular group.

I conclude each of the focal group chapters with analysis and interpretation of the relevant data. I discuss various types of literary learning that took place during the group's literature discussions, citing specific instances when such learning occurred. In addition, I describe both positive and negative aspects of students' discourse during the literature discussions and explore the cognitive, social and affective benefits students derived from their verbal interactions. I also allude to problems with the group's interactions that may have hampered students' learning.

Although I realize that it is conventional to separate the analysis and discussion of the data, in the focal group chapters, I have opted to combine analysis and interpretation in order to give the reader a better sense of why I believe the experiences of the various literature groups varied so considerably. The brief interpretive comments in chapters 4-7 serve to foreshadow the more extensive discussion of contextual factors in chapter 8.

CHAPTER 4: THE ALL-FEMALE (AF) STAR FISHER GROUP

My focus in this chapter is the All-Female (AF) Star Fisher Group, a group composed of four girls who read and discussed the novel, *The Star Fisher*, by Lawrence Yep. I begin the chapter by describing each group member and giving a detailed description of the girls' interactions during select literature circles. I then analyze and discuss the interactions in order to highlight learning opportunities afforded to group members during the literature circles, as well as missed opportunities for learning. In addition, I look at the social and affective impact of literature circles on each of the four girls in the group

Group Members

The AF Star Fisher Group was a lively group made up of four girls with four very different personalities. Table 4.1 below presents each girl's cultural background and home language. It also gives a general indication of how frequently group members participated in literature discussions and how they perceived literature circles.

Table 4.1 Students in the AF Star Fisher Group

	Jill	Lily	Juanita	Diane
Home Language	English	English	Spanish	English
Ethnic background	European	European	El Salvadorian	Trinidadian/ South Asian
Frequency of Contributions	Very frequent	Frequent	Frequent	Relatively infrequent
Attitude Towards Literature Circles	Highly enthusiastic	Mixed	Positive	Positive

Jill

A second-generation Canadian of East European descent, Jill was the most extroverted of the four. Loquacious, bubbly and prone to occasional giggling fits, Jill was an enthusiastic participant in literature circle discussions. Jill's engagement during literature circles was particularly notable, given that prior to beginning literature circles, Jill had professed that she had negative feelings for language arts and did not particularly like to read.

Lily

Lily, the other European-Canadian in the group, was an avid reader who, when asked to describe her feelings about reading, wrote, "I love to read, any book, any time." While less ebullient and more prone to negativity than the effervescent Jill, Lily frequently contributed to the group with her incisive comments and provocative questions. In addition, Jill was also recognized by her peers as being particularly good at making connections between the book and her own life.

Juanita

Juanita, a Jehovah's Witness with an El Salvadorian-Canadian background, had an affinity for reading and read for pleasure in her spare time. Levelheaded and soft-spoken, Juanita would often make insightful comments that facilitated deeper understanding of the book. In addition, Juanita would frequently ask questions that required group members to share personal experiences in connection with the book's content.

Diane

Diane, a second-generation Guyanese Canadian was the least vocal of the four girls. However, Diane's contributions to the group were not insignificant. In particular, it was Diane who seemed most interested in the issue of racial discrimination and would challenge the group with questions regarding why people act as they do.

Early Observations

In the beginning of *The Star Fisher*, the Lee family, newly arrived in West Virginia, encounters blatant bigotry, and therefore the AF Star Fisher group naturally tackled the topic of racism during their early discussions. During one literature circle in particular, Diane asked a number of provocative questions regarding how racism affects us today and what we can do to put an end to racist behaviors and attitudes. Juanita contended however, that racism isn't as serious a problem today, as it was in the 1960's when Blacks were not treated equally. Diane countered with specific examples of people she knew who were teased because of the way they spoke or the way they looked, and persisted with asking why such injustices occurred. However, these questions, while important, did not provoke much discussion, and the topic was eventually dropped.

In another notable interaction, Jill asked why the book was entitled "The Star Fisher," considering the fact that the Star Fisher legend was only mentioned once in the book. When I deflected the question back to the group, Lily responded by explaining to Jill that the Star Fisher legend is very significant, because the feelings of alienation that

plague the Star Fisher (a magical otherworldly creature trapped on earth) are similar to the feelings Joan Lee has, struggling to adapt to life in a new place.

During the second week of literature circles, I happened to sit in on the group when the girls were discussing a chapter in which there is an intense interpersonal conflict between Joan Lee and her mother. During the questioning segment of the discussion, Lily, quoted from the argument between Joan Lee and her mother and asked the group why they thought Joan's mother would say such a thing to her. Then Juanita asked if any of the girls had ever felt like Joan did after her mother slapped her. Juanita's question prompted a flurry of discussion, with most of the group members telling stories of times when they had been physically disciplined by their parents. The only one who was quiet during the discussion was Diane, who seemed to be staring disconcertedly into space. When she was prompted by the other girls to share a story of when she was hit, Diane at first refused to answer. However the girls persisted and Diane finally relented.

At that point, I felt satisfied that the AF Star Fisher group was doing quite well, and I left them to observe another group. However, before long, Linda informed me that Diane had burst out in tears, and a melancholy mood had overtaken the group. And sure enough, when I went to check up on them, the girls, all teary-eyed, were huddled around Diane in a show of support, and Linda was talking with them about how books can inspire us regarding how to deal with various issues in our lives. I too offered them some words of encouragement. And finally, Lily suggested that she could cheer up the group by reading aloud an essay from the inspirational book, *Chicken Soup for the Teenage Soul*. The girls readily agreed to Lily's suggestion, and Linda later followed up by talking to Diane one-on-one about the troubling family issues with which she was dealing.

Transcribed Discussion-March 27th

Background Information

On March 27th, Jill bounded over to me and excitedly asked if I would audio tape her group's literature circle discussion. Pleasantly surprised by the girls' eagerness to have their conversation captured on tape, I told Jill that I'd be more than happy to record her group's discussion. I then advised Linda that I'd be taping Jill's group, and Linda responded by telling the girls to go out into the hallway to conduct the discussion, as the din in the crowded classroom made audio taping problematic. The girls and I promptly went out into the corridor, and I remained with them throughout their entire discussion.

During the literature circle, the girls discussed chapter 12. The chapter begins with Joan and her siblings worried that they will be humiliated after they hear that their mother, an infamously bad cook, has decided to enter an apple pie in an auction at the town's pie social. At the social, no one bids for Mrs. Lee's pie except for Mr. Lee and the kind Reverend Bobson. Once the pie is bought, all refuse to eat it except Joan Lee's friend, Bernice, who is herself an outcast. In the end, it is discovered that Mrs. Lee's pie is in fact very tasty, and she is highly complimented by all the townspeople.

The Discussion

After some initial chatter among group members regarding procedural details, Jill summarized the chapter. When Jill paused, Juanita added further details and Lily, in turn, elaborated on Juanita and Jill's contributions. Once the three girls had spoken, Lily turned to Diane and explicitly cued her to join in the conversation. Diane responded to Lily's prompting by

commenting on how Mrs. Lee's persistence at pie making and eventual success reminded her of the adage, "practice makes perfect."

Once the chapter summary was completed, Lily read aloud a passage she had selected to share with the group. Lily gave a brief interpretation of the passage and then Jill and Juanita responded by echoing Lily's ideas.

Subsequently, Jill jumped in with a question asking the girls to speculate on what would have happened if Bernice had not tried a slice of Mrs. Lee's pie. After Juanita responded to Jill by discussing some of the possible repercussions if Mrs. Lee's pie had never been eaten, Lily tried to bring up her own question, at which point Jill turned to Lily and indignantly exclaimed, "Hey, hey, hey, you've got to answer my question!" Lily promptly obliged Jill by answering the question and again took the initiative to solicit Diane's opinion.

In general, all three girls agreed that if Bernice hadn't tasted Mrs. Lee's pie, the family would have suffered humiliation. However, there was no discussion as to the justice or injustice of the Lee family being judged solely on Joan's mother's baking skills until Jill, answering her own question, stated:

I kind of think the same as Juanita. Maybe their business will start picking up... cause people know them now. But it's kind of rude...just because she made pie, doesn't mean her business should shoot up into the air.

Juanita pointed out that they must take into consideration the fact that people in the town in which the novel is set tend to be cliquish and gossipy, as evidenced by information provided in previous chapters. Trying to capitalize on Juanita's insights, I commented that the fact that pie baking played such a big role in whether or not the Lee

family was accepted, really tells us a lot about the rural culture and society in which the book takes place.

Once the discussion that Jill had begun with her question petered out, Lily, at Jill's prompting, asked why they thought the townspeople had not wanted to buy Mrs. Lee's pies. Jill responded that the people in town were probably reluctant to buy Mrs. Lee's pie because nobody knew her and "she came from China." Lily quickly corrected her, saying, "No she didn't. She came from Ohio." Diane suggested that people's unwillingness to eat the pie might have stemmed from the fact that it was "a Chinese pie." When I questioned Diane as to what she meant by Mrs. Lee's apple pie being a Chinese pie, she simply stated that there might be a big difference between an American pie and a Chinese pie and people might think, "How disgusting. I'd rather taste a pie I'm used to." Jill, then elaborated on Diane's point, listing what she perceived (somewhat inaccurately) as typical features of Chinese life and concluding that "the Chinese are completely different...from us."

While Jill and Diane rationalized the townspeople's actions, Lily offered a different and very thoughtful perspective, stating:

In my opinion, I think they were just being rude, because they didn't even want to try anything new, because they were just used to their old ways. That was probably being quite rude, because I try lots of new things, everything, and they're just being rude by not trying anything new.

Juanita asked if anyone in the group had ever had the experience of feeling as though they did not fit in. Jill responded by talking about problems she had with being accepted at her previous school. Lily then took the opportunity to read from her

connector sheet a very personal and poignant paragraph she had written about experiencing profound loneliness and rejection as a young child.

The conversation abruptly took a lighter turn when Diane asked the group whether they had ever cooked anything that others found disgusting. All the girls readily described their own humorous culinary mishaps, and soon we were all laughing uproariously.

Once all the stories of cooking misadventures had been told, Jill initiated the vocabulary segment of the discussion. However, it turned out that only Jill had any new words to bring to the group. Juanita, for her part stated that she understood all the words in the chapter and Lily, curtly remarked she "didn't care" about the vocabulary words.

After a brief discussion around the lack of suitable vocabulary words and each girl's respective favorite parts, I asked if they thought the sudden change in the Lee family's fortunes resulting from the pie social was realistic. This question prompted some further discussion regarding the book's setting, and the nature of the Lee's laundry business. Jill then concluded the conversation by informing me that they were done and asking if they could hear themselves on tape. I confirmed with the other group members that the conversation was in fact over, and after switching off the tape, I let them briefly listen to their own audio taped voices.

Transcribed Discussion-April 9th

Background Information

By April 9th, the girls in the AF Star Fisher Group had completed their book, and Linda had instructed them to use the class period to engage in a final discussion of the entire novel. In addition, they had been assigned a plot graph (See Appendix C), which they completed during the discussion. The participants in the April 9th discussion were Jill, Diane and Juanita, as Lily was absent on that day.

The Discussion

The group approached this discussion in a particularly playful manner, passing the microphone (an omni directional table mike!) from one to another and pretending that they were newscasters or special guests on a talk show. The conversation began when Jill started talking about the book's setting. However, downright giddy at that point, Jill was overcome by fits of giggles and was unable to continue speaking. After being gently chastised by Juanita, Jill pulled herself together enough to begin summarizing the book in great detail. Once Jill had spoken for a while, she "introduced" Juanita, who, with an air of mock-formality replied, "Thank you for the introduction, my dear."

Despite the levity of the group, the three girls collaboratively recounted the book in a detailed and accurate manner. In addition, going beyond merely recounting textual details, in the midst of the collaborative summary, Juanita spontaneously offered her thoughts on the book's message, incisively commenting:

I think that what the story is teaching us is that everyone is different and even though people might be from different cultures and all that, they're still people and they still have feelings...

Diane interrupted the summarizing to ask the other group members how they would feel if they were Joan Lee and a person like Ann (a character who bullies Joan) was telling people not to be their friend. Both girls responded to Linda's question in a thoughtful and sincere manner, and then Jill inquired as to what Diane would do in such a situation.

Jill concluded the summarizing portion of the discussion and solicited questions from the group. Juanita responded by asking the others if they had ever experienced being new anywhere. Jill, always anxious to talk about herself, answered Juanita's question with a longwinded story regarding her experience of moving from one school to another. Some further talk regarding friendship and fitting in followed and subsequently, a discussion ensued regarding their favorite parts of the book and the book's climax.

After Juanita related her favorite parts, Jill urged Diane to speak as well. Then Jill herself excitedly began to talk about the parts in the book she liked best and what she perceived as the novel's "turning point." After describing the climactic scene in detail, Jill turned her attention to the book's conclusion and forthrightly opined that the ending of the book "sucked." To demonstrate her point, Jill read aloud the book's final sentence in which Joan, at a family picnic, comments, "I think I'm going to like it here" and goes to straighten out the picnic blanket.

Juanita suggested that the ending might indeed be appropriate in light of how Joan and her family's situation has changed over the course of the book. Juanita explained:

Yeah, well if you notice, in that part, she's like "oh," because...in the beginning, she felt bad because the business wasn't going well and people didn't like her at school. So if you think, when she's straightening the blanket, she's like thinking, "I'm going to like it here," because at the beginning she didn't and so...

It is at that point that something clicked for Jill and with a sudden burst of insight, she exclaimed:

I probably understood why they put straightening the blanket because she's straightening, like her life out. Her life is going smooth just like the blanket is going to be, something like that. I don't know. It's just a little connection I made (giggles).

Diane followed Jill's comments with a statement that adroitly synthesized the various opinions that had been expressed during the exchange. She concluded:

I think that was a good ending ...because probably...the whole book was about her being different and how she didn't like it there and everything. So probably she just went, and they changed the whole situation around to her liking it. And they showed the reason why. So basically they explained the whole problem in the book, so I think that was a good ending but Jessica was right. They could make it more better.

The Interview

Benefits

When asked what the benefits of literature circles were, Juanita, Jill and Diane responded enthusiastically. In particular, Juanita mentioned that she valued the communicative aspect of literature circles; Jill credited the literature circles with motivating her to read; and Diane saw the discussions as a means of becoming more cognizant of societal issues. Some of their comments included

Juanita: Well, we get to discuss more often what we think. Your ideas get expressed. And well you learn to communicate.

Jill: It doesn't exactly force you to read, but for me, it forced me to read. And I'm kind of happy it did, because I don't really like to read. But I was happy to read this book, Star Fisher.

Diane: And you notice more about what's going on in the world because of the connections. Like prejudice-ism, we don't really think of racism that much... but when you're talking about it, you really notice how common it is and everything.

When asked if they learned about one another during the literature circles, the group responded with a chorus of “yeas” and commented on the fact that the literature circles helped them to get to know one another better. In particular, they mentioned as particularly significant, the conversation in which they talked about their cooking experiences and the literature discussion on familial conflicts in which Diane and the others had become emotional and supported one another.

Task Structure

The girls informed me that in general, they worked on their role sheets at home prior to their discussions, because they felt that they would be too easily sidetracked if they worked on them together in class. When I asked them how they felt about the role sheets, most of the girls had fairly negative comments. In particular, Lily asserted that she despised the role sheets and found completing them to be tedious. Jill commented that, although she liked learning new vocabulary, filling out a vocabulary role sheet seemed superfluous when they also had to list new vocabulary words in the back of their journals. Juanita added that because they already were familiar with most of the words, they ended up writing the same vocabulary words multiple times, which seemed “pointless” to her. Regarding the roles themselves, Juanita complained that at times she felt that the circles

were overly structured. In addition, the girls voiced some dissatisfaction with the amount of work involved in the literature circle unit.

Lily commented that she hated the fish bowl because she did not like passively listening to others talk about their book. However, Lily did feel that a joint session in which her group and another group (not a focal group) got together to hold a joint literature discussion focusing on cross-cultural issues common to the two novels was valuable. During that session, the groups made intertextual connections between their books, and Lily interviewed an East Asian boy in the other group regarding his experiences with racial discrimination.

Group Dynamics and Values

Describing why her group worked so well together, Jill commented, "Everyone here has a different personality, like completely, so discussion is fun. Like, everyone brings in their two cents and everything." And when asked if anyone in the group had a leadership role, Diane pointed to Jill and indicated that Jill often took on the role of discussion gatekeeper and to some extent, took control of the group's interactions.

In answer to the question of what makes a good literature circle group member, the girls mentioned a number of attributes. Specifically, Lily pointed out that a good group member has to work diligently and contribute lots of ideas to the group. And Juanita commented that to be a good group member, a person has to enjoy discussing and arguing a lot.

The Text

Jill commented that she found *The Star Fisher* interesting. However, Lily complained that the book didn't give them a lot to discuss and had a boring ending. Juanita, trying to find the middle ground between Jill's enthusiastic praise for *The Star Fisher* and Lily's criticism of the novel commented that the last few chapters, focusing primarily on Mrs. Lee's baking achievements, weren't great, but that the beginning was really interesting and kept the reader's attention.

Adult Intervention

Jill commented that in general she didn't mind having an adult in the group, but that Linda's presence made her nervous because she had the marking book. Diane concurred, remarking, "As soon as I see the (marking) book, I get scared."

Linda's Perspective

In discussing the overall performance of the AF Star Fisher group, Linda remarked, "I was very pleased with their enthusiasm with the book they had chosen, and they were getting right into the discussion. They were fantastic." Linda felt the literature circles had been particularly good for Diane who previously had been difficult to motivate.

Linda emphasized the importance of the group members supporting one another during the emotionally charged discussion of parent-child conflicts. According to Linda, "It was important for that discussion to happen and for them to share in that. There was a bonding." However, over the course of the literature circle unit, Linda perceived a large

change in the dynamics of the group. In particular, Linda had observed that Jill, who had been relatively subdued in the beginning of the unit, had become increasingly boisterous and confident and during the latter part of the unit, had “totally taken charge” of the group. At the same time, Linda noticed that Lily, who had taken a leadership role in the group early on, had, by the end of the literature circle unit, started feeling “pushed out” and found it increasingly difficult to relate to the other girls.

Analysis and Discussion

Literary Learning

In their discussions, the girls in the AF Star Fisher group sought to identify with characters in the text, particularly the protagonist Joan Lee. Juanita, in particular, would frequently ask if any of the group members had gone through experiences similar to Joan's or felt as Joan did, and the girls would readily share experiences from their own lives. Because being able to empathize with literary characters is one of the abilities required to be fully literate (Beers and Probst, 1998), the girls' attempts to relate to characters in the novel can be considered educationally beneficial.

In addition, by using the text as a springboard to share experiences and to discuss those topics that had great import and relevance to them, the girls learned a great deal about one another. The members of the AF Star Fisher group may also have learned much about themselves as they pondered such issues. For instance, from Lily's writing poignantly about her own past struggles with not being accepted by her peers, one can infer that participating in literature discussions prompted Lily to reflect deeply on her own life and how she herself interacted with others.

Another striking feature of this group's discussion was how the students used the events in the text to think about how they themselves might react in various situations. For example, when Diane asked Juanita and Jill how they would feel if they were Joan Lee and were being picked on by a girl at school, the girls had an opportunity to use their imaginations to place themselves in the hypothetical situation posited. Articulating their thoughts on the subject, they could think through various courses of action and begin to reflect on how it must feel to be ostracized by one's peers. In this way, the girls had an

opportunity to develop a sensitivity to the issue that they may not have developed otherwise.

Analyzing their discussions, it is also readily apparent that the girls' talk afforded them a number of opportunities to think about the complexities of the human psyche. In particular, there were a number of instances when they pondered characters' behaviors and motives. Such character analysis was particularly evident when Lily asked her group members why they thought no one wanted to try Mrs. Lee's pie. In surmising reasons why characters in the novel acted the way they did, the group members seemed to be making a concerted effort to reflect on and deepen their understanding of human behavior. In answering that perhaps the townspeople were reluctant to taste the pie because they had a fear of, or an aversion to, that which was foreign, it is possible that the girls were applying what they knew of human nature to better understand the characters in the book.

However, the girls in the AF Star Fisher Group went beyond using their life experiences to impute motives to characters' behaviors. They also delved into issues of right and wrong. For instance, during the discussion of the pie social, Lily asserted that the townspeople, who initially refuse to taste the pie, were "rude," and she declared that she herself tries many different types of foods. In making this statement, Lily was demonstrating a particular aspect of literacy, described by Probst and Beers (1998) as the ability not only to empathize with characters, authors and readers, but "the ability, on other occasions to declare ourselves other than, different from, the author and his characters and perhaps readers, rejecting bigotry, insensitivity, indifference, or illogic" (p. 18).

The fact that Lily brought up a value-laden perspective not put forth by the other girls was also important because, in doing so, Lily provided an opportunity for the others to reflect on their own values. For instance, it is possible to speculate that perhaps it had never occurred to the other girls that rejecting something because it is unfamiliar is not simply human nature, but could in fact be considered unkind and hurtful behavior. And it is also possible to surmise that Lily's comments may have caused them to reflect on their own beliefs regarding the proper way to react if they encountered unfamiliar foods or unfamiliar customs of any sort. For as Miller (1993) states, when alternatives challenge a reader's assumptions and understandings, "he may be stimulated to clarify his own values, his own prior sense of the world and its values" (p.145).

