THE ROLE OF ONLINE LITERATURE CIRCLES IN INCREASING ENGAGEMENT AND
LITERACY IN STUDENTS WITH LEARNING DISABILITIES

by

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A PROJECT SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE
REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF

MASTER OF EDUCATION

in

Special Education

VANCOUVER ISLAND UNIVERSITY

August, 2012
Acknowledgements

I would like to gratefully acknowledge my husband, David, and my children Jordan, Christian and Annemarie, for their support during the completion of this Master’s degree. Without them, the past two years of teaching in two different schools, taking course after course, reading stacks of research material, and writing for hours after teaching was finished for the day, would not have been possible. Their loving prodding and support was instrumental, and they are loved and appreciated more than I can say.

I would also like to thank my colleagues, and the parents and students, of my DL school, for their patience, support and enthusiastic participation in this project. I couldn’t have done this without them, and I am so grateful for each of them.

Lastly, but certainly not least, I would like to thank Dr. Mary Lindsay for her time, energy, dedication and attention to detail in her role as my advisor: she has been a guide, mentor and supporter in demanding the best from me, and encouraging me in my journey as a Master’s student. My teaching will reflect what I have learned from her.
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Abstract

The study and teaching of literacy, in the sense of learning to read and think meaningfully about what is read, and the study and teaching of literature, in the sense of stories that bring readers into a deeper understanding of the world and their place in it, are interwoven in the practice of a teacher of English and Special Education in a Distributed Learning school, and explored through the medium of an online literature circle project. In the role of a researcher-practitioner the author uses the approach of action research to illuminate the role of online literature circles in increasing engagement and literacy in students with learning disabilities, through a project involving written conversations about literature with distributed learning students.
Chapter 1

In considering literacy in the sense of learning to read, as well as learning to think meaningfully about what is read, the reading of literature seems intrinsic to the task, and something that every language arts teacher would subscribe to without question. When the element of learning disabilities is inserted, however, there is less recognition of this precept: with the accepted focus often centered on phonics, decoding, spelling and comprehension of each element of each sentence, the place of literature is often diminished. While stories are used in the teaching of reading, they are often in the form of leveled readers, and are conduits of vocabulary lists at various reading levels rather than “literature,” which can be defined for the purposes of this thesis as stories that bring readers into a deeper understanding of the world and their place in it. Literary stories can be set apart from others as stories that reach readers of various ages and reading levels on an emotional as well as an intellectual level, and that provide interest and a deepening of both an understanding of life, and ideally, a desire to read more. As Rosenblatt (1995) says, literary stories “emerge from personal and intimate experience of specific human situations, presented with all the sharpness and intensity of art” (p. 4-5). This artistic intensity provides a connection that draws readers into a narrative, opening a door to enjoyment, engagement and further reading.

In this inquiry, literacy was considered in the context of guiding students in the reading of literature that appealed directly to them, and in a Distributed Learning (DL), or distance education, context. The goal of this project was to discover whether students with learning disabilities in the areas of reading and writing would be able to make progress in reading fluency and comprehension during a process of guided, dialogic interaction with literature. Because of the ongoing research taking place in educational and academic settings in the areas of reading
comprehension, literacy strategies and literature circles, and comprehension through dialogue and conversation, there is increasing awareness that it is through not just reading, but discussion and interaction and even wrestling with a text, that we come to the fullest understanding of it.

The intention of this project was also to implement a way for students to share, discuss and relate their experiences of reading within a DL environment, so an additional goal was to discover through this project how the use of technology--using email for literary conversations rather than meeting and discussing face-to-face--would support and make possible this teaching strategy for DL students. And a further aspect of discovery was whether it would be even easier for them to carry out those discussions online rather than in a physical discussion circle, as they felt their way initially through an unfamiliar strategy.

The idea of creating an online literature circle through emailed conversations about literature in order to share thoughts and ideas that spring from the readings, and to connect teacher and students through shared readings and/or conferences, was based on the premise that greater discussion and thoughtfulness lead to greater engagement with a text; greater engagement leads to greater understanding; and greater understanding leads to stronger reading skills, as confidence and interest lead into fluency and increased interaction with the written word.

In considering the idea of conducting a literature circle involving students with learning disabilities, the first step was to place the inquiry within the context of special education, and to consider the students who would be involved in the light of a global definition of special needs education and the nature of disabilities, as well as the aspect of DL within the jurisdiction in which this project took place.
Special Needs in Education

In the field of education around the world today, educators, economists and sociologists are working hard to define the responsibilities as well as the limitations of education, and within that broad category, special education. Over the past forty years, global organizations have attempted to clearly and concretely define—more carefully each time—the parameters of disability, and the place of students and adults with disabilities within society and within the educational system. As Susan Peters (2007) sets out, from the “United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Disabled Persons” in 1975; to the World Programme of Action in 1982; the Convention on the Rights of the Child in 1990; the UN Standard Rules in 1993; and the Salamanca Statement and Framework for Action at the World Conference on Special Needs Education in 1994, global studies and summits have attempted to determine and mandate the right to education for all, and the growing importance of educating students with special needs in tandem with the general education population, “combating discriminatory attitudes, creating welcoming communities, building an inclusive society and achieving education for all” (UNESCO, 1994, para. 2).

If this mandate to build an inclusive society and provide education for all is taken seriously, then the next question that arises is, What is special education, and who qualifies for it? As defined by IDEA (the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act) in the United States, “Special education means specially designed instruction, at no cost to the parents, to meet the unique needs of a child with a disability” (IDEA, 2004). In British Columbia, to look specifically at the jurisdiction in which this project has taken place, special education is defined as:

[enabling] the equitable participation of students with special needs in the educational system in British Columbia…Students with special needs have
disabilities of an intellectual, physical, sensory, emotional, or behavioural nature, or have a learning disability or have exceptional gifts or talents. (BC Ministry of Education, SPED)

There have been numerous extensions of these definitions in countries around the world, and at the previously-mentioned health, education and economic summits over the years, including discussions about the definitions of disability, inclusion and categorization.

**Frameworks of Disability**

Consequently, both within and outside of the system of K-12 education, there is also the need to discuss the term *disability* as a critical issue within our society. Carol Thomas (2004) has explored frameworks of disabilities in three fundamental ways, and she refers to these frameworks as follows:

1. in terms of “disability studies”--disability is structured by social oppression, inequality and exclusion; it is a social construct that society has created around those who are not “normal,” who don’t fit into the curve of average, with its acceptance of mild disabilities (e.g. glasses, hearing aids, lactose intolerance), but rejection of those who are further along on the spectrum of “abnormal”;
2. in terms of medical sociology--disability is caused by illness and impairment and entails suffering;
3. in terms of the postmodern view--disability is caused by both social barriers and physical impairment. (p. 580-581)

Thomas (2004) also speaks of the “social relational character” (p. 578) of disabilities, as equalling a socially-imposed restriction of activity, not just the effects of physical impairment.
For teachers in the public school system, the social relational view of disabilities is played out every day within schools, and there is an obvious social construct around learning disabilities, as well as the impairments that prevent children from learning in the same way as most of the children around them.

In the light of these critical theoretical frameworks of disability, and accepting that students in our schools do not only have to deal with the academic or physical implications of their disabilities, but also with their social and emotional effects, it is especially important to consider another of the guiding tenets referred to in UNESCO’s Salamanca Statement: “every child has unique characteristics, interests, abilities and learning needs, and education systems should be designed and educational programmes implemented to take into account the wide diversity of these characteristics and needs” (UNESCO, 2004, para.2).

**Distributed Learning**

Because of the mandate for educators to provide educational programs for students with diverse needs, Distributed Learning is an aspect of education that is gaining increasing interest and adherence. A simple definition of “distance education” describes education in which “the 'instructor' is absent at least most of the time” (Menconi, 2003, p. 3). In British Columbia, where this project exploring online literature circles has been carried out, distance education has been renamed as Distributed Learning (DL), and, according to the Ministry of Education in British Columbia, takes place when: “a student is primarily at a distance from the teacher; whether he/she is at home; or connected to teachers from another learning facility” (BC Ministry of Education, DL).
By these definitions, this model of education has an inherent flexibility and ability to meet individual learning needs for students who need to learn from home or some other environment outside of school for many and varied reasons. These learning needs could include health issues; temporary long-term travel plans; students who need an academic challenge; students who need more time to complete music practice, pursue a sport, or explore a passion or career interest; a family choice to go “off-grid” because of ideological issues with the school system; distance from the nearest school; or the fact that students are struggling in school at their grade level. It is this last criterion that is of relevance in relation to this project: the presence of DL as a factor in this project meant that in addition to an inquiry into the need for reading engagement for students who were struggling with reading, this became an inquiry into the use of online conversations as a means of promoting and exploring reading engagement. This use of the medium of communication most relevant and accessible to DL students was a response to the need, and mandate, for individualized education for all students.

