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Jessica Spindler
St. Catherine University

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Increasing Boys Engagement in Literature through Supplementary Texts

An Action Research Report
by Jessica Spindler

Increasing Boys Engagement in Literature
through Supplementary Texts

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St. Catherine University
St. Paul, Minnesota

Advisor: _____ Date: _____

Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to describe the findings of a study on the effects of implementing a literature circle with adolescent boys disengaged with texts studied in their language arts class. The literature circle presented supplementary texts which supported the understanding of the primary text studied in the students' class. The research was conducted with a group of four 10th grade boys who showed signs of disengagement in the traditional language arts classroom setting. The data collection methods used included teacher interviews, student surveys, observational tally sheets, attitude scales, and student journal entries. The results of the research indicated an increase in engagement when the students studied supplementary texts in the literature circle setting. The implications of this action plan include methodical changes to the way literature is taught in the language arts classroom, such as the formation of literature circles and the offering of texts to supplement primary texts studied.

KEYWORDS: Supplementary texts, literature circles, engaging boys in literature

Many educators and parents are familiar with the stereotypical lament groaned by adolescent boys when they are asked to read a book. Assertions of the book's stupidity and claims of not "getting it" often follow close behind. In schools, I have on many occasions witnessed this negative, almost abhorrent, reaction to literature and wondered what caused the boys' disinterest. This curiosity prompted me to explore possible strategies in increasing boys' interest and engagement in literature taught in schools. I conducted this research in an inner city school, with a group of four 10th grade boys, who have histories of being unengaged in class and disinterested in school literature.

Although much has been written about the gender gap in reading, the subject is far more complicated than much of the literature suggests. Getting boys to read is not just a matter of locating texts with a male protagonist in an action-oriented setting or stocking libraries with graphic novels (Fisher and Frey, 2012). Understanding motivation for reading among adolescents has been of interest to educators, librarians, and families for decades. Klecker (2001) found that "There is an extensive body of research literature examining the relationship between gender and reading achievement; recent studies report that females consistently score higher than males" (p. 2). The gender gap in reading and discovering its roots remains a legitimate concern among educators, families, and communities.

The research clearly indicates that a large number of boys are struggling. In some states, the percentage of boys performing at a proficient level in reading plummets below more than 10 percentage points below that of girls. Because of this lagging performance by boys in reading, The Center for Education Policy (CEP) asserts it is the most pressing gender-gap issue facing our schools.

We know that a gender gap exists in reading. It stands to reason that there is a disparity between how we are teaching literature to our boys and what actually works. One problem may be the books we are providing them to read in school. Much of the literature indicates that the selection of the books adolescent boys read in class plays a big role in their attitude and performance.

In answer to biological difference causing the gap St. Jarre (2008) asserts, “As far as genetic or physiological or maturity factors are concerned in ability to learn to read, we see the key is not aptitude but is instead our teaching approaches” (p. 15). He believes the best approach in shifting the male performance in literature courses comes down to empowering students to make some of their own selections. He believes that the reason boys seem to be underperforming in literature courses compared to girls is because the books studied in class seem to be aimed at more of a female audience. He states that most English teachers are women and they have the responsibility of picking books, resulting in titles reflecting a female preference. In *Motivating Boys to Read*, Fisher and Frey (2012) also emphasize the importance of choice. They assert “What we are certain about is that choice, rather than assigned whole class novels, is an important aspect in reaching students and engaging them in learning” (Fischer and Frey, 2012, p. 594).

Research shows that the types of literature that interest boys have elements of action, violence and popular culture. Williams (2004) states that “these themes and genres are usually prohibited in the classroom where emphasis is often on ‘high culture’ literature driven by character and nuance; which is often considered not only intellectually superior to other forms of literacy but also morally superior” (p. 512).

The literature suggests that suspense is the key ingredient for the fiction boys truly like. Part of the appeal of action oriented writing is that in the same way young boys pretend to be superheroes on the playground and adolescents role-play in video games, action literature offers them a way to transcend the often powerless world of children into a fictional world where they can “claim power and privileges they could never in real life” (Williams, 2004, p. 513)

National surveys reveal that graphic novels are perhaps the most popular recreational reading choice for adolescents, especially among boys. Graphic novels cover numerous topics, and this variety, along with their enormous popularity, makes them enticing and useful resources for teaching and learning in virtually any classroom (Brozo, 2012, p.551).