In addition to discussing values, the girls discussed social issues such as racism, and it was Diane's opinion that those discussions raised her awareness of societal problems in the world today. Unfortunately however, Diane's thought-provoking questions regarding why people discriminate against those who are different did not always lead to a substantial discussion of the issue. This was a missed opportunity, as the underlying question of why people behave in a racist manner is important, and a sophisticated discussion on the topic could have led the students to greater awareness of the issues, or even inspired them to brainstorm actions they could take to fight prejudice locally or globally.

Also, I was dismayed by the fact that students voiced stereotypical ideas regarding Chinese people and Chinese culture and stated that Chinese people and North Americans are "totally different." The fact that this misconception went uncorrected was

unfortunate, because such a characterization could result in the perpetuation of false stereotypes.

In terms of reading comprehension, while the book's content was by and large self-explanatory, the occasion when Lily explained to Jill about the significance of the book's title indicated that the interaction among the peers did, at least on some occasions, lead to greater comprehension of the text. In addition, Juanita's comment regarding the nature of the townspeople as gossipy and cliquish shed light on the rural culture of the 1920's and the way cultural mores can shape our behavior.

Overall, the literary learning of students in the AF Star Fisher Group was considerable. The frequency of opportunities to engage in various aspects of literary learning is presented below.

Table 4.2 Literary Learning Opportunities - AF Star Fisher Group

	Frequently	Occasionally	Rarely	Never
Learned about the book's content	X			
Learned about one another	X			
Learned about themselves	X			
Learned to substantiate arguments using the text.			X	
Had opportunities to discuss values	X			
Had opportunities to make meaningful intertextual connections	X			
Learned about other cultures		X		
Learned about human nature	X			
Learned about the nature and use of language.			X	
Had opportunities to discuss social/historical/cultural issues		X		

Students' Discourse

One particularly salient feature of the AF Star Fisher group's discourse was that they allowed each other to speak at length and rarely interrupted one another. This allowed students the opportunity to use speech not only to communicate but also to think through and reflect on what they were saying. For instance, during their April 9th discussion, Jill began criticizing the book's ending and read aloud the part she took issue with. However, once she began articulating her criticisms and was privy to Juanita's thoughts on the passage, Jill constructed a plausible explanation of why the author had chosen the ending he had. Jill's new understanding came not as a result of receiving "the answer" from a teacher, a book or even from a peer, but through her own cognitive processes fostered by the opportunity to engage in discourse with her peers. In fact, Jill's insight can be considered a prime example of what it means to construct knowledge through dialogue with others.

Another instance of the girls communicating effectively and using talk to think through their ideas occurred during the March 27th discussion when Jill posed the question, "What do you think would have happened if Bernice never tried a slice of pie?" Juanita, Lily and Diane answered matter-of-factly, each commenting that the Lee family would have been humiliated, and their business would not have prospered, if nobody had tried Mrs. Lee's pie. However, as Jill answered her own question, the dialogue evolved as follows:

Jill: I kind of think the same as Juanita. Maybe their business will start picking up. They'll actually...cause people know them now. But kind of rude. Just because her pie was good, doesn't...mean her business should shoot up in the air.

Juanita: Yeah but remember how Miss Lucy (a neighbor) said in the previous chapter that when she came back to town, no one was with her again. So this town is like that. How do you call it, rumor, they like to chat a lot....

Jill: They only like a person if they do well at something.

Juanita: Yeah, they're only like that. That's the kind of town, because they knew each other back then.

During this exchange, a relatively straightforward question about the possible repercussions if a character had acted differently lead to an insightful characterization of the society that the book is set in. Significantly, Juanita's description of the townspeople is not polished in any way. Attempting to articulate her point as best she can, she is engaging in what Barnes (1992) calls "rough draft speech." Yet the fact that she does not find precisely the right words to describe the townspeople does not seem to be an impediment to communication. And arguably, this flash of insight occurred precisely because the students had an opportunity to engage in an extended discussion of the topic and to freely bounce ideas off one another without worrying about how articulate they sounded.

During the literature circle unit, the group members also had numerous opportunities to acquire the skills necessary to appropriately participate in a group discussion. In general, such learning came naturally as group members subtly negotiated the terms of the group's interactions and strategically applied the communicative skills they possessed to the group discussions. At other times, the learning was more overt. For instance, during the March 27th discussion, Lily began to ask her question without answering Jill's, and Jill promptly admonished her for breaching the unstated group rule that each question should be answered by every group member. While it seems likely that

Jill's reasons for scolding Lily were far from didactic, nevertheless, through such exchanges, it is likely that Lily and the others learned, or at least were reminded, of the importance of listening to others and contributing during group discussions.

While overall the girls interacted well with each other, group members only occasionally engaged in debates. This was unfortunate because it meant that they had fewer opportunities than some of the other groups to engage in "exploratory talk" (Mercer, 1995) requiring them to take a stance and substantiate arguments using logical reasoning or information provided in the text.

Table 4.3 Features of Students' Discourse - AF Star Fisher Group

	Frequently	Occasionally	Rarely	Never
Responded directly to one another's utterances	X			
Solicited clarifications and elaborations		X		
Used tentative language	X			
Debated points in a logical manner			X	
Substantiated opinions		X		
Reached new understandings	X			

Social/Affective Impact

The social and affective benefits afforded to Jill during literature circles were considerable. In particular, she found that having the opportunity to participate in

literature discussions motivated her to read, although she had previously not been a big reader. In addition, I had the sense that Jill was immensely proud of some of her contributions during literature circles. Specifically, when she formulated her own theory regarding the final passage in the novel, she seemed pleasantly surprised at the fact that she was able to come up with such a sophisticated interpretation. In fact, Jill was so impressed with that particular contribution, that during the interview, she recounted what she had said to Lily who had been absent during the April 9th discussion. Furthermore, Jill was highly engaged in the literature circle discussions as evidenced by her enthusiastic participation.

For Diane, there also seemed to be some affective benefits. Specifically, she received a great deal of emotional support during the literature discussion in which she broke down crying while speaking about problems between her and her parents. While Diane did not say outright how that particular incident affected her, one can surmise that she must have been touched by the warm show of support and comforted by the knowledge that others in the group had experienced the same type of difficulties with their own parents. For adolescents, such problems can seem overwhelming, and it may have been important for Diane to know that she was not alone in dealing with such problems.

Because Juanita was less effusive than Jill and less emotional than Diane, it was somewhat more difficult to discern how the literature circle impacted her emotionally. However, she did participate consistently during literature circles, and according to Barnes (1992), students learn to value their own thinking when they are given the opportunity to express themselves.

As for Lily, my sense is that she seemed to feel reasonably self-confident and engaged in the earlier literature circle sessions. In particular, when she was able to explain the meaning of the novel's title to Jill, I imagine that she must have felt a sense of pride in her abilities to edify one of her peers. However, in the later literature circles, as Jill became increasingly vocal and self-assured, Lily, according to Linda, seemed to feel less and less comfortable in the group. Also, during the interview, Lily's comments were overwhelmingly negative. In particular, she strongly disliked the role sheets and the fishbowl activity, and she also found parts of the novel uninteresting. In addition, Lily griped that she felt stymied by the rule that they could only read one chapter for each literature circle session. As someone who loved to read, Lily asserted that she would have preferred being given the freedom to just read continuously and finish the book within a set amount of time.

Final Reflections

Overall, the members of AF Star Fisher Group worked well together, and their experiences with literature circles were generally positive. However, while the girls learned much by engaging in literature discussions, it is possible that they would have benefited even more if, in addition to discussing *The Star Fisher*, they had also discussed a more challenging text that compelled them to engage in more debates in which they had to use the text to substantiate their arguments.

CHAPTER 5: THE MIXED-GENDER (MG) FREEDOM TRAIN GROUP

In this chapter, I take an in-depth look the Mixed-Gender (MG) Freedom Train Group, a group that read and discussed *Freedom Train: The Story of Harriet Tubman* by Dorothy Sterling. I begin by giving a brief description of the group members, and then I look at the nature of the group's interactions during several literature discussions. I conclude the chapter by discussing what the group members learned, what they failed to learn and how participation in the literature circle unit impacted each group member socially and affectively.

Group Members

In terms of ethnicity and gender, the MG Freedom Train Group was the most diverse of the four focal groups. The group consisted of two males, Amrit and Anoop and three females. Information about students' backgrounds and their involvement in literature circles is summarized in Table 5.1 below.

Table 5.1 Students in the MG Freedom Train Group

	Lynn	Shaquila	Anoop	Amrit	Sandy
Home Language	Spanish	English	Punjabi	Punjabi	English
Ethnic Background	Jamaican	Jamaican	East Indian	East Indian	European
Frequency of Contributions	Very Frequent	Frequent	Less Frequent	Less Frequent	Frequent
Attitude Towards Literature Circles	Very Positive	Positive	Positive	Positive	Very Positive

Lynn

Lynn, an African-American, was a Jehovah's Witness and a first-generation immigrant from Jamaica. As I observed Lynn throughout literature circles, I became deeply impressed by her thoughtful comments, her excellent reading comprehension skills and her obvious love of learning. Although Shaquila and Sandy both good-naturedly referred to her as a very controlling person, I found Lynn to be highly engaged, insightful and a valuable contributor to the group.

Shaquila

Like Lynn, Shaquila, a second generation African-American with a Jamaican background, also impressed me as a strong reader and a sharp thinker. Shaquila contributed much to the group, offering cogent arguments to support opinions she put forth, and patiently explaining textual content when other group members expressed confusion or asked questions. Shaquila also exhibited strong leadership qualities and was highly praised by Sandy for ably keeping the group organized and encouraging group members who had been remiss in completing their work to promptly finish up their assignments in class. What made Shaquila's impressive performance during literature circles particularly remarkable was that according to Linda, Shaquila had been failing four subjects, including language arts, the previous term, had a highly erratic academic history, and had had behavior problems earlier in the year.

Anoop

While Lynn and Shaquila could be heard loud and clear during literature circles, it was all too easy to overlook the contributions of the soft-spoken Anoop, a native Punjabi speaker who had immigrated to Canada from India five years earlier and was still struggling to acquire academic language proficiency (Cummins, 1996). Despite his tendency to speak in a barely audible voice and his struggles with reading comprehension, Anoop's contributions to the group were far from insignificant. For it was Anoop who often took the initiative to ask questions and seek clarification when he did not understand something in the text and in doing so, often initiated discussion topics that would prove to be fruitful and interesting for all involved.

Amrit

Like Anoop, Amrit also tended to be somewhat reserved. A Punjabi Sikh and a second generation Indian-Canadian, Amrit received ESL services for four years until he reached the fifth grade, and even in the seventh grade, his English language skills were still not particularly strong. Amrit though worked hard, maintained a positive attitude toward language arts and contributed to the group by occasionally asking thought-provoking questions and providing an interesting perspective on pertinent issues.

Sandy

Sandy, a Caucasian student from out of the province, entered South Lake Middle in mid-year, several weeks after the literature circles had been formed. At that time, Sandy, who had in the past been taunted by unkind peers, did not know too many of her

classmates and could have spent the rest of the year lonely and ostracized. However, fortunately, Sandy sat next to Lynn in homeroom, and Lynn quickly invited her to join the MG Freedom Train Group. And according to Linda, “it was a perfect match,” because Sandy felt very comfortable with the group and “just blossomed.” Sandy’s group mates also benefited from her participation in the group because although Sandy’s language skills were not as strong as Shaquila’s and Lynn’s, she had an inquisitiveness and an infectious enthusiasm that added much to the group’s discussions.

Early Observations

During the first literature circle session, I observed the group in dismay as Anoop read inaudibly from a role sheet held in front of his face. When Anoop finished reading from the paper, without comment, Amrit immediately began presenting to the group what he had written on his role sheet. In my field notes, commenting on the interaction, I wrote: “at that point, the discourse resembled mini-performances, not a conversation of any sort.”

Later that period, however, I returned to the group and was encouraged to find Lynn speaking intently about how the biography of Harriet Tubman reminded her of Rosa Parks and her heroism. Also, in connection with a scene in which the young Harriet is looking after a cantankerous baby, I heard Lynn recount a fascinating story about how, as a young girl living in Jamaica, she had been required to watch her aunt’s children. While I found Lynn’s participation impressive, I noted that the other group members did not seem to be contributing to the discussion to the same extent.

Although I had been generally pleased with the group's interactions during the first month of literature circles, in mid-March, I sat in on a discussion that I found very disheartening. Specifically, I observed that after Lynn, "the summarizer," had given a synopsis of the chapter, none of the others asked questions or commented at all on what she had said. In addition, when Lynn asked several thoughtful questions regarding the particulars of Harriet's escape from slavery, there was again a complete lack of responsiveness. Seeing the group struggle, I tried to model an effective approach to literature study by guiding them through a passage that was pertinent to the issues Lynn raised. I felt my scaffolding was relatively effective in helping them make meaning from the text, but the discussion soon fizzled out, and the group split up to work on role sheets, completely disregarding the instructions Linda had given them to work on the sheets cooperatively.

At that point, I went over to Anoop, and observed that he was writing down on his role sheet a number of thought-provoking questions. Unfortunately, those questions had never been raised during the discussion. Similarly, Amrit was filling in his "passage master" role sheet by making note of several passages of interest, none of which he had shared with the group. Sitting in on the MG Freedom Group's discussion that day, I realized that the students in Linda's class needed more guidance when it came to engaging in literature discussions, and that afternoon, I persuaded Linda to begin doing "fish bowls" (peer modeling episodes).

The next day, when they took their turn in the fish bowl, the MG Freedom Train Group interacted, for the most part, much more effectively than they had previously. In particular, the summary was collaborative, and they spent time sharing their favorite

passages. However, at that point, the group members still seemed reluctant to challenge each other or elaborate on one another's comments.

Transcribed Discussion-April 4th

Background Information

On the fourth of April, I sat in with the MG Freedom Train Group for the first part of their discussion. They were discussing a chapter entitled "The Old Folks." In the chapter, Harriet Tubman discovers her father is in prison and raises money to go down to Maryland to rescue him. Once in Maryland, Harriet, her mother, Old Rit, and Jacob Jackson, a freed man, collaborate to devise a plan to free Harriet's father. Harriet subsequently frees her father, and sets out to liberate her parents from slavery. Although Old Rit expresses great trepidation at the thought of fleeing her masters, and is particularly fearful when she realized Harriet won't be accompanying them on their train trip North, in the end, Harriet's plan is successful. The chapter concludes with Harriet and her parents arriving safely at the Anti-Slavery Society in Philadelphia.

The Discussion

The group began their discussion with a remarkably detailed description of the story events, given collaboratively by Anoop, Lynn and Shaquila. During the summarizing phase of the discussion, Amrit and Anoop asked questions regarding the events of the chapter and Lynn explicitly and matter-of-factly answered the boys' questions. However the group quickly went beyond simply recounting the details when

Lynn, speaking of the fear Harriet Tubman's parents expressed upon hearing Harriet's plan for their escape, editorialized as follows:

And her parents didn't believe in her. They thought she was um, she was young, she-I wouldn't believe in my child either (laughs) because she's my child, and I know her weaknesses, and I wouldn't believe in her either because...She could have like fell underneath one of her (sleeping) spells and fell asleep. And then she would've let the patrollers take her parents away, because she'd be sleeping.

Lynn's comments sparked a lively discussion in which every member of the group gave their opinion regarding Harriet's trustworthiness and whether or not they would be inclined to trust Harriet if they were in her parents' position. During the exchange, Amrit provoked a brief discussion related to gender roles and slavery by commenting that perhaps Harriet's parents would have trusted her more had she been a man.

Following the summary, the students discussed their favorite parts in the book. Lynn and Shaquila gave rather complete answers when asked about their favorite parts, and I left the group at that point to attend to another group. Subsequently, the other three group members mentioned their favorite parts. However, when I listened to the tape, I realized that in this section of the discussion, Amrit, Anoop and Sandy did not offer any original thoughts, but simply reiterated what Lynn and Shaquila had already said.

From that point on, an air of silliness overtook the group, and the quality of the discussion seemed to rapidly decline. In particular, when making connections, Shaquila began to insist that connections be made exclusively to the students' personal lives. Consequently, several students ended up telling stories of relatives that had been incarcerated. Even when the stories turned serious, the prevailing mood of giddiness

resulted in much giggling and an inappropriately lighthearted reaction to a deeply personal story of family difficulties.

Towards the end of the block, each group member attempted to carry out the duties specified on their role sheets. For instance, Amrit, “the illustrator,” showed the others his illustration, Shaquila, “the connector,” reiterated her earlier remarks about a relative’s experience in jail and Sandy, “the summarizer,” dutifully summarized the story.

The discussion concluded with the entire group engaged in an assessment of both the chapter and of the literature discussion itself. (It was at this point, that I returned to the group.) In general, the girls gave the discussion low marks because of the excessive levity during the period. Critiquing the discussion, Shaquila pointedly remarked:

My mark for today is two out of four because everyone is laughing when another person is trying to speak, and they're not collaborating with others. Like Anoop and Amrit, they're not working together. When others are talking, they're laughing.

Shaquila’s criticisms were echoed by Lynn and Sandy, and all three repeatedly chastised the boys for their behavior overall and particularly for their laughing during Sandy’s personal story. On the other hand, Anoop and Amrit gave the discussion higher marks, citing the fact that they had asked questions and expanded on one another’s remarks.

Transcribed Discussion-April 9th

Background Information

On April 9th, I audio taped the MG Freedom Train Group’s discussion of a chapter entitled “Moses.” The chapter describes Harriet Tubman’s heroic deeds as a

conductor on the Underground Railroad. In particular, it talks about how Harriet Tubman successfully led groups of slaves to freedom time and time again, despite frequent “sleeping spells,” and the fact that there was a substantial monetary reward offered for her capture. The chapter informs us that on the journeys, Harriet was tough but compassionate, and used her wit to outsmart the authorities. Because of her heroic deeds, we learn, Harriet gained legendary status and became known as “Moses” to her people.

The Discussion

After some procedural talk regarding which chapter they should be doing and which book belonged to whom, Amrit began to summarize the chapter, speaking about Harriet Tubman’s journeys back and forth and the bounty that had been placed on her. However, no sooner had Amrit spoken a few lines, then he was asked to clarify what he had said. And soon, each group member was chiming in, alternatively giving textual details, asking clarifying questions and elaborating on one another’s utterances.

After the textual details had been gone over, Sandy asked the group what parts they liked most about the chapter and “what parts confused (them) a little bit”? Characteristically, Anoop took the opportunity to ask some questions, inquiring about Harriet’s frequent sleeping spells. Both Lynn and Shaquila began explaining how Harriet got injured, and then Shaquila, perhaps sensing Anoop’s confusion was partly language-based, asked Anoop whether he knew what a sleeping spell was. Anoop answered that he didn’t, and the girls went on to explain the nature of Harriet’s illness.

Subsequently, Sandy asked whether sleeping spells still exist. This question provoked a big group debate, regarding whether or not people are still diagnosed with sleeping spells today. Different group members began to take a stance on the issue and

subsequently substantiate their arguments. And from those who didn't immediately speak up, opinions were elicited. During the dynamic exchange, Shaquila, who originally contended that sleeping spells must still exist today, modified her point of view after listening to Amrit and Anoop argue that perhaps the advent of technology has made sleeping spells less prevalent in modern times.

The talk about Harriet's sleeping spells naturally evolved into a discussion of how slaves were treated and subsequently into a discussion about why slaves were kept at all. Then Anoop asked about the number of Whites in the South compared to the number of Black slaves, and we began discussing why slaves didn't just overthrow their White masters. In this way, the discussion meandered from one topic to another according to the interests and questions of the group members. When Linda announced that the time for discussion had run out, the MG Freedom group was in the midst of discussing the problem of racism and the fact that bigotry is not the only significant problem the world is facing today.

Interview

Benefits

The MG Freedom Train group had much to say about the benefits of literature circles. In particular, several group members mentioned that participating in literature circle discussions helped their reading comprehension, and made them better able to retain what they read. Also, the group felt that during literature circles, they had learned much about Harriet Tubman's life and work on the Underground Railroad. And in

addition, several group members mentioned that the literature discussions provided them with opportunities to learn more about one another.

In general, the group enjoyed literature discussions because they were able to share opinions and ask questions of one another. Sandy informed me that she thought the opportunity to engage in discourse with her peers was vital because “adults...want you to understand more than you actually can, but with your classmates, they understand the same amount.” Lynn, elaborating on Sandy’s point, explained that the advantage of speaking with one’s peers is that when discussing a particular topic, “you can take it level by level, so you understand as you’re going, and you come to understand better.”

In addition to the cognitive benefits, the members of the MG Freedom group repeatedly mentioned that they thought that literature circles had definite social benefits. In particular, Sandy commented, “I think literature circles brought everyone in this group closer together, so now we know more about each other.” Lynn agreed, remarking, “if you’re with your group members, you begin to feel like you’re all friends, and...you just say whatever you want. You don’t feel nervous at all.” Similarly, Shaquila said that literature circles fostered friendships because when you participate in literature circles, you are essentially compelled to interact with all people in the group, even those whom you had not previously liked or associated with.

