

# Reading and Storying in Circles

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## Abstract

This article discusses findings from the qualitative research study which was conducted at a K-12 parochial school in Midwestern city. The study was conducted to understand how first and second graders who were located in one particular educational setting, with reading levels that ranged from low to high in a split classroom, made meanings from stories they read while in leveled reading circles. Using the frameworks of how learners respond to literature and share lived experiences with peers, student engagement was closely analyzed to understand readers' connections to stories. Observations with field notes, active participation, and casual talk were used for gathering data. Three students from different reading circles and their teacher were participants in the study.

**Keywords:** Abeka curriculum, literacy, reading, reading circles, reading comprehension, storytelling

## 1. Introduction

In one comic strip Charlie Brown is depicted sitting on the couch beside Snoopy and he says, "Reading is like a journey to a new place." Reading, for many of us, does take us out of our familiar spaces into places that we have never visited or have wished to journey to. Sometimes, the places we read about, or the circumstances the characters encounter are ones to which we can relate. Reading is a dynamic practice that can offer an imaginative and interactive space for the reader to make sense of their lives and to later share with others their own relatable experiences.

This article shares information from learning about three young learners' meaning making related to stories they had read and discussed in reading circles in a 1<sup>st</sup>/2<sup>nd</sup> grade split classroom.

Except for Miss H's classroom, other classrooms used traditional seating with students seated in fixed rows. Miss H tended to seat students, accordingly, naming different reading groups, or as she called them "reading circles", corresponding to Peanuts characters like "Peppermint Patty" and "Linus". The cooperative grouping of students using reading circles, especially within a first/second grade split class became an interesting topic for inquiry. Seeking to understand how Miss H's use of reading circles affected students' learning and comprehension led to the overarching question of *How do learners make meaning within a leveled reading circle from stories they read?*

## 2. Material Studied

This study used threads from social learning theory, particularly social constructivism, which contends that learning development is a social and collaborative activity (Cooper, 2009; Vygotsky, 1978). It is also related to reader response (Rosenblatt, 1995), which considers individual readers' relationship to text and authorial perspective along with individuals' lives and experiences in responding to different kinds of literature.

I wanted to understand students' connections to stories they read within the context of their leveled reading circles. I also wanted to understand how students were able to share in reading circles. The Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), which is the difference between what a learner can do independently and what they can do with guidance (Vygotsky, 1978), was a perspective I continued to reflect upon to understand the teacher's role in the circle and the leveraging of space for students to share.

Classrooms that have a social learning theory framework will visibly portray learning as social and cooperative, have ZPD as a guide to the classroom's curriculum, be reality-based, have activities that are applicable to the real world, and extend learning to other environments besides the classroom (Cooper, 2009). During time spent in

Miss H's classroom I was able to observe students' reading circles and the ways in which meaning making was connected to their lived experiences outside of the classroom.

Many teachers hope to give their students opportunities to connect to literature through lived experiences, collaboration with peers, and active learning, as Bruner (1986) advocates:

Education is (or should be) one of the principal forums for performing this function...It is the forum aspect of a culture that gives its participants a role in constantly making and remaking the culture – an active role as participants rather than as performing spectators who play out their canonical roles according to rule when the appropriate cues occur. (p. 123)

Literature discussion groups are ways of learning that not only offer students opportunities for actively engaging but also offer some freedoms in students' responses that are connected to their lived experiences (Ivey, 2000). Literature discussion groups are student-centered, work against the idea of students as passive recipients, (DaLie, 2001) and involve active learning. In literature discussion groups, students openly discuss stories with one another. Students' independence is fostered by opportunities to explore topics in depth (Daniels, 2002; Maloch, 2004; Short and Pierce, 1998). As literature circles (Candler, 2017; Daniels, 2002), book discussion groups (Candler, 2017; Short and Pierce, 1998), or book clubs (Candler, 2017; Hedt and Kronenberg, 2008; Raphael and McMahan, 1994; Short and Pierce, 1998), literature groups can support reluctant readers (Hedt and Kronenberg, 2008) and offer opportunities for authentic conversations about literature to take place (Raphael and McMahan, 1994; Roser and Martinez, 1995; Samway, Whang, Cade, Gamil, Lubandina, and Phommachanh, 1991).