Individualized education is not only a valuable goal in general and special education, it is an essential one. Because each student has a unique value both as a person and as a learner within the educational system, each student must be given the best opportunity to learn in relation to his or her skills and learning needs (Fowler, Ostrosky, & Yates, 2007; Kugelmass, 2007; Mesmer, 2008; Norwich, 2007; Rose, 2007; Rouse & McLaughlin, 2007; Wendling & Mather, 2009). This is especially true in the context of special education, when considering students who fall outside of the range of the “average student” whom most classroom teachers must focus most of their resources on. Children with specific physical, mental or emotional, intellectual and environmental needs have a greater requirement for extraordinary programs—programs outside of the ordinary day-to-day framework of classroom learning—and must
therefore be considered as less able to succeed without a program in which they can explore and learn within the context of their individualized program. This need for individualized education is one ideally poised to be met within the framework of Distributed Learning, where individualized learning is already part of the fabric of the DL system of education. This is increasingly supported by technological innovations, which make DL more accessible, and the teacher’s role more concrete in communicating with students and teaching lessons; information technology has been called “the single most important component of 21st century education” (Woods, 2010, p. 18). Increasingly, as well, DL is being recognized not only as a viable option for students, but one that allows students to perform at a higher level than their peers in more traditional classrooms (Woods, 2010).

“Placing” the Project in Context

The place where these two systems--special education and Distributed Learning--met to provide the context for this project was within a Distributed Learning school in a public school district in British Columbia where the teacher-researcher is both a virtual classroom teacher, and a Special Education teacher. Within this intersection the very individual needs of students are able to be met in a flexible and individualized setting. Within a DL context, there is a general finding that students are less affected by the social constructs around their disabilities; partly because of the great diversity of learning styles and backgrounds in DL schools, and partly because teaching is more likely to be structured in a way that takes into account the individual’s place in the social construct than in some other settings. The impact of peer pressure is less pronounced in this setting as well, as many students are outside of the standard definition, or peer definition, of “normal.”
Values Statement

For educators consistently involved with researching and referencing various perspectives on knowledge and education, an awareness of underlying beliefs about special education is key to the many daily interactions with students whose abilities fall outside of the norm. For active teacher-researchers as well, when reflecting on teaching practice, there is a need to bear in mind the values foundation of that practice. Educators in the field of special needs must consider various epistemological perspectives on special education, and the beliefs about knowledge that drive methods of teaching and learning. The following theories of knowledge are meaningful to any researcher-practitioner who undertakes a project involving inquiry into how students learn and how their learning can be enhanced:

- post-positivism, built as it is upon the framework of logical positivism but without the foundational view that a researcher is able to be totally objective and find a true truth outside of any bias whatsoever;
- constructivism, which “regards reality as a creative product of mind interacting with the external world” (Paul, Fowler & Cranston-Gingras, 2007, p. 180), and builds “social constructs” of the phenomena observable around us;
- critical theory, which develops epistemology through the lens of specific viewpoints (e.g. race, gender, disability or political perspective).

With whichever method of research or foundational belief any project moves forward, or any teacher engages in daily teaching, there is a need to analyze and interpret research and studies in the field of special education with a great deal of care, transparency and awareness of the history of research that has gone before in this field. The theories of knowledge mentioned above are inherent in this thesis paper, but the following comment from Paul et al. (2007) can be taken as a
focusing statement for the need to work from a set of values that address the importance of the individuals being taught:

The role of social values in policy development is relatively clear: the rules we make and the understandings we negotiate in order to conduct the affairs of institutions should reflect the values we wish to enact and the kind of society we want. (p. 180)

A consideration of the values of inclusivity and the mandate of education for all, delivered to the best of each teacher’s ability in many different educational settings, is the basis for this project review.

Therefore, in reflecting on this project at the nexus of Distributed Learning (DL) and learning disabilities (LD), there is an opportunity to analyze student achievement in an environment that very much values the individual strengths and needs of students, and the relationships between children, families and teachers. An exploration of the ways that discourse and reflection can bring students to a new appreciation of their abilities in reading and thinking, and their ability to make a positive contribution on their journey of understanding their own strengths and challenges, becomes increasingly meaningful throughout the course of the project. If the value that educators place on students with learning disabilities is dictated by their need to be given the gift of celebrating their uniqueness, both epistemologically--through the insights they gain through literature and through discussion and growth in understanding how they can best learn--and ontologically, through accepting their place in the world and their ability to function and interact with the many gifts they have--then the results of this project, and the subsequent learnings from it, may deepen an understanding of that value.
Chapter 2: Literature Review

The idea of using the study of literature as part of a language arts or English class is not a surprising one; it’s rather the raison d’etre for secondary grades, and an integral part of primary and intermediate classes. Using a fiction or non-fiction book that is interesting, relevant and has “goodness-of-fit” (Travers & Travers, 2008, p. 81)--meaning that the biopsychosocial development of the specific child who will be reading the book is taken into account--makes sense in the minds of teachers as they prepare units and lessons and choose reading material as a support or a focus for their lessons. This idea of matching the book choice to the developmental level of each child is uniquely suited to meeting the needs of students who fit into both the category of “developmentally normal” and those who wear the label of “special needs,” whatever those needs may be. In this chapter, a discussion of the study of literature in order to increase reading engagement in students with learning disabilities will be addressed, along with a broader consideration of the use of literature circles.

Reading Engagement

Engagement in any activity, including reading, implies a focus, an ability to attend, and a willingness to bring independent and innovative thinking to bear on the task at hand. It is not an optional aspect of improvement in reading; as Bomer (2011) says, “Engagement involves motivation, desire, care, and participation, and it is essential to reading proficiency” (p. 3). Without engagement, reading is a chore, a task accepted as a necessary evil in school. Reading, for students with learning disabilities who struggle with reading, can be a dreaded part of their day, and the motivation and desire for participation that reading engagement involves is doubly missing in their educational lives, both because of educational or academic deficits in structure
or delivery, and because of their own individual reading challenges. Engagement in reading for struggling readers is thus doubly necessary.

Engagement has also been referred to in the context of challenging students to become more independent as writers about what they have read in order to more fully understand and engage with their reading, “recruit[ing] whatever is most appropriate and emotionally lively in…[their] repertory” (Dias, 2002) to better interpret what they’ve read. This understanding of a transaction with a text through paraphrasing or rewriting in another form highlights the need to be creative in seeking engagement as readers, and the need to allow learners with reading disabilities to explore new ways of seeing what they read.

Another aspect of engagement in reading is that of reading choice and setting: the more readers are able to control their own reading choices, time and setting, the more engaged and responsive they will be (Atwell, 1998; Cox, 2002). Conversely, the more that the setting in which reading takes place is prescribed, and the less choice a reader is given in reading material, the less engagement and motivation will be guiding factors in a student’s reading journey. There is irony in the idea that offering choice in reading time and material is rarely feasible in many classrooms, and so engagement is often lost in students who most need it in order to grow as readers.

The concept of reading engagement as the first step in the process of building strength in reading fluency and comprehension is often referred to in the literature on reading instruction as the need to “just read;” as Ivey (2000) says, “allowing students to just read is the only way for them to become truly engaged in reading” (p. 42). The gift of time to “just read,” which has been shown to lead to greater enjoyment of reading and engagement in reading (Atwell, 1998;
Hawkins, 1990; Ivey, 2000; Stanovich, 1996; Strickland & Walker, 2004), is something that is provided in the context of a literature circle within an educational setting.

Sheridan Blau (2003) refers to “the power [of literature] to interest and engage students emotionally and intellectually” (p. 58) in his discussion of the “politics of reading.” He talks about the problems caused for some educators in focusing on literary texts rather than the teaching of basic reading skills, and the fear for some that a “skills-based method of reading instruction” (p. 58) will be displaced to the detriment of reading improvement. He makes the case that the critical thinking skills, intellectual exercise and amount of reading needed in order to interpret and understand literature, are a valid and essential part of improving reading in an educational setting, across age and grade levels.