Task Structure

Lynn commented that Linda should have given them more guidance in terms of how much time they were supposed to spend on the discussion, the role sheets and so forth. Also, several group members complained that it was difficult for them to keep track

of what they were supposed to be doing, and consequently, they had to contend with the constant problem of group members being at different spots in their reading. On a positive note, however, Sandy opined that she liked the fact that they were reading just one chapter at a time, because that way she could “figure out” each chapter before going on to the next.

In regard to the role sheets, Lynn, Sandy and Shaquila agreed that they preferred completing the role sheets collaboratively after the discussion, rather than independently before coming to class. Their preference was based on the fact that they liked that group members could assist one another with role sheets. Also they mentioned that they found it helpful, when filling out the role sheets, to draw from the pool of ideas that had come to the fore during the group discussion.

Unlike some other groups, the MG Freedom Train group appreciated the structure the role sheets provided. Specifically, Lynn felt that without the role sheets, literature discussions would have been boring because “we wouldn’t have known what to talk about.”

When asked what particular aspects of the discussion they enjoyed, Anoop mentioned that he liked the connections in particular because they could elaborate on one another’s connections to make the discussion “longer and more interesting.” Sandy also enjoyed the connections, because she felt that when people bring up experiences that relate to the text, “it’s more fun, because you know you’re not the only one who can relate to the story, and it helps you.” The only criticism of the role sheets that the group had was that they felt the role sheets were time consuming and delayed the group’s progress.

Group Dynamics and Values

During the interview, when I inquired about what they learned about one another, my intention was to discover whether they had gained insights into one another's lives and cultural backgrounds by sharing personal experiences. However, the girls in the MG Freedom group responded to the question by appraising the personalities of each group member. First, Shaquila informed me that if Anoop and Amrit are together, they engage incessantly in off-topic talk. Lynn agreed, but pointed out "if you get [Amrit and Anoop] to sit down, and not sit beside each other, or look at each other, they can be serious and think." At that point, Sandy told me that she had split Amrit and Anoop prior to the interview, and indeed Sandy was sitting in between the two seemingly docile boys.

While Anoop and Amrit were at the receiving end of most of the girl's criticism, the girls also appraised one another quite candidly and not necessarily in glowing terms. Shaquila remarked that Sandy had a tendency to be controlling and dictate orders to others. In turn, Sandy and Shaquila both agreed that Lynn could be quite authoritarian sometimes, with Sandy in particular remarking that Lynn was "like the controlling-ist person here." In describing Shaquila, the girls weighed in with the following comments:

Sandy: Shaquila's probably the one who keeps the group organized.... She keeps saying that if you didn't do your homework, do it now, and I won't tell. She won't tell on us if we don't have it, and we go do it.

Lynn: Shaquila is the one who has no worries in the world.

When I asked the group to tell me characteristics of a “good group member,” many of their comments revealed the importance they placed on being considerate and respectful towards one another. Their remarks in this regard were as follows:

Lynn: I think that what makes a good group member is someone caring, someone considerate and if somebody's talking, they don't interrupt, they just listen. And um they talk. They just don't sit there and act like they're in another world.... If you're lost on some page, they help you to understand what it is.... And if the person told a sad story, you would try to cheer them up...and make them feel better.

Amrit: Someone who encourages the person in the group.

Sandy: I think a good group member would be someone who listens, talks, acts like they know what you're talking about and they actually do.

Anoop: Mainly like helping each other.

Shaquila: What I think is a good group member is that the person is very organized. They'll get...and let everyone else get their work done. They'll listen to what you say and try to relate to what they people try to say.

Also, when I asked what the group did when a particular member was off task or unprepared, Lynn explained:

If we were in the middle of doing something, and...say somebody was not getting their work done, we'd just stop and ask why they're not doing their work, and if they don't understand their work, we have to help them.

The Text

Perhaps more so than any other group, members of the MG Freedom Train Group expressed great enthusiasm about the book they read. In particular, they praised the author's meticulous attention to detail and the emotional impact of the book. Some of the laudatory comments they offered included:

Sandy: It's amazing. It looks like when you're reading the book, you're actually there because they're giving you so many details.

Lynn: Yeah, very, very detailed.... If she was in the forest, they don't just say forest, they say how so lush and green and muddy and everything. They just give so much details, it's like you're right there.... And when you find something sad or scary, you'd stop reading the book, and you'd just sit there. And you're like meditating on what happened.... You want to read and read and read and not stop.

Amrit: It's like you're actually there, and that's happening to us.

Anoop: It's like they give you so many details, you can pretend you're Harriet.

Shaquila: This is a good book for people who like to imagine, because they can imagine they're like in the story and act like they're going through the same thing as Harriet.

The only criticism the group had of the book was that they felt that in the later chapters, a multitude of characters and events are introduced but are not described in sufficient detail. As Sandy remarked, "At the end of the story, there is like twenty people being introduced, and you don't know what they are [or] who they are."

Adult Intervention

The general consensus of the group members was that having an adult with the group helped because it motivated the group members to be focused and well behaved. As Sandy remarked, "When the teacher's here, like the students want to make a good impression, but when they're gone, it's like they're in a whole different world."

Physical Environment

Like students in the other literature circle groups, students in the MG Freedom Train Group were unanimous in stating that they preferred working in the school

cafeteria to working in the classroom. Specifically, they complained that they were distracted in the overcrowded classroom by other groups' discussions. Also, they commented that they felt more "free" in the spacious cafeteria.

Linda's Perspective

Regarding the MG Freedom Train group, Linda said, "I'm really happy with the mixture." She described how she thought literature circles had benefited each member of the group. In particular, she thought that literature circles afforded Amrit and Anoop, whom she described as shy, the opportunity to work on their speaking skills. In addition, she perceived the literature circles as having been a forum which allowed Shaquila and Lynn to really shine, and she felt that the fact that the group embraced Sandy and made her "feel welcome," allowed Sandy to thrive both socially and academically during literature circles.

Analysis and Discussion of Data

Literary Learning

Although, students in the MG Freedom Train Group were not provided with the background knowledge regarding the Civil War and slavery that may have further enhanced their understanding of the novel, there were numerous occasions when the students did seem to be using the discussion forum to help one another extract meaning from the text. Specifically, group members frequently took the liberty to ask and respond to questions regarding textual details. I was very pleased with the group's

collaborative attempts to construct meaning from the text for a number of reasons. First, I believe that by soliciting the help of their peers, Amrit and Anoop, both former ESL students with relatively weak language skills, were able to understand and enjoy the book more than they would have otherwise. And secondly, I would imagine that by explaining parts of the text to others, Shaquila and Lynn might have inadvertently ended up increasing their own understanding of the textual content.

Another segment of the discussions that I found quite striking was the lively exchange the group members engaged in regarding why Harriet's parents did not appear to have confidence that she could successfully lead them to freedom, and what each group member would do if he or she were in Harriet's parents' situation. One reason I think that this part of the discussion had great merit is that it gave the students an opportunity to apply their knowledge of human behavior to better understand what motivated the characters in the book to act and feel as they did. The opportunity to delve into the minds of characters in the text and think about why people behave in certain ways in certain situations is important because, as Hynds (1994) writes, "The qualities of empathy, understanding and insight into the complexities of human behavior are qualities that enlarge students as readers and as human beings-emotionally and socially and intellectually" (p.177).

Furthermore, by using their imaginations to put themselves into a situation that they would not encounter in their daily lives, the students were acquiring literacy, defined by Probst and Beers (1998) as "the capacity to deal with the conception of human possibilities formulated in language" (p.18).

In arguing back and forth about whether or not they would put their trust in Harriet, the group members used facts from the text to substantiate their position. For instance, Lynn talked about the problem of Harriet's sleeping spells, and Shaquila and Anoop brought up Harriet's vast experience on the Underground Railroad. Having the opportunity to strategically use information from the text to support one's arguments is another example of literary learning (Knoeller, 1994).

Finally, I saw the discussion regarding Harriet's parents as exemplary because various perspectives were raised, including Amrit's intriguing view that Harriet's parents may have had more faith in her had she been male. It is just such an exchange of ideas that proponents of literature circles feel can be so valuable in broadening students' perspectives on issues, helping them to learn more about their fellow readers, and leading them to reflect on why they hold the ideas they do (Probst, 1990; Rosenblatt, 1983).

The literature circles also provided opportunities for the students to engage in in-depth discussion of important historical and social issues. For instance, in the latter part of the April 9th discussion, the MG Freedom Train group discussed such pivotal issues as why white Americans owned slaves, how slaves were treated, why slaves could not simply use force to overthrow their masters, and how slavery was finally abolished. The discussion of such historical realities led to a discussion of racism in modern times and other profound problems that plague societies today. Arguably, these are some of the most important issues facing our world today, and the fact that students were afforded the opportunity to engage in a sophisticated discussion was very gratifying. It was unfortunate however that while the group's dialogues on issues of racism and slavery were impressive, and discussion of such topics seemed to pique group members' interest,

the students were never given the opportunity to explore social, cultural and historical issues in greater depth.

In terms of language learning, there were a number of opportunities for vocabulary acquisition. On occasion, students explained word meanings to one another, such as when Shaquila and Lynn explained the term “sleeping spell” to Anoop. However, most opportunities for vocabulary learning seemed to occur when I was sitting in with the group and could give the students a clear explanation of what certain words meant. In particular, one day Sandy asked me to define the word “philanthropist” which had occurred in the reading. I explained what the term meant and mentioned that a prominent figure who had been in the news for donating a lot of money to charity could be considered a philanthropist. Perhaps because of our extended discussion of the term, the word seemed to stick with Sandy, as evidenced by the fact that during the final interview, she proudly mentioned how she had learned the word.

While students did discuss some vocabulary from the text, there were no general discussions of the language used in the book or the author’s craft. Specifically, there was no mention made of the African-American dialect used throughout the book. If the issue had been raised, a provocative dialogue on language and language differences may have emerged, and students could have been taught to use dialogue and dialect in their own writing. Also, in order to raise students’ awareness of what good writing is, it would perhaps have been useful to explore with students in detail how the author used descriptive language so effectively.

Table 5.2 below indicates the frequency with which students were afforded opportunities for various types of literary learning.

Table 5.2 Literary Learning Opportunities - MG Freedom Train Group

	Frequently	Occasionally	Rarely	Never
Learned about the book's content	X			
Learned about one another		X		
Learned about themselves		X		
Learned to substantiate ideas using the text	X			
Had opportunities to make meaningful intertextual connections		X		
Learned about other cultures			X	
Learned about human nature	X			
Learned about the nature and use of language		X		
Had opportunities to discuss social/historical/cultural issues	X			

Students' Discourse

Looking at the nature of students' verbal interaction, it is evident that there were a number of occasions on which students in the MG Freedom Train group engaged in sophisticated dialogue in which they were intently listening to one another, responding to one another directly and helping each other reach new understandings.

For instance, during the April 9th discussion, the sequence in which each group member gave their opinion on whether or not sleeping spells currently exist exemplified students' use of sophisticated communicative and higher thinking skills. Below is an excerpt from this debate.

Sandy: Does that sleeping spell still exist...in the world?

Lynn: Yes, it still exists.

Shaquila: ...if I take a weight and hit you on the head, it's not like it could be there, just for back then and not up to date now.

Amrit: There's more technology.

Lynn: Why do you think sleeping spells are not prevalent today?

Amrit: They're scarce, because there's more technology.

Shaquila: OK, what do you think Anoop?

Anoop: There's more technology, and they can use technology to solve the problem.

Shaquila: One way I do think that...there are sleeping spells, and in another way, when I think of it in a different way, different views like you see different ways, and I think there could and there couldn't-because the reason I think there could is just because it's back then and not up to date, doesn't mean you can't get sleeping spells, and another reason why I think we can't get it is that we have like better doctors, up-to-date, so they...should know how to...give you what type of medicine to take to make you feel much better, to make your brain function.

What is striking about this exchange is how almost every group member readily responded to Sandy's question and weighed in on the debate with an opinion that was backed up by sound reasoning. In fact, even when Anoop did not speak up, his opinion was directly solicited. Such responsiveness was typical of many of the group's better interactions. It was characteristic of the group to ask for one another's viewpoints. Consequently, both Amrit and Anoop, who tended to be less vocal than the girls, nevertheless, were given opportunities to engage in academic discourse during the discussions.

Also, Shaquila's final statement is particularly notable because it indicates that within the duration of the dialogue, Shaquila reached a new understanding of the issue by

assimilating opinions voiced by other group members and ably synthesizing opposing viewpoints. Also, it should be noted that Shaquila not only incorporated Anoop and Amrit's opinions into her newly formed understanding, but she elaborated and clarified Anoop and Amrit's vague reference to "more technology" by specifically citing the existence of "better doctors" and "medicine to make you feel better" as factors that may have rendered sleeping spells obsolete.

However, the group did not always engage in such fruitful discussions. In particular, it seemed that students in the group tended to be less focused on the discussion when no adult was present. Consequently, students in the group may have missed opportunities for learning when they were not being supervised by Linda or me.

Overall however, the data collected on the MG Freedom Train Group also indicates that through participation in the literature circles, students developed vital communication skills. This is evident both from that fact that the group's later discussions were much more dynamic than the earlier discussions and from the students' characterization of a "good group member" during the final interview. Specifically, during the early literature discussions, students seemed more apt to approach literature circles in a ritualistic manner (Barnes, 1992), performing their given tasks perfunctorily with little genuine interaction among group members. However, the students' later discussions and interview responses indicated that during the literature circle unit, they came to realize the importance of asking questions, listening to others, encouraging one another, and responding to others' contributions.

Table 5.3 Students' Discourse- MG Freedom Train Group

	Frequently	Occasionally	Rarely	Never
Responded directly to one another's utterances	X			
Solicited clarifications and elaborations		X		
Used tentative language	X			
Debated points in a logical manner	X			
Substantiated opinions	X			
Reached new understandings		X		

Social/Affective Impact

In the MG Freedom Train Group, more than any other group, the social and affective benefits were obvious. Specifically, from the group's responses in the final interview, it was clear that the girls in the group believed that participation in the literature circles resulted in a sense of increased emotional closeness among the group members. In addition, although Amrit and Anoop did not voice the same sentiment outright, observing the group regularly led me to believe that a bond had formed among the group members, some of whom had had essentially nothing to do with each other prior to the literature circle unit.

In terms of affective benefits, since I did not know the group members well prior to beginning literature circles, it is impossible to conclude definitively how literature

circles impacted the participants on an emotional level. However, much of the data on this group indicates that participation in the literature circles may have increased group members' self-esteem, decreased their anxiety levels, and resulted in their becoming more engaged in the learning process. These conclusions are based on Linda's statements regarding specific changes in group members since their participation in literature circles, my observations of group members and the students' own comments during the group interview.

Specifically in the case of Shaquila and Lynn who were both very outspoken and frequently the ones to answer the questions posed by the other group members, it seems likely that being positioned as the more knowledgeable peers may have served to boost their self-esteem. In addition, it can be surmised that Shaquila's self-confidence was bolstered by the fact that during the interview, she was praised highly by Sandy for being an exemplary group member and playing a leadership role in the group. Another indication that literature circles had a positive impact on the two girls is that according to Linda, both Lynn and Shaquila's academic performance improved after they became involved with literature circles, with Shaquila's academic turnaround being particularly dramatic. And lastly, observing Lynn and Shaquila, my impression was that for the most part, they were highly engaged in the literature circle discussions and greatly enjoyed the opportunity to converse with their peers.

As for Sandy, the affective benefits of her participation in literature circles could also be readily discerned. When Sandy entered the class in midyear, my first impression of her was that she seemed shy and awkward. (I later learned from Linda that she had been subject to ridicule by classmates in years past.) However, after being involved with

the MG Freedom Group for a few weeks, Sandy seemed like a new person. She formed friendships with Shaquila and Lynn, and became an enthusiastic contributor to the literature discussions. And unsurprisingly, it was Sandy, who during the interview emphasized the fact that a significant benefit of literature circles was that they could foster friendships and “bring your class closer together.” Linda’s statements corroborated my impressions regarding the role of literature circles in hastening Sandy’s adjustment to the new class, and giving her a greater sense of self-confidence during the interview.

As for Anoop and Amrit, because they were less vocal during the literature circle unit, it is somewhat more difficult to say specifically how literature circles impacted them affectively. In particular, I was concerned that Amrit and Anoop rarely shared their cultural knowledge with the others and did not appear to have many opportunities to be positioned as the more knowledgeable peers. I would speculate that is possible that if the two boys had had more opportunities to share the knowledge they possessed with their group mates, they may have felt an enhanced sense of self-worth and may have gained a sense of pride in their own cultural background.

However, on a more positive note, the fact that Amrit and Anoop did participate, at least to some extent in the literature discussions and felt comfortable enough to raise questions and voice their opinions leads me to believe that they both felt more confident and less anxious speaking during the small-group discussions, than they did speaking in front of the entire class. This may have been especially true for Amrit who had a strong aversion to speaking in front of large groups and candidly wrote in his self-description, “If I am doing a presentation and I am speak I always shock a little bit.”

Final Reflections

Despite some problematic aspects of the group's interactions, overall I would assert that the members of the MG Freedom Train Group benefited considerably from their participation in literature circles. In particular, they had many opportunities for various types of literary learning, and they were able to communicate in a sophisticated manner that fostered higher-level thinking. Furthermore, the group members seemed to be highly motivated, to be engaged in their discussions and to genuinely enjoy the opportunity to engage in high-level discourse with their peers.

CHAPTER 6: THE ALL-MALE (AM) UNDERGROUND GROUP

In this chapter, my focus is the All-Male (AM) Underground Group, a group of four boys who read and discussed the novel *Underground to Canada* by Barbara Smucker. In the first part of the chapter, I describe each group member briefly, talk about the group's interactions early on in the literature circle unit, and then take an in-depth look at one audio taped literature discussion which occurred later in the unit. In the latter part of the chapter, I present my analysis of the boys' interactions, focusing specifically on the learning that did and did not take place during the group's literature discussions and the affective and social impact of the literature discussions on the various group members.

Group Members

The AM Underground Group consisted of three boys of South Asian heritage and one boy who was a first generation immigrant from China. Information on the boys' backgrounds and their involvement in literature circles is summarized in Table 6.1 below.

Table 6.1 Students in the AM Underground Group

	Savinder	Curtis	Gurpal	Ranjit
Home Language	Punjabi	Chinese	Punjabi	Punjabi
Ethnic Background	Indian	Chinese	Indian	Indian
Frequency of Contributions	Very Frequent	Somewhat Frequent	Infrequent	Infrequent
Attitude Towards Literature Circles	Very Negative	Very Negative	Somewhat Negative	Very Negative

Savinder

Savinder, a second-generation Indian-Canadian, was a highly articulate, insightful and outspoken boy who once boasted that he spent his leisure time reading long and

challenging books. What was striking to me about Savinder was not only his obvious intelligence, but also his palpable negativity towards everything related to school, the way in which he completely dominated discussions, and the scathing manner in which he criticized every aspect of the literature circle unit. The extent of Savinder's contempt towards literature circles was particularly evident when, on his literature circle evaluation web, under the word "negative" Savinder wrote "everything," and proceeded to write out in elaborate detail why he despised the entire literature circle unit.

Curtis

Like Savinder, Curtis, a first-generation Chinese-Canadian, was also very bright and highly scornful of literature circles. Curtis, a second-language speaker who had immigrated to Canada only a few years earlier, caught my attention early on, because of his tendency to frustrate his group members and thwart discussion by adopting extreme and rigid perspectives on issues. However, after observing Curtis over the course of the literature circle unit, I gained respect for his inquisitive nature and his sharp intellect.

Gurpal

Gurpal, a native Punjabi speaker, was a relatively weak language student who barely spoke during literature circles and purported to not like reading anything other than sports books. However, despite his reticence and his aversion to reading, Gurpal seemed to have a more balanced attitude towards literature circles than his group mates. In particular, on his literature circle evaluation web, Gurpal wrote that the positive aspects of the literature circle unit were that that they had opportunities to work in groups

and to talk with their peers. In addition, Linda noted that Gurpal seemed relatively engaged in literature circles, whereas earlier in the school year, he was “very, very lazy” and “just didn’t care about anything.”

Ranjit

Ranjit was also a native Punjabi speaker with a strong aversion to reading and seemingly little interest in language arts in general. However, observing Ranjit during literature discussions and the group interview, my impression was that while Ranjit did not often contribute many original thoughts to the discussion, he was paying attention to the conversation, as evidenced by the fact that he would often repeat others’ comments. Although I never noticed Ranjit being particularly disruptive, it was Linda’s impression that Ranjit was a distraction and that his returning to the group after being away in India for several weeks had a negative effect on Gurpal’s performance.

Early Observations

During the second literature circle group, I went over to the AM Underground Group, and I overheard Savinder commenting that he felt sorry for the slaves. However, Curtis responded that feeling pity for oneself and others was a waste of time and effort. He also remarked that he wasn’t interested in history, but only in the future. I then asked Curtis if he thought we could learn something from studying history. Curtis replied enigmatically that history repeats itself but that studying history is tantamount to “cheating.”

Savinder then asked Curtis what he would do if he were a slave. Curtis replied curtly that he wasn't a slave and therefore could not answer Savinder's question. Savinder then asked Curtis to imagine that he were a slave, but Curtis responded that he did not like to imagine hypothetical situations and that anyway, imagining was not an important skill in daily life. In this way, Curtis effectively thwarted all of Savinder's attempts to delve into potentially interesting topics.

