

# **The Impact of Literature Circles on Student Engagement in Middle Years English**

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## **Abstract**

This thesis investigates the connection between literature circles and student engagement in middle years English classes. It aims to contribute insight into the impact of literature circles on student engagement in English. The investigation is undertaken in relation to current and historic academic research regarding the connection between effective pedagogical practices and student engagement.

Student disengagement continues to be a serious problem for education systems in Australia and internationally (Bland & Carrington, 2009; Christenson et al., 2008; Hawthorne, 2008; Lamb, Walstab, Teese, Vickers, & Rumberger, 2004). The increased level of disengagement occurring during the middle years of schooling is of particular concern given the serious behavioural, emotional and cognitive consequences of disengagement (Bland & Carrington, 2009; Lamb et al., 2004). English teachers, in particular, note that as students enter middle school their engagement decreases considerably, resulting in a resistance to reading and writing, and a drop in academic achievement (Abu-Hilal, 2000; Bruning & Horn, 2000; Hawthorne, 2008; McRae & Guthrie, 2009).

Literature circles, a pedagogical practice that supports student voice and caters for a wide range of interests, have been posited to improve student engagement (Harvey & Daniels, 2009). Whilst research regarding the effect of literature circles on reading ability has been conducted, there is a paucity of research regarding the effect on student engagement (Daniels, 2001; Daniels & Steineke, 2004). The focus of this study is therefore on beginning to examine this area, centring on the impact of literature circles on student engagement in English. The intention is to understand how this pedagogical practice articulates with the disengagement of middle school secondary students in English classes.

The findings of this study highlight the complex nature of student engagement and the positive contribution that literature circles can make. Three main lines of analysis are developed throughout this research. Firstly, it is argued that literature circles can improve students' perceptions of English. Secondly, literature circles effectively reengage middle school students in reading, encourage them to read independently and create a community of readers. Finally, the positive impact of literature circles on students' behavioural, cognitive and emotional engagement with English, suggests a student centred, democratic approach is needed.

Given the emerging applicability of literature circles across the curriculum, this research presents important insights into the issue of middle years engagement, and effective pedagogical strategies. The study shows that literature circles cause a significant increase in students' behavioural, emotional and cognitive engagement in reading, and English. This study will add to existing local and international research and literature into student engagement and effective middle school pedagogies.

## **Declaration**

This is to certify that:

- i. The thesis comprises only my original work towards the Masters except where indicated in the Preface;
- ii. Due acknowledgement has been made in the text to all material used;
- iii. The thesis is no more than 20,000 words in length, exclusive of tables, maps, bibliographies and appendices.

Loren Alyce Clarke

October 30, 2013

## Preface

Aspects of this thesis have previously appeared in the conference proceedings of the 2013 IAFOR Conference on Literature and Librarianship.

Clarke, L. (2013). Making a Difference to Middle Years Literacy: Using Literature Circles to Enhance Engagement and Celebrate Reading. *The Asian Conference on Literature & Librarianship Osaka Conference Proceedings* (pp. 212-234). Osaka: IAFOR.

## **Dedication and Acknowledgements**

*This thesis is dedicated to the memory of my grandfather, who always took an interest in my further studies and the development of my professional ability.*

Although writing a thesis is often a personal and singular journey it is undertaken with the support of many people. I would therefore like to thank the following people for their assistance in undertaking this research. To begin with, the staff and students of the research site must be acknowledged for their willingness to participate in this research. It is not an easy feat to complete postgraduate study whilst maintaining a full teaching load and the support of the school's administration, particularly the Principal, in encouraging teachers to further their own education must be recognised.

Thank you to my supervisor Dr. Melody Anderson for her contribution to the design and conduct of this study and for her personal and professional engagement in the production of this thesis. Finally, the advice, encouragement and proofreading assistance of my family and friends must be acknowledged. Your efforts are clear for all to see in the following pages.





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***“Until a reader explores the pages of a book, it is simply a collection of words.”***

(Fisher, Frey, & Lapp, 2012, p. 77)



# Chapter One

## Introduction

*"It is a truth universally acknowledged, that a single man in possession of a good fortune must be in want of a wife". (Austen, 2011, p. 1)*

*"Mr and Mrs Dursley, of number four Privet Drive, were proud to say that they were perfectly normal, thank you very much" (Rowling, 2004, p. 1)*

*"People simply disappeared, always during the night". (Orwell, 1983, p. 1)*

*"Shoot all the bluejays you want, if you can hit 'em, but remember it's a sin to kill a mockingbird" (Lee, 1960, p. 1)*

No matter what the text, English teachers face an important task: developing a love of reading in their students and turning the words of authors such as Austen, Rowling, Orwell and Lee into more than a "collection of words" (Fisher, Frey, & Lapp, 2012, p. 77). For many people an aversion to reading is a hard concept to comprehend because they love reading and see the benefits. Unfortunately, and all too often, today's students do not, creating the perception that "teenagers don't read" (Aronson, 2001, p. 100). At times getting through a class text can be an arduous journey where the teacher is left exhausted and the students are more reluctant to read than before. For some students reading is something to be avoided at all costs, replaced by computer games or, if reading is absolutely necessary, side stepped via audio books. This is further hampered by the tendency for student engagement to significantly decrease as students progress through secondary school, reaching its lowest point during middle school<sup>1</sup> (Appleton, Christenson, & Furlong, 2008; Barrett, 1999; Bland &

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<sup>1</sup> The middle years of schooling broadly refers to any students between the ages of 11 and 15. In Victoria, 'middle school' traditionally refers to secondary school Years 9 and 10 (Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, 2001).

Carrington, 2009; Bridgeland, Dilulio, & Morison, 2006; Chadbourne, 2001). Correspondingly student engagement in reading and English also drops, with studies finding that by the time students reach middle school only 30% read outside of class (Hopper, 2005). The question is: what happens to create this disengagement? More importantly: what can be done to reverse the trend, particularly in middle school where levels of disengagement peak?

## **Aims of the Research**

In responding to these questions, the focus of this study is teachers' use of student centred pedagogies and their impact on disengagement at middle school. It centres on the experiences of students in middle school as the most significant site of disengagement. The study seeks to map the impact of literature circles, a pedagogy predominately used in primary schools, on the emotional, cognitive and behavioural engagement of Year 9 English students (Daniels, 2001; Pitton, 2005).

## *Research Questions*

This study was designed focusing on the impact of literature circles on student engagement in middle years English and underpinned by the following research questions:

1. Do students' perceptions of English change during their involvement in literature circles?
2. Do literature circles impact on students' independent reading habits?
3. Do literature circles improve the level of student engagement in English?



### *Research Site*

Participants were all drawn from the same research site: a Victorian government secondary school in the Northern Metropolitan Region. The school caters for students in Years 7-12 and has a total student population of 1365, of which 4% have a language background other than English (Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority, 2012). The results of students at the school sit within the average of comparable schools, allowing comparisons to be made across student populations.

The study was undertaken in 2012 and involved 106 Year 9 English students and their 6 English teachers. Student participants represented a range of engagement and ability levels ranging from highly disengaged to highly engaged, and one year below the expected level of achievement to one year above the expected level of achievement. Teacher participants varied in terms of their familiarity with literature circles, with 3 having never employed the pedagogy, as well as their level of teaching experience, ranging from graduates to highly experienced teachers.

## **Background to the Research Problem**

### *Student Engagement in Australia – The Issue with Middle Years Education*

Growing student disengagement presents a serious problem for education systems, teachers and families both internationally and locally (Appleton et al., 2008; Bland & Carrington, 2009; Hawthorne, 2008). Disengagement occurs for a variety of academic, cognitive and social reasons and has been found to significantly increase as students' progress through secondary school and peaks during the middle years of schooling (Jones, 2010; Lamb et al., 2004). Jones (2010) highlights:

*It is now well recognised that the middle years of schooling are a time that students disengage from learning, classroom activities, teachers and their schools. Many of our schools and thus the classrooms reflect a factory model of learning and teaching. Students are taught material which for many of them is irrelevant. (Jones, 2010, p. 1)*

This heightened level of disengagement typically leads to poor school attendance and a drop in academic performance (Bland & Carrington, 2009). In part, this attitude can be connected to the “factory model of learning and teaching” (Jones, 2010, p. 1) that many perceive to be prevalent at middle school. At a system wide level the confusion, boredom, and disconnection that such a model causes is also a factor (Appleton, Christenson, Kim, & Reschly, 2006; Bland & Carrington, 2009; Jones, 2010). Innovative and student focused pedagogies are therefore of central importance in ensuring that today’s students maintain a positive school experience and gain the maximum benefit from their education.

In the Australian context, student disengagement during the middle years of schooling is well documented in the literature (Pendergast & Bahr, 2005; Sullivan et al., 2009). It is now widely acknowledged that in Australia the middle years is the stage at which “students either turn on or turn off school” (Jones, 2010, p. 17) and the point at which engagement, or lack thereof, becomes the primary issue confronting educators (Australian Curriculum Studies Association, 1996; Department of Education and Early Childhood Development [DEECD], 2001; Jones, 2010). Whilst most students are motivated to learn during the early stages of secondary school, by the time they reach middle school their cumulative experience dulls motivation or in some cases suppresses it entirely (Lamb et al., 2004). This ultimately diminishes students’ impetus to actively participate in learning, reduces their identification and connection with school, and leads to significantly decreased engagement (Newmann, 1981).

The Australian Curriculum Studies Association (1996) has identified enhancing student engagement as a key challenge associated with improving the middle years across Australia. Comprehensive reviews of school structures, teacher quality and training, and pedagogical approaches have been undertaken across Australia over the past three decades to cater for the changing needs of 21<sup>st</sup> century learners (Gonski et al., 2011; Ministerial Council for Education, Early Childhood Development and Youth Affairs [MCEECDYA], 1996; McKinsey & Company, 2011; Senate Employment Education and Training References Committee, 1998). These reviews suggest that there is a fragmentation of ideas governing school life and academic activity at middle school, leading dissatisfaction and disengagement to peak at this level. This is exacerbated by different content structures; changing views of teacher-student relationships; the unique needs of adolescent learners; the passivity students perceive in the curriculum; and the different emphases students encounter as they progress through their education (Australian Curriculum Studies Association, 1996; Barrett, 1999; Chadbourne, 2001; Cole, 2006; Holdsworth, 2000; Johnson & O'Brien, 2002; Libbey, 2004). Despite these findings, there has been a lack of corresponding action and as Ramsey (2000) notes:

*Whilst teaching is the most reviewed profession in Australia...The most common characteristic of reviews has been the lack of action on their recommendations. This situation contrasts markedly with other professions. (Ramsey, 2000, pp. 116-117)*

As a result Australian middle school structures continue to be fragmented and isolated as they attempt to cope with the diverse and burgeoning needs of 21<sup>st</sup> century middle school learners. This is particularly the case in the Victorian government education system where it has been suggested that existing school structures have caused students to lose connection with their teachers and peers (Appleton et al., 2008; Barrett, 1999; Bland & Carrington, 2009; Bridgeland et al., 2006; DEECD, 2001). Consequently, students become distanced from those

creating and enforcing norms; become at odds with school goals and are less committed to rules governing their behaviour (Lee & Smith, 1995).

Broad disengagement manifests itself in a number of ways that are often unique to individual subjects within the curriculum. Pedagogies that address these typologies of engagement are therefore crucial in the effort to reconnect students to learning. One such pedagogy that presents real opportunities to address disengagement in English, and reading, is the use of literature circles.

### *The History and Relevance of Literature Circles*

Traditional literature circles were first described by Daniels (1994, 2001) in the early 1990's and are believed to have originated in American elementary schools (Daniels, 1994). Literature circles focus on students working in small groups to discuss texts they have selected. A range of texts are available for selection based on both student and teacher recommendations, with the final decision resting with students. Students agree to read designated sections of their text and meet regularly to discuss the reading, much like a book club. To facilitate this students assume roles that guide their discussion (Burns, 1998; Daniels, 1994; Peterson & Belizaire, 2006).

Literature circles bring together powerful research based theories of literacy education, evidenced by a significant body of research suggesting that literature circles assist students to make greater gains in their reading (Daniels, 1994, 2001; Daniels & Steineke, 2004; Danielson, 1992; Pitton, 2005). Book-club style discussions such as literature circles have been linked to higher reading achievement across a variety of grade levels and among students who have a low socio economic background, are bilingual or second language learners (Daniels, 2001). Research examining the discourse that occurs during literature circle meetings has found that discussion is purposeful and critically minded, often more so than when students study texts as a whole class (Latendresse, 2004;

Sandmann & Gruhler, 2007). Furthermore, literature circles empower students to work independently; allow and value student voice; and increase students' sense of responsibility toward their learning (Johnson, 2000; Raphael, Florio-Ruane, & George, 2004; Sandmann & Gruhler, 2007).

Despite documented evidence of the impact literature circles have on reading achievement, there is a paucity of local and international research explicitly exploring the link between literature circles and student engagement. Other than Fox and Wilkinson's (1997) finding that literature circles improved engagement in reading for beginning literacy teachers, little is known about the correlation between literature circles and engagement (Daniels, 2011). Whilst it may be posited that literature circles contain many of the vital elements for enhancing student engagement and that their effect would be positive, this has not been investigated in any depth.

## **Summary**

Following an outline of the rationale and background to this study throughout the introduction, this thesis now moves to a summary of relevant literature in Chapter Two. Chapter Three then describes and justifies the methodology and methods of the study to frame the findings as they are presented in Chapter Four. The thesis then concludes with a discussion of the key findings in Chapter Five and explores the implications for educators, curriculum design and notions of student engagement in Chapter Six.

## **Chapter Two**

### **Review of Research**

The first phase of the literature review aims to define the concept of student engagement. It examines seminal and recent research that has contributed to evidence in this field both locally and internationally. This includes the impact of student engagement in the middle years of schooling and the link between engagement and student voice. The second phase of the literature review situates the discussion regarding student perceptions and disengagement in middle school English. It explores issues related to pedagogical choices, the development of literature circles as a pedagogy, and their applicability in dealing with issues of disengagement.

Relevant literature was found using electronic databases and 'by hand'. A range of online journals, databases, reports and other publication formats were utilised as part of this review with titles and abstracts screened to identify applicable research. This allowed for the identification of literature that may not appear in academic databases but that is understood to contribute meaningful knowledge to the field. Combinations of key words were used across online databases and search engines including terms such as engagement, student engagement, disaffection, middle years/school disengagement, student voice, and democratic classrooms. Literature regarding teacher knowledge, pedagogical content and strategies originates from government policy statements and reviews from departments of education, particularly in Victoria. Research on literature circles exists under terms including 'book clubs', 'reading circles' and 'literacy circles'. As this inconsistency of terms can hamper the identification of relevant material, searches in this area required the use of varied terms to complete a comprehensive review.

## **Student Engagement**

Student engagement is the glue, or mediator, that links important contexts – home, school, peers, and community – to students and to outcomes of interest (Reschly & Christenson, 2012). It is associated with positive academic, social, and emotional learning outcomes and is considered the primary theoretical model for understanding, and promoting, school completion and achievement (Klem & Connell, 2004). The focus on engagement has arisen due to the global obsession with high quality teaching and enhanced student engagement. The direct relationship between the level of student engagement and the level of student achievement has been identified in distinguished research, indicating that student engagement and achievement are inextricably linked (Appleton et al., 2008; Bridgeland et al., 2006; Perry, Liu, & Pabian, 2010; Steinberg, 1997). Internationally, student engagement has become a key mediator of academic achievement in terms of assessment results, grade promotion, and student retention (Perry, 2008; Perry et al., 2010). Students who are highly engaged show better results across all of these areas, even after controls for background and psychological factors are applied (Fredricks, Blumenfeld, & Paris, 2004). Overall, the literature suggests that engagement, in all its forms, is a “proximate determinant of both current and future academic achievement” (Griffiths, Lilles, Furlong, & Sidhwa, 2012, p. 569).

### *Definitional Perspectives*

Defining student engagement is highly complex. This is reflected in disparate views on measuring and monitoring engagement. Steinberg (1997) and Westwood (1995) define engagement through attention to the amount of time students spend actively focused on completing academic tasks, together with rates of retention and attendance at school. Applied research centres in

Australia, such as the Assessment Research Centre<sup>2</sup> in Melbourne, define engagement in terms of discrete indicators, such as observable academic achievement and effort (Griffin, Care, & McGaw, 2012). International research similarly documents school attendance and completion; participation in school related activities; the achievement of high grades; the amount of time spent on homework or engaged in work during class; and the rate of work completion as evidence of engagement (Finn & Rock, 1997; Johnson, Crosnoe, & Elder, 2001). These behavioural indicators are often seen as the primary markers of engagement, demonstrating the historical focus on behaviour as a key measure of engagement (Anderson, Christenson, Sinclair, & Lehr, 2001; Bullis, Yovanoff, Mueller, & Havel, 2002). Although academic and behavioural factors are important, they cannot independently accomplish the varied goals of schooling: student learning across academic, social, emotional and behavioural domains (Appleton et al., 2008). A well-rounded definition should also consider the affective and cognitive aspects of engagement. Engagement then becomes more than simply academically engaged time, or the way in which the curriculum is organised.

The observable and measurable elements of engagement are described in the influential engagement models of both Skinner and Belmont (1993) together with Sullivan et al. (2009). These theorists argue that engaged students do more than just attend school or perform academically. They also demonstrate effort, persistence and self regulation, adjusting their behaviour to meet goals and exceed their potential (Klem & Connell, 2004; Skinner & Belmont, 1993; Skinner, Kindermann, & Furrer, 2009; Sullivan, et al., 2009). In both models engaged students show behavioural involvement through exhibiting positive body language, such as attentiveness to instructions, regular eye contact, and open postures, which indicate interest and attention (Skinner & Belmont, 1993). Students are consistently focused on learning and are actively engaged in

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<sup>2</sup> The Assessment Research Centre at The University of Melbourne undertakes research and training to improve assessment and measurement practices at all levels of education (Griffin, Care, & McGaw, 2012).



sharing opinions, asking questions, and reflecting on their progress (Sullivan et al., 2009). Emotionally, students appear enthusiastic, happy and interested, persisting when faced with challenging tasks. In contrast, disengaged or disaffected students are passive, do not persist, appear bored, and display negative emotions such as anger and denial (Skinner & Belmont, 1993; Sullivan et al., 2009). They frequently lack persistence, appear off task and employ work avoidance strategies, such as distracting other students. Task progression therefore is limited for these students. These observable factors begin to explore engagement as a multidimensional construct; however, do not take into account the impact of factors such as support systems and cultural or socioeconomic background on engagement.