The illustrations in graphic novels provide visual clues to the meaning of the print and dialogue; they are an invaluable tool for motivating and supporting struggling readers. In his research Brozo (2012) has found that these features may be particularly attractive to boys, who have demonstrated higher competencies with nontraditional texts; he suggests pairing graphic novels with canonical texts to increase engagement and understanding (p. 551).

Another strategy for increasing engagement is the use of touchstone texts. A touchstone text is a piece of literature that is used by a learning community to study genre, craft, or some other aspect of writing across an extended period of time. In an article on motivating boys to read Fischer and Frey (2012), suggest using a touchstone text as a platform for making connections with other pieces; which complements the

strategy of offering additional literary choices for students in the classroom. In this model they can select any book from a list developed by the English teachers to represent a range of text difficulty, genre, and type. The teacher then uses a touchstone book to guide inquiry in the classroom and model critical thinking in their own selections.

In summary, the literature indicates that the reading gap in adolescent males could be a result of current practices not meeting their needs. It is clear that we are not engaging boys with traditional methods of teaching literature. More effective strategies proposed include the use of high interest books and offering choices. Researchers assert that the best way to get adolescent boys interested in reading is by giving them books they actually like. Another strategy is the use of touchstone texts to supplement and further engage young male readers. Using a touchstone text to connect high interest books to the primary book taught in class is a great way to weave the researchers' suggestions together.

However, I found a gap in the literature supporting the use of these strategies with hands-on research in the classroom. My own research is aimed towards filling that gap. My question is what is the outcome of having boys disengaged with reading meet in a small literature circle to read and discuss texts which are supplemental to the texts read in class?

Methodology

The research process on using supplemental texts to engage adolescent boys spanned a time frame of two months, with meetings being held twice a week. A variety of data collection sources were used to determine the outcome of using the proposed strategy to increase engagement. The data sources include artifacts such as student journals, observational tally sheets, attitude scales as well as student surveys, and teacher interviews.

The format chosen was a literature circle of four boys from a tenth grade English class. The male subjects were chosen based on one primary criterion: class performance below what the teacher perceived their capabilities to be. To increase the odds that the research would be completed in its entirety, as a secondary criterion we chose four boys that she felt would be most cooperative during the research process. The group had varying levels of disengagement and academic abilities. However, based on her experience with these particular students the teacher knew that they could perform at higher levels than they currently were.

The first data source used was a teacher interview (see Appendix A) designed to gather background information as well as a baseline performance level for each of the four students. The interview consisted of the same three questions for each student. The questions were focused on the teacher's perception of the students' performance and engagement in reading.

After gathering some background information from the teacher interview, the second data source I used was an observational tally sheet (see Appendix C) with typical signs of engagement to measure and track the student's interest in classroom activities such as lecture, discussion and reading. With this tool, I conducted several observations

in the collaborating teacher's classroom, on the students selected to participate in the study.

Once the baseline of engagement for each student was established, the group was formed and the literature circle meetings began. The group met twice a week, for forty minutes during regular classroom instruction time. During the first meeting, I used my third data source (see Appendix D). The students completed an attitude scale to measure their own perceived interest in reading and the books that they study in school.

The next data source (see Appendix B) occurred in the initial meeting and the final meeting. The students answered brief questions on a student survey. The initial survey was designed to develop a deeper understanding on the students reading preferences, habits and tastes in order to choose books that would be of interest to them.

Based on what I learned from the collaborating teacher and the students who would be participating in the literature circle, I picked a book that correlated with the students' interests but also reinforced themes of the text being studied in the class. I also incorporated a third book, a graphic novel version of the primary text being used in the class. The book being used in class, *Macbeth*, became the touchstone text for our literature. We used graphic novel versions of *Macbeth* and the book *Animal Farm* to supplement the themes in the touchstone text.

After the completion of the book selection, literature circle meetings began with an introduction to both books and to the format in which the meetings would be held. Each session, held twice a week, followed the same schedule: the first 5 minutes for discussion of any questions of the texts, 15 minutes for reading the supplementary text aloud, 10 minutes for review of graphic novel based on the primary text the entire class

was studying, 5 minutes for writing on a journal prompt which linked the two texts and 5 minutes discussion.

One data source ran throughout the data collection window, the observational tally sheet. Throughout each session I observed the students during the meeting, using the same observational tally sheet used during the classroom observation. I tracked typical signs of engagement for each student, such as body language, verbal participation, level of disruption, and task completion.