In the research study, literature discussion groups took the forms of leveled reading circles with Abeka readers as the curriculum. I realize that what constituted "literature" in the research setting is different from the idea of reading novels, stories, poetry or other forms that have rich and complex plot lines. Students in the research setting (their split classroom) were reading a constrictive type of literature within a fixed curriculum. As such, students were not able to choose the literature or stories they read. By recognizing their Abeka stories as literature it honors the children's experiences and what they were able to utilize for reading and discussions within their classroom.

### **3. Area Descriptions**

#### *3.1 Abeka Book Curriculum*

The Abeka Book curriculum uses a Christian worldview of education, where parental, teacher, and civic authorities are foundational (Rand, 2004). Abeka, developed from results of studies for traditional best practices, recognizes knowledge as the first step to critical thinking and emphasizes certain elements within subject areas remaining constant (Shoemaker, 2011). This emphasis is based on the perspective that human language is God-given and is to be used to spread God's truth (Hicks, n.d.). The curriculum is based on Robert Sternberg's (Rand, 2012) model for developing expertise: metacognitive skills (a student's understanding of how to think about and accomplish academic tasks), learning skills (teachers' skills demonstrating new learning), thinking skills (critical, creative, and practical thinking), knowledge (factual, conceptual, principal, law, and procedural), and motivation (keeps students wanting to learn).

#### *3.2 Reading Circles in Miss H's Classroom*

In Miss H's classroom, reading circles were based on students' reading assessment levels. Students usually gathered with the teacher to discuss stories and review vocabulary. Reading circles, as practices in Miss H's classroom related to what Cumming-Potvin (2007) describes as collaboration and personal discussions of different kinds of literature. The difference? Abeka.

Four different reading circles with three different levels met in Miss H's classroom: low, medium, and high. Peppermint Patty was the low second grade reading circle; Snoopy and Woodchuck and Charlie Brown and Sally were the high second grade reading circles, and Lucy and Linus was the low first grade reading circle.

Throughout the time of the study, I was able to separately observe each of the reading circles. I verbally invited three students to become focus group members. I purposefully asked Brana (self-selected pseudonym) to participate because of her situatedness in her circle, which was more of a student-teacher pairing. I invited Michael to participate because I noticed his engagement in sharing during the whole class time. I invited Liliana to participate because of her leadership role in the classroom.

Brana was a second-grade student, a Peppermint Patty reading circle member. Brana and her teacher (Miss H and a teaching assistant rotated in and out of reading circle teaching roles at different times) were the only members of the reading circle, and so her reading circle was more of a student-teacher pairing. Michael (pseudonym), a

first-grade student, was a Lucy and Linus reading circle member, and Liliana (pseudonym), was a second-grade student member of the Charlie Brown and Sally reading circle.

#### 4. Methods

##### 4.1 Role of the Researcher and Study Context

This study, which was qualitative in nature, was conducted to understand how first and second grade students in one educational setting made meaning from stories they had read in leveled reading circles. Though there are meanings and important insights that were gleaned from the research, the study's purpose was not to generalize but rather to provide understanding for teachers and others who are located in parochial settings or may be situated in contexts that have restrictive reading curricula.

I invited Miss H to participate in the study because of my knowledge of her engaging classroom practices, such as unique teacher talk (Allington, 2002; Fielding & Pearson, 1994) and privileging student agency (Van Lier, 2008). As a school volunteer over the years, I had also observed Miss H's engaging ways of speaking to/with her students and her ability to differentiate the school's prescribed curriculum.

At the time of the study, there were 220 students enrolled in the school. The classroom was a 1st/2nd grade split classroom located on the ground level of the school, and the total enrollment for this classroom was 19 students, constituting 13 first graders and 6 second graders. Miss H, as a seasoned teacher, had taught many years at the elementary level but had never taught in the context of a split classroom. Miss H was also the only teacher for the first and second grades, which was the reason for her split classroom.

Learning Academy (pseudonym), which was the study site and a parochial Pre-Kindergarten through 12th grade school, was in a primarily Caucasian, working class neighborhood in an urban Midwestern city. The school, which was first established in 1971, was accredited by the State and offered traditional classes with Abeka as the central curriculum for grades K-12.

##### 4.2 Data Collection

My time in Miss H's classroom involved several weeks of observations and active participation in reading circles. During times I could not be on-site, Miss H and I communicated through email and through casual conversations when I was on-site. I gathered data through field notes and audio recordings of reading circle discussions in which I actively participated, taking on the role of teacher. I also interviewed focus members through circle conversations, as opportunities arose.