Wilhelm's (2007) engagement continuum, modified from Morgan and Saxton's (1994) Taxonomy of Personal Engagement, further builds on this by highlighting the social aspects of engagement. Here, engagement takes the form of interest and curiosity about a topic, commitment and responsibility to set tasks and an ability to work cooperatively. It also appears as a desire to synthesise, apply and refine understandings of new information and skills (Wilhelm, 2007; Morgan & Saxton, 1994).

Drawing these elements together, Bronfenbrenner (1979) more deeply explores the multidimensional nature of student engagement through his systems based theory. This situates adolescent students within a set of systems that influence their development:

- The microsystem: the relationships, roles and activities within a particular setting;
- The mesosystem: the linkages between two or more settings in which the student participates such as peer groups, classrooms, school, and family;
- The exosystem: a system in which the student does not participate actively but within which influential events may occur.

This interconnection begins to demonstrate the causal and cyclical nature of engagement. Within this process, participation leads to academic success, which in turn influences identification with school and results in an increased likelihood of future engagement. The mesosystem associated with each student is regarded as particularly important to the young person's experiential framework. For students who have a substantial mesosystem working to provide support and connect learning to the other elements in their lives engagement is more likely to be high, and the cyclical process of engagement is more likely to be maintained (Bronfenbrenner, 1979).

Within this framework, Bronfenbrenner (1979) highlights the substantive influence of the ongoing activities that students are involved in, structured along a continuum of complexity and capacity for engagement. For Bronfenbrenner (1979), there is a greater potential to deeply engage students using complex and cognitively challenging tasks. However he argues that schools fail to involve students in "real work", work that another actually depends on; and do not participate in a "curriculum for caring", a curriculum which engenders caring for the community and for learning itself (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, p. 53). By portraying engagement as a product of both the organisation and the individual, this model accounts for a wider range of environmental influences which impact student engagement.

Although this model of engagement begins to explore the complexities of student engagement, positing the notion of curricular and academic factors as central, a myriad of alternative definitions compete with this. As a result, a lack of definition clarity regarding the central tenets of engagement currently exists (Christenson et al., 2008; Crick, 2012; Fredricks et al., 2004). This discordance continues to hinder efforts to research and enhance engagement through pedagogical intervention (Christenson et al., 2008). Although there is some consensus that engagement must be framed as a multidimensional construct, the exact nature of any such definition is still contested (Fredricks et al., 2004). Yet,

to define and examine the components of engagement individually would result in an artificial separation of dynamically interrelated factors (Christenson et al., 2008; Crick, 2012; Fredricks et al., 2004). Any successful construct therefore requires an understanding of the affective, social, emotional, cognitive, and cultural factors that influence engagement, so that academic learning time, participation and attendance remain important but not central (Appleton et al., 2008).

Consequently, this research adopts the definition presented by Fredricks, Blumenfeld and Paris (2004, p. 67) who define engagement as “the behavioural intensity, cognitive focus and emotional quality of a student’s active involvement during a learning activity”. This frames engagement as a multidimensional construct that is comprised of not only observable behaviour, but also internal cognition and emotion. The fusion of these elements is valuable as it provides a richer characterisation of students than is possible in research on single components. Fredricks, Blumenfeld and Paris’ (2004) definition accounts for both the importance of academic achievement, and the range of interconnected factors that influence students’ attitude toward learning. It therefore draws together the disparate elements of previous definitions such as those presented by Bronfenbrenner (1979), Westwood (1995) and Steinberg (1997). It further extends the cyclical process suggested by Bronfenbrenner (1979) to develop a more complex and holistic web of the factors which impact engagement. This provides the means for research to more accurately determine levels of engagement by accounting for a broad range of variables; thus allowing educators to develop pedagogies which engage the whole student in the benefits of learning.

### *Middle School Disengagement*

Australian and international research presents a range of perspectives on student engagement. A key element of this is the need to consider the

interaction of contextual elements with individual students' needs in promoting or undermining engagement. Lee and Smith (1995) argue that the move away from a common school model to a strongly rational-bureaucratic model has led to the alienation of a considerable number of students. Middle schooling in particular has become decentralised through the implementation of differentiated learning systems, and specific middle school programs or alternative campuses. This shift from a consistent, contained curriculum and a supportive social environment of learners has resulted in a modest, but constant, negative impact on student engagement and achievement during these years (Lee & Smith, 1995). The case for the rational-bureaucratic and communal models of schooling is further supported by the Department of Education's (2004) discussion of Victorian school structures in the *Blueprint for Government Schools*. Schools are characterised as promoting "fragmented individualism", "balkanised groups" or "collaborative communities" (DEECD, 2001, p. 45), with each model directly affecting student engagement and achievement. Consequently, Lee and Smith's statement that lack of school reform has continued to manifest itself in disengagement from school, and in poor student achievement and behaviour, has real salience in the Australian context (Lee & Smith, 1995).

In many ways, this characterisation of the issues associated with middle school does not go far enough. Although there is no doubt that the findings of Lee and Smith (1995) and the DEECD (2001), are valid, the issues associated with engagement during the middle years of schooling cannot be attributed solely to a change in school structures. As Chadbourne (2001, p. iii) correctly notes, in the Australian context "middle schooling refers more to a particular type of pedagogy and curriculum than a particular type of school structure". The focus needs to be simultaneously on the provision of schooling structures that positively impact students and on the development of curriculum, pedagogy and assessment that meet the diverse needs of adolescent learners.

In assessing the way that schools meet these diverse needs, local and international research highlights that middle school students spend more time than their peers learning superficial information and completing assignments for the sake of keeping up, rather than to promote meaningful learning (DEECD, 2001). Consequently, middle school students in Australia may conclude that achievement can be maximised through a surface level approach, in order to reproduce rather than internalise knowledge (DEECD, 2001; Hattie, 2009, 2012). This leads to high levels of academic, cognitive and emotional disengagement as many middle school students believe that passive compliance and the appearance of motivation is sufficient to achieve tasks (Crick, 2012). This in itself is a significant cause of disengagement.

The research community suggests a strong focus on consolidating and internalising students' deep understanding of new information and skills (Abu-Hilal, 2000; Bland & Carrington, 2009; Dornyei, 2001; Hattie, 2009, 2012). Incorporating pedagogies that facilitate mastery learning and peer/cooperative learning addresses this by ensuring that students are not positioned as passive recipients of knowledge (Freire, 2000; Hattie, 2009). In light of this, middle school teachers need to interrogate the framing of work, the use of questioning techniques and their expectations of students (Hattie, 2009, 2012). When this takes place effectively learners are more likely to be deeply engaged in understanding and developing skills; are more likely to exhibit increased motivation; can make clearer links between ideas and develop higher levels of self-belief. These attributes are the hallmarks of highly engaged, successful students who achieve to the best of their potential (Crick, 2012; Hattie, 2009).

The notion of balancing deep and surface level understanding to engender engagement is closely linked to the need for challenging goals and high teacher expectations. Research consistently demonstrates that teachers' expectations, attitudes and opinions have a significant influence on students' success at school (Christenson et al., 2008; Oakes, 1985; Powell, Farrar, & Cohen, 1995). Without

high expectations, middle school achievement reflects a self-fulfilling prophecy where students internalise the expectations and goals of their teachers, become what they are expected to become and achieve only to the level they are expected to achieve (Rosenthal & Jacobsen, 1968). Articulating high academic and behavioural expectations that are varied to cater for a range of abilities is therefore imperative. When teachers articulate high expectations and challenging goals, the effect on student achievement is significant, with an average effect size of 0.67 on Hattie's psychometric scale (Hattie, 2009, p. 164). When student voice is also promoted, there is a further positive increase in effect. Allowing students a voice in the process of goal setting, designing learning outcomes, and reflecting on progress is therefore essential (Holdsworth, 2000, 2005). Incorporating such strategies correlates to increases in self efficacy, connections to learning, and confidence (Hattie, 2009, 2012).

### *Student Voice and Engagement*

The link between student voice and student engagement has become increasingly significant as views about the place young people play in schools and society have changed. Authentic incorporation of student voice encourages students' active participation in decision making and provides opportunities for students to make decisions about what and how they learn, and how their learning is assessed (Fielding, 2001; Holdsworth, 2005). It provides students with the power to influence change, "validating and authorising them to represent their own ideas, opinions, knowledge and experiences throughout education" (Fletcher, 2005, p. 4; West, 2004). Within this context Ranson (2000, p. 265) argues for the incorporation of a "pedagogy of voice" that enables learners to develop self understanding and self respect with the overarching aim of improving students' sense of agency and their level of engagement.

Student voice therefore requires more than providing a forum for students to communicate ideas and opinions, such as through student councils and focus

groups (Fielding, 2001, 2011). Such an approach only has a noticeable effect on those students who are directly involved, that is student council representatives and focus group participants, whilst those on the periphery demonstrate little change in engagement (Mitra, 2003). More sophisticated methods of supporting student voice focus on students sharing their views by collaborating to improve educational outcomes. This allows for students' interests to direct the curriculum and for students to be actively involved in determining what and how they learn (Mitra, 2003). The later approach, whilst relatively slow in developing, acknowledges the value of students' voice in their own education. It moves away from earlier tokenistic consultations, to the heart of students' own interests - why classroom practices are the way they are and how students themselves experience education (Mitra, 2003; Mitra & Frick, 2004). This new paradigm involves young people in a true partnership with their teachers and the school community so that they can influence their school experience and become meaningfully involved in their own learning. The fundamental purpose of facilitating and accessing student voice in this way is to improve the engagement of students and the outcomes of their learning. It allows student issues with the learning environment to be addressed and provides important insights into the factors that inhibit student engagement in learning, and school more broadly.

At all levels of education, there is an inherent value for the learner and the teacher in moving toward this approach. Transitioning from traditional didactic models of education to more democratic models where curriculum is negotiated begins to increase the agency of students, develops their creativity, and provides opportunities for engagement and deep learning (Boomer, Lester, Onore, & Cook, 1992; Fielding, 2011; Freire, 2000). This is recognised not only in international research but in the development of Victorian government policy through the directive that:

*Students can also contribute views about the kinds of learning they feel are most appropriate for them.... Parents, teaching staff and students who have taken part in planning a school's curriculum are more likely to be committed to making it work. (Ministry of Education, 1984, p. 2)*

Since this directive, notions of student voice have increasingly become embedded in government policy and strategic planning, particularly when related to the issue of middle years engagement. Strategies such as the *Principles of Learning and Teaching*<sup>3</sup>, which articulate the educational philosophy employed by Victorian government schools and their teachers, stress the importance of avoiding the dominance of the teacher's voice in pedagogy and learning. Instead, they focus on creating learning environments that promote independence, interdependence, self motivation, and student voice (Department of Education and Training, 2004).

Recent research conducted by the Victorian Department of Education and Early Childhood Development builds on the findings of international research to further support the importance of student voice in any discussion of student engagement. The Department's report *Student Voice: Historical Perspectives and New Directions* concludes that Victorian students are more engaged in learning, particularly at middle school, when they see that their opinions are used to transform pedagogical practices and the classroom environment (DEECD, 2007). This leads to increased self esteem, improved learning outcomes, more positive attitudes towards learning, and an increase in overall engagement.

Adopting such an approach where student perceptions are taken seriously is important if engagement is to be improved, particularly in the middle years where student voice is evidently a significant factor (Campbell, 2011). Student perception data is therefore highly instructive for schools as they work to

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<sup>3</sup> The Principles of Learning and Teaching are a set of six principles designed to assist Victorian schools and teachers to reflect on their practice and develop their pedagogical practice (Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, 2013).



examine and improve the learning of all students. It provides students' perspectives on their lives at school, and fosters the development of classroom environments where students' voices are heard (Knezek, Christensen, & Tyler-Wood, 2011). Yet, as Yazzie-Mintz and McCormick (2012) note, despite their position as a key stakeholder students are frequently left out of conversations regarding engagement and pedagogy, even though they are in a unique position to see, feel and understand what is occurring in their schools. In many ways this response removes the humanity of research surrounding student perceptions, making light of the role students can play in identifying their learning needs and the pedagogies which best support this. Addressing this issue is an important step in developing pedagogies that are more effective in reengaging students in learning.

### **Pedagogical Aspects of Engagement**

There is no one solution to the issue of middle years disengagement however understanding the impact of teachers' pedagogical decisions is a significant step towards dealing with the problem (Barrett, 1999). Whilst some teachers believe that their pedagogical choices significantly influence the learning outcomes of their students, many teachers do not (Shulman, 1986, 1987). They continue to believe that learning or engagement problems should be attributed to the inadequacy of a student, developmentally or as a result of individual characteristics such as intelligence rather than pedagogical choices (Turner, Christensen, & Meyer, 2009). This reflects a historical tendency to overestimate the contribution of learner attributes, and to underestimate the powerful influence of teaching methods and the school curriculum. It is imperative that teachers take responsibility for the impact their pedagogical choices have on students and develop a flexible approach which draws on a range of strategies (Shulman, 1986, 1987; Victorian Institute of Teaching [VIT], 2010). This means that middle school teachers need to consider both general and subject specific practices that focus on engaging their students in meaningful learning.

The academic needs of middle school students centre on both the systemic structure of their school experience and the way in which curriculum, pedagogy and assessment are organised. Within Victorian middle schools particularly, the curriculum often shifts from generalised and integrated to structured and specific, increasingly focusing on higher order concepts and content (DEECD, 2001). Tight timelines and the need to prepare students for the later years of their education also mean that learners are regularly required to take on a more passive role, and that pedagogy becomes narrower (DEECD, 2001). Perhaps as a product of this, middle school students are quickly able to identify the relevance of material, and the pedagogies they find engaging or beneficial for enhancing their learning (Yazzie-Mintz & McCormick, 2012).

### *Student Perceptions of Pedagogy*

Both international and local research regarding students' perceptions of learning suggests that students learn best through group projects, and through pedagogies that involve discussion and debate (Australian Curriculum Studies Association, 1996; Chadbourne, 2001; DEECD, 2001; Yazzie-Mintz & McCormick, 2012). Students commonly identify these characteristics in participatory activities such as those conducted in art and drama (Yazzie-Mintz & McCormick, 2012). These practices provide forums for students to interact collaboratively with peers and teachers, and to generate knowledge as active participants in the learning process, no matter what their individual capabilities.

Middle school students also highlight the importance of pedagogies that focus on skills that can be applied to any body of content. These include critical thinking, problem solving, and generic literacy and numeracy skills. They underline the significance of pedagogies which are learner centred, with an emphasis on self-directed and co-constructed learning; and assessment which is relevant, authentic and connected to real life experiences (Appleton et al., 2008; Bland & Carrington, 2009; Yazzie-Mintz & McCormick, 2012). Taking account of these

pedagogical perceptions is an important step in addressing issues of disengagement at middle school.

## **Student Engagement and Perceptions in English**

From a student's perspective, one of the biggest challenges reported in the transition to middle school is the sharp increase in demands on literacy skills (Fisher, Frey, & Lapp, 2012). As Rose and Acevedo's (2006) study into the effectiveness of literacy practices in Australian schools notes, literacy is perhaps the most difficult at middle school. The middle years can therefore be a problematic time for literacy learning and engagement, particularly with regard to English. In Australia, and indeed internationally, achievement in literacy tends to plateau or go backwards, and the gap between good and poor readers grows even wider (Daniels, 2011; Daniels, 2001; Pendergast & Bahr, 2005). Students may disengage from English during this time and can become reluctant to read or write even if they are able to. The reasons for this are varied but can be tied back to the overarching issues associated with middle year's engagement, particularly in terms of the pedagogies utilised by teachers.

Whilst literacy traverses the curriculum and takes on various forms in different learning areas, English is often the focus of middle years' literacy disengagement. This is primarily due to its strong association, and undoubted reliance, on literacy practices. Middle school students point to the fact that the reading tasks they encountered in English appear to become highly fragmented and less interesting. They place increased value on reading and writing for their own purposes and on the ability to choose their own reading materials, opportunities that are seldom afforded them during these years (Pendergast & Bahr, 2005). As a result, middle school students report that literacy practices are out of step with their needs and interests, and that many lessons do not have a clear purpose (Kiddey & Robson, 2001). Overall, they often perceive that there is a lack of depth, rigour and challenge in English (Kiddey & Robson, 2001).

From a curriculum perspective these issues are also accompanied by an increased level of difficulty in terms of the material presented to students and the need for sustained engagement with longer texts that cannot be completed in a single sitting (Szymusiak & Sibberson, 2001). As students enter middle school they are required to work harder to interpret and analyse the meaning of a text. Large numbers of characters are introduced and students often have difficulty switching between flashbacks, shifts in subplots, and deciphering the meaning of complex language (Maclean, 2005). Consequently, some students who read successfully in the early years are unable to cope with the increased demands of middle years' literacy and find it easier to disengage rather than struggle to keep up. On top of this added peer pressure hinders the identification of students who require assistance and their willingness to accepting prolonged help (Fisher, Frey, & Lapp, 2012). Collectively these issues can be closely linked to students' motivation to, and engagement in reading. This resonates with links made in existing literacy research between reading comprehension, motivation and engagement (Burns, 1998; Chadbourne, 2001; Fountas & Pinnell, 2001; Guthrie, 2001, 2008). Together, these factors significantly impact students' engagement in literacy, resulting in the majority of students turning away from reading.

This perception is further supported by Rennie and Patterson's (2008) analysis of student reading habits in Australia. Their study of Year 9 students in Darwin further confirms the decline in traditional, text based reading during the middle years of schooling. In fact only 17% of participants reported they regularly read at school or at home. Despite the local context of Rennie and Patterson's research, their findings can be extrapolated to reflect the reading habits of Australian students more broadly. The study involved government schools from a range of both rural and urban areas with the Northern Territory that catered for students with a range of socioeconomic and ethnic backgrounds. It was not confined to a single population, for example indigenous or second language students, who have a markedly different educational and literacy experience from the average Australian secondary school student. Although Rennie and

Patterson's research is intended as a "starting point analysis" (Rennie & Patterson, 2008, p. 55) of reading habits in Australia, the findings firmly suggest that middle school students report low levels of engagement with reading, and with novels in particular. This is due not only to the complexity and irrelevance of the texts students encounter but also to the changing nature of communication and the increasing digital literacy practices of today's students (Rennie & Patterson, 2008).

