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TRANSITIONING FROM TEACHERS' WORDS TO STUDENTS' WORDS:  
STRATEGIES TO PROMOTE COMPREHENSION DURING LITERATURE CIRCLES

by

Tiffany Totzke Brian

A capstone submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for the degree of Master of Arts in Literacy Education.

Hamline University

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I hope I teach you as much as you teach me.

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## CHAPTER ONE

## Introduction

*“Teachers can position children as competitors or collaborators, and themselves as referees, resources, or judges...A teacher’s choice of words, phrases, metaphors, and interaction sequences invokes and assumes these and other ways of being self and of being together in the classroom.”*

-Peter Johnston, *Choice Words*, p. 9

**Introduction**

Silence. Not something I am accustomed to in my middle school classroom. Unless, of course, it occurs during a literature circle discussion. Then silence is not uncommon. Of course, it is typically not the kind of silence a teacher hopes for—the kind that is accompanied by students shuffling through books looking for the quote they wanted to share with the group, the kind that is accompanied by patient countenances waiting for a classmate to find the right word to explain a thought, or the kind that holds space for a student searching for the words to express a thought. No, this is the silence of a faltering conversation.

Often, these torturously stagnant book clubs take place in the exact same room as much more lively book club conversations, with a slew of conversations filling the scale between the two. So, what is the difference? It is the same activity, but with a much different result. What can I say to the stagnant group to help jump-start them into a vibrant, comprehension-enhancing discussion?

Throughout my years of teaching, I’ve come to recognize the power of words to frame a problem, an idea, or a situation. Simply rephrasing a question can open a world of

possibility in a classroom. “Have you finished the assignment?” assumes that a student can, and for some, will never complete an assignment. A student may hear this and think, *My teacher expects me to fail. She knows I rarely do assignments and never will.*

“When will you turn in the assignment?” assumes that the student will complete the assignment. A student may hear this and think, *My teacher expects me to succeed. She thinks I can, even if I haven't in the past. A world of possibility!*

In my research, I wanted to see how the power of words and the power of literature circles intersect and complement each other to promote deeper comprehension through discussion. I have experienced powerful learning and community in literature circle conversations, and I want to foster these types of conversations for my students. I cannot control my students' actions or what they say, but I can equip my students with words to foster a mindset for community and learning from one another in literature circles. As I consider my own classroom and the future I hope to create for my students, this is the question that comes to my mind: *How does a teacher's intentional focus on words in the classroom influence students' learning in literature circles?*

### **The Power of Words to Create Worlds**

My love for and belief in the power of words greatly influenced my decision to become a secondary English teacher, but my appreciation for language has continued to develop over the course of my teaching career.

Growing up, I filled the walls of my closet with quotes—bits and pieces of language that spoke to me. I fell in love with Zachariah's wise words from Avi's *The True Confessions of Charlotte Doyle*: “A sailor chooses the wind that takes a ship from safe port, but winds have a mind of their own”. I was so excited when I realized the layers of meaning in this

quote, what it meant to different characters, and what it meant to me. I would stand in awe of how these words could speak to so many. That was the extent of my appreciation of words.

Today, I can see a teacher approach a student and say, "Hey, are you and Ben friends? Yeah? Then maybe you shouldn't hit him! That's not how friends treat one another." I would stand in awe of how that student would nod in agreement, say a quick "Yeah, I guess so," and move on to class. This interaction contrasts with others that end with the student shouting, "You're not the boss of me!" and running down the hallway.

Words shape who we are, how we see ourselves, and what we hope for. I have seen my students react completely differently to the same teacher in similar situations when the teacher uses a different approach with her words. I experienced the way small nuances in language can change an interaction even before I read the work of Peter Johnston, who put into words what I had learned from my teaching experience: "As teachers, we choose our words and, in the process, construct the classroom worlds for our students and ourselves" (2012, p. 1).

Therefore, what more powerful tool than words to foster deeper comprehension in my classroom? I can start with focusing on the explicit and implicit messages I send with my words and body language, and move toward explicitly teaching language structures to help my students take their thinking to deeper levels.

### **The Power of Literature Circle Conversations to Foster Deeper Comprehension**

One of my foundational experiences in gaining deeper comprehension and understanding of a text through discussion was in a book club I joined my second year of teaching. The young adult literature book club was geared toward and filled with

educators: a couple college professors, several teachers from all levels, and a couple librarians. We would read a young adult literature book and then discuss its general merits, our thoughts on how teens would receive the book, and possible uses in the classroom. These book club meetings were transformative in my understanding of how readers learn about and from books.

We had read the third book in the *Hunger Games* series, *Mockingjay*. I had eagerly read the long-awaited book, giving in to my speed-reading tendencies to see how Katniss would bravely triumph over President Snow and the Capitol! I dove into the book, reading it over the course of a weekend, devouring the words and story. Sadly, by the end of the book, I felt Katniss was just a whiny, indecisive teenager and I could have cared less about what happened to her or her sister. In short, I hated it. I was shocked at my own apathetic reaction to the death of her sister. I did not even care; the whole book was dumb and pointless. I trudged into book club with a chip on my shoulder. I was livid as I started the conversation.

“Suzanne Collins has no idea how to write a conclusion to a trilogy!” The gauntlet had been thrown—and by me! I had made my decision about this book, and as a “good” reader (whatever that means), I understood everything in the book. I was excited to share my perspective with the group and to feel that unique and primal bond created by attacking a common adversary; in this case, by bashing this book and the author who failed in writing it.

This book club discussion did not go as I thought it would, though. My fellow readers asked open-ended questions, posed possibilities I hadn’t considered, and focused on evaluating Collins’ intentions and values in a manner I had not thought to do. The group

and our discussion encouraged me to consider a new way of thinking. I gained a new understanding as the result of one specific train of questions:

“What if your feelings of apathy are about the war? You say that you didn’t even care about Katniss and what happened to her—is that your reaction to the book, or to war? I wonder if maybe Collins is making a statement about the effect of war on all of us.” As my mentor teacher, the woman who invited me to the group, posed these open-ended questions that encouraged me to consider alternative explanations to what I was thinking and feeling, I was pushed outside of my own realm of thought and into a new realm of deeper understanding.

Others shared thoughts both disagreeing with and supporting my mentor, and I came to consider that perhaps Collins was not the washed-up author I originally thought, but instead an insightful, thoughtful scrutinizer of war.

My book club community had opened my eyes to another way of reading the story. While each person was connected to the story, the discussions we had about the story connected us to one another. Our skillful use of words to suggest ideas, posit hypotheses about the story, and draw connections between the text and our lives created new meaning for each of us. Our words were the foundations of discussions that deepened our comprehension. I want to equip my students with the words that create life-transforming and growth-inspiring discussions.

### **Literature Circles in a Middle School Classroom**

While I was loving my experience in book club and recognizing the effect it had on my own reading and understanding, I felt restricted by the high school in which I worked. The curriculum in place was etched in stone, it seemed, and the process for purchasing new

sets of books for a unit like literature circles was long and difficult. And, of course, I was working in a district that, like so many others, was cutting budgets. “Unnecessary curriculum upgrades” like literature circle books were dismissed. I felt ill equipped to change the status quo, and unfortunately, I let that paralyze me.

However, I was given a natural opportunity to facilitate literature circles in my classroom when I switched schools and grade levels. The new curriculum in my seventh grade classroom included literature circles! Over the course of four years, I tried piecing together literature circles, with mixed results.

There were the literature circle discussions that made me want to cry tears of joy! Students from different social groups were animated in their discussion, listening to one another share their thoughts, building on their classmates ideas to respectfully contradict another idea, and groaning when I told them we needed to stop for the day. Of course, these discussions were few and far between, and I know now that when these vivid discussions happened, it was more *in spite of* me than *because of* me.

More common were the literature circle discussions that made me want to cry tears of frustration and failure. Pairs of students would argue (about the book just as often as about an external conflict) as the rest of the group looked on. Then there were the groups that would give me hope, as they were taking turns and responding, but closer observation would reveal a surface-level discussion. I worked hard to set up the students for a lively conversation, but my ill-informed efforts resulted in a half-blown up smiley-face balloon.

“Why did Cassie and her siblings dig a hole in the road?” Andre obediently read in a monotone voice the question he had written in preparation for the discussion.

Immediately, his friend Maria responded, "Because they wanted to get back at the bus driver, who would always splash them as they walked to school." Silence fell upon the rest of the group as I walked up. I crouched down between Maria and Andre. All eyes turned to me. The half-blown up smiley-face balloon hovered over the literature circle. More silence.

"Who else has a question?" I'd prompt, trying to pump air into that bright yellow balloon!

"We already answered them all," Andre responded.

"But we've only been discussing five minutes! Surely you have more to discuss?" I responded enthusiastically. The energy behind my words practically pushed the pathetic balloon to the ceiling.

The group stared at one another, the pathetic balloon, and me. "Nah." I could almost hear a slow "EEEEEEEEEEEE," as the comment poked a tiny needle into the membrane of the shrinking balloon. This was the sound of a slow, painful leak—no crazy diving around the room, as there was little air in the balloon to start. As I searched for the words to say to get the group engaged with the text and one another, the balloon fell flat. "Can we write our Exit Slips now?" A quick read of their reflections showed very little deeper engagement with the text through the literature circle.

It's a wonder I continued to persist in facilitating literature circles in my classroom! Recently, I have come to be curious about the role of words in facilitating these discussions. What could I have said at the time to re-energize the group? More importantly, what could I have said, and with what words could I have equipped my students in the *days and weeks*

*before to fill that balloon with more air? How does a teacher's intentional focus on words in the classroom influence students' learning in literature circles?*

### **Summary**

In light of my own experiences participating in book clubs and teaching seventh graders, I feel compelled to use literature circles to promote new understandings of texts through discussions marked by higher-level thinking and deeper comprehension. So, as I begin addressing my question, *How does a teacher's intentional focus on words in the classroom influence students' learning in literature circles?*, I turn to the power of words to inspire my students to use their own words to enhance each others' understanding in our classroom.

In Chapter Two, I will establish the importance of a focus on words in a social, collaborative environment like literature circles in the middle school classroom and examine the current research on how to observe deeper comprehension in literature circles. I will also detail the scaffold by which I transfer teacher words to students: academic language scripts. In Chapter Three, I provide an overview of my methods. I present the results from my study in Chapter Four, followed by a discussion of the implications of teacher language on students' participation in literature circles in Chapter Five.



## CHAPTER TWO

## Literature Review

**Introduction**

As I've witnessed in my own classroom, teachers need to recognize the power of the specific words they use to facilitate conversations. The words a teacher uses frame the manner in which her students view one another, view discussions, and view the text they are discussing. Moreover, intentional teacher word choice can foster deeper comprehension.

Learning is an incredibly social endeavor, and educators are using this to their students' benefit, as shown by the rise of literature circle discussions in language arts and reading curricula. In order for these social academic activities to be successful, it is imperative that students feel comfortable in their classrooms, at least enough that they are willing to carefully consider the thoughts and ideas of every single one of their classmates. One essential tool educators have in fostering these types of classrooms is intentionality in the words with which they facilitate these discussions. This leads to the question of my research: *How does a teacher's intentional focus on words in the classroom influence students' learning in literature circles?*

Literature circles can be a powerful tool for motivating students to take part in discussions around text. The power of these literature circles lies in the success of the conversations students have. Those conversations are shaped by the words the teacher uses to introduce them, and by the words students use within them. However, teacher's words are easily overlooked in a busy classroom with competing needs of students and demands of a curriculum.

In this chapter, I establish the importance of a focus on words in a social, collaborative environment like literature circles in the middle school classroom. I examine the research on the unconscious language habits of teachers that can be modified to enhance learning. I explain the setting of this word use, literature circles, and the complementary roles of community building and discussion in this context. I also discuss current research on how to observe deeper comprehension in literature circles. Finally, I describe the scaffold by which I transfer teacher words to students: academic language scripts.

### **Words: Building Blocks of Thinking and Learning**

In my experience, middle school students are highly social. At the dawn of their adolescence, my students care so much about their peers and how their peers perceive them. This can be simultaneously an advantage and an impediment, as learning is highly social. At the foundation of social interactions are words. The words students use to interact with one another in conversations are important.

Among the earliest researchers in social constructivism is Lev Semyonovich Vygotsky. Key to his research is the belief that children learn from their interactions with others (Tracey & Morrow, 2012). Barnes (2008) asserts that school learning is simultaneously individual and social. An individual's words will influence her classmates while the classmates simultaneously impact the individual's thinking, whether it affirms or challenges it. All learning takes place within a social and cultural context, and that greatly influences the meaning a learner creates when encountering new information.

Conversations are the means through which new information is explored. However, not all conversations are equal in their value in learning. Vygotsky asserted that more

cognitive growth occurs in conversations in which participants encounter multiple perspectives and disagreements (Johnston, 2012). Johnston builds on this idea to emphasize the importance of dialogic classrooms where students are continually introduced to contrasting viewpoints. Barnes (2008) calls this kind of talk “exploratory talk” and he, too, affirms the social nature of learning in his call for more exploratory talk in the classroom. Barnes frames learning as making models of how the world works, and then testing how the models work in describing the world. This testing is most easily and efficiently done through dialogue with peers. Tracey & Morrow (2012) agree, asserting that a child needs to use higher thinking skills socially (in dialogue, for example) before internalizing them individually.

To elaborate on the social nature of learning, Bakhtin (1981) suggested that we are surrounded by a multitude of voices, and each interaction with another person informs our perspective. Each time we have a social interaction, we take bits and pieces and internalize them. The words expressed in conversations accumulate to shape our identity.

Educators grounded in social constructivist theory note the importance of the social aspect of learning, placing it at the core of daily life in the classroom. Words are the foundation of these social interactions, and words greatly influence the learning that takes place in the classroom.

Teachers are facilitators of learning, charged with the task of leading learners to new knowledge. If words are the foundation of learning, teachers then must be expert users of language. Words are powerful tools, and educators must not only refine their own language habits but also provide the scaffold for students to use this powerful tool to take their learning to a new level.

**Transformational power of teacher words.** Johnston (2004) argues that an essential tool for educators is their word choice. Teachers use words to “mediate children’s activity and experience, and help them make sense of learning, literacy, life, and themselves” (p. 4). Words are the means through which teachers help students see things in a new way, which ultimately brings about the growth in skills and knowledge. Denton (2015) agrees, contending that language “molds our sense of who we are; helps us understand how we think, work, and play; and influences the nature of our relationships” (p. 3). Werner Erhard is so bold as to argue that *all* transformation is linguistic, and that any shift or change in thinking will come from a shift in our conversations (Block, 2008), and therefore, change in thinking will come from a shift in our words.

The words an educator use to frame a question will set up students to respond in a certain manner. This is important, as what children say “is a powerful indicator of what they will later *think*” (Denton, 2015, p. 58).

Stanford University psychologist Carol Dweck’s groundbreaking research on mindsets caused educators and parents alike to examine the words they use when speaking with students. Dweck (2006), in establishing her argument that students have a fixed or growth mindset, argues that every word and phrase a parent, teacher, or coach utters to a student sends a message. She analyzes specific phrases that one might expect to hear in a conversation between students and teachers, such as: “You learned that so quickly! You’re so smart!” (2006, p. 174). The message implied in these statements might be: *Smart people learn things quickly. If I don’t learn something quickly, I’m not smart.* Dweck is critical of this type of language and calls for teachers and parents to carefully consider their language and the implicit messages they are sending their students and children.

Ellin Oliver Keene took the idea that a teacher's language habits can foster a growth mindset and built on it, arguing that a teacher's word use can also foster deeper comprehension. She dedicated half of her book referenced earlier in this chapter, *Talk About Understanding* (2012), to encouraging teachers to examine the words they use when initiating conversation and responding to children's ideas. Keene writes, "Simply put, our language about learning shapes their understanding" (p. 81).

Johnston (2012) affirms the effect of small changes in the words we use, describing a study in which one group was told, "This is a cup," and the other told, "This could be a cup." Simply changing "is" to "could be" made the group more likely to think creatively about the problem at hand (p. 60). This is but one specific example of the way words shape the mindset of listeners and users both.

It is difficult to ignore the growing body of research that outlines the importance of words and phrases and their power in transforming thinking. Words are a powerful tool that teachers need to wield consciously and intentionally. In the next section, I outline language habits teachers can adopt to take student thinking to a deeper level.

