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# A Case Study for Improving Reading Comprehension in Third Grade Using Literature Circles

Joy Hinds

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# A Case Study for Improving Reading Comprehension in Third Grade Using Literature Circles

**Abstract**

This action research study investigated whether or not literature circles help increase reading comprehension, especially for young readers who are relatively new to interacting with chapter books. The participants were ten third grade students in a general education classroom. All students completed a Differentiated Reading Assessment (DRA) before beginning literature circles. These groups were created with three or four students each, according to their interest and book choice. With the teacher helping to facilitate group discussion, these literature circles met regularly during class. After about four weeks, all students were again assessed using the DRA benchmark assessment to compare comprehension data. The results of this study indicate that literature circles had a significant positive impact on the reading comprehension of third grade students.

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A Case Study for Improving Reading Comprehension in Third Grade Using Literature Circles

by

Joy Hinds

B.A. Trinity Western University, 2006  
B.Ed. Trinity Western University, 2007

Action Research Report  
Submitted in Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the  
Degree of Master of Education

Department of Education  
Dordt College  
Sioux Center, Iowa  
May, 2019

A Case Study for Improving Reading Comprehension in Third Grade Using Literature Circles

by

Joy Hinds

Approved:

Patricia Kornelis, Ed.D.  
Faculty Advisor

April 17, 2019  
Date

Approved:

Stephen Holtrop, Ph.D.  
Director of Graduate Studies

April 17, 2019  
Date

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Story sparks our imagination and inspires us. From a young age, I remember fun bedtime stories and my family reading aloud chapter books together in the living room. The school bus was a place for curling up with a book during the long ride home. Even today, my favorite place in a book store is the children's literature section. Having fallen in love with good stories as a young reader, I enjoy helping my elementary students discover that joy and fun in reading too. God has given me the gift and the love for teaching, and I am thankful for this opportunity to grow. I want to thank my parents for encouragement to pursue this degree at Dordt College, and for making reading as a family a treasured time. While many teachers and instructors shaped my thinking along the way, I am especially thankful to Dr. Monica Hilder for both inspiring me as an undergrad student in her wonderful Children's Literature course and later welcoming me as a teacher with further discussion about story, imagination, and Narnia. I also appreciate Dr. Pat Kornelis for equipping me well for this journey and giving me courage to create an action research study in a topic I love. My gratitude also goes to Wendy, our school librarian, for sharing my passion for children's literature and brainstorming book selections as well as literature circle logistics with me over a mocha. Thank you to the many people who are praying me through each day. It is a gift to live out God's Story. Further up and further in!

**Table of Contents**

Title Page ..... i

Approval ..... ii

Acknowledgements ..... iii

Table of Contents ..... iv

List of Tables ..... v

Abstract ..... vi

Introduction ..... 1

Review of the Literature ..... 5

Methods ..... 14

Results ..... 18

Discussion ..... 23

References ..... 28

Appendixes

    Appendix A: Literature Circle Role Sheets ..... 31

**List of Tables**

Table	Page
1. Overall Results Comparing Reading Comprehension Scores Before and After Literature Circles .....	19
2. Winter Quarter Reading Comprehension Sub-categories: 4-point Rubric Scale .....	20
3. Spring Quarter Reading Comprehension Sub-categories: 4-point Rubric Scale .....	21
4. Statistical Analysis of the Data: t-Test: Paired Two Sample for Means .....	22

**Abstract**

This action research study investigated whether or not literature circles help increase reading comprehension, especially for young readers who are relatively new to interacting with chapter books. The participants were ten third grade students in a general education classroom. All students completed a Differentiated Reading Assessment (DRA) before beginning literature circles. These groups were created with three or four students each, according to their interest and book choice. With the teacher helping to facilitate group discussion, these literature circles met regularly during class. After about four weeks, all students were again assessed using the DRA benchmark assessment to compare comprehension data. The results of this study indicate that literature circles had a significant positive impact on the reading comprehension of third grade students.

*Keywords:* literature circles, reading comprehension



Beloved stories. Well-worn books. Lifelong readers. A deep hope of elementary teachers is for their students to fall in love with books and learn to read well. Yet reading proficiency remains a complex task to teach young readers, especially with students who find reading a chore and struggle to understand grade-appropriate material: “For reading to become a lifelong habit and a deeply owned skill, it has to be voluntary, anchored in feelings of pleasure and power” (Daniels, 2002, p. 19). Elementary literacy programs need ways to equip young readers, serve those who are often left behind, encourage those too shy to participate in class discussion, and bring that joy of learning to read at the next level. In order to address these concerns, educators must understand from an instructional standpoint what specific factors lead to an increase in reading proficiency.

A crucial element of literacy instruction involves teaching students how to understand what they read (Rasinski, 2017, p. 519). Ability to comprehend or understand reading material grows particularly important in the second, third, and fourth grades as students tackle more complex texts and begin to dive into chapter books during literacy instruction or during their independent reading time (Baumann, Fuentes, & Holman, 1996, p. 3). Additionally, teachers commonly view third grade as the year where students shift from the goal of “learning to read” into primarily “reading to learn”. At this level, science and social studies textbooks often begin providing content for background information, experiments, and group discussion or debate. An increasing number of story problems in math are designed to have students both decode and understand the content in order to fully participate in the learning. Even creative learning activities, like a Reader’s Theater to bring alive history lessons or a special school program, often require application of multiple literacy skills for comprehensive understanding. As upper elementary classrooms make this transition in learning, struggling readers may not only find

language arts activities a challenge, but also many other subject areas as well where reading skills are helpful or required. Therefore, ability to understand what they read in any subject remains a crucial skill for students as they grow into mature readers.