In concert with these issues, middle school students are also heavily influenced by the instructional practices that are associated with reading at middle school, together with the process of text selection. As McRae and Guthrie (2009) suggest, higher levels of motivation to read and engagement in English can be achieved through instructional practices that promote the relevance of reading; student choice in text selection; and collaboration between peers. The manner in which text selection occurs therefore has real relevance to student engagement in the middle years. Across most English departments in Australia, teachers are responsible for determining the set texts at each year level. However, this process is often conducted as an "unofficial competition" (McLean-Davies, 2008, p. 48) where the texts most known to, previously studied or enjoyed by teachers are most likely to be selected. Whilst some texts are undoubtedly chosen to engage students, others are chosen due to budget constraints, teacher familiarity or genre (McLean-Davies, 2012).

As such middle school students get little, or no, direct involvement in text selection, despite this being a key aspect of their decision to engage in English or reading. To this end, successfully engaging middle school students in English requires varied structures and approaches which account for the specific needs of middle school students (Fountas & Pinnell, 2001; Maclean, 2005). However, despite the plethora of general research regarding successful middle school pedagogies, there is a paucity of research into the effect of subject specific practices, including in English (Appleton et al., 2008; Bland & Carrington, 2009;

Bridgeland et al., 2006; Rose & Acevedo, 2006; Yazzie-Mintz & McCormick, 2012).

## **Literature Circles**

One pedagogical practice that presents real opportunities to increase student engagement in English is the use of literature circles. Particularly in middle school English classrooms it has become clear that it is not enough to simply encourage and promote reading (Aronson, 2001). Not all students will read and learn just because they are instructed to do so, especially if they do not find relevance in what they are learning, or feel engaged in the decision making process. As Pendergast and Bahr (2005) highlight, effective pedagogies at a middle school level therefore need to focus on creating motivating learning environments where students are actively involved in the decision making process. This ensures, as far as possible, that students learn the curriculum and achieve academically (Pendergast & Bahr, 2005). In part this can be achieved by harnessing the power of student voice through text selection and student lead discussion. Daniels (2001) supports this by noting the success of literature circles is the product of student driven discussion based on texts chosen by students. This means that student voice is not only heard but respected, valued and fed straight back in to the English curriculum (Daniels, 2001).

On top of the academic benefits of literature circles, including improvements in reading skills and text analysis, the pedagogy contains many of the essential components required to develop engagement and motivation within middle school students. As a pedagogical approach, literature circles bring together peer-led discussion in conjunction with active involvement in learning and decision making. Since middle school students place increased emphasis on developing relationships with peers and teachers, and on group work, that facilitates discussion and debate it is important that pedagogical practices reflect this (Yazzie-Mintz & McCormick, 2012). Literature circles encourage a high

degree of shared exploration and study that may therefore be posited to enhance interest and engagement. Perhaps equally importantly, such practices give students the opportunity to take on the role of the expert, enabling them to take ownership of learning. As Ogle and Lang (2011) suggest:

*Talking with peers to negotiate understandings of what was read is highly motivating and engaging. Not only are students likely to become involved in the active interaction often associated with peer-led discussion groups, they may be more interested in what they read.*  
(Ogle & Lang, 2011, p. 156)

The strong reliance on peer led discussion within literature circles promotes active engagement in the learning process and positions students to generate, rather than passively receive, knowledge (Daniels, 2001). In this sense, the teacher acts as an observer and literacy coach, introducing targeted literacy strategies and personalising learning. Literature circles therefore provide teachers with consistent opportunities for small group instruction in order to strengthen students' skills and confidence in dealing the increasing complexity of literacy in middle years (Daniels, 2011).

In order to engage fully in reading students need substantive opportunities to develop their own enthusiasm, interests and opinions about what they read. By providing structures and schedules to promote student selected reading, literature circles offer a way to address the imbalance between teacher assigned and student driven tasks (Daniels, 2001). They promote value in students' opinions, both regarding text selection, and critical analysis of literature. Importantly, this approach places students at the centre of the decision making process, so that their opinions are respected and heard by the school community. Through this avenue, literature circles present a sophisticated approach to harnessing the power of student voice and increasing engagement (Mitra, 2003).

## **Summary**

This chapter has reviewed the relevant literature that informs current perspectives on student engagement and the use of literature circles. It highlights the definitional discord within the field and the perspective applied to this research as well as the difficulties associated with middle school pedagogies. The next chapter moves to a review of the research methodology employed in this study.



## Chapter Three

### Methodology

This chapter maps the methodological framework of the study. It seeks to justify the rationale for undertaking mixed methods research and the selected research methods. It further outlines the connection between the research questions and data collection. Qualitative data has been collected through interviews with teacher participants and quantitative data through surveys and guided field observations. Finally, the chapter outlines the data analysis approaches implemented, alongside a discussion of the way in which validity and reliability have been maintained.

#### Research Methodology

This research employs both quantitative and qualitative methodologies and is therefore a mixed methods study. Mixed methods are “necessary to uncover information and perspective, increase corroboration of data, and render less biased and more accurate conclusions” (Reams & Twale, 2008, p. 135). Mixed methods research is comparatively young and comprises a range of different definitions that vary according to the breadth, scope, location and underlying orientation of the research. This study adopts the following definition of mixed methods research:

*Mixed methods research is defined as research in which the investigator collects and analyses data, integrates the findings, and draws inferences using both qualitative and quantitative approaches or methods in a single study or a program of inquiry. (Tashakkori & Creswell, 2007, p. 4)*

Mixed methods is therefore an approach that is “driven by pragmatism, that yields real answers to real questions” (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011, p. 26). The intention of adopting such an approach was to eliminate the bias of individual methods and therefore allow a “convergence upon the truth” (Denzin, 1978, p. 14). Due to the existence of multiple perspectives within this study, the use of mixed methods also provided the opportunity for greater triangulation and data validity (Denzin, 1978). This offset the weaknesses of undertaking quantitative and qualitative research independently (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011). The mixed methods approach allowed broad generalisations to be made regarding teacher and student perspectives on engagement. Quantitative methods provided an ability to analyse overall trends and make generalisations regarding the student population. They also address the possibility of personal bias and interpretation in purely qualitative research (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011). Qualitative methods provided insights into the factors behind changes in engagement, dealt with the lack of understanding regarding context, or setting that often arises in quantitative research, and allowed the voices of participants to be directly heard.

## **Methods and Instrumentation**

The study therefore concurrently employed qualitative and quantitative data collection methods. During one data collection phase online surveys, field observations and interviews were used to gather data assessing the impact of literature circles on student engagement. Whilst literature circles were conducted, three surveys, focusing predominately on the collection of quantitative data were used to collect student and teacher perceptions of the literature circles. Concurrently guided field observations, providing both quantitative and qualitative data, were undertaken in each class. After the conclusion of the literature circles qualitative interviews were conducted with all teachers.

### *Engagement Versus Disaffection with Learning (EvsD) Survey*

Data were collected from all participants through online surveys using a modified version of the Engagement Versus Disaffection with Learning (EvsD) Survey. The original engagement items contained within the instrument were developed by Wellborn and Connell (1987; 1991) and further developed by Skinner, Kindermann and Furrer (2009). Teachers were required to complete two online surveys (see Appendix 5), one a week prior to the commencement of literature circles and the other at their conclusion. Students completed three online surveys (see Appendix 5) during their English classes: one a week prior to the commencement of literature circles, one at the mid-point (week 4), and one at the conclusion of the research cycle (week 8). No identifying information was required from participants and as such responses were anonymous.

Both the student self report and teacher report instruments have been developed to assess engagement as a key component of student learning and achievement (Fredricks, et al., 2011). The instruments assume that engagement ranges from enthusiastic, effortful, emotionally positive interactions with learning activities, to withdrawn, discontent and frustrated alienation (Skinner & Belmont, 1993). This model of engagement sits within the characteristics outlined in other key engagement research (Klem & Connell, 2004; Skinner & Belmont, 1993; Sullivan, et al., 2009).

The student self report survey is typically completed in the classroom and has previously been used with middle school students in a range of settings (Fredricks et al., 2011). The self report contains 24 items in four subscales, including behavioural engagement and disaffection, and emotional engagement and disaffection. Questions regarding student perceptions are also used to assess engagement during learning. The teacher report contains items grouped in the same subscales as the student survey, with each section containing four items.

Skinner et al. (2009) together with Fredricks et al. (2011) report that the internal consistency of the student subscales between .61-.85 and .81-.87. Combining the behavioural and emotional engagement items produces higher levels of internal consistency at .79-.86 for the student report and .90-.91 for the teacher report. Evidence of construct validity has also been reported through several methods including Skinner, Kindermann and Furrer's (2009) confirmatory factor analyses which found that a four factor model distinguishing between behavioural, emotional and cognitive engagement as well as engagement and disaffection was the best fit for student self report and teacher report data. The instrument also presents expected age grade patterns of engagement, with middle school students demonstrating lower levels of engagement than students in late primary school (Fredricks & McColskey, 2012; Skinner & Belmont, 1993).

Additional questions were added to the initial student survey to determine previous experience with literature circles and gather data regarding students' current reading habits, including the frequency and types of reading undertaken. Questions regarding discussion of texts were also included to understand the integration of reading into students' lives outside the classroom. Later student surveys followed the same structure however questions were modified to focus specifically on the pedagogy taking place. For example: 'When I'm in class I do just enough to get by' was modified to 'When I'm involved in literature circles I do just enough to get by'. The purpose and meaning of the questions remained consistent with the Skinner, Kindermann and Furrer (2009) model, to maintain the validity and reliability of the instrument.

Teacher surveys were consistent with the instruments designed by Skinner, Kindermann and Furrer (2009) with the addition of questions regarding the number of students submitting work and students' comments regarding set texts

in their end of term reflections. As with the student survey, later teacher surveys contained modified questions focusing on literature circles.

Student self report surveys are commonly used in engagement research, as they are practical and easy to administer across classroom settings (Fredricks & McColskey, 2012). Given the multiple research sites within the school the use of surveys was a practical consideration in the distribution and collection of data. In addition, surveys allowed a wider population to be accessed and the anonymity and non-traceability of data to be guaranteed (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011). This is an important consideration due to the possibility of students providing socially desirable responses as a result of their dependent relationship with teacher participants.

In addition, students' at the research site have a known preference for electronic resources and reluctance to write extended responses. Given that web based responses typically show fewer missing entries than paper based surveys, online surveys were used in order to ensure the maximum number of completed responses (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011). Online surveys also supported several students with hearing and visual impairment in the study. The use of online tools allowed these students to more readily access data and enter responses through audio or visual files and therefore dealt with known issues regarding their learning style.

### *Interviews*

Standardised open-ended interviews were incorporated to discover and portray multiple participant views regarding literature circles (Stake, 1995). The purpose of these interviews was to focus on teacher perspectives around the three areas of student engagement: behaviour, cognition and emotion, during class, together with student reading habits. The process of interviewing centred on allowing teachers to present their own unique experiences and to discover

what occurred as literature circles were been conducted in each class (Stake, 1995). Employing interviews as part of this study encouraged participants to develop their own ideas and attitudes to literature circles, allowing them to express their point of view with greater spontaneity and freedom than through set survey questions (Oppenheim, 1992). As Opie (2004) suggests, although surveys may contain open ended questions designed to elicit detailed responses they often fail to do so as respondents may lack the confidence or desire to express their views in this manner. Yet it is through the exploration of such responses that richness and value in research can be developed (Opie, 2004). The conversational nature of interviews and the increased allowance for open ended responses provided therefore provided teachers with the opportunity to elaborate on their use of literature circles and the subsequent impact on student engagement (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2011).

In order to maintain the reliability of each interview, increase comparability, and alleviate issues of bias, predetermined questions were presented (see Appendix 5). Each interview covered topics that mirrored those addressed in the teacher survey, using the same format, sequence and wording for each respondent (Cohen et al., 2011; Oppenheim, 1992; Silverman, 1993). Follow up questions were then used to elicit greater meaning from individual responses. In doing so the interviews were designed to be responsive to participants' own frames of reference and to engage with their unique experiences, eliciting descriptions of specific situations and actions rather than generalities (Cohen et al., 2011).

A particular issue with teacher interviews was the expression of inferences regarding students without sound evidence (Cohen et al., 2011; Griffin, 2007). Of concern was the possibility that teachers may infer student behaviours, cognition or emotion based on their own interpretation rather than observable evidence. As such, teachers were asked to comment only on what students did, said, made or wrote when coming to a conclusion regarding impact or learning

(Griffin, 2007). In order to substantiate their perceptions teachers were also asked to provide examples of student behaviours that lead to their conclusions.

### *Guided Field Observations*

Guided field observations were also undertaken in all classes using the International Centre for Leadership in Education's classroom walkthrough protocols (Jones, 2009). The use of observational structures as part of student engagement research is a common practice to understand if self reported engagement is consistent with the behaviour, emotion and cognition students demonstrate on a regular basis (Fredricks & McColskey, 2012).

Observational structures such as those set out by Jones (2009) provide a means of capturing 'live' data from naturally occurring situations (Cohen et al., 2011). The use of this method therefore provided the potential to yield more valid and authentic data and correlate participants' written responses with their actions (Cohen et al., 2011). Given the strong emphasis on participant perceptions within this study, the use of observations also ensured sensitivity to context and "ecological validity", moving beyond the realm of perception (Moyle, 2002 in Cohen et al., 2011, p. 456). This was of particular importance given that previous studies incorporating both teacher surveys and student self report surveys have found a stronger correlation between behavioural engagement than emotional or cognitive engagement (Fredricks & McColskey, 2012). Given this, survey data required further substantiation using observable behaviours and interactions.

The Jones (2009) model of observations focuses on obtaining specific information about the level of student engagement present during a given lesson or instructional strategy. Importantly, the model focuses on behaviour, cognition and emotion and is therefore consistent with the Skinner, Kindermann and Furrer (2009) survey instrument. The classroom walkthrough instrument examines the degree of behavioural engagement through pure observation.

Scaffolded interactions are then used to assess cognitive and emotional engagement. Each criterion uses a likert scale of 'very low' to very high' and an overall level of engagement is determined by compiling each criteria (see Appendix 5). To enhance the consistency of the instrument, guiding statements and behaviours/emotions are provided for each criterion.

Teachers were asked to conduct field observations during every literature circle lesson as regular weekly observations provided a means of building a more substantial picture of changes over time and patterns of behaviour (Opie, 2004). Training regarding the use of this instrument was provided in an effort to improve the level of inter-rater reliability during scoring. Periodic visits to each class were also made to ensure a consistent scoring approach was maintained and to cross reference the accuracy of teacher observations. This process was implemented in order to address the possibility of bias or inaccuracy as a result of infrequent or late stage observations (Opie, 2004).

## **Research Site**

The research was conducted at a Victorian government secondary school in the Northern Metropolitan Region. The student population of the school is diverse in terms of ability and engagement as well as socio economic background. According to ACARA (2012) the socio-economic background of students is distributed evenly between the middle and upper quarters of the Index of Community Socio Educational Advantage. 6% of students sit in the bottom quarter. Six classes of Year 9 English students and their respective English teachers made up the sample for this study.



## Classroom Curriculum Context

Literature circles are an existing pedagogical practice at the research site in Year 9 English. Approximately 50% of students undertake literature circles in Semester 1 and the remainder in Semester 2<sup>4</sup>. Teachers at the research site use the Daniels (2001) model for literature circles that involves undertaking weekly group discussion sessions run by students. Students are provided with roles to facilitate their discussion but are not required to strictly adhere to these as teachers have noted this impacts the fluency of discussion. This anecdotal observation is supported by Daniels and Steineke (2004, p. 76) who note that role sheets provide “mixed results”. Whilst they work for initial discussion training, continued use tends to result in “mechanical, pro forma discussions rather than sparking conversations” consequently stifling rather than energising discussions (Daniels & Steineke, 2004, p. 76). Daniels’ (2001) model outlines the following recommended roles to support the initial stages of discussion:

**Table 1: Literature Circle Roles (Daniels, 2001)**

<b>Role</b>	<b>Reading Strategy</b>
Discussion Director	Asking questions
Connector	Making connections
Illustrator	Visualising
Vocabulary Enricher	Noticing author’s craft
Literary Luminary	Determining importance
Insight Note Taker	Summarising

The Daniels’ (2001) roles outlined in Table 1 have been modified to fit the needs of middle school students at the study site. Roles such as the ‘Illustrator’ were removed, as students have not responded well in the past. The ‘Vocabulary Enricher’ role is merged with ‘Literary Luminary’ where discussion group sizes

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<sup>4</sup> This is an operational decision to spread the burden on popular texts and to allow for the purchase of additional texts as per student requests.

are smaller. Previous school based professional development at the research site has resulted in the following literature circle roles:

**Table 2: Adapted Literature Circle Roles**

<b>Adapted Role</b>	<b>Daniels (2001) Role</b>	<b>Reading Strategy</b>
Discussion Director	Discussion Director	Asking questions
Discussion Contributors	Vocabulary Enricher and Literary Luminary	Noticing author's craft; Determining Importance
Connector	Connector	Making connections
Insight Note Taker	Insight Note Taker	Summarising

Teacher participants brought varying degrees of experience and knowledge of literature circles to this study. For this reason, teachers were asked to follow the same basic literature circle structure and use the full range of texts selected by student participants, in order to maintain the integrity of the study and limit variables. Teachers were asked to use the same student roles to guide discussion and to limit the discussion sessions to a single period each week<sup>5</sup>. Teachers made all other pedagogical decisions relating to the literature circles. In order to facilitate a consistent teaching approach and implementation, in house professional development was run by the researcher prior to the commencement of the research cycle.

## **Participant Selection**

### *Student Participants (n=106)*

Year 9 students were selected as the focus of the study due to consistent anecdotal evidence from teachers at the study site. These teachers noted student disengagement increased significantly at Year 9. Students were generally late to

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<sup>5</sup> These practices already existed at the research site to assist teacher preparation and planning and were continued during the research cycle.

class, arrived unprepared, submitted work late and were resistant to reading texts selected by teaching staff. In English students displayed a resistance to reading independently and were regularly off task. Anecdotal evidence also indicated that classroom management problems increased at this year level. Overall, the perception was that students were academically capable but disconnected from learning and school.

In total, 108 students consented to be involved in the study. A fortnight in, two students dropped out of the study, reducing the number of active student participants to 106. One student (male) had behavioural and learning difficulties and was selected to attend an alternative school placement. The remaining student (female) had consistent attendance issues and was not present in class whilst the literature circles were conducted.

The 106 student participants were drawn from a total population of 129 Year 9 students involved in literature circles, leading to a confidence level of 95% and interval of 4%. This sample size permitted generalizations to be made from the sample to the population it represented. Using principles of redundancy and saturation, where the collection of new data does not lead to new insights, it was therefore determined that that sample was representative and purposeful (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). It further allowed the documentation of important common patterns as a result of observations and open-ended survey questions (Opie, 2004; Patton, 1990).

