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Remedial and Special Education 2002; 23; 99

DOI: 10.1177/074193250202300206

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Literature Circles

A Tool for Self-Determination in One Middle School Inclusive Classroom

H. TIMOTHY BLUM, LAURA R. LIPSETT, AND DOROTHY JEAN YOCOM

ABSTRACT

Students in one multiage middle school inclusive classroom engaged in literature circles while reading various short stories and novels during the course of one school semester. The use of literature circles was meant to encourage students to improve their abilities to analyze literature selections as well as their self-determination in selecting literature to read and discussing their ideas. Students assessed their reading abilities before and after being introduced to literature circles. An analysis of variance between the means of pre- and postsurveys indicated that students with special needs believed literature circles helped them read, analyze, and discuss literature selections. The target group, students identified with special needs, showed a significant gain when their survey results were compared to the rest of the class. Procedures of the classroom study and emergent themes are described and interpreted in the context of an inclusive classroom.

EFFORTS TO INTEGRATE STUDENTS WITH SPECIAL needs into the broader context of general education seems daunting to most general education teachers, who report that they have little understanding of these students' difficulties and little support in facilitating integration (Boyer & Bandy, 1997; Cook, Tankersley, Cook, & Landrum, 2000; Klingner & Vaughn, 1999). Teachers are already in mixed-ability classrooms and face multiple challenges, with many students arriving in classrooms with differing cultures, learning styles, levels of emotional and social maturity, and interests (which vary in both topic and intensity). To complicate things further, readiness and interest can vary for a given student over

time and can depend on subject matter. Even the most experienced teachers have difficulties when they are faced with such student complexity.

With classrooms being more diverse than ever, teachers must rely on their own abilities to instruct students with special needs—the very students that they feel least prepared to teach (Walmsley & Allington, 1995). Differentiated reading instruction has been viewed in the past as an intervention or a remedial measure, but it is fast becoming the way to teach all students (Ivey, 2000; Tomlinson, 1995). Although there is no perfect method for teaching students with reading difficulties, many educators continue to pursue the illusion that there is. No single method, program, or book will help accelerate the needs of all children or any subset of children, and establishing a balanced reading program that responds to individual students is complicated (Irvin, 1998; Ivey, 2000). Most students with special needs have more difficulty comprehending what they read than do students without disabilities. The major reason for this is that many students experience poor comprehension due to a failure to read strategically and to spontaneously monitor their own understanding of what is being read (Vaughn, Gersten, & Chard, 2000). Furthermore, the most effective reading instruction that teachers can provide for any student is one teacher to one student. Although it is ideal, one-on-one instruction is rarely practical except under unusual circumstances. Thus, most teachers must teach students in groups or through whole-class instruction. In accommodating the range of student diversity, teachers must consider the most effective practices and procedures for enhancing the educational outcomes for

students who often are achieving at several grade levels below their classmates. The challenge then is to create a learning environment for reading that uses varying grouping formats, encourages all students to develop a variety of reading strategies, and encourages them to develop in their metacognition of how these work for them and can help them understand what they read.

LITERATURE CIRCLES TO FACILITATE SELF-DETERMINATION

Self-Determination

The construct of self-determination has become prominent in the field of special education (Sands & Doll, 1996). *Self-determination* has been defined as empowerment for people with disabilities and also as “the ability to identify and achieve goals based on a foundation of knowing and valuing oneself” (Field & Hoffman, 1994, p. 164). An emphasis on self-determination requires that students be viewed as active participants in the educational process (Wall & Dattilo, 1995). Self-determination involves metacognition, self-perception, social problem solving, and autonomous decision making (Sands & Doll, 1996). Development of these processes must occur within the context of interpersonal relationships, and a social environment must be created that allows these processes to happen. Therefore, instruction and support must be provided to students to prepare them to assume more responsibility in their educational programs. Within the classroom, self-determined students might evaluate the match between specific instructional approaches and their learning and social needs and make choices about the most appropriate purposes for their learning.