**Teacher language habits for deeper comprehension.** Teacher talk in a classroom is a common form of interaction. Henson (1993) suggests that perhaps this is why it is difficult to understand the role of talk in building community, and I extend that logic to understanding the role of talk in promoting deeper comprehension. By definition, habits are deeply ingrained in what a person does on a daily basis. However, in light of the research I presented in the previous section, it is prudent for teachers to examine their language habits and to work to change those habits that do not promote deeper comprehension.

Nichols (2006) discusses the use of “accountable” talk in classrooms, championed by the New Standards Primary Literacy Committee in *Reading and Writing Grade by Grade* (1999, cited in Nichols, 2006). While exploratory talk refers to a specific kind of conversation, accountable talk is both a process and a purpose. Nichols writes that it is “a way of being present and focused in a learning environment, a way of living as a learner” (p.8). Students introduce and ask for knowledge that is related the topic or text at hand. Students respond to and develop what others say. If students are to learn how to do these things, teachers need to teach and model them. In the next section, I will outline four habits that model accountable talk for students.

***Open-ended questions.*** A skilled educator knows different questions have different purposes, and are suitable at various points of instruction (Mercer & Dawes, 2008). When teachers ask open-ended questions, students hear diverse responses that help deepen their understanding of each other. Johnston (2004) would argue that an open-ended question like, “Are there other ways to think about that?” (p. 52) is one such carefully worded question. This question explicitly calls students’ attention to listening for diverse perspectives and to suspend their judgment.

Carefully crafted questions can elicit any number of the indicators of deeper comprehension Keene (2012) presents. Open-ended questions can encourage students to think empathetically, to ponder the text, to generate new ideas and imagine new possibilities, and to evaluate the author’s intentions.

Denton (2015) also points out that, at times, teachers need to be more explicit and reassure students that they are not looking for one specific answer, but they are looking for multiple perspectives on the issue. When educators resist revealing their own thoughts and

assumptions on the topic, they reaffirm that they are not looking for a specific answer. They also keep themselves out of a controlling position, and subsequently, students may be more willing to share (Webb, 2009).

***Words that mark hesitation.*** When educators use words that mark hesitation, students recognize that discussion as a space for brainstorming and generating ideas, not one for judgment of those ideas.

Johnston (2004) recommends the phrase, “I wonder...” as a helpful start for teachers wanting to create a safe space for students to share new ideas (p. 68). Similarly, Denton adds that words like “might,” “may,” “could,” or “possibly” send the message that the teacher is not looking for one answer (p. 63).

These words are also essential for students participating in literature circles, as they create a more symmetrical power structure in the classroom. They serve as signals for students that each student holds the power to suggest an idea, not just the teacher or the “smart kids”. When a teacher uses hesitation markers, this tells students that the teacher is not a gatekeeper of “correct” information, and that even teachers try out new ideas and possibilities. As students begin to see teachers as constructors of meaning from a text and not gatekeepers of “correct” information about a text, students move toward understanding that they can and ought to construct meaning from the text themselves.

***Restate and probe student thoughts.*** Multiple researchers encourage educators to carefully consider how they respond to a student’s ideas. The research I’ve found on restating calls for attention to detail in restating. Researchers like Denton (2015) contend that when educators simply restate a student’s words, what she terms a “voice over” (p. 30), educators send the message that a student’s words are important only if the educator

repeats them. As a result, the class may begin to listen only to the teacher and ignore student comments.

Keene (2012) suggests the power of restating student ideas, but emphasizes the importance of using more complex words to extend and deepen student thinking when doing so. Restating student comments and labeling them with more sophisticated language will make them more useful to students in the future. In like manner, Mercer (2002) stresses the importance of elaborating on what a student said. Nichols (2006), too, notes that re-voicing student language to interpret what is said and rephrasing so others can build on it is an effective teacher language technique. Denton (2015) does agree that educators can help students gain deeper understandings by connecting abstract ideas with concrete examples, and the reverse, when responding to students.

In addition to restating and extending student ideas, educators ought to probe student responses. Probing includes asking open-ended questions, as previously discussed, to encourage students to go beyond their first thought. This may be as simple as asking, “What else?” or “Then what were you thinking?” (Denton, 2015, p. 126).

Educators can emphasize the importance of student voices by encouraging students to connect new comments to previous comments from other voices. Educators can label and point out how comments are generative—that fresh thinking can come from a classmate’s comment. Asking questions like, “How does your comment connect to what Lee said about this poem?” demonstrate the generative power of comments for students.

When probing and restating, educators must take care not to add judgment or evaluation of the student’s idea. Multiple researchers (Johnston, 2012; Denton, 2015; Dweck, 2006) stress the danger of praising and judging students for their responses.



Judging a response creates an asymmetrical power arrangement in which students are competing for the teacher's approval, which ultimately turns the attention of students back to the teacher and away from constructing deeper meaning for themselves.

**Listening.** Students will find it difficult to learn from each other and think deeply about text if they do not pause to listen to one another, so educators need to model active listening in their classrooms.

Denton (2015) emphasizes modeling pausing before responding to students to demonstrate how careful listening informs a thoughtful listener's response. It shows respect for student ideas and sends the message that the teacher wants to be sure the student has finished with the thought, and that the teacher wants to process before responding.

Keene (2012) also encourages educators to make room for silence in the classroom. She writes that the "silence of thought [is] maybe one of the most powerful oral language tools at our disposal" (p. 129). Keene argues that silence gives time for students to think more deeply instead of blurting the first thing to come to mind.

Johnston (2004) shares an example of how he models open-minded listening for his students. He acknowledges the words of a student, and explains briefly how it affected his learning: "You know, Sheila, that just gave me a memory. Thank you. I'll just write it down" (p. 72). Language like this—including open body language—sends the message to students that the ideas of all members of the classroom community are valued, and that even the teacher listens to, and subsequently learns from, students.

**Turn Taking.** Many teachers have the language habit of calling on students raising their hands and controlling the speaking space of a classroom. However, in controlling the

“turn taking,” teachers waste an opportunity to teach students and subsequently practice turn taking in a conversation.

Several researchers advocate for explicitly teaching turn-taking skills to students (Mercer and Dawes, 2008; Keene, 2012; Webb, 2009; Freedman, 1993). Teachers need to abandon being the gatekeeper of classroom conversations by calling on students raising their hands. Rather, teachers ought to use phrases to invite students into a classroom conversation that they would want their students to use to do the same: “Darren, would you like to share?” (Keene, 2012, p. 105). Students are taught to say, “Yes, thank you,” or “Not at this time” or something similar. This sends the message that students have an active role in the conversation, and that they should be recognizing whose voices are not being heard, and inviting them into the discussion. These phrases and skill should also be explicitly taught to students.

Webb (2009) elaborates on the importance of students recognizing whose voices are absent from the classroom conversation. Webb cites several studies that confirm unequal participation in classroom conversations by students of high- or low-status. Students with a perceived high academic or peer status are more likely to contribute to discussions, whereas students with a lower perceived status tend to remain silent. Teachers can address this inequality by teaching students how to invite others into the conversation. Moreover, teachers can artificially create a higher perceived status for students, which Webb believes can be done by structuring tasks that need multiple abilities or perspectives to complete. Ideally, Johnston (2012) would argue, when teachers work to increase a student’s perceived status, the result is a more symmetrical power arrangement for all students.

Words are a powerful tool that teachers ought to use consciously and intentionally. However, we recall that learning takes place in a context and culture, and the words teachers use exist within that context. Literature circles are a context growing increasingly common in schools today. Next, I examine literature circles and why they are optimal arenas for practicing using words intentionally.

### **Literature Circles**

Words are at the heart of conversations, and conversations are at the heart of literature circles. Therefore, literature circles present themselves as an ideal setting for educators to support students in using words to take their comprehension and learning to a deeper level.

The general concept behind literature circles is rooted in book clubs—the kind that many adults choose to take part in. Researchers in the 1980s and 1990s (Nelms, 1988; Short & Pierce, 1990; Peterson and Eeds, 1990; Pierce and Gilles, 1993; Schlick, Noe, and Johnson, 1999; Daniels, 2002) observed the structure of book clubs—that is, small groups of peers choosing a book, reading the book, holding small group discussions to gain new perspectives and gain deeper understanding—and saw potential in the structure for engaging students in authentic, organic conversations surrounding texts. Pierce (1993) notes that her studies of informal conversations between readers engaged in discussion around texts showed that “they learned things about one another, changed their experiences with the books, and changed themselves” (p. 293). Literature circles are a platform for facilitating those powerful conversations and stand in contrast to the whole-class novel, small groups with assigned readings, and independently-chosen reading. Teachers have made modifications to make literature circles work for their settings; some

hold a single cycle of discussions and move on to other curriculum, while others conduct rotating cycles of literature circles in which groups start a new book immediately following the completion of the first.

Harvey Daniels, a prominent proponent of literature circles in classrooms, reflects on literature circles and their implementation in classrooms in his regular column in *Voices from the Middle* (2006). He contends that the success of literature circles lies in engagement, choice, and student responsibility, and he confirms this success with a growing body of research that affirms the role of literature circles in growing academic skills and reading comprehension. Researchers like Hattie (2009) confirm that small group instruction strategies like literature circles do have a significant effect on student learning, especially when students are specifically taught how to work in small groups.

Literature circles are more engaging than whole-class reads for students, who have more opportunities to take ownership of the content and flow of the conversation in literature circle discussions, as opposed to a teacher-controlled whole-class discussion. Daniels (2006) also notes that there is an increase in positive peer pressure in a literature circle, and often students want to be involved in the discussion.

Literature circles provide countless opportunities for teachers to give their students choice in the learning process. Numerous researchers have emphasized the effect of choice on motivation, and literature circles are no exception. Part of the literature circle process includes students having a voice in the books they read. Batchelor (2012) contends that, when it comes to reading the book, her students' struggles typically lie in reading ahead and ruining plot twists for classmates rather than falling behind in the reading for the sole reason that students had a choice in what they read. Involving students in creating their

own rules is another way to integrate student choice into the literature circle process.

Finally, literature circles build student responsibility in their own learning. Students often lead the small group discussions, create the reading schedule, and generally take ownership over their books and discussions. Educators must provide scaffolds and supports for students to empower them to make their literature circles more successful.

Literature circles have been examined through many lenses, but for the purposes of this study, I will briefly outline an overall framework of literature circles, detail the role of community in literature circles, and examine characteristics of effective discussions in literature circles. Then, I will discuss the current research on how educators can identify and subsequently encourage deeper comprehension in literature circle discussions.

**Literature circles framework.** There are consistent elements that exist throughout literature circles. Hanssen (1990) notes that there are many approaches and structures that serve different purposes in literature circles. Changing the number of participants will change the feel and flow of the conversation, how often the group meets will create different discussions, and the extent to which the teacher sets the focus of discussion as well as the extent to which a teacher participates will create a slightly different experience. However, Hanssen asserts that no matter how these elements are adjusted for the context, there is much value in the collaborative conversations and reflections by students and teachers alike.

Nearly two decades later, Daniels and Zemelman (2014) assert some elements they feel should be common to literature circles (Figure A). These researchers seem to disagree on a few points in regards to control, as Daniels and Zemelman tend to endorse placing the locus of control with the students, whereas Hanssen notes times when it may be

appropriate for teachers to assume more control. For example, while Hanssen noted that a teacher may set the focus for discussion, Daniels and Zemelman believe the groups should be doing this.

<b>Common Elements of Literature Circles</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>● Students choose reading materials.</li><li>● Groups are limited to three to five students.</li><li>● Grouping is by text choice, not by “ability.”</li><li>● Students keep notes as they read to bring to the discussion.</li><li>● Groups meet on a consistent basis.</li><li>● Discussion questions, personal responses, connections, and questions are the basis of discussion, preferably all from the students (not the teacher).</li><li>● A spirit of playfulness and sharing exists in the process.</li><li>● Teachers act as facilitators, fellow readers, and observers (not leaders) of groups.</li><li>● Evaluation is done by teacher observation and student self-evaluation.</li></ul>

Daniels & Zemelman, 2014, p. 243

Figure A

Teachers may offer scaffolds in any of these elements. For example, some teachers provided limited options of reading materials, but students still have voice in the choice. Teachers in elementary and middle school classrooms may find it appropriate to provide some discussion questions to help students get started in their conversations, whereas students more experienced in the process may be ready to drive the discussion with their own notes from reading. Again, a flexible structure is part of the nature of literature circles and the art of teaching, and experienced teachers will adjust literature circles for their classrooms and students.

Assessment practices also vary widely. Daniels (2006) advocates for making literature circle assessment as authentic as possible. He recommends assessing the process itself--that is, recording group discussions and evaluating them with rubrics created by or

with the students. Involving students in the rubric creation process fosters student investment and, therefore, engagement. Not only should students help create the rubric for discussions, but students should also review and reflect on their discussions, noting strengths and weaknesses and creating plans for improvement.

Batchelor (2012) recommends metacognition journals as one of the best assessments in literature circles. Students complete these journals as they read and, done well, can remain authentic to the reading process. If a teacher must include a final project, Daniels recommends projects that serve as celebrations and that publicize the book in order to encourage others to read it. These hands-on projects also serve to encourage student engagement.

While the look of literature circles varies from classroom to classroom, the foundation and premise behind them ought to remain consistent. This foundation preserves student choice, small-groups, and literature-based discussions. Given what educators know about the social nature of learning and about students, recognizing and addressing the community in the classroom is essential when planning for literature circles. In the next section, I will highlight the importance of establishing a foundation of community to prepare literature circles for success.

**Community in literature circles.** Literature circles are primarily social, so the communities in which they take place and how students feel in relation to their communities is important. Community is certainly built through literature circles, but it is important for teachers to set up a foundation of belonging for students in their groups. Teachers can do this by intentionally framing classroom activities with words that open students' mindsets toward community. Doing so will create more successful literature

circles, and students will increase both social skills and academic skills because of this focus on building community.

The word “community” is used in many and multiple ways, but the type of community teachers facilitating literature circles aim to create is what Henson (1993) defines as a place that accepts diversity, creativity, and where people communicate with one another. The ideal type of communication is where people “share thoughts and feelings and through this sharing they affect the thoughts and feelings of others” (p. 38). This type of community takes intentionality in both language used by the teacher (which will be discussed in further detail later in this chapter) as well as time. Educators must take time to specifically build community among their students.

***Essential nature of community.*** Time in classrooms is limited, and our students deserve a purposeful and valuable use of that time. In today’s educational climate, educators are called to defend any classroom endeavor in terms of its effectiveness in improving academic achievement. Community-building time is often dismissed as a luxury, secondary to time spent on academic skills and content. Educators may be tempted to skip the time spent on community building in order to get to the “more important” academic work. However, community and belonging is strongly linked to academic achievement, and therefore ought to be a primary focus in classrooms. Teachers can scaffold conversations extensively, modeling with their words the way to discuss, but that endeavor will be fruitless unless students are comfortable enough in their communities to actually use the words themselves.

In their research, Northfield & Sherman (2004) cite several studies linking a sense of community and belonging to the feelings of competence (Connell and Wellborn, 1991;



Deci and others, 1991; Ryan, 1995), which is connected to academic success. If students feel like they can achieve something, they are much more likely to achieve it. Block (2008) describes the work of Allan Cohen, a business strategist, who argues that the foundation of all achievement is relatedness—community. Furthermore, Northfield and Sherman note that teachers who focus on relationship building between students as well as between teachers and students may ultimately improve not just social development, but academic development as well.

Henson (1993) joins these researchers in emphasizing the power of learning communities in increasing learning achievement, especially in learners who are least successful. She notes that many researchers believe that major social reforms need to be enacted in order for the students at the lowest end of the learning spectrum—students who are the least successful in schools—to see real improvement in education. This is the achievement gap that so many educators are concerned about and working hard to counteract. However, Henson rejects the suggestion that teachers are powerless in making gains to close this gap, and advocates that teachers can make a big difference in the lives of individual students in their classrooms by creating situations where those students can join the learning community. Literature circles fit the criteria for just this type of situation.

***Community-building in literature circles.*** There are many ways to build community in a classroom. Books, curricula, and even entire organizations focused on community-building activities exist and are in full demand. Given the discussion-based nature of literature circles and the focus of my research question (*How can teachers, through intentional use and focus on language, influence students' learning in middle school literature circles?*), I will focus on the type of discussions in which students can participate

to build community in their literature circles.