**Literature Circles**

In the last few years, the idea of “literature circles” has gained ground, and has been used in classrooms at various grade levels. Daniels and Steineke (2004) use this definition: “In school, we define literature circles (interchangeably called book clubs or reading groups) as small, peer-led discussion groups whose members have chosen to read the same article, poem, book or novel and to talk about it with each other” (p.3). This definition encompasses the idea of providing engagement in reading through interaction with a text, as well as interaction with other people who have read the same text.

Even more prevalent in the current literature about reading and discussing literature as a means of teaching and learning literacy is the idea of a “reading workshop” as an opportunity for students to read books of their own choosing, and then discuss what they’ve read in journal or dialogue form (with a teacher or with peers), or in whole-class or small-group format (Atwell, 1998, 2007; Blau, 2003; Copeland, 2005; Daniels & Steineke, 2004; Eeds & Wells, 1989; Towle,
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2000). In this format, each of the students in a classroom could be reading a different book; what brings the class together is the teacher’s “mini-lesson” (Atwell, 1998; Daniels & Steineke, 2004) as a way of teaching specific skills and strategies; and the sharing by members of the class and the teacher about books they have loved, and why they have made the “much-loved list.” The reading workshop format provides for an even more flexible and individualized learning process, focused on reading and responding to literature, than the more traditional literature circles, though in many ways the terms are interchangeable.

The strong thread running through each of these forms of literature study is the shift from a teacher-centred, top-down, positivist, empirical view of communicating knowledge (knowledge as the purview of the teacher, who shares it freely and generously, but with the understanding that his or hers is the interpretation that will be relied on at the end of the day), to a student-centred, inquiring, bottom-up, constructivist view of exploring and understanding knowledge together as students and teachers (Beers, 2004; Bomer, 2011; Copeland, 2005; Sumara, 2002). As Sumara (2002) says:

> Although schools are becoming more and more proficient at teaching students to read, they are not very adept at teaching them how [sic] to read…

> Although students are taught to hunt for metaphors, symbols and themes, they are not usually taught how to develop a meaningful relationship with a literary work. (p.37)

It is this “meaningful relationship” that draws students into a sense of engagement with the book they are reading, and which can transform their relationship with reading, and their willingness to work hard to improve their reading.
This transformation of the teaching of literature as a culturally-conditioned, “classics”-oriented transmission of certain ideas about certain books, to a sharing of ideas and responses that involve students’ own life experiences and connections to other texts, has the potential to completely revitalize the attitude and approach to reading by students, and perhaps most importantly, by students who are struggling readers. In referring to the type of literacy that we inculcate in our school settings, Allington (2012) says:

When you consider the richness of the dialogue about texts that occurs outside of school, the typical patterns of school talk about texts seem shallow and barren. Outside of school we rely on the richness of a person’s conversation about texts to judge how well they understood it and their literateness; in school we typically rely on the flat recitation of events or information to make that same judgement….Reading lessons must change and begin to foster the sorts of thinking about texts that is commonly accepted as literate behaviour outside of school. (p. 124)

Students in school should have the opportunity to engage with books that interest and challenge them in the same way that adults, young adults and children do in non-academic settings. Our ability as readers to meet in a literate conversation about our reading should not be constrained by age, context, or reading ability.

Theoretical Foundations of Using Literature Circles as Tools in Reading Improvement

In looking at the practice and the theory behind using literature circles to engage students, there are four theoretical bases that were used in planning and preparing this literature- and discussion-based project: learning as a social and interactive pursuit; reading as a transactional
learning experience; engagement as a key to learning how to read and comprehend; and literary
dialogue as an essential element of reading improvement.

Learning in a social context. In considering a discussion of the sociocultural nature of
learning, and especially of learning language, the literature centres around the thinking and
writing of Lev Vygotsky (1978), who considered that:

Meanings created in social interactions are internalized in the
form of thought. These internalized interactions are used in
subsequent interactions, influencing the dialogue which occurs
within the minds of learners and between participants. Learning,
thus, has its roots in a social dialectic or dialogue. (Short et al.,

According to this sociocultural theory, a dialogic framework for interacting with texts is
predicated upon a belief that dialogue will lead to greater learning and engagement with reading
as an academic task. In this framework, formative learning is not a solitary pursuit, but rather a
process of sharing meaning through discussion and interaction. As John-Steiner says (1997),
“Language is a bridge between individuals who wish to overcome divisions born of the diversity
of human experience. It is also a bridge between inner thought and shared understanding” (p.
111). In understanding the world through reading and exploring language and literature,
Vygotsky’s social constructivist theory holds true as well: “discussions about a shared text” can
help a learner integrate and elaborate knowledge in new ways (Malloy & Gambrell, 2010, p.
255). Vygotsky was also influential in describing a zone of proximal development --the period of
development within which a student can be expected to most meaningfully grow and learn with
the help of a mediator, or a more knowledgeable other (Malloy & Gambrell, 2010). This
combining of personal growth within the social context of a learner and with the help of a guide through the zone of proximal development (ZPD)--whether that guide is a teacher or parent--fits in well theoretically with the idea of constructing an online literature circle with students who are struggling readers: the interaction through dialogue between student and teacher not only takes into account the social nature of learning, but also the idea of teacher as mediator. The online environment limits the extent of the group dynamics, but hopefully allows for a rich dialogic learning environment.

Reading as a transactional learning experience. As with Vygotsky and sociocultural learning, there is a central figure in any discussion of the role of the reader in creating meaning during the reading process, and here it is Louise Rosenblatt (1986), who posited that: “Reading is a transactional process that goes on between a particular reader and a particular text at a particular time, and under particular circumstances…The meaning…comes into being during the transaction” (p. 123). Therefore, each book, poem, newspaper article or text message from a friend is not only the arrangement of signs and symbols on a page, leading to one right interpretation that can be made from that particular combination of letters and words (Rosenblatt, 1964), but is rather an opportunity for a reader to make a unique response to a written text. No one else will be in the exact same position as the individual reader meeting a certain text. As Rosenblatt (1964) says, “The reader is engaged in a creative process at once intensely personal, since the poem is something lived-through, and intensely social, since the text…can be shared with others” (p.126). Almasi et al. (1996), in referring to students in a study of engaged reading through classroom discussions of literature, discovered that: “One interpretive tool which students used that displayed their cognitive engagement occurred when students related the content of the text to their personal experiences” (p. 125). For those who struggle with reading,
and finding the “one right interpretation” that well-intentioned teachers and educational systems often require, out of a true desire to help students to the fullest experience of meaning possible, this transactional theory allows for a relaxation of the fear of failure to understand, and an ability to engage in reading for pleasure.

Lastly in this overview of Rosenblatt’s theory is her consideration of reading as fulfilling two purposes: either seeking information that can be taken away from the reading, which she terms *efferent reading* (from the Latin term, “efferre,” meaning “to carry away”); or seeking the experience that can be lived through during the reading event, which she terms *aesthetic reading* (1986). In aesthetic reading, the reader responds to the feelings and connections that are being made internally as he or she reads, and takes ownership of the meaning and response to the written word. There is an implied expectation that an aesthetic response will be made to a literary work, as will be the case in this research project with literature texts, but, “*Any text can be read either efferently or aesthetically [sic]***” (Rosenblatt, 1986, p. 124). For children with learning disabilities, the concept of a literature circle, which is provided along with an understanding that they do not have to read literature efferently, as they are often expected to do, but rather for pleasure and personal connection and meaning, can be a tremendous support for engagement, and reading improvement. Allowing student readers the freedom to read for pleasure, as well as giving guidance and mediation between reader and text, can give teachers the opportunity to help students deepen and enlarge their understanding of what is being read.