Helping to foster all students’ abilities to set and reach goals through decision making is a necessary outcome of self-determination. Self-determination is important for all students but particularly for students with disabilities, who often encounter curricular and instructional approaches that perpetuate their dependency on programs and professionals who make decisions for them and fail to encourage them to develop their own self-awareness, which is one of the building blocks for self-determination. All students, not just students with special needs, benefit from the capacity to choose and to have their choices be the determinants of their actions. As stated previously, a key strategy in learning and in developing one’s ability to read is the ability to utilize a variety of strategies and to metacognitively assess one’s understanding and the strategies that provide for successful reading.

Literature Circles

Various studies have reported that general students without disabilities recognize that accommodations for students with special needs can benefit all students (Klingner & Vaughn,

1999). It is possible that literature circles can address the challenges of the inclusive classroom and in a sense promote self-determination. Literature circles are a form of literary engagement that encourage students to read with a focus and then report on what they have read, determining themselves what is significant in their reading and why. Literature circles have many forms, but essentially they are small, temporary discussion groups composed of students who are reading the same story, poem, article, or book (Daniels, 1994). Many of the elements of literature circles are found in self-determination curricula. Like self-determination curricula, literature circles promote interpersonal relationships through discussion, self-perception, problem solving, and decision making. Self-determination is about making choices that affect one’s education. Literature circles are meant to empower the reader by allowing him or her to participate in the decision-making process. While reading the text, the reader may assume various roles at specific times, to provide focus and framework for reading and discussion. The reader attaches personal significance to elements in the reading and then shares these ideas with other students in his or her assigned circle.

A literature circle is typically composed of four to six students, but conversations about literature can take place with as few as two readers or with the whole class (Daniels, 1994). More important than the number of students is how the circle size affects student interactions. A literature circle needs to be configured so that the size of the group does not interfere with the readers’ opportunities to become increasingly adept at expressing interpretations of texts and responding to the contributions of others in thoughtful, respectful, and probing ways. Readers get ready for discussion by assuming different roles assigned to them in advance—such as discussion leader, vocabulary enricher, illustrator, and connector—and then by completing an assignment sheet to prepare for the role or by simply writing down their own questions or ideas as they read, asking questions, or sharing ideas that such a role might demand (Burns, 1998; Daniels, 1994). If assignment sheets are used, they might contain various tasks that students in their roles are to enact. For example, for a vocabulary enricher, tasks might include identifying “tricky words” or word phrases and then clarifying them to share later with other students in circle discussion. Other students in the circle are encouraged to take notes regarding the enricher’s findings, and it is hoped that clarification and insights then happen for all circle members. Decision making and interpersonal relationships occur when circle members plan a way to highlight their reading with the wider community.

In a large class, struggling readers may be at a disadvantage and may be silenced by procedures that require them to discuss texts with peers who read more quickly and proficiently. As a result, literature circles provide scaffolds that offer alternatives to independent reading and engage all students as readers. *Scaffolds* are defined as conversations and interactions in which adults temporarily support children’s

development of complex thought and language (Bruner, 1978). Literature circles go a step further, by providing conversational structures that help both students and teachers break away from typical classroom discourse patterns, in which students would normally respond only to the teacher's probes (Brabham & Villaume, 2000). Literature circles are meant to support the repositioning of stances that control talk in the classroom, allowing students to take responsibility for developing and discussing their own questions and interpretations of texts and launch more complex levels of thought, language and literacy for students and teachers (Burns, 1998). Essentially, the students, not the teacher, set the agenda and determine what is of value in the reading, responding from the tasks associated with the assigned reader role.

The various roles that students enact in literature circles encourage them to make predictions, construct visual images, create connections to personal experiences and other texts, monitor their reading and whether it makes sense, solve word- and text-level problems in flexible ways, summarize as they go, argue with the author, and evaluate content and writing style (Brabham & Villaume, 2000). In encouraging student control and ownership of learning, literature circles feature student choice, groups with mixed abilities, student management of small interactive groups, and substantial time to read during the school day (Burns, 1998). Literature circles can help change the classroom climate so that it is more cooperative, responsible, and pleasurable (Daniels, 1994). Self-determination is a byproduct of literature circles, and it promotes decision making, problem solving, and self-assessment. Improved self-perceptions translate into success in the classroom setting, which in turn improves self-esteem and feeling good about personal accomplishments, which are both recognized as cornerstones of self-determination in the classroom (Field, Hoffman, & Posch, 1997).