One key factor to consider is effective reading instruction. Research points toward literature circles as a powerful instructional model that “draws on three main streams of thinking: independent reading, reader response theory, and collaborative learning” (Daniels, 2002, p. 33). While elementary schools now widely recognize the importance of daily independent reading, literature circles pair this time with discussion in an empowering, peer-led context. Reading involves thinking, which is highlighted in real-time conversations about a book. Literature circle groups potentially serve as an instructional context for students to apply their developing comprehension skills by listening to other students in a range of grade levels, from a range of backgrounds. Teachers aim to make these “small-group, peer-led literature discussions sites for comprehension strategy practice” (Berne & Clark, 2008, p. 74). While most commonly utilized in the middle school or high school setting, literature circles may offer a potentially effective tool for guiding younger students through more challenging reading material as well.

Literature circles may not only be an effective way to coach children toward reading proficiency and comprehension, but they may also tap into the power of shared story. When people gather around a book they chose and care about, the opportunity to share and discuss it with others actually multiplies the enjoyment and learning. Shared observations, context, and connections in a literature circle group can naturally spur on further thoughts for discussion that build on one another with deeper reflection. To discover more in a great story (which an individual may not have noticed at first) through group conversation is like discovering yet more treasure or figuring out another piece of a puzzle. Independent reading paired with collaborative

discussion creates a naturally rewarding and memorable learning experience for young readers as they enjoy exploring it together.

Using literature circles as an instructional strategy also honors learners, as they exercise their God-given ability to create meaning in a learning community. The structure invites students to actively engage with the book in preparation and welcomes their personal response. Comprehension involves making sense of what someone else wrote, and children can discover a book's meaning through various ways of interacting with it. They may participate through creative predictions, artistic expression, thoughtful reflection questions, or personal text-to-self connections. Providing multiple ways to engage with and understand a story in this manner recognizes the unique learning experience each student discovers for themselves in the story, which make it meaningful to them as individuals. To teach the whole child, educators need to provide appropriate space for gathering around quality literature and engaging it more deeply together. Literature circles may not only equip elementary classrooms to achieve high standards for learning but may also help educators use literacy tools that honor students as creative meaning-makers.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study was to determine if using literature circles with chapter books in third grade would increase student comprehension scores on reading benchmark assessments. The researcher hoped to identify how well this instructional practice equips students to apply reading strategies and more fully understand what they read in the future. Further, the researcher sought to provide insights into literacy instruction that may better equip students to transition into both reading and enjoying chapter books with ability to maintain comprehension over a longer period of time. To that end, the study addressed the following research question:

**Research Question**

Do literature circles help increase overall reading comprehension, especially for young readers who are relatively new to interacting with a longer chapter book text?

**Definition of Terms**

For the purpose of this study, the following definitions are used. The definitions are the author's own, unless otherwise indicated:

*Developmental Reading Assessment (DRA or DRA2)* = A formative reading assessment system that allows teachers to observe and measure student reading engagement, oral reading fluency, and comprehension.

*Literature Circles* = Small, peer-led groups that discuss the same story, poem, article, or book they have all read (Daniels, 2002, p. 2). Also sometimes called lit circles, literature discussion groups, book clubs, reading circles, or reading groups.

*Metacognition* = Ability to recognize how you learn or to explain your own thought process

*Reading Comprehension* = Ability to understanding what one has read (Rasinski, 2017, p. 519).

*Reading Fluency* = Ability to read smoothly with expression at an appropriate reading rate.

*Running Record* = Observation notes as a child reads aloud, detecting a student's errors and the strategies employed to decode unfamiliar words.

*Reading Strategies* = Ways that proficient readers cognitively process text, such as predicting, connecting, questioning, visualizing, determining importance, inferring, or retelling.

*Think-aloud* = An instructional model where the teacher models and explains what they are thinking as they complete an activity.

*Word Decoding* = Ability to use knowledge of letter-sounds to figure out how to pronounce an unknown word.

## Review of the Literature

### Literacy Challenges

In the elementary classroom, there is an urgency to help children learn to read well. Research has long shown a strong correlation between learning to read early and an individual's ability to later achieve academically (Neese, 2017). Experts believe "that students who read with understanding at an early age gain access to a broader range of texts, knowledge, and educational opportunities, making early reading comprehension instruction particularly critical" (Shanahan, Callison, Carriere, Duke, Pearson, Schatschneider, & Torgesen, 2010, p. 5). Reading skills are central not only to success in school, but also open a child's world to learn independently and to filter information on a variety of topics that may impact the spheres of professional, social, and civic life.

Yet research shows that a significant number of students lack a strong reading foundation and continue to struggle in becoming proficient readers, despite the fact that quality literacy instruction remains a priority for primary and elementary educators. According to the United States National Assessment of Educational Progress, some 32% of fourth grade students scored below the "basic" level in reading performance (National Center for Education Statistics, 2018). If students experience reading difficulty and "continue to struggle in the upper elementary grades with competencies that should have been adequately developed in the primary grades, it is likely that those areas of concern will continue to plague students' overall reading proficiency" (Rasinski, 2017, p. 520). Indeed, studies show that students who have not achieved proficiency in reading by grade 3 are four times more likely than proficient third grade readers to not graduate from high school (Hernandez, 2011, p. 3). The earlier students master foundational

reading skills, the more likely they will be able to make good progress in comprehension and overall reading achievement through grade school and well beyond.