Garmston (1998) argues that the key to building community and belonging in schools lies in dialogue, which is a type of conversation with the purpose of creating shared understanding. He asserts that dialogue not only builds community, but also creates a safety zone for students to share ideas without judgment, which encourages new ideas to be heard and considered. Henson (1993) contends that when dialogue occurs and participants engage in critically looking at issues from multiple and diverse perspectives, they become “interdepending,” with each member of the community learning from each other (William T. Grant Foundation, 1988, cited in Henson, 1993). Interdepending is essential, because it is through interdepending that students and teachers can see the world through each other’s perspective. Interdepending builds empathy. Furthermore, sharing, understanding, and combining perspectives helps communities solve problems in creative ways. Together, this creates a strong community.

Teachers can set up their literature circles for success by facilitating dialogue around what Henson (1993) terms as stories: “the tales that we tell ourselves that let people know who we really are” (p. 47). Telling these stories forms deep bonds among students and teachers. These bonds are the foundation of community. As Henson believes, “Everybody belongs when they have a story to tell” (p. 47). The emphasis on everybody is important here, as both students and teachers must be open to listening to new ideas, or communication, and therefore, community building, can falter (Gumperz, 1986; Short and Burke, 1991; as cited in Henson, 1993). Similarly, Pierce and Gilles (2008) advocate the importance of social talk (in addition to other types of talk like exploratory and presentational), saying this type of talk is what really brings a community together because

students come to really know and care about one another.

In her article detailing the success of literature circles in her middle school classroom, National Board Certified teacher Katherine Batchelor (2012) describes an activity she uses to facilitate dialogue at the beginning of a literature circle, creating a spirit of trust and community in groups. She asks groups to create a membership grid in which students gather information about one another. Students create these membership grids together, participating in dialogue and building community as they do so.

Dialogue is an excellent form of discussion that builds community, but it is also a powerful tool for enhancing academic growth. In the next section, I outline the research advocating the use of dialogue and a related framework of conversation, exploratory talk, for enhancing academic learning.

**Conversation essentials for literature circles.** Putting students into small groups, letting them choose their books, helping them establish a community, and scaffolding their discussions with academic words and phrases will not simply lead to fantastic discussions marked by questioning, collaboration, building understanding, and deeper comprehension. Educators must attend to structuring the purpose of these conversations, and they also teach and model the social skills for collaborative discussions in order to facilitate successful literature circles.

In this section, I will discuss exploratory talk and dialogue, which are types of talk with purposes conducive to facilitating deeper comprehension in literature circles. I will also outline the importance of teaching social skills to facilitate the process of literature circle conversations.

***Purpose for conversation: exploratory talk & dialogue.*** Students who approach a

literature circle conversation with the purpose of proving their opinions are not likely to have a successful discussion. Students who approach a literature circle conversation with the purpose of gaining new insights or perspectives are more likely to have rich conversations marked by the indicators of deeper comprehension as discussed previously in this chapter.

The purpose of dialogue is to create shared understanding. While the previous section outlined how dialogue builds community, researchers also recommend dialogue as an essential conduit for developing critical and higher-order thinking skills. Newman (2016) goes as far to say that dialogue in classrooms is rare, but “cognitively potent” (p. 107). Paying attention to the words taught to students and the role various phrases play in a discussion can influence the purpose for and outcome of those discussions, guiding students to conversations of dialogue.

Garmston’s (1998) work examining dialogue was built on the work of Douglas Barnes (1977), who coined the term exploratory talk to label talk that works on understanding. Garmston’s concept of dialogue is a form of exploratory talk, with a subtle emphasis on finding shared understanding, or consensus, in dialogue. Exploratory talk does not look to find consensus.

Barnes writes that exploratory talk is “hesitant, broken, and full of dead-ends and changes of direction” (2008, p.5). Exploratory talk examines new ideas, so participants must be cautious with their previously held beliefs, be curious to hear new perspectives, and be ready to consider new ideas. Barnes positions exploratory talk in contrast to presentational talk, which is the more polished talk used in lectures. Barnes contends that teachers often move into presentational talk too soon, and that students should partake in

more exploratory talk that helps them “digest new ideas” (2008, p. 3). Literature circles are just the place for this type of exploratory talk, but middle school students need direct instruction and practice in using language that leads to exploratory talk.

Many subsequent researchers have supported and elaborated upon Barnes' work. As previously discussed in this paper, Henson (1993) argues for the inclusion of more exploratory talk, as well as Newman (2016) agrees, noting that coming to an agreement is not the only purpose of discussion. Much of Denton's (2015) work supports exploratory talk, as does Johnston's (2004). Gilles (2010) remarks that these type of discussions help students think more deeply, as they hear points and counterpoints and more elaborate support for each. Tracey & Morrow support this assertion in their examination of Vygotsky's work as well: children need to use higher level thinking skills socially before internalizing those skills individually (2012). Through dialogue or exploratory talk, students have a context for exploring new ideas and navigating social and higher leveling thinking skills. Participants challenge one another, and in that challenge, growth takes place.

A crucial partner to exploratory talk is its often-silent and often-ignored partner: listening. Garmston (1998) warns against careless listening that can lead to judgment of ideas. Careless listening often focuses on looking for gaps in the argument, or thinking about how to respond in order to prove the opinion wrong. This kind of listening is neither helpful nor productive in exploratory talk. Garmston argues that the spotlight should also be on active listening that focuses on understanding the other, not identifying the weaknesses of the other. After all, the purpose of exploratory talk is to lead to new understandings, not to decide a winner or correct answer. Nichols shares examples of

language that is indicative of active listening. Phrases like, “That’s what I thought, and...”, “I disagree with you because...”, “That’s because...”, and even “What do you mean?” all show the listener is hearing the speaker and making meaning (Nichols, 2006, p. 45).

**Deeper comprehension in literature circles.** One difficult point for many educators using literature circles is assessing the quality of the discussion and whether the students have gained deeper understanding as a result of the literature circle. Educators want to be able to observe when their students construct knowledge, and assessments for measuring to what extent students have deeper understanding are controversial. To begin, educators must understand what deeper comprehension looks like.

In her book *Talk About Understanding: Rethinking Classroom Talk to Enhance Understanding* (2012), Ellin Oliver Keene provides a solid foundation for recognizing deeper comprehension in literature circles, presenting ten cognitive outcomes that serve as markers or indicators of deeper levels of comprehension. She calls these “Outcomes of Understanding in Narrative Text: Indicators of Deeper Understanding” (Figure B).

While Keene also identifies nonfiction indicators, I will focus on narrative indicators. Keene asserts that if a child shows these indicators, “we could *reliably predict that she understood quite deeply*—that she was more likely to remember and reapply an idea from the text” (p. 22, italics in original). This is the ultimate goal of every literature teacher I know.

*We experience empathy.* When readers engage deeply with a text, they see themselves in the book in some way. This may manifest in readers feeling as though they know characters, are part of the setting, or feeling as though they are in the conflict of the book itself.

Outcomes of Understanding in Narrative Text: Indicators of Deeper Comprehension
<ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>1. We experience empathy.</li><li>2. We experience a memorable emotional response.</li><li>3. We experience the aesthetic.</li><li>4. We ponder, pause, and dwell on the text.</li><li>5. We generate new ideas and imagine new possibilities.</li><li>6. We advocate and evaluate.</li><li>7. We recognize patterns and symbols.</li><li>8. We extrapolate from details in the text and arrive at global conclusions from focal points in the text.</li><li>9. We evaluate the author's intentions, values, and claims and are attuned to ways in which they affirm or change our beliefs, values, and opinions.</li><li>10. We remember.</li></ol>

Keene, 2012, p. 23

Figure B

*We experience a memorable emotional response.* The emotions brought about by a book or text resonate in such a way that those emotions will stay with the reader for a long time. This cognitive outcome is happening in the girl reading the section of the book when the dog dies and is so moved that she quietly cries.

*We experience the aesthetic.* Readers deeply engaged with a text will want to re-read specific portions of the text that stand out to them. Keene characterizes the aesthetic as parts of text that are “beautiful, well-written, surprising, humorous, or moving” (2012, p. 23). The reader who packs his book with flags marking his favorite passages is experiencing the aesthetic.

*We ponder, pause, and dwell on the text.* Readers want to think about a specific plot twist—to discuss it, reflect on it, and predict how it might play out. An example of this cognition is in the girl who discovers new information about the book and immediately wants to discuss it with someone because it is so incredible.

*We generate new ideas and imagine new possibilities.* These new ideas generated by

readers are related to the text, but reveal themselves outside of the text. This cognitive outcome is present in the boy reading a book about integration of a football team in the 1960s and making multiple predictions as to how the new team might function.

*We advocate and evaluate.* Engaged readers become invested in the book in such a way that they begin “rooting for” characters and outcomes. The readers want the book to end a certain way. The class reading a book about a teenage father who is unable to see his infant daughter and hoping that he is able to meet her is advocating for the character.

*We recognize patterns and symbols.* Readers recognize themes, motifs, and other literary devices and experience insights about the stories. A girl recognizing the recurring dream throughout a book, bringing it to the attention of her group, and discussing its meaning in the story is deeply comprehending the book.

*We extrapolate from details in the text and arrive at global conclusions from focal points in the text.* Readers recognize the relevance and connection of characters, conflicts, and situations in the texts they read, and they want to act on it in their community. A boy deeply comprehending a book about an innocent character forced to dig holes as punishment might want to research the judicial system to see if this happens often in real life.

*We evaluate the author's intentions, values, and claims and are attuned to ways in which they affirm or change our beliefs, values, and opinions.* Readers may examine the style of the text and judge its effectiveness and value. They are aware of the writing moves authors make to influence the reader and recognize the affect the author's writing and ideas have on their own thinking and beliefs. This cognitive outcome is manifest in a boy who reads a story about a refugee and gains new insights about refugees. These new



insights modify his understandings and inform his future actions. Furthermore, he can identify the literary devices the author used that influenced his understanding.

*We remember.* Readers have an understanding from the story that they can apply in new situations. Readers who quickly read a book and don't recall much about it did not deeply comprehend; readers who remember themes and life lessons that inform their decisions in other situations have deeply understood that text.

A literature circle conversation can be fertile ground for students to consider new perspectives, test hypotheses, and partake in high-level thinking. The teacher is charged with fostering an environment in which these rich discussions can take place, teaching and modeling skills for holding these discussions, and adding support where students need in order to build new understanding. Furthermore, the teacher must explicitly model skillful word use to take students to a deeper understanding of the text. One especially useful tool for modeling skillful word use is the academic language script.

### **Academic Language Scripts**

In light of the research I found regarding literature circles, including the minimal role of the teacher's voice in those discussions, I realized that the findings I previously describe about teacher language use can and should be adapted to student language use. The more the *teacher* uses her words in literature circles, the less *students* will use their words with one another. This is when I decided I needed to get students involved in changing their words—and to recognize the roles of the words they use—to promote learning. I needed to focus on how I could scaffold student word use. This is when I turned to academic language scripts.

While teacher language habits contribute to an overall culture of learning in a

classroom, it is necessary for teachers to be explicit with their language intentions for their students. In order for students to take part in discussions of deeper understanding, they need the words to express these increasingly complex ideas. Teachers, then, must provide structures to scaffold these discussions until students are more adept at conversing in this manner.

The type of social skills needed to engage in deep academic conversations (i.e. active listening, turn-taking, agreeably disagreeing) must be taught. Daniels and Zemelman (2014) write that educators who explicitly teach social skills see an increase in student learning success, as measured by course grades and standardized test scores (p. 204).

Graff and Birkenstein advocate using templates or academic language scripts, and they describe a long history of this tool dating back to ancient Greece and Rome, where public orators examined “model passages and formulas that represented different strategies available to public speakers” (2010, p. xxii). They also note that the well-known educational theorist Howard Gardner uses a template to guide doctoral applicants in their thought processes. Furthermore, the nonprofit organization AVID, dedicated to finding and sharing with educators the best practices for closing the achievement gap, promotes what it calls academic language scripts as an essential tool for scaffolding valuable collaboration activities. See Figure C. for a sampling of the academic language scripts AVID provides. Nichols (2006) supports the use of these types of scripts as well, noting that they support students in learning how language shapes a conversation, and ultimately strengthen purposeful talk.

AVID Academic Language Scripts	
<p><b>Probing for Higher Level Thinking</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● What examples do you have of...?</li> <li>● How does this idea connect to...?</li> <li>● What would happen if...?</li> <li>● Why is ___ important?</li> <li>● Is there another way to look at this?</li> <li>● How are ___ and ___ similar?</li> </ul>	<p><b>Building on What Others Say</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● You bring up an interesting point, and I also think...</li> <li>● I hadn't thought about that before. You make me wonder if...?</li> <li>● ___ said that....I agree and also think...</li> <li>● I thought about that also, and I'm wondering why...?</li> </ul>
<p><b>Disagreeing</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● I don't really agree with you because...</li> <li>● I see it another way. I think...</li> <li>● My idea is slightly different from yours. I believe that...</li> </ul>	<p><b>Soliciting a Response</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Do you agree?</li> <li>● ___(name), what do you think?</li> <li>● Can someone else ask a question or offer an opinion?</li> </ul>

AVID, 2017

Figure C

Academic language scripts provide the words for students to express their increasingly complex thoughts. The scripts also simultaneously guide students to a deeper thought process. As students read, "I hadn't thought about that before. You make me wonder if...?", they search their minds for something to wonder about that statement, which brings them to generate new ideas, one of Keene's Indicators of Deeper Comprehension (2012).

The words that teachers use promote a certain way of thinking. Teacher language is important in this manner. More important, however, is the intentional focus of teachers teaching students how to use language adeptly. Denton (2015) asserts that when educators model expert use of words, students often begin using words more skillfully as well. Words are a powerful tool, and educators must not only carefully refine their own language habits but also provide the scaffolds for students to use this powerful tool to take their thinking to a deeper level.

## Summary

Teacher words are powerful tools in capitalizing on literature circle discussions to promote deeper comprehension in reading. Middle school literature circles are the optimal setting for this language modeling, teaching, scaffolding, and practice. Through academic language scripts, teachers can provide students with words to help them frame their thinking and learning in their literature circle discussions.

So, as I planned for my own literature circles, I developed a literature circle platform supported by the research in this chapter, including student choice, journaling, and intentional community building. I planned to carefully consider academic language scripts that provide students with a frame for their thoughts and discussions, as well as to explicitly model and teach the use of these scripts. Finally, I used Keene's (2012) Indicators of Deeper Comprehension as both a goal of discussion and a measure of the success of a discussion.

In Chapter 3, I will outline the methods for my action research to systematically observe and analyze how academic language scripts and my intentional word use foster quality literature circle discussions in my classroom. Chapter 4 follows and explains the results of my observations and research. Finally, in Chapter 5, I will determine the implications of the research in this chapter and my own action research examining the question, *How does a teacher's intentional focus on words in the classroom influence students' learning in literature circles?*

## CHAPTER THREE

### Methodology

#### **Introduction**

My research explores two passions of mine and how they intersect: words and literature circles. Literature circles are an excellent setting for deeper comprehension of text through collaborative conversations. The language habits of a teacher create a culture of learning, and the words used by students are a reflection of that culture. As my research aims to examine *How does a teacher's intentional focus on words in the classroom influence students' learning in literature circles?*, my methods for researching this will include conducting literature circles in my own middle school classroom, providing academic language scripts for students to use to frame their thoughts about the books, observing the patterns of language my students use, and examining the depth of understanding they reflect.

#### **Rationale for Action Research**

I chose to conduct action research in my classroom because I wanted to take a closer look at how the words I use as a teacher guide my students to deeper comprehension of texts in literature circle discussions. Johnson (2012) promotes action research as a method by which teachers can observe their own practices. Therefore, action research is a natural fit to observe the affects of my words.

I also chose action research with the goal of improving my skills as a professional. Johnson (2012) argues that engaging in action research helps teachers become flexible thinkers who are willing to try new ideas, so they are better able to solve problems as they arise. For example, I was hoping action research might help me identify my own

problematic language habits in order to make improvements. Ultimately, I conducted this research with the intent to grow as a reflective practitioner as well as help me better reflect on my use of language in my classroom.

I approached my research from a qualitative standpoint, using systematic observations to reach a new understanding. Johnson (2012) notes that action researchers are looking at their classrooms and schools as they are, and not in the interest of isolating variables, and this is true in my own research. Action research seemed most appropriate because I planned to analyze data to inform instructional changes during the study.