Stratified purposive sampling was used to select a representative student sample in terms of ability and engagement (Teddlie & Tashakkori, 2009; Teddlie & Yu, 2007). This approach ensured that those who have the most in depth knowledge of the issue were included, reducing sampling error (Babbie, 2002). It further allowed for a cross section of experiences, including negative cases, to be included, so that the research did not become selective or biased (Babbie, 2002; Teddlie & Yu, 2007). The aim was therefore to include a stratified sample of

student achievement, skills and engagement, including negative cases where students presented with above average skills and engagement. Although this method involved a trade off as it provided less breadth than alternative sampling methods, it also had the potential to provide greater depth as it allowed access to “knowledgeable people” (Cohen et al., 2011, p. 157).

This provided the basis for inferences about the larger student population to be drawn through the representation of student subgroups (see Appendix 3), including:

- An even gender split between male and female student participants;
- Student participants with low literacy and engagement in English prior to the study;
- Student participants with above average literacy and engagement in English prior to the study;
- Student participants who represent the middle band in terms of skills and engagement prior to the study.

Information was mailed home to all legal guardians of prospective student participants containing a plain language statement and consent form outlining the requirements of participation, and a letter from the school Principal confirming support of the research and approval by the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development. Completed consent forms, signed by both legal guardians and student participants, were returned via mail to the school. (See Appendices 1-2)

#### *Teacher Participants (n=6)*

As the teacher population was small (n=6) total population sampling was used to invite all teachers using literature circles during the research period to participate. This included:

- 3 graduate teachers and 3 experienced teachers;

- 3 teachers with previous experience using literature circles and 3 without experience.

The inclusion of all available teachers in the population resulted in a confidence level of 99% and interval of 4%. In a study of this scope 5-6 individual interviews was an appropriate and manageable number given the time constraints for interviews (Opie, 2004). It also reduced the transcription of irrelevant data that may have obscured the identification of patterns and themes.

Teacher participants were all provided with information through the school's internal mail system. Each teacher received a consent form and plain language statement outlining the requirements of participation and a letter from the school Principal confirming support of the research and approval by the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development. Completed consent forms were returned via the school's internal mail system to the researcher.

## **Data Analysis**

Data were analysed according to the conventions of qualitative and quantitative analysis and represented based on the key research questions of the study. As a mixed methods study, data analysis was based on the way qualitative and quantitative data sets were embedded into the study (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011).

Data were analysed undertaking a three stage process. This involved analysis of primary survey and observation data, analysis of secondary interview data before further analysis to determine how the data sets supported, or diverged from, each other. This approach enabled patterns, comparisons and qualifications to be explored whilst preserving the coherence of the data (Cohen et al., 2011). In doing so, the intention was to connect the various data collection methods of the study and provide a collective answer regarding the impact of literature circles on student engagement.

### *Survey & Field Observation Analysis*

Survey data and observational statistics have been computed to descriptive statistics. To provide greater clarity combined categories have been used to describe rating scales where appropriate (Cohen et al., 2011). Comment boxes and descriptive questions were coded to identify themes and causal relationships using predetermined codes based on interview analysis.

### *Interview Analysis*

All interviews were transcribed and sent to participants for final approval prior to analysis. Data coding occurred using both predetermined (P) and emerging (E) codes, to ensure a familiarity with the data as well as responsiveness to emerging trends (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Significant themes have been represented as narrative passages using multiple perspectives from participants and direct interview quotations. The focus for interview analysis was on determining whether student perceptions, reading habits and engagement changed over the course of the study, identification of factors that could be attributed to this and the overall impact of literature circles. Data coding was used to identify and track themes, causal relationships and patterns of behaviour, and/or engagement. Significant areas for coding included the following:

- Emotional engagement of students – increase; decrease; static (P)
- Behavioural engagement of students – increase; decrease; static (P)
- Changes in reading habits – increase; decrease; static (P)
- Gender impact – male; female (E)
- Organisation – increase; decrease; static (P)
- Motivation for employing literature circles (P)

- Overall impact on students (P)
- Logistics of literature circles – timing of lessons; reading sessions; initial text selection (E)
- Variations in teaching approach (E)
- Impact of text selection (E)
- Impact of group dynamics (E)

### *Comparison of Results*

The three data sources were compared using side-by-side comparison after initial individual analyses (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011). Quantitative results have been presented followed by qualitative data, requiring a discussion of the concurrent or divergent themes that emerge in both data sets. Merging of the data therefore predominately occurred through the results and discussion section of this study.

### **Validity and Rigour**

As a mixed methods study, validity centres on potential issues related to data collection, analysis, and the merging of quantitative and qualitative data (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011). The following discussion therefore focuses on maintaining validity and rigour in surveys, interviews and guided field observations.

An important factor in the collection of student self report data was the possibility of socially desirable responses. Fredricks and McColskey (2012) note the consistent concern regarding student self report measures and the honesty of responses in classroom situations. This is further supported by broader trends regarding the over reporting of admirable attributes and underreporting of undesirable attributes (Krosnick, 1999). The issue of teacher influence was

therefore a consideration in the design of data collection, as students involved in the research were all in dependant relationships with teachers. This created the possibility that students may be influenced by the presence of teachers during data collection. More specifically, it suggests that they might respond in ways designed to please the teacher, both academically and socially, rather than recording accurate responses (Cohen et al., 2011; Greig & Taylor, 1999; Skinner & Belmont, 1993). Student survey data collection was therefore set up so that teachers did not know the content of survey questions. To avoid undue influence or perceived pressure all teaching staff were asked to leave the room whilst students completed their surveys. Students were also reminded of their complete anonymity prior to completing each survey.

Given that classes were scheduled at varying times during the school day and in a given week, the varied conditions had the potential to affect responses and skew data. This applied primarily in terms of respondent fatigue and lack of concentration towards the end of a lesson, particularly whilst students were preparing to finish class and begin scheduled recess or lunch breaks (Krosnick, 1999). Although some classes were timetabled at the same time, it was not possible for all student participants to complete the online surveys at the same time and in the same location. In order to avoid compromising survey results, each class conducted surveys in the same classroom on each occasion, to maintain a consistent physical environment. In addition, surveys were always completed within the first 15-20 minutes of the selected lesson, and never immediately after the completion of a literature circles session.

The validity and reliability of teacher interviews was maintained using member checking, to accurately translate interviewees' viewpoints and to ensure that misrepresentation did not occur (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). A final copy of the interview transcript along with the original sound file was sent to each participant for personal comment and verification. All teachers were asked to confirm their acceptance, or rejection, of the transcripts via email.



## **Ethical Considerations**

The University of Melbourne Human Research Ethics Committee<sup>6</sup> and the Victorian Department of Education and Early Childhood Development<sup>7</sup> have approved all aspects of this research. Overall, there were few perceived ethical issues associated with the study. The main issue centred on the use of a research site where the researcher is currently employed. The researcher had an existing relationship with all staff involved in the study and a dependent relationship with approximately 30 student participants. To address this a number of additional safeguards were put in place to ensure the ethical conduct of the study. To avoid undue influence from the researcher all participants were mailed or pigeon holed information regarding the study. All participants were made aware that their participation was completely voluntary. Students were also made aware that their participation would not impact their assessment, reports or final grades for Year 9 English. It was also explained that anonymity was ensured to the fullest extent possible, and that there was no way that the researcher could isolate or identify individual responses from the online surveys, nor would English teachers have access to the data. All students were provided with the contact details of the school's welfare staff to be contact in the event students became distressed or uncomfortable during the study.

All teacher participants, and the legal guardians of all student participants, were made aware of the researcher's position at the school through a letter endorsed by the Principal and provided with each information packet. This letter outlined the school's support of the researcher but made a clear distinction between participant involvement and impact on employment, reporting, assessment and/or teacher performance. All participants were reminded that they were free to withdraw their participation, and any unprocessed data, at any stage of the

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<sup>6</sup> HREC Application 1237541.

<sup>7</sup> DEECD Application 2012\_001646.

research. The principal researcher was not present when students or staff completed online surveys and did not actively participate in any classes, including interacting with students in class, whilst field observations were undertaken.

## **Limitations of the Study**

Although a range of limitations were dealt with through the design and implementation of the study several areas of limitation remained.

As students were given the choice of the novel that they wanted to read during literature circles it could not be guaranteed that these were at their independent or instructional reading level. As such, some texts may have been above, or below, the students' frustration level, leading to greater difficulties when reading or discussing the text (Guthrie, 2008). This in turn may have impacted levels of engagement, particularly for weaker readers where protracted frustration in comparison to more able peers is an identified issue in text matching (Fisher, Frey, & Lapp, 2012).

Many students indicated previous experience with literature circles in primary school. Given that what students bring to learning is highly dependent on their experiences and achievement in previous years, the perceptions of students are strongly linked to the positive, or negative incidents of their earlier education (Hattie, 2009, 2012). Consequently, those students who indicated previous experience with literature circles are likely to have brought this knowledge to the current study. Although it is the task of teachers to understand these experiences and account for them in their teaching approach, there still remains the possibility that they were a factor (Hattie, 2009, 2012). As this was not an aspect of the current study the impact of these experiences on students' current perceptions is unclear. Although it is reasonable to assume that their current experiences were foremost in the minds of students, previous educational

experiences have clear impact on students' decisions regarding the value and relevance of pedagogies (Skinner & Belmont, 1993)

A similar issue also existed in terms of the teachers within the study. Each teacher came into the study with a different degree of knowledge about literature circles and the model to be implemented. Although all teachers made a commitment to the use of the pedagogy with their class, the level of experience in implementing this differed substantially. As a result some teachers were more adept at identifying and appropriately dealing with issues that arose during the conduct of literature circles, such as group dynamics, and the pre teaching of necessary skills. This in turn had the potential to impact students' level of engagement with the pedagogy.

The student participants in this study were also of a highly homogenous cultural and socioeconomic background. Most students had similar background knowledge that supported common assumptions regarding texts and their meaning (Fisher, Frey, & Lapp, 2012). This facilitated smooth and collaborative discussion however students may not have needed to work hard to actively understand others' perspectives, a recognised component of developing engagement (Appleton et al., 2008; Bland & Carrington, 2009).

Finally, this study acts as a point in time analysis of engagement and is therefore unable to assess the longitudinal impact of literature circles on student engagement. It is limited in its ability to yield data which maps change over an extended period of time (Cohen et al., 2011). Whilst the engagement of students measurably increased during the conduct of literature circles, the long term effects of this are unclear based on the current data collection model.

## **Delimitations of the Study**

The criteria for teacher participants was:

- That they were English teachers at the selected school;
- That they were currently teaching a Year 9 English class;
- That they were using literature circles in their classes during the research cycle.

The criteria for student participants was:

- That they were enrolled in Year 9 at the selected school;
- That they consistently attended an English class conducting literature circles during the research cycle.

## **Summary**

This is a mixed methods study incorporating three methods of data collection. The methodology and methods are designed to investigate the impact of literature circles in three key areas and determine their overall impact on student engagement in middle years English. Data has been collected through the use of surveys, interviews and guided field observations, and data analysed to determine trends regarding student perceptions, independent reading habits and overall engagement. A number of limitations and ethical considerations have been considered in the design and implementation of the study. Having outlined these considerations, a summary of the key findings is explored in the following chapter.

## **Chapter Four**

### **Findings and Analysis**

The aim of this mixed methods study was to investigate the possible impact of literature circles on student engagement, focusing on Year 9 English students. Qualitative and quantitative data were collected through surveys, interviews and observations to understand the impact of literature circles on students' perception of English, their independent reading habits and their level of engagement during the research cycle.

To ascertain the effect of literature circles on student engagement and perceptions of learning in English data collection focused primarily on students' cognitive, emotional and behavioural engagement for the period of the study. A further line of inquiry relating to students' independent reading habits was also embedded within the study to ascertain the effect that literature circles had on students' wider reading habits and broader engagement with the process of reading.

An approximately even gender spread of students was achieved with 54 male and 52 female students responding. Of these students the majority, 82 in total, were 15 years old whilst the remaining 24 were 14 years old. 48% of students had previous experience with literature circles at primary school. No students had participated in literature circles during secondary school. Of the six teacher participants, three had previous experience with literature circles whilst the remainder did not.

#### **Perceptions of English**

##### *Initial Perceptions of English*

Coming into the study students largely had negative perceptions of English, as demonstrated by the following student comments:

*"I strongly dislike English."* (Student 56)

*"I hate the work we do in English."* (Student 46)

*"I don't like English, the set texts are boring, long-winded and generally awful."* (Student 37)

Although 78% of students indicated that they enjoyed learning new things in English, 68% of students thought English was boring and 75% thought that it was not challenging. Only 8% of students indicated they were highly interested in English. Student reflection tasks, administered by teachers at the end of each term as a part of the school curriculum, indicated that a significant portion of English was perceived as 'easy'. When asked to identify an aspect of the English course that had challenged them in the previous term, teachers reported that only 33% of students could do so. Overall, teachers noted that only 50% of students displayed any real enthusiasm for English.

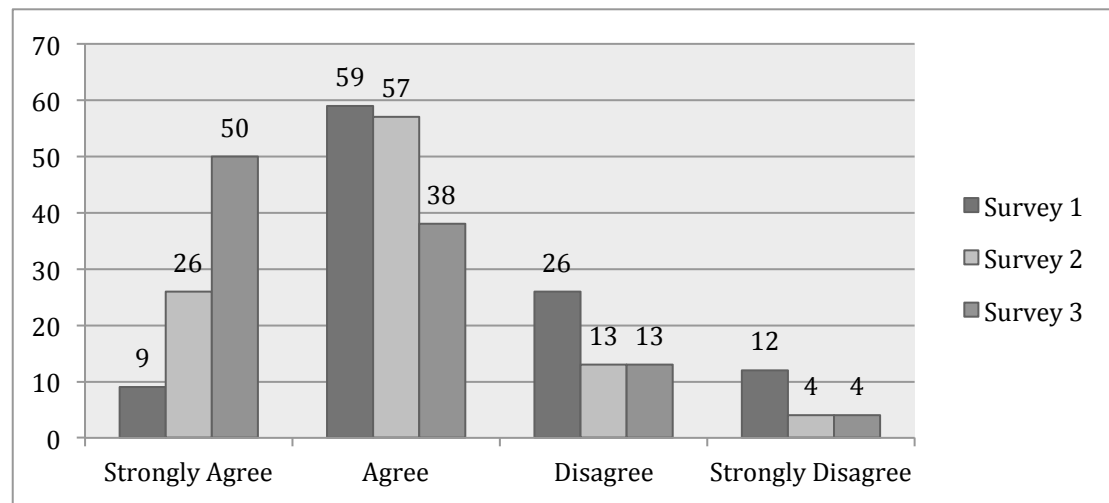
#### *Perceptions of English During Literature Circles*

At the conclusion of the study, perceptions of English had shifted to a significantly more positive outlook. 92% of students came to believe that English was challenging and the behaviour exhibited by students lead all teacher participants to suggest that they were enthusiastic about English during the research cycle. An 18% rise in interest and 28% increase in enjoyment in student self report data corroborated this. Student comments indicated:

*"They [literature circles] are really interesting and have made English much better and enjoyable."* (Student 87)

*"This has been so opening to me. I always disliked English but this has been so, like, amazing. It has added a new way to engage in English study and change the way I see the subject."* (Student 64)

**Figure 1 - Student Interest in English**



These increases corresponded to an improved willingness to get involved in class activities and engage with reading, both in class and at home. Due to this rise, the percentage of students who indicated they 'felt bored' also decreased by 34%.

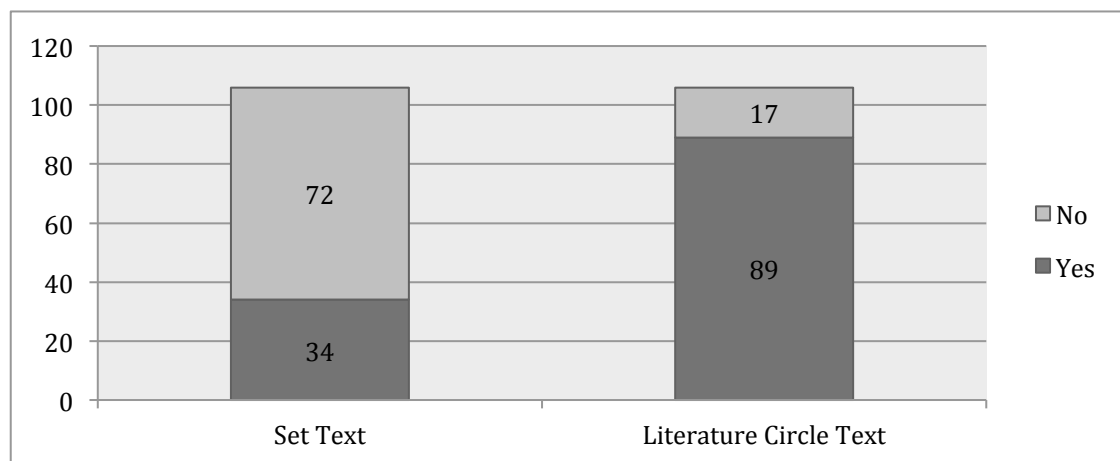
## **Reading Habits**

### *Engagement in Reading*

Perhaps the biggest positive improvement throughout the study was the level of engagement with reading generally and particularly in the level of discussion that occurred outside of class and through social media. Baseline data indicated that students did not consistently read at home and discuss texts outside of class. Of the students who did read their set text at home 63% did so because they were either behind with their reading (34%) or had difficulties comprehending the information (29%), a further 28% indicated other motivations for reading at home including parental pressure and difficulty focusing during reading in class. 84% of students indicated that they read their literature circle text at home, as indicated in Figure 3, an increase of 52% over the course of the study. Those students who indicated they did not read the set texts outside class stated that

this was due to lack of engagement or dislike. In contrast, students who did not read with their literature circle text outside class indicated this was due to lack of time due to extracurricular activities.

**Figure 2 - Student Engagement with Text at Home**



The change in engagement with independent reading was also backed by an indication that students were reading at home, with 68% of students reporting they read because they were engaged. As a result, the number of students who were behind in their reading also decreased from 23% to 8%.