Another data source that ran throughout the data collection window and perhaps the most important tool used in gathering data on the students' engagement was the journal responses (see Appendix F). Each session the students had five minutes to answer a journal prompt. The journal prompt was a guiding question that linked themes, ideas or characters in both of the text selections. The responses given by the students were later evaluated for thoroughness, depth, and understanding to gauge the students engagement with both the primary and supplementary texts.

The sessions concluded after five weeks, at which point both texts had been read completely. I conducted a finalizing student survey (see Appendix E) which included questions designed to gauge the student's self-perceived engagement and efficacy of the methods used during the research.

The final data source was a culminating teacher interview (see Appendix A). To finalize observations on the students and get an end point analysis, I interviewed the collaborating teacher again. The questions were the same as the initial interview and were meant to give qualitative data on the students' growth in engagement during the study.

Analysis of Data

At the conclusion of my research, I analyzed the information that I collected from my data sources and looked for patterns. These data sources included teacher interviews, attitude scales, student surveys, observational tally sheets, and journal responses.

The piece of data that I analyzed first was the initial interview I conducted with the teacher to determine a baseline performance level of each student in their language arts class. Three very pronounced themes emerged from this data source. Firstly, 75% of the students I studied were performing below their ability level. The teacher reported different reasons for the students' poor performance in class but many of the responses indicated a lack of engagement. For one student she stated, "He is a very good reader, his test scores are high and he can quickly finish large books for enjoyment. However, in class he often seems distracted and can be disruptive." Her answer to the second question leaned overwhelmingly towards the students not finding enjoyment in the books studied in school. For two of her replies she explicitly stated that she believed the students would enjoy reading more complex texts than what was in the curriculum. A distinct pattern emerged on the third question of the interview as well. When asked if the teacher felt that the designated students were engaged in class, her responses indicate that 75% of them did not seem engaged. She reported that the same percentage did show signs of engagement during group discussion.

The next data set I evaluated was observational tally sheets compiled from three different dates. The tally sheets were designed to measure student's level of engagement based on common indicators such as body language, consistent focus, verbal participation, confidence, and level of enthusiasm exhibited by the student. The total

possible score on the tally sheet would be 25, which would be a very high rating in each of the 5 indicators of engagement. In analyzing the data, I combined the scores for each student in each category and calculated an average score for the level of engagement for the day.

The first date that I observed the students designated for my research, was during a lecture in class. Based on the tally sheets, this was the least engaging classroom activity with an average score of 10. Three of the four students were rated a low or very low in the category of positive body language. Signs of positive body language would include tracking and body posture that indicates they are paying attention. Another area that scored particularly low on that date was consistent focus. The considerations in gauging focus are staying on task with minimal disruptions.

The second observation was on a day that the students were completing an assignment in a small group. Scores seemed to indicate the students were slightly more engaged in this format, with an average of 15, which is around the midpoint of the scores analyzed. Three of the four students scored high in the fun and excitement category, exhibiting interest, enthusiasm and positive humor during their group work.

The last class period I observed was on a day that the entire class read aloud from a play. Students could volunteer for parts and were responsible for reading their lines as their time came. Two of the students from my research group volunteered for parts and were very enthusiastic about their roles. Although the other two did not choose speaking parts, they still scored higher in engagement during this activity. As a whole the average score for engagement was 18, establishing the activity as the most engaging of all I

observed. All indicators of engagement scored higher in this activity, 75% of the students scored high or above in all five categories.

After analyzing the tally sheets, I spent time looking at another source of qualitative data, my first student survey. This survey was designed to gather information on each student's preferences in literature. The questions were: have you read a graphic novel, what is your favorite genre of books, do you enjoy reading nonfiction and what is your all-time favorite book? Most of the data gathered on this survey was not representative of any group trends, as its primary purpose was to inform me of their individual tastes. However, one notable trend did emerge in analyzing the students answer to what their favorite genre was. My findings corroborated the literature with action and comedy as the student's favorite genres.

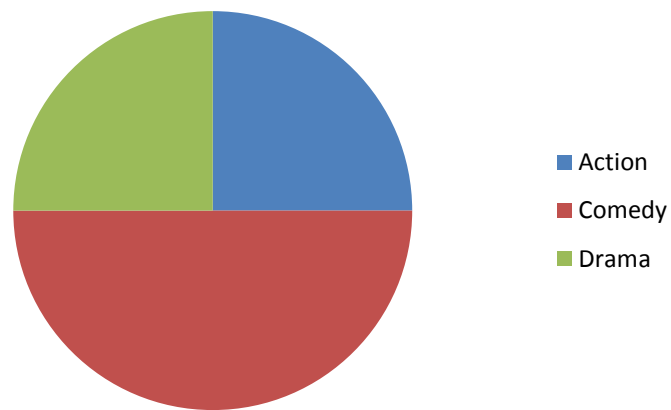


Figure 1. Student Literature Preferences. Pie graph illustrating students response to open ended question asking for their favorite type of literature. Examples for students' reference included: action, mystery, romance, drama, comedy, and fairy tale.