**Engagement for learning.** The ideas that reading should be fun, that it should inspire us and make us laugh and cry, that we should feel that characters in books are our best friends or our worst enemies, have not been a high priority in school classrooms. With all students, and especially with those who struggle to read, the focus of many teachers has often been on
decoding, fluency, phonemic and phonographic awareness, and meeting learning outcomes for each grade level—and rightly so in many cases. However, the loss of reading for enjoyment in school has been especially hard for those who do not come by that kind of reading in their home environments, and even more specifically for children with LD, for whom reading can be agonizing work anyway. This has meant that struggling readers continue to struggle for literacy far longer than they might if more attention were paid to periods of time set aside for age-appropriate, just-right, aesthetic reading. Nancie Atwell (1998), in her ground-breaking book *In the Middle*, speaks of finding that when she set aside time in her classroom just for reading, her students developed into deeply engaged readers who made connections to personal experience and other books they read, and who made huge strides in fluency and decoding and the other building blocks of reading, because they became aesthetic readers. When students chose what they wanted to read, read with personal commitment and enjoyment, and became engaged, reading became a “whole, sense-making endeavor” (p. 147). As Atwell (1998) says, “Allowing readers to select their own books has a major impact on students’ fluency, reading rate, and comprehension” (p. 37). In the midst of that engagement, there is a greater opportunity for learning.

**Learning through literary dialogue.** The concept of “classroom talk” about books is often compared to a book club for adults, where friends gather to discuss, argue and dig more deeply into a book that everyone has read, gaining further insights through the discussion, and finding more personal connections through the process of speaking their thoughts about the book. The premise stands that much dialogue with others in literary conversation about the meaning and importance of a book will lead to greater engagement and understanding: “…talk
helps to confirm, extend or modify individual interpretations and creates a better understanding of the text” (Eeds & Wells, 1989, p. 27).

The idea of talk leading to learning is a long-held premise, and one that finds great support in the educational literature published recently. There are several terms used to describe the experience of talk about books. Copeland (2005) draws a distinction between classroom “discussion” and classroom “dialogue.” In his view, discussion is deductive, a form of talk meant to bring participants to a certain conclusion, something that takes place at a meeting. By contrast, dialogue is inductive, philosophical, meant to generate ideas rather than solve problems.

Daniels (2007) uses the terms “conferences” and “dialogue journals” to refer to the practices of teachers and students meeting to talk about books through letters to each other. The term “conferences” refers to the richness of conferring, of a coming together of thoughts and ideas, and even more, of a true exchange of ideas that might not be prompted without dialogue.

Allington (2007) refers to “the power of literate conversation--discussion--in fostering both literacy development and the acquisition of content knowledge” (p. 281). Malloy and Gambrell (2010) discuss building a “reflective classroom” involving classroom discourse in order to create the social interactions that lay the foundations of constructing meaning (p. 255); this dialogic classroom provides figurative mind-room for imagining, creating, reflecting and shaping ideas, and can take place productively in a “virtual classroom” space as well.

As Smith and Wilhelm (2010) put it vividly: “Literature provides a unique and powerful way of knowing--and therefore offers us new ways of becoming and being. Reading literature allows us to explore both what is and what could be” (p.7). With an invitation like this beckoning us forward into an exploration of life through literature, through a literature circle that provides a space for students to read, and then to discuss what they have read with great support from those...
around them, the benefit to opening that door to students who are struggling readers seems both worthwhile and inarguable.

**Literature Review Summation**

The assumption underlying the focus of this literature review, and the description of the project that follows, is that one reason that students with LD, or any students who struggle with reading, find it so difficult to improve in their reading ability or reading “level” in school, is that reading has become a frustrating and unsatisfying experience. Throughout the literature circle project, which focused on exploring the experience of literature in an educational setting—through a choice-based, dialogic, individual, response-based and aesthetic approach—the goal was to *engage* students in reading, and usher them into the world of reading for pleasure with the help of a teacher-mediator. Atwell (2007) says in a later work, after more years of providing reading experiences in her classroom:

> More than anything else that a school can provide them…struggling readers need surefire stories written near--or not impossibly above--their independent readings levels, and time to read them. They need pleasure… Only frequent, sustained, voluminous reading will bring these readers up to grade level. (p. 43)

The goal of this literature circle project, of enabling improvement in fluency and comprehension through engagement in reading, was in response to this need, and a perceived gap between the need and the reality in many classroom reading experiences, both in general education classrooms, and in special education settings.

Malloy and Gambrell (2010) put the case for providing the accommodations intrinsic to this online literature circle project this way:
Using cues to direct students towards constructive discussion techniques, allowing additional time to process and respond, and monitoring the range of topics to promote a coherent thread for students to follow are accommodations that are relevant to all students in learning to engage in literature discussions, but may specifically support students with reading disabilities. (p. 261)

The opportunity to examine how the experience of reading aesthetically, and with the opportunity to engage in literature discussions, could draw students in to the joy and pleasure of reading often and fluently, in spite of the fact that they have struggled consistently with reading, were powerful incentives to begin this project.
Chapter 3: Research Methods

Action Research

The research method used in the formulation of this project was that of action research, using mixed methods and combining quantitative and qualitative data collection. There is an element of the “design experiment” (Gersten & Santoro, 2007) here as well, in which instructional interventions can be tried and evaluated prior to considering the development of a more large-scale, quantitative study; this project provided the opportunity to prepare the ground for seeing what further research could be done in the area of online literature circles/discussion groups with students with learning disabilities.

Action research has been described as “combin[ing] the ideas of taking purposeful action with educational intent, and testing the validity of any claims we make about the process….The ‘action’ of action research is always about improving practice, however practice is understood” (McNiff & Whitehead, 2010, p. 18-19).

McNiff and Whitehead (2010) also define action research as being carried out “by practitioners within a particular social situation, [so it is] insider research, not outsider research” (p. 17-18). The authors’ reference to “outsider research” is to the practice of traditional researchers standing outside a research situation in order to observe and document, rather than being part of the lived experience of a project’s participants in order to more fully understand and explain the findings of a project. In the field of education, teachers are ideally situated to be teacher-researchers in an action research situation, as the opportunity to develop the parameters of an action research project within their own teaching contexts leads to the improvement of practice, the creation of knowledge, and the generation of living theories of best practice (McNiff & Whitehead, 2010, p. 18-19).
The formation of the structure and outline of this project began with an understanding of its limitations: that it would involve the use of both qualitative and quantitative research, but without the establishment of a population base for research large enough for traditional outcome validity; and that because of time constraints within the school year it would not involve the use of a normed reading assessment (as a normed assessment cannot be repeated within the same year). The project incorporates validity through adherence to the values stated regarding the importance of each individual student and his or her right to meaningful and individualized education; careful record-keeping; and the inclusion of a measure of quantitative as well as qualitative data. However, action research by its very nature cannot be “reliable,” in the sense that lived experience is not generalizable: it cannot be replicated exactly from time to time, or even from one time to one other time.

The steps and results of this project, then, are presented from an action research perspective, reporting on the planning, the action that was taken, the observation and assessment that took place, and the reflection involved in the project. At the same time, the voice of the teacher-researcher will be heard in a personal, narrative form, using a split-format design, to differentiate between the two dialogic voices: the research-oriented, and the reflective. The teacher-researcher voice is in regular type, and the teacher-as-reflector voice is italicized.

**Philosophical Foundations of a Project Involving Students with Learning Disabilities**

In an article written by two women, Carol Thomas and Mairian Corker (2002), self-described as feminists, as well as sociologists and sociolinguists, they structure their article as a dialogue with each other, and discuss their experience and roles as women and academics with disabilities. They reflect through their dialogue about building social structure on the foundation
of language and discourse. In this way they provide “living theory” as they use this strategy for informing others through this article, build ideas as they connect in discussion, and provide a concrete example of the efficacy of discussions as a bridge to greater understanding. They also express concern that the “voices on the margins” (p. 30) are not silenced. The literature circle project discussed in this thesis reflects the teacher-researcher’s intention to give students the experience of giving voice to their ideas, thoughts and reflections on literature, not only as a way of improving their reading ability, but as a way of stating their views on their place in the world, and their unique way of seeing. Because the parameters of the project involved working with students with learning disabilities, and therefore students who had become used to their place “on the margins” within the school system, their voices may not have been heard as clearly as those of their classmates without the same struggles in reading, writing and communicating. This literature circle project attempts to provide that opportunity.

**Online Literature Circle Pilot Project: Steps**

*“Request for participation.”* The project began with a request to parents at the start of the school year, in the context of school-start interviews, to think about their potential interest in an online literature circle project, designed to improve literacy through increasing engagement in students with learning disabilities (LD). This informal, verbal survey was the first step in gauging interest and soliciting feedback on whether this could be a viable action research project. The feedback from parents was very positive, so administrative approval was granted to launch the online literature circle project within the school community.