While Curtis and Savinder dominated the conversation, Ranjit and Gurpal gave one-word answers. For instance, when I asked how reading the book made them feel, they tersely replied, "bad." And to my dismay, all the boys informed me that they were discussing the book only because they *had to*, not because they wanted to.

A week later, I observed the group for a second time and listened as they discussed whether or not the Underground Railroad actually existed. Curtis was asserting that there was no way to confirm anything, as everything could potentially be fabricated. I was considering challenging Curtis's assertions, when Ranjit spoke up and said that they were getting off topic. Surprisingly, Curtis agreed and the boys went on to discuss a different question.

Despite disappointments with the AM Underground Group in the early weeks of the literature circle unit, when they were chosen to model a discussion in "the fishbowl," their discussion was surprisingly dynamic. Right from the beginning of the fishbowl discussion, I was impressed to hear Savinder using the words "ornithologist" and "abolitionist," two words that the boys had written up on their group vocabulary chart some weeks before. Then Gurpal asked a question regarding whether or not the protagonist, a runaway slave named Julilly, would be caught. Savinder answered

Gurpal's question in a very thoughtful manner, first answering "no," and then answering "yes," and giving numerous reasons to support both positions. Savinder used logical arguments as well as details from the book to substantiate the positions he took. Also, both Gurpal and Curtis responded to Savinder's comments and debated various points back and forth.

Curtis then asked when the first abolitionists were active in America. Savinder replied that he could not answer that question, and Curtis seemed to accept that². Savinder then remarked that the slaves were like Roman gladiators in that both groups were forced to do work that they did not want to do. The three boys then explored the similarities and differences between slaves and gladiators.

Gurpal suggested that he thought slaves were comparable to homeless people. However, Curtis challenged Gurpal's analogy, asserting that slaves had no opportunity to improve their quality, whereas at least homeless people could aspire to something better. The question of how the present-day homeless population compared with the African-American slave population of the past led the boys to engage in an intense discussion of the circumstances faced by each group of people. In the course of the discussion, Curtis displayed an impressive knowledge of sophisticated vocabulary words by explaining the difference between "realists" and "idealists."

After each boy's question had been discussed in depth, the group went on to talk about the vocabulary they had looked up. Curtis said the vocabulary word he chose was "scowl" and contorted his face to demonstrate what the word meant. Savinder then

² Impressively, Curtis must have investigated this question on his own, as he reported during the April 19th discussion (see below) that people of German origin were the first to protest slavery in America.

presented the word “scolded” and explained the definition of the word by saying that for example, a person might be scolded by his parents.

At the end of the literature discussion, in front of the entire class, Linda praised the boys extensively, saying their discussion had been “fantastic,” “excellent,” and “very natural” and that Curtis appeared to have toned down his cynicism. Linda also remarked that she particularly liked the connection they made between slaves and the homeless. Subsequently, a whole-class-discussion on homelessness and other social issues ensued.

Transcribed Discussion-April 19th

Background Information

On April 19th, I sat in with the AM Underground Group as they discussed chapter 12 of their text. The chapter tells of the adventures of two runaway slaves, Liza and Julilly, as they make their way through the mountains, across Kentucky and finally to the house of Jeb Brown, a Black abolitionist. Along the way, the two girls encounter many obstacles, but are fortunate to meet a kindly slave who gives them his daily ration of food. When they reach Jeb Brown’s house, Jeb and his wife Ella feed Julilly and Liza well and hide them in a secret compartment in their home. Jeb then surprises the girls by informing that their captured friends, Lester and Adam, had managed to escape their captors and had also come to the Brown’s house. The chapter ends with Jeb Brown explaining to Liza and Julilly how the Underground Railroad operates.

The Discussion

The discussion began with Savinder giving a brief summary of the chapter. Because no one elaborated on or questioned anything Savinder said, I threw out a question to the group regarding whether or not they had been surprised to learn that Lester and Adam had already been to Jeb Brown's house. Savinder responded that he was surprised and explained why. Gurpal yawned, and Ranjit accused Savinder of having read the book before. Curtis interjected with a few comments, but essentially the major contributors to the discussion at that point were Savinder and myself.

After wondering aloud about the details of Lester and Adam's escape, I began to read a passage describing the details of how they the two runaway slaves extricated themselves from the handcuffs that bound them together. The group members seemed interested in the scene and several asked questions. In particular, Ranjit clarified what had occurred by asking, "So they were attached to each other?" I responded to Ranjit's comment by explaining, "Yeah, it's like if you and Gurpal were sort of attached. There's a chain on you, a chain on him, and it's attached to both of you."

After my explanation, Savinder asked a question regarding how Julilly and Liza are able to make it on their own considering that they are so young. Curtis began to answer by talking about Julilly and Liza being on the mountaintop, but Savinder immediately cut him off, commenting that the girls are no longer on the mountaintops, but have already gotten to Ohio.

Although Savinder's first question hadn't really been adequately answered, he abruptly posed his second question, "What do you think is a Mennonite?" Curtis responded that a Mennonite is a German person. Savinder then talked about how

Mennonites don't like modern society and don't believe in slavery. Curtis interjected that he had read on the Internet that Germans in North America were among the first people to protest slavery. Ranjit then asked why the Mennonites "turned against society." Savinder responded that Mennonites "like to be old-fashioned," and live in relatively secluded places like mountaintops, because they have an affinity for unsullied nature and quiet, tranquil locations. After sharing all his thoughts on Mennonites, Savinder then asked Gurpal what he thought a Mennonite was. When Gurpal jokingly responds that a Mennonite is a knight, Savinder turned to Gurpal, and remarked in a condescending manner, "I guess you never heard of that word, did you?" Savinder then followed up on his original question by asking the group what sort of apparel they thought Mennonites wear today. Savinder immediately answered his own question, speculating that Mennonites probably wear "old cruddy things...like cotton and stuff." Curtis then suggested that perhaps Mennonites dressed "like those people who went through the American revolution," but his ideas were quickly dismissed by Savinder who asserted, "I doubt they dress like that."

After the discussion on Mennonites, Savinder abruptly began talking about vocabulary. Specifically, he said that there were no words in that chapter that he didn't understand, but that previously he had learned that the term, "ornithologist" meant "bird watcher." This comment led to a brief conversation between Curtis and Savinder regarding an abolitionist in a previous chapter who had posed as an ornithologist in order to gain access to a plantation and aid in the escape of several slaves.

Savinder, perhaps realizing then that he was only one who had had an opportunity to ask his questions, prompted Curtis to ask his question. Curtis then asked, "why do you

think there aren't much dangers from the slave catchers on top of the mountains at night?" Savinder replied that walking in the mountains is less dangerous than walking in the cities, because the cities are more heavily populated, and therefore the possibility of someone spotting the runaway slaves and reporting them to the police is greater. Savinder elaborated on his point by suggesting various reasons why the mountains are so sparsely populated, and he also mentioned that the mountains are relatively safe because there are numerous places to hide in the mountains. This exchange led to an involved discussion regarding Liza and Julilly's route to freedom, during which Curtis, Savinder and I began referring to the map provided in the book and conjecturing about how long it would take the escaped slaves to get to Canada.

After a while, Ranjit, who had been listening quietly, asked whether the boat the two girls would eventually have to take to reach Canada would be a stolen boat? Curtis said that it's possible it would be a stolen boat, but Savinder replied that they'd probably use one of the abolitionist's boats.

Changing the topic, Savinder commented that he had read in other books about how certain buildings had secret compartments where slaves were kept. Attempting to delve into this topic further and get the others engaged, I then asked the boys, "If you were an abolitionist, and you were going to create a hiding space in your house...where [and] how would you do it?" Savinder immediately responded by saying that he would have to create a hiding space that exploited the natural features of the area in which he lived. Ranjit interjected that he would put a secret compartment in the attic. However, Savinder did not pause to give Ranjit an opportunity to explain further. Wanting Ranjit to elaborate on his suggestion, I made a point of turning to him after Savinder finished

speaking and asking, "What were you saying Ranjit, about the attic? You would make it in your attic?" However my efforts to get Ranjit to expand on his ideas were in vane, as Ranjit tersely responded, "yeah," and Savinder quickly pointed out that the attic would not be a suitable place for a hiding spot because "it would creak too much." Curtis then shared some ideas of his own.

When Savinder deemed that enough had been said about creating hideaways, he changed the topic once again by asking what the abolitionists did to earn money. I explained that abolitionists generally held paid jobs in addition to aiding runaway slaves.

Then suddenly Savinder asked, "But how can these people like look at themselves in the mirror when they're treating people this bad, by like whipping them, making them do your work." Regarding Savinder's thought-provoking comment, I asked the group how they thought slave owners justified their actions. Curtis pointed out that the slave owners perceived slaves as material items to be possessed; Ranjit said a slave owner was "like a bully;" Gurpal noted that slave owners were "mean and like beating people," and Savinder commented that "having slaves was considered a good thing then."

Savinder then brought up the fact that the institution of slavery still exists in various parts of the world today, and that observation led to a somewhat prolonged discussion of the problem of enslaved children and child laborers. During this discussion, Gurpal commented that there is a slavery problem in Nepal, but he did not elaborate on this assertion.

After a while, the topic of discussion turned to televised ads for charities which solicit donations by showing desperate, poverty-stricken children in developing countries, and Ranjit commented that he thought that the claims in the ads were false. Intrigued by

this comment and wanting to hear more from Ranjit, I asked him, “Ranjit, when you went to India, didn’t you see a lot of poverty?” Ranjit answered, “Yeah, a lot of that.” Unfortunately, at that point, Savinder began talking again, and my opportunity to further question Ranjit about what he had observed in India was lost.

After the conversation regarding child laborers and child poverty wended down, Savinder asked Ranjit what question he had prepared. Ranjit then asked the group what they thought would happen next in the book. Savinder answered with predictions that were spoken in a tentative manner, but were so uncannily accurate, that I became convinced that Savinder had read the book through, despite his claims to the contrary. To prevent Savinder from completely dominating the conversation, I asked the boys how they hoped the novel would end. Ranjit began tentatively answering the question, but Savinder cut in and began talking over him, so that Ranjit’s voice was drowned out.

After Savinder explained that he had been able to predict the book’s plot so accurately because he had read other books similar to *Underground to Canada*, Ranjit asked Gurpal what his question was. Thus prompted, Gurpal asked the group how long they thought it would take Liza and Julilly to get to Canada. Ranjit and Curtis speculated that it would probably take a few weeks for the girls to complete the journey, considering that they have to rest along the way. Savinder compared the runaway slaves to goalies in hockey who also have to rest periodically. However, Ranjit challenged the validity of Savinder’s analogy on the basis that goalies may rest, but they don’t actually sleep during hockey games. After some discussion around the physical demands made on hockey players, Savinder then began talking about the difficulty of walking a long distance and the many impediments Julilly and Liza faced that would necessarily prolong their trip.

Gurpal vaguely complained, "It doesn't say that much in this book." And Savinder added, "This book makes it seem like it's taking days only." I began to state how I agreed that Gurpal and Savinder's criticism was a valid one, as the book does not always make clear the passage of time during Liza and Julilly's arduous journey North. However, in the middle of my comments, Savinder interrupted me to suggest that perhaps the book should have been written in diary form. Curtis agreed. However, Savinder astutely pointed out that it would not be realistic to have the book in a diary form, as the slaves themselves did not know how to write. Curtis countered that Lester, who had secretly been taught to read, did have the skills to write. Savinder and Ranjit then argued that Lester did not necessarily have the ability to write a diary. Curtis then asked the fascinating question, "If you can read, why can't you write?" Ranjit echoed the question verbatim. Savinder responded to Curtis's query by saying that even if Lester could write, he'd probably write slowly due to a lack of practice. I then pointed out to the boys that they should keep in mind that the slaves may very well not have even had access to writing implements. Savinder concurred that the slaves probably just had the bare essentials with them, and that the abolitionists wouldn't have given them an abundance of goods, because if they were carrying too much, they would probably "arise more suspicion." I then rephrased Savinder's comments in a grammatically correct manner, stating, "yeah, they would arouse suspicion, that's true." Savinder then said, "oh, arouse," indicating that he had apicked up on his own mistake and my subsequent correction.

Savinder's comment led Gurpal to ask how the runaway slaves obtained food. Ranjit answered that they got food from the abolitionists, and I recounted a passage from the book in which they had tried to buy food and ended up having their lives threatened.

My comments prompted Savinder to suggest that the girls would be better off if they just stole food. Curtis and Ranjit argued that Savinder's suggestion was not feasible. In particular, Ranjit contended that the White people might have guns or dogs that could attack the girls if they tried to steal food from their homes. Savinder however responded to Ranjit's contentions with counterarguments, and the boys ably debated the point back and forth until Linda announced the end of the period.

Group Interview

Benefits

When I asked the group what the benefits of participating in literature circles were, Savinder immediately responded "nothing," and Ranjit stated bluntly, "I just don't like this." When no positive responses were forthcoming, I asked more specifically whether they had learned anything about one another, but Savinder immediately replied "no." Similarly, when I asked them whether differences of opinions helped them to rethink certain issues, Ranjit said "nope," and Savinder agreed, saying, "I don't think our opinions are too different." Later in the interview however, Gurpal conceded that he liked literature discussions "because...you at least got to talk."

Task Structure

Both Curtis and Savinder complained about the length of time that was spent on getting through one, relatively short novel. Savinder commented, "I could have read...a book twice as long by...now. We're going so slow." Curtis concurred, saying that he could have easily read *Underground to Canada* in two nights.

In terms of the role sheets, the comments from the group were overwhelmingly negative. Specific statements regarding the role sheets were as follows:

Savinder: They were just annoying...They're so stupid.

Gurpal: I don't like the role sheets.... Some stuff you don't even know what to do.

Curtis: They're a waste.

Ranjit: Exactly, there is no point. It's wasting your time. They're meaningless.

Also, Savinder commented that too much homework was required for literature circles and that he particularly disliked having to make connections. The sole positive comment regarding role sheets was made by Savinder who advised me he thought that completing role sheets prior to the discussion enabled the group members to be better organized.

Both Gurpal and Ranjit said they preferred working in groups to working individually. Ranjit commented that he liked sharing work with his peers because then "it's not a heavy load." However, Savinder disagreed, saying that for him, working with peers meant that he had to shoulder a particularly "heavy load," because he generally he ended up "doing most of the work."

When I asked for suggestions regarding how to improve literature circles, Savinder commented that they should have had more opportunities to debate various controversial topics. However, none of the others had constructive suggestions, and simply proposed not doing literature circles at all.

Group Dynamics and Values

From group members' comments during the interview, it was apparent that Savinder was regarded as the most knowledgeable and responsible group member, and that Gurpal and Ranjit were clearly regarded as the less competent group members. That the status of each group member differed considerably within the group was particularly evident during a conversation among the boys regarding how the group's work was divided up. Savinder asserted that he did most of the work in the group, and Curtis agreed that in terms of workload, Savinder probably "did 40% or so." Explaining why he had to do a disproportionate amount of work, Savinder, clearly referring to Gurpal and Ranjit remarked, "some people don't know what they're doing." Gurpal and Ranjit responded that the reason they didn't know what they were doing was simply that Savinder did not tell them what they had to do. And when Savinder asked, "Why should I have to tell you [what to do]?" Ranjit said, matter-of-factly, "because you're smart."

The Text

When I asked for their opinions on *Underground to Canada*, characteristically none of the four boys had anything even remotely positive to say. Savinder griped that the novel was too short, unchallenging and just totally uninteresting, and that he preferred reading "action books with some funny parts." Curtis agreed with Savinder that the book was just too easy, and Ranjit said that didn't like the book because he just had no interest in history. And Gurpal, for his part, opined that he too thought that the book was boring.

Linda's Perspective

When I asked Linda about the AM Underground Group, she initially stated that she was “generally disappointed” with them. She expressed frustration at not being able to motivate them more and told me that it was her observations of this group in particular that made her decide that the next time she used literature circles, she would have the students order their own books in order to give them a wider range of novels to choose from.

However, Linda's comments were not totally negative, and she recognized that the group had experienced some clear successes along the way. Speaking about how she perceived the overall performance of the group, Linda stated:

In general with the reading, with the literature circles, it's been up and down. When they did the fish bowl, that was fantastic, and I really hoped that would propel them into...having better experiences with literature circles...and it did. Maybe, that lasted about 2 weeks, and they sort of slowed down again.

About Gurpal's experience with literature circles, Linda told me:

I'm pleased with how far Gurpal has come. Sure, he could have come farther... but I started hearing him talk, state his opinion and Mandeep saying, “Well Gurpal, what do you think?” in kind of a condescending way, but then Gurpal would give a few ideas. Independently, he works better now. And when Ranjit was away, Gurpal was doing very well. He was doing very well. Ranjit came back, and he went down hill again.

In regards to Savinder and Curtis, Linda commented that although she recognized that “Savinder is very opinionated himself...and can be negative,” it was her perception that his attitudes were strongly influenced by other boys in the class and by Curtis in particular.

Analysis and Discussion of Data

Literary Learning

What was perhaps most impressive about the AM Underground Group's fishbowl discussion was that during their dialogue, the boys effectively made connections to the book that were both substantial and thought provoking. For instance, during that model discussion, the boys compared slaves to gladiators and to homeless people. These comparisons had particular pedagogical value, because they led the boys (and indeed all who were privy to their discussion) to think about slaves, gladiators and homeless people in new and unconventional ways. In particular, comparing slaves to homeless people compelled the boys and the onlookers to grapple with such important questions as "Do homeless people today really have more opportunities to better themselves than the slaves did?" and "Are people today willing to help the homeless the way abolitionists of long ago helped the slaves?" It can be surmised that perhaps the opportunity to engage in a thoughtful discussion of important societal problems led the boys of the AM Underground Group to think more deeply about the issues raised.

Also noteworthy was the fact that during the boys' fishbowl discussion, they were correctly using words from the novel, indicating that they had not only looked up unfamiliar words in the text, but had effectively incorporated those words into their vocabularies. In particular, I was impressed that the group used the words "abolitionist" and "ornithologist," repeatedly, both during their fishbowl discussion and in subsequent literature discussions. While Curtis and Savinder seemed to be the most proactive in

looking up and using new vocabulary words, occasionally the other two other boys would feel confident enough to use one of the new words.

The boys in the AM Underground Group also had a number of opportunities to discuss cultural, social and historical issues. Specifically, during their April 19th discussion, the boys had an involved discussion regarding the customs and attitudes of the Mennonite people. Furthermore, throughout their literature discussions, the boys discussed the conditions under which slaves lived and the activities of the abolitionists who worked on the Underground Railroad. Of particular import in terms of exploring the issue of slavery in depth was Savinder's question regarding how slave owners could live with the fact that they were severely mistreating other human beings. To me, this provocative question indicated that reading *Underground to Canada* had led Savinder to begin thinking about important issues of morality and how people behave towards one another. By following up Savinder's query with a question asking them to think about how the slave owners may have justified their morally reprehensible actions, I tried to give the boys an opportunity to begin to think about how one's behavior can be shaped by societal mores and about how conforming to the norm can often lead people to behave in seemingly unthinkable ways. Unfortunately, our conversation on this topic was rather brief, and the boys did not have an opportunity to delve into this issue in depth.

In hindsight, it is clear that the issue of cultural norms and human behavior is one that would have been worth taking up in a whole-class discussion. Additionally, it may have been beneficial to have members of the AM Underground Group read more about the Civil War period and write journal entries from the perspective of a slave owner and

from the perspective of a slave. Such writing tasks would ideally have allowed the students to learn more about slavery and to view situations from multiple perspectives.

In addition to having opportunities to judge the morality of others' actions, students had some opportunities to think about how they might feel or act in given circumstances. For instance, when Savinder told the group that Julilly and Liza should resort to theft to obtain food for their journey, presumably he was speaking about what he would do if he were in the girls' situation. By putting himself in the proverbial shoes of the novel's characters and suggesting what he perceived as the best course of action for them, Savinder was indicating that he had pondered the characters' circumstances as well as his own character and values.

While Savinder was willing and able to imagine himself in the position of a slave, the same could not be said of Curtis. Specifically, when Savinder asked Curtis how he would feel if he were a slave, Curtis declined to address the question and dismissed such speculation as pointless. Curtis's refusal to try to imagine how he would behave if he were subjugated was unfortunate, because putting himself in the character's position may have led him to better understand himself, in terms of how he handles extreme adversity, and to better understand why the slaves were willing to take the risks they did to attain freedom.

Exercising his imagination may also have led Curtis to recall and share with the group a time in which he felt he had been treated unfairly. However, sharing of a personal nature rarely occurred in the AM Underground Group. This lack of personal story telling resulted in the boys in this group learning comparatively little about one another's lives and cultural backgrounds and prevented their profiting from the unique

knowledge each member possessed. For instance, although it may have been interesting for the entire group to hear about Ranjit's experiences during his recent trip to India, as far as I could observe, Ranjit's comments regarding the trip and what it meant to him were minimal. Similarly, I heard little from Curtis about Chinese culture and customs, although his Indian-Canadian group mates would certainly have benefited from learning about a culture with which they most likely had little familiarity.

It also seems likely that the boys missed out on opportunities to construct meaning from the text itself. Particularly worrisome was the fact that although my observations of the AM Underground Group led me to believe that Gурpal and Ranjit may have had some difficulties comprehending *Underground to Canada*, there did not seem to be many opportunities for either of the boys to express confusion or ask questions regarding the book's content. Therefore, my feeling is that the discussions did not always serve to enhance the boys' understanding of the novel itself to the extent that they could have, had atmosphere in the group been more conducive to asking questions.