THE PURPOSE OF THE CLASSROOM STUDY

Research is needed to show that students with special needs can function in an inclusive classroom without major accommodations in the areas of literature and reading; therein lies the significance of this study. The setting for this study was one multiage language arts inclusive classroom that provided an opportunity for triangulation of multiple perspectives gathered by the classroom teacher and university researchers. Data included students' self-perceptions and the observations of the classroom teacher and university researchers as well as anecdotal evidence collected from the educational specialists assigned to students identified as having disabilities. The use of literature circles was meant to encourage both students identified as having disabilities and general education students to improve in their abilities as readers. Qualitative research tools (e.g., observations, interviews, document collections) as well as statistical analyses (of pre- and postsurveys) were selected to assist the classroom teacher and

university researchers in determining the role of literature circles in helping all students assess their own abilities (which is one aspect of self-determination). Of secondary importance was the ability of literature circles to address students' needs in light of state and district standards and in light of the Individualized Education Programs (IEPs) of the students identified as having disabilities. The literature circles were introduced to students as a tool that might help them to become better readers and discussants of what they read and might help them meet standards and other educational goals. Fourteen students participated in this study.

METHOD

Setting and Participants

Setting. The middle school in this study had a unique history. It was part of a larger school that educates students in kindergarten through Grade 9 and was operated by the local university for over 100 years. In 1999, this school became part of the local public school system, featuring the full inclusion of students with special needs, multiage classrooms, and a curriculum focused on project-based learning. The administration and faculty members were committed to maintaining a child-centered approach to education and negotiated waivers with the school district. The waivers allowed the school to continue to fashion curricula that were different from those of other schools in the district, as long as standardized test scores remained strong. The school admitted students based on a lottery system, and it aimed to work with all students, to teach them in a multitude of ways to allow each individual to be successful.

Participants. The context of this research was an inclusive language arts classroom for eighth and ninth graders. Four students were identified as having disabilities, one student was from China, and one student had a hearing loss (this student's parents elected for the student not to receive special services). Three students in the classroom had reading problems and probably needed to be identified but for various reasons had not been. At times there were two educational specialists in addition to the classroom teacher working with students during the course of one class period. Educational specialists were assigned to work with specific students both inside and outside the classroom, and they provided additional tutoring, remediation, and language and skills development to assist students in being academically and socially successful in the general classroom.

Research Questions

The teacher, university researchers, and educational specialists assigned to students in this class sought an answer to the research question "Does the use of literature circles and their inherent reading strategies enhance students' perceptions of

their reading abilities?" A total of 14 students were involved in this study. The students were willing to engage in literature circles because they viewed them as potentially helpful to their academic needs. Tied to this research question was the potential problem of the logistics of operating multiple discussion groups at the same time in the inclusive classroom.

Literature Circle Structures and Procedures

Structures. The students in this study agreed that literature circles would be used to help them become more strategic readers and discussants and would be used to address state and district standards. School district standards for literature require that students read a variety of grade-level materials, applying strategies appropriate to various situations (Albany County School District Standards, 2000). Initially, each literature circle in this study was composed of a teacher-selected group of five to seven students. Literature circles eventually evolved into groups determined by student-selected young adult novels supplied by the classroom teacher that were organized by themes. The books were organized under broad themes so students could address standards in language arts, social studies, and health and wellness. Literature circles throughout the semester were characterized by flexible structures that included individual student reading time, paired reading time in which students read with other students or adult partners, and small-group discussions. The number of literature circles that operated simultaneously never exceeded four.