For many students the popular culture references within the texts and the group nature of the task was a factor in reading. This led 75% of students to read more texts by the author of their literature circle text. In addition, the nature of text selection meant that students overwhelmingly selected texts that were part of a series, which further increased their capacity to continue reading. As one student commented:

*"I have now read 2 other books by the same author and that is a first for me - I actually read 2 books at the same time!"* (Student 93)

The process of literature circles therefore appears to have engendered a reconnection with reading for many students, some of whom commented that:



*"Lit circles have changed the way I think about the benefits of reading. I am surprised by that."* (Student 67)

*"I am amazed that I enjoyed this so much. It was the first time that I had actually loved school and reading...I have started to read the next book in the series – we should be reading more books like this!"* (Student 58)

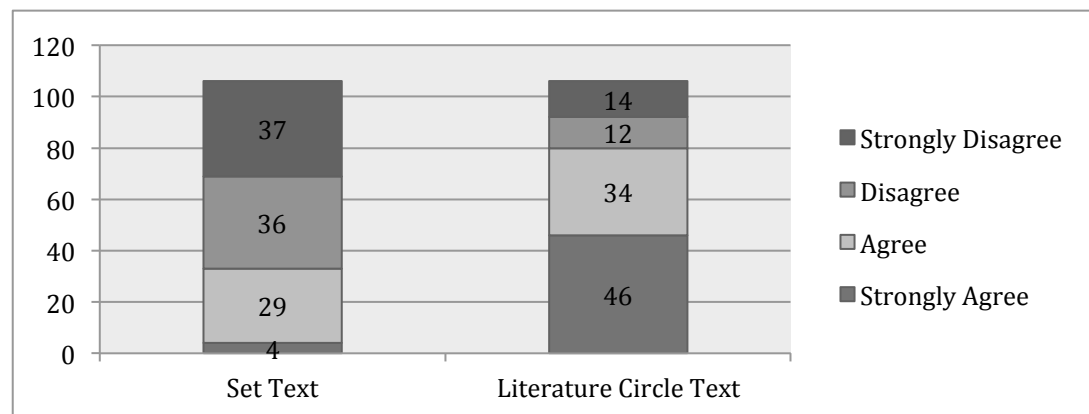
### *Engagement in Text Based Discussions*

At the beginning of the research period student discussions were largely focused on students' dislike of the set texts. As one student commented:

*"...Because the set texts are so bad the only time we discuss it is when my friends and I are explaining how much we hate it."* (Student 42)

By the conclusion of the study students were more engaged in positively discussing their literature circle text outside of class, with a 44% increase in this area over the research cycle.

**Figure 3 - Student Discussion of Texts Outside Class**



A range of student comments supported this shift in discussion, including:

*"We discussed it because we were also watching the movie at home too."* (Student 99)

*"We discussed our book all the time at recess and lunch cos it was a great book, I liked hearing about other people's books."* (Student 98)

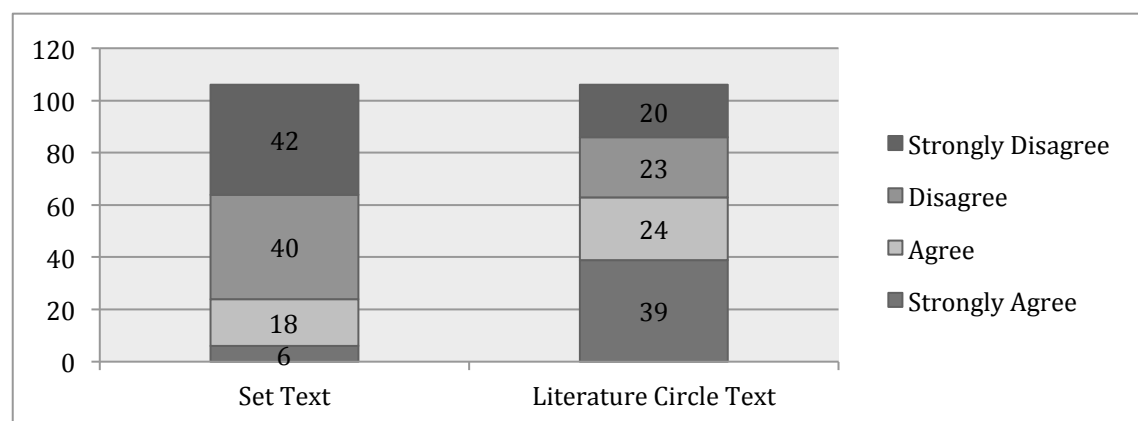
Through these discussions, students also became more active on social media, with a rise from 20% to 60% of students who used social media to discuss their literature circle text outside the classroom. Students used these sites in a range of ways. A number of students used Facebook to converse within and between groups whilst others used blogs to broaden the community of readers in their group. Student comments highlighted this effectively, with a several stating:

*"We set up a Facebook page in our group to chat on our book. It was soooo hard not to look up Google and see what finished in the end!"* (Student 20)

*"We made a page to discuss our books and have started passing Gone around to our friends."* (Student 4)

*"We kept track of where we were all up to on Facebook, some other people at school also commented because they were reading the same book."* (Student 106)

**Figure 4 - Use of Social Media to Discuss Text**



## Engagement in English

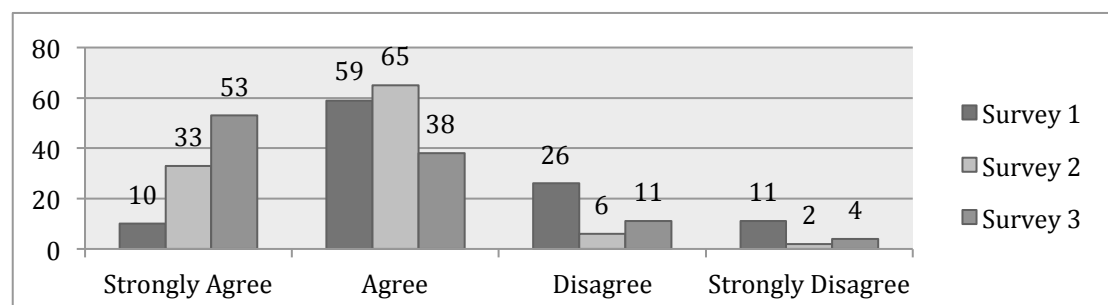
### *Initial Level of Engagement*

Over the course of the study a clear difference in student engagement was noted. Baseline data indicated that students were not highly engaged in English prior to the study. Teachers noted that engagement was ‘fragmented’ and it was hard to ‘get students into an activity and keep them at that working point’<sup>8</sup>. Only 9% of students indicated they had been highly engaged in English over the course of the year and 50% of students felt they were organised, listened carefully and worked hard prior to the study.

### *Cognitive Engagement*

The level of cognitive engagement, reported by both students and teachers, consistently improved throughout the period of the study. This was demonstrated through an increase in on task behaviour. Previously 53% of teachers suggested that their students were off task whilst in class. In contrast all teachers agreed that students were usually on task when engaged in literature circles. This was triangulated by student self report responses, indicating that 83% of students believed they were on task during literature circles, an increase of 47% from previous English activities.

**Figure 5 - Student Ability to Stay on Task**



<sup>8</sup> Teacher 1, 3 and 4 comments.

Students' self reported ability to stay on task and engage cognitively with literature circles was further substantiated by field observations in each class. A minimum 65% and maximum 97% of students consistently focused throughout the research cycle. Teacher and student comments alike corroborated this change:

*"The difference was marked actually, a remarkable difference from the group of kids I had before to the group that was working in the literature circles. There was a real introspection that came with the kids that I hadn't noticed before...because they had made choices in the process and because they were able, at different points, to nominate how far they would progress in each session. As soon as they became part of that decision making process it was a lot easier for them."*  
(Teacher 1)

*"This was like amazing, the room was so quiet. I even looked around to see if some people had left the room coz it was like too weird. We have never been this quiet ever."* (Student 100)

This sense of introspection and clarity was also highlighted through field observations, with a high correlation between students indicating individual attention, clarity of learning and rigorous thinking. As a general trend these elements began at a high point (95-98%) before steadying to a regular level of 75-83% across the three domains. As a result of these changes, teachers noted increased focus and enjoyment, suggesting:

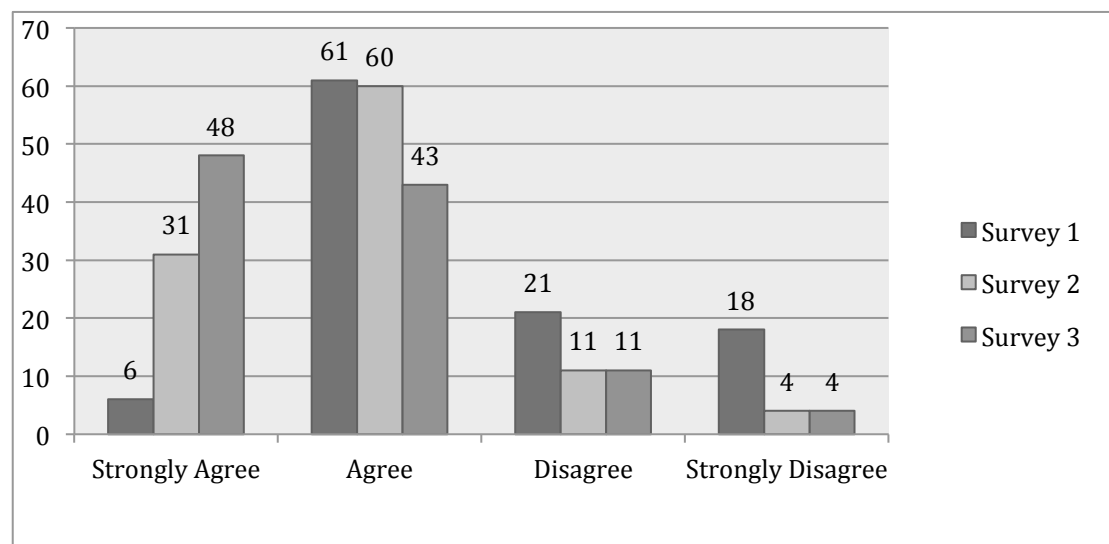
*"There appears to be a relationship between increased focus and enjoyment of the lit circles and increased focus in other English activities in my class – students were generally more organized and better behaved whilst we were conducting the discussion and this flowed on to other aspects of the class and the students' learning."*  
(Teacher 4)

*“During the literature circles there has been a marked difference in students’ attention, organization and general enthusiasm.” (Teacher 3)*

*“This was electric! It was impossible not to be involved.” (Student 20)*

Such changes also supported students to plan manage, clarify and deepen their own learning, with positive increases of 5-10% across student data and 60-70% increases in teacher data. Teachers and students also noted moderate positive increases in students who sought clarification of concepts, learning goals and performance outcomes and who independently organized their time, worked cooperatively with peers and self assessed their performance.

**Figure 6 - Student Motivation to Complete Tasks and Extend Learning**



As teachers noted:

*They were student directed in terms of making decision about how they read the text, sometimes they chose to read independently and sometimes they elected one student to read aloud to the whole group and sometimes they would take turns. A couple of them tracked down audio too. (Teacher 4)*

*“The way that the groups worked together to self manage their own behaviour and discipline themselves to complete work was great – there was a strong sense of completing work so that they did not let each other down.” (Teacher 5)*

This was largely due to the sense of agency that students derived from the process of text selection and peer led discussion. A predominate trend across both staff and student comments was the effect that this had on students’ participation:

*“The teacher let us make decisions about our learning and that was amazing. Very freeing...They trusted us and that does not happen much in school...I liked that trust, I felt grown up in a way that I had not been before.” (Student 103)*

*“I hope that other teachers can see that student generated learning is really empowering for us. I know we did not always get things right, but I think our whole class is different from the experience. I love reading now, or even more than I did before we started this.” (Student 88)*

*“They wanted to make choices. I think a lot of the time as teachers its easy enough for us to say ‘this is happening’. When the kids had to make really conscious choices about the way they wanted to approach things it made a complete difference to them in the learning environment.” (Teacher 1)*

*“Allowing students the choice is actually a really powerful thing.” (Teacher 5)*

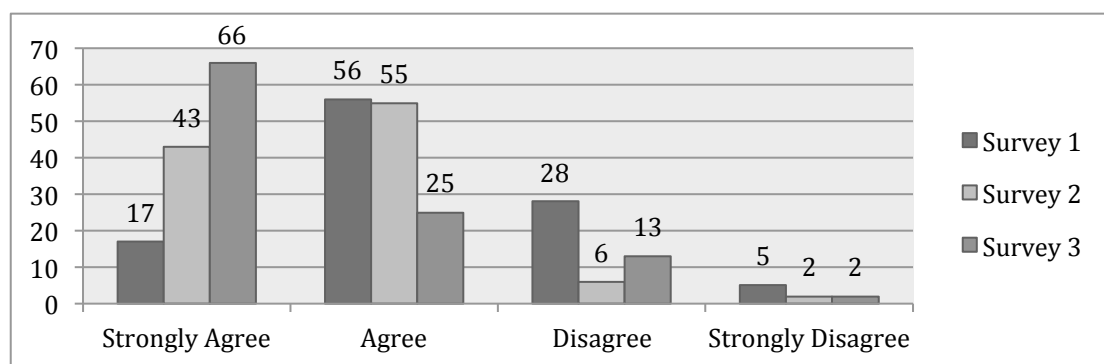
For students and teachers alike this fundamentally shifted the way they viewed the role of the teacher, to the extent that one teacher commented ‘we had an agreement that my job was basically to be invisible’<sup>9</sup>.

It was evident from the diversity of responses regarding the difficulty of literature circles that there were varying degrees of satisfaction with this aspect of the pedagogy. Student responses across the three surveys varied significantly with no consistent pattern emerging. Comments indicated that this inconsistency may be due to the shifting nature of roles, amount of reading per week and group dynamics at the time, impacting students’ ability to make generalisations regarding this aspect of their experience.

### *Behavioural Engagement*

Despite this inconsistency, students’ behavioural engagement, particularly their desire to work hard improved by 88% at the conclusion of the study.

**Figure 7 - Student Desire to Work Hard**

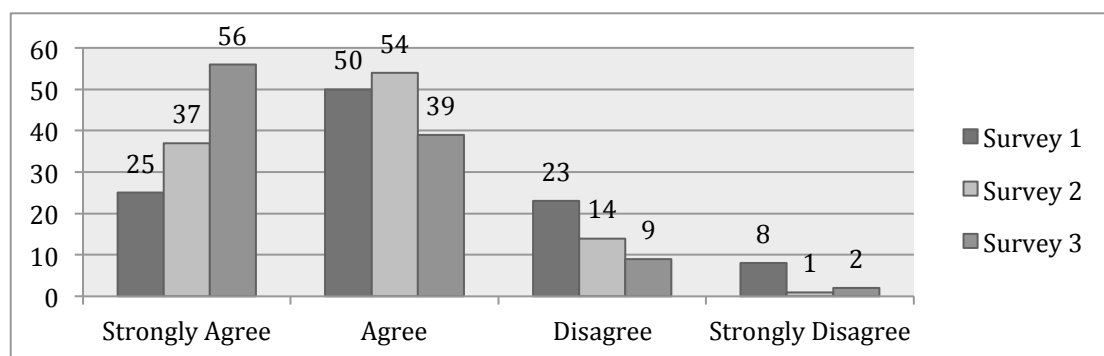


This was further supported by consistent increases in the number of students who submitted work on time, listened carefully and paid attention during literature circles. This result in a 29% increase in the number of students who regularly participated and a corresponding drop in the number of students who felt they did not regularly participate to only 10% of respondents.

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<sup>9</sup> Teacher 1 comment.

**Figure 8 - Student Reported (Regular) Participation in Class**



This trend of high participation was mirrored in the verbal participation of students documented through field observations. At their peak 97% of students were seen to express a very high level of thoughtful ideas and actively share opinions with their group. This figure steadily rose from a base point of 64% in the first two weeks of the study and is increased further by the combination of 'very high' and 'high' levels of verbal participation. Students' desire to participate was supported by an increase in persistence of 35%, with students indicating they were more likely to 'keep trying if something was difficult'. Field observations regarding persistence substantiated this by identifying an increase in students' ability to independently problem solve and to resolve difficulties rather than giving up.

### *Reasons for Lack of Engagement*

Whilst the majority of students indicated clear changes in engagement over the course of their involvement in literature circles, a number indicated they were not highly engaged by the pedagogy. The number of disengaged students fluctuated from 24-25% between the second and third student surveys, still a decrease of 23% from the baseline level of engagement. Comments from these students all centred on the impact of text selection and peer dynamics.

Reasons for disengagement can therefore be broadly separated into two distinct categories: issues with text selection and issues with group function, with an even split between students falling into the two areas. No students indicated



that both text selection and group function were the reason for disengagement. Those who commented that they were disengaged due to text selection noted the length of the text, the pace of reading required, a dislike of the main characters or the complexity of the language that they encountered. This was supported by comments from several students who indicated engagement with the literature circles but noted that it would be hard to stay engaged if they didn't like the book:

*"I think that the concept of literature circles is good, but that my book and group were really bad."* (Student 92)

*"I don't think literature circles would be enjoyable if I wasn't interested in the book that I was reading."* (Student 88)

The issue of text satisfaction and engagement was a strong trend prevalent across both teacher and student comments. As teachers suggested:

*"Selecting a book was an important part of them engaging in the first place. The groups that struggled in my class did so mostly because they didn't love the book."* (Teacher 5)

*"Text selection was a huge factor."* (Teacher 6)

Those students who indicated disengagement due to group function commented on the commitment of other members to the task, lack of familiarity with peers, issues with cooperation or a more general dislike without specific cause. Two students also commented that the noise level of the class troubled them during discussions. Typically, students who continued to be disengaged due to issues with the dynamic of their group indicated that they had tried to take part in literature circles but found the process difficult, highlighted by one student who commented that:

*"I try as hard as I can but I just find it too hard to learn with my group."*  
(Student 65)

## Further Trends – Benefits For Male Students

A particular trend emerging from teacher comments was the impact on disengaged male students:

*“My tough and rough boys, they were the biggest surprise of them all. They had a text that was also a modern movie and they were right in it...It was joyful to see them so connected.”* (Teacher 1)

*“To be honest I think the boys benefited more because I felt that in giving them a choice with their text they were able to connect more to what was happening.”* (Teacher 4)

Whilst this trend is supported in part through student perception data, overall there was little appreciable difference between male and female students self reported engagement. Although more male students reported that they tried hard to do well, were organised and worked hard in class, the difference compared to female students was not statistically significant. For example, 95% of males reported they tried hard to do well compared to 94% of female students. In addition, 75% of males indicated engagement during literature circles compared to 84% of females. In some areas female students therefore outscored males, particularly in terms of their emotional and cognitive engagement where there was an average 5-10% difference.