The next step in the process was sending out, via email, a "Request for Participation" letter. This went out to families of students within the school with a current designation of Category Q (LD) within the province of BC, or who had been personally assessed by the teacher-
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researcher and who had tested as reading at least one grade level below their own placement. Each of these students, therefore, was already on an Individual Education Plan or an Individualized Learning Plan within the school; these criteria were used in order to give some structure to the request for their participation in this project, as well as meeting the guidelines for an inquiry into an online literature circle as a means of improving both reading engagement and reading fluency in struggling readers. The category of “learning disabilities” provided the framing criterion for those considered to be struggling readers, as that definition included the understanding that each student was reading below grade level.

Because of the need for students to be reading at an independent or approaching an independent level, the requests were sent to only seven students, between grade 6 and grade 8; the goal was to work with approximately four to seven students in an online literature circle, and the expectation was that not everyone would be able to commit to participating in the project.

Responses from each family were quickly returned. Two responses were to decline to participate. The rest of the responses were quite enthusiastic acceptances of the invitation, plus one extra request for inclusion. In the end, I had a participating group of six students between Grades 5 and 8, made up of five girls and one boy. As I began the project, I wondered whether I would wish that I had more students involved, in order to give greater breadth to the results, but by the end I was very grateful that there were only six participants, in light of the amount of time and effort and organization that responding to each student involved. In an unexpected twist, only five of the six students who began the project completed it, due to extenuating family circumstances. This change in my expectations was actually not disappointing, as I believe that the outlier will eventually finish the project as well, and also because this is the reality of working in an action research setting, and discovering what factors influence the education of
our students. Often, it is the extra-educational aspects of life that have a strong impact on how well our students are able to learn.

In the initial emailed invitation/”Request for Participation” letter to parents, the project was explained and the benefits of being involved were detailed, including the foundational theory behind the inquiry: that student book choice, coupled with increased engagement in reading through an online literature circle, would result in increased literacy, in terms of fluency, comprehension and enjoyment of reading. The parents who had expressed interest agreed to continue with the project on the basis of this explanation, and the steps of settling into the process began.

**Beginning of the project.** The steps at the beginning of the project were as follows:

1. An “intake” interview was held with each student participant, along with at least one of his or her parents, in order to explain in detail the goals and features of the project, the teacher-researcher expectations, and to provide a question-and-answer session. It was explained to the students that the project would include a pre-and post-project reading assessment; a pre- and post-project reading attitude survey; and an agreement to read a book of their choice. An assent form was signed by each student, in which they agreed to the terms of the project.

*This was an exciting step in the process: the anticipation of beginning a new teaching project, based on strong findings in previous studies and projects, but with the added distance education component, was invigorating. This field of inquiry lined up very clearly for me with my background in English Literature, as well as my work in the field of Special Education, and my excitement and anticipation were combined with the support and enthusiasm of the students and*
parents involved in the project. There was a sense of positive energy at this stage in the project that I found very meaningful.

2. Two pre-project reading attitude surveys were given to each student participating, both a “Reading Survey” (adapted from Atwell, 1998), and a “Reading Interview” (adapted from Burke, 1993). The Reading Survey asked questions such as “Why do people read?”, “What does someone have to do in order to be a good reader?” and “In general, how do you feel about reading?” The Reading Interview questions included, “When you are reading and you come to something you do not know, what do you do?”, “What would you like to do better as a reader?” and “Do you think you are a good reader, and why or why not?” These questions were intended both to provide some level of anecdotal data collection, in that students’ answers to the reading attitude surveys before and after the project would give information about the efficacy of the online literature circle project, but also to provide a level of narrative inquiry, in that the participants’ voices were being solicited. The questions demonstrated an interest in finding out how these students, with documented reading ability below their grade level, and with a history of struggles in reading as detailed by their parents and previous teachers, felt about reading.

I was struck by the openness and honesty of these students: they told me how they felt about reading and for most of them, they didn’t hate it—they just didn’t get it. They didn’t get the fun and enjoyment of reading, and when they did read, they didn’t get the point of what the author was saying. They needed help with reading that they weren’t necessarily getting in school.

3. A pre-project reading inventory assessment was also conducted with each student, at the same time as the initial interviews. The assessment tool used was the Jerry L. Johns
Basic Reading Inventory (2005), a criterion-referenced reading assessment. The Reading Inventory measures oral and silent reading comprehension assessed through retelling and comprehension questions, and is designed for students in pre-primer levels through to Grade 12.

The decision to use a criterion-referenced reading assessment rather than a norm-referenced reading test was based on both time constraints and fitness-for-purpose factors: within the timeframe of this project--4-6 weeks--it was felt that there was insufficient room for seeing any change that would be interpretable using a norm-referenced reading assessment, and indeed the policy of most school districts is not to re-test students with a tool such as the Woodcock-Johnson III reading assessment subtests inside of at least one year, even using another form (another version of each of the same subtests). Criterion-referenced assessments "determine how well a student is making progress toward mastery of specific skills or subject matter…based on a pre-established criterion," unlike norm-referenced tests that compare a student's performance to that of other students in a broad population base (Klingner, Vaughn, & Boardman, 2007), and for the purposes of this study this was deemed to be a valid choice.

Body of the project. The project per se consisted of the following steps:

1. Each student chose a book, either one that they were already interested in reading or one that they had already started, or even a book that they had read before, if they agreed to re-read it for the purposes of the project. Freedom of choice was an important factor in this project, as it has been proven to be an important factor in reading engagement, and that was a large part of the exploration of reading improvement here. There is also
evidence that students respond best to being able to leave a book unfinished if it's not what they were hoping for, or they aren't “getting into it” (Atwell, 1998), so there was an emphasis on freedom to switch books if necessary. The expectation was that each student would read at least one book during the course of the study, with the opportunity to read as many as he or she was able to read, as long as there was evidence of reading and comprehension through each student's written submissions.

The value that I was placing on individual strengths and the voices of individual students also needed to come out in the choice and autonomy given to each of them in choosing the books that they read for this literacy project. At the project's inception I felt some uncertainty about whether to allow students to choose a book only at a certain reading level, or only from a pre-set list of books. This relatively simple decision was not only about logistics, but also about my values regarding these students and their experience with reading in school up to now, and the choices that they would and should be allowed to make in order to influence their attitude to reading and school in the future. Based on the research regarding the importance of book choice, as well as the need to give my students their own voices in this area, they each chose their own books, with my guidance only if they asked for it, and some of them were books that I wouldn’t have chosen. For each of them, however, they were the right choice.

2. Each student committed to reading at least twenty minutes daily during the course of the project, as agreed upon in the assent letter.

3. Each student wrote at least one “written conversation” letter to the teacher-researcher during the week, via email. The goal of these letters was threefold: to build a strong teacher-student relationship of trust and mutual respect in regard to sharing insights about
the book and responses to it; to engage the student in talking about literature in a way that valued his or her opinions, connections to self, and connections to other books, media or experiences; and to evaluate the student's on-task reading time, as well as his or her writing abilities and level of critical engagement with the text, and to be able to use the teacher’s letters in response to encourage, direct and teach the student in reading with increasing depth and understanding.

_Because of my own love of reading, and my desire to pass that on to my students, as well as my belief (backed up by research) that we learn to read and to love reading by reading, this project’s framework was ideally suited to what I love to do as a teacher. The opportunity to speak via email with my students about what they were reading was never a chore. Because of this project, however, my ear was attuned to changes and improvements in their reading and writing voices in a much more focused way; I was evaluating their written responses to their reading based on their initial reading surveys and reading assessments, as well as interacting with them in dialogue about the text. This was a learning experience for me as well._

4. Twice through the duration of the project the teacher-researcher sent out a "mini-lesson" on an aspect of reading, writing and comprehending, with the request that students and parents read it and incorporate it into their reading and their next written conversation letter if possible. The topics were “student-generated questions,” and “paraphrasing,” both tools to use in interacting with and understanding a text. Each of these techniques was also modeled in the mini-lesson handout, in order to encourage and mentor students in these tools of good reading.
My hope and intention in sending out these mini-lessons was to encourage these students to try out new techniques in reading and responding to their reading, which would help them to improve in their abilities to focus on and interact with the text. After each of the mini-lessons was sent out, students responded with an effort to include these techniques in their emailed conversations with me--I was asked questions about the text (as I was asking questions of them, in order to model the technique as well), and I heard from their parents that they were attempting to paraphrase, though that was not as easy for them. There are many more topics I would like to cover in future literature circles, as I think the “mini” aspect of the lessons made them more accessible than some other lessons I have given to students.