In addition, the boys did not discuss the language used in *Underground to Canada*. Lack of attention to the author's craft by the AM Underground Group was particularly unfortunate, because Barbara Smucker the author of *Underground to Canada*, is especially adept at using language to conjure up vivid images in the reader's mind. For instance, in the chapter the boys discussed on April 19th, there is a line in which Julilly, seeing the aftermath of a thunderstorm says, "Looks like somebody stirred this whole place up with a big wooden spoon" (p. 96). And in the same chapter, the railroad tracks, which Julilly and Liza were following on their journey, are compared to "silver ropes pulling them on and on and on to Canada" (p. 99). It is my contention that

early on in the literature circle unit, the boys' attention should have been drawn to Smucker's masterful use of metaphorical language. Then perhaps they could have been asked to identify and even occasionally illustrate their "favorite metaphors" in each chapter. Additionally, they could have been asked to think up and share their own descriptive phrases. It is possible that such assignments may have served both to enhance the boys' skills as writers and to give them greater appreciation for the text they were discussing.

While their discussion of the book itself was not always as thorough as it could have been, there were a number of instances in which the boys in the AM Underground Group seemed to be deepening their comprehension of the text through the literature discussions. For instance, on April 19th, when I read over and elaborated on the passage pertaining to Lester and Adam's escape from captivity, I inferred from the boys' questions and comments that for the first time, they were truly comprehending what had transpired in that riveting scene. In addition, when, during the same discussion, Gurpal inquired as to how long it would take for Liza and Julilly to reach Canada, the discussion that ensued, along with frequent references to the map, gave the boys an opportunity to gain a good understanding of the route the two girls were traversing in their quest for freedom.

From this analysis, it is apparent that despite the AM Underground Group members' contention that they did not benefit at all from the literature discussions, in fact they were afforded a number of opportunities for certain types of literary learning during the literature circles. However, as Table 6.2 indicates, because of the nature of the boys' interactions, in this group, some types of literary leaning took place very infrequently.

Table 6.2 Literary Learning Opportunities - AM Underground Group

	Frequently	Occasionally	Rarely	Never
Learned about the book's content	X			
Learned about one another			X	
Learned about themselves			X	
Learned to substantiate ideas using the text		X		
Had opportunities to make meaningful intertextual connections		X		
Learned about other cultures			X	
Learned about human nature			X	
Learned about the nature and use of language		X		
Had opportunities to discuss social/historical/cultural issues		X		

Students' Discourse

During the fishbowl discussion, students in the AM Underground Group responded to one another's assertions, debated issues, and used logical arguments to support their positions. The give and take among them at that time was truly exemplary. However, as far as I could observe, the quality of the boys' interactions during other discussions did not reach the level attained during the fishbowl discussion.

What was specifically problematic was that during most of their discussions, the boys in the group rarely made a concerted effort to ensure that every person in the group answered the questions posed. Instead, what would frequently happen would be that Savinder would raise one topic and then abruptly raise a new topic before the first issue he brought up could be sufficiently discussed. Consequently, except for the fishbowl discussion, this group rarely engaged in the collaborative construction of meaning. That is, during the discussions I observed, I rarely saw students responding to or building on

one another's comments in an effort to achieve an understanding or gain a perspective that they may not have on their own.

What often prevented genuine dialogue among students in the AM Underground Group was that certain group members would make dogmatic statements which reflected a "closed approach" (Barnes, 1992) to addressing the issue at hand. This was particularly evident in the early discussions in which Curtis made statements such as "feeling pity is a waste of time." While this assertion may have genuinely reflected Curtis's feelings, his stating his own personal perspective as though it were an absolute, incontrovertible fact precluded any meaningful discussion on the issue. In contrast, if Curtis had said something tentatively such as, "I wonder if it's really worthwhile to feel pity for someone you can't help?" it is possible that others would have been more inclined to offer their opinions on the subject and a potentially interesting discussion could have taken place.

Another glaring problem with this group was that Gurpal and Ranjit rarely engaged in extended speech. Consequently, neither boy sufficiently exploited the opportunity the literature discussions provided to enhance their proficiency in academic English. Furthermore, Gurpal and Ranjit did not have the opportunities that the more verbose boys did to use speech to reflect on, clarify or modify their own thinking.

In contrast, Curtis, a relatively recent immigrant, seemed to benefit from the opportunity to engage in academic discourse, particularly during the fishbowl discussion. During that discussion, Curtis had many opportunities to use extended speech to communicate highly sophisticated and abstract concepts. For instance, when Curtis was describing the difference between a "realist" and an "idealist," he visibly struggled with how to express what he wanted to get across. Yet, the small-group discussion forum

allowed him the opportunity to phrase and rephrase his thoughts until he was able to adequately articulate his ideas. In that instance, Curtis had the opportunity to use “cognitively demanding language” (Cummins, 1996) with the contextual support that face-to-face conversation provides. Such opportunities are particularly crucial for second-language speakers, because as Cummins (1996) suggests: “language and content will be acquired most successfully when students are challenged cognitively but provided with the contextual and linguistic supports required for successful task completion” (p. 60).

Similarly, Savinder appeared particularly intent on developing his academic language skill. Specifically, Savinder seemed to have the ability and desire to learn new vocabulary words implicitly during the normal course of the literature discussions. For instance, during the April 19th discussion, the following exchange took place between Curtis and Savinder.

Savinder: There's less people, on what's it called, the mountains.

Curtis: It's a rural area.

Savinder: Right, it's rural. Less people, right.

In the above excerpt, Curtis supplied Savinder with a word to accurately describe the mountainous region, and Savinder repeated the word, along with the phrase “less people,” indicating that he had at least some understanding of what the word “rural” implied. In addition, when I sat in with the group, there were a number of instances in which Savinder would correct his own grammar or pronunciation after hearing me model correctly spoken English. Savinder’s attentiveness to language during literature

discussions indicated that he was effectively utilizing the opportunity to engage in academic discourse in order to enhance his own academic language skills.

Overall, it can be said that the quality of the verbal interactions among the boys in the AM Underground Group was highly erratic. At times, the boys' used language in a way that was very sophisticated and fostered higher-level thinking. While on other occasions, group members would use language to silence or belittle one another. Table 6.3 below shows the frequency with which various discourse features were evident in the group's discussions.

Table 6.3 Students' Discourse - AM Underground Group

	Frequently	Occasionally	Rarely	Never
Responded directly to one another's utterances		X		
Solicited clarifications and elaborations			X	
Used tentative language			X	
Debated points in a logical manner		X		
Substantiated opinions		X		
Reached new understandings		X		

Social/Affective Impact

Because overall the boys in the AM Underground Group were so overwhelmingly negative about anything school related and were loathe to concede that they liked much of anything at all, it is difficult to say conclusively how these boys were emotionally

affected by their participation in literature circles. Most likely, Savinder, Curtis and Gurpal experienced a sense of pride and self-satisfaction when they received public praise from Linda and me after completing their exemplary fishbowl discussion. Also, they occasionally did seem engaged in their discussions. However, my overall impression of the boys in the AM Underground Group, particularly Savinder and Curtis, was that they seemed almost perpetually disgruntled and sullen.

Also, Savinder seemed to be blatantly condescending towards Gurpal and Ranjit. Savinder's contemptuous attitude towards his less academically inclined peers was particularly evident during the interview when he ridiculed Ranjit for not having read many books and alleged that he had to work especially hard in literature circles because of Gurpal and Ranjit's ineptitude. Unfortunately, it is very likely that Savinder's constant criticism may have adversely affected Ranjit and Gurpal's self-image.

Final Reflections

While the boys in the AM Underground group did benefit from their participation in literature circles, it seems apparent that they did not always maximize their opportunities for learning. Why the boys' overall experience with literature discussions was not as enjoyable or fruitful as it could have been is a complex question, which I address in chapter 8.

CHAPTER 7: THE ALL-FEMALE (AF) FREEDOM TRAIN GROUP

In this chapter, I focus on the All-Female (AF) Freedom Train Group, a group consisting of four girls who read and discussed *Freedom Train: The Story of Harriet Tubman* by Dorothy Sterling. I begin the chapter by giving a profile of each group member. I describe my observations of the girls' literature discussions during the early weeks of the literature circle unit, and I give a detailed description of two of the AF Freedom Train Group's transcribed discussions. Concluding the chapter, I analyze and discuss the benefits the girls derived from participating in literature circles, as well as missed opportunities for learning.

Group Members

The AF Freedom Train Group consisted of four friends with very distinct personalities. All four were bilingual. Three were of South Asian ancestry and one was from Eastern Europe. Key facts about the four girls are presented in Table 7.1 below.

Table 7.1 AF Freedom Train Group Members

	Sonja	Amarjeet	Mira	Ruth
Home Language	?	Punjabi	Punjabi	Urdu
Ethnic background	Bosnian	East Indian	East Indian	Pakistani
Frequency of Contributions	Frequent	Very Frequent	Frequent	Frequent
Attitude Towards Literature Circles	Negative	Positive	Mixed	Mixed

Sonja

Sonja was an outgoing girl with strong opinions and a sharp wit who had come to Canada from Bosnia five years earlier. After her arrival in Canada, Sonja attended ESL classes for two years. However, when I met Sonja, I found her language skills were relatively strong, and I was pleasantly surprised to read in her self-description that she loved both reading and writing. Unfortunately, while I found Sonja to be an affable person who was obviously intelligent, her performance during literature circles was somewhat erratic. While she would participate in group discussions, had good reading comprehension skills and occasionally had insightful comments, Sonja seemed unwilling to seriously discuss issues around race and discrimination and occasionally appeared to be more interested in cracking jokes, than in focusing on the issues at hand.

Amarjeet

Amarjeet, on the other hand, was an aspiring lawyer who liked nothing better than to ask thought-provoking questions and delve into challenging issues around race and social justice. A second generation Sikh whose home language was Punjabi, Amarjeet was described by the other group members as a model literature circle participant because of her affinity for debating, her natural talkativeness and her willingness to make connections during the discussions. While Amarjeet described herself as a weak language arts student, she seemed, at times, to shine during literature circles.

Mira

Mira was also a second-generation Sikh whose home language was Punjabi. However, Mira, who described herself as an avid reader and a decent (but not spectacular) language arts student, did not have as forceful a personality as Amarjeet, and tended to be somewhat reticent at times. Yet, Mira did contribute to the group consistently, and when the literature discussions provided opportunities for intercultural connections to be made, she was particularly willing to share her considerable knowledge of Indian culture and history.

Ruth

Ruth, a close friend of Mira's, was a Christian from Pakistan who had come to Canada several years earlier. Like Mira, Ruth was a relatively diligent student who did well in language arts, although she professed unabashedly to "hate reading." Overall, Ruth was quite vocal during the literature circle discussions, asking pertinent questions and weighing in on various issues.

Early Observations

During the first literature circle session, the AF Freedom Train Group got off to what seemed to me to be an excellent start. When I approached group, the girls were discussing a section of the book that describes how Harriet Tubman, as a young woman, was forced to spend her days endlessly toiling at her master and mistress's behest. Enthusiastically making connections between the text and their own lives, several of the

girls commented that they felt overwhelmed by the chores they had to do at home and therefore could empathize with the young Harriet. On a more global scale, Mira, with apologies to Ruth, made a connection between how Whites mistreated Blacks and how Pakistanis provoked wars with India. Ruth retorted that she and her family were Christians, not Muslims, and therefore were not culpable for the Pakistani wrongdoings. Amarjeet then alluded to the British mistreatment of Indians. I marveled at both the personal and cultural connections the group was making and the controversial issues that were coming up. However, when I commented that it seemed that they could all relate to the book, Sonja quickly responded that she personally could not relate to the book.

During the next literature circle as well, I commented in my field notes that the group “seemed to have an excellent discussion.” This assessment was based on the fact that when I went over to the group, they were intently engaged in a dialogue with Linda regarding why Blacks slaves had been dominated and grievously mistreated by the Whites and not vice versa. Sonja had sparked the discussion by asking how Harriet Tubman’s master and mistress would have felt had they been beaten in the same manner that they beat Harriet. The group speculated that if the White slave owners had been physically assaulted, other Whites would have been enraged by the mistreatment and would have formed a mob to riot against the Blacks. The group then went on to tackle the question of why Blacks could not respond to maltreatment with violent uprisings, and their sophisticated discussion touched on fundamental issues of race, power, money and education. The girls themselves were visibly energized by the intensity of their discussion, and they told me proudly how they had “argued in a good way.” On their

reflections sheets, the girls' positive comments also revealed how much they valued and enjoyed the interaction.

During the next several literature circles however, the girls' level of engagement was highly erratic. At times, I witnessed some very dynamic discussions in which the girls would ask thought-provoking questions and seemed highly motivated. As the literature circle unit progressed however, I began to observe that the girls seemed increasingly disinterested and unfocussed during the book discussions.

Transcribed Discussion-March 22nd

Background Information

On March 22nd, the chapter discussed by the AF Freedom Trained Group was "The Old Folks³." Participants in the discussion included Mira, Sonja and Ruth, as Amarjeet was absent that day. Also, I myself was not present at any point during the group's recording of this literature discussion, which took place in the hallway outside of Linda's classroom.

The Discussion

The March 22nd discussion began with a brief collaborative summary in which the girls touched on the main points in the text but did not delve into the particulars of what transpired in the chapter. Following the summary, the group began discussing new vocabulary, and Sonja commented that she had found a lot of words, but was unable to

³ For a summary of this chapter, refer to the section on the April 4th discussion of the MG Freedom Train Group on page 83.

pronounce them. Mira began to read aloud Sonja's words for her, along with the definitions that Sonja has copied from the dictionary. Because some of the words were quite difficult, I assisted Mira with getting the proper pronunciation and tried to clarify some of the word meanings.

Sonja asked the group if they thought that Harriet's parents would successfully escape slavery. In response, the girls gave uninspired responses, basically suggesting that they might possibly make it to freedom but then again, they might not. Sonja then asked the group whether or not they thought that Harriet Tubman had changed during the eight years she had been away from her family. Mira responded that of course, Harriet must be happier now and Ruth said that obviously she was older, but Sonja expressed dissatisfaction with these responses and indicated that their answers did not get to the heart of what she was asking. Finally, Sonja answered her own question in the affirmative, citing specific trials that Harriet endured that could have caused her to undergo a personal transformation.

There were no responses made to Sonja's comments. Instead, after Sonja spoke, Ruth piped up with her own question regarding whether or not Harriet's parents would be safer if Harriet accompanied them. While there was a brief exchange of opinions regarding this issue, there was no in-depth exploration of the feelings, behavior or motives of the principal characters being discussed. Nor was there any attempt by the girls to imagine themselves in the character's situations.

Once the questioning was completed, Ruth volunteered the following connection in reference to the sojourn Harriet's parents took without Harriet and their subsequent reuniting. Ruth told her group members:

I do the same thing in the mall. I tell my parents that they should meet me here, or they say that to me, and then I go to my own shop and after that, they go where they want, and afterwards, we meet in one place.

Sonja and Mira responded by recounting similar personal experiences in which they had spent some time away from their parents.

Once each girl had discussed her ‘connection’ with the book, the group went on to tell one another the passages they particularly liked. While the content of the individual passages was not discussed, Sonja did mention to her group members that there were a couple of words in her passage that she did not understand. As the words were relatively antiquated, none of the other girls knew them either. And while there was some attempt to surmise the meaning of one of the words, no effort was made to look up either word in a dictionary or solicit an adult’s help in defining the word. Overall, however, the girls did seem to enjoy reading over and sharing passages with one another.

During the discussion of the passages, Ruth, with a sense of genuine admiration exclaimed, “Harriet, she’s smart man. She’s smart big time.” Then, perhaps pondering the depths of Harriet’s ingenuity, Ruth asked the others if they thought Harriet had conceived of the plan prior to coming down to rescue her parents, or only after she had rescued them. This question led the group to begin debating the particulars of Harriet’s plan, and how and when she thought up her plan. While the girl’s arguments were logical, and they responded to one another with well-crafted counter-arguments, interestingly, they never referred to the text itself in an attempt to find answers to their questions.

During the debate, the question arose as to whether or not Harriet could have phoned Jacob Jackson, the man who provided the horse for Harriet’s parents escape.

However, none of the girls knew for sure whether the phone had been invented at that time. Consequently, they asked Linda, who happened to have momentarily approached the group, whether or not the phone existed during the time period in which Harriet lived. Not knowing the answer, Linda advised the girls to “talk about two scenarios” and speculate what life would have been life if there had been a phone at that time.⁴ The girls then went on to discuss the fact that even if there had been a phone at that time, perhaps only the White slave owners may have had access to it. Ruth then raised the possibility that if Harriet had had a phone conversation, it may have been bugged. However, Sonja pointed out that they did not have such technology back then.

Once the conversation regarding Harriet and her plans petered out, Ruth asked the group what they thought they needed to improve on in the next discussion. Mira responded that they needed to ask more questions, and Ruth agreed, adding that she herself needed to remember to take the time period of the book into consideration. Ruth also suggested that the discussion would have been better if Amarjeet had been there because “she adds more stuff to [the conversation] and that makes it good...it makes the discussion longer and you keep thinking about more ideas.”

When Mira asked what the best part of the discussion was, Ruth said she liked the arguing. Mira agreed, remarking, “because arguing is the fun stuff, and that’s what brings the whole discussion together.” The conversation drifted to a discussion of the different types of phones and communications technology, and then to further discussion of Jacob Jackson. In particular the girls speculated about Jacob Jackson’s race, whether, or not he was a slave and where he resided. Their discussion indicated a concerted effort

⁴ In fact, the phone was not invented until 1876, a fact I investigated and shared with the girls after listening to a tape of this discussion.

to construct meaning from the text and a genuine interest in the characters and events in the chapter, but at no point did they consult the text or any other reference materials. And in the end, the issue of Jacob Jackson's identity was left unresolved.

Transcribed Discussion-April 19th

Background Information

On April 19th, the girls discussed the chapter entitled "Victory." The chapter begins with a brief description of how the Civil War is progressing and Harriet's involvement in the war thus far. It tells how Harriet returned home from the war and was criticized by her mother for having neglected her parents to fight in a war for no pay. The chapter also describes an episode in which Harriet resisted a conductor who accosted her and angrily told her that she has to sit in the baggage car, because Blacks weren't allowed in regular passenger cars.

The Discussion

Sonja began summarizing the chapter, and the other girls chimed in. The points touched on by the girls included the inequity in the pay of White and Black soldiers, Harriet's illness, and Harriet's racially motivated expulsion from the train car in which she was riding. During the discussion of Harriet's illness, Ruth asserted that Harriet's mother was responsible for her falling ill, because it was she who told her to go and fight with the army. Although this assertion was not supported by the text, Ruth's comments were left essentially unchallenged, and no mention was made of the fact that what

actually happened was that Harriet's mother chastised her for being away so long and for fighting without pay. There was also no discussion by the girls of the Civil War itself.

After the summary was concluded with a description of how Harriet was brutally dragged out of the train car by three White men, Amarjeet, with characteristic concern for justice, commented, "Why couldn't they treat Black people the same way as they treat White people? What's so different about Black people?" However, Sonja was in no mood to debate the issue and with an unmistakable touch of irritation in her voice, said, "O.K., we've been over this a hundred times!" Ruth, also seemingly tired of the topic, turned to Amarjeet and condescendingly said, "They did not like Blacks, get it!" But Amarjeet was not satisfied with such a simplistic answer and probed further, asking why Blacks were despised so. Amarjeet's persistence seemed to further exasperate Sonja, who with undisguised frustration, turned to Amarjeet and said, "They think they're not smart. We've been through this in the beginning. I don't want to go through this again." But Amarjeet, not prepared to let the topic go that easily, retorted that the reason the Blacks were uneducated was that the White people hadn't allowed them to receive an education. I concurred.

Ruth and Sonja began to contend that such discrimination was a relic of the past. Specifically Ruth commented, "White people were stupid back then, but hey, we weren't in that time...we don't know all the facts." Sonja then added, "We're raised better now. Manners, parents, we're not racist like before."

Wary of their portraying discrimination as an obsolete issue, I then brought up the reality of ethnic tensions in places like Eastern Europe, the Middle East and Rwanda. Trying to elicit their background knowledge, I then inquired about discrimination in

India. This prompted a discussion of the differences between servants in India and Pakistan and African American slaves. Amarjeet then commented, “You don’t see racism in India because there’s mostly Indian people there.” However, Mira said, “I don’t know. There is racism in India, but you see all the cultures go to India and visit all the cool places and stuff.” This seemingly innocuous comment effectively derailed the discussion of racism and sparked an unrelated discussion about the Taj Majal and other such architectural wonders of the world.

After a while, Ruth conscientiously brought the discussion back on track with the comment, “back to the book.” Amarjeet asked if there were any connections, and Mira pointed out the parallels between Harriet Tubman’s refusal to sit in the baggage car on the train and Rosa Park’s resistance to sitting in the back of the bus. Ruth brought up a time that she, like Harriet, had been ill.