Finally, I was especially inspired by the work of Peter Johnston and his book *Choice Words: How Our Language Affects Children's Learning* (2004). In his book, Johnston describes specific words and phrases he observes in classrooms and analyzes the implicit and hidden meanings behind them (in the vein of Carol Dweck's 2006 work on mindsets). I was also intrigued by Keene's book *Talk About Understanding: Rethinking Classroom Talk to Enhance Comprehension* (2012), in which Keene goes a step further to recommend specific language habits that can increase student engagement and comprehension. Finally, Johnson's work also led me to Maria Nichols' book *Comprehension Through Conversation: The Power of Purposeful Talk in the Reading Workshop* (2006), in which Nichols explores the ways teachers can develop habits of purposeful talk for students to use in creating shared meaning. These researchers and others led me to take an interest in examining my intentional use and focus on language and how it might influence students' learning in my middle school classroom.

### **Setting**

**District.** I currently teach in a seventh grade classroom in district serving a first-

ring suburb of a metropolis area. The district serves just under four thousands students kindergarten through twelfth grade. Roughly forty percent of its students receive free or reduced lunch, and roughly one third of its students are students of color. The largest and growing minority group is Hispanic. The district has been long accredited by International Baccalaureate, which encourages an emphasis on fostering positive traits, called the "Learner Profile," in students. These traits include being caring, open-minded, and communicators, all of which are relevant to my research, as they are valuable mindsets in a literature circle conversation. My seventh grade students come from elementary schools that emphasize and talk about these traits on a regular and consistent basis.

**Building.** I teach in the district's sole secondary building, which houses grades six through twelve. The seventh grade is divided into two teams, with students moving to each of the core classes with the same group of students. This is intended to build a sense of smaller community within the larger community as well as to improve the productivity of teachers collaborating to support students. Most of the teachers of seventh graders have been teaching in this district for over ten years. The teachers of the core subjects have a positive and strong relationship with one another, and they work well with one another to support students. Collaborative or small group learning is part of the repertoire of instructional strategies of the teachers I work with, and each uses them at some point or another. Therefore, my students' experience with small group discussions is widely varied.

**Classroom.** My classroom demographics are reflective of the overall district demographics. The classroom in which I chose to conduct my research is my smallest class with nineteen students. Ten of my students are girls, and nine are boys. Eleven students identify as Hispanic, seven students identify as White, one identifies as Black. Many of my

students come from single-parent or blended homes. My students tend to communicate only with other students in their cliques, which are often racially divided. My students have worked in small groups to read nonfiction and to discuss content area topics, and I have a “social goal” for each day that we review. However, this will be a unit that focuses on the skill of discussion for learning.

My classroom this year is atypically talkative in a distracted sense, and I am interested in seeing how academic scripts can help structure and focus their conversations. Many students also struggle with motivation; at the time of my research, four were on a behavior/academic intervention due to low grades from the previous trimester.

**Participants.** I chose a group of four girls as the focus of my research. Even in a small group, they are representative of my larger student population in terms of ethnicity, motivation, and academic skill level. They are not diverse in gender.

I chose to put these four girls in the same group carefully. Sophie is a reluctant student who had formed a friendship with Hazel, who is quiet and uncertain. However, Rose and Hazel are good friends, and Rose is also a focused student, so I saw potential in Rose to be a leader in the group. I thought the girls would be welcoming to Janessa, who was very new to our classroom. I provide more detail about each participant in Chapter Four. Pseudonyms are used to protect the identity of all students.

I made these decisions as part of the complex task of creating groups in a classroom with many constraints: groups needed to be four or less (as we only have four copies of each book) students; each student needed to be placed in a group reading a book that they had placed in their top three choices; each student needed to be placed with other students with whom they had camaraderie, or at least not animosity; and I also needed to take into



account students who had declined to take part in the study.

### **Literature Circle Unit Structure**

At the beginning of the unit, the class previewed nine young adult literature books with the common theme, "The American Experience." The big idea of the unit was, "What is the American Experience, and is it accessible to everyone?" I thoughtfully placed students into literature circle groups with other students who wanted to read that same book and were also a good fit socially. Before we began reading the literature circle books, we spent a week focusing on building community, learning about others in the literature circle groups, and practiced having literature discussions using short texts. Even in the week of introduction to literature circles, I was very intentional about providing academic language scripts, and modeling their use, that would help students express their ideas.

The literature circle unit followed a general structure over the course of four weeks. Each week consisted of four days of reading and one day of discussion. On weeks with standardized testing, students had fewer days of reading.

On a typical reading day, I conducted a whole-class mini-lesson addressing either content skills or discussion skills through intentional academic language scripts, students would read their scheduled reading, and then students responded to journal prompts intended to aid comprehension and help them during their weekly discussions. The day before the discussion, I read the students' journal entries and put stars next to the questions or topics that would be good to bring up during the group's discussion. In this manner, I was providing students with a script that they themselves had already written.

On a typical discussion day, I conducted a whole-class mini-lesson modeling and practicing discussion skills that students were to use during that day's discussion. During

this mini-lesson, I provided Discussion Guides with Academic Language Scripts for students to use during discussion. The mini-lesson and Discussion Guide were intended to help students conduct discussions that would deepen their understanding of the books. Students would then take part in their small-group discussions using their Discussion Guides, recording as they discussed, and then complete Reflection Sheets about their discussions. The reflection sheets were also written with carefully chosen Academic Language Scripts to help students ruminate on their discussions.

### **Data Collection Methods**

I collected data over the course of a five week period in which students conducted book clubs, as outlined in my Method Chart (Appendix A). I chose four primary tools to collect data. The purpose of the tools were to illuminate the students' engagement in conversations using purposeful academic talk that led to deeper comprehension and exploration of new ideas and perspectives.

**Field Notes.** Throughout the entire research process, I kept notes capturing how I introduced the lessons, how I focused on language on a daily basis, and my intents and purposes for the decisions I made surrounding the literature circles. At the beginning of my research, I included a "Beliefs & Practice Chart" in order to guide my decisions as well as to use as a reflection at the close of my research. Each day, I used my field notes as a place to reflect on the lesson, my actions, and how my students responded in their own behavior and work. Unfortunately, due to the daily life of a classroom, I did not reflect in my field notes every day, and some days I was unable to reflect until much later in the day.

**Journal Responses.** Each day, students were asked to respond to a journal prompt asking students to make connections with the text, ask questions about the text, and

identify significant aspects of literature, such as Beers and Probst's Signposts (*Note and Notice*, 2012). Students were encouraged to use journal responses as a foundation of information in their literature circle discussions. The journal prompts (Appendix C) were an essential aspect of my focus on words, as I carefully structured them as a way for students to have language to help them carry out their discussions. My assumption was, *if students have academic words to draw from, they are more likely to have an academic conversation for deeper comprehension.*

**Literature Circle Discussions.** I recorded all group discussions so students would not know which was the target group. However, I focused my analysis on the target group. I focused on identifying and analyzing each student's use of the teacher-provided Academic Language Scripts on the Discussion Guides, looking for examples of student use and reflecting on the responses of the group.

**Literature Circle Discussion Reflections.** After each formal discussion, I provided students with Reflection Sheets (Appendix E, G, I, & K). These reflections were essential in providing insight about each group's discussion, as I was able to get a glimpse of how each student viewed the discussion, their role in the discussion, their classmates' roles in the discussion, and what new insights and perspectives they brought and took away from the discussions. Unfortunately, the degree to which these discussions were completed was varied and often minimal.

### **Data Analysis Methods**

Throughout the course of my research, I used inductive analysis to analyze the data I collected. I coded the discussions and reflections of my students as well as my own field notes to identify patterns and themes in the discussions and reflections of my students. I

looked for evidence of Keene's Indicators of Deeper Comprehension (2012). Throughout the process, I used multiple sources (audio recordings, written reflections) and collected data at different times throughout my research to achieve triangulation, ensuring trustworthiness in my observations.

**Field Notes.** I used my field notes to capture my thought process as I crafted mini-lesson goals and journal prompts. I reflected on patterns that I was noticing in my students' discussions. Often, I recorded my real-time analysis of the discussions in my field notes as well, creating an accessible narrative that show my thought process in making decisions during the unit. I reflected on what I perceived my students needed to take their discussions to the next step, and explained what steps I planned to take as the result of those conclusions. I used my field notes as the only record of whole-class instruction and my verbal teacher language use, as I did not record whole-class instruction.

**Journal Responses.** I gathered student journal entries the day before the discussion to give feedback in the form of stars or highlighting questions and comments that I thought would help them advance their discussions. I later coded the journal entries looking for language that indicated Academic Discussions as well as language that indicated deeper comprehension.

**Literature Circle Discussions.** I recorded and transcribed the literature circle discussions, and then I analyzed the literature circle discussions for examples of deeper thinking, especially the thinking that was aided by classmates. I also listened for examples of student and group discoveries. A main focus on my analysis were the teacher-provided Academic Language Scripts on the Discussion Guides. I looked for examples of student use, either directly or indirectly.

**Literature Circle Discussion Reflections.** My analysis of the reflection sheets mirrored that of the discussions themselves. I created the reflection sheets with language specifically asking students to reflect on their own deeper thinking, new discoveries, and use of academic scripts. I wanted to use these sheets to give students an opportunity to show further processing that they may have done as a result of the discussion, but did not verbalize in the discussion.

### **Institutional Review Board**

My capstone project was approved by the Hamline Institutional Review Board on March 28, 2017. Parent and student consent forms (Appendix B) were obtained for the participating students, and pseudonyms were assigned to students to maintain anonymity.

### **Summary**

In this chapter, I began by describing the context (district, school, and classroom) in which I conducted my action research. I then explained the overall unit plan and timeline for my action research, the data collection tools I designed and used, and the analysis techniques I used. In Chapter 4, I will share the findings of my action research examining the question, *How does a teacher's intentional focus on words in the classroom influence students' learning in literature circles?*

## CHAPTER FOUR

### Results

#### **Introduction**

I have long been intrigued by how teacher words influence students' thoughts, comprehension, and their own word use. To examine this more closely, I conducted literature circles in my own middle school classroom. With my research informing me, I recognized that teachers ought to have a smaller role in the literature circle discussions. I began to recognize that my voice needed to be minimized in order for my students' voices to be heard. Therefore, I shifted my focus on empowering students to use words in the manner I had found teachers ought to model. I scaffolded student use of words with academic language scripts with that hopes that having this academic language would help students frame their thoughts about the books in a manner that would lead one another to deeper comprehension.

My action research took place during a five-week literature circle unit in which seventh grade students independently read books chosen from a limited selection, completed daily journal entries, took part in weekly discussions with their small groups, and completed reflections on those discussions. The groups created their own reading schedules and directed their own small group discussions using Discussion Guides with minimal teacher intervention. As the unit progressed, I adjusted instruction, journal entries, and Discussion Guides to address the needs I observed in the moment. I collected what documents I could from the participants, though I encountered challenges with students losing documents or simply not completing them. I also recorded their discussions and transcribed them for closer examination, and I kept a detailed Field Notes on a semi-

daily basis. Through the collection of these data, I sought to answer my research question: *How does a teacher's intentional focus on words in the classroom influence students' learning in literature circles?*

### **Participants**

I chose a group of four girls as the focus of my research. Even in a small group, they are representative of my larger student population in terms of ethnicity, motivation, and academic skill level. However, they were not representative in terms of gender; all were girls. The girls each put the book *Shooting Kabul* by N.H. Senzai as one of their top three choices of the nine possible selections, so this is the book they read. Pseudonyms are used to protect the identity of all students.

**Janessa.** Janessa is well-articulated and poised African-American girl who joined our school at the beginning of the spring trimester. Janessa was proving herself to be an organized and eager participant in class for two weeks before she shared with our assistant principal that she is actually supposed to be in eighth grade. However, she was in more than five schools since her fifth grade year, and she did not pass seventh grade last year, so her last school had placed her in seventh grade. This explained why Janessa was one of the more mature students in my classroom; she was older. While Janessa showed great academic skill and focus in class, unfortunately during the course of my research she was suspended for two days due to fighting. After other struggles, Janessa ultimately ceased attending school altogether, and I was unable to collect data from her after Discussion 2.

**Rosa.** Rosa is a soft-spoken Mexican-American girl who is a diligent and conscientious student. Rosa had an Individualized Education Plan for her speech disability, though Rosa's stuttering did not cause her to hesitate to speak up in class. Rosa's speech

teacher had been very pleased with Rosa's progress, and at the time of my research, Rosa was typically disfluent only when answering questions from adults and peers alike, or if she was excited. Rosa's family spoke both English and Spanish at home. Rosa is a natural and inquisitive leader, which greatly helped her group.

**Sophie.** Sophie is a petite White girl who thrives in artistic expression. Sophie had struggled with motivation and emotional stability throughout the school year. When she encountered an academic challenge, she tended to extend the locus of control outside of herself and fall into despair. However, in the weeks prior to my research, Sophie had an increase in motivation and success in my class, though this motivation lessened over the course of the literature circle unit. Many students said they wanted to be in the same group as Sophie, who they saw as a kind and fun classmate.

**Hazel.** Hazel is a kind and quiet Mexican-American student who prefers a small group environment for learning. Hazel attended a small-group intervention for moderate decoding issue, through which she experienced improvement. Hazel has struggled to find books that interest her and are at her reading level, but she is generally motivated and continues to search. She wants to be successful, and she does her best in class.

### **Week #1**

Week 1 was a four-day school week. Monday was a state standardized testing day, Tuesday and Thursday were reading days, and Wednesday was a discussion day.

**Discussion Preparation.** This discussion took place after reading the first chapter of *Shooting Kabul*. Daniels and Steineke (2004) recommend having a discussion after the first chapter as a platform for students to sort through the confusion that naturally arises when first beginning a new book. Therefore, I crafted a journal prompt (Figure D) to



prepare students with topics to discuss. I collected their journals prior to their discussions and highlighted questions and comments that they should bring up to their groups. In doing this, I hoped to point out some of the words they were already using that could lend themselves to deeper conversations.

Journal #1

- 1) Record character names.  
Record the page number you first see them.
- 2) What is the setting? What clues do you have so far?  
Remember: Setting = place and time
- 3) What questions/confusions do you have so far?

Figure D

Rose and Sophie completed Journal #1. Sophie, however, simply copied down the prompt and did not respond to it. Rose's responses are below:

- 1) *Record characters names: Noor, Fadi, Kabul, Marium*
- 2) *What is the setting? Clues? Afghanistan.*
- 3) *What questions/confusion? Where are what's real and whats not?*

While I did not fully understand what Rose's question was asking, I wrote, "I hope you asked the group!" next to it. The discussion transcript shows that she did not ask the group this question.

I chose to focus on defining "exploratory talk" with the class the day of our first discussions to help students recognize what the goal of their discussions were: exploring the book. I asked the questions, "What does it take to be an explorer? Why explore? Do explorers know what they're looking for? Do explorers know what they will find?" The students were familiar with the concept of exploring, and many had ideas for what explorers need on their adventures. We compared the things explorers need (i.e tools, sense of adventure, risk-taking) as well as why they explore (i.e. to find new things) to our

discussion. Their tools in exploratory talk were Academic Scripts (words), and their purpose was to find new ideas about the book. Student participation and engagement was high, with many students adding opinions, and it seemed as though they made a connection between exploring new places and exploring new books.

This week, I also focused on building community in each group through Membership Grids. In the grid, the groups assigned each member a column, and each row was a new topic (i.e. favorite shop, favorite food, names of siblings). The groups filled in the blank grids, asking one another questions to learn about one another.

**Literature Circle Discussion.** Rose, Hazel, and Sophie were present for Discussion #1. The recording for this discussion did not capture the entire discussion, as the students were still getting used to using the recording app MicNote.

In the first three minutes of the discussion, Rose used the Discussion Guide #1 (Appendix D) to attempt to start conversation. The Discussion Guides and the Academic Scripts on the guides were intended for this very purpose: to guide students to ask questions that help them think about the book in new ways. As you see below, her group mates did not respond:

*Rose: Right now in the book, there's not that much that's happening.*

*(Silence.)*

*Rose: It's in Afghanistan, and it's going back and forth in the past and the present.*

*Hazel: Yeah.*

*(Silence.)*

*Rose: Sophie what do you think? [Repeats]*

*Sophie: About what?*

*Rose: About the book.*

*Sophie: I like it. It's pretty good so far.*

*Hazel: So far it is.*

*Silence.*

*Rose: So...what's interesting so far?*

*Sophie: [Inaudible] I can't think of anything.*

*Rose: So then...what characters did you write down?*

*Rose: I wrote down Zafoona. I think she's the mother.  
Silence.*

Rose tries to talk about the setting, which the Discussion Guide #1 encourages: "ASK: When does this book take place? How do you know? What pages did you see clues about the setting?" However, when her classmates don't continue to the conversation to explore the setting, Rose moves on. The same thing happens when Rose asks about the characters, another Script from the Discussion Guide. However, Sophie and Hazel do not respond.