### **Transition in Third Grade**

Third grade is typically a pivotal year where many students shift from picture books to reading chapter books. They are eager to explore the world of more complex story and ongoing series. Teachers sometimes assume this is a natural transition, but that is not always the case:

We have found that many students have difficulty making this transition. Some students seem to choose chapter books that are too difficult and pretend to read them just to be like other more advanced students. Other students often avoid selecting chapter books for recreational reading and instead choose books that can be read in one sitting.

(Baumann et al, 1996, p. 3)

Another unfortunate pattern that sometimes develops is that students may enthusiastically choose to read a chapter book at their appropriate reading level, but then rarely complete it. In order to continue tracking with the story in a chapter book, students need instruction in solid comprehension tools that will equip them to understand more challenging reading material.

Further research highlights how support through guided literacy instruction may help third grade students change their mindset, access enjoyment of a more complex story, and better navigate this reading transition. In one qualitative study, a third-grade student reading below grade level reported a preference for short excerpts in a basal text over chapter books due to difficulty in tracking the beginning, middle, and end. The researchers noted that “these students will require high-interest texts, additional scaffolding and targeted interventions to support them in moving toward authentic novels” (Certo, Moxley, Reffitt, & Miller, 2010, p. 251). Another study showed how guided literacy activities and discussion groups increased student ability to

maintain understanding and enjoyment throughout an extended text: “Students began to see chapter books as accessible reading choices. . . Students enjoyed discovering and reporting that chapter books many times included more interesting character development, complex plot twists and increased suspense” (Baumann et al, 1996, p. 4). During the reading process, effective comprehension support can enable young readers to track and enjoy a story throughout the chapters.

### **Reading Comprehension**

Teaching comprehension skills at an early age stands out as a key element for developing capable readers down the road. Along with particular focus on foundational decoding for “word identification and reading fluency in kindergarten through grade 2” (Rasinski, 2017, p. 521), experts call for focus on text comprehension as an ongoing, increasingly essential element for reading proficiency. Reading comprehension, or “understanding what one reads, can reasonably be seen as the goal of reading” (Rasinski, 2017, p. 519). When students do not demonstrate proficiency in reading comprehension, they are identified as struggling readers. Therefore, according to a guide from the Institute of Education Sciences (IES), a part of the United States Department of Education, students in kindergarten through third grade should learn how to use reading strategies to improve reading comprehension (Shanahan et al, 2010, p. 10). Although instructional practices for beginning readers will naturally differ somewhat from practices in second or third grade, when students exhibit more mastery over language, effective instruction involves breaking down the complex process of comprehension into specific skills or strategies.

With explicit instruction on how to think while reading, students develop comprehension by applying these intentional, mental actions during the reading process (Neese, 2017). The fundamental objective with this type of literacy instruction is “to give young readers the tools

they need to understand increasingly sophisticated material in all subjects from elementary through later years of school” (Shanahan et al, 2010, p. 5). After examining ten studies where instruction of reading strategies had positive effects on overall comprehension, the IES panel of experts identified the following six strategies as the most important in the primary grades for improving reading comprehension: predicting, questioning, visualizing, monitoring or clarifying, making inferences, and retelling (Shanahan et al, 2010, p. 11). Literacy instruction that focuses on these six comprehension strategies can help students actively make meaning while they read and overcome comprehension difficulty.

### **Literature Circles**

A combination of independent reading and guided comprehension instruction may support young or reluctant readers so that they understand what they read with increasing enjoyment and reward. Reading achievement is highly correlated with independent reading: “The centrality of independent reading to students’ lifelong literacy development has been underscored in every major report on reading issued over the past two decades” (Daniels, 2002, p. 33). Elementary educators look to make the most of this valuable independent reading time by also pairing it with instructional frameworks that will equip young readers to use comprehension strategies like real adult, lifelong readers. One popular method of instruction that has increased both student motivation and comprehension understanding are literature circles:

Literature circles are small, peer-led discussion groups whose members have chosen to read the same story, poem, article, or book. While reading each group-assigned portion of the text (either in or outside of class), members make notes to help them contribute to the upcoming discussion, and everyone comes to the group with ideas to share. (Daniels, 2002, p. 2)



Where “authentic and engaging foundational instruction can help many students move toward reading proficiency” (Rasinski, 2017, p. 518), literature circles emulate adult book clubs in a classroom context. They place heavy focus on peer-led discussion about a text and “require students to rely on their comprehension of the material in order to share their understanding with group members” (Coccia, 2015, p. 11). When students gather together, the format allows them to also “deepen comprehension and extend their initial understanding through discussion with peers. As students read and internalize information with others, questions and textual elements are scrutinized” (Jacobs, 2015, p. 6). Rich comprehension elements are naturally explored, just like in a real-life book club, and reinforced as students engage with chosen reading material in meaningful discussion.

Literature circles have been a classroom comprehension tool for over 35 years. In 1982, after her fifth-graders discovered a box of forgotten books in her classroom, teacher Karen Smith observed students a few days later gathering to talk about the books they were reading and knew she was witnessing something special: “She sat in on a couple of the groups and was dazzled by the quality, depth, range, and energy of the talk she heard. Karen’s ten-year-old students had just invented their own literature circles” (Daniels, 2002, p. 32). With the assistance of her professors at Arizona State University, Smith explored how she could enter into children’s book-talks without dominating the interaction and began to develop the format now recognized as literature circles (Coccia, 2015, p. 5). Daniels became the next educational leader associated with this valuable comprehension method in 1994 through the first edition of his book on literature circles. According to Daniels, a major part of the success and popularity of this literacy instruction model comes from authentic interactions with material:

Teachers who implement literature circles in their classroom are recreating for their students the kind of close, playful interaction that scaffolds learning so productively elsewhere in life. . . It's no surprise, then, that teachers are energized by literature circles, that they so often comment on how much they and their students *enjoy* the time together. And when fun is unleashed in the classroom, can learning be far behind?" (Daniels, 2002, p. 25).