The next data source I analyzed was the observational tally sheets completed during my literature circle meetings. The quantitative data gathered in these observations was intended as a comparison to the activities I had previously observed in the classroom.

I observed the students throughout the meeting, during the different tasks of each session. The time was divided between discussion, reading aloud, reading independently, and journaling. Although different students seemed more engaged in particular segments of the meetings, as a whole their engagement levels scored well above the classroom activities observed. The mean engagement score compiled from the three lessons I observed in the classroom was 14.7 out of a total of 25 points. The mean engagement score of the literature circles totaled 21.3. The patterns seem to indicate a correlation between categories, if scores were higher in one indicator of engagement it tended to follow that the scores would be higher in the other categories as well. This pattern suggests a high level of student engagement, present in all activities during the session.

The figure below illustrates the average engagement score of each observed activity from the classroom and the literature circle.

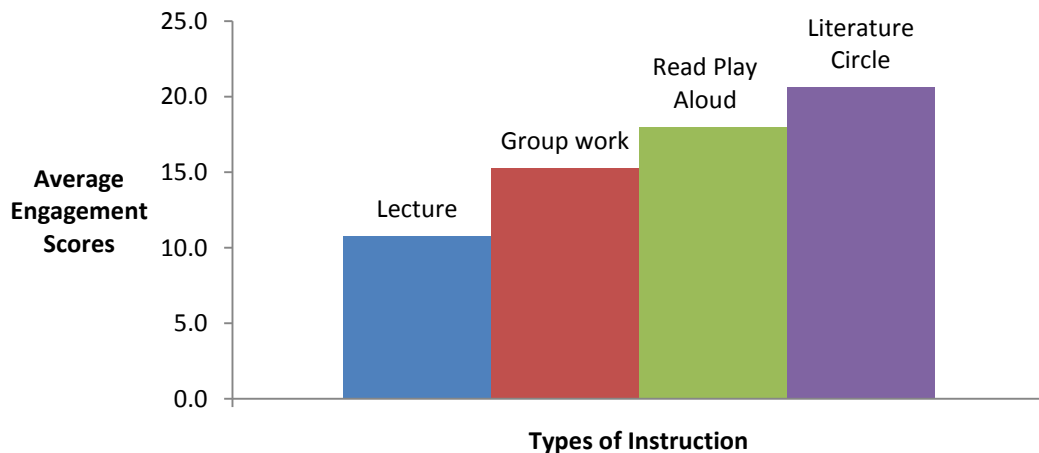


Figure 2. Engagement Scores. Bar graph illustrating average engagement scores for each type of instruction observed.

As shown in Figure 2, the engagement levels during the literature circle scored almost 11 points higher than during classroom lecture and even rating 3 points above the highest scoring classroom activity.

In observation of the students during meetings I did notice areas in which the students did not exhibit high levels of engagement or interest. An activity that was consistently not engaging for the group was journaling.

When analyzing the students' response journals, I coded the qualitative data on two criteria: reference to the text and depth of response rated 1-3, 1 being superficial comments to a maximum of 3 for thorough and reflective answers. There were two notable trends that emerged from the data. Firstly, the students referenced the text in their journal responses 95% of the time. Secondly, the average score on the depth of responses was 1.75. This number reflects a majority of superficial responses, indicating students' lack of interest in the activity.