Amarjeet intriguingly remarked that race relations between Blacks and Whites were similar to race relation between Sikhs and British, who once ruled the Sikhs. Amarjeet elaborated on the connection, explaining that Sikhs had also been used as slaves and had fought back against their oppressors. I asked if what she was saying had anything to do with Gandhi? Realizing my complete ignorance of Sikh history, Amarjeet and Mira took great pains to explain to me, in detail, how a Sikh leader disguised himself as an Englishman, entered a British government building and perpetrated violence upon the British in the fight for his people’s freedom. I then commented on how what they described sounded like an interesting piece of Indian history and how I had learned something from their discussion. At that point, I left the group to attend to another group.

Once I left the group, the girls began to share with one another their favorite passages. Both Sonja and Mira agreed that they particularly liked the part where Harriet fought to get equitable pay, and they began discussing how they too had to fight to receive an allowance from their parents. Such comments led to an intense discussion among the girls about who got an allowance, who didn't and what each of their parents believed about giving kids financial compensation for work done in the home.

The discussion concluded with Mira asking the group what their favorite part of the discussion was. Ruth said she liked sharing passages, while Mira and Amarjeet said they liked connections the best. None of the girls elaborated on their choices, and the discussion ended when Sonja declared definitively, "it's over."

The Interview

Benefits

Mira's comments focused on how helpful it had been for her to have an opportunity to engage in meaningful and often contentious dialogue with peers. Specifically, Mira spoke of how she had previously been very reticent and had been the kind of person who was afraid to "talk back" to others. She credited the literature circles with enabling her to feel comfortable disagreeing with others. In addition, Mira suggested that the literature circles helped students improve their reading comprehension because the discussions gave them an opportunity to question one another about the textual content.

Amarjeet, who had been outspoken to begin with, asserted that the literature circles were good for an aspiring lawyer because they involved discussion and “when you’re a lawyer, you have to discuss a lot.”

Ruth, recounting her anachronistic assumptions about the communication technology available during the 1850’s, asserted that the literature discussions had helped her to gain a more accurate understanding of life during the era in which Harriet Tubman lived. Ruth also indicated that she liked literature circles because during literature discussions, you could “sit and talk and not feel scared to say something, like when you’re in front of the entire class.” Also, Ruth comment that she liked the fact that she could rely on her peers to help her with difficult vocabulary words and could even ask them “really stupid” questions without feeling embarrassed.

Task Structure

A frequent refrain of the group members was that literature circles involved “too much work.” They complained about having to constantly do the role sheets as well as journal questions and other written tasks.

Regarding the task order, the group explained that if they had to do the role sheets at all, they preferred to do them before, rather than after the discussions, because they found that completing the role sheets individually, ahead of time, provided them with more topics for discussion. Sonja commented that the role sheets were helpful in the beginning of the literature circle unit, because they provided structure to the group, but weren’t really necessary once the group became familiar with the discussion format.

When asked what specific role sheets she found useful, Sonja opined that the connector sheet, in particular, was helpful, because completing it compelled her to reflect on her life.

In terms of the overall structure of the literature circle unit, there were complaints about the lack of variety in the literature circle unit and the amount of time that was spent on literature circles. For instance, Ruth griped, “It was dragging on. It was like doing the same routine over and over and over and over.” Sonja agreed, commenting, “You get bored of it.” And Mira added, “I think in the beginning I liked literature circles, but I just stopped in the middle.”

In general, the girls had negative feelings about the fishbowl activity, commenting that it was boring to listen to other groups speak about their books. Instead, they preferred a whole-class discussion on current social issues that arose as a result of the Am Underground Group’s particularly lively fish bowl discussion. They also enjoyed informally discussing their book with some of the other literature circle groups.

Group Dynamics and Values

When discussing how the group worked together, all the girls conceded that all too often they spent time designated for literature circles engaging in off-topic talk. Ruth even asserted that one of the benefits of literature circles was that “sometimes you can slack off,” and both Ruth and Mira both agreed, “we hardly stayed on track.” However, the girls did help one another out with their work. In particular, they told me that if one person were unprepared, they would help her out by telling her what the chapter was about and assisting her in filling out the role sheets.

Several girls indicated that Amarjeet acted as a leader of sorts in the group and made the discussions interesting by raising controversial topics. Sonja was described as the member who provided comic relief and energized the group during “boring discussions,” and Mira praised Ruth for being the person who kept the group on track by making sure everyone was contributing as required.

When I asked them what makes a good group member, Mira remarked that to be an exemplary group member, “you should act like Amarjeet because she talks a lot.” Ruth agreed. Amarjeet, for her part, said a good group member was someone “who argues” and Mira added that a good group member was a person who “comes up with good questions.”

The Text

When I asked the group what they thought of the biography, Sonja, immediately responded that the two words that would best describe the book were “boring and lame.” She then went on to explain that the reason she thought the book was totally uninteresting was that time after time, Harriet managed to free groups of slaves successfully, and consequently, there was no dramatic scene in which Harriet Tubman was caught by the authorities.

While Sonja maintained that there was absolutely nothing about the book she liked, Amarjeet, Ruth and Mira were of the opinion that the first part of the book was good, but that the last part lacked detailed and seemed repetitious. Their conversation on this point went as follows:

Ruth: Maybe in the first few chapters there was tons of detail. There was like on every word, you had a detail on it.

Mira: Too much detail isn't good either.

Ruth: Yeah, but like in ways, after you see all those chapters, it got so boring, and there's no point of reading it.

Mira: Because you know what's going to happen in the next chapter.

Amarjeet: Like you can predict what happens in the next chapter. You can predict what she's gonna do, how she's gonna do it. It gets boring.

Ruth: And then it made us not want to read the book.

Adult Intervention

The girls implied that they felt somewhat inhibited when Linda was present during their discussions. Their comments on this issue included the following:

Sonja: You couldn't crack that many jokes, and that wasn't interesting. We had a boring discussion.

Amarjeet: Yeah, it kind of changed it. You kind of got nervous because Mrs. Hill was marking us.

Mira: [Mrs. Hill] is not in our group, so sometimes you see, we're fooling around and stuff, right, so when she comes, she usually goes, "So, what was your question?" um and we act like we're on track.

In contrast, they asserted that when I was with their group, they were not intimidated in the least and carried on as they normally would.

Physical Environment

All the girls in the group agreed that they preferred to have literature discussions in the cafeteria, rather than in their regular classroom, because the cafeteria was more spacious and as Sonja put it, "the classroom gets so damn crowded." Also, Ruth

commented that sitting at desks was useful for reading and writing but was not conducive to engaging in what she called “social talk.”

Linda’s Perspective

Regarding the overall performance of the AF Freedom Train group, Linda commented, “There were several times I was disappointed with this group because you’ve got some strong speakers in that group, girls with strong opinions.” Linda also told me that she believed that the girls’ experience would have been more positive if they had had a different book, because in general, she felt that the group “enjoyed the concept of literature circles” and particularly “enjoyed being able to talk and express their opinions.”

Analysis and Discussion of Data

Literary Learning

During the literature circle unit, there were a number of occasions when members of the AF Freedom Train group helped one another to comprehend the text. For instance, during one literature discussion, Ruth explained to the group that when Harriet Tubman cryptically told a newly freed slave that he had “shook the lion’s paw,” that what she was trying to tell him was that by attaining freedom, he had done something as seemingly impossible as shaking the paw of a wild animal. I found Ruth’s interpretation of the metaphorical phrase very insightful, and I imagine that her explanation enabled the other girls to gain a better understanding of the passage in question.

However, at times, the students' comprehension of the text was impeded, because they lacked access to background information regarding Harriet Tubman and the period in which she lived. For instance, although AF Freedom Train group members were interested in and even asked Linda, whether or not the telephone had been invented during the period when Harriet was working on the Underground Railroad, Linda was unable to accurately answer their question, and there were no resources readily available for them to consult. Consequently, it is likely that if I had not happened to listen to the audiotape and look up the answer to their question on the internet, they most likely would have never received the important information they sought

In addition to not consulting outside references, the girls in the AF Freedom Train group rarely referred to the text to seek answers to questions regarding textual details, and consequently, at times, they did not have a clear understanding of the characters and events portrayed in the biography. The fact that the girls debated textual content without consulting the text was unfortunate not only because it hindered their understanding of the text, but also because they did not have the opportunity to learn how to use evidence from the text to back up their textual interpretations.

What the students in the AF Freedom Train group did have an opportunity to learn was that taking into consideration a book's setting is critical to accurately understanding the text's content. This fact was particularly impressed upon Ruth during the March 22nd literature discussion, when the girls in the group pointed out that her suggesting that Harriet's phone may have been bugged was completely ludicrous, because such technology did not exist during the 1850's. That this episode led to a change in Ruth's thinking was evident in the fact that during the final interview (which

took place over a month after the discussion), Ruth recounted her misguided statements and how she had learned from the others to be more aware of the time period in which the biography was set.

However what was especially striking about the AF Freedom Train literature discussions was not that students learned from one another about the text itself, but that quite often, the students seemed to be learning much about one another's lives and cultures. At times, cultural knowledge was shared through students telling stories of daily life in the countries in which they or their parents had lived. For instance, during one discussion on slavery, Amarjeet began talking about how her family in India had servants that helped out the family in various capacities, but were, of course, treated better than slaves. Upon hearing Amajeet's comments, Ruth proceeded to tell a story about friends in Pakistan with servants. Through such sharing, group members were afforded opportunities to learn about the backgrounds of their peers and were also given a sense of how the more privileged classes in India and Pakistan live.

At other times, the discussion of other cultures revolved less around personal issues and more around historical or political issues. For example, during the April 9th discussion, Amarjeet and Mira shared fascinating information about Sikh history and the struggles between the Sikh community and the British rulers in India.

In addition to learning about one another and about one another's cultures, students in the AF Freedom Train group learned about and gained an admiration for Harriet Tubman, the subject of the biography they read and discussed. That they grew to respect Harriet was evident in the laudatory comments that the girls made about the heroic woman during one of their earlier discussions. Specifically, Amarjeet said that

Harriet was her “role model;” Sonja said that she would like to meet and speak with Harriet; and Ruth marveled aloud about how intelligent Harriet must have been to think up the various ingenious stratagems she used to outwit the authorities and keep from getting caught.

From observing the girls’ discussions, it was evident that talking about Harriet Tubman’s life gave them opportunities not only to learn about Harriet, but also to begin to think in a sophisticated manner about issues of race and power. Specifically, during one of their earlier discussions, when discussing how the young Harriet Tubman was beaten mercilessly by her mistress, the girls began to tackle the question of why the slave community did not retaliate when the girl was abused. In discussing the reasons for the black community’s inaction, the girls perceptively suggested that the slaves might have been subjugated in the manner they were, because of their lack of education, money and power. I was gratified to hear the girls conversing about such topics, because, conceivably, a dialogue of that nature could lead them not only to better comprehend the conditions of African American slaves in the 19th century, but also to begin to think about the tremendous obstacles faced by oppressed peoples in every age and in every nation.

Unfortunately, many of the connections the group members made to the book were fatuous and did not foster literary learning. For instance, Ruth compared meeting her parents at a designated spot in the mall after a shopping trip to Harriet Tubman meeting her mother and father after her parents completed the train portion of their long and monumental journey to freedom. While finding parallels between one’s one life and the lives of characters in a text can often be an interesting endeavor, it seems to me that if the connections are superficial in nature, as Ruth’s clearly was, such connections can

hinder rather than foster understanding. And in this case, I think that Ruth's connection did indeed impede literary learning. By equating what must have been an extremely emotional parting and an equally emotional reunion to a temporary separation during a shopping trip, Ruth effectively brought the focus of the discussion away from the import of Harriet's parents journey and the mix of fear and exultation that Harriet and her parents must have felt. To compound the problem, after Ruth spoke, Mira and Sonja made similarly superficial connections to their own lives, and unfortunately, the conversation never returned to the significant issues around Harriet's parents' danger-filled journey.

Furthermore, even some of the more interesting and thoughtful connections did not seem to go far enough in leading the group members to link ideas together, perceive new relationships among disparate ideas and bring "unity to their understandings" (Short, 1992). For example, although Amarjeet's suggestion that race relations between Blacks and Whites were similar to relations between the Sikhs and British was potentially thought provoking, there was no deeper exploration of the underlying issues of racism and colonialism. That is, there was no effort made to delve into important questions such as why certain groups are able to accrue power and status and other groups are victims of oppression. Nor did the girls look at similarities and differences between race relations in North America and relations between various groups in India.

Similarly, when Mira mentioned that Harriet Tubman's being thrown into the baggage car reminded her of Rosa Parks, the girls simply agreed that Mira's connection was a good one and went on to another topic. The lack of discussion around Mira's connection was unfortunate, as juxtaposing the heroic act of Rosa Parks with Harriet

Tubman's courageous act could potentially have led to a fruitful dialogue about what makes a person particularly courageous and what qualities the two women may have

Another shortcoming of the AF Freedom Train group was that they did not always maximize vocabulary learning opportunities. For instance, during the March 22nd discussion, the term "shanty" was defined as "hurt [should have been hut] or mean dwelling," and no further explanation of the term was provided or sought. From my perspective, in this instance, Mira was simply reading (or misreading, as it were) a definition copied straight from the dictionary, and neither she nor any of the other girls had any real understanding of the definition she provided. Occasionally, when I was sitting in with the group, I was able to provide elaborated explanations of the vocabulary words they had found. However, all too often, it seems the girls simply glossed over definitions that had no real meaning to them.

Also, it was apparent that although Amarjeet repeatedly asked important questions regarding the underlying reasons why African-Americans had been discriminated against and enslaved, the other girls in the group resisted exploring the important questions she raised. In particular, Sonja was adamant that the group had already explored such issues sufficiently, and that there was no need to bring up the topic repeatedly. The girls' aversion to discussing the topic precluded a thoughtful dialogue on the existence of discriminatory behavior in many different contexts. This lack of discussion was particularly regrettable, because the girls came from various ethnic communities and undoubtedly possessed knowledge of ethnic and racial conflicts in the countries of their ancestors

Overall, although students in the AF Freedom Train Group did benefit from literature circles, as indicated in Table 7.2 below, they did not always have the opportunities for literary learning that their peers in other literature circle groups did.

Table 7.2 Literary Learning Opportunities - AF Freedom Train Group

	Frequently	Occasionally	Rarely	Never
Learned about the book's content		X		
Learned about one another	X			
Learned about themselves			X	
Learned to substantiate ideas using the text			X	
Had opportunities to discuss values			X	
Had opportunities to make meaningful intertextual connections		X		
Learned about other cultures	X			
Learned about human nature			X	
Learned about the nature and use of language			X	
Had opportunities to discuss social/historical/cultural issues		X		

Students' Discourse

The verbal exchanges between the girls in the AF Freedom Train group were often quite impressive in some respects. In particular, the girls frequently demonstrated higher thinking skills as they engaged in "exploratory talk" (Mercer, 1995), debating points and using logical arguments to substantiate their positions. This type of sophisticated verbal sparring was particularly evident in a discussion in which Sonja, Ruth and Mira were trying to determine whether or not Harriet had conceived of a plan for her parents escape prior to actually traveling back to her hometown to rescue them. During the exchange,

Ruth argued that Harriet could not have known that she would have access to a horse, a fact that turned out to be critical to the success of her plan. On the other hand, Sonja and Mira contended that Harriet must have thought of the plan in advance. The following are excerpts from that discussion:

Ruth: Do you guys think before she traveled all the way to her parents, do you think she would have thought of that plan? Or did she just think of it at the top of her head when she...

Sonja: You have to plan that out.

Mira: You can't think of such a smart thing just on the top of your head.

Ruth: Yeah, but the thing is that Harriet right. What was it called? Do you think that she would have known, like known way before that she, like Jacob Jackson had a horse. Do you think she would have known that when like eight years...Eight years she's been away from there right. Eight years is what they said in the book. The thing is don't you think she would have thought it was dead or something cause it's old and everything.

Mira: It's too much of a risk. Go there ask them if they have a horse. If they don't have a horse, she gets in trouble.

Sonja: Exactly.

Ruth: That's true.

It is evident in this dialogue that the three girls were thinking in a rational manner to try to reason out what actually occurred in the text. In particular, the fact that Ruth pointed out that Harriet's been gone for eight years indicates that she was using knowledge gained from the text to try to construct a persuasive argument. Another salient feature of Ruth's statements in the above dialogue is that she was clearly using an "open approach" (Barnes, 1992) to construct meaning from the text. That is, she asked questions and stated her position in a tentative manner by preceding her assertions with expressions such as

“don’t you think.” In this way, Ruth was not closing off discussion by making dogmatic assertions, but was instead indicating to the other group members that she expected them to contribute their opinions. And responding to Ruth’s implicit invitation to contribute, both Mira and Sonja readily expressed their opinions.

Not only did the girls engage in educationally beneficial discussions, but also by talking about the nature of their interactions, the girls in the AF Freedom Train group developed some awareness of what constitutes a good discussion. For instance, during their March 22nd discussion, Ruth and Mira spoke as follows about why they like “arguing” as opposed to simply agreeing with one another all the time.

Mira: Arguing is the fun stuff, and that’s what brings the whole discussion together.

Ruth: Oh I agree with you. Oh I agree with you. I agree with you.

Mira: That’s too boring.

Ruth: Exactly.

Mira: You have to disagree.

In this dialogue, Mira and Ruth are jointly expressing the same idea that Mercer (1995) asserts in his work, namely that what makes for interesting discourse is not “cumulative talk” in which discussants simply echo one another’s opinions, but “exploratory talk” in which they challenge one another’s ideas in a rational manner.

Table 7.3 indicates the approximate frequency with which educationally beneficial discourse was evident during the girl’s literature discussions.

Table 7.3 Students' Discourse - AF Freedom Train Group

	Frequently	Occasionally	Rarely	Never
Responded directly to one another's utterances		X		
Solicited clarifications and elaborations			X	
Used tentative language	X			
Debated points in a logical manner.	X			
Substantiated Opinions	X			
Reached new understandings			X	

Social/ Affective Impact

While I observed Sonja's delight at making a good point or entertaining the group with a witty comment, and I assumed Amarjeet was pleased when the girls praised her for adding to the discussions with her provocative comments, it was not always evident to me that participating in the group had affective benefits for Mira. Therefore, I was pleasantly surprised when Mira made the following comments during the focal group interview:

I think the arguing was good because, see before...I hardly even talked, because I didn't have any friends and all that stuff, but you know, you see when you're with literature circles, (you) just talk to the person...disagree with the person. You can say something, and you can say something bad. I used to be the kind of person that I was scared to talk back, like I didn't know what they were going to think of me and stuff.

From these comments, it can be inferred that the opportunity to participate in group discussions resulted in Mira gaining greater confidence to express her ideas in a forthright manner, even when her opinions did not match those of her peers.

The girls also commented that they particularly enjoyed reading aloud their chosen passages. While they did not elaborate on why this was so, from observing them, my sense is that they valued the opportunity to share with one another the enjoyment they had gained from reading particular bits of text.

Final Reflections

During the times when members of the AF Freedom Group were engaged in animated discussions, all the group members appeared to enjoy the opportunity to express themselves, and seemed to gain a sense of satisfaction from knowing that they had debated important ideas in a sophisticated manner. However, I would agree with Linda that the girls would have had more opportunities for literary learning had they been more interested in the literary text they were discussing.

CHAPTER 8: ANALYSIS OF CONTEXTUAL FACTORS

In this chapter, I explore the question of *why* students in the various literature circle groups benefited from literature circles in particular ways and failed to benefit from literature circles in other ways. In accordance with my analytical framework described in chapter 2, I begin this chapter by looking at how each group was impacted by group-specific contextual factors, namely the text students discussed and the particular ways students interacted with one another. I then look at the factors that impacted the class as a whole, specifically the literature discussion format used, the various written assignments done in conjunction with the literature discussions, and the way time was managed during the literature circle unit. I also look critically at how the role Linda played in the classroom may have impacted on students' learning during literature discussions. I conclude the chapter by exploring how macro factors, including the physical environment students worked in, the financial situation of the school and the working conditions of the classroom teacher, impacted on students' learning opportunities.

The All-Female (AF) Star Fisher Group

The Text: *The Star Fisher* by Lawrence Yep

I would argue that the fact that students in the All Female (AF) Star Fisher Group benefited in the ways they did from literature circles has much to do with the novel they selected. Specifically, I would suggest that one reason that the girls in this group got into so many personal discussions that enabled them to learn more about themselves and more

about one another is that it was relatively easy for them to relate their personal lives to the book. In particular, they strongly empathized with the adolescent protagonist, Joan Lee, and the numerous problems she faced, and they could readily recount occurrences in their own lives that paralleled Joan's experiences. For instance, descriptions of conflicts between Joan and her mother strongly resonated with the group members and prompted the girls to share personal stories involving tense moments in their own homes.

Similarly, Joan's feelings of alienation led group members to talk about stories of feeling left out or lonely.

Significantly, *The Star Fisher* focuses not only on individual relationships but also on the broader issues of racism and xenophobia. Consequently, like students in the other groups, the girls had opportunities to ponder significant social issues and talk about why people discriminate against others based on appearance or other perceived differences.

However, what was particularly interesting about *The Star Fisher* was that unlike books read by other groups that deal with the unfathomable horrors of slavery, *The Star Fisher* deals with the issue of prejudice as it manifests itself, even today, in the everyday lives of visible minorities. Therefore, rather than simply discussing racism in abstract terms, the girls had opportunities to reflect on human behavior in concrete, familiar situations and think about why people behave the way they do. They also had opportunities to reflect on how they might act in a similar situation and to grapple with their own sense of right and wrong.