Literature circles are "ways to capture children's imagination in and out of the classroom by immersing them in rich, provocative literature – literature that has the potential to challenge, arouse interest, and awaken in students a passion for reading and imagining" (Long & Gove, 2003, p. 350). This combination of student ownership, independent reading, and collaborative learning brings together powerful theories of education in a playful, highly motivating format.

Accompanying this boom in the practice of literature circles and teacher testimonials, researchers have studied how literature circles impact student reading comprehension. Research indicates that "an important benefit of literature discussion is its potential to help students learn to comprehend, that is, to develop their comprehension processes" (Berne & Clark, 2008, p. 74). Literature circles encourage an in-depth examination of a text where "the main points such as characters, personalities of them, the space where the events take place, time of the events and unknown words are handled in a detailed way" (Avci & Yuksel, 2011, p. 1299). The overwhelming evidence shows that students understand the books they read very well, because this type of close reading leads to an increase in understanding. Daniels (2002) highlighted a sample study that echoes his own research, linking literature circles to improving student achievement scores. In a 1998 study of fourth graders, Klinger, Vaughn, and Schumm found that "students in peer-led groups made greater gains than control groups in reading

comprehension and equal gains in content knowledge after reading and discussing social studies material” (Daniels, 2002, p. 8). Quality peer-discussion and reading comprehension strategies bolster student understanding as they engage in literature circles.

Even when students may not understand a part of the text, they have opportunity to learn more about it from others who have stronger comprehension skills and are able to discuss their reading strategy with team members. The students read the book meticulously by internalizing it, discussing small details, and correcting misunderstandings through peer discussion (Avci & Yuksel, 2011, p. 1298). While an individual student may read a page and move on without understanding all or part of the content, the cooperative learning dynamic naturally built into literature circles enables students to deepen their comprehension through the thoughts and ideas of others. Not all reading instruction comes from the teacher, especially in a format where peers are modeling effective comprehension skills through natural group conversations. Learning how to talk in a group about a book increases participation and teaches children, who may not initially know how to respond to texts, how other individuals make meaning from text and become proficient at participating in literacy conversations.

Additionally, opportunity for peer book discussion increases enjoyment of the reading process. Literature circles can “intrinsically motivate students to be involved in the act of reading because they are associating the method with the pleasurable of act of conversation with their peers” (Coccia, 2015, p. 4). When researchers interviewed diverse students in first, third, fourth, and fifth grades to evaluate their attitudes toward literature circles and their perception of comprehension strategies, they found that students not only rated literature circles as the most enjoyable part of language arts, but also believed that writing before and after enhanced the discussion (Certo, Moxley, Reffitt, & Miller, 2010, p. 250). Another new finding in this study

was that 50% of the students interviewed reported that they read other books, even seeking out chapter books at the library, because of texts they discussed in literature circles (Certo et al, 2010, p. 251). With peer-led literature circles, students can discover the joy of reading at the next level.

### **Comprehension Strategies in Literature Circles**

With its discussion format, literature circles also allow teachers to explicitly model key reading comprehension strategies and offer real-time coaching as students practice such strategies themselves for deeper understanding. Comprehension research shows how a skillful reader's response includes several kinds of active, ongoing thinking: "questioning, connecting, inferring, visualizing, determining importance, and the rest. Today we name and teach those cognitive operations using instructional models like think-alouds, in which the teacher opens up her head and shows kids how smart readers think" (Daniels, 2006, p. 13). Mature readers may do this thinking largely unconsciously, so effective reading pedagogy must show exactly how effective readers think, "naming and demonstrating each of these major cognitive tools. Then, we need to give kids plenty of time to practice applying these strategies, not in drills or worksheets, but in real conversations about real books" (Daniels, 2002, p. 38). For young readers to acquire this set of comprehension strategies for interacting with a story, educators must offer explicit modeling and scaffolded instruction during reading conversations.

As teacher and students gather around quality text, the small group context helps to not only facilitate more explicit reading strategy training, but also meaningful application. Literature circles break away from the typical classroom discourse patterns in which students respond only to a teacher's prompts, but instead invite students to "take responsibility for developing and discussing their own questions and interpretations for texts, and launch more complex levels of

thought, language, and literacy” (Brabham & Villaume, 2000, p.279). Similarly, Long and Gove (2003) conclude that when teacher and students meet to interpret and engage in well-chosen literature, it creates an environment that promotes student curiosity, questioning, purposeful reflection, and critical response beyond the obvious (p. 351). The depth of engagement with text translates into higher comprehension of it. Some teachers have structured peer-led discussion groups that help students both construct meaning and also identify how they constructed it (Berne & Clark, 2008 p. 74-75). When children join in such reading conversations, they can practice complex reading comprehension strategies and receive scaffolding for their response: “The most authentic, and therefore, successful application of the strategies is in the context of book clubs – small groups of children talking regularly about books and the strategies they use to understand them” (Daniels, 2002, p. 38). This explicit comprehension instruction not only helps students think metacognitively about their comprehension processes, but could also be helpful for transfer of comprehension skills into future reading contexts.