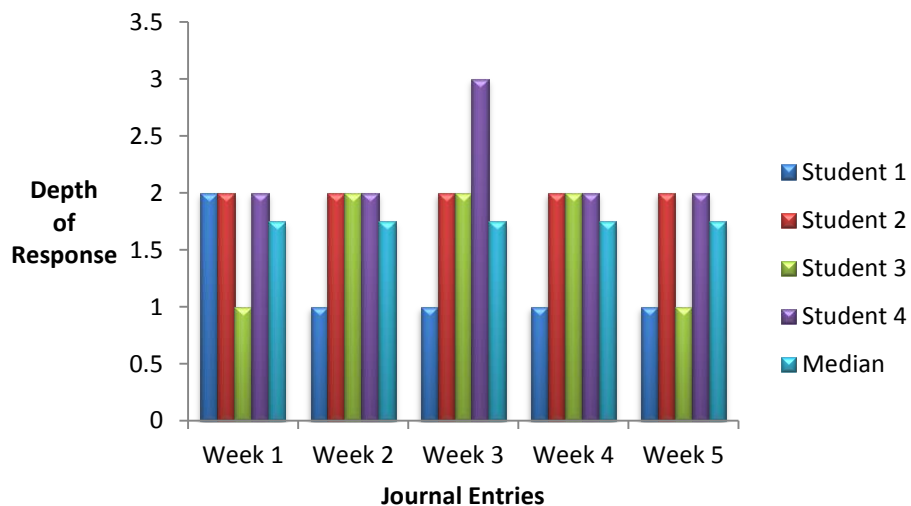


Figure 3. Depth of Journal Response. Bar graph illustrating student scores on journal responses. Median score was 1.75.

My last task with my literature circle was to get feedback on their experience. I gave each student a survey to gauge the effectiveness of the literature circle as perceived by the individual student. In analyzing the data, some interesting trends emerged. For

the first question on what they felt they learned, 50% answered in some type of reflection of theme of the selected books, the other 50% reported information on the supplementary book. The entire group answered that they feel they had a better understanding of the primary text after reading the supplementary texts in the literature circle. Interestingly, the survey did not find their attitudes towards reading in school changed from the beginning of the research. The results were split on the question of what was most helpful about the literature circle. Half of the students reported that the extra discussion time was most beneficial and the other half state that reading the supplementary books was the biggest benefit. An overwhelming 75% stated that journaling was the least helpful for them.

The final data source used in this study was a concluding teacher interview. In this interview I asked the teacher identical questions to the initial interview, to determine each student's growth from their baseline. The findings from this interview were encouraging. All but one of the students displayed growth in their reading comprehension and overall grade for the unit. The figure below displays these findings.

In response to the second question regarding the student's level of enjoyment in reading, it was difficult to determine if their enjoyment in reading as a whole went up because of their experience in the literature circle. However, the teacher did have some anecdotal evidence indicating a students' enjoyment in the supplementary text. She had observed one of the students telling a classmate that was not included in the literature circle about the book we were reading together.

Action Plan

My research demonstrated an overall positive effect on engagement for the students in my literature circle. The students looked forward to meeting in our group every week and it was evident that the small group format with an educator was a very positive environment for them to work. The students not only had an opportunity to be more engaged in the literature but they also benefited from the smaller teacher/student ratio. The students and I bonded through the experience, often discussing things beyond the scope of the research. The more personal nature of the format increased mutual trust between all the students; I noticed their relationships growing along with my connections with them.

The students expressed positive feedback to me both verbally and on the student survey. They all stated that they feel the literature circle contributed towards their deeper understanding and engagement in the primary text they were studying in their English class. They also expressed satisfaction of having completed two books. This was very promising feedback from students that typically lag behind in class, with little engagement or enjoyment in their school reading. The results of my action research indicate that the students' engagement did significantly improve through reading supplementary texts in our literature circle.

One reason this proved to be successful is that students were given the opportunity to read and reread selections of the text, often in different formats such as graphic novels. The illustrations in graphic novels provided visual clues to the meaning of the print and dialogue. These features interested the boys. Research suggests pairing graphic novels with canonical texts to increase engagement and understanding the use of

books such as graphic novels as a technique for improving student understanding. I found this to be truly beneficial technique in my own research. The boys had the opportunity to read the original format of the book and then reread in graphic novel form. This not only increased understanding but the boys' enjoyment as well. Feedback on the student survey indicated that they were a favorite aspect of the literature circle.

Another reason that the literature circle was a successful method for increasing engagement was the interactive nature of the meetings. The students had the chance to verbalize their questions, ideas, and feelings about the texts that they were reading. The discussions were also an invaluable time for them to make connections between texts

The use of a primary and supplementary text was very beneficial in uncovering themes and big ideas that the two texts shared. The literature review supported the method of touchstone texts, using a primary text as a platform for multiple text connections. The exploration and understanding of these connections were integral in deepening engagement for the boys. The texts plots paired very well together and led to further application of the books big ideas, such as the influence of greed.