The research question for this research study was *How do learners make meaning within a leveled reading circle from stories they read?* Having actively participated in the reading circles, I began to more closely consider how the reading circles in Miss H's classroom could facilitate spaces in which students could reveal their own lived experiences. An extended question emerged: how did aspects of the reading circles allow students connections with their own lives?

##### 4.3 Data Analysis

I wanted to understand how first and second grade students in a split classroom made meaning from stories they read within a leveled reading circle, so I asked the questions *Were students actively engaged in reading circle discussions? If so, to what degree?*

I took notes of students' nonverbal behaviors, verbalized comments, and interactions with one another. I also noticed students' reading circle roles. I observed students' attitudes toward teacher discussion strategies as well. I closely observed ways in which the teacher-initiated circle discussions, the degree of responsibility and accountability students owned, as well as how much attention the teacher paid to students' background knowledge and experiences.

For this study, I define "teacher" as the role enacted by an adult (including myself) who led reading circles in Miss H's classroom during the time of the study. Initially, during my observations of the reading circles, I used field notes to record Miss H and her classroom assistant's behaviors. As I moved into the reading circles and enacted the role of teacher, I centered my field notes, observations, and reflections on my own behaviors and students' responses to questions I asked them in our reading circle discussions.

Action Research is defined as "any systematic inquiry conducted by teachers...for the purpose of gathering information about how their particular schools operate, how they teach, and how their students learn" (Beran, Milton-Brkich, and Shumbera, 2010, p. 47) This study used ethnographic action research, to not only deconstruct categories and themes that emerged from the data but also as a design to facilitate change. As Miss H and I spoke about my observations, Miss H at times asked me for advice and recommendations. She then implemented

strategies, such as discussion strategies for students into the reading circle time.

## 5. Results

During the length of this study the primary focus centered on three focus members' reading circle discussion responses and their interactions and meaning making within their different leveled reading circles. Focus group members' reading levels ranged from low to high, and each of the students were grouped accordingly. Because Miss H was unable to read with each leveled reading circle in her classroom every day, she usually read with a different circle once a week, while a classroom assistant read with the other groups each day. Organizing reading circles was challenging because of the split grade levels. As I began participating in the reading circles, I was able to gain an appreciation for how reading circles worked in Miss H's room. The children's richly voiced responses, connections, and overall discussions were ones that became highly visible, engaging, and were important foci of the study.

### 5.1 Reading with Brana

"Quiet Beauty" is nice to have, but it should speak up now and then.

-Peppermint Patty

Brana, was a second-grade African American student in Miss H's class at the time of the study. She came from a single-parent household and lived with her mother, sister, and foster siblings. On weekends she moved between her mother's and father's homes. Brana had started the school year later than her classmates and was behind in her schoolwork during the time of this study. She had difficulty focusing during class time and getting homework completed and submitted was challenging. Miss H considered Brana's reading skills to be below average in comparison to her classmates' reading skills. Socially, Brana had a difficult time getting along with classmates, which informed Miss H's decision to keep Brana in a reading circle that consisted of Brana and the teacher.

The first conversation with Brana occurred during my time leading Brana's Peppermint Patty student-teacher pairing. During circle time, my observations noted Brana's quiet reading volume and hesitation with new vocabulary terms. Further inquiry revealed that Brana had gradually become disengaged with reading and with classwork in general. Conversations with Brana, while observing her reading practice encouraged a more in-depth investigation into her meaning-making with the stories she was reading, as well as her perceptions of the reading circle itself or the dynamics of it. During one conversation with Brana an opportunity emerged to ask her questions specifically directed toward the *Peanuts* theme that is prevalent in all of the reading circles:

C: Which Peanuts reading circle do you belong to?

Brana: Peppermint Patty

C: Do you like your circle being called a Peanuts name?

Brana: No.

C: Why not?

Brana: Because like, I don't know if Peppermint Patty...I don't know.

C: Do you know who Peppermint Patty is?

Brana: No

From this brief dialogue with Brana, it was apparent that there was a disconnect between Brana's non-familiarity and Miss H's familiarity and appreciation of *Peanuts*. Conversations with Brana revealed not only a dislike of her reading circle name but also an unfamiliarity with the character Peppermint Patty. This, a seemingly small finding, perhaps, was an important one because it allowed for the questioning of identity. How were students' familiarities and backgrounds recognized in Miss H's classroom? Aside from Brana's unfamiliarity with her reading circle's name and placement in the circle, was there another reason she had been placed in a reading circle that was isolated from her classmates?