Procedures. Literature circles were initially taught through modeling, and students first practiced the roles and their assigned tasks by reading and discussing short stories. These short selections allowed for the completion of readings, discussions, and group processing in one class period. The roles assigned to students were borrowed from Daniels (1994) and gave students a focus for reading and discussing these short selections in manageable time increments. Roles included discussion leader, illustrator, connector, character captain, literary illuminary, researcher, investigator, and conflict catcher. For example, the student illustrator created a picture related to the reading, connected the drawing to his or her own ideas about the reading, and shared his or her work during discussion. Task organizers or idea sheets (as shown in Figure 1) assisted students to enact their roles during reading and in discussion groups. Students completed the task organizers during and after the reading. The classroom teacher and educational specialists who facilitated discussions completed discussion rubrics. The task organizers and discussion rubrics collected by the researchers helped to evaluate students' understandings of their reading.

Literature circles evolved into the use of novels, which were selected for the availability of multiple titles, diverse reading levels, and the ability to group novels under overrid-

ing themes connected to various curricula in the school. For example, in history class, during the study of the Revolutionary War, students could obtain factual content but had difficulty realizing the personal impact of revolution on the people. Literature circle books therefore included *The Forty-third War* (Moeri, 1989), *My Brother Sam Is Dead* (Collier & Collier, 1974), and *Cast Two Shadows* (Rinaldi, 1978). These books for young adults provided readers with insights into the impact of war on families and relationships. Students were given choices, with the understanding that the selected book would determine the members of their literature circles, which would remain unchanged until the completion of that book.

The second round of literature circles focused on the theme "change process" and was tied to the social studies curriculum, which dealt with the change and formation of a new government as well as health and wellness standards addressing decision making and problem solving. Students were expected to recognize the change process, whose stages are denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance. Literature circle books that fell under this theme were *The Catcher in the Rye* (Salinger, 1951), *The Little Prince* (de Saint-Exupery, 1971), *Death of a Salesman* (Miller, 1976), and *The Chocolate War* (Cormier, 1986). As with the first round, students' self-selections in this round determined the composition of the literature circles.

Literature circles shifted the role of the classroom teacher to that of facilitator, and the students made the choices, raised the questions, and discussed and constructed the meaning for each reading. During literature circle discussions, the classroom teacher and the educational specialists functioned as observers of the process, completing discussion rubrics that measured students' responses and participation. Adult supervision of the groups ensured that discussions would be more in depth and less superficial than when no adult was present. The rubric included categories for students' participation, contributions, use of quotations from the books, preparedness, and insights. It also measured behavioral responses, such as active listening, reinforcement, connections, and the ability to disagree in an appropriate manner, as shown in Table 1.

Surveys. The same survey was administered pre- and post-literature circles; it asked students to self-assess their abilities as readers. The five-item survey shown in Table 2 was administered and analyzed to determine whether students perceived any changes in their reading abilities due to the intervention of literature circles. Questions focused on students' perceived levels of comprehension, their abilities to remember what they read, and their abilities to explain what they read.

The classroom teacher discussed the purpose of the survey and its design, to ensure accurate reporting of students' perceptions. Students completed the five-item survey at the start of the school year, in September, answering questions on a 5-point continuum (1 = *strongly disagree*, 5 = *strongly*

Task Organizer: Illustrator

Date: _____ Name: _____

Book: _____ Assignment: p ____ p ____

Task: Your job is to draw some kind of picture related to the reading. It can be a sketch, cartoon, diagram, flowchart, or stick-figure scene. You can draw a picture of something that's discussed specifically in your book or something that the reading reminded you of or a picture that conveys any idea or feeling you got from the reading. Any kind of colored drawing or colored graphic is okay. You can label things with words if that helps. Make your colored drawing on a separate sheet.

When the discussion director invites your participation, you may show your picture, without comment, to the others in the group. One at a time, they get to speculate (guess) what your picture means and to connect the drawing to their own ideas about the reading. After everyone has had a say, you get the last word. Tell them what your picture means, where it came from, and what it represents to you.