In addition, because the students were the same age as Joan, they could, with little difficulty, enhance their literary experience by projecting themselves into the text and imagining what they would do, or how they would feel, if they were in Joan's situation.

It is also worth noting that in comparison to books read by the other focal groups, *The Star Fisher* is relatively easy to comprehend. That is, the vocabulary used is not particularly difficult, the story is told in a reasonably straightforward manner and most importantly, students don't necessarily require much specialized historical or cultural knowledge to understand the novel. Consequently, the girls in the AF Star Fisher Group were able to spend comparatively little time figuring out what transpired in each chapter and a great deal of time speculating about *why* things in the book happened the way they did.

And finally I think it is significant that the group was generally enthusiastic about the book they chose. It is very possible that had the girls been less enthusiastic about the novel, they would have had less engaging discussions and would have learned far less than they did.

Group Dynamics and Values

To understand why the girls learned what they learned in literature circles, it is also important to look at the group dynamics and the rules established (often implicitly) by the group as a whole regarding how ideally they should be interacting. What was striking about this group was that one of the shared group values was that every group member should have the right to speak freely without being frequently interrupted. As a result students were able to "talk through" their ideas and gain clarity of thought as they

struggled to verbalize what they were thinking and reflected on their own and others' utterances.

Another significant factor was that all students in the AF Star Fisher Group were expected to respond to the questions posed by each group member. By insisting that all questions be answered by everyone, the group members held each other accountable for responding directly to one another's utterances and engaging in extended discussion on issues raised. Significantly, although, some of the talk was simply "cumulative," (Mercer, 1995) with the students echoing one another's ideas, because topics were sustained over a number of turns, the group had more opportunities to explore ideas in depth and come to new understandings than groups which did not take one another's questions seriously and jumped from topic to topic.

Also interesting is that in this particular group, it was considered perfectly acceptable for group members to exhibit emotion, and the atmosphere of the group was such that students seemed to feel secure enough to make themselves vulnerable by revealing personal difficulties. It is quite possible that if there had been less of a sense of trust among group members, or there had been any students in the group who were insensitive to others' feelings that Diane may never have taken the risk of talking about her family problems, and Lily may never have disclosed her past experiences with loneliness.

Perhaps the reason for this openness was not only that the students were friendly with one another to begin with, but also that the group was composed solely of females. While it is of course conceivable that such a safe environment could exist in a mixed-gender group, I would argue that the atmosphere in all-female groups is, in general, more

conducive to sharing highly personal and emotionally-laden topics for two reasons. One is that in small-group situations, young adolescent boys, more so than girls, have a tendency to tease and marginalize others (Evans, 1996). Secondly, research has shown that in general, girls are more apt than boys, to express emotions to one another and to share highly personal experiences (Derlega et al, 1993; Tannen, 1990).

The Mixed-Gender (MG) Freedom Train Group

The Text: Freedom Train: The Story of Harriet Tubman by Dorothy Sterling

Students in the Mixed-Gender (MG) Freedom Train Group commented that by and large, they found the biography they read to be interesting and enjoyable. Students in this group seemed particularly interested in the subject of the biography, Harriet Tubman and her work on the Underground Railroad. In this case, students' attitudes are particularly significant, because it was students' affinity for the book and the people depicted in the biography that led them to spend time sorting out textual details, constructing meaning from the text and delving into the motives of characters.

Students' engagement in the biography was particularly striking, given that the book contains difficult vocabulary and somewhat convoluted descriptions of Harriet's many adventures and is therefore relatively difficult to comprehend. In addition, certain chapters in the book contain numerous references to events and historical figures with which Canadian students are not generally familiar. The book, it seemed, proved especially challenging for Amrit and Anoop, the second-language speakers in the group. Yet instead of simply giving up on the book, all the group members asked each other

questions and took an “open approach” (Barnes, 1992) to trying to understand the textual content. Consequently, it can be argued that in some ways, the complexity of the book ended up to be advantageous, in that it led to opportunities for collaborative meaning making that may not have existed had the text been more readily accessible to all group members.

Significantly, the students in the MG Freedom Train group not only liked the way the biography was written, but they seemed taken with the biography’s subject, Harriet Tubman. This was particularly the case with Lynn, who seemed to eagerly absorb any information the biography provided on Harriet Tubman’s life and asserted that after reading the book, she had learned much about the life of the inspirational black woman.

The group members’ intense interest in the biography and in Harriet Tubman herself stands in sharp contrast to the disengagement of several students in the All-female Freedom Train Group. While it is impossible to say conclusively, one might speculate that one reason Lynn and Shaquila were so enamored with the book was that they felt a sense of ethnic pride when reading about a heroic woman of their own race. In addition, the girls’ interest in slavery and the Underground Railroad may have also been connected to an interest in their own racial heritage. While the other group members were not African-Canadian, it stands to reason that because Lynn and Shaquila were the two most outspoken members of the group, that their overwhelmingly positive attitude towards the biography may have influenced the way the other three students in the group perceived the book.

Also significant is that the book raised many issues regarding racism and slavery that the group was willing to tackle. Specifically, students in the MG Freedom Train group explored topics of historical import such as why slavery existed, how slaves were treated and how slavery eventually came to be abolished. They also discussed questions such as why racism exists in modern-day society and what the world would be like if people everywhere ceased to behave in discriminatory ways.

Group Dynamics and Values

The MG Freedom Train Group was the only group that Linda had a hand in forming. Consequently, unlike the other groups, the group members did not all start out as good friends or even as friendly acquaintances. That is to say, Lynn and Shaquila had been friends and Anoop and Amrit had been friends, but prior to literature circles, the two girls and the pair of boys had had very little to do with each other. And Sandy, for her part, entered the group, barely acquainted with any of the other group members.

Despite the initial lack of familiarity among group members and the girls' readiness to chastise the boys at the slightest provocation, I sensed an underlying ethos of compassion and mutual respect in the group. This was particularly evident in students' insistence that "a good group member" would be empathetic, caring and supportive of others.

And it is my contention that it was the supportive nature of the group that was responsible for much of learning that took place. Specifically, I believe that the reason so many questions were asked both specifically about the text and about broader issues relevant to the text was that from what I could observe, group members seemed to

entertain every question posed, patiently answered queries that could be readily answered and never belittled anyone for asking a question or stating an opinion. In such an environment, students could feel free to ask questions or seek clarifications about the text when necessary.

Another significant feature of the group dynamics was the fact that there were two articulate females with strong reading skills in the group who were not only willing but also able to provide direction for the group members with weaker language skills. I think Lynn and Shaquila's presence in the group was important to the group's success, because it is possible that if there had been five weak language arts students in the group, even if all students had been compassionate and friendly, the group may have just floundered without getting much accomplished.

Also, although Amrit and Anoop were occasionally off task, for the most part, the three girls seemed to keep the boys "in check," as it were, by monitoring their behavior and chastising them if they became too rambunctious. And the boys, for their part, were relatively docile and generally seemed willing to abide by the girl's rules. As a result, the group was generally (although not always) able to stay relatively focused and to engage in fruitful literature discussions.

On the negative side, the group atmosphere did not seem particularly conducive to exchanging personal stories. This was especially evident when Sandy revealed familial problems, and the boys, perhaps not knowing what to say, responded with inappropriate laughter. It is possible to speculate that if the group had been entirely composed of females, then there may have been more sharing of personal experiences.

One can conjecture too that the ethnic makeup of the group may have impacted on group discussions significantly. For instance, it is possible to speculate that the fact that Amrit and Anoop were the only two Indo-Canadians in the group may have stifled them in some ways. Specifically, it is possible that Amrit and Anoop felt uncomfortable talking about Indian culture or history in their group, when the dominant group members did not share their cultural background. In contrast, one can imagine that if Amrit and Anoop had been in a group with students such as Mira and Amarjeet who readily discussed Indian culture and history, they too may have been prompted to share their own culturally specific knowledge.

The All-Male (AM) Underground Group

The Text: *Underground to Canada* by Barbara Smucker

Overall, the boys in the All-Male (AM) Underground Group expressed overwhelmingly negative feelings towards the book. However, in the case of Curtis and Savinder, their negativity did not seem to impede their ability to comprehend the text. Judging from their remarks during literature discussions, both boys had a relatively good understanding of the text itself. Unfortunately, I am not at all certain that Ranjit and Gurpal were able to comprehend the novel equally well, and for them, lack of engagement may have been particularly problematic. That is, as weaker readers, they may have needed to be truly engaged in and excited about the book in order to make the effort to extract meaning from the text.

There are several possible reasons why the students in this group did not take to *Underground to Canada*, even though it is a well-written and highly regarded novel. One is that the boys may have been unable to relate to the main characters, two girls who were running away from slavery. Although the story was substantially action packed, the boys did not seem to care deeply about the protagonists, and therefore their interest in the book was minimal. Another problem may have been that the group required additional support and guidance to get them truly engaged in the book. In particular, it is possible to speculate that the boys may have responded to the book with more enthusiasm if they had had more knowledge of slavery, or if the written assignments had asked them to respond to the book in more creative and thought-provoking ways.

While the boys in the AM Underground Group did not seem to particularly enjoy reading *Underground to Canada*, the novel did provide them with a number of interesting topics to discuss. Specifically, because of the focus of the novel, students had an opportunity to discuss extensively the issue of slavery in the U.S as well as a variety of important social issues. In addition, because the book was, in some respects, an adventure story filled with drama and suspense, the boys had numerous opportunities to speculate about how the Liza and Julilly would fare during their travels and to debate what the girls should and should not do to survive their arduous journey.

Group Dynamics and Values

I found the roles and relationships established by members of the AM Underground Group particularly interesting because they were so different from those of

the other literature circle groups and because they seemed to change as the literature circle unit progressed.

Early on, Curtis seemed to sabotage the group discussions by refusing to answer questions posed by Savinder and by making dogmatic statements that seemed to effectively derail any conversations that Savinder tried to initiate. During those early discussions, I sensed that Savinder was genuinely trying to engage in dynamic discussions, and that there was something of a power struggle between Curtis and Savinder.

During their exemplary fish bowl discussion, however, the boys seemed to be working cooperatively as a team, with Savinder, Curtis and Gurpal all contributing to make the discussion successful. Interestingly, during that discussion, the boys seemed to place a premium on the ability to debate issues in a rational manner, as they constantly contradicted one another, using logical arguments to support their respective stances. Also, I observed that unlike the all-female groups, the AM Underground Group seemed not to particularly value personal connections. Instead, the boys seemed inclined to invoke broader connections that transcended time and place and involved looking at groups of people rather than specific individuals. It is interesting to speculate whether the impersonal, more abstract connections arose because of the particular gender makeup of the AM Underground Group.

During discussions that took place after the fishbowl, I observed that the cooperative spirit in the group had waned considerably. In these discussions, there was also not much evidence of a power struggle. Curtis had become uncharacteristically subdued, and Savinder had taken to unabashedly dominating conversations. Also, I

began to notice that unlike other groups, the AM Underground Group did not seem to place a high value on having input from all members. Only occasionally were opinions directly solicited, and as a result, Gurpal and Ranjit, the less vocal members of the group, were essentially silenced during many of the literature discussions. Consequently, these two boys did not seem to benefit from literature circles to the extent they may have had they been able to ask questions of their peers and engage in extended academic discourse.

In addition, my feeling is that overall, Savinder and Gurpal's negative attitudes towards literature circles and towards the novel strongly influenced Ranjit and Gurpal. While it is impossible to know for sure, it is possible to speculate that if Ranjit and Gurpal had been in a group with members who were enthusiastic about reading and discussing the text, that they may have perceived literature circles in a more positive light.

The AF Freedom Train Group

The Text: *Freedom Train: The Story of Harriet Tubman* by Dorothy Sterling

Overall, students in the All-female Freedom Train Group did not have overly positive feelings about the biography. Specifically, when asked about what they thought of the book, most of the girls in the group generally contended that they had mixed feelings towards the biography and that they liked some parts, but not others. Sonja however, expressed strongly negative feelings toward the entire book and claimed that she found reading the text downright tedious. I would assert that Sonja's negativity and the girls' overall lack of engagement with the characters in the biography adversely

impacted on their literature discussions. In contrast to the MG Freedom Train Group, the AF Freedom Train Group seemed less willing to use their imaginations to project themselves into the story and less willing to make a concerted effort to sort through textual details. In fact, even when they did engage in a prolonged discussion of what transpired in a given scene, they did not refer back to the text to answer their questions, perhaps indicating that they were not heavily committed to making sense of what the text had to say.

Why the girls' feelings towards the book ranged from lukewarm to outright hostile is an interesting question to ponder. There may be several explanations for why the girls related to the book in the way they did. First, it is important to consider that except for Sonja, the girls seemed generally interested in the biography during the initial literature circle sessions and gradually lost interest in the book as they came to the later chapters. I would argue that one reason for the change in their attitudes was that in the later chapters of the biography, there were frequent references to historical figures and events with which the girls were not familiar. Furthermore, in some cases, the figures and events were alluded to obliquely, but were not explained in sufficient detail to give the girls a good sense of what the author was trying to describe. Given that the students in this group were provided with barely any pertinent background information prior to or during the literature circle unit, it is no wonder that when bombarded with historical references in the later chapters of the book, they became confused, and their opinions of the book soured.

Another reason for the girls' lack of enthusiasm may have been that they did not feel that they could relate to Harriet Tubman and her experiences, particularly as the book

progressed and Harriet grew older. While discussing the early chapters which describe Harriet's childhood, the girls readily connected the hardships Harriet endured as a slave in the household of a tyrannical master with their own perceived hardships as children in households with parents, who, at times, seemed to wield absolute power. However, the girls could no longer empathize with Harriet after she escaped slavery because she was portrayed in the book as almost superhuman, someone who was practically invincible despite her physical impediments and the many challenges she faced.

Also, it may be speculated that the members of the AF Freedom Train group were relatively unenthusiastic about the biography because they were not themselves African-Canadian and had no special interest in African-American history. Nor is it likely that they felt a sense of pride in Harriet Tubman's achievements to the same extent that African-Canadian students might.

Beyond their not being terribly enthusiastic about the book itself, and not being able to empathize with Harriet Tubman, the girls in the AF Freedom Train group (with the exception of Amarjeet) did not seem overly interested in discussing the bigger issues raised in the text, namely slavery and racism. While the topics were discussed to some extent, Sonja, in particular, exhibited a strong aversion to talking about racial issues and became exasperated when Amarjeet asked thought-provoking questions regarding why people behave in discriminatory ways.

While it is difficult to know for sure why Sonja reacted the way she did when the topic of racism came up, my sense is that as one of the few Caucasian students in a class of visible minorities, she may have felt uncomfortable talking about how members of her own race oppressed others. She may have felt in a sense maligned, as though by talking

about the heinous acts committed by Whites, her peers were accusing her of belonging to a race of evil people. At times, Sonja responded with an attitude of defensiveness and explicitly disassociated herself from the White slave owners, by claiming that people today are "raised better" than those who perpetrated racist acts in the past. Additionally, it is possible that speaking about inter-group conflicts in any context may have been emotionally distressing to Sonja, due the fact that she was from Bosnia, a country plagued by tension between ethnic and religious groups.

Group Dynamics and Values

In trying to understand group dynamics, it is vital not only to look at the personalities of individual group members but also to look at the role each member plays within the group itself. In the AF Freedom Train Group, the strongest personalities were clearly Amarjeet and Sonja, and consequently both of these girls had a large impact on the group's literature discussions.

Amarjeet's impact on the group was very positive. With her willingness to ask provocative questions and raise issues of great import, Amarjeet was the group's social conscience, and she prompted the girls to engage in fascinating discussions of topics ranging from the persecution of Sikhs in India to the plight of African-American slaves.

Sonja, on the other hand, despite her insightful comments, seemed, at times, to have a somewhat negative effect on the group, particularly during the later literature discussions. Specifically, because Sonja was so vocal about her dissatisfaction with literature circles and would make distracting comments during literature discussions, it is my opinion that Sonja's attitude had an adverse effect on the motivation and the

productivity of the group as a whole. In addition, Sonja ended up sabotaging the group's discussions on racism by refusing to even consider the questions on the subject posed by Amarjeet.

The group dynamics in the AF Freedom Train group also seemed to be impacted by the fact that all four girls in the group were friends, a fact which seemed to have both positive and negative ramifications. On the positive side, because the girls were in the same social group, they felt comfortable speaking openly and honestly with one another. Specifically, Mira, who was generally more introverted than the others, felt comfortable enough in the group to express her opinions and even at times contradicting others. It is possible, that if she had been in a group in which she felt less secure, she may not have mustered the courage to speak so forthrightly. On the negative side, however, the girls were so relaxed with one another that they readily became distracted and engaged in off-topic conversation.

Assessing the Task Structure

Students' discussions were impacted substantially by the structure of the literature circles. Specifically, in this section, I explore how discussions were influenced by the literature discussion format, by the written work students completed during literature circles and by the allocation of time during the literature circle unit. I also explore how students may have been impacted by the role Linda assumed in the classroom when literature discussions were taking place.

Literature Discussion Format

Having a designated structure for students to follow in their discussions seemed to be generally beneficial. Requiring group members to collaboratively summarize the text, raise questions, make connections and share interesting passages provided students with a sense of structure that they felt comfortable with. Because there were prescribed tasks to perform, students were not under pressure to continuously generate new topics for discussion or to unnecessarily prolong uninteresting threads of conversation. When interest in a topic waned or a dialogue seemed to have run its course, students could simply go on to the next question or the next connection. Importantly, however, the format was not so rigid that it stifled students and prevented them from discussing interesting issues in depth.

In terms of specific role responsibilities, I found it generally beneficial to have students summarize the chapter, ask questions and share favorite passages. However, students did not receive great benefit from the connections they made to the text, primarily because many of their connections lacked any real substance. The superficial nature of the connections may have been a result of the fact that students were not given any guidance regarding how to make connections with the text. Also, in some cases, students simply did not have sufficient knowledge or experience to draw upon to constantly think up substantial connections to their reading, and it may have been unrealistic to expect them to make connections with every single chapter they read. I am also dubious that having the students "share" vocabulary words with their group was of any particular benefit to anyone other than the person who actually looked up the words.

I do not think that students generally learn vocabulary by hearing someone else read aloud verbatim a definition that has been copied out of the dictionary.

In regards to how students carried out role responsibilities, I think it can be concluded that in general, it is best for students not to have to assume one specific role during literature discussions. In particular, I observed that in the early weeks of the unit, when each student was responsible for a single task, the discussions tended to be extremely stilted. Perhaps because each student felt responsible only for making contributions associated with his particular role, group members did not seem particularly interested in responding to ideas presented by one another. In addition, I found it pedagogically questionable to arbitrarily designate one student to be responsible for making connections or asking questions, when, in fact, other group members might very well have thought-provoking questions or highly meaningful connections to make.

On the other hand, when Linda and I changed the task structure and began requiring students to jointly fulfill the responsibilities of various assigned roles, students seemed to benefit in a number of ways. Most significantly, students no longer sat passively by while their group mates presented ideas. Instead, they began to interact more and respond directly to one another's utterances. On occasion, they elaborated on one another's ideas and asked each other clarifying questions. That is to say, they began to engage, in some cases, in genuine dialogue resulting in the joint construction of knowledge.

Written Work

In the normal course of the literature circle unit, students had to do written work in conjunction with every chapter read. Specifically, they had to complete role sheets, write three vocabulary words with the definitions in their notebooks and prepare "good" questions to bring to discussions. In addition, they were periodically assigned to write in their journals, and fill out "reflection sheets" assessing their literature circle discussions.

Through observing student discussions, I came to realize that it is very fruitful to have students write out questions individually prior to their convening in literature circle groups. I found that in many cases, students prepared well thought out questions that generated dynamic discussions. Having students ask questions also gave them an important opportunity to exercise and develop their natural ability to be inquisitive (Barnes, 1992; Commeryas, 1995).

Unfortunately, I did not always find that having students write three vocabulary words for each chapter in their journals was similarly beneficial. My primary objection was that although some students found looking up definitions interesting and were able to integrate new words into their vocabulary, in many cases, students simply copied definitions out of the dictionary verbatim. They had no real understanding of what the words meant or how to use the word in context. Consequently, although students were filling task requirements, in many cases no real vocabulary learning was taking place.

In terms of the role sheets, it is interesting to note that although after the first few literature circle sessions, Linda asked students to begin completing the role sheets collaboratively after the discussion, in many cases, students did not follow her instructions. Depending on the group, students filled out role sheets before the

discussions, after the discussions or during the discussions. Similarly, some students worked cooperatively to fill out role sheets, while others worked on the sheets independently. Because students used the sheets in different ways, it is difficult to make general statements regarding the utility of the role sheets. However, what I can say is that the role sheets were beneficial to some extent in that they gave students an opportunity to reflect in various ways on what they had read or on what they had discussed with their peers.

Unfortunately, although the role sheets had some merit, they were relatively restrictive in that they required students to write in set ways about the text. Also, the fact that they were used for almost every chapter⁵ precluded the assigning of other tasks calling for a variety of potentially more interesting and creative types of responses to the literature.