## Summary

This chapter has outlined the key findings of the study regarding student perceptions, reading habits and engagement in English during the conduct of literature circles in Year 9 English classes. Overall, data indicates that literature circles have a positive impact in each key area. The implications of these findings and their connection to existing research and literature will be explored in the following chapter.

## **Chapter Five**

### **Discussion**

This chapter will offer a detailed discussion of the key findings of this study, drawing on existing research and literature. Through this discussion, it is suggested that literature circles can make real and practical differences to middle school students' perceptions, independent reading habits and engagement in English. It is further argued that literature circles present a model of student engagement and student voice that can be applied across the curriculum.

#### **Perceptions of English**

Initial data from student participants in this study mirrors the perceptions of middle school students across Australia, confirming that English lacks depth, rigour and challenge for many learners (Kiddey & Robson, 2001). Since the classroom environment reinforces perceptions regarding subject content and learning styles, student perceptions of their experiences are fundamental to engagement (Tomul, Celik, & Tas, 2012). If students do not perceive that a subject provides the conditions for engagement, the likely outcome is withdrawal and lack of interest. When attention is directed to student opinion and engagement this is less likely to occur. This is particularly important given that student perceptions have been linked to improved academic achievement, reduced discipline problems and are often used to implement school improvement initiatives (Mitchell, Bradshaw, & Leaf, 2010).

The findings of this study suggest that changes in student perceptions of learning have an important impact on engagement (Czernianwski & Kidd, 2011; Knezek et al., 2011). Dealing collectively with issues of student voice, text selection, pedagogies and engagement can therefore positively impact student perceptions

of English and their level of engagement. Addressing these elements individually, whilst beneficial in some respects, will not foster an overall change in engagement. For example, it is not through dealing with perceptions of challenge in the English curriculum alone that a more positive outlook is achieved. Students in this study indicating positive changes in perception did so largely through comments that touched on all four issues outlined as markers of poor perception and disengagement. Student 87 for example, made the following comments regarding their level of engagement:

*"They [literature circles] are really interesting and much better than our other stuff in English because we get to choose our own text and it isn't boring. I get to extend my learning more in literature circles without the teacher telling me what to do and work with people who want to do the same. I wanted to read ahead to see what happened next, the book was actually interesting!"* (Student 87)

This suggests that a holistic change in perceptions regarding text selection, choice and pedagogical practice work together to enhance engagement. By taking account of student perceptions in English and incorporating pedagogies such as literature circles, teachers may begin to reform students' perceptions of English. In doing so they not only increase engagement in reading and learning but also improve the overarching learning outcomes of middle school students. Teachers should therefore be expected to remain aware of student perceptions. Using student perception and achievement data to develop engaging and challenging learning environments encourages students to take responsibility for their learning and develop positive perceptions of English (VIT, 2010). It is therefore an important component of effective teaching

## Engagement in Reading

It has now become clear that it is not enough to simply encourage and promote reading, particularly in middle school English classrooms (Aronson, 2001). At this level students will not read and learn just because they are instructed to do so, especially if they do not find relevance in what they are learning or feel engaged in the decision making process (Yazzie-Mintz & McCormick, 2012). The significance of this is given further weight when it is revealed that:

*Nearly half the population struggles without the literacy skills to meet the basic demands of everyday life and work. There are 46% of Australians who can't read newspapers; follow a recipe; make sense of timetables; or understand the instructions on a medicine bottle.*  
(Australian Childrens' Literature Alliance, 2012, p. 10)

In light of this, and the current perception that “teenagers don’t read”, it is important that reading is promoted as a key life skill (Aronson, 2001, p. 100). Developing a love of reading in students must therefore remain a central goal for English teachers. In order to do so prevailing instructional practices need to be reassessed, particularly at middle school where the needs of adolescent learners differ from their younger peers (Rudduck, 2007). If this goal is not achieved, educators risk far more than turning students away from reading, they risk the wellbeing and success of a generation of readers (McLean-Davies, 2012).

In reassessing middle school students’ needs it is important to work back from the end goal: lifelong, engaged readers. In doing so several key patterns emerge. Lifelong readers choose what they will read and connect personally with the material they select. They draw on a range of cognitive strategies to decode, analyse and interpret texts; using informal writing, such as notes or quick thoughts, to deepen their understanding of information (Daniels, 2011; Daniels & Steineke, 2004). Perhaps most importantly, they often seek out other readers

to explore ideas and test theories. As Daniels (2001, p. 2) suggests, this allows them to “own reading”. Unfortunately, this pattern is fundamentally different in many classrooms (Daniels & Steineke, 2004). Of the students in this study not one had experienced literature circles or a similar pedagogy since their entrance to secondary school. Instead, they had experienced a ‘traditional’ view of reading in secondary school. For many students reading was conceived as a solitary, often silent, activity that rarely includes open-ended discussion or reader-to-reader dialogue (Daniels & Steineke, 2004; Fisher, Frey, & Lapp, 2012). Students were either read to or read in isolation, writing to test recall and progress rather than thinking. Students in this study had therefore hardly ever ‘owned’ reading the way that lifelong readers are able to and as such, they did not engage in the same way. Several teachers in this study commented on such a trend prior to using literature circles, noting that:

*“I think I felt because we also read it aloud in class it took away the ownership of them reading the book. I didn’t feel like they had actually taken ownership of the book in reading, they hadn’t actually read it, it was read to them so you have a different connection with the text if you do that. I felt the engagement was probably lacking.”* (Teacher 2)

*“My class had a level of complacency with reading and weren’t really engaged because they weren’t necessary active in the process.”*  
(Teacher 3)

The notion of creating a dynamic, engaged reading community, modelled on the habits of lifelong readers, is therefore vital to the success of English pedagogies. Creating such a community requires that the process of reading becomes student centred (Fisher, Frey, & Lapp, 2012). The application of literature circles is therefore particularly suitable. As this study highlights, allowing students to become active in selecting and generating discussion regarding texts creates a strong sense of community with a classroom. Teachers noted:

*“The activity created a great reading community within the class and allowed us to interact with students on a different level because they had ownership over their reading and learning.” (Teacher 3)*

Through literature circles, students therefore came to ‘own’ their reading through a more dynamic and personal interaction than traditional pedagogical practices (Daniels & Steineke, 2004). They developed their own interests, connections and understandings; making strong judgments about the value of a text, the authors’ craft and the personal significance of the ideas (Daniels & Steineke, 2004). Since literature circles are closely patterned after adult reading groups of lifelong readers, it is not surprising that they achieve many of the same results (Daniels & Steineke, 2004). In particular, the 44% increase in discussion of texts outside class, together with the 40% rise in use of social media, highlights the different connection students found with reading during literature circles.

More broadly this study has highlighted that effective middle school pedagogies need to focus on creating motivating learning environments where students are actively engaged in decisions regarding reading (Pendergast & Bahr, 2005). Doing so enables students to connect personally with reading and build habits of choice, independence, and resourcefulness (Daniels, 2011). This is not to say that all current reading pedagogies are redundant. Many studies continue to highlight that a balanced program of reading which involves whole class text study provides a valuable shared experience of reading, and can equally add to the sense of community literature circles develop (Gambrell, 1996; Ivey & Broaddus, 2001). The key is balance. Many English curricula are still “drastically overbalanced” (Daniels & Steineke, 2004, p. 3) with teacher centred, isolated reading structures which inhibit the creation of empowered and literate citizens. To address this, developing a culture of reading in the classroom is

vital. This allows students to be active in decisions regarding their learning style, group dynamics and importantly, text selection.

### *The Power of Text Selection*

The important role of texts in terms of engagement therefore highlights that at middle school, where students increasingly desire input into learning decisions, complete teacher control over text selection is unlikely to result in the same degree of engagement. Whilst there is no doubt that teachers have a vital role to play in selecting texts, and that not all decisions can or should be influenced by students directly, student voice in this process is a significant means of increasing levels of active participation in learning and as a consequence, overall engagement in English.

The clear correlation between text satisfaction and engagement in this study suggests that harnessing the power of student voice through text selection is therefore a powerful way to reengage students in reading and English. 80% of students who indicated low engagement at the outset of the study commented a key element of their engagement was 'choice' in text selection, indicating they did not feel interested or connected to the set texts. In total, 90% of teachers and students in this study repeatedly cited text selection as the most common reason for disengagement from English. The lack of connection that many students feel with current set texts therefore suggests that text selection in all its forms needs to be reviewed (McLean-Davies, 2012).

This notion is further supported by international and local research which suggest that students use reading to help them deal with issues in their lives and develop them as individuals (Ma'ayan, 2010; Reynolds, 2000; Robertson, 2002). Since students are fundamentally shaped by the texts they encounter throughout their school experience, the impact of these texts is vital. The aim in text selection should be not only to engage students in reading within the classroom but outside it as well. When students find relevance in their reading



material, when it assists them in dealing with issues in their lives, they are far more likely to engage with reading outside the classroom, as the experience of students in this study suggests. Given the opportunity to select relevant and interesting materials that resonated with their own experiences students were far more likely to become engaged in reading outside the classroom.

A central issue here is the closeness or distance of students to the texts set for study, that is, the connection students make with their reading. As Manuel and Robinson's (2002) investigation into the reading choices of Australian adolescents suggests, recognising the diverse preferences of students assists in improving their reading experiences. This stresses the need for English teachers to consider how to develop a sense of proximity through text selection. At times texts are selected because teachers feel that they will capture students' imagination or that they will be able to relate to the themes and experiences of characters (McLean-Davies, 2012). Whilst this is valuable, it is also important that students experience texts that present different ways of knowing, experiencing, or viewing the world (McLean-Davies, 2012). It is this aspect of reading which has a significant impact on the "textual lives" of students (McLean-Davies, 2012, p. 15). Given the unique, varied and personalized reading preferences of students this is even more important considering that "we model ourselves on the stories others tell us...these stories, for better or worse, come to constitute our being" (Misson, 1998, p. 105).

This then contributes to the sense of a reading community so that students participate in substantive discussions regarding texts outside as well as within the curriculum. The increased level of discussion that resulted from literature circles in this study suggests that choice and connection in reading can shift conversations from a focus on explaining how much students 'hate'<sup>10</sup> reading, to how much they 'love reading'<sup>11</sup>. Ultimately this indicates that text selection and the process of student centred reading can assist students to make deeper

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<sup>10</sup> Student 42 comment.

<sup>11</sup> Student 88 comment.

connections with reading, developing lifelong readers with the literacy skills necessary to succeed.

## **Student Engagement**

### *The Importance of A Multifaceted Definition*

From the outset it has been clear that defining student engagement is highly complex. Measuring levels of engagement therefore requires a multifaceted approach that takes account of the myriad of elements that influence students' school experience. Through undertaking this study it has become clear that a single measure of engagement does not go far enough in determining the extent of students' involvement in a learning activity, and in school more broadly. Definitions that narrowly focus on behaviour as the sole determinant of engagement are therefore too limiting (Appleton et al., 2008).

It is also not enough to judge the level of student engagement simply by observing students, particularly given that middle school students are adept at presenting the appearance of compliance and engagement when they are highly disengaged (Crick, 2012; Rudduck & Flutter, 2000). The definition provided by Fredricks, Blumenfeld and Paris (2004), which sits at the core of this research, is therefore crucial in determining the impact of pedagogies such as literature circles on the behavioural, cognitive, and emotional quality of students' learning. This is important as research in this field is unlikely to fully articulate the true impact of pedagogies on reengaging students without accounting for the full range of components that contribute to engagement.

### *The Link Between Pedagogy and Student Engagement*

Engagement is as much about what teachers do as what learners do. For engagement to be improved the two must be inextricably linked (Hattie, 2009).

The current view is that all teachers make a difference, however, this is not strictly accurate: certain teachers using certain pedagogies have a powerful effect on student learning and engagement (Hattie, 2009). In fact, it is the pedagogies teachers employ that have the strongest effect upon learning and engagement (Hattie, 2009). Knowledge of student thinking, interest and learning styles is therefore as important as familiarity with subject matter (Ball & McDiarmid, 1990; Mishra & Koehler, 2006; Shulman, 1986, 1987).

This suggests that middle school student engagement stems from pedagogies that provide challenge, autonomy, worthwhile goals and peer-to-peer interactions. Such elements were highlighted in guided observation data in this study, where the sense of challenge and worthwhile goals reached a peak of 98%. In order to cater for a range of learners, effective pedagogies therefore need to focus on creating motivating learning environments where students are actively involved in decisions regarding learning (Holdsworth, 2000, 2005; Pendergast & Bahr, 2005). Student comments from this study consistently cited ‘working with other people’, ‘group discussions’ and ‘working together’ as reasons for enjoyment and engagement<sup>12</sup>. When students in this study were involved in pedagogies that addressed these learning preferences engagement increased from 47% to 75%. These findings support previous research indicating that middle school students often learn best through group projects and through pedagogies that involve discussion and debate (Yazzie-Mintz & McCormick, 2012). These approaches provide forums for students to interact collaboratively with peers and teachers and to generate knowledge as active participants in the learning process.

Having a sense of control over learning is therefore important. Students who take on personal responsibility for learning, labelled “internals” by Findley and Cooper (1983), typically maintain a higher degree of engagement and achieve as expected. Without this responsibility, engagement inevitably decreases, often

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<sup>12</sup> Student 24, 93, 14 comments.

leading to significant disengagement and demotivation. This then directly impacts students' commitment to goals, desire for feedback and direct involvement in learning (Dornyei, 2001; Hattie, 2009). The students in this study replicate this pattern, transforming from disengaged students with little sense of responsibility for their learning into 'internals' who were effectively engaged. This was indicated by one student who commented:

*"The teacher explained why she didn't get as involved. It was nice to see if we could manage learning ourselves and take responsibility. We weren't as good at the beginning but we got better and better. Actually by the end of it, each person sort of had an assigned role and was more involved in class. Everybody had a place." (Student 103)*

Overall 70% of students self reported a sense of freedom and autonomy as a result of literature circles, and a degree of pride that they had been trusted to 'be in charge' and allowed to 'take ownership' of their learning<sup>13</sup>. Given the chance to take personal responsibility for their own learning reversed the trends reported by Hattie (2009) and Dornyei (2001). They were more receptive to feedback, sought to extend their own learning more regularly, persisted in the face of difficulties, and were more consistently on task. This suggests a marked difference in engagement across the cognitive, emotional and behavioural domains of engagement, primarily as a result of pedagogical change, supporting Bland and Carrington (2009), Hattie (2009, 2012) and Dornyei's (2001) assertions regarding the link between engagement, learning and pedagogies.

The passivity experienced by some middle school students is thus more a product of the pedagogies teachers employ rather than an inherent dislike of learning. This resonates with the notion that motivation, and as a result engagement, should not be solely attributed to the innate characteristics of students. These characteristics are largely influenced by the situational

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<sup>13</sup> Student 20 and 36 comments.

conditions and teaching practices student encounter (Fisher, Frey, & Lapp, 2012). The use of student centred pedagogies in this study assisted in increasing students' self reported motivation and desire to work hard by 22% and 20% respectively. The aim must therefore be to actively engage students in the learning process so that they have agency and take responsibility for their own learning. This requires teachers who can see learning from their students' perspective and through this, understand how to meaningfully engage them (Hattie, 2009). Shulman (1986) argues that successful teachers do so by addressing pedagogy and content simultaneously and find different ways of representing skills or knowledge that are accessible and engaging for students. Using literature circles supported this approach by developing engagement through 'something different', 'new' or which 'deepened thinking'<sup>14</sup>. Based on this, the increased level of student engagement within this study highlights that when teachers can achieve this, when they begin to make decisions based on the experience of students and what students desire, they are far more effective in engaging and motivating students to succeed, largely due to a reduction in students' passivity (Gambrell, 1996). This was evident across teacher comments and emphasised effectively by one teacher who commented:

*"They wanted to make choices. I think a lot of the time as teachers its easy enough for us to say 'this is happening'. When the kids had to make really conscious choices about the way they wanted to approach things it made a complete difference to them in the learning environment."* (Teacher 1)

Having said this, literature circles have benefits for all and can be utilised to intervene at the point of need for any student, regardless of their engagement level. They therefore have benefits for students who, unlike the majority of their peers, maintain engagement. Given the student population within this study it is reasonable to suggest that literature circles can impact not only those students

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<sup>14</sup> Student 74, 4 and 27 comments.

who are already disengaged but also negative cases, that is students who remain engaged. The following engaged student effectively illustrates this:

*"I like being able to choose my own book, I am a good reader and sometimes the novels we have to read are too simple. I like English and enjoyed being able to choose a harder book and discuss it with other people who like reading as much as me." (Student 76)*

By providing such students with the opportunity for extension and challenge in their learning, they too report a growth in engagement. The reasons for this correlate with the principles of literature circles that appeal to disengaged students, namely choice, voice and peer-to-peer discussion. Consequently, it is evident that literature circles deal with a range of educational issues, providing a platform for extension and differentiation of learning in a range of ways.

### *Pedagogy and Gender*

A range of literature also suggests that the impact of pedagogies on engagement may vary according to gender, with the impact heightened for male students (Kovalik, 2008; Sax, 2006). Teachers in this study supported this by perceiving a greater impact on male students. As Teacher 4 noted:

*"To be honest I think the boys benefited more because I felt that in giving them a choice with their text they were able to connect more to what was happening...I had felt the boys were particularly disconnected earlier." (Teacher 4)*

This perception was articulated by 4 of the 6 teachers involved, each of whom highlighted a greater perceived impact for male students' engagement. These teachers noted a marked difference in the connection that male students made with learning during literature circles, as well as their ability to generate and extend learning, developing greater connections with their peers in the process.

Having said this, the impact on male students was not substantiated by student self report data. Self reported engagement for male students was actually 9% lower than their female peers, in direct contradiction to teacher perceptions.

A number of possible reasons for the divergence between teacher perception and student self report data are extended in the literature. Firstly, given that male students are often considered the most disengaged during middle school any marked change may garner greater attention than a more modest rise in female students engagement (Hattie, 2009; Kovalik, 2008; Sax, 2006). Secondly, the phenomenon of increased praise for male students compared to female students is such that teachers often seek out positive behaviour in male students more readily in an attempt to foster motivation through behavioural reward (Kovalik, 2008; Sandmann & Gruhler, 2007; Sax, 2006). Whilst this is often an unconscious act on the part of teachers it suggests that perception data may be unintentionally skewed if not further substantiated.