Additionally, teachers have freedom and flexibility to differentiate literature circles in a way that best fits the needs of their students. Since today’s classrooms include a wide variety of learners and reading abilities, it is encouraging to see how literature circles “not only challenge the more capable readers to engage with different genres, but also support struggling and reluctant readers” (Day, 2003, p. 2). When students are engaged in well-structured book clubs, “their comprehension and their attitude toward reading both improve. This seems to be true for students of many ages, and for those with disabilities as well as typical students, when the right accommodations are offered” (Daniels, 2006, p. 12). Within the structure and routine of gathering around a text, there is an organic quality that can shift to meet student needs. The teacher can provide support and “adaptations of literature circle procedures that enable struggling

readers to become the group's authority on the text" (Brabham & Villaume, 2000, p. 280). These scaffolds are intended to be flexible and temporary to match student needs. Around the world educators "have adopted, adapted, modified, and personalized the basic model. The consistent outcome is that kids are falling in love with books they have chosen and talked about with their friends" (Daniels, 2006, p. 11). This differentiated learning component of literature circles creates a powerful tool for literacy instruction in the realities of a diverse classroom.

### **Summary**

In summary, quality reading instruction is a key element in helping students become proficient readers (Rasinski, 2017; Certo et al, 2010; Shanahan et al, 2010). The research suggests that a literature circle teaching model positively impacts literacy instruction, resulting in evidence of significant gains in student reading comprehension (Avci & Yuksel, 2011; Berne & Clark, 2008; Brabham & Villaume, 2000; Certo et al, 2010; Coccia, 2015; Daniels, 2002; Day, 2003; Jacobs, 2015; Klinger et al, 1998). As third grade students transition into more challenging reading material like chapter books, they face the need for maintaining comprehension over a longer period of time. Literature circles are a possible solution, and therefore more study should explore the impact on elementary student learning.

### **Methods**

This study examined whether or not literature circles in third grade would help increase reading comprehension. Students participated in chapter book literature circles for four weeks. Growth was determined through data collected from winter and spring quarter Developmental Reading Assessment (DRA) scores. By comparing comprehension data from before and after the implementation of literature circles, the researcher hoped to identify how well literature

circles equipped students to apply reading strategies and more fully understand what they read in the future.

### **Participants**

The research participants were a single classroom of third grade students attending a private Christian school in the Pacific Northwest during the 2018 – 2019 school year. Since one student with significant special needs was not present during literacy instruction, 10 out of the 11 classmates joined this study with literature circles. One student, who was reading below grade level due to an eye-sight condition, received support and accommodation. Either peers or parents read aloud the chapter book sections at home with this child in preparation for weekly literature circle time. Participants included three female and seven male students, who were all eight or nine years of age. These third-grade students came from somewhat similar socio-economic backgrounds, mostly middle class.

### **Research Design**

This action research was meant to replicate previous studies, which indicate that literature circles help increase reading comprehension (Avci & Yuksel, 2011; Berne & Clark, 2008; Coccia, 2015; Daniels, 2002; Jacobs, 2015; Klinger et al, 1998; Long & Gove, 2003), but in the unique classroom context of younger students who are transitioning into chapter books. This quasi-experimental study measured the DRA overall comprehension achievement scores of students before and after implementing literature circles in the classroom. The independent variable was third grade students participating in literature circles. The dependent variable was the measurement of growth in comprehension scores on DRA benchmark assessments. The confounding variables were gender, students' prior knowledge, parental reading support, disruptive student behavior, and the teacher's instructional ability to establish literature circle

procedures as well as explicitly teach comprehension strategies. There was also a natural maturation process that occurred over time.

### **Materials**

Scores from the Developmental Reading Assessment, Second Edition Plus (also referred to as DRA or DRA2) provided reading comprehension data in this study. According to Pearson Education, this assessment tool “has undergone rigorous field-testing and is supported by sound validity and reliability analyses. . . . A student’s DRA2 level (independent reading level) reflects the student’s oral reading fluency (95% accuracy) and comprehension (90%) at independent performance levels” (Beaver & Carter, 2018). This reading assessment tool utilized key characteristics and behaviors of proficient readers based on a variety of sources in research literature and input from educators. The Pearson Education website (2018) also stated that as the DRA assessments were developed, continual analysis helped monitor its internal consistency, passage equivalency, and test-retest reliability.

The DRA benchmark assessment, used as a universal screening and reading level assessment throughout the elementary school of the participants, was determined to be the best data collection tool for measuring growth in reading achievement and determining student ability to apply comprehension strategies. Winter quarter DRA scores were entered as the pretest, and spring quarter DRA scores were entered for the post-test. The classroom teacher gave both DRA benchmark assessments to each student participant individually.

Student participants were familiar with the assessment format, having completed a DRA benchmark assessment at the beginning of the year and also at the end of each nine-week quarterly grading period. During an individual conference with their teacher, students read aloud the first couple pages of a leveled DRA text until a marked stopping point. The teacher



completed a running record of errors throughout this oral reading sample, made observation notes about reading behaviors, and wrote down the student's initial predictions and description of characters. After each child finished reading the remaining pages of the leveled DRA text on their own, the teacher acted as a scribe to record students' verbal responses to comprehension questions. Students were asked to give a story summary as well as respond to comprehension questions concerning literal details, interpretation, inference, reflection on the most important part of a story, justification for its importance, and sometimes explanation of reading strategies they implemented during reading this text. Each of these comprehension elements were later evaluated for quality, using a provided 4-point scale rubric, and totaled into an overall comprehension score.

For the literature circles themselves, students were given a choice between various chapter books texts, and small groups were created according to their interest and book choice. The three titles were *Ramona Quimby, Age 8* by Beverly Clearly (1981), *I Survived the Sinking of the Titanic, 1912* by Lauren Tarshis (2010), and *Imagination Station: The Redcoats Are Coming* by Marianne Hering and Nancy I. Sanders (2014). Weekly, these three book clubs each gathered one at a time to discuss their respective chapter books during an independent reading block, enabling the teacher to also be present and help facilitate group discussion.