Hazel does join the conversation after almost four minutes, after Rose refers to an event in the book, getting money for passports.

*Hazel: Yeah, the passports. And they had to get them because they had to move.  
Rose: I think there's a war.  
Hazel: yeah. And it was dangerous and they decided to move. The dad said they were going to move. And they were like, "Why?"  
Silence.  
Rose: It says over here that the Taliban is oppressing everyone and that they banned everything. Movies, kites, wine. They banned them all. Music, movies.*

The conversation lulls, and then Rose tries to jump-start the conversation again with a generic but open-ended question: "So who do you think is interesting so far?"

*Sophie: Um...the main character.  
Rose: What's her name?  
Hazel: It's um...Zaf..  
Sophie: I drew a picture of this...!  
Rita: I think Fadi is the brother I think...*

This is where the discussion recording ends.

**Student Reflections.** After the discussion, Rose completed Reflection Sheet #1 (Appendix E), but Sophie and Hazel did not. One of the sentence starters asked students to consider what they learned from their classmates in the discussion. The starter reads, "\_\_\_\_\_ said that \_\_\_\_\_, which made me wonder \_\_\_\_\_." Rose wrote, "Hazel said that she also thought that Marium went to the U.S., too which made me wonder why and how she is

getting there.” Rose also said that in order to have a more interesting discussion next time, the group needed to “get more focused and I need to read more carefully.” I wrote, “Rely on journal notes!”, as this was the intent of the journals.

## Week #2

Week 2 was a five-day school week. Monday, Tuesday, Thursday, and Friday were reading days, and Wednesday was a discussion day.

**Discussion Preparation.** After Discussion #1, my field notes show that I was concerned about two discussion skills: asking open-ended questions and building on other students’ ideas. As seen in Discussion #1 in my focus group, students would often ask exploratory questions that no one would respond to, or students would answer an open-ended question with one possibility and then move on. Therefore, I continued to provide journal prompts that would lend themselves to asking open-ended questions and bringing up ideas that others could build on. Furthermore, I conducted two mini-lessons focused on these two skills, one the day after Discussion #1, and the other on the day of Discussion #2.

The day after Discussion #1, I addressed the skill of asking open-ended questions, or “Thick Questions,” as we termed them in class. This skill was going to be a focus of their journal entries each day leading up to Discussion #2, so I wanted them to understand open-ended questions. We made a list of characteristics of open-ended questions and their opposite (Figure E).

<p><u>Thick Questions</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>--not easily answered</li> <li>--have more than 1 possible answer</li> <li>--lead to different opinions</li> <li>--make you predict future problems</li> <li>--make you see something in a different way</li> </ul>	<p><u>Thin Questions</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-- “yes” or “no” answer</li> <li>--can easily find the answer</li> <li>--only 1 opinion possible</li> <li>--don’t make you go back to the book</li> <li>--don’t require much thinking</li> </ul>
--	--

Figure E

I also reminded students of the “Question Chart” (Figure F) that we had posted in the classroom intended to help students ask Thick Questions.

	<b>is/are was/were</b>	<b>do/does did</b>	<b>can could</b>	<b>will would</b>
<b>What</b>	Thin	Thin	Thick	Thick
<b>When Where</b>	Thin	Thin	Thick	Thick
<b>Who</b>	Thin	Thin	Thick	Thick
<b>Why</b>	Thick	Thick	Thick	Thick
<b>How</b>	Thick	Thick	Thick	Thick

Figure F

We kept this Question Chart on the board for the remainder of the unit to help students write questions for their groups about the text.

After this mini-lesson, students were asked to write two open-ended questions about their reading for each journal entry. Rose wrote several questions of this nature, including, “Will Mariam be safe?”, “How will they ever get Mariam back?”, and “Why didn’t Mariam listen so then she wouldn’t get left behind?”

I was unable to give feedback to students on their journal entries before their discussion this week. Unfortunately, due to a last-minute schedule change that meant I was going to miss class on the day of discussions for a meeting, we had to move up our discussion day. My field notes mention that I took take a “raise your hand” poll the day before the discussion day, and only five of nineteen students had all of the journal entries completed.

Rose was the only student to have her journal entries fully completed for the discussion. Janessa did complete the journal entries, but I did not have access to those journals. Sophie did not complete any of the journal entries for this week, and Hazel used her journal time to copy the prompts but did not respond to them.

If students had completed the journal entries in the days preceding Discussion #2, they would have had between four and eight open-ended questions to ask their group mates. Therefore, they would need to be able to respond to these open-ended questions. With this in mind, on the day of Discussion #2, I addressed the second skill, building on classmates' ideas. We practiced as a class responding to conversation phrases, and my field notes note that this was "not easy for the students." To practice this, I projected a statement that might be heard in a discussion. Then, we used the Academic Scripts (Figure G) on Discussion Guide #2 (Appendix F) to practice responding.

Building on A Classmate's Idea	
Looks Like	Sounds Like
Eye Contact	"I hadn't thought of that. This makes me wonder ____."
Desks Close	"What examples do you have of ____?"
Nodding	"What made you think that?"
Looking interested	"I agree, and I also think ____."
Leaning in	"Maybe..."

Figure G

For the statement, "I thought the main character is motivated by baseball," Jack suggested, "What examples do you have of \_\_\_\_?" and Esperanza added, "I agree, and I also think \_\_\_\_." Finally, students highlighted two of the scripts that they thought they might use in the discussion. Janessa highlighted, "I hadn't thought of that. This makes me wonder \_\_\_\_," and "I agree, and I also think \_\_\_\_."

Before students began their discussion, I emphasized using their journals and discussion guides to help them build on each other's ideas in their discussions.

**Literature Circle Discussion.** All four students were present for this discussion. We had reading days on Friday, Monday, and Tuesday before Discussion #2 on Wednesday.

Throughout the conversation, all three girls were following the "Looks Like" half of the Discussion Guide 2 (Appendix F). They were generally leaning in, looking interested, and making eye contact with one another.

Rose started the conversation using the Discussion Guide #2, asking directly from the paper, "*What examples of Again and Again did you see?*" Monday's reading day focused on Again & Again, and the journal prompt for that day asked them to consider this. Rose repeated the question, with no response from her peers.

Janessa picked up the conversation with a "thick" question that reminded Rose of something that had been on her mind about the book.

*Janessa: I was just confused about why would he want to make his mom--cuz I was reading that his mom was sick and he ran away and she felt like she wasn't being a good parent cuz he ran away. I just wanna know why he would want to make [her feel that way].*

*Rose: And also when she got left behind--she, like, she would not have been left behind if she had put her doll in her backpack...*

At this point, the girls begin to clarify some progress in the book, as Sophie and Hazel were not caught up. After getting on the same page, Rose asked another question from the Discussion Guide #2 that resulted in the following interaction:

*Rose: Who do you think is a wiser character in the book?*

*Janessa: Um...the mom.*

*Rose: The mom?*

*Sophie: Yeah, the mom.*

*Hazel: yeah.*

*Rose: What questions did you have about the book?*

*Sophie: Hmm...why it's kinda boring in my opinion.*

*Janessa: Hmm...I actually think it's kinda interesting cuz I kinda see how Fadi felt cuz I've run away a couple times.*

*Rose: You have?*

*Janessa: A few times. A few times. And my mom, she kinda came to get me from where I was at. Most of the times for just the day or the weekend and stuff like that. And one time I got found by the police and she came to the office and she was crying. And I kinda feel like she felt like she wasn't being a good parent cuz I ran away. But I was going through stuff at that time and I felt like I had nobody to talk to.*

Following Janessa's running away story, Sophie and Rose both shared stories about their little brothers running away. About three minutes later, Hazel said, "Okay, we should get back on topic." The girls did not ask each other questions about their stories; they each simply shared and moved on. However, after Hazel's refocusing of the group, Janessa went back to her question that she first brought up at the beginning of the discussion:

*Janessa: Okay, so I wonder why he would want to get that attention...why he would want to make [his mom] feel that way. I mean, she seems like a nice person, other than being sick.*

*Hazel: Yeah.*

From here, Rose explicitly asks Sophie a question, but the recording is inaudible to decipher the exact question. The conversation then shifts to how the book seems to have a "lot of negative" so far. However, Hazel picks up on Janessa's question later in the conversation after Rose has used a discussion-starting phrase:

*Rose: Hazel, what questions did you have from the book?*

*Hazel: Just um...I don't know...Why did Fadi run away?*

*Janessa: He ran away cuz...um...they were leaving the country, right? They moved from what?*

*Hazel: I'm not sure.*

*Rita: So, how do they know everyone is going to be okay?*

*Hazel: What happened to his little sister? I want to know that.*

**Student Reflections.** In their verbal reflections, all of the girls noted that a skill their group needed to work on was "staying on topic." In her written reflection, Janessa also



said they needed to “keep the discussion going”. She also reflected that she never used an Academic Script to respond to a classmate’s idea, but felt she had done a good job of saying her classmates’ names and focusing within the group.

### **Week #3**

Week #3 was a five-day school week, with standardized testing on Wednesday. Therefore, students had reading days on Monday, Tuesday, and Friday, with a discussion on Thursday. Janessa was not in school this week.

**Discussion Preparation.** To help my students practice listening and building on each other’s ideas (in a very basic and elementary way), they played the game, “I’m going on a picnic” game on Monday at the beginning of class. The game is played in a way that each student must listen to his or her group mates and also repeat verbatim what they said. Figure H is the slide I used to explain how to play.

<p><b>I’m Going on a Picnic Game</b></p> <p>Person #1: “I’m going on a picnic, and I’m bringing (Object).</p> <p>Person #2: “I’m going on a picnic, and I’m bringing (Person #1’s object) and (New Object).</p> <p>Person #3: “I’m going on a picnic, and I’m bringing (Person #1’s object), (Person #2’s Object), and (New Object).</p>
--

Figure H

The majority of the students in the class participated in the game, and when I checked in with the groups, most students could complete the task. Tuesday, they played “CHARACTER is going to PLACE,” to help them think about their characters and their preferences, as they needed to choose a place in the book as well as objects that the

character could actually use in the book. Initially, I had been surprised by how much I needed to help them actually repeat their group mates' ideas. In one group, each person was actually starting their own character, even though they had played the game correctly the day before. However, by the end of the activity, my field notes remark that the game was more successful than I thought it might be!

In Discussion #2, each participant had shared a connection to the book. So, in creating Discussion Guide #3, I wanted to capitalize on their strength of sharing connections, and I had hoped that the emphasis on how to build on those connections could enhance their conversations. On the day of the discussion, I again modeled using the Discussion Starters and Academic Scripts on Discussion Guide #3 (Appendix H) for the students. We talked through it just as if we were having the discussion. We took the Starter from Discussion Guide #3 and said, "What connection or question do you have?" I projected on the board, "My little sister ran away once." Then, we talked about using the follow up questions and the scripts to continue the conversation. Izzy offered, "If that were me, I'd feel \_\_\_\_." Patrick also suggested, "Why did she run away?" and Mandy said, "How did she run away?" My intention was that instead of seeing connections as "off topic," that students would see connections as new perspective about the book worth exploring.

**Literature Circle Discussion.** I looked for exchanges in the discussion in which students built on one opinion, connection, or question. The Academic Scripts shared on Discussion Guide #3 reflected the journal responses: Memory Moments, Aha Moment, Tough Questions, and connections. The girls did not attempt to discuss Memory Moments, Aha Moment, or Tough Questions, but Rose did ask about connections:

*Rose: "Did anyone make a connection?"*

*Sophie: Well, the running away part; I've tried doing that before.*

*Rita: What happened?*

*Sophie: When I was seven, I was mad at my dad, and I said, "you know what, Dad? I'm gonna run away and never see you again!" and he was like, "Okay, fine, put on your shoes and go!" and then I was like, "You know what? Never mind!"*  
*[Girls all giggle.]*

*Sophie: I was really the stupidest and most rebellious kid ever when I was seven. My brothers used to make fun of me for running away, and I was like, "You stole money from me when I was five! You stole sixty dollars from me!"*

*Rose: I think Mariam was like that!*

*Hazel: Because she doesn't want to pay attention!*

*Sophie: I never want to pay attention!*

The conversation continued on for two minutes, the girls talking about what is happening in the book. Their talk is mostly review of what happened in the book, until Rose brought up Noor, Fadi's sister, giving her pay check to the family to help out. This brought a question to mind for Sophie:

*Rose: Fadi couldn't believe that Noor was giving Father money she earned when she worked at McDonald's.*

*Sophie: Why doesn't the mother work?*

*Rose: Isn't their mother sick?*

*Hazel: Yeah...[inaudible]*

Later, Hazel also used an Academic Script from Discussion Guide #3. Read their exchange as the girls consider Hazel's question:

*Hazel: Do you have a connection or question? Rose?*

*Rose: ...Wait...*

*[Girls laugh]*

*Sophie: [You're just] staring off and like "What?!" I'm still [inaudible] though, like in science, I'm just staring into space and...*

*Rose: Do you think Fadi is like that? Like staring off into space?*

*[Silence.]*

*Sophie: I do not want to go to gym.*

There is where the discussion recording ends.

**Student Reflections.** All three girls turned in a written reflection sheet for this discussion. The reflection sheet asks, "What was something valuable you heard from each

person in the group? If you didn't hear an idea from someone, write down how you might include them in the discussion next time." Sophie wrote down something that she shared, but didn't write anything about her group mates. Hazel and Rose both wrote down Sophie's story about when she ran away, and they both recognized something from each other (Hazel shared a connection, and Rose wondered why they were not looking for Mariam).

All three marked they used an Academic Script "a couple times." When asked to rate to what extent "I looked at my group mates during the discussion and didn't allow myself to focus outside my group, Sophie marked "Often," while Hazel and Rose marked "A couple times." Hazel also wrote that the skill their group needed to focus on is "to not get off task".

#### **Week #4**

Week #4 was a five-day school week. Students had reading days on Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, and Friday, with their final literature circle discussions on Thursday. Janessa was not in school this week.

**Discussion Preparation.** As with previous weeks, I continued to provide sentence starters to guide their journal entries. The written language structures were intended to help students better facilitate their literature circle discussions. My field notes show that I had noticed few students had completed the journal entries before Discussions #1, #2, and #3. Since the purpose of these journals was to provide students with thoughts and questions on which to base literature circle conversations, my focus for Discussion #4 was work completion strategies. Hazel and Sophie did not complete the journal entries, though Rose did.

Rose recorded seven open-ended questions in her journal entries over the course of the week: *I wonder why Fadi got beaten up? Why don't they start looking for Mariam because*

*it looks like they gave up? How are they not worried about Mariam? Why didn't Fadi tell the names of the kids? How can Fadi make a new photography for the project to win the prize to Asia I think? Who [is] gonna tell Mariam they were looking for her then after a while forgot about her until they found her? How if Fadi gonna get Mariam if he loses the competition?"* In the discussion, Rose did bring up one of the passages that she wrote about in her journal entry--the section where Fadi is beaten up.

On the day of the discussion, we practiced using the Discussion Guide #4 with a book we had read together as a class (*Orbiting Jupiter* by Gary Schmidt). As a class, we practiced asking the first starter, "What did you think of what we read?" (This first prompt was to open space for students to share their general reactions to the resolutions of their books.) We compared three student responses: "The dog is dead", "Why didn't the mom let him go get the dog?", and "How do you think they felt at that moment?" The class talked about how the first statement shut down conversation, whereas the second two seemed to be "thick" questions that opened up the conversation. I encouraged them to offer the thick questions to their groups to have good final literature circle discussions.

**Literature Circle Discussion.** Discussion Guide #4 directed the students to dwell in the text and to use their journals as a support for this. After sharing initial reactions, the guide directed them to share a passage from the book that they felt were important, and then to discuss the theme or message of the story.