Although I would like to continue using this method in the future to increase my students' engagement in literature, after conducting my research there are a few changes that I would make:

- Extend this method to entire language arts class.
- Allow students to choose supplementary texts from a preselected group of supporting texts.
- Plan for more time for students to write connecting journal responses.

Going forward, the results of my research will also change my practice in several ways. Firstly, I plan to structure the study of literature in my classroom around a touchstone text. Supplementary texts will be read in conjunction, to deepen understanding with connections to the primary text's theme and big ideas. A method that I found for utilizing supplementary texts in the classroom is the concept of text sets. Text sets are a group of books, compiled by the educator, which have varying reading levels and formats, but all contribute to the students' understanding of the primary book studied as a class (Giorgis and Johnson, 2002). Secondly, I will form small literature circles in the classroom for the students to read and discuss their literature selections. During the meeting times I will circulate and assist in facilitating discussion if needed. Another important implantation from my research that I plan on using for future instruction is the basic, but impactful method of rereading (Faust and Glenzer, 2000). Supporting Faust and Glenzer's (2000) research, rereading was a big factor in the boys increased understanding, and the resulting higher engagement with the text.

It is my belief that through more effective practices in language arts classes we can close the reading performance gap between girls and boys. As an educator trying to answer how to engage adolescent boys in literature, this research shows the need for more opportunities for boys to read texts they are interested in and that support the understanding of required texts, as well as time for them to discuss and reread texts for greater understanding. Implementing these methods in language arts classrooms will greatly improve boys' engagement and ultimately success in reading.

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Appendix A

Student Name: _____

Completed by: _____

Date: _____

Teacher Interview:

1. Tell me about the student's performance in reading.

2. Do you feel the student enjoys reading?

- a. If no, what do you feel like stands in the way of their enjoyment?

- b. If yes, what books do they enjoy the most?

3. Is the student engaged during lecture/discussion and reading of course texts?

- a. If yes, what does this look like?

- b. If no, what does this look like?

Appendix B

Student Survey #1

Please complete the following survey on your tastes in literature.

You do not need to include your name.

1. Have you read a graphic novel?
2. What is your favorite genre of books (action, mystery, romance, drama, comedy, fairy tale, etc.)?
3. Do you enjoy reading nonfiction?
4. What is your all-time favorite book?

Appendix C

Observational tally sheet: monitoring engagement

I will use a tally sheet with typical signs of engagement to measure the boy's interest in the literature. I will use this while observing literature circles and complete one for each student.

OBSERVATIONS

Positive Body Language

Student exhibit body postures that indicate they are paying attention to the teacher and/or other students.

Very High High Medium Low Very Low

Consistent Focus

Student is focused on the learning activity with minimum disruptions.

Very High High Medium Low Very Low

Verbal Participation

Student expresses thoughtful ideas, reflective answers, and questions relevant or appropriate to learning.

Very High High Medium Low Very Low

Student Confidence

Student exhibits confidence and can initiate and complete a task with limited coaching and can work in a group.

Very High High Medium Low Very Low

Fun and Excitement

Student exhibits interest and enthusiasm and use positive humor.

Very High High Medium Low Very Low

Appendix D

Inquiry: Attitude Scale

Using an attitude scale before I begin my interventions will give me a good baseline on the student's interest and attitudes about reading for school.

I enjoy the reading I do in school

Agree **Somewhat Agree** **Somewhat Disagree** **Disagree**

I am confident in my reading abilities

Agree **Somewhat Agree** **Somewhat Disagree** **Disagree**

I am confident in my ability to analyze the meaning of a book

Agree **Somewhat Agree** **Somewhat Disagree** **Disagree**

I feel the books I read in school are interesting

Agree **Somewhat Agree** **Somewhat Disagree** **Disagree**

Appendix E

Student Survey #2

Please complete this survey on literature circles. Answer each question, and provide as much information as you can on the open ended questions. Please be honest, as I will use the feedback you give me to plan future language arts lessons. You do not have to put your name on the survey.

1. What have you learned from reading the supplementary books with Macbeth?
2. After participating in our literature circle do you feel you had a better, worse or same understanding of Macbeth?
Why?
3. Has participating in the literature circle changed the way you feel about reading for school?
4. What activities during the literature circle have been most helpful to you?
5. What activities have been least helpful to you?

Appendix F

Sample Journal Prompts

1. Looking at the illustrations, reading the title and skimming the book, what do you think this selection is going to be about?
2. What event that has occurred so far did you find entertaining or interesting?
3. Chapter_____ has some pretty important things happen to the characters, what do you feel is the most impactful and why?