Task Organizer: Connector

Date: _____ Name: _____

Book: _____ Assignment: p ____ p ____

Task: Your job is to find connections between the book and the "world outside." This means connecting the reading to your own life, to happenings at school or in the community, to similar events at other times and places, or to other people or problems that you are reminded of from reading this book. You might also see connections between this book and other writings on the same topic or by the same author. There are no wrong answers: Whatever the reading connects you with is worth sharing!

"Some connections I found between this reading and other people, places, events, and authors are . . ."

1. Page & paragraph: _____

Reason for choosing: _____

2. Page & paragraph: _____

Reason for choosing: _____

3. Page & paragraph: _____

Reason for choosing: _____

FIGURE 1. Examples of task organizers.

agree). The students were given the same survey at the end of the semester, in December. In order to compare the survey data, the class was divided into two groups; a target group and the remainder of the class. The target group included four students identified as having disabilities and three other struggling readers.

Data Analysis

Observers scored rubrics on a 4-point scale (1 = *nonproficient*, 4 = *advanced*). Space was provided for anecdotal nota-

tions that might include students' insights and connections made to the reading and peer comments. The classroom teacher, university researchers, and educational specialists discussed the rubrics during the evaluation phase of the literature circles. This triangulation of students' comments in each literature circle aided in determining the nature of student involvement, depth of understanding, and attitudes toward the discussion process. Other data collected included task organizers completed by the students, student interviews, and student surveys that measured students' perceptions of their reading abilities before and after engaging in literature circles.

RESULTS

The students' responses to the two surveys demonstrated that the students did have an understanding of the difficulties they faced as readers. Based on the classroom teacher's understanding of the students, it is believed that the self-assessments were accurate. The first analysis of variance (ANOVA) compared the means of the survey responses, and significant differences were found between the two groups. The members of the target group recognized that their reading skills were not as good as those of the remainder of the class, $F = 6.513$, $p = .024$. These students reported that they had difficulty

understanding what they read, $F = 21.344$, $p < .001$; remembering what they read, $F = 19.045$, $p = .001$; and explaining what they read, $F = 7.519$, $p = .017$. Table 3 shows the differences between the means of the two groups before literature circles were introduced.

After a semester of practice, the second survey showed a dramatic change in comparisons of group means. The second ANOVA showed that the significance in three of the four areas had disappeared: self-assessment, $F = 2.773$, $p = .120$; remembering what they read, $F = 2.920$, $p = .111$; and explaining what they read, $F = 1.019$, $p = .331$. In the area of understanding what they read, the target group still perceived

TABLE 1. Rubric for Teacher Assessment of Participation in Literature Circles

| | Students in literature circle | | | | | | |
|-----------------------------------|-------------------------------|----|----|----|----|----|----|
| | S1 | S2 | S3 | S4 | S5 | S6 | S7 |
| Discussion contributions | | | | | | | |
| Used book quotes to support ideas | | | | | | | |
| Showed exceptional insight | | | | | | | |
| Interested, active listener | | | | | | | |
| Disagreed in appropriate manner | | | | | | | |
| Reinforced others' ideas | | | | | | | |
| Prepared for own task | | | | | | | |
| Made connections | | | | | | | |
| Score | | | | | | | |
| 1 = nonproficient | | | | | | | |
| 2 = partially proficient | | | | | | | |
| 3 = proficient | | | | | | | |
| 4 = advanced | | | | | | | |

TABLE 2. Pre- and Post-Literature Circles Student Reading Survey
Directions: Circle the number from 1 to 5 that represents your ability as a reader.

| | Low | | | | High |
|--|-------------------|---|---|----------------|------|
| 1. How would you rate your reading ability? | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 2. How would you rate your reading ability as compared to others in the classroom? | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| | Strongly disagree | | | Strongly agree | |
| 3. I have trouble understanding what I read. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 4. I have trouble remembering what I read. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 5. I have trouble explaining to others what I read. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |

a significant difference between themselves and the remainder of the class, $F = 5.735$, $p = .032$. However, this difference was not as dramatic as in the initial survey. Table 4 shows the differences between the means of the two groups after a semester of literature circles.