Sophie decided to start the discussion by saying how bad the book was, which was her reaction to the first starter, "What do you think of what we read?" Hazel and Rose both promptly disagreed:

*Sophie: Should we talk about how bad this book is?*

*Hazel: No! We gotta...*

*Rose: It's getting really interesting. It's intense!*

*Sophie: By the end of the book, it actually starts getting good. I'm just like--"*

*Rose: And then it ends! ...How did you feel when Fadi got beat by those mean kids?*

*Sophie: Well...I had bullies in kindergarten. And I would like to beat them up, too.*

*[Girls giggle.]*

Even though she didn't start with the exact Academic Script, Sophie did get the group to share their reactions to the book, which was the intent of the Discussion Guide's first response. Rose continued the conversation explaining how she was mad when Fadi was beat up, and both Hazel and Sophie agreed. Rose wrote about this event--Fadi's beating--in her journal entry from Wednesday, the day before the discussion.

Rose remembered that Hazel was gone the day before, so she started filling Hazel in on what she missed. Rose told Hazel, "...we learned that it's Fadi's fault that Mariam got lost!" Hazel showed surprise, and Rose began searching for the passage in the book. Hazel asked what page it was on, and the two girls began searching. When they found it, Rose started reading aloud. Hazel was following along, as shown when she provided a word that tripped up Rose. After she read the award scene, she asked for the reactions of her classmates:

*Rose: "...The grand prize," repeated Ms. Bethune, "goes to Filbert Dewbury, eleventh grade, Calvert High School, San Jose. What? Fadi's eyes widened..." [Stops reading.] What did you feel when Fadi lost?*

*Sophie: Like, during the awards?*

*Rose: Like, when he actually lost?*

*Sophie: I felt disappointed because I can relate, because I didn't get an award at the end of trimester two.*

*Rose: I actually thought that Fadi was going to win, but deep down I thought that it had to be something bad and then he lost...*

Rose's open-ended question asking her group how they felt reflects one of the prompts we discussed as a class, "How do you think they felt that moment?" The group continued their

conversation, looking in the book two different times for two different passages. They were searching for the part of the book Rose referenced earlier, when Fadi reveals it was his fault they lost Mariam. Rose said, "Here, at chapter 24 it says 'Confessions' [chapter title]...I think it's on page 236," and Hazel responded about the page number. The girls did not speak for some time as they re-read (or read, in Hazel's case) the sections of the book. After finally finding and reading the section, Rose posed a question about how the group felt.

*Hazel: I felt sad!*

*Sophie: That actually happened to me! I fell, and my brother kept running, and I was like, "Don't leave me!"*

*Hazel: That actually...actually that was...I actually got lost in Walmart! And then I started crying!*

*[Girls laugh.]*

The girls continued the conversation with Rose and Sophie both sharing a specific time they got lost. Finally, at the end of the conversation, the girls show their enthusiasm for finishing the rest of the book:

*Hazel: I can't wait to finish the book.*

*Sophie: Same.*

*Hazel: How much pages to you have left?*

*Sophie: Not that much*

*Rita: ...In the beginning, it's all excitement, and then at the end it goes slower.*

*[End of recording.]*

While the group did not use the specific Academic Scripts on the Discussion Guide #4, they did find other language to discuss the book in a focused, continuous manner.

**Student Reflections.** All three girls turned in a reflection sheet. In the section asking students, "What was something something valuable you heard from each person in the group?", Hazel and Rose wrote similar responses (slightly different wording) and Sophie wrote her own story. Hazel wrote that Sophie "said that she got bullied and she would fight back," and that Rose, "said that her brother hid in the clothes and got lost..."

Rose had something similar for Sophie's contribution, and she wrote about Hazel's story about getting lost in Walmart.

I asked students to reflect on how they have grown in their abilities individually and as a group. As you see in Figure I, the girls all felt they had made progress either individually or as a group with staying focused on one topic for a longer stretch of time.

Discussion #4 Final Reflection	
<b>"I think I have grown in my ability to..."</b>	<b>"I think our group has grown in our ability to..."</b>
Hazel: <i>not to get off topic</i>	Hazel: <i>listening</i>
Sophie: <i>focus</i>	Sophie: <i>discussing more about connections</i>
Rose: <i>make more connection[s] and stay on topic like the profound spots like when he lost the competition]</i>	Rose: <i>make a lot of connections because the paragraphs at the end are really profound like how it's his fault and how his reaction was when he lost.</i>

Figure I

I conducted a final "Literature Circle Survey" (Appendix L) as part of an end-of-unit reflection that coincided with an end-of-year survey. All three girls said they "somewhat" enjoyed the book, and all three said they finished reading the entire book. When asked what they would change about the unit, Hazel and Sophie expressed displeasure in the book and wished they could have read another book. Rose said she wished she "had more time to understand the book better." Students also shared their perceptions of their growth in the discussion skills and other goals of the unit. Those results are in Figure J. Notice, the options for each skill were "Not at all", "Somewhat", and "A lot." In the three discussion skills that were the focus of the unit, all three students felt they had made progress



“Somewhat” or “A lot.” Finally, the goal of the exploratory discussions was to understand the book in a deeper way, and all three said “Somewhat” or “A lot” as well.

<b>Book Club Survey</b>			
<i>To what extent do you feel these skills improved after book club discussions?</i>			
	<b>Hazel</b>	<b>Sophie</b>	<b>Rose</b>
<b>Building on classmates' ideas</b>	Somewhat	Somewhat	A lot
<b>Including everyone in discussion</b>	A lot	A lot	A lot
<b>Staying on topic during a discussion</b>	Somewhat	Somewhat	Somewhat
<b>Appreciating a book</b>	Not at all	Somewhat	A lot
<b>Understanding the book in a deeper way</b>	Somewhat	Somewhat	A lot

Figure J

### Summary

The goal of my research was to find, *How does a teacher's intentional focus on words in the classroom influence students' learning in literature circles?* As I explained in Chapter Three, I focused on using words intentionally to enhance literature circle discussions to help my students learn in deeper ways through several avenues in my classroom. Chapter Four has shown how this unfolded in my classroom. I provided and explicitly modeled how to use Academic Language Scripts to carry on an academic conversation. I provided journal prompts that echoed those scripts, providing students with a base of information to talk about in their groups. Finally, I asked students to reflect on the words and contributions of their classmates in the discussion to emphasize how they could learn from one another. In Chapter Five, I will interpret the data from my study and share implications for teachers considering the use of literature circles in middle school classrooms.

## CHAPTER FIVE

## Conclusions

**Introduction**

Through my experience taking part in literature circle discussions through book clubs, I became interested in harnessing the power of social relationships and discussion in helping my middle school students take their learning about novels to a deeper level. Literature circles came on my radar as an ideal setting for this type of learning to take place. After conducting literature circles in my classroom for five years, I took this opportunity to analyze how words--specifically, a teacher's words--would affect students' conversations, thoughts, and overall learning.

In this action research project, I attempted to answer the question, *How does a teacher's intentional focus on words in the classroom influence students' learning in literature circles?* My intentional focus on words began with a focus on providing words with the intent of facilitating academic discussions. Through my research and reflection, I made a fundamental shift in the way I was using language to support my students' discussions. The academic scripts moved from being the goal of the discussion (I can use scripts to discuss) to being a tool in discussion (I can discuss the book deeply to explore new ideas and perspectives). With this move, I also moved my classroom from teacher-focused to student-focused.

**Major Findings**

I began my research with the intent of focusing on the words I used as a teacher. I quickly realized that in literature circles, my voice should be minimized in order for my students' voices to be heard. So, I began to shift my focus to student words--how I could

## Discussion Overview

	Discussion 1	Discussion 2	Discussion 3	Discussion 4
	Teacher gives words.	Teacher supports students in using word structures to generate ideas.	Teacher supports students in recognizing the ideas shared by others and using scripts to those ideas.	Teacher supports students in recognizing the ideas in the book worth discussing.
Word Focus	Teacher gave student words (scripts).  Students' use of scripts did not extend or deepen the conversation.	Teacher gave structure (Q-Chart) for asking open-ended questions.  Teacher modeled & facilitated student practice building on ideas.  Students explicitly practiced asking questions.	Teacher modeled building on classmate's connections.  Teacher provided game for practicing listening.  Students asked questions of each other's connections.	Teacher provided journal opportunities to guide students to find events from the book for discussion.  Students practiced writing open-ended questions.
Effects of Word Focus on Discussion	The group... --didn't use the scripts much, and the scripts weren't helpful to the discussion.  --discussed book only—no other 'off topic' or connections.	The group... --focused on why Fadi ran away and what happened to Mariam.  --shared their own experiences with running away, but didn't extend.  --felt they didn't stay "on topic."	The group... --shared personal stories, and others helped recognize similarities between the personal stories and characters.  --seemed very comfortable sharing with one another.	The group... --shared what happened with Hazel, who had been absent and couldn't read.  --discussed their reactions to Fadi not winning the award.  --expressed excitement at finishing the book.

Figure K

provide students with words to hold discussions, what words they used, and the deeper comprehension they were showing. This came from both practical and philosophical purposes: my goal was to improve the quality of the literature discussion happening in the group, so I began to concentrate on the student words as instructed by the teacher.

**The power of student-focused literature circles.** As seen in Discussion Overview (Figure K), as the discussions progressed, my focus as a teacher moved from teacher-focused word use to student-focused word use. In Discussion #1, I gave my words to the students to use. In Discussion #2, I supported students in using scripts like the Question Chart to generate ideas. By Discussions #3 and #4, I was supporting students in recognizing ideas in their classmates and in the book that would lead to a good discussion, and the academic scripts helped them build on each other's ideas. The academic scripts moved from being the goal of the discussion (I can use scripts to discuss) to being a tool in discussion (I can discuss the book deeply to explore new ideas and perspectives).

I began this study with the impression that by simply using a literature circle structure, with student-choice and student-voice, I was facilitating my classroom in a student-focused manner. My students had a choice in what they read, they had a choice in with whom they were discussing, and they were doing the majority of the talking about the book, so I felt I must have been facilitating a student-focused unit. However, literature circle discussions can still be teacher-focused if handled that way. I found that, as my focus became more student-focused, their discussions grew richer, and students became more engaged, as shown by their increase in turn-taking and richness of discussion topics.

**The power of verbal processing.** I had intended for students to use the Academic Scripts—my words—to help them express the thoughts they had about the book. This was

rooted in the research I shared in Chapter Two. AVID, a program designed to explicitly teach the academic skills students need in order to be successful, endorses the use of Academic Language Scripts, and their examples were the basis of my own scripts I wrote for my students' discussions. Furthermore, Graff and Birkenstein (2010) as well as Nichols (2006) endorsed the use of Academic Scripts to build capacity in students' academic discussion skills.

However, Nichols cautioned that using scripts in this manner can become “the end rather than the means of developing stronger thinking” (2006, p. 44). Therefore, she recommended using the students' natural language from their conversations and helping students understand the role they play in a discussion. This processing of how to use the words and the role the phrases play in a purposeful conversation that leads to deeper thinking. I saw this in my own research. The verbal practice of the scripts and the discussions we had about when and why we might use different phrases in our discussions made the scripts more useful for students. The actual written scripts also seemed helpful in journaling and reflection—in written thought processing.

In the early discussions, I anticipated the students generating new ideas or possibilities about the text, which is why the Discussion Guide #1 included Academic Scripts such as, “I wonder...” and “I think maybe (CHARACTER NAME) is going to...” In Discussion #1, Rose used one of the Academic Scripts when she asked, “What's interesting so far?”, but her group mates did not use the Academic Scripts designed to help them respond with deeper comprehension (“I wonder...”). Sophie simply said, “I can't think of anything,” and Hazel didn't respond. Upon reflection, the Academic Scripts I provided in Discussion #1 did not necessarily lead students to many of Keene's (2012) Indicators of

Deeper Comprehension due to the purpose of the discussion, which was to clear up any confusion students may have had at the beginning of the book.

The Academic Scripts I provided for Discussion #2 were more aligned with Keene's (2012) Indicators of Deeper Comprehension. Two of the Academic Scripts were intended to lead students to dwelling in the text and generating new ideas. In Discussion #2, Rose asked both of these Academic Script questions: "What examples of Again & Again did you find?" and "Who did you think is a wiser character in the book?" No one responded to the "Again and Again" question. The girls answered the "Words of the Wiser" question, but didn't go deeper than to name the character.

Perhaps, if we had more discussions earlier in the unit about the role of the phrases in starting conversation, we may have had more engagement in conversations that led to deeper comprehension.

**The power of student ownership of words.** When the discussions were rooted in the students' questions and thoughts about the book, the conversation was deeper and more interesting. In Discussion #2, Rose asked what questions the students had about the book, and Sophie expressed her boredom with the book. Janessa then responded with why she thought it was interesting. Janessa's question, which responded specifically to Sophie's thoughts, led to the group extensively sharing connections to the book.

On the contrary, a generic, scripted question like, "What did you think about the text?" often resulted in just as generic answers, such as Rose's question in Discussion #1, "Who do you think is interesting so far?", which Sophie responded with, "Um...the main character." This was not satisfactory to me, as simply answering questions in this manner does not lead to the type of discovery of new ideas I had anticipated for my students in

their discussions.

Discussion #3 had all three participants asking questions that exemplify this deeper comprehension and engagement with the text. Discussion Guide #3 started by prompting students to ask one another about their connections or questions, and each student did have something to share:

Rose: *"What do you think?"*  
*"What issue do you have with the book?"*  
*"What do you think [Mariam] is doing right now?"*  
*"Did anyone make a connection?"*  
*"Isn't their mother sick?"*  
*"Do you think Fadi is like that? Staring into space?"*

Hazel: *"She's only six. What if something happened to her?"*  
*"Do you have a question or connection? Rita?"*

Sophie: *"I'm just like, where's the action?"*  
*"I'm just like, you should be worrying about your sister?"*  
*"Why doesn't the mother work?"*

When students used the language of open-ended questions about the book, the discussion flourished and comprehension went deeper. I provided words not in the form of generic scripts, but in the form of the Question Chart (Figure L). I modeled the use of the words in that chart to write open-ended questions. Even when students asked feelings-based or opinion questions, the discussion often focused around the text and dwelling in the text, which Keene (2012) presents as an Indicator of Deeper Comprehension. As students grew more confident in asking their own open-ended and text-dependent questions about the book, their discussions grew deeper and more interesting.

Question Chart				
	<b>is/are was/were</b>	<b>do/does did</b>	<b>can could</b>	<b>will would</b>
<b>What</b>	Thin	Thin	Thick	Thick
<b>When Where</b>	Thin	Thin	Thick	Thick
<b>Who</b>	Thin	Thin	Thick	Thick
<b>Why</b>	Thick	Thick	Thick	Thick
<b>How</b>	Thick	Thick	Thick	Thick

Figure L

**The power of group dynamics.** Each year, like so many other teachers, I set out with the best of intentions to help my students learn to collaborate with one another and to learn from that collaboration. The classroom is set up with desks in pods, students facing one another, and my lesson plans are filled with group work. Inevitably, the classroom begins to spiral out of my control, with discussions going off-topic and students “collaborating” when they ought to be listening. In the first weeks of school, as I work to create a culture of learning and respect in a classroom, that lack of control begins to feel scary, and I panic. To ease that panic and regain control, I turn the desks back to the front, students facing the teacher. I begin to focus on skills like, “I can listen to my classmate,” because that is what makes the classroom most orderly.

However, truly transformative learning is rarely orderly. Exploratory discussion is rarely orderly. I framed the literature circle discussions in terms of exploring the book, and as we recall, Barnes notes that exploratory talk is “hesitant, broken, and full of dead-ends and changes of direction” (2008, p.5). Through my research, I found myself trying to



provide words that would help discussion flow smoothly, but that is not what words are needed for in an exploratory discussion. Words are needed to express new ideas. Furthermore, students need to feel comfortable to use their words to bring up new possibilities and ideas that are essential to exploring text in a deeper manner. In exploratory discussions like literature circles, the group dynamics are just as important as the words students use.

One of the goals in our literature circles was to involve everyone in the discussion, and to accomplish this I was intentional in teaching students the words that encourage broader participation. We practiced using our group mates' names to ask them questions that would engage them in the discussion.

However, just having the words to involve others in participating is not enough to accomplish this goal. As my literature review explains, it is important to build a community of trust in the literature circle group so members feel comfortable to share. Henson (1993) and Pierce and Gilles (2008) all advocate for including social talk in small groups, which is the kind of talk that brings a community together as the group really comes to know and trust one another. To this end, I intentionally led students in completing "Membership Grids."