### **Procedure**

The comprehension intervention was literature circles, which were implemented in small interest groups of three to four students each. The researcher identified her own third grade classroom as the most accessible student participants for conducting this study. Before setting up small groups, the researcher established literature circle procedures and rotating literacy roles for group members. The teacher also, during the daily class read-aloud chapter book, offered

explicit modeling of comprehension strategies and sample responses for book club roles. These roles included Discussion Director, Text Connector, Illustrator, and Word Wizard. The teacher created a simplified role sheet for each, so that students could record their thinking and use it as a reference later during discussion. (See Appendix A.) Each group met once a week and created a reading schedule with clear expectations for how much of the text to have read in preparation for the next group session. While these small group discussions were mainly a student-centered discussion process, the teacher took the role of facilitator. After each gathering and discussion, group members rotated the literature circle roles so that members were responsible for preparing a different comprehension response for the next literature circle meeting. Students continued this process of reading the book, preparing a thoughtful response to share with group members, and rotating literature circle roles until the chapter books were completed. Upon completion, each group chose how to share and present information about their book with the class.

### **Results**

This study sought to determine whether or not literature circles increased reading comprehension, especially for young readers who are relatively new to interacting with a longer chapter book text. In order to answer this question, the researcher first determined student comprehension scores during winter quarter before any instruction on literature circles. All students individually completed an appropriate level DRA benchmark reading assessment.

### **Findings**

After about four weeks of participating in weekly small group literature circles, all students were again evaluated during the spring quarter using a different DRA text, but at the same appropriate reading level. The exception was one student who had already been exposed to all the DRA reading material at that particular level and was ready for reading at the next level

up. Instead of giving this student any unfair advantage of prior interaction with a text, the teacher evaluated this child at one DRA level higher in the spring quarter. This change in reading level for one student ensured that all participants were demonstrating comprehension of a new, unfamiliar text they had not already encountered. As shown in the table below, winter and spring quarter DRA overall comprehension scores were compared in order to determine whether or not there was any significant growth in comprehension.

**Table 1**

*Overall Results Comparing Reading Comprehension Scores Before and After Literature Circles*

<b>Student</b>	<b>Winter Quarter DRA Comprehension Score</b>	<b>Spring Quarter DRA Comprehension Score</b>
1	83 %	83 %
2	79 %	96 %
3	61 %	92 %
4	68 %	90 %
5	75 %	81 %
6	71 %	75 %
7	68 %	88 %
8	83 %	92 %
9	89 %	75 %
10	79 %	88 %

After documenting these overall comprehension scores, the researcher also noted the sub-categories of comprehension questions from both the winter and spring reading assessments.

The recorded sub-categories of comprehension included and correlated with questions about text

features, questioning, prediction, summarizing, vocabulary, literal comprehension, interpretation, reflection, and metacognitive awareness. Student response to each question or comprehension section of the DRA were evaluated according to a 4-point scale rubric, as shown below in Tables 2 and 3. However, not every participant received questions concerning each comprehension sub-category. Variation even occurred from winter to spring across same reading level DRA test formats. Therefore, accurate comparative data is incomplete.

**Table 2**

*Winter Quarter Reading Comprehension Sub-categories: 4 Point Rubric Scale*

Student	Text Features	Questioning / Prediction	Summary	Summary: Vocabulary	Literal Comprehension	Interpretation	Reflection	Metacognitive Awareness
1	no data	4	3	no data	3	4	3	3
2	no data	4	4	no data	3	3	3	2
3	2	3	2	2	3	3	3	no data
4	2	3	3	3	3	2	3	no data
5	no data	4	3	no data	3	3	3	2
6	2	4	4	3	3	2	3	no data
7	3	3	2	3	3	3	2	no data
8	no data	3	4	no data	3	3	3	4
9	no data	no data	3	4	no data	no data	4	4
10	4	4	3	no data	2	3	3	no data

**Table 3***Spring Quarter Reading Comprehension Sub-categories: 4 Point Rubric Scale*

Student	Text Features	Questioning / Prediction	Summary	Summary: Vocabulary	Literal Comprehension	Interpretation	Reflection	Metacognitive Awareness
1	no data	4	3	no data	4	3	3	3
2	no data	4	4	no data	3	4	4	4
3	3	4	4	no data	4	3	4	no data
4	4	4	2.5	no data	4	3	4	no data
5	no data	3.5	3	no data	3	3	3	4
6	3	4	3	3	3	3	2	no data
7	4	3	4	no data	3	4	3	no data
8	no data	3	3	no data	4	4	4	4
9	no data	no data	3	3	no data	no data	4	3
10	2	4	4	no data	4	3	4	no data

**Data Analysis**

An independent sample t-test was conducted to compare the overall growth in winter to spring DRA comprehension scores. There was statistically significant improvement in overall comprehension among the third grade students who were tested. The percent individual changes from winter to spring DRA scores ranged from -14% up to 31%. The mean winter DRA score was 0.756. The mean spring DRA score was 0.860, an improvement of 13.75%, ( $P < 0.02$ ). As shown in Table 4 below, these results indicate that literature circles had a significant positive impact on the reading comprehension of third grade students.