From my initial observation of the reading circles, I noticed that other reading circles contained at least four classmates in each one. Brana was the only student in her reading circle, with the only other person being the teacher. I understood that learning could be fostered, even in a situated space like Brana's, in which she was the only student in her reading circle, because of the ability for a higher-leveled learner (like the teacher) to be able to share knowledge and model good reading (Vygotsky, 1997; 1978). I became concerned with how rich of an experience Brana was able to have, being the only young learner in her group. As Keegan and Shrake (1991) note, students' greater interactions are with their peers: "When a more capable reader thinks aloud with a less able one, both students benefit." (p. 547).

My further conversations with Brana involved talking about ideas for changing things about her reading circle. I asked her what she would like to change, if she could. Brana responded: "I would want a bigger group because I always have to read by myself, just me and Miss H\_\_\_\_\_." My concern began to grow as I thought about how Brana was missing out on peer-to-peer interactions. I wondered about how conversations might differ with peers, had they been in her group. Lea McGee (Roser & Martinez, 1995) suggests that some of the best conversations happen in groups that are composed of children with differing abilities. I continued paying close attention to Brana's responses and what these could mean.

C: What was this story about?

Brana: A little girl, her parents wanted to go to a parade, the little girl said she would clean up the house, George Washington was going to do a speech at the parade.

Brana's response was matter of fact, and she provided a thoughtful, clear but brief plot review. In her summarization, Brana named content vocabulary words, which provided a snapshot of her ability to recall parts of the story. I wanted to know about her connections to stories though, so I shifted the discussion toward Brana's lived experiences and the connections these could have to the story we had read. Since the story involved a girl meeting George Washington, a famous individual, the discussion centered on Brana's connections to meeting someone famous.

C: Is there anybody you've wanted to meet who was famous?

Brana: Barrack Obama.

Again, Brana's reply was direct and culturally responsive, since Barrack Obama was the president at the time of this research study. Her responses though, were just that: responses. Brana did not voluntarily extend the narrative to story any connection with her own life and only responded to questions I had asked during our discussion.

Brana was able to comprehend the story sequence with no problems. My concern that remained ever-present was her missing out on sharing with classmates and what sharing might look like if she were placed in a group that consisted of members other than a teacher. I reflected on Short's (2012) emphasis of stories being the modes in which children share about their lives and lived contexts for ways of knowing. How might the sharing with classmates differ from the sharing with a teacher? Would Brana talk more freely about why she would like to meet President Obama if she were in a reading group with her peers?

### *5.2 Reading with Michael*

I'll be wishy one day and washy the next!

-Charlie Brown

Michael was a Caucasian first grade student, who was in Miss H's class at the time of this study. He lived with his mother, father, and three siblings, one of whom had a child. Miss H described Michael as being "full of imagination and dreams and well-liked by his classmates" (Miss H, email communication). He enjoyed participating in classroom activities, being one of the first to raise his hand to be called and was usually engaged but tended to easily lose focus. Michael also tended to delay classwork. At the time of the study Miss H considered his reading level to be below average. When reading aloud, he repeated words several times and read slowly, having the most difficulty with reading and comprehension. Classmates often became frustrated with having to wait on him during reading time. Michael was one of the first students to always contribute responses in a class discussion but had difficulty verbalizing what he wanted to say. Observational findings showed that Michael's frustration level tiered when he was not one of the first acknowledged for sharing in class discussions and winning in classroom games.

During the whole class time, Michael's enthusiasm was evident. He enjoyed reading aloud, and oftentimes he was the first one to volunteer to read and respond during discussion time. During the whole class time he became very excited, raising his hand up and down or even jumping up and down for the teacher to take notice. I noted that it took Michael several seconds to provide his response, and sometimes he did not finish, but he volunteered to read more than other students.

During reading circle time, Michael's behaviors changed. He tended to volunteer to read, but in quieter ways and without the extroverted behaviors that had been evidenced during whole class time. Since Michael was one of the first students to volunteer responses, I wanted to learn about what his sharing in discussions looked like.

Because I wanted to be able to understand through observations, paying attention to his responses during the discussions but also to gain an understanding from his own perspective, I interviewed him through casual talk.

During the interviews Michael was hesitant to answer questions. Through observations I had previously noted Michael's frustration with change in routines, and his hesitancy to answer questions during interviews seemed to stem from my entrance as teacher in his circle. As time progressed though, Michael became less hesitant to talk, seemingly accepting my role as teacher in his circle. I noticed that Michael seemed more at-ease when our discussions involved stories that he had enjoyed reading.