I believe that this attention to words and community building did have an impact on the group, as they improved greatly in participation throughout the unit. By the last discussion, each group member felt more comfortable using their words. See Figure M for the number of turns taken by each student in each discussion. Hazel took eight turns talking in each of the first two discussions, but that jumped up to twenty-one turns in Discussion #3 and fifteen turns in Discussion #4. More importantly, Hazel showed deeper

thinking in the later discussions. In Discussion #1, of the eight times Hazel spoke, five of those times she simply agreed with someone else in the group.

<b>Turns in Discussions</b>				
	<b>Discussion #1</b>	<b>Discussion #2</b>	<b>Discussion #3</b>	<b>Discussion #4</b>
<b>Rose</b>	19	14	37	20
<b>Hazel</b>	8	8	21	15
<b>Sophie</b>	5	8	22	12
<b>Janessa</b>	Absent	8	Absent	Absent
<b>Total</b>	32	38	80	47

Figure M

Two of the other turns she referenced an event in the text, and the last turn she said, “*I don’t know.*” In Discussion #2, Hazel again spoke eight different times, but this time she shared a connection and an open-ended question, “*Why did Fadi run away?*” However, in Discussion #3, she spoke twenty-one times, expressing emotional responses, bringing up a possibility, sharing an opinion and a connection, and asking two open-ended questions: “*She’s only six. What if something happened to her?*” and “*Do you have a connection or question, Rose?*” Hazel also responded to or built on classmates ideas regularly throughout the discussion:

Rose: *What do you think she’s doing right now?*

Hazel: *Trying to look for someone to help her.*

Rose: *I think Mariam was like that!*

Hazel: *Because she doesn’t want to pay attention!*

Rose: *Like if I was Fadi, I would run away.*

Hazel: *...or at least get help or something.*

Rose: *Isn’t their mother sick?*

Hazel: *Yeah.*

In the last discussion, Hazel spent much time dwelling in the book, clarifying what

happened and why, sharing her sadness and anger, and finally expressing, *"I can't wait to finish this book!"* This was a big change from Discussion #1, when the majority of her comments showed agreement with classmates.

Sophie experienced a huge jump in active participation in the discussion. Sophie's five turns talking in Discussion #1 were limited to such scripted and generic answers that they could have been the answer to any number of questions about any book: *"I like it. It's pretty good so far," "I can't think of anything,"* and *"The main character."* During Discussion #2, she seemed really excited to share her connections after Janessa got the group talking about running away, which the main character tried to do in the book. After the class talked about stories like their run-away stories being a starting point to dive deeper into the book and not simply "off topic," Sophie thrived in Discussion #3. She took twenty-two of eighty turns, showed great emotional engagement with the text, shared a possibility, expressed three opinions, and responded to classmates. In this discussion, Sophie asked questions like, *"I'm just like, where's the action?"*, *"I'm just like, you should be worrying about your sister?"*, and *"Why doesn't the mother work?"* And while she didn't complete the journal prompts, she did copy them down.

The increase in engaged participation from Hazel and Sophie is likely due to a combination of factors, with the focus on words that encourage broader participation being one factor I intentionally influenced. The verbal game that students played Week 3, "Character is going to...", required all students to speak. Perhaps Hazel and Sophie began to find more comfort in expressing their voices due to this game, or perhaps due to the growth in a sense of security sharing with their group, which had remained supportive throughout Discussions #1 and #2. Neither girl was very confident in their reading skills

and were very hesitant to offer suggestions, but this gradually diminished.

**The power of drawing connections among ideas with words:** One of the skills the students recognized as important in our discussion was staying on task. It was the skill that was most often cited on reflection sheets as something their groups could work on, and it was always mentioned in our verbal processing at the end of the discussions. I picked up this skill, which aligned with my desire for order that would lead to new learning, and provided Academic Scripts to help students refocus their discussion.

However, nowhere in my literature review did researchers emphasize the importance of this kind of “direct refocusing.” The AVID Academic Language Scripts did not include this type of language. Furthermore, as I noted earlier this chapter, Barnes reminds students and teachers alike that transformative learning is not going to be orderly. Unfortunately, it was not difficult for me to ignore the research, even when I was intentionally trying to conduct my class according to the research. Fortunately, my students used the Academic Script I provided for refocusing, giving me an opportunity to examine its effect on the discussion, which led me to the realization that we need to teach students to follow those trains of thought as opportunities for discovering new connections, not to simply “refocus” the conversation.

Hazel used one once in Discussion #2 in the middle of the stories Janessa and Sophie were sharing when she said, “*Hey, we should get back on the topic.*” Janessa responded to this, saying, “*Okay, so I wonder why he would want to get that attention [by running away]...why he would want to make [his mom] feel that way.*” While this comment appears to go “back on topic,” it’s still a continuation of their stories, which were about running away. That is to say, that script did not “refocus” or change the direction of the

conversation, but the group did not necessarily need to jump back on topic. They needed to recognize how their stories could be connected back to the book.

Before Discussion #3, as a class we practiced recognizing how connections are linked to the book. Rose then used that skill to link a connection in a way that led to deeper comprehension:

*Sophie: I was really the stupidest and most rebellious kid ever when I was seven. My brothers used to make fun of me for running away, and I was like, "You stole money from me when I was five! You stole sixty dollars from me!"*  
*Rose: I think Mariam was like that!*  
*Hazel: Because she doesn't want to pay attention!*  
*Sophie: I never want to pay attention!*

Instead of jumping back "on topic," Rose recognized how Sophie's story was linked to the book, and she voiced it. As a result, Hazel recognized a new connection, Sophie realized a commonality she had with Mariam, and Sophie's story became the source of a new, deeper understanding of Mariam by all three of the girls in the discussion. Their words showed Keene's (2012) Indicators of Deeper Comprehension: "We experience empathy," and "We generate new ideas and imagine new possibilities." That deeper comprehension would have been missed if Rose had used the script, "Hey, we should get back on topic."

### **Limitations**

The conclusions of my action research are limited for several reasons. Clearly, the narrow nature of my study (one class, one group, four students) makes it impossible to make generalizations that would apply broadly. However, the narrow nature of my study also reveals the incredibly complex nature of teaching and learning. During the course of the unit, I had my preconceived expectations and hopes for what the discussions should produce. Focusing on one group helped me recognize that I had those expectations, and that they became a lens through which I viewed the results of the discussion. Therefore,

this limitation also became a point of learning for me: Teachers need to be aware of and be willing to step back from their expectations to gain a more complete picture of what is happening in their classrooms.

It is difficult to fully analyze the effect of my teacher word use for several reasons. As I noted in the Academic Language Script section above, I found that my explicit words as shared through Academic Scripts seemed more helpful in written journal entries and reflection responses, and the written data I collected was incomplete (six journal collections out of sixteen possible collections). So, to analyze the effect of my verbal language on their discussions, I would need to have recorded my specific words in a whole-class discussion, which I did not do. Instead, as I described in the introduction to this chapter, in my efforts to maximize student learning, I shifted my focus to the students' literature discussions, which is what I recorded. This was a limitation that prevented me from fully understanding the effect of my words on student learning.

This brings up another limitation: the lack of data. Even with the narrow focus on my study, I failed to collect all the data that I would later wish I had. Students don't complete work because they run out of time, teachers forget to collect work because they're managing one behavior or another, conversations don't get recorded because of misunderstanding, and field notes are written hours later (or not at all) because of last-minute meetings. This limitation just goes to illuminate the incredibly fast-paced, sporadic, and chaotic nature of the middle school classroom.

Finally, a factor in the literature circle discussions that I did not expect and therefore had not explored was the effect of Janessa's departure from the group. I was intentional about creating a group comprised of students with a variety of personalities and with

different strengths and weaknesses while also being cohesive. Those good intentions were thwarted by the unexpected and abrupt absence of Janessa. However, this is simply the reality of the classroom. Even Hazel's absence the week before Discussion #4 changed the nature of that discussion, as she was unable to read the assigned section. However, that became the catalyst for the group dwelling in the text at length. The experienced and savvy educator will view this limitation—the uncontrollable inconsistencies of classroom life—not as a road block in the learning process, but as yet another new route to learning.

### **Implications**

As I consider the data I've collected, several implications for instruction arise. By changing the manner in which I use words and attending to group dynamics in the ways I describe in this section, I believe future student learning and comprehension will increase and deepen significantly.

**Academic Language Scripts.** For written journals and reflections, Academic Language Scripts are helpful in guiding students in processing complex reflections about their discussions. The word-for-word language worked well in writing responses.

Teaching students how to ask open-ended questions about a text is essential. The use of the Question Chart was quite beneficial in this. Also essential is the explicit modeling of responding to questions.

Academic Language Scripts can be powerful in the classroom, but simply providing them is not enough. Even if students have Academic Language Scripts in front of them, the thinking they need to use those scripts needs to be modeled and practiced with more scaffolding than what I provided in this one unit at the end of the year. Therefore, I recommend using Academic Language Scripts to help facilitate collaborative conversations

throughout the entire school year. Even more importantly, teachers ought to glean the words provided in Academic Language Scripts from discussions among students themselves, naming and explaining the roles the language plays in furthering academic discussion.

This is true in teaching students how to use words in maneuvering discussions, such as when it appears a discussion is moving “off topic.” I realized that there are some instances where a group is completely off-topic, with questions like, “Wait, are we running the mile in phy ed?” or “Is it supposed to be Connections [class] already?” However, in my research, each time those completely off-topic comments were made, the group simply let them pass and continued with the main conversation. When the conversation gradually became off-topic, such as when the discussion of connections go on to connect less to the text, it seems best for teachers to teach students to follow that train of thought. Examine it. Discussing the link between the connecting story and the text is a great way to take comprehension deeper.

I assert that it is important to teach students to recognize the types of off-topic conversations because they ought to be handled differently. When a student thinks the conversation might be off-topic, they ought to ask, “How does this relate to the text?” If the answer is, “It does not relate,” students ought to recognize that and make a big jump back on topic. However, if the answer is, “It does relate,” that can be the opening for deeper thinking (or recognizing the deeper thinking that they’re doing).

**Group Dynamics.** The dynamics of a group are very important in a successful literature circle discussion. If Sophie and Hazel had not felt comfortable with their group mates, I do not believe they would have opened up to participate as they did in the second



half of the unit. The intentional group building I did in the form of the Membership Grids and the "Character is going to..." activities helped the groups get to know one another, practice discussion with intentionality, and also to discern the dynamics of their groups.

While I am intentional each year about building relationships among my students, this literature circle unit at the end of the year showed me that the intentional focus on group dynamics needs to be emphasized throughout the year with activities to facilitate conversations, with the specific attention to language I outlined above, between small groups every time a new group is formed. Hazel and Rose were already good friends, and both expressed interest in being in a group with Sophie, and yet, they still hesitated to share ideas that they weren't absolutely positive about until the third week of discussion. To me, this underscores the importance of intentional grouping, and intentional team building in each grouping.

### **Future Research**

The research in teacher's use of words and middle school literature circles is growing. As I conducted my research, both in my literature review and action research, several areas for further examination rose.

The effect of teacher word use on student learning and motivation is still a major interest of mine, and the research in this area is still in its infancy. More research on language habits of effective teachers needs to be done. Once studies can detail the habits of word use that teachers ought to adopt, teachers need to know strategies for adopting those habits. How do teachers change their speaking habits, their questioning habits, and their listening habits? I set out to intentionally study my habits of word use in a small context, and still I struggled to accomplish this. Researchers need to find ways to help teachers

identify, reflect upon, and ultimately modify their habits of word use to best serve their students.

In my research, I was reminded of the power of games in a middle school classroom. Games are generally engaging, and any middle school teacher will tell you engagement is always a primary factor in the classroom. How can teachers use word games, turn-taking games, listening games, and others to boost engagement and increase discussion skills? This is also a compelling topic for future research.

Finally, I'm interested in examining the roles students play in literature circle discussions. Yes, there are curricula that assign roles to students (i.e. "summarizer") in literature circles, but I'm interested in the functional roles that students assume in a discussion, sometimes intentionally and other times unintentionally. Does a student tend to see their self as a discussion leader, as a passive consumer of the discussion, or as an occasional speaker? Are there roles that students move between in a discussion? If so, how can teachers recognize those roles, and how can a teacher help a student move out of dysfunctional roles and into active, productive roles in a literature circle discussion?

### **Summary**

I set out to examine the question, *How does a teacher's intentional focus on words in the classroom influence students' learning in literature circles?* While I had the best intentions and assumptions for how this research would unfold, my most valuable insights came from the places where those intentions and assumptions were thrown on their heads.

I thought Academic Language Scripts—providing expert academic words, modeling how to use those words, and listening for those words--would change the way my students discussed. I found that actual verbal practice was most helpful for my students than the

written scripts themselves, and that discussing how the scripts help a discussion unfold productively is also important. This seemingly simple realization grows complex as I consider how to engage students in that practice.

I also learned that relationship building, as important as I already thought it was, requires even more dedicated time for some groups of students. Fortunately, relationship building and discussion-skill building through skilled word use can go hand in hand, if a teacher structures the activities appropriately. And the more fun, the better! After all, this is a middle school classroom!

Finally, as students grow older, it is the job of teachers to teach students to recognize what is happening in their discussions and in their learning process. I thought my students needed to learn how to refocus when they digressed. However, I realized that students actually need to be able to differentiate between a discussion that is pulling them away from essential learning and a discussion that is actually taking their learning to a new, deeper place. Then, I need to help students learn to respond appropriately in order to best enhance their learning.

Words are the foundation of our classrooms. Teachers know that one wrong word can set a student spiraling just as quickly as one well-constructed question can set a group of students to a lively conversation filled with challenging perspectives that lead to new learning. And yet, these words that are so important are also so fleeting. It can be difficult to recreate either circumstance.

Therefore, educators are called to use words skillfully, to practice academic language with their students, to teach students to identify significant ideas in the text and from in their classmates thoughts, and to guide students in using academic language to

deepen their understanding of those ideas. Learning begins with words, and it flourishes in communities in conversation.

Appendix A  
Methods Chart

PHASE	FOCUS	DATA COLLECTION TOOLS	ANALYSIS
1	<p style="text-align: center;">Week 0: Planning</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Complete Belief/Practices chart</li> <li>• Students complete Book Club Sign Up form</li> <li>• Assign students to groups</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Field notes</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Connect beliefs chart to “practices” to determine alignment</li> </ul>
1	<p style="text-align: center;">Week 1: Lit Circle Prep</p> <p>Focus Lessons: Literature Discussion Content: This I Believe essays (existing curricular event)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Document the ways I explained the work students are expected to do in lit circles</li> <li>• General field notes and audio record (just for general listening) practice lit discussions to select target group</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Field notes</li> <li>• Audio record practice lit discussions</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Choose target group and explain why, reflect on the questions and insights that led you to this group</li> <li>• Analyze audio recordings to determine group discussion needs</li> </ul>
2	<p style="text-align: center;">Weeks 2-5: Lit Circles</p> <p>Focus Lessons: Language Arts standards (i.e. character analysis, theme, Note &amp; Notice) Content: Lit Circle books</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Audio record all Lit Circle Discussions (groups w/o consent papers will not be analyzed, but included for “placebo effect”)</li> <li>• Record, listen to, and write reflections on Lit Circle Discussions for target group</li> <li>• Weekly reflections on what I’m noticing and what I feel I should do to scaffold their effective use of purposeful, effective talk</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Field notes</li> <li>• Audio record target group Lit Circle Discussions</li> <li>• Student Lit Circle Discussion Reflections (student-completed)</li> <li>• Student Lit Response Journals</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Read, highlight, reflect on data sources</li> <li>• Draft “theoretical memos” on topics I’m noticing -- (turn-taking, use of AVID phrases, evidence that they are constructing new ideas and challenging one another’s ideas, etc.)</li> </ul>

3	<p>Weeks 2-5: Lit Circles Focus Lessons: Literature Discussions Content: Lit Circle books</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Whole class discussions to “process” student self-reflections as well as my observations (looks like/sounds like chart)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Field notes/teacher journal re: whole group debrief</li> <li>• Student Lit Circle Discussion Reflections (insights and “goals” for next week’s discussion)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Read, highlight, reflect on data sources</li> <li>• Revise “theoretical memos” and create new ones as appropriate</li> </ul>
4	<p>Weeks 2-5: Lit Circles</p> <p>Continue to “spiral” between Phase 2 &amp; Phase 3 Look, Think, Act (Stringer, 1999 as cited in Creswell, 2005)</p> <p>Look: My observations of Lit Circle Discussions Students’ observations of Lit Circle Discussions Think: Reflect on and interpret observations Identify priorities and strategies to use Act: Model and facilitate strategies to students (intervene as necessary)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Field notes/teacher journal</li> <li>• Audio recordings of target group Lit Circle Discussions</li> <li>• Student Lit Response Journals</li> <li>• Student Lit Circle Discussion Reflections (insights and “goals” for next week’s discussion)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Read, highlight, reflect on data sources</li> <li>• Revise “theoretical memos” and create new ones as appropriate</li> </ul>
5	<p>Week 5: Final Reflection</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Student Reflections (Interviews and/or reflection sheets with students in target group)</li> <li>•</li> </ul> <p>Questions to answer: How did they grow as participants? How did they contribute to the learning of others? How did others contribute to their learning? How did the discussions affect the way they understood the book? Lessons learned for the future?</p>		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Read, highlight, reflect on data sources</li> <li>• Revise “theoretical memos” and create new ones as appropriate</li> <li>• Revisit beliefs chart determine change/modification of beliefs, or support beliefs</li> </ul>

Appendix B  
Consent Form



March 2017

Dear Guardians and Parents,

In addition to teaching your child's language and literature class, I am currently a graduate student at the Hamline University in St. Paul. I am working on completing a capstone project as part of a Master's Degree in Literacy Education. I am writing to ask your permission for your child to participate in my capstone action research project.