This is not to say that male students did not experience an uptake in engagement, but that this may not have been statistically different to that of the female students in the study. Regardless of this issue the overall increase in male students' engagement during literature circles can potentially be attributed to a number of factors. Firstly, when male students are required to work together they readily collaborate and have a strong sense of responsibility toward their peers (Kovalik, 2008). In addition, Atkinson's (2009) research into the motivation of middle school males suggests that they have a greater desire for input into learning activities. In contrast female students are more hesitant to do so, and do not require the same connection to tasks in order to satisfactorily complete them (Kovalik, 2008). This is perhaps corroborated by the fact that male students more consistently reported extending their learning spontaneously in comparison to female students in this study. Several all male groups independently sourced audio or video versions of their chosen text and incorporated this into their weekly discussions. This further supports

Atkinson's (2009) finding that male students are more likely to compare books with corresponding film versions, conduct broad ranging discussions and take on roles in shared reading. This suggests that male students respond well to autonomy and that the issue of disengagement can be addressed by gender neutral pedagogies which do not privilege males over females or vice versa (Hattie, 2009, 2012).

This is important due to the continued debate regarding the exact differences in male and female learning. Some research maintains that male students have inherently different needs and achievement levels than female students (Sax, 2006). However, those such as Hattie (2009, 2012) argue that males and females do not differ in terms of their fundamental education achievement or needs. In this instance, the perceived improvement from male students may therefore be attributed more to a perception of heightened disengagement rather than any inherent characteristics within literature circles that are more appealing to specific genders.

### *The Connection Between Student Voice and Engagement*

The results of this study also confirm existing understandings regarding the link between student voice and engagement. This confirms the idea that students can make powerful contributions to discussions regarding learning, and feel more empowered, committed and engaged as a result. The findings of Holdsworth (2000), together with Rudduck and Flutter (2000), can therefore be further supported by this study. As Holdsworth (2000) outlines:

*The majority of learning activities carried out in schools are only immediately productive in terms of being seen and marked by the teacher. Students are told 'learn this because it will be valuable to you later'...Some students will be content to defer the outcomes of their*



*learning whilst others...will become passive collaborators or active resisters. (Holdsworth, 2000, p. 352)*

Teachers in this study mirrored Holdsworth's concept by noting:

*"A lot of the time as teachers its easy enough for us to say 'this is happening'. When the students were able to make conscious choices about the way they wanted to approach learning it made a complete difference to them."* (Teacher 1)

Baseline student data also supported these ideas. Initially students felt a lack of connection with their learning and as a result became passive and resistant. 52% stated that they did just enough to get by and only 33% indicated that they worked hard or persisted. It could therefore be argued that students were fundamentally disengaged and experiencing a form of "action poverty" that Coleman (1972, pp. 5-8) suggests has become increasingly prevalent in young people's lives. Teachers in this study support this characterisation with 67% indicating that students didn't listen, persist or regularly participate in class and that their learning was therefore 'unproductive'<sup>15</sup>. This leads to the conclusion that without voice and activity students become increasingly restive, irresponsible, dependent, and ultimately unproductive (Coleman, 1972). However, through engaging in literature circles there was a 15% reduction in students who 'did just enough to get by' and a corresponding 20% increase in students who indicated they worked hard and persisted. Overall this resulted in 87% of participants responding positively in these areas by the end of the research cycle. Comments from students indicated that this change was largely due to the sense of voice they found through literature circles. Students emphasised this trend by commenting that they were engaged by:

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<sup>15</sup> Teacher 6 comment.

*“Getting to have a say about what we did in the classroom. Most teachers don’t do that and its very frustrating.” (Student 25)*

*“The freedom to choose cos we don’t get that very often.” (Student 105)*

*“How we got to be in charge and not having the teacher read to us.” (Student 98)*

*“I loved that we got to generate the learning, the teacher actually let us set the work and that made all the difference.” (Student 62)*

These findings confirm previous conceptions of student voice presented by Holdsworth (2000, 2005), Czerniawski and Kidd (2011) and Wisby (2011) who suggest that many students feel education is something “done to them” rather than a process that engages them in “designing, producing and creating the learning they seek” (Wisby, 2011, p. 38). Whilst it is easy to suggest that this can be achieved through consultation with students regarding general school matters, authentic student voice means much more and has a far greater effect on student engagement. By embedding student voice through pedagogies such as literature circles, themselves an exercise in “student voice and choice” (Daniels, 2001, p. 5), students make greater gains in engagement and connectedness to learning. This method invariably results in improved student relationships, engagement and perceptions. It meets the fundamental needs of disengaged students by strengthening self esteem, developing respect, and providing an avenue to improve overall school experience (Mitra & Frick, 2004).

In order to engage fully students need substantive opportunities to develop their own enthusiasm, interests and opinions. Harnessing the power of student voice in an authentic manner, such as through the process of literature circles is therefore crucial. Part of the success of literature circles stems from the

“pedagogy of voice” (Ranson, 2000, p. 265) contained within the learning. Literature circles provide a means of addressing the imbalance between teacher assigned and student driven tasks as well as promoting value in students’ opinions regarding text selection and critical analysis of literature (Daniels, 2001). This approach places students at the centre of the decision making process, recognizing their preference for pedagogies which are learner centred; and assessment which is relevant, authentic and connected to real life experiences (Appleton et al., 2008; Bland & Carrington, 2009; Yazzie-Mintz & McCormick, 2012). Taking account of these preferences is an important step in addressing issues of disengagement at middle school

## **Summary**

A number of important considerations regarding student perceptions, independent reading and engagement have been highlighted in this discussion, connected to existing literature and supported by data from this study. The conclusions, implications and recommendations emerging from this will be discussed further in the next chapter.

## **Chapter Six**

### **Conclusion**

This mixed methods study investigated the impact of literature circles on student engagement in Year 9 English classes. The focus of this study is on teachers' use of student centred pedagogies and their impact on disengagement at middle school. The study is developed through the following research questions:

1. Do students' perceptions of English change during their involvement in literature circles?
2. Do literature circles impact on students' independent reading habits?
3. Do literature circles improve the level of student engagement in English?

In this final chapter there is a need to consider the implications that the study raises for educators and curriculum design in English, and more broadly. Given that the impact of literature circles was clearly positive, it is hoped that this study will stimulate further discussion regarding the necessary changes required to improve student perceptions of English, increase independent reading, and reengage students.

### **Conclusions of the Study**

Literature circles evidently have a positive impact on student perceptions, independent reading habits and engagement in English. Firstly, student perceptions of English positively increased whilst literature circles were conducted. By the conclusion of the study students indicated that they enjoyed learning new things in English and that they were 'challenged'. Levels of enthusiasm and interest in English also markedly increased. Secondly, literature circles appear to have assisted students to reengage with independent reading. A significant portion of students began to engage with reading outside the

classroom and went on to read other texts either during or after the research cycle. Participating in literature circles also created a reading community within the classroom, providing authentic reading experiences for students and connecting them to texts that had salience to their lives.

Overall, a positive increase in student engagement was evident across the study. Both student self report data and teacher observations noted a change in students' connection to learning as well as their cognitive, emotional and behavioural engagement. Given validity concerns regarding the social desirability of student self report responses and inconsistencies in teacher reporting of emotional and cognitive engagement noted in the literature, triangulation through the use of guided field observations and interviews substantiates this conclusion (Cohen, et al., 2011; (Fredricks & McColskey, 2012; Griffin, 2007). Importantly, literature circles had an impact both for disengaged and engaged students, suggesting that the pedagogy is applicable for a wide range of students. As a result of these conclusions is clear that, aside from the academic benefits of literature circles, the pedagogy contains many of the essential elements required to develop engagement, motivation and positive perceptions within middle school students. The success of literature circles at middle school therefore highlights a number of key issues for broader curriculum development and for English.

## **Implications**

### *Student Perceptions*

At a systemic level, the success of pedagogies such as literature circles suggests that bringing together peer-led discussion, in conjunction with active involvement in learning and decision making, creates the conditions to enhance student engagement and transform perceptions of learning. This necessarily implies that we need to continue revising the systemic "factory model" (Jones,

2010, p. 1) of learning and teaching which exists at middle school toward a student driven democratic process, where adolescents have real input into their learning (Holdsworth, 2000, 2005). By doing so educators also begin to take account of student perspectives on learning, creating opportunities to transform the negative outlook of disengaged students who ‘can’t be bothered’<sup>16</sup> to positive and engaged students who ‘really want to do better with reading’ and who become ‘engaged and eager to come to English’<sup>17</sup>.

Positioning students to generate, rather than passively receive, knowledge, therefore assist them in dealing with the complex demands of middle school (Daniels, 2001; Holdsworth, 2000, 2005). It disrupts the traditional, banking model of the student-teacher relationship outlined by Friere (2000). Rejecting such a paradigm assists students in assuming a more active role, enhances creativity, and develops opportunities for engagement and deep learning (Fielding, 2011). This is recognised not only in international research but in the Australian context. Further investigation into the most effective methods of embedding these understandings in curriculum design and implementation is therefore of central importance in raising the education standards of Australian students, so that other systemic and subject specific approaches sit alongside the use of literature circles.

### *Independent Reading*

From a subject specific point of view the use of literature circles highlights a range of issues for English teachers and pedagogy. Primarily this study highlights that at middle school, complete teacher control over text selection is unlikely to yield high levels of student engagement across a cohort. The issue of text selection is therefore key (Guthrie, 2008). Previous research has determined that teachers believe they are selecting text to meet students’ needs

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<sup>16</sup> Student 42 comment.

<sup>17</sup> Student 87 and 54 comments.

and interests (McLean-Davies, 2012). Yet the success of this practice, however well intentioned, does not appear to result in the level of engagement or motivation that teachers intend (Hastie & Sharplin, 2012). A growing body of research highlights that teachers need to do more than simply consider perceived student interests in order to enhance motivation and engagement (Gambrell, 1996; Guthrie, 2001; Hastie & Sharplin, 2012). They need to take the time to understand how student views can be addressed in decisions regarding curriculum, pedagogy and reading material. Advocates of this perspective are guided by the idea that an engaged learner is “motivated, knowledgeable and strategic” (Gambrell, 1996, p. 16) about their understanding of subjects and hence has a greater prospect of maximizing learning and achievement when directly involved in decision making. Direct student involvement in the text selection process, whilst not practical on every occasion, is therefore an important component of addressing the decline in reading and disengagement from English that occurs during middle school.

### *Student Engagement*

Having said this, literature circles cannot become the sole means of text work in English and they should not be considered the only answer to the issue of engagement. Alongside other pedagogies, they are a powerful tool that can be used to reengage students in reading and in English. As a point in time activity literature circles can successfully improve engagement in school and in reading however as one teacher in this study highlighted: ‘As a one off the potential of literature circles is almost wasted’<sup>18</sup>. It is therefore possible that without supporting pedagogies that have the same core focus on voice and democracy, literature circles will only serve to have an immediate rather than lasting impact on student learning. Incorporating these pedagogical elements across the curriculum allows student perceptions of their experiences in middle school to

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<sup>18</sup> Teacher 2 comment.

be addressed, with their views feed back into curriculum design and implementation.

This study highlights that student voice is indeed key to student engagement. The traditional tendency to discount students' views due to a lack of legitimacy must therefore be replaced by a sense that students have important and meaningful contributions to make in discussions regarding their learning. The emphasis must be on the ability of student voice to build engagement in, and with, school (Fielding & Bragg, 2003; Johnson & O'Brien, 2002). Significant within this research is the finding that when students are given a voice they become more engaged with learning. Given the neoliberal framework of western education which positions students and their parents as the key consumers in the educational marketplace, students increasingly expect schools, like businesses, to be responsive and flexible to their needs. Failure to recognise this often leads to a lack of positive and collaborative student-teacher relationships, thus resulting in decreased engagement and underperforming students (Rudduck & Flutter, 2000). As Rudduck and Flutter (2000) suggest, if schools are to reflect the different capabilities of today's students they need to provide consistent opportunities for students to contribute to decision making and meaningfully influence their own education.

The impact of pedagogy on student engagement is therefore clear and must not be underestimated by educators. Consequently, the historical tendency to attribute lack of engagement to student inadequacies needs to be addressed (Turner et al., 2009). It is not student inadequacy that is the issue: when teachers utilize pedagogies which account for student difference, promote voice and create a sense of community, all learners, no matter their ability, can be engaged. The wide range of student ability and achievement levels contained within this study indicate that no matter what the student characteristic, engaging pedagogies have an influence. Those with low engagement and ability



are equally as responsive to engaging pedagogies as those with average or high ability and engagement.

Educators' understanding of pedagogy therefore needs to capture not only what teachers do, but also the judgments and decisions they make about students learning (Churchill et al., 2011). Unless educators begin to deliberately cultivate the belief that the teacher's role in the learning process is extremely powerful, attention on perceived student inadequacies is likely to continue. The focus for educators must therefore be on the power of teaching, rather than the inadequacies of learning, or learners. This approach ensures that the interaction between teaching and learning is not lost, and the power of pedagogy to impact student learning is not diminished.

### **Recommendations for Future Research**

There are a number of avenues for further research that have arisen as a result of this study. As a point in time analysis, this study highlighted the impact of literature circles. What is unclear is whether this impact is maintained after literature circles are completed or if students revert to their previous level of perceptions, reading and engagement. Longitudinal research into the far reaching effects of literature circles on student engagement will assist in developing community understanding of the long term effects pedagogical change and student voice have on engagement and learning outcomes.

A further line of inquiry regarding the impact of literature circles on engagement in other subjects is recommended. This study maintained a localized focus on engagement in English, and did not seek to investigate the impact of literature circles on engagement in other subjects. The possibility of further research in this area presents an opportunity to explore ways in which student voice can be embedded across the curriculum, highlighting the need for continued discussion about the connection between student engagement and student centred, student

voice driven pedagogies. An analysis of whether an increase in English engagement translates to an increased interest in other areas may therefore lead to further insights.

Student self report data from this study also indicates that students found literature circles more challenging than earlier pedagogies. Further investigation as to the elements of literature circles that provide this sense of challenge, and which positively impact students' perceptions of English is therefore needed. In conducting such an inquiry pedagogical practices that can be transferred to other English tasks or curriculum areas may be discovered, leading to more positive perceptions of middle schooling, and English, overall.

Finally, a discrepancy between teacher perceptions of gender based engagement, particularly in relation to male students existed in this study. Although the majority of teachers indicated a greater increase in male engagement this was not supported by student self report data. Research focusing on the specific gender impact of literature circles would be required to fully clarify this discrepancy.

## **Summation**

This study highlights that there are salient results to be gained in the application of literature circles to middle school English classes. Incorporating such a pedagogy has a positive impact on students' perceptions, independent reading habits and level of engagement during the middle years of schooling. This suggests that employing such pedagogies can begin to address the issue of disengagement, a problem that continues to be of central importance to the education community locally and globally. Addressing the root causes of disengagement, in all its forms, allows educators to reengage students in learning and improve their perceptions of schooling. In doing so, the process of increasing engagement needs to begin with those students who are the most disaffected and disconnected.

This study therefore highlights a number of issues that have implications for curriculum, educators and middle years' students. The impact of literature circles on student perceptions, independent reading habits and engagement suggest that a change in pedagogical approach at middle school may be needed. In doing so issues of text selection, student perceptions, student voice and engagement in reading can simultaneously be addressed to improve the educational outcomes of middle school students. The findings of this study therefore contribute to existing research in the areas of student engagement, reading, and English pedagogy. They are complementary to international and Australian research by prominent researchers in the field (Anderson et al., 2001; Aronson, 2001; Barrett, 1999; Bland & Carrington, 2009; Bruning & Horn, 2000; Burns, 1998; Christenson et al., 2008; Cole, 2006; Daniels, 2001, DEECD, 2001; Gambrell, 1996; Harvey & Daniels, 2009).

Overall, the implication of this study is that our current practice needs to be reinvigorated. Increasing student voice and democracy in the classroom will improve engagement so that students choose to read actively and engage in learning. This approach ensures that educators create the conditions for students to read, to make learning student centred and to ensure that student opinions are heard. Literature circles are one pedagogy that this study has found to be effective in bringing about these changes at this point in time. However, the starting point is not just literature circles but any pedagogy that has real benefits for student learning and engagement. Fundamentally, this study has a simple message: educators must know their students and be attuned to their perceptions. They must respond to the calls from students for more autonomy, more choice, and more ownership over learning in order to develop positive perceptions, increase independent reading and ensure students are engaged in learning. In doing so students are able to bring to life an author's words and engage meaningfully in reading and learning.



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## Appendices

### Appendix 1: Plain Language Statements

#### *Parent Plain Language Statement*

##### **Melody Anderson (Principal Researcher)**

Melbourne Graduate School of Education  
ph: 8344 8321  
em: [mand@unimelb.edu.au](mailto:mand@unimelb.edu.au)

##### **Loren Clarke (Co-Researcher)**

ph. 9430 5145  
em: [l.clarke@student.unimelb.edu.au](mailto:l.clarke@student.unimelb.edu.au)



### ***PLAIN LANGUAGE STATEMENT (child participation)***

***Project: “Do literature circles impact on student engagement in Middle Years English classes?”***

#### **Introduction**

As the parents of a student currently enrolled in Year 9 English at X High School we would like to invite you and your child to participate in this Masters level research project currently being conducted by the researcher through the Melbourne Graduate School of Education at the University of Melbourne.

The aim of this project is to investigate the impact of literature circles on student engagement in Middle Years (Year 9/10) English classes. This project has been approved by both the University of Melbourne Human Research Ethics Committee (ID: HREC 1237541) and the Northern Metropolitan Region of the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development (ID: 2012\_001646).

As a standard component of the Year 9 English curriculum at X High School your child will be involved in literature circles during their English classes in Term 4. Literature circles are a common form of text study which share many similarities with a book club. Within their English classes your child will have the choice to study one of five fiction texts during Term 4. These texts are drawn from both student suggestions and teacher recommendations. All texts are read by the classroom teachers prior to use to ensure they are suitable. Based on your child's preference they will be grouped with 3-4 other students in their class who have chosen the same text. Students will be expected to read their chosen text during the term, with a weekly reading schedule to be determined by each group. Students will meet once a week with their group, within their English class time, to discuss their weekly reading and their understanding of the text. The teacher will supervise all discussions and assist students with their work in the regular manner.

The research to be conducted involves observation and analysis of student participation in literature circles, with a particular focus on whether their engagement with English and/or their reading habits change over the period of the observation.

What will my child be asked to do?

Should you provide consent your child would be asked to contribute in two ways. Your child would be asked to complete 3 approximately 10 minute surveys, over the course of their involvement in the literature circles. These surveys would require your child to indicate their level of engagement with the literature circles they are involved in, their reading habits during the research period, and to reflect on the skills they are developing. It is estimated that the total time commitment required in responding to the surveys would not exceed one hour.

How will my confidentiality be protected?