C: What story did you read today?

Michael: The Big Day.

C: What did you like about this story?

Michael: I liked where they started to read the Bible.

One of Michael's primary chords of engagement in the reading circle seemed to stem from his interest in the Bible, as noted in Michael's above response. In further discussions, one of the questions I asked was, "How are the activities you do in your reading circle like some of the things in your own life?" Michael replied, "Sometimes... when we was talking about Jesus dying on the cross." Michael's reply testified to the power of literature discussion groups which "offer a framework for allowing children opportunities to discover what they know, to extend their thinking, and to develop strategies that will make them lifelong readers." (Keegan and Shrake, 1991, p. 547). Other questions about his reading experiences and stories, like this one tended to involve a response that was connective to Michael's appreciation of stories from the Bible.

During the time spent in Michael's reading circle, on different occasions, questions were posed to understand each story's plot. Though he was not able to outline specific, consecutive plot details, Michael's engagement and knowledge stemmed from his connections with the stories related to his own life.

### 5.3 Reading with Liliana

Sorry to wake you up Big Brother, but I've been thinking. I have begun to doubt the existence of the tooth fairy. Is it wrong to lie awake at night thinking about such things? --Sally Brown

Liliana was an Asian American first grade student, who was in Miss H's class at the time of this study. She lived with her mother, father, and two siblings. Her family was very close-knit and spent much of their time on vacations and school breaks doing activities together. Miss H described her family as being supportive in her education, as her parents closely followed her reading homework. Liliana enjoyed reading independently, and Miss H noted that she was a "well-read student" (Miss H, casual conversation). Liliana also performed as a class leader and held high expectations of classmates by redirecting others who were not on task.

During initial meetings with her reading circle and in conversation with Liliana, I learned that one of her favorite hobbies is going fishing with her family. A story we read one day during circle time, "Water Overflowing" allowed for Liliana's talk about an activity she would like to participate in.

C: What did you like about this story?

Liliana: Um, the kids were playing on the river on the boat and there was a joyful girl and a happy boy.

C: Can you think of a way this story is like your own life?

Liliana: Well, if I were them ,cause I'd like to ride in the boat. I never have before. I just wished I did.

Liliana's response with specific details from the story, stating where the children from the story were playing, and with descriptions of the characters' feelings: "joyful girl" and "happy boy", were clearly stated. The girl in the story, like her own perception of spending time with others participating in activities (especially family members) made her joyful. This relates to the idea that children see themselves reflected in stories and can use these connections for understanding their worlds (Short, 2012).

Liliana's response to the question *Can you think of a way this story is like your own life?* was a type of storied response that expounded upon background information from her own life that included never having had the opportunity to ride in a boat and the wish to do so. The opportunity for Liliana to be part of a reading group allowed for her to wonder about what it might be like to ride in a boat and provided a way to take her outside of her own life to another way of living and experiencing an activity (Short, 2012).

During another reading circle discussion, this time regarding a story read about having pets, Liliana was again able to respond narratively, by talking about her mother's allergies and how the family was not able to have pets in the house. I decided to propose the idea of having "make-believe" pets at home instead of real ones because I wanted to know how Liliana would share about having a pet, even if it were an imagined one. Liliana enthusiastically contributed a story of her invisible goldfish. Creatively, she described her care of the goldfish

and toward the end of her story, the lack of care with not feeding the goldfish, which had led to its demise. The literature helped to expand imagination (Short, 2012) by offering a story with which Liliana could enthusiastically engage, and the space of discussion allowed for a rich response in which Liliana could share her created story.

## 6. Discussion

Observations of Brana, Michael, and Liliana's behaviors during whole-class discussions were very different compared to small-group reading circles with the researcher fulfilling the role as teacher. In class, Brana was quiet, rarely raising her hand to share. During reading circle time, once she began reading, her voice gradually became more enthusiastic and confident. During whole-class observations, Brana never volunteered to read aloud. During reading circle time, she talked about the story characters and made connections with the story characters' experiences and her own.

Cooperative grouping with peers, like storytelling (Wright, Bacigalupa, Black, and Burton, 2007) encourages socialization and helps to build social skills as they share ideas and experiences. During most of the study Brana was situated in a reading pairing made up of herself and the teacher. Toward the end of my time in Miss H's classroom, Brana was moved into a circle with peers. Miss H also restructured each of the reading circles to contain learners of differing reading levels and abilities.