The purpose of my capstone project is to study how a teacher can use intentional language to facilitate deeper comprehension among her students. While this is something I work toward every day in my classroom, this spring I will be conducting action research to systematically observe the effects and effectiveness of specific strategies. In order to collect data, I will use recordings of student book club conversations and written student reflections to identify deeper comprehension within discussions.

The information published in my project may include written and verbal student reflections that can help inform other educators about what I learn from this process. However, your child will remain anonymous in any and all documents. Moreover, I will remove any identifying information about your child, including the district, building, and classroom in which this research will take place. There is no risk of harm for you or your child. If you decide at any time that you are no longer interested in participating, you or your child may choose to withdraw from the research project. The decision to decline participating in this action research will in no way negatively affect your child.

I have already received permission to complete this research from district administration as well as the Hamline University Institutional Review Board, whose purpose is to ensure the safety and rights of research participants. My research will be published in a book housed in the library at Hamline University, and I may choose to publish portions of my research in educational journals. In the event of publication, your child's identity will be protected at all times. Finally, I will also share what I learn with your child! Together, we will discover more about the power of conversation and language to think deeply.

Please return the permission form on the attached page by \_\_\_\_\_. If you have any questions about my project, please feel free to contact me via email \_\_\_\_\_ or phone \_\_\_\_\_.

Thank you,

Tiffany Brian

March 2017

Dear Ms. Brian,

We have received and read your letter about conducting action research on conversations in a middle school classroom. We understand your goal is to better understand how teachers can facilitate conversations that lead to deeper learning.

I, \_\_\_\_\_, wish to participate in the research project that is part of your graduate degree program. I understand that all results are confidential and I may stop taking part at any time without negative consequences.

I give permission for my child, \_\_\_\_\_ to participate in the research project that is part of your graduate degree program. I understand that all results are confidential and my child may stop taking part at any time without negative consequences.

Signed,

\_\_\_\_\_  
Student

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Parent/Guardian

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

Appendix C  
Journal Prompts

**Journal #1**

Record character names.

Record the page number you first see them.

What is the setting? What clues do you have so far?

Remember: Setting = place and time

What questions/confusions do you have so far?

**Journal #2**

Write 3 THICK questions as you read.

Remember: Thick Questions...

...are not easily answered.

...having more than 1 possible answer.

...get you emotionally involved.

...connect the book with personal experiences.

**Journal #3**

What is an object or event that you see over and over in your book?

I keep seeing \_\_\_\_\_ in my book. It showed up \_\_\_\_.

What 2 questions can you ask your group from today's reading?

I wonder why \_\_\_\_\_?      What if \_\_\_\_\_?

**Journal #4**

Who is a "wise" character in your book? Who does the main character seem to go to for help?

The character \_\_\_\_\_ seems to see \_\_\_\_\_ as a wise person to go to for advice. One time that the main character spoke with this wise figure was \_\_\_\_\_.

What 2 questions can you ask your group from today's reading?

Use the Question Chart on the back board.

**Journal #5**

What is your main character like?

The main character's name is \_\_\_\_\_.

He/she is motivated by \_\_\_\_\_.

Her/his strengths are \_\_\_\_\_.

His/her weaknesses are \_\_\_\_\_.

What surprises you about the character?

I was surprised when s/he \_\_\_\_\_ because \_\_\_\_\_.

I would be surprised if s/he would \_\_\_\_\_ because \_\_\_\_\_.

**Journal #6**

What past event plays an important role in the life of the main character? Is this a "Memory Moment," where the character tells us about it, or is it unspoken?

The main character \_\_\_\_\_ experiences a "Memory Moment" when s/he describes \_\_\_\_\_.

I think this past event might be important to the plot because \_\_\_\_\_.

What 2 questions can you ask your group from today's reading?

Use the Question Chart on the back board.

**Journal #7**

What discoveries has your character made? What realizations has s/he had?

The character \_\_\_\_\_ had an Aha Moment when s/he realized \_\_\_\_\_. This discovery might change \_\_\_\_\_.

What connections have you made with the book?

\_\_\_\_\_ reminded me of \_\_\_\_\_.

I am interested in \_\_\_\_\_. I wonder about \_\_\_\_\_.

**Journal #8**

What difficult life questions is your character asking?

The character \_\_\_\_\_ is wondering \_\_\_\_\_. This makes me wonder if \_\_\_\_\_.

What connections have you made with the book?

\_\_\_\_\_ reminded me of \_\_\_\_\_.

I am interested in \_\_\_\_\_. I wonder about \_\_\_\_\_.

**Journal #9**

Which character is experiencing change (a dynamic character)? OR, which character do you think SHOULD change?

The character \_\_\_\_\_ is a dynamic character. S/he changes when \_\_\_\_\_.

Which character is not changing (a static character)?

The character \_\_\_\_\_ is a static character. Some examples of how s/he remains the same are \_\_\_\_\_ and \_\_\_\_\_.

**Journal #10**

What does it mean to be "American?" Which characters in your book have the ability to reach that? Why?

To be American means \_\_\_\_\_.

(List characters) are or can be American because \_\_\_\_\_.

(List characters) can NOT become American because \_\_\_\_\_.

Write 2 questions or connections you take to your discussion.

I wonder why \_\_\_\_?      What if \_\_\_\_?

**Journal #11**

What does THE BOOK say about "being American"? Write about that line using an in-text citation.

The author talks about "being American" when they write, "DIRECT QUOTE FROM THE BOOK" (Author last name page number). This makes me wonder \_\_\_\_.

Write 2 questions or connections you take to your discussion.

I wonder why \_\_\_\_?            What if \_\_\_\_?

**Journal #12**

Good literature will always impact the reader. What is a passage from the book that really affected you? What insight have you gained about yourself that relates to the novel?

On page \_\_\_\_, the author writes "QUOTE" (Author last name).

This stood out to me because \_\_\_\_\_.

I have learned \_\_\_\_\_.

Before I read this book, I thought \_\_\_\_\_. Now, I think \_\_\_\_\_.

Appendix D

Discussion Guide #1

Discussion Guide #1

Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Book: \_\_\_\_\_ Hour: \_\_\_\_\_

DIRECTIONS: Use your notes from Journal #1 and the scripts below to help you carry your discussion.

1. Write the names of characters who have been introduced. Include the page number you first are introduced to them.

ASK: "What characters did you write down?"

"What page did you see that on?"

"Who is interesting to you so far?"

SAY: "I wonder..."

"I think maybe (CHARACTER NAME) is going to..."

2. What is the setting? What clues do you have so far?

ASK: "When does this book take place?"

"How do you know?"

"What pages did you see clues about the setting?"

SAY: "I think this takes place...because..."

3. What questions/confusions do you have so far?

ASK: "What questions do you have right now?"

"What does that make you wonder?"

SAY: "I wonder..."



Appendix E

Discussion Reflection #1

Discussion #1 Reflection

Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Book: \_\_\_\_\_

	Never	A couple times		Often
I used an Academic Script to express my ideas.	2	4	6	8
I shared an idea that someone else had not considered.	2	4	6	8
I said a classmate's name in the discussion.	2	4	6	8
I looked at my group mates during the discussion and didn't allow myself to focus outside my group.	2	4	6	8

**Reflection:** Fill in the sentence starters below to reflect on your book club discussion.

1. \_\_\_\_\_ said \_\_\_\_\_  
 \_\_\_\_\_,  
 which made me wonder \_\_\_\_\_  
 \_\_\_\_\_.

2. A new idea I gained from the discussion was \_\_\_\_\_  
 \_\_\_\_\_  
 \_\_\_\_\_.

3. I wish I had said \_\_\_\_\_  
 \_\_\_\_\_  
 \_\_\_\_\_.

4. To have a more interesting discussion next time, our group needs to \_\_\_\_\_  
 \_\_\_\_\_  
 \_\_\_\_\_.

Appendix F  
Discussion Guide #2

Discussion Guide #2

Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Book: \_\_\_\_\_ Hour: \_\_\_\_\_

**DIRECTIONS:** Use the Academic Scripts below to respond after a classmate has shared an idea.**Building on a Classmate's Idea**

Looks Like	Sounds Like
Eye contact	"I hadn't thought of that. This makes me wonder _____."
Desks close	"What examples do you have of _____?"
Nodding	"What made you think that?"
Looking interested	"I agree, and I also think _____."
Leaning in	"Maybe...?"

**DIRECTIONS:** Use Journal entries #2, #3, and #4 and the scripts above to help you discuss your book with your groupmates.

1. Journal #3: Discuss any examples of "Again and Again" your groupmates found.

ASK: "(NAME), what examples of Again and Again did you find?"SAY: "I thought maybe \_\_\_\_\_."

2. Journal #4: Discuss any examples of "Words of the Wiser" your groupmates found. Be sure to use the names of specific characters.

ASK: "(NAME), who did you think is a wiser character in the book?"

"Where did you see a wiser character give advice to another character?"

SAY: "I thought maybe \_\_\_\_\_ is a wise character. S/he seems to help \_\_\_\_\_ when \_\_\_\_\_."

"I think the main character relies on \_\_\_\_\_ for help."

3. Journal #2, 3, and 4: Ask the questions you wrote for these journal entries.

ASK: "What question did you have about the book, (name)?"

"What page did you see that on?"

SAY: "I wonder \_\_\_\_\_."

Appendix G

Discussion Reflection #2

Discussion #2 Reflection

Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Book: \_\_\_\_\_

	Never	A couple times		Often
I used an Academic Script to RESPOND to a classmate's idea.	2	4	6	8
I shared an idea that someone else had not considered.	2	4	6	8
I said a classmate's name in the discussion.	2	4	6	8
I looked at my group mates during the discussion and didn't allow myself to focus outside my group.	2	4	6	8

**Reflection:** Fill in the sentence starters below to reflect on your book club discussion.

1. \_\_\_\_\_ said \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_  
which made me wonder \_\_\_\_\_

2. A new idea I gained from the discussion was \_\_\_\_\_

3. I wish I had said \_\_\_\_\_

4. To have a more interesting discussion next time, a skill our group needs to work on is \_\_\_\_\_

Appendix H

Discussion Guide #3

Discussion Guide #3

Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Book: \_\_\_\_\_ Hour: \_\_\_\_\_

**DIRECTIONS:** Use the Academic Scripts below to respond to classmates' ideas.**Building on a Classmate's Idea**

Looks Like	Sounds Like
Eye contact	"I hadn't thought of that. This makes me wonder _____."
Desks close	"What examples do you have of _____?"
Nodding	"What made you think that?"
Looking interested	"That is like _____."
Leaning in	"Why _____?"      "How _____?"

**DIRECTIONS:** Use Journal entries #6, #7, and #8 and the scripts above to help you discuss your book with your group mates.

1. All Journals: Take turns sharing the connections you wrote for the journal entries.

ASK: "What connection or question did you have, (NAME)?"FOLLOW UP:"Your story is like (Character, event, or aspect of the book)."

"If that were me, I'd feel \_\_\_\_\_"

2. Journal #6: Discuss Memory Moments and their importance to the book.

ASK: "(NAME), what Memory Moment did you see?"

"Why might this event be important?"

3. Journal #5: Discuss Aha Moments and their importance to the book.

ASK: "(NAME), what Aha Moment did you see?"

"How might that memory affect the character?"

4. Journal #8: Discuss Tough Questions and their importance to the book.

ASK: "(NAME), what Tough Question did you see?"

"What does that make us wonder?"



Appendix I

Discussion Reflection #3

Discussion #3 Reflection

Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Book: \_\_\_\_\_

	Never	A couple times		Often
I used an Academic Script to RESPOND to a classmate's idea.	2	4	6	8
I shared an idea that someone else had not considered.	2	4	6	8
I said a classmate's name in the discussion.	2	4	6	8
I looked at my group mates during the discussion and didn't allow myself to focus outside my group.	2	4	6	8

**Reflection:** Fill in the sentence starters below to reflect on your book club discussion.

1. What was something valuable you heard from each person in the group? If you didn't hear an idea from someone, write down how you might include them in the discussion next time.

Name: Idea:	Name: Idea:
Name: Idea:	Name: Idea:

2. I could have also said \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

3. To have a more interesting discussion next time, a skill our group needs to work on is \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

Appendix J

Discussion Guide #4

Discussion Guide #4

Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Book: \_\_\_\_\_ Hour: \_\_\_\_\_

**DIRECTIONS:** Use the Academic Scripts below to respond to classmates' ideas.

1. Reactions. Are there any burning reactions to the book since your last discussion?

Share them now!

STARTER: "What did you all think of what we read?"RESPONSE SCRIPTS:

"I was surprised when \_\_\_\_\_"

"I liked that part when \_\_\_\_\_"

"I think \_\_\_\_\_"

2. Save the Last Word for Me. Using Journal #12, share a passage from the book that was really important or impactful to you. Read the passage. Then, starting to your left, your groupmates should talk about their reaction to that passage. Finally, after everyone has spoken, share your reaction and reasons for choosing that passage.

STARTER: "What do you think about this passage, NAME?"RESPONSE SCRIPTS:

"This passage makes me wonder \_\_\_\_\_"

"I did/didn't like this passage because \_\_\_\_\_"

"This passage stood out to me because \_\_\_\_\_"

3. Theme. Using Journal #10 & #11, discuss the topic of "Immigration in America." What might the author be saying about this topic (theme)? Share your thoughts in your group.

STARTER: "(NAME), what do you think the author is saying about 'being American'?"RESPONSE SCRIPTS:

"Why do you think that?"

"Where do you see that in the book?"

"Do you agree with the author?"

Appendix K

Discussion Reflection #4

Discussion #4 Reflection

Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Book: \_\_\_\_\_

	Never	A couple times	Often
I used an Academic Script to RESPOND to a classmate's idea.	2	4	8
I shared an idea that someone else had not considered.	2	4	8
I said a classmate's name in the discussion.	2	4	8
I looked at my group mates during the discussion and didn't allow myself to focus outside my group.	2	4	8

1. What was something valuable you heard from each person in the group?

Name: Idea:	Name: Idea:
Name: Idea:	Name: Idea:

2. **TIP:** Reflect on your group's discussion of Question 3 to respond:

Our group thinks a theme of this book is \_\_\_\_\_

because \_\_\_\_\_

3. Since we started our discussions, I think I have grown in my ability to \_\_\_\_\_

4. Since we started our discussions, I think our group has grown in our ability to \_\_\_\_\_

Appendix L

Literature Circle Survey

NAME: \_\_\_\_\_

## Book Club Survey

1. To what extent do you feel these skills improved after book club discussions?

Skill			
Building on classmates' ideas	Not at all	Somewhat	A lot!
Including everyone in discussion	Not at all	Somewhat	A lot!
Staying on topic during a discussion	Not at all	Somewhat	A lot!
Appreciating a book	Not at all	Somewhat	A lot!
Understanding the book in a deeper way	Not at all	Somewhat	A lot!

2. To what extent did you like the book you read?

- a. Not at all.
- b. Somewhat.
- c. A lot!

3. To what extent did you read the book you read?

- a. About 1/4 the book
- b. About 1/2 of the book
- c. About 3/4 of the book
- d. I finished it.
- e. I'm still reading it.

4. If I could change one thing about book clubs, I wish \_\_\_\_\_

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5. If I could recommend one thing about book clubs to next year's students, I'd tell them \_\_\_\_\_

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