5. An end-of-project interview was held with each student participant, along with at least one of his or her parents, in order to bring closure to the project. At this time a post-project reading survey and a post-project reading assessment were conducted, in order to assess both quantitatively and qualitatively the progress in reading of each student, as well as to receive feedback from both parents and students on the meaningfulness of the project. The post-project reading inventory assessment, given to assess any progress that was made over the course of the literature circle project, was taken from the Jerry L. Johns Basic Reading Inventory, Form B, which consists of a different set of paragraphs and comprehension questions than the Form A set. The expectation at the beginning of the project was that each student would perform at least as well as they did on their pre-project assessment, and the hope was that they would have made some improvement in reading fluency and comprehension.

This was another energizing moment for me: being able to bring closure to the project, and meeting in person again with parents and students after the weeks of writing back and forth, was
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rewarding. I also felt trepidation, as I wasn’t sure what the post-project surveys and reading assessments would tell me, and how the participants had felt about the project. It was a moment of truth.

6. A post-project parent survey was given to at least one parent of each student participant, requesting feedback on whether they felt the project was enjoyable to their child, what could be improved, and whether they considered that their child had improved in their reading attitude or ability.

This was very necessary: I knew that there was great value in having the parents of these struggling readers tell me how the project had gone from their perspective.

Values Framework

The teacher-researcher’s goal for this project was to look at reading levels and reading improvement for the sake of the child and the family, rather than the school or any specific DL program. There was no intention to approximate “high stakes testing,” where the strength and the objective of each strategy of instruction lies in the end result, and where there can even be personal (for the teacher) or school-wide repercussions or benefits tied to that end result of student success. The goal of this project was that its results would add something of value to the literature regarding dialogue about literary works, reading engagement in improving reading in students with learning disabilities, and using online discussion forums to meet the needs of struggling readers within the Distributed Learning community.
Chapter 4: Results of the Project

In presenting the results of this study, action research methodology calls for a more individualized and personal perspective than is called for in traditional reporting of results of quantitative research. In this chapter, an overview of the results will be given in the voice of the author, in the role of action research teacher-researcher, with the italicized reflective voice given room to speak again as well.

Findings from Reading Assessments

As detailed already in the overview of the steps involved in the online literature circle project, the first step after the initial interview that involved the students in the study was giving a reading assessment to each student. The Jerry L. Johns Basic Reading Inventory (9th ed.) (2005) is designed so that a student’s reading of passages during the assessment moves from lower to higher grade levels, increasing the level of difficulty and decreasing the size of the text for each passage read.

On the basis of the miscues made by the student during the oral reading, each grade level is assigned a proficiency category, ranging from Frustration to Instructional to Independent. The goal for each student is to discover at which grade level they are comfortable, or Independent readers, and also to discover at which level they reach the Frustration point, which indicates that the passage is too difficult to read smoothly and understand easily. The reading level in between these two, the Instructional level, means that students can read with adequate understanding, though with some effort and help needed. The Basic Reading Inventory also divides its assessment into intermediate categories, so that a certain number of miscues in a graded reading selection would mean that a student was in an Independent/Instructional
category, or Instructional/Frustration, indicating that a student is in the process of reaching the next level of competence.

The pre-project reading assessment of each student took place in a familiar environment for each of them, and with an explanation of the purpose of the assessment: to see where they were at in their reading, and to be able to gauge after the literature circle project if their reading fluency, or ability to decode, or comprehension ability, indicated any change, and especially progress.

In her book Proust and the Squid, Wolf (2007) defines fluency as follows:

Fluency is not a matter of speed; it is a matter of being able to utilize all the special knowledge a child has about a work--its letters, letter patterns, meanings, grammatical functions, roots, and endings--fast enough to have time to think and comprehend. Everything about a word contributes to how fast it can be read. The point of becoming fluent, therefore, is to read--really read--and understand. (p. 130-131)

As the students in this literature circle project worked to read more fluently--and for most of them, their reading was halting, hesitant and cautious--it was not just a matter of decoding the next word more quickly in order to prove that their reading was “getting better”; fluency was a matter of being confident that they really knew the word they were reading, including the definition and its bearing on the story.

Shared traits emerging from pre-project assessments. At the beginning of the literature circle project, there were some generalities that could be made about each of the six participants. They each approached reading with a measure of hesitation, but their willingness to
undertake this project, including the reading assessments at beginning and end, was a sign of a certain confidence in their ability to read. I posited two main probable causes for their willingness to embark on this project: first, they were not being singled out in a group for their struggles with reading; rather, all visits between students, parents and the teacher-researcher took place in students’ homes, which is the typical meeting environment for this DL school, and the literature circle discussions were through online conversations rather than group meetings.

Second, their parents were very enthusiastic about this project, recognizing that this was an opportunity for their children to spend additional time reading, writing about their reading, and being held accountable for their reading and responding by a school-based adult who was different from the parents they spent so much time with, and also from their regular class teacher. Because of this support and relative lack of pressure, the students expressed a great deal of positive energy in relation to this project.

Another shared trait that emerged from the pre-project reading assessment was that each of the students read independently at least four grades below their own grade level. Three students were reading independently at four grades below grade level, two students at five grades below grade level, and one student—the least able reader—at more than six grades below grade level.

The great deficits that these students were experiencing in reading were a source of real concern to them, to their parents, and to any teachers that they had had in the past, as reading truly affects every subject area in school, and many common tasks outside of the school setting.

My determination to undertake this project was based partly on a scholarly desire to discover what the impact of a focus on literature through engagement and dialogue would have on these students’ reading ability, but was based just as much on a desire to give them the gift of
confidence in and enjoyment of reading in any setting. Their struggles needed to end as quickly as possible, and I believed and wanted to test the belief that literary reading and discussions are key to reading improvement.

Findings from post-project assessments. The first consideration that I addressed in looking at the post-project assessment results was that of the timeframe. Because this pilot project took place within a relatively short time period--four to six weeks, depending on how quickly each student completed their book and their written conversations with me--the findings were less meaningful than if this had been a longer-term project. The issue also arose again of the use of a criterion-referenced assessment rather than a normed reading assessment, as these results are much less statistically verifiable. However, in considering the context and the parameters of my project, I was convinced that I had made the right decision, as everything that made this a rich and valuable action research project for me, with findings that fit into a useful format for my consideration of how helpful the online literature circle dialogues were, and that fit easily into the everyday structure of my students’ school routine, had been reachable.

The next step in looking at the post-project reading assessment results was to consider two figures: the grade level at which students could read independently, and the grade level at which they experienced frustration (based on the number of miscues they made as they read a passage orally). Finding that a student had moved to a higher or a lower grade level at which they could read independently was a factor for me in analyzing student progress in reading over the course of the literature circle project.

The findings were interesting in their variety: of the five students who finished the project before this printing, three moved up at least one grade level in their Independent reading ability; one student moved from a same-grade Instructional/Frustration level to an Independent
level; and one moved from a same-grade Instructional level to an Independent/Instructional
level. In all of these situations there was a movement of upward change, though it was not
substantial.

In considering the post-project reading assessment results from the perspective of the
grade level at which each student reached the Frustration level--the level beyond which it was
too difficult for a student to read easily and fluently, and with good comprehension--there were
some quite varied findings as well. Some students moved up two to three grade levels in the
ceiling at which they reached the Frustration level, which was quite a significant shift. Others
made less of a jump in their Frustration ceiling, but this seemed to be anomalous in terms of the
overall results. There could be several reasons for this, ranging from students having a tiring day,
to being uncomfortable with the assessment that day for some reason, to not feeling as confident
with the readings in Form B of the Basic Reading Inventory. However, any of those reasons
could have applied to any of the other students, who were also being re-assessed using Form B,
and who could have been influenced by many other factors, so I am unwilling to make any
definite statements regarding a downward movement at the end of a period of regular reading
rather than an upward movement.