Case Study: Aaron

Aaron was one of the four students identified as having special needs (see Note). Aaron had been diagnosed as having attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder. His Individualized Education Program (IEP) included specific goals in the areas of reading and explaining. Aaron's work in literature circles called for him to make connections, engage in verbal processing, both in writing and orally, and use appropriate behavior in the classroom setting. In large-group settings, Aaron was easily distracted and pulled off task by other students. He had difficulty verbalizing his thoughts, which led to frustration and behavior that was not acceptable in the classroom (i.e., physical interaction). Aaron was often assigned the roles of connector and illustrator because his IEP required him to develop skills as a summarizer and show improvement in his ability to draw comparisons. His role as connector required that he draw comparisons from the reading to his own life or to similar events at other times and places or to other people

or problems. The following scenario was derived from the teacher's observation of Aaron's participation in a literature circle. This scenario was typical of Aaron's classroom performance when he was engaged in literature circles and demonstrated his ability to draw connections between the author's feelings and his own:

The student leader of the discussion had prepared well. His questions caused the students in this literature circle to think, compare, and reflect on the assigned reading. They were discussing *The Four-Minute Mile*, a short story by former Olympian Roger Bannister. Aaron had been out of his assigned seat and in almost every other empty chair in the room. At this point he was in a chair next to the classroom teacher, twisting a shoelace in his hands. The student leader asked the members what they thought was going on in the author's mind as he assumed the starting position. Aaron uncoiled his body and before anyone else could respond, he blurted, "He is on an adrenaline high, man. His stomach is tied in knots. He's afraid to start; at the same time, he can't wait to hear the gun." Aaron resumed his hand wringing. Despite his struggles in the classroom, Aaron held

TABLE 3. Students' (N = 14) Perceptions of Their Reading Abilities Pre-Literature Circles

| Source | SS | df | MS | F |
|-----------------|--------|----|--------|------------|
| Self-assessment | | | | |
| Between | 3.471 | 1 | 3.471 | 6.513* |
| Within | 6.929 | 13 | .533 | |
| Total | 10.40 | 14 | | |
| Understanding | | | | |
| Between | 15.244 | 1 | 15.244 | 21.344**** |
| Within | 9.589 | 13 | .747 | |
| Total | 25.333 | 14 | | |
| Remembering | | | | |
| Between | 13.630 | 1 | 13.630 | 19.045*** |
| Within | 9.304 | 13 | .716 | |
| Total | 22.933 | 14 | | |
| Explaining | | | | |
| Between | 9.430 | 1 | 9.430 | 7.519** |
| Within | 16.304 | 13 | 1.254 | |
| Total | 25.733 | 14 | | |

Note. Item 2 on the self-assessment survey, which asks students to evaluate their reading skills compared to other members of the class, was not included in this table because the differences between the means of the two groups was not significant.

* $p = .024$. ** $p = .017$. *** $p = 001$. **** $p = .001$.

TABLE 4. Students' (N = 14) Perceptions of Their Reading Abilities Post-Literature Circles

| Source | SS | df | MS | F |
|-----------------|--------|----|-------|-----------|
| Self-assessment | | | | |
| Between | 1.219 | 1 | 1.219 | 2.773** |
| Within | 5.714 | 13 | .440 | |
| Total | 6.933 | 14 | | |
| Understanding | | | | |
| Between | 4.286 | 1 | 4.286 | 5.735**** |
| Within | 9.714 | 13 | .747 | |
| Total | 14.000 | 14 | | |
| Remembering | | | | |
| Between | 2.519 | 1 | 2.519 | 2.920*** |
| Within | 11.214 | 13 | .863 | |
| Total | 22.933 | 14 | | |
| Explaining | | | | |
| Between | 1.144 | 1 | 1.144 | 1.019* |
| Within | 14.589 | 13 | 1.122 | |
| Total | 15.733 | 14 | | |

Note. Item 2 on the self-assessment survey, which asks students to evaluate their reading skills compared to other members of the class, was not included in this table because the differences between the means of the two groups was not significant.