Time Management

In my opinion, a major problem with the literature circles was that the allotted time was not used as efficiently as it could have been by both teacher and students. On most days, the students spent the entire one-hour block in literature circles. This was clearly too much time, as student discussions generally lasted only about 15-20 minutes, and role sheets could be completed in approximately 10-15 minutes. Consequently, students would use class time to finish up reading or do other preparatory work that should have been completed at home, and those students who were prepared would simply spend large chunks of time waiting for unprepared group members to catch up.

⁵ It should be noted, however that due to a large number of complaints by the students, Linda eventually decided to stop using the role sheets during the final weeks of the literature circle unit.

And in those cases, when a group did work diligently and manage to complete their discussion and the related written assignments in a reasonable amount of time, group members would often spend the remainder of the block fooling around or engaging in off-topic talk.

Because too often precious class time was simply not used as efficiently as it might have been, there was minimal time for other instructional activities that could potentially have greatly enhanced the literature circle unit. Specifically, because entire classes were devoted to having students prepare for and engage in small-group discussions, there were no opportunities for mini-lessons on topics such as author's craft or reading strategies, no opportunities for students to conduct outside research on topics related to their texts and hardly any chances for students to engage in teacher-guided whole-class discussions on fundamental issues around race and culture that were raised in all the texts.

Another problem with the literature circle unit was that students were restricted to preparing one chapter for each literature circle session. While for some students this pace may have been comfortable, for many students, being restricted to reading only a small number of pages every two or three days was frustrating. Perhaps, most distressing of all is that this pace meant that students spent an average of two months reading just a single book and did not have opportunities to do any other reading in their language arts class during that entire period of time.

Teacher's Role

Because I only occasionally had opportunities to observe Linda interacting with students in their literature circle groups, it is particularly difficult for me to assess how Linda's presence in particular groups impacted on students' discussions and their learning opportunities. However, on the few occasions that I was privy to Linda's interactions with various groups, my impression was that she seemed to be less interested in fostering students comprehension of textual details than with helping students to link the content of the book to larger social and historical issues. I would speculate that Linda's desire to have the students think about important issues around race and culture as well as her desire to make the books relevant to the students' lives must have impacted strongly on the types of discussions students had when she was with their group. In particular, I would imagine that when Linda was sitting with a group of students, they might have focused more on making connections and exploring social issues than on talking specifically about the text itself.

When asked about Linda's impact on their discussions, students themselves primarily mentioned that, as one would expect, they were generally more focused and on-task when Linda was present. In this respect, it can be said that simply by being present in a group, Linda positively influenced the learning of students in that group.

On the other hand, students also talked about being anxious when Linda was in the group, and one student mentioned that Linda generally talked too much. From these comments, it is possible to surmise that Linda may have also had a somewhat negative impact on group discussions with which she was involved. Specifically, it is possible that

some students may have been more hesitant to speak when Linda was present, because of fear that she would negatively evaluate their comments. In addition, it is possible that in trying to guide students, Linda may have, at times, taken the discussion in a direction that was contrary to the interests of the students themselves.

Speaking about her role in the classroom, Linda herself commented:

I enjoyed being more like the facilitator and just guiding them through some bumps in the road, sitting in on conversations and contributing myself.... In terms of my role, I've enjoyed it because the kids are teaching one another, and I'm there just to guide them along the way, give them suggestions, keep them on track, help them when problems arise, provide them with some sort of structure but also give them choices.

Physical Environment

During the early weeks of the literature circle unit, most literature circles sessions would take place in Linda's classroom. This was problematic for a number of reasons. One was that the class was overcrowded and when students got into groups to begin literature discussions, there was a general sense of chaos in the room. Students were sitting every which way, and there was a constant din that made it difficult for Linda and me to hear the students and for the students to meaningfully communicate with one another. To ameliorate the situation, Linda would often send a couple groups of students to work out in the hallway. However, while it was generally quieter in the hallway, the numerous teachers and students who would happen to walk by during the course of their discussion would inevitably distract the students working in the corridor.

Because her classroom was not conducive to literature discussions, midway through the literature circle unit, when possible, Linda began reserving the school cafeteria and having students do literature discussions there. The cafeteria was large and

spacious and contained rows of long white tables. In the cafeteria, students would arrange themselves, one group per table, with the groups spread out so that no group's conversation could disturb any other group.

While it is difficult to say conclusively how the move affected students' discussions, my sense is that students communicated better in the cafeteria than in the classroom because in the cafeteria, students could hear one another better and could focus better on what their group members were saying. Also, on an affective level, the students clearly enjoyed having discussions in the cafeteria more than they did in their regular classroom. In addition, Linda and I both felt relatively calm in the spacious cafeteria, whereas in the classroom we had felt somewhat overwhelmed and unfocused due to the constant commotion. We were able to better listen to students and help facilitate discussions in the cafeteria than in the classroom.

Material/Financial Resources

Another problem for the students in Linda's class was the lack of financial and material resources at the school's disposal and specifically the lack of money to buy new books. To me, this was especially distressing because, as mentioned previously, Linda and I had originally planned to buy multiple copies of several novels for the students to read. The texts we had selected included *Mina and the Spring of Colors* (Gilmore, 2000), a novel featuring an East-Indian Canadian girl caught between two cultures and *The Skin I'm In* (Flake, 1998), a novel featuring a 13-year old African-American female who has to contend with a number of problems including the derogatory comments of her African-American peers who chide her for being "too black." In addition, we had planned to

purchase *Joey Pigza Swallowed the Key* (Gantos, 1998), a novel about a mischievous boy with attention deficit disorder that we had thought might be particularly appealing to the male students in the class.

While I cannot know for certain, I think that these books would have, in general, engaged the interest of Linda's students, because not only are they well written, but they deal with issues that are very relevant to young adolescents living in a multicultural society. Considering the ethnic makeup of Linda's class, I think it would have been wonderful to give students the opportunity to read a book with a South Asian-Canadian protagonist because reading such a novel may have prompted them to feel a sense of pride in their ethnic heritage. Also, discussing a book having to do with Indian culture may have resulted in East Indian students having a large number of opportunities to share the knowledge they brought from their homes and communities and may have given all bicultural (as well as monocultural) students in the class a chance to explore how they themselves deal with issues of ethnicity and identity.

Thinking about how purchasing new books may have enhanced the learning opportunities for many of the students in Linda's class, I feel intensely frustrated. It seems terribly unfair that students' learning should be impeded by the lack of financial resources in the schools.

School Environment

The environment in a school is heavily influenced by government policies as well as by the rules of the specific school and the general tone established by administrators who oversee the running of the institution. Yet those who are most heavily affected by a

school's environment are the teachers who work in the school and the students who learn there.

In some ways, Linda was fortunate to be teaching seventh grade at South Lake Middle. Her principal and vice-principal were supportive of the idea of implementing literature circles, and she had considerable freedom to choose what and how she wanted to teach in her language arts class. The freedom to make such curricular decisions was a direct result of the fact that her seventh graders were not required to take a standardized literacy test at any time during the year. If they had been scheduled to take such a test, Linda would have undoubtedly been under a great deal of pressure to "teach to the test" and would probably not have been able to implement literature circles. Similarly, if she had a principal who insisted on more traditional teaching methods, she would not have been able to experiment with a concept as innovative as literature circles.

On the negative side, Linda's efforts to implement literature circles in the most effective manner possible were clearly constrained by her working conditions. Specifically, the fact that she was teaching five different subjects meant that she could not put a great deal of time into planning for literature circles. I would imagine that if she had been teaching only one or two subjects, she may have been able to spend more time creating a variety of interesting literature circle activities that could have supplemented role sheet assignments.

In addition, Linda was hampered by the fact that she did not have opportunities to meet with colleagues who could offer her support regarding the literature circle implementation. The reason she and her fellow teachers did not generally confer with one another was that there no specific time allotted in the school day for teachers to share

ideas. Furthermore, teachers often had to spend their planning periods covering other teachers' classes, due to a shortage of substitute teachers. From my perspective, the lack of cooperation among teachers was regrettable because, while Linda and I worked together as best as we could, she and her students may have benefited tremendously from the opportunity to get additional input from other language arts teachers.

Conclusion

There were a number of complex factors that impacted on students' experiences with literature circles. Students' experiences were primarily affected by the text they discussed and the way they interacted with one another. However, literature circle groups were also influenced by the structure of the literature circle unit as well as by other contextual factors that directly or indirectly influenced their learning environment. It becomes clear that there is no simple answer to the question of why students learned what they did. Only by looking at both micro and macro factors can we begin to gain an understanding of why learning opportunities varied widely from group to group and some students benefited from literature circles tremendously while other benefited from the innovation only minimally.

CHAPTER 9: FINAL REFLECTIONS

In this final chapter, I reflect on my own considerable learning throughout the research process. In particular, because my primary interest is in trying to make research applicable to classroom practice, I focus on the insights I gained that may be particularly useful to classroom teachers.

Choosing Texts

Reflecting on the successes and failures of the literature circle unit Linda and I implemented, I am struck by the extent to which the text a student chose to read and discuss impacted on the student's overall experience with literature circles. In general, students who found the texts they read interesting and engaging had a positive attitude towards literature circles and seemed to receive many cognitive and affective benefits from engaging in literature discussions. Conversely, students who were not particularly taken with their chosen text, generally perceived literature circles in a negative light, were often disengaged during literature discussions, and were ultimately afforded fewer learning opportunities than their peers.

I have come to realize that for optimal learning to take place in small-group peer-led literature discussions, students must be provided with a selection of books that not only raise substantial issues for discussion, but that will engage the students' interest. While it is not always easy to determine what books will appeal to students, my research experience has taught me that the nature of a text's protagonist is an important factor in determining whether or not students will find the text engaging. If students can empathize with the main character in a text, they will more than likely find the written

work interesting and be motivated to engage in dynamic discussions of the text. When they feel a kinship with a character, they may revel in projecting themselves into the text and imagining themselves in the place of that character. When students can relate to characters in a book, they may be prompted to share similarities and differences between their own lives and the lives of the characters.

I have learned that when trying to determine if students will relate to a protagonist or not, it is important to look beyond factors such as the race of the character and the time period in which he or she lives. As was evident with the students in All-Female The Star Fisher Group, students can readily relate to characters whose lives seem on the surface vastly different from theirs, if the characters have experiences, problems and values that are similar to their own.

On the other hand, if students feel the characters have problems and experiences with which they cannot relate at all, students will be less likely to try to make an effort to extract meaning from the text and to delve into an analysis of the characters' behavior. "Unless pupils are willing to take the risk of some emotional commitment, they are unlikely to learn" (Barnes, 1992, p. 87).

This is not to say that teachers should not use books depicting characters who think and act in ways that do not immediately resonate with their North American students. It is indeed vital to expose students to multicultural literature that broadens their horizons and challenges them with unfamiliar ways of perceiving the world. However, if students are left alone with such challenging texts, they may be apt to react negatively and become disengaged (Beach, 1997; Soter, 1999). Texts with characters to whom students can not easily relate are generally not appropriate for small-group

literature discussions where different groups of students are reading different books, and the teacher is unable to provide extensive scaffolding for any one group.

Instead, I would suggest that if a teacher chooses to teach a book that may not be readily accessible to students for whatever reason, that book should be given to all students in the class to read as a class text. In that way, the teacher can focus her energies on familiarizing herself with the complexities of the chosen text, and she can take the time to provide the whole class with crucial background information that will give students a better understanding of the characters and the context depicted. In addition, teachers who are focused on teaching just one book will have the opportunity to endeavor to help students overcome their resistance to a text by having the students critically examine their own attitudes regarding race and culture.

Grouping

Having thought about why certain groups learned more and were generally happier than other groups, I've also come to understand the role of group dynamics in determining how productively and enthusiastically groups engage in literature discussions. I have learned that when teachers strategically form students groups, factors that should be taken into consideration include the personality traits and academic abilities of group members, as well as the gender and ethnic makeup of the group. The nature of a group is very often determined by the values and attitudes of the most dominant group members. For instance, the overall enthusiasm of the Mixed-Gender Freedom Train Group during literature circles was largely due to the positive attitudes of Lynn and Shaquila, the two most vocal members of the group. Likewise, I believe that

the pervasive negativity of the All-Male Underground Group can, in part, be attributed to the fact that Savinder and Curtis, the strongest members of the literature circle group, frequently and vociferously expressed their contempt for literature circles.

Similarly, if the dominant students in the group make a concerted effort to solicit participation of all group members, as was the case in the Mixed-Gender Freedom Train Group, the AF Star Fisher Group and the AF Freedom Train Group, then even the more reticent group members will venture to voice their opinions and pose questions. However, if the most assertive group members unabashedly dominate conversations, as happened in the case of the AM Underground Group, less verbal students will be effectively denied opportunities to engage in academic discourse.

Consequently, if teachers decide to hand pick groups for literature discussions, it might be prudent to consider the personality traits and academic abilities of students in the class and to place one student with strong leadership qualities in each literature circle group. In choosing students with leadership qualities, teachers could look for students who have good literacy and oracy skills, are vocal but not overbearing and have a generally positive attitude towards school.

In terms of gender, I realize that some educators (Cox and Boyd-Batstone, 1997) choose to group students, so that the gender makeup of the group reflects the gender makeup of the class as a whole. However, my research suggests that at times, all-female and all-male groups may be appropriate. In particular, I found that all-female groups were more apt to discuss personal and emotionally laden issues than all-male or mixed-gender groups. Therefore, if a text deals with a sensitive topic and is likely to elicit strong emotional reactions from students, then it might be advantageous to have all-

female groups. As certain books appeal specifically to boys or girls, and four boys had a strong desire to read a certain book, for instance, I think it would be acceptable to have the boys form an all-male group. Likewise, if four girls wanted to read a particular book, I would find nothing wrong with having them form an all girl group.

In terms of ethnic makeup, as many researchers suggest (London, 1994; Johnson and Johnson, 1994), having diverse students work together can improve relationships among students of different backgrounds. This was particularly notable in the MG Freedom Train Group in which Punjabi, Caribbean and Caucasian students grew closer to one another as a result of participating in literature circles. Another reason I would recommend that students of various cultural backgrounds be grouped together in literature circles is that students can learn about one another's culture during literature discussions. This cross-cultural exchange was evident to some extent in the AF Freedom Train when Amarjeet and Mira talked about Sikh history, and Ruth talked about life in Pakistan.

Various grouping strategies are appropriate depending on the objectives of the teacher and the types of texts students are reading. By frequently varying the constitution of literature groups, teachers will enable students to have the opportunity to work with all different group members and have a variety of different learning experiences.

Task Structure

In this section on task structure, I focus on what being in Linda's class taught me about how to implement a literature circle unit and what I would suggest to teachers who have the opportunity to design such a unit for their own class. Most importantly, I would

suggest that teachers expand the scope of the literature circles and not limit students to filling in role sheets requiring them to summarize, make connections, ask questions and note interesting passages. These are important tasks and should be assigned on occasion, but teachers could also introduce a variety of other tasks to enhance students' learning and prevent them from becoming bored with the sameness of literature circles. For instance, teachers could have students collaboratively compile a list of attributes of a character in the text or write out questions that they might want to pose to a given character if he mysteriously materialized in the classroom⁶. Such assignments would give students a chance to exercise their imaginations and would prompt them to think more deeply about the nature of the characters in the text.

Another suggestion would be to give students more explicit instructions in what it means to make meaningful connections to the text. Teachers need to emphasize to students that making a good intertextual connection does not mean vaguely relating an event in one's own life to an event in the text in the way that Ruth connected her shopping mall trip to two elderly slaves' journey to freedom. Instead, making a connection that fosters learning entails exploring similarities and differences between what one has read and what one has previously learned about or experienced in order to "link ideas together, see new relationships, and bring unity to [one's] understandings" (Short, 1992, p. 317). Students should be taught that if they want to make a connection between Harriet Tubman and Rosa Parks, they need to be more explicit about the connection between the two women. They need to try to describe in what ways the women are similar and in what ways they are different. Also, they need to explore, for

⁶ These ideas are adapted from ideas presented in *Reading Response Logs* (Kooy and Wells, 1996).

instance, what looking at the lives of these two heroic black women in juxtaposition reveals to us about black history, courage and what it means to be a strong woman.

Students should also understand that meaningful personal connections arise when characters or events in the text trigger our own memories and prompt us to look inside and examine our own lives. For instance, when Lily wrote about her experiences alienation, I sensed that reading certain scenes in *The Star Fisher* had prompted her to reflect on painful childhood experiences. Such connections though are genuine responses to a text that moves us. Asking students to make connections too frequently leads to students simply manufacturing superficial connections. Therefore, I would suggest that teachers encourage students to make personal connections on occasion, but not require connections to be made on a regular basis.

And lastly, I would emphasize the importance of teachers managing time in such a way that they have sufficient opportunities to have whole-class discussions and mini-lessons on literary language and author's craft. As Purves (1993) asserts, it is essential for language arts teachers to help students "read literature...to speculate on the nature and use of language that is the medium for artistic expression" (p. 360).

Conclusion

There are, inevitably, limitations inherent in any case study. What I have documented and analyzed in this paper is specific to one particular classroom and may not necessarily be applicable to other contexts. Therefore, it is my sincere hope that researchers will continue to study factors impacting on the learning that takes place in literature discussions in a variety of contexts. From what I have observed in Linda's

classroom, I think that educators need to have a better understanding of the complexities of group dynamics, and there is a need for additional studies focusing on the relationship between group dynamics in a particular group and the learning that takes place in that group. In addition, I believe that there needs to be more research on how institutional and political factors impact directly and indirectly on the literacy learning that takes place in classrooms. A deeper understanding of all aspects of peer discourse, I believe, is particularly essential as more and more teachers are embracing not only literature discussion groups, but also a whole range of collaborative learning activities.

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APPENDIX A: PROTOCOL FOR INTERVIEWS WITH STUDENTS

Topic	Questions
Lit Circle Benefits	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What for you were the benefits of literature circles? If you were going to recommend a teacher to use literature circles, what would you say to persuade her/him? • What aspects of the literature circles did you find helpful (asking questions, making connections, talking about the vocabulary words etc.) • Did you learn anything about your fellow students from talking to them about literature? • In the discussion groups, often, different people have different opinions on issues that come up. Can you tell me one instance in which talking to your peers in the discussion groups increased your understanding of an issue, or in some way led you to rethink your own beliefs?
Previous Experiences	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What kind of stuff have you done with reading in the past? • How are lit circles different than other types of literature instruction? • How often have you done group/cooperative learning in school?
Negative Aspects /Improvements	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What were the negative things about literature circles? • How could literature circles have been improved?
Role Sheets	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Did they help you in any way? • What is the purpose of doing role sheets • When did you do the role sheets, before or after discussions? Why? • Did you do the role sheets collaboratively or independently? • How did you decide who would do what role sheet? • How do you think the task would have been different if you were told to just discuss and not given so much structure?
Novel	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What did you think of your novel? • Did the novel give you lots of good stuff to discuss?
Interpersonal context	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Tell me what makes someone a good group member? • In general, did your group members worked well together? • Was there a student who was sort of the group leader? • What did you do when someone was off task or not prepared?
Individual and social meanings	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What is the purpose of literature circles? • What is the purpose of reading? • What is the purpose of reading? • What is the purpose of writing about what you've read?
Local cultures and institutions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How did the open structure of the classroom affect you? • How did Mrs. Haynes' and I impact on your discussions?

APPENDIX B: INTERVIEW GUIDE FOR INTERVIEW WITH LINDA

1. Educational/ Professional Background
 - a. Training in teaching literature (literacy)
 - b. Previous teaching experiences (literature/literacy)
 - c. Training in cooperative learning
 - d. Other uses of cooperative learning in the classroom
2. Motivation for Using Literature Circles
 - a. Goals
 - b. Expectations
 - c. Reservations
3. Thoughts on Teaching Resources (Reference Materials)
 - a. Literature Circles: Voice and Choice in the Student-Centered Classroom (Daniels, 1994)
 - b. Other books and articles
4. Texts
 - a. Were you happy with the texts chosen?
 - b. What did you think about using several different novels?
 - i. Advantages?
 - ii. Difficulties?
5. Role Sheets
 - a. What are your feelings about the role sheets?
 - b. Did you think they were helpful for the students?
 - c. Would you use them again? (Which ones? How? For how long?)
6. Task Structure
 - a. What are your feelings about the way the task was structured?
 - b. Benefits?
 - c. Disadvantages?
 - d. How would you structure the task differently if you were doing small-group literature discussions again?
7. Benefits
 - a. From your perspective, what were the benefits of using literature circles?
 - b. What aspects in particular, do you think were beneficial to the students?
 - c. What about literature circles pleasantly surprised you?
8. Disappointments
 - a. Did anything about literature circles disappoint you? (Be specific.)
9. Constraints
 - a. What factors had a negative impact on literature circles? (i.e. physical structure, time etc.)
10. Individual Groups
 - a. What were your impressions of how each group worked together?
 - b. What do you think accounted for the successes/failures of each group?
 - c. In retrospect, would you group students differently?
11. Your Role

- a. What are your feelings about your role in the classroom?
- b. How were you able to help students in the classroom?
- c. Do you wish you had done anything differently?
- d. How did your need to evaluate students affect your role in the classroom?
- e. What other factors affected your role in the classroom?

12. The Language Arts Program

- a. What else was done in language arts this year?

13. Teacher-researcher collaboration

- a. Benefits
- b. Difficulties

APPENDIX C: STORY MAP

Appendix C

Story Map