Themes, issues and ideas arising from reading assessment results. The fact that in
most of the students’ cases there was some forward or upward movement in terms of their grade
level reading ability was a positive outcome of the pre- and post-project reading assessments. As
has been mentioned more than once, my expectation was not necessarily that there was enough
time to see a change in reading ability during the course of the project. Even more pertinently,
because this was not structured using a normed reading assessment and with verifiable statistics,
there was no evidence to conclude that any progress or change in reading ability was the direct
result of the online literature circle pilot project, and was not simply a developmental milestone that these students passed in this timeframe, or that any one of a number of other factors at play in their lives throughout the duration of the project had not made a difference in their reading ability. I believe that the results have validity, however, in the sense that McNiff and Whitehead (2010) refer to when they say that as action researcher-practitioners, we are responsible for validating our research claims in terms of the way that the values that inspired the research have been realized (p.196). Since my research into the literature surrounding literary dialogues, written conversations, and reading choice, and my experience in teaching students in the classroom and in a DL setting have shown the importance of using literature and conversations about literature in improving reading ability, I do believe that the fact that most of the students found an improvement in their reading assessment outcomes is relevant to the literature circle project, and is further validated by the results of the reading surveys and the parent surveys.

The inclusion of the values perspective in an action-research project, which allows for a less empirical but still valid basis for evaluating research results, is an extremely pertinent and increasingly acceptable view in the fields of social science. Without an understanding of how the theoretical bases of our inquiries provide the underlying sense and meaning of our findings in terms of our students’ practical and meaningful progress in learning, all of the data in the world will not make a difference in how we teach. My belief in the importance of reading engagement and dialogue in improving reading has to do with more than the results of the reading assessments and surveys, but also with my own willingness to engage with literature and with my students in guiding them to a greater understanding of what they read, and to an ability to push themselves in their reading level and discussion about books. This can only come from my
acceptance of the value inherent in meeting each student’s need when it comes to choosing a book, talking about it, and being supported in becoming a better reader.

Findings from Reading Surveys

The aim of the reading surveys that were given at the beginning of the project was to obtain a feel for the students’ background in reading--how many books were in their homes, how many books they’d read recently, whether they ever re-read books, and whether they ever read for pleasure--in order to more fully understand whether a lack of exposure to books and reading may have been a part of the difficulty they had with learning to read with fluency and understanding. The surveys were also designed to encourage the participants to think about the keys to being a good reader, and whether those keys would be available to them as well as to others who they perceived as being good readers already.

The findings from the Reading Survey and Reading Interview questions were anecdotal, as they were asked and answered at the pre- and post- project interviews, in a very informal setting.

Shared traits regarding attitudes to reading. One of the most surprising findings from this reading survey for me was the number of books that most of the participants had around them in their homes. There is a generalization that is often made about struggling readers: that they come from homes where reading is not valued and books are not present. In these students’ homes, however, their reading difficulties obviously did not spring from a lack of opportunity to read, or lack of access to books. This reality is also clear in their attitudes to reading, for most of them enjoy reading--though often that takes place through being read to--and have a very good idea of what reading involves, and what it might mean to be a “good reader.”
DL school culture, which is often cross-pollinated with the homeschooling culture, and the importance placed by homeschooling parents on books, reading and good literature in the home.

Students also had interesting responses to the question about how parents and teachers can tell that students are good readers; the answers which involved ideas that teachers would “look through their work,” or see if they’re reading books with smaller type, were more typical of students used to a classroom setting where teachers seem to need to hunt for clues about a student’s reading proficiency. Some of the responses indicated a grasp of the use of strategies, as well, such as giving reading assessments, or using the “five-finger rule,” which asks students to turn to a page in a new book, begin reading, and hold up a finger for each word they encounter on the page which they don’t recognize or understand; if they hold up five or more fingers by the end of the page, the reading level is considered too difficult for them.

There was also a heartening response to the question of whether students ever read for pleasure--in these families, in spite of struggles with reading, that is something people do--and to the question of how they felt about reading; the answers were mostly positive in spite of some recognition that it wasn’t easy.

In order to find out slightly different relationships with reading among the participants in the Online Literature Circle Pilot Project, I also gave a Reading Interview survey, which asked questions of the students that gauged their understanding of the process of reading.

**Participant responses to reading process questions.** In the light of the established reading difficulties among these students, I found their answers to these questions very poignant, and very telling. They live in a world where those around them have always been better readers, and usually those “good readers” live in the same house as they do. They seemed proud of their
older siblings who are their examples of good readers, and did not demonstrate any sense of chagrin or envy, but were matter-of-fact about this distinction between those in the same family.

The answers to a question regarding what to do when they encountered something they didn’t know revealed a mixture of strategy—including asking a parent for help—or avoidance—skipping the hard part and hoping that everything would make sense in the long run, which can result in many gaps in a book.

One of the clear pictures that is seen from the answers the students gave to that one question is that they are searching diligently for meaning when they read, and sense-making from the words, but unless they ask for help, they are just as likely to be reduced to skipping the part they cannot “get” and moving on in the book.

These students are also willing helpers, generous with their ideas or strategies that have been tried with them sometime or somewhere. They offer tips such as asking the teacher, or skipping the hard part, or sounding out words. However, their knowledge of how to come to clarity in their reading is unclear and their ideas about how teachers or parents can help them or others who are struggling to read is also not very firm.

These students do hold personal knowledge, and the ability to communicate it, about how they want to read: with fluency, with smoothness, with a larger vocabulary, with greater speed but with undimmed comprehension, and with expression and emotion. They want the words to have meaning and sense, and to be able to communicate that sense to those around them as well.

As I listened to the participants read out loud to me in the reading assessments, with halting, hesitant voices, reluctant to read a word incorrectly but knowing that they may be waiting forever if they wait for the word to make sense in their minds before they say it out loud, I heard
what they were saying in the answers to the reading interview questions as well: We do not consider ourselves good readers, because reading is so hard for us.

At the end of the online literature circle project, I asked students to fill out a final survey, in which I again asked some questions about their views on reading, as well as some survey questions about the experience of participating in the literature circle project. I wanted to analyze from these informal survey questions how much their attitude to reading had changed, if at all, as well as solicit feedback on the process of the reading they had done, and the written dialogue about the reading that they had sent me.

**Participant responses to reading survey questions.** Because the post-project questions gave the participants the opportunity to reflect on their reading, but also on the process of being part of the literature circle, and having to write at least four times to me about their book, I was very interested in hearing what they thought the impact had been on their reading and their views on reading and writing.

*My hope was that the project had been enjoyable, that they had been engaged in the book and in the discussions about the book, and that they had learned something about the joy of reading, and the practice of reading.*

Of the five who completed the project and answered the survey questions, the responses were very positive in terms of enjoyment of the books, commitment to and completion of the project, and an ability to see that there had been learning that took place over the course of the literature circle. There was a mixture of answers to the question about whether views on reading had changed during the literature circle project, ranging from answers paraphrased as “Yes, I am a whole new reader,” to “No, I already loved to read,” or even a simple “No,” with no explanation. On the whole, their responses showed that they had enjoyed and learned from the
reading experience of the online literature circle project. I appreciated the students’ honesty in answering these questions: they were not trying to communicate anything other than what they had found to be true, and were willing to be very real about their experience of reading throughout this project.

Once again, the participants had strong ideas about what makes a good reader good: wanting to read, paying attention to the story, visualizing and questioning the book, practicing reading and being willing to read, and, very interestingly, being willing to do some research in order to understand what’s being read. This idea of “going beyond” is a very potent and meaningful one, as the willingness to take the extra time needed to look up the background of the setting of a book, or to look up an unfamiliar word when there is no one around to ask for a definition, are reading tasks that even proficient readers sometimes struggle with, or avoid.

_This is a powerful lesson to learn for any reader: that reading takes effort, but that it is worth it in the end, when thoughts and ideas flow freely from the page to our minds, and when our hearts and eyes are opened to new ideas and philosophies we would not have encountered without the book in front of us._

Questions about the type of book, and the format of the literature circle project, were very useful for me as a special education teacher who will continue to teach these students, and hopefully continue the practice of online literature circles when the option of meeting in person in a classroom is not possible--or even when it is, as the practice of “written conversation” about books leads to a different relationship with the book than that fostered by a face-to-face discussion. There is something very powerful about putting one’s thoughts down in words before sending them out to a fellow reader, and not having to feel that there will be an instant judgement as to the soundness of the views, or the quirkiness of the reaction to the book.
Especially for students with learning disabilities, who are accustomed to “getting it wrong,” the chance to write to me—a safe and encouraging adult who loved reading and believed that they would be able to read and understand books at many reading levels—provided a welcome break from feeling evaluated on the basis of their poor grasp of reading. I rarely corrected their grammar or spelling for the purposes of this project, as that would have interrupted the process of thinking and responding, and I did not want the participants to feel that they were being evaluated in their dialogue about their books. Several of the students informed me that even if they were given the option of participating in an in-person literature circle, they would prefer to continue with the online version, as they appreciated not having to do their thinking and responding to a book out loud, and in real time.