* $p = .331$. ** $p = .120$. *** $p = .111$. **** $p = .032$.

the state record for his age group in the 440. To a trained eye, he would be easy to spot: the child who cannot sit still. He was in and out of his seat; his face was often contorted by tics; often he poked students next to him, uttered extraneous statements; his hands were typically a blur of continuous motion.

On one other day Aaron was especially active. Aaron's literature circle was discussing *Battle of the Breadfruit Tree*, a short story about naturalists observing baboon behavior. The naturalists in the story witness a violent battle involving a mother baboon who tries to save her baby from a leopard. The story recounts the tribe's response to the threat of the leopard. Aaron's role was illustrator, which meant his tasks included providing visuals of scenes in the story that would cause other members in the circle to speculate about its meaning and to connect the drawing to their own ideas about the reading. The classroom teacher asked circle members about the completion of their tasks. Aaron's face showed anxiety. When he was asked if he had completed the task, Aaron mumbled that he hadn't gotten it done. When he was asked why, his hands immediately stirred the air. He clenched his teeth, pushed back his hair, and struggled with the words:

"Because, because, because I can't do those drawings!" The classroom teacher said, "Okay, I am not going to take away points if you can tell me what you would have drawn if you could draw those pictures." Aaron explained that he would have used color to convey the author's ideas. There would have been the blues of the sky, the browns, and the golds and the greens of the land before the appearance of the leopard. After the battle between the baboon and leopard had begun, the colors would have shifted to reds, with browns for the baboons and gray for the rocks. The lines would no longer have been smooth but would have been jagged to show the conflict. The final picture would have featured the red of the blood fading into black, the color of death.

It was apparent that Aaron had put some thought into how he would illustrate these battle scenes. Aaron's parents had requested that he not be allowed to dwell on violence. Aaron didn't complete the illustration because he didn't feel comfortable taking the risk. Prior to meeting in his literature circle, Aaron and his educational specialist discussed ways to illustrate the author's intent without showing violence, by using colors and lines to illustrate mood, but Aaron still felt uncomfortable taking this risk. When he realized that the classroom teacher would accept his oral picture, he grew more confident as a reader and discussant of literature. This confidence became evident through Aaron's response in a later discussion, when he drew the connection between life-and-

death struggles on the African veldt and struggles of the business world:

Later, when connections were being made about the same story, the classroom teacher asked the students about the author's statement "death would show no mercy on the African veldt today." Students were asked if contemporary American society was in any way similar to the life-and-death struggles portrayed in this story. Aaron was quick to volunteer. He said no and that society had laws to protect people from violence. The classroom teacher asked, "What about the business world?" The students were asked if any of them knew of a local business that had recently failed. One student volunteered, "Oh, you mean like Top Notch Records?" The classroom teacher then said, "On one hand, you have a locally owned record store; on the other hand, you have Hastings Discount Videos and Recordings. One succeeds; the other goes out of business." Suddenly Aaron's voice shot to the center of the conversation. "Oh, it isn't about killing them; it's about knocking them out of the game!"

Representation and Validity

The primary focus of this study was on students identified as having special needs and their perceptions of their own reading abilities. The students felt that the literature circles gave them tools for success. This study also focused on providing all students with a reading tool to assist them in addressing state and district standards. A number of procedures were used to ensure that the findings were a valid representation of this. First, multiple interviews were conducted with the teacher, students, and educational specialists. Emergent themes were identified. Second, anecdotal records (e.g., classroom observations, discussion rubrics) were collected. Themes relating to students' understanding of the readings were identified. Third, comparisons of scores applied to discussion rubrics were made, to determine students' involvements in literature circles. Fourth, the analysis of task organizers completed by the students showed consistencies with anecdotal records and discussion rubrics.

CONCLUSIONS

The classroom teacher and university researchers came to several conclusions. First, members of the target group, which consisted of students identified as having disabilities and struggling readers, accurately assessed their reading difficulties and perceived an improvement in their reading skills due to literature circles. Pre- and post-literature circles surveys indicated improved perceptions of reading abilities.