**Table 4***Statistical Analysis of the Data: t-Test: Paired Two Sample for Means*

	<i>Winter DRA Score</i>	<i>Spring DRA Score</i>
Mean	0.756	0.86
Variance	0.007	0.005244
Observations	10	10
Pearson Correlation	-0.293	
Hypothesized Mean Difference	0	
Df	9	
t Stat	-2.580	
P(T<=t) one-tail	0.01485	
t Critical one-tail	1.833	
P(T<=t) two-tail	0.02970	
t Critical two-tail	2.262	

Since breaking down overall comprehension scores into sub-category comprehension strategies in Table 2 and 3 revealed too many areas lacking data, no statistical test was conducted to analyze growth of specific comprehension strategies. Looking at the raw data, the researcher observed that 5 out of the 10 students showed a marked improvement particularly in the literal comprehension category, from a score of 2 or 3 points up to 4 points. Third grade students also seemed to improve with the reflection questions, where once again 5 out of the 10 students showed an improvement to 4 points. While any formal analysis of this sub-category comprehension data would be incomplete, it is tempting to postulate that when studied in the

future, the sub-categories of literal comprehension and reflection may show positive improvement with literature circles.

## **Discussion**

### **Overview of the Study**

Students need reading instruction that will help them become proficient and successful lifelong readers. This study was designed to answer the question: Do literature circles help increase reading comprehension, especially for young readers who are relatively new to interacting with chapter books? Literature circles are an engaging, effective method of instruction with the potential to improve reading achievement and comprehension in learners. While a popular instructional strategy in education, literature circles are more often utilized in middle or high school classrooms with students who tend to be more familiar with maintaining comprehension throughout a textbook or chapter book. Yet many third grade students are just beginning to make the important transition from mostly reading picture books to trying out chapter books. Due to the success of literature circles in many classroom settings, this study looked at the impact of chapter book literature circles on younger, third grade students as well. Previous research had shown significant improvement in comprehension achievement of students who participate in literature circles in comparison with those who do not (Avci & Yuksel, 2011; Daniels, 2002; Klinger et al, 1998). Since literature circles are shown to effectively improve reading comprehension, it was worthy of this study's investigation.

### **Summary of Findings**

The results of the winter DRA pretest and spring DRA post-test shown in Table 1 indicate that literature circles had a statistically significant, positive impact on the reading comprehension of third grade students. Comparing the overall reading comprehension data

showed that 1 student's comprehension remained the same, 1 student scored lower in the post-test, and 8 out of the 10 participants grew in overall reading comprehension. An analysis of these reading results in Table 4 gave significant statistical evidence that chapter book literature circles helped increase young third grade readers' overall comprehension understanding.

Although an informal observation, the researcher also noticed that students grew more comfortable with comprehension language and appeared to transfer their experience in literature circle discussions to other contexts. In general, during the spring post-reading DRA benchmark assessment, students seemed more readily able to answer comprehension questions such as making predictions or thinking of questions they wondered about while they read. Additionally, as the teacher daily read aloud a chapter to the class, it became more common for students to offer predictions and want to discuss their thoughts about the latest plot twist. Several special guest readers also visited the classroom for a school-wide Love of Literature Week during the time frame of this action research study. As these guests read picture books aloud to the class, the researcher noted that students were again frequently using language from literature circle discussions, often interjecting with "I have a text connection," or "Can I make a prediction?" These informal observations of student response seem to suggest that literature circles helped equip the class with comprehension tools and common language for discussing their understanding of what they read.

Both the data analysis and informal observations appear to reflect and replicate similar research findings (Avci & Yuksel, 2011; Berne & Clark, 2008; Coccia, 2015; Daniels, 2002; Jacobs, 2015; Klinger, Vaughn, & Schumm, 1998; Long & Gove, 2003). Just as these studies about literature circles indicate improved achievement, often along with increased student engagement and enjoyment of book discussion, the third grade participants in this study also



showed similar reading comprehension growth. This action research study, which focused on younger readers relatively new to chapter books and the instructional strategy of literature circle discussion, appears to compliment and agree with the body of research literature.

### **Recommendations**

Based on these findings, the researcher recognizes the value of using literature circles with third grade students for building comprehension strategies. Additionally, there is an opportunity for more research that would investigate the implications of how literature circles specifically impact the development of different reading comprehension strategies. Where this study lacked the data to sufficiently compare growth of particular comprehension strategies, such as making predictions or summarizing, more detailed reading data collection might offer more insight. Ability to analyze each comprehension strategy may potentially be helpful in shaping instructional best practice or pinpointing areas in need of more intervention.

It would be worthwhile to explore further the extent to which chapter book literature circles in third grade classrooms positively influence the amount of chapter books those students choose to read independently. Do structured opportunities to discuss and develop their comprehension skills with a longer text inspire children to continue reading chapter books? To what extent do literature circles influence the genres, book series, or personal preferences of books that children select? If students are equipped to better understand what they read, is there evidence that they will fall in love with reading more complex material or continue in easier, familiar reading patterns? Perhaps a future research study could compare the number of chapter books that third grade students voluntarily choose to read before and after experiencing literature circles. This could also involve a student survey to compare any change in their attitude toward chapter books.

**Limitations**

While the researcher took great care to plan and implement this action research, there were some factors that could have affected the findings. The first factor was the limited scope of this research that involved a small number of participants. This study used a sample of 10 students from a single third grade classroom. An increased sample size, which included more third grade participants from multiple classrooms, may have been beneficial. Would these findings be generalizable in urban settings, rural schools, faith-based instruction, or a homeschool co-op environment? With a greater number of participants, the increased amount of data collected could strengthen the reliability of this study and make it more applicable to other third grade reading programs. A similar study done with more participants could support these results with greater statistical power.