Michael's whole class behaviors were like when he was in reading circles, in the ways of seeking recognition. He raised his hand to be called on many times in class and during reading circle times. One of the primary differences though, was the level of anxiety observed during the whole class compared to reading circle time. Because the reading circle allowed Michael more individualized attention there was no need to compete for attention by jumping out of his seat or shouting. He still exhibited excitement in wanting to share ideas or to be called upon but did not exhibit behaviors that vied for the teacher's attention.

Liliana's behaviors during whole class time differed from her behaviors during reading circle time. In the whole class, she was quiet. She raised her hand and seemed to timidly share ideas. In her reading circle, Liliana exhibited a competitive nature and took on the role of leader. When classmates were not on the right page of the story or when they did not raise their hand to speak, she redirected them. She also tended to excitedly wave her hand in the air to discuss or share experiences. Sometimes she even shouted out answers without raising her hand. The following table conceptualizes aspects of the reading circles and connections made to each of the children's lives.

Table 1. Children's Connections to Stories: Lives & Circles

Connections & Meaning Making	Engaging Aspects of the Reading Circle	Connections to Students' Lives
C: What was it about? Brana: A little girl, her parents wanted to go to a parade, the little girl said she would clean up the house, George Washington was going to do a speech at the parade.	Guided, open-ended talk that centers on popular culture	Wanting to meet the current U.S. President
C: Is there anybody you've wanted to meet who was famous? Brana: Barrack Obama.		
C: What story did you read today? Michael: <i>The Big Day</i> .	Guided, open-ended questioning that offers opportunities for students to share	Enjoyment of reading the Bible
C: What did you like about this story? Michael: I liked where they started to read the Bible.		
C: What did you like about this story? Liliana: Um, the kids were playing on the river on the boat and there was a joyful girl and a happy boy.	Guided questioning, discussions that center on students' background knowledge and experiences	The understanding of riding in a boat and wanting to experience riding in a boat
C: Can you think of a way this story is like your own life? Liliana: Well, if I were them „cause I'd like to ride in the boat. I never have before. I just wished I did.		

### 6.1 Stepping Back: Observing Reading Circles from a Distance

Stepping back – leaving the reading circles, allowed for the researcher to function again as just an observer, and in that role allowed for reflection of what Rosenblatt (1995) says about students' contributions to their literacy experiences: "The reader's fund of relevant memories makes possible any reading at all. Without linkage with

the past experiences and present interests of the reader, the work will not come alive for him, or rather, he will not be prepared to bring it to life (p. 77).

During visitations to Miss H's classroom, I had observed students using their memories to connect to the stories being read. Remembering significant events provided connections to story characters' experiences of events, and these enriched the researcher-led reading circle conversations. As shown in the following table, students were able to bring much to the conversation.

Table 2. Ways of Navigating Experiences & Using a Literary Lens

Ways of Navigating	Descriptions	Literature Framework
Connections with lived experiences	Students use their own lived experiences to connect to story characters' lived experiences.	Students' experiences in connection to readings allow for meaning making (Rosenblatt, 1995).
Created stories	Students created stories as precursors and/or extensions of topics and themes that were discussed after reading the stories.	The ability to choose to make and remake the culture is one of the ultimate factors in a student's ability to learn (Bruner, 1986).
Thematic story talk	Students used thematic story talk, replicating the teacher talk and talk from the stories.	Dialogue is a moment where humans meet to reflect on their reality as they make and remake it (Freire as cited in Cessna and Anderson, 1998).

## 7. Conclusion

The findings discussed showed that Brana, Michael, and Liliana were able to make connections with the stories they were reading and their lived experiences. Students also shared their stories and personal experiences with more ease during reading circles that involved open-ended questioning about learners' lives.

Brana, who was usually quiet and tended to share little during the whole class discussed and shared her wishes and experiences in reading time. Michael, who usually excessively strove for attention in class, was able to take advantage of a smaller group setting where the teacher was able to give more one-on-one attention, allowing him to raise his hand and share in a quieter manner. Liliana showed more enthusiasm and interaction during reading circle time.

The question of how to provide more opportunities for students to experience enriching, authentic sharing and conversations with their peers is one that can be asked by many educators. As we consider opportunities to open spaces for students to share about their reading and lives, we must also intentionally consider how literature discussion groups are structured. *How* are students being purposefully grouped? *Why* are we grouping students in particular ways?

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