Second, the classroom teacher and educational specialists observed literature circle discussions; they collected and compared anecdotal records and agreed with the perceptions of the target group. Third, discussion rubrics reflecting student participation, contributions, and evidence of understanding indicated that students were willing to take risks and communicate within groups.

Fourth, student interviews provided insights and feedback, indicating that literature circles were viewed as providing self-management skills for students. Interviews with educational specialists indicated that small-group discussions fostered risk taking, communication, interpersonal communication, and listening skills, as well as self-assessments.

Fifth, literature circles provided an opportunity for students to engage in activities that promote self-determination. After engaging in literature circles, the target group members felt that they were better able to read and understand literature. They had the sense of accomplishment necessary for building self-esteem. Small-group discussions among teachers and students and among students only helped develop students' social behaviors. The target group students used task organizers to focus their thoughts. Target group students took risks, and they communicated with and listened to each other. Two themes that have significance for teachers, their students with special needs, and all students in the inclusive classroom emerged from this study: Literature circles are an appropriate accommodation for inclusive classrooms, and this approach promotes self-determination.

The validity of the results reported here was established through the combined presence of several factors across both student groups. Both student groups believed that literature circles encouraged their participation in literature discussions and helped them become better readers of literature. During discussions, both groups heard a variety of perspectives on the meaning of the literature, giving students immediate reinforcement and confirmation of their own reading and helping them clarify areas that may have been unclear beforehand. As one student said, "Four heads are better than one." Students believed that literature circles helped them to focus and become better readers and helped them participate in class discussions of literature.

Perhaps a major finding of this study is that literature circles can be the documentation of an effective accommodation in an inclusive classroom and a tool for self-determination. Another finding of this study is that literature circles can help students with special needs increase their perceptions of their own abilities as readers. For example, Aaron discovered that his focus improved when he was assigned roles with specific tasks. He found that what he had to say was valued by others in his circle who affirmed his insights. Literature circles in this classroom utilized small-group discussions, assigned roles that gave focus and allowed for students' successes, created interactions among students and between students and their teachers, and used task organizers, which sequenced the order of how students read and

share their insights with members of their literature circles and with students in the whole class.

PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS

Inclusive classrooms are successful when all students are perceived as valued participants and students perceive methodologies as being the same for all individuals (Klingner & Vaughn, 1999). The results reported here tell a story of creating a classroom in which all students are valued participants and students' assessment of their own abilities is encouraged and valued. All teachers can implement literature circles. Given the critical contexts of inclusion in today's schools, teachers need to try a variety of approaches, adapted to their particular contexts. There is no single best approach, but if teachers consider that most approaches are adaptable, then success in inclusive classrooms for both general education students and students with special needs will be more likely.

Classroom teachers, remedial educators, and educational specialists are encouraged to conduct more investigations. Future studies might look more closely at how state and district standards related to reading and literature might be addressed in inclusive classrooms where all students are held accountable for meeting the same standards. It is imperative in inclusive classrooms that general education teachers understand accommodations for students with special needs, understand the nature of reading instruction, and be able to interpret and adapt a variety of methodologies for diverse students in the classroom. It is suggested that literature circles and self-determination be further studied in these contexts. ■

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NOTE

All names have been changed or omitted to protect the identities of participants.

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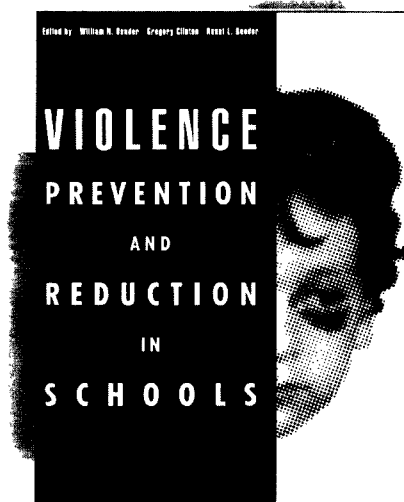
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