The students’ ability to think about what they had learned, and articulate some thoughts about the progress of their reading over the course of this literature circle project, was encouraging to me; the metacognition required for answering survey questions, and reflecting on what had happened rather than just taking part in a project such as this and moving on, provided an opportunity to own their learning.

*I was encouraged to find that it was a positive growth experience for them, and that they were interested in continuing next year, and even during the summer, as I was asked by two of the students. I felt great satisfaction stemming from this excitement about continuing to read, and to exchange emailed conversations about books. This desire to continue the project came wholly from the students, without prompting from me or from their parents, and there was a sense that they had absorbed the value of reading with enjoyment, and an expectation that there was meaning to be found within the pages of a book.*
The last piece of data collection was in the form of a Parent Literature Circle Project Survey, so that the parents of the participants—who are an integral part of our DL school community, and who were an integral and supportive part of the online literature circle project—could respond with their feedback on what they saw happen during the project.

**Parent responses to project survey questions.** Because the anecdotal comments from participants’ parents were almost uniformly positive in terms of their children’s progress, I was gratified that the project seemed to have fulfilled the goals of creating a sense of engagement and interest in reading in students with learning disabilities, and pointed to a degree of improvement in reading decoding and fluency as well.

*I was also somewhat wary, however, of accepting these words of affirmation without measuring them against at least one other possible extenuating and underlying reason for this positive perspective. As parents with the best interests of their children at heart, and especially children who have struggled with reading for so long and sometimes with no progress, to be given an opportunity to participate in a very intensive, one-to-one, evidence-based, literature-based reading project was a truly valuable resource opportunity. As a result, I understood that their reaction may have been slanted towards the positive no matter what the measureable outcomes were, because of the low teacher-student ratio and the sense of well-being and growth engendered in their children. On the other hand, I have had the opportunity to get to know and respect these parents in our school, and I did not believe that they were exaggerating for the sake of continuing with a program that did not meet their expectations or their children’s learning needs. There did seem to be a true growth in engagement in reading based on student and parent feedback.*
Chapter 5: Summary and Looking Ahead

In looking at the results from the online literature circle project, and collating the findings from the pre- and post-project reading assessments; the pre- and post-project reading surveys; and the parent survey, I have no doubt that this action research project can be considered to be both evidence-based--in terms of the literature review of various books, articles and studies on the topics of literature circles as a means of improving reading engagement and therefore reading ability--and informed by data, in the form of practice-centered, criterion-referenced reading assessments, as well as anecdotal evidence through participant and parent surveys.

The goal of the project was to determine whether an online literature circle would provide a forum to meet the needs of students in a DL school, who could not regularly meet together to discuss the same or different books, to have a meaningful dialogue about the book they were reading in order to deepen engagement and comprehension, and also to increase reading fluency. The results have generated the following statements:

1. Of the five participants who completed the project, four demonstrated increased reading fluency by the end, according to the Jerry L. Johns Basic Reading Inventory (9th ed.) (2005), as measured by grade level;

2. Each of the five participants who completed the project felt that their reading had improved, as well as their understanding of what comprises “good reading,” according to their anecdotal answers to reading survey questions;

3. Each of the five participants who completed the project had enjoyed their book, and rated it highly on a scale of one to ten;
4. Each of the six participants wrote with interest, engagement, conscientiousness and even enthusiasm about their books, seemed to enjoy the conversations we had, responded to my questions, and posed many of their own.

In analyzing the data generated from the reading assessments and the reading surveys, I would interpret the Online Literature Circle Pilot Project as being successful in engaging students in reading regularly; providing a sense of accountability because of the agreement that they each signed and the format of writing back and forth to someone who was expecting their letters and had agreed to respond with letters about the book; and providing an informally measurable arc of improvement in reading fluency according to a criterion-referenced reading assessment. It was not successful in the sense of providing a strong and objectively measurable correlation between participation in the literature circle and improved reading, and nor did it span a long enough time frame to allow students to form some strong habits of reading and thinking about reading that would more likely be sustained.

In reflecting on the course of this project, its meaning lies chiefly in two areas, I believe: first, in the anecdotal and values-based learning and growth in reading evidenced through the online literature circle project, and the responses from participants and their parents. And second, in the application of my research and findings to my future practice and that of my colleagues in the areas of reading engagement; dialogue about literature as a key to understanding and building engagement leading to fluency; and increasing reading comprehension through participation in online or in-person literature circles.

The strong consensus at the end of the literature circle project from both the participants and their parents was that this had been a worthwhile project, and that there was an interest in being involved in another literature circle. Comments about the sense of accountability that
participants were given to follow through on their reading and writing about their books, the validation of their personal responses and interactions with their books through the written conversations that took place, and the enjoyment of reading a book that engaged and interested them, made the benefits clear.

The significance of this response to me is that the stakeholders in the process—the participants who stood to gain or lose ground in the time spent reading and writing—felt that they had discovered a love of reading that may have been lost for a time, or that they had not yet had the opportunity to discover, and that this enjoyment of reading and discussing their books prompted a willingness to spend more time in daily reading, and consequently an increased ability to read smoothly, confidently and with comprehension.

This confirmed the premise that there is a power in engagement with literature to effect change in the ability to read, which in turn affects the ability to learn in almost every other academic area.

A major point of meaning for me in the light of this project’s results lies in the transferability of the evidence-based methods used in this project to other DL settings where teachers might work with LD students in English Language Arts and literature circles. I believe that there is transferability both to other settings within my DL school, in that the outlines of this project can be replicated by other teachers and with other students, and to other DL schools or non-DL settings. However, the findings regarding reading growth, improvement in engagement, and attitude change towards reading cannot be generalized or verified statistically due to the limited nature of the sample, the lack of a control group, and the lack of a normed reading assessment. The value in terms of generalizability lies in the usefulness of the project in a practice-based setting.
I also believe that this project holds promise in developing inclusive literature circles in a DL setting or otherwise. The opportunity for students with learning disabilities to interact on an equal footing with students without reading difficulties, as readers enjoying and interacting with a good book, rather than divided into leveled reading groups, or pulled out for remediation, holds potential for developing confidence and increased engagement in students, and an improved ability to learn.

**Conclusion**

*Wolf (2007) makes a brilliant reflection on the importance of reading in a child's life when she says:*

> As every teacher knows, emotional engagement is often the tipping point between leaping into the reading life or remaining in a childhood bog where reading is endured only as a means to other ends. An enormously important influence on the development of comprehension in childhood is what happens after we remember, predict, and infer: we feel, we identify, and in the process we understand more fully and can’t wait to turn the page.

> The child who is moving from decoding well to decoding fluently often needs heartfelt encouragement from teachers, tutors and parents to make a stab at more difficult reading material....After all the letters and decoding rules are learned, after the subterranean life of words is grasped, after the various comprehension processes are beginning to be deployed, the elicitation of feelings can bring children into a life-long, head-on love affair with reading and
As I began this action research project, my goal was to incorporate engagement with a text into a relationship between me as a special education teacher, and students with learning disabilities in reading, through an online literature circle. I planned to provide opportunities for students to read and to write about reading in order to increase reading fluency and therefore literacy. And I worked from an understanding of literacy as the ability to read and write to the level of need for each student, whether that is academic literacy, everyday literacy, or the literacy increasingly important in the technological world we live in today (see Beers, 2007). My hope was that I would be able to use the results of this project to demonstrate the role of reading for pleasure and with engagement in moving to a higher grade level according to a criterion-referenced reading assessment, so that more literature circles, more written conversations about books, more book clubs and more online reading groups would be formed to facilitate a love of reading and an improvement in literacy.

The opportunity to expand this study’s reach, through a greater population base of participants, both with learning disabilities and without, and through a longer time frame, would be of benefit in generating further findings in regard to the efficacy of an online literature circle in improving reading fluency. The inclusion of normed reading assessments at the beginning and end of an expanded study would also generate a different level of validity in terms of measuring change, and could be helpful in planning programs for a greater variety of students.

As Wolf (2007) says above, a love of reading draws children--and adults--into a world of literacy that might otherwise escape them, and an online literature circle can be used as a tool to
foster an engagement in reading that may help students to read with greater confidence and understanding in every subject area they encounter.
References