Additionally, effective literature circles take time to implement well. Especially with younger children, teachers know the importance of training students well at the start in order to establish expectations for each book club role and small group procedures. Students will also naturally gain confidence the more familiar they are with preparing for quality peer-discussion and thinking about what they read with new comprehension strategies. While these four weeks of action research produced significant improvement in reading comprehension, perhaps spending more time over a semester or school year to establish literature circle norms may eventually enable young students to deepen their comprehension reading strategies even further. Developing this familiarity with the learning format may also allow students to rely less upon their role-sheet notes and lend itself to increasingly more organic, meaningful conversations that dig deeper into a book.

Collecting only one year of winter and spring DRA data was another potential limitation of this study. If it were possible to have a control group of third grade reading comprehension scores, it would have offered helpful data to compare and contrast the extent to which literature circles were the determining factor of growth. A comparison of winter and spring reading comprehension scores from a previous class of third grade students, who did not participate in literature circles but instead received traditional reading instruction, might have provided a meaningful control group. Identifying student reading growth from fall to spring might also offer a better indication of growth, allowing more time between the pre and post data gathering points.

Another limiting factor was that this research study sought to measure growth in reading comprehension through literature circles, which was a new instructional format for the classroom teacher. An educator more experienced with literature circles could potentially offer more effective instruction. Figuring out discussion protocols, age-appropriate forms, and even a realistic pace for the reading schedule of a chapter book was a process of trial and error. This may have increased the number of variables in the study. To implement a best practice like literature circles with fidelity may require some level of experience and expertise.

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## Appendix A – Examples of Literature Circle Role Sheets

Discussion Director:

1. Read until page \_\_\_\_\_
2. **Questioning:** As you read, your mind should be asking questions.  
List questions to think about with your group. (I wonder . . .)

- \_\_\_\_\_
- \_\_\_\_\_

Due in time for our next book club gathering on: \_\_\_\_\_

**Job:** Guide the conversation so everyone can share. Keep the group on task.

To start conversation or to refocus the group, ask questions like:

- What text connections did you make with this reading?
- Do you have any mental images that you want to share with us?
- Which interesting words “sparkled” or helped you understand better?
- What questions are you wondering about this part?
- Do you have any inferences? What clues led you to those thoughts?
- What important story elements did you notice?  
(setting, characters, problem and solution)
- Feel free to ask other questions that come to mind as you discuss!

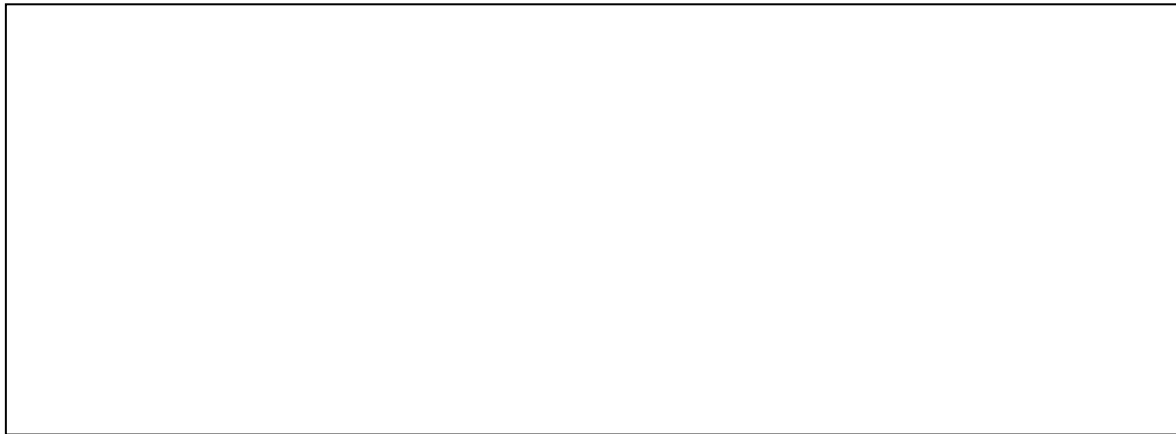
End book club by asking everyone: “What do you predict will happen next?”

Appendix A – Examples of Literature Circle Role Sheets

**Illustrator:** \_\_\_\_\_

As you read, your mind should be making its own movie of the story.

1. Read until page \_\_\_\_\_
2. Choose your favorite moment in this section where you made a mental image to help you understand.
3. Draw a picture that shows how your mind visualized a part of the story. Include as many details as possible. (Page # \_\_\_\_\_)



I made a mental picture of the part when \_\_\_\_\_

---

4. **Questioning:** As you read, your mind should be asking questions. List questions to think about with your group. (I wonder . . .)

- \_\_\_\_\_
- \_\_\_\_\_

Due in time for our next book club gathering on: \_\_\_\_\_



Appendix A – Examples of Literature Circle Role Sheets

Word Wizard:

As you read, catch interesting or new words that expand your vocabulary.

1. Read until page \_\_\_\_\_
2. Choose two or three interesting or new words that you noticed.
3. Look up the word in a dictionary and record what it means to help your team understand.

Word	Page #	Definition	Picture

4. Questioning: As you read, your mind should be asking questions.

List questions to think about with your group. (I wonder . . .)

- \_\_\_\_\_
- \_\_\_\_\_

Due in time for our next book club gathering on: \_\_\_\_\_

Appendix A – Examples of Literature Circle Role Sheets

**Text Connector:**

As you read, your mind should be making connections to yourself, to other books with a similar idea, to the Bible, or to the world.

1. Read until page \_\_\_\_\_
2. Choose two or three interesting connections that you made.

Page #	Connected to (self, book, Bible, or world)	How this helped you understand

3. **Questioning:** As you read, your mind should be asking questions. List questions to think about with your group. (I wonder . . .)

- \_\_\_\_\_
- \_\_\_\_\_

Due in time for our next book club gathering on: \_\_\_\_\_