We endeavour to protect your anonymity and the confidentiality of your child's responses to the fullest extent possible, within the limits of the law. However, due to the relatively small size of the participant group it is possible that other participants will be able to identify your child. In compliance with University of Melbourne ethics procedures, your name, the name of your child, and any contact details provided, will be kept in a separate, password-protected computer file from any data that you supply. This will only be able to be linked to your child's responses by the researchers, for example, in order to provide you with the final report.

Once this project has been completed the report will be published as a Master of Education thesis. This thesis will be read by staff at the University of Melbourne for assessment purposes. It is also possible that the results will be presented at academic conferences or published in academic journals. The final report will not include your name, the name of your child or any other identifying information. All participants included in the final report will be referred to by a pseudonym (false name). The data will be kept securely at the University of Melbourne for five years from the date of publication, before being securely destroyed.

How will I receive feedback?

Once the thesis arising from this research has been completed, a brief summary of the findings will be available to you by application. It is also possible that the results will be presented at academic conferences or in academic journals. However, at all times your identity will be protected and the researchers will refer to you or your child with a pseudonym in all reports.

What risks are involved?

It is not foreseen that there are any specific risks to participants in this study. Participants do not have to answer any questions they do not want to and may withdraw consent to participate and any unprocessed data at any time.

Will participating or not participating in this project have any other consequences?

Your child's participation in this study is completely voluntary. This research will in no way impact on your child's assessment in Year 9 English nor will it form part of any grades or reports that they receive. Participation in this research is completely independent of any school based assessment. Should you wish to withdraw your child at any stage, or to withdraw any unprocessed data you have supplied, you are free to do so without prejudice. Your decision about participating will not have any effect on your child's education and/or your relationship with the school.

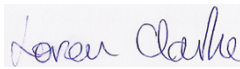
Where can I get further information?

Should you require any further information, or have any concerns, please do not hesitate to contact either of the researchers using the contact details provided. Should you have any concerns about the conduct of the project, you are welcome to contact the Executive Officer, Human Research Ethics, The University of Melbourne, on ph: 8344 2073, or fax: 9347 6739.

How do I agree to participate?

If you agree to allow your child to participate, please indicate that you have both read and understood this information by signing the accompanying student consent form. Forms should be returned by mail, using the envelope provided. The researchers will then contact you and your child to provide details about how to access the online surveys.

Thank you for your consideration of this research project,



Loren Clarke  
Co-Researcher



Melody Anderson  
Principal Researcher

## *Teacher Plain Language Statement*

### **Melody Anderson (Principal Researcher)**

Melbourne Graduate School of Education  
ph: 8344 8321  
em: [mand@unimelb.edu.au](mailto:mand@unimelb.edu.au)

### **Loren Clarke (Co-Researcher)**

ph. 9430 5145  
em: [l.clarke@student.unimelb.edu.au](mailto:l.clarke@student.unimelb.edu.au)



## **PLAIN LANGUAGE STATEMENT** **(Teacher participation)**

*Project: "Do literature circles impact on student engagement in Middle Years English classes?"*

### **Introduction**

As a teacher of Year 9 English, who intends to conduct literature circles with their class, we would like to invite you to participate in this Masters level research project currently being conducted by the researcher through the Melbourne Graduate School of Education at the University of Melbourne.

The aim of this project is to investigate the possible impact of literature circles on student engagement in Middle Years (Year 9/10) English classes. This project has been approved by both the University of Melbourne Human Research Ethics Committee (ID: HREC 1237541) and the Northern Metropolitan Region of the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development (ID: 2012\_001646).

The research to be conducted involves observation and analysis of student participation in literature circles, with a particular focus on whether student engagement with English and/or reading habits change during the research period.

What will I be asked to do?

Should you agree to participate, you would be asked to complete 2 approximately 15 minute online surveys regarding the level of student engagement during literature circles, the reading habits of your students and any relevant observations of your students as they participate in the literature circles. One survey would be completed at the beginning of the research period and the other at the end. In addition, you would be asked to record guided observations of your students as they are involved in the literature circles. Each guided observation would occur whilst students are working and would take approximately 15 minutes to complete. You would also be asked to participate in an interview with the principal researcher, which would be audiotaped with your consent. This interview would focus on the guided observations you have made about your students during the literature circles and evidence that has informed your opinion of the impact the literature circles have had on student engagement in your class. The interview would be conducted after the project cycle of literature circles has concluded. It is estimated that interview will require a time commitment of approximately 30 minutes to 1 hour and the total time commitment would not exceed three hours.

How will my confidentiality be protected?

We endeavour to protect your anonymity and the confidentiality to the fullest extent possible within the limits of the law. However, due to the relatively small size of the participant group it is possible that other participants will be able to identify you. In compliance with University of Melbourne ethics procedures, your name and any contact details provided will be kept in a separate, password-protected computer file from any data that you supply. This will only be able to be linked to your responses by the researchers, for example, in order to provide you with the final report.

Once this project has been completed the report will be published as a Master of Education thesis. This thesis will be read by staff at the University of Melbourne for assessment purposes. It is also possible that the results will be presented at academic conferences or published in academic journals. The final report will not include your name or any other identifying information. All participants included in the final report will be referred to by a pseudonym. The data will be kept securely at the University of Melbourne for five years from the date of publication, before being securely destroyed.

How will I receive feedback?

Once the thesis arising from this research has been completed, a brief summary of the findings will be available to you by application. It is also possible that the results will be presented at academic conferences or in academic journals. However, at all times your identity will be protected and the researchers will refer to you by a pseudonym in all reports.

What risks are involved?

It is not foreseen that there are any specific risks to participants in this study. Participants do not have to answer any questions they do not want to and may withdraw consent to participate and any unprocessed data at any time.

Will participating or not participating in this project have any other consequences?

Your participation in this study is completely voluntary. Should you wish to withdraw at any stage, or to withdraw any unprocessed data you have supplied, you are free to do so without prejudice.

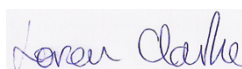
Where can I get further information?

Should you require any further information, or have any concerns, please do not hesitate to contact either of the researchers using the contact details provided. Should you have any concerns about the conduct of the project, you are welcome to contact the Executive Officer, Human Research Ethics, The University of Melbourne, on ph: 8344 2073, or fax: 9347 6739.

How do I agree to participate?

If you agree to participate, please indicate that you have read and understood this information by signing the accompanying consent form. Forms should be returned by mail, using the envelope provided. The researchers will then contact you in order to provide details about how to access the online surveys.

Thank you for your consideration of this research project,



Loren Clarke  
Co-Researcher



Melody Anderson  
Principal Researcher

## Appendix 2 - Consent Forms

### Parent Consent Form

#### MELBOURNE GRADUATE SCHOOL OF EDUCATION

##### Consent form for parent participating in a research project

**PROJECT TITLE:** Do Literature Circles Impact on Student Engagement in Middle Years English Classes?



Name of participant:

Name of investigator(s): MELODY ANDERSON (Principal Researcher), LOREN CLARKE (Co-Researcher)

1. I consent to my child participating in this project. The details of the project have been explained to me and I have been provided with a written plain language statement to keep.
2. I understand that after I sign and return this consent form it will be retained by the researcher.
3. I understand that my child's participation will involve three online surveys and I agree that the researcher may use the results as described in the plain language statement.
4. I acknowledge that:
  - (a) the possible effects of participating in the surveys have been explained to my satisfaction;
  - (b) I have been informed that I am free to withdraw my child from the project at any time without explanation or prejudice and to withdraw any unprocessed data my child has provided;
  - (c) the project is for the purpose of research at Masters level;
  - (d) I have been informed that the confidentiality of the information my child provides will be safeguarded subject to any legal requirements and that due to the relatively small sample size, it is possible that other participants may be able to identify my child;
  - (e) I have been informed that with my consent the surveys will be stored at University of Melbourne and destroyed after five years;
  - (f) my child's name will be referred to by a pseudonym in any publications arising from the research;
  - (g) I have been informed that a copy of the research findings will be forwarded to me, upon request should I choose to participate.

I wish to receive a copy of the summary project report on research findings ☐  
yes ☐ no

(please tick)

Participant signature:

Date:

Participant contact details (PREFERRED EMAIL ADDRESS FOR CORRESPONDENCE):



## Teacher Consent Form

### MELBOURNE GRADUATE SCHOOL OF EDUCATION

#### Consent form for teacher participating in a research project



**PROJECT TITLE:** Do Literature Circles Impact on Student Engagement in Middle Years English Classes?

Name of participant: \_\_\_\_\_

Name of investigator(s): MELODY ANDERSON (Principal Researcher), LOREN CLARKE (Co-Researcher)

1. I consent to participating in this project. The details of the project have been explained to me and I have been provided with a written plain language statement to keep.
2. I understand that after I sign and return this consent form it will be retained by the researcher.
3. I understand that my participation will involve 2 online surveys, guided observations and an interview and I agree that the researcher may use the results as described in the plain language statement.
4. I acknowledge that:
  - (a) the possible effects of participating in the interview, surveys and guided observations have been explained to my satisfaction;
  - (b) I have been informed that participation is completely voluntary and that I am free to withdraw from the project at any time without explanation or prejudice and to withdraw any unprocessed data that has been provided;
  - (c) the project is for the purpose of research at Masters level;
  - (d) I have been informed that the confidentiality of the information provided will be safeguarded subject to any legal requirements and due to the relatively small sample size, it is possible that other participants may be able to identify me;
  - (e) I have been informed that with my consent the interview will be audio-taped and I understand that audio-tapes, survey data and my guided observation notes will be stored at University of Melbourne and destroyed after five years;
  - (f) I have been informed that my name be referred to by a pseudonym in any publications arising from the research.
  - (g) I have been informed that a copy of the research findings will be forwarded to me, upon request should I choose to participate.

I wish to receive a copy of the summary project report on research findings ☐

yes ☐ no

(please tick)

Participant signature: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Participant contact details (PREFERRED EMAIL ADDRESS FOR CORRESPONDENCE): \_\_\_\_\_

### Appendix 3: Participant Details

#### *Student Participants*

Participant Number	Gender	Age	Ability Level <sup>19</sup>	Engagement Level <sup>20</sup>
1	Male	15	At Expected Level	Engaged
2	Male	15	At Expected Level	Engaged
3	Male	15	1 Year Below Expected Level	Engaged
4	Male	15	1 Year Below Expected Level	Disengaged
5	Male	15	At Expected Level	Engaged
6	Male	15	1 Year Above Expected Level	Disengaged
7	Male	15	At Expected Level	Disengaged
8	Male	15	1 Year Below Expected Level	Disengaged
9	Male	15	At Expected Level	Engaged
10	Male	15	6 Months Below Expected Level	Engaged
11	Male	15	At Expected Level	Disengaged
12	Male	15	At Expected Level	Engaged
13	Male	15	1 Year Above Expected Level	Engaged
14	Male	15	At Expected Level	Engaged
15	Male	15	At Expected Level	Engaged
16	Male	15	At Expected level	Disengaged
17	Male	15	1 Year Above Expected Level	Disengaged
18	Male	15	6 Months Below Expected Level	Disengaged

<sup>19</sup> Ability Level has been determined through both teacher judgment and NAPLAN data.

<sup>20</sup> Engagement Level has been determined by student survey 1, Question 6.

19	Male	15	At Expected Level	Engaged
20	Female	15	1 Year Above Expected Level	Disengaged
21	Female	15	At Expected Level	Engaged
22	Female	15	1 Year Above Expected Level	Engaged
23	Female	15	6 Months Below Expected Level	Engaged
24	Female	15	At Expected Level	Disengaged
25	Female	15	1 Year Above Expected Level	Engaged
26	Female	15	1 Year Above Expected Level	Disengaged
27	Male	15	2 Years Below Expected Level	Disengaged
28	Female	15	At Expected Level	Disengaged
29	Female	14	6 Months Below Expected Level	Engaged
30	Male	15	1 Year Below Expected Level	Engaged
31	Male	15	6 Months Above Expected Level	Engaged
32	Male	15	At Expected Level	Engaged
33	Female	15	6 Months Above Expected Level	Engaged
34	Female	14	At Expected Level	Engaged
35	Female	14	1 Year Above Expected Level	Disengaged
36	Female	14	At Expected Level	Disengaged
37	Female	14	6 Months Above Expected Level	Disengaged
38	Male	14	At Expected Level	Disengaged
39	Male	14	2 Years Below Expected Level	Engaged
40	Male	15	At Expected Level	Disengaged

41	Female	15	At Expected Level	Disengaged
42	Male	15	At Expected Level	Disengaged
43	Male	15	At Expected Level	Disengaged
44	Female	15	1 Year Above Expected Level	Engaged
45	Female	15	At Expected Level	Disengaged
46	Female	14	At Expected Level	Disengaged
47	Male	15	6 Months Below Expected Level	Disengaged
48	Female	15	1 Year Above Expected Level	Engaged
49	Female	14	At Expected Level	Disengaged
50	Female	14	6 Months Above Expected Level	Disengaged
51	Female	15	At Expected Level	Disengaged
52	Female	15	At Expected Level	Engaged
53	Female	15	At Expected Level	Disengaged
54	Male	15	1 Year Above Expected Level	Engaged
55	Male	15	At Expected Level	Disengaged
56	Male	15	At Expected Level	Disengaged
57	Female	15	6 Months Above Expected Level	Disengaged
58	Female	14	At Expected Level	Disengaged
59	Female	14	At Expected Level	Engaged
60	Female	14	6 Months Above Expected Level	Engaged
61	Female	15	6 Months Above Expected Level	Engaged
62	Female	13	At Expected Level	Engaged

63	Male	15	6 Months Below Expected Level	Disengaged
64	Male	15	6 Months Below Expected Level	Disengaged
65	Male	14	At Expected Level	Disengaged
66	Female	15	At Expected Level	Engaged
67	Female	15	6 Months Below Expected Level	Engaged
68	Male	15	At Expected Level	Engaged
69	Female	15	At Expected Level	Engaged
70	Male	15	1 Year Above Expected Level	Engaged
71	Male	15	At Expected Level	Engaged
72	Male	15	6 Months Above Expected Level	Disengaged
73	Male	15	6 Months Above Expected Level	Engaged
74	Male	13	6 Months Below Expected Level	Disengaged
75	Female	14	6 Months Below Expected Level	Engaged
76	Female	15	6 Months Above Expected Level	Engaged
77	Male	15	At Expected Level	Disengaged
78	Female	15	At Expected Level	Engaged
79	Male	15	At Expected Level	Disengaged
80	Female	15	At Expected Level	Engaged
81	Male	15	At Expected Level	Engaged
82	Male	15	At Expected Level	Engaged
83	Female	15	At Expected Level	Disengaged
84	Male	15	6 Months Below Expected Level	Engaged

85	Female	15	At Expected Level	Engaged
86	Male	15	1 Year Above Expected Level	Engaged
87	Male	14	At Expected Level	Engaged
88	Female	14	At Expected Level	Engaged
89	Male	15	At Expected Level	Engaged
90	Male	15	At Expected Level	Engaged
91	Male	15	6 Months Above Expected Level	Engaged
92	Female	15	6 Months Above Expected Level	Disengaged
93	Female	15	At Expected Level	Engaged
94	Male	15	1 Year Above Expected Level	Engaged
95	Female	15	At Expected Level	Engaged
96	Female	15	At Expected Level	Disengaged
97	Female	15	1 Year Above Expected Level	Disengaged
98	Male	15	At Expected Level	Engaged
99	Female	15	6 Months Above Expected Level	Engaged
100	Female	15	6 Months Below Expected Level	Disengaged
101	Female	15	1 Year Above Expected Level	Engaged
102	Male	15	6 Months Below Expected Level	Disengaged
103	Female	15	6 Months Above Expected Level	Disengaged
104	Female	15	At Expected Level	Disengaged
105	Female	15	At Expected Level	Disengaged
106	Female	14	6 Months Above Expected Level	Disengaged

### *Teacher Participants*

<b>Participant Number</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Previous experience with Literature Circles</b>
1	Female	No
2	Female	No
3	Male	No
4	Female	Yes
5	Female	Yes
6	Female	Yes

## Appendix 4 - Permission Documents

### *Letter Requesting Assistance*

Monday 30<sup>th</sup> April 2012

Dear Principal,



As you are aware I am undertaking my Masters of Education at the University of Melbourne. As part of this course I am undertaking a research project investigating the possible impact of literature circles on student engagement in Middle Years English classes. As literature circles are a component of the English curriculum for Year 9 in Term 4, I would like to request your approval for students and staff to be involved in this project.

This important research on the impact of literature circles on student engagement can provide new and important insights into the ways that students engage with texts and the impact of student voice. It is a worthwhile project with future implications for our students and the broader educational community.

The research to be conducted would involve observation and analysis of student participation in the literature circles, with a particular focus on whether their engagement with English or their reading habits change during their involvement in the project. Part of this study is conducted through teacher observations within class which would be conducted by Year 9 English teachers. Teachers would be asked to complete a series of guided observations, complete 2 online surveys and participate in a 30 minute interview with the researcher. Students would also be asked to complete 2 online surveys whilst they are involved in the project.

The project will be approved by the University of Melbourne Ethics Committee (ID:1237541.1) and the Department of Education and Early Childhood Education before it proceeds. A copy of these approvals will be provided to the school before research commences.

If you agree to the involvement of Year 9 English classes in the project, individual consent from all participants must be obtained. We would therefore like to request your assistance in contacting parents to inform them of the project and providing them with the consent documents.

A copy of the proposed letter, to be printed on school letterhead, together with all the consent forms and plain language statements to be provided to participants are enclosed for your approval.

Yours Sincerely,

Loren Clarke  
Co-Researcher

Melody Anderson  
Principal Researcher



## *School Approval Letter*

3 May, 2012

Ms Loren Clarke

Dear Loren,

I write in response to your request to conduct research at [redacted] High School as part of your Masters degree work.

I am very pleased to inform you that I give consent for the research to take place. I have read the information that you intend to provide to students, parents and teachers and consider it appropriate.

I am more than happy to assist you with your research by sending the proposed letter to parents in regards to their children's and their participation in the study as well as to the teachers you have identified to participate in the study.

I wish you all the very best with your study and I look forward with interest to reading your final submission.

Yours sincerely

Principal

## Appendix 5 - Data Collection Tools

### *Student Survey 1*

Literature Circles Student Survey 1
<b>1. Introduction</b>
<p>PROJECT TITLE: 'Do literature circles impact student engagement in Middle Years English classes?'</p> <p>The aim of this project is to investigate the possible impact of literature circles on student engagement in Middle Years (Year 9/10) English classes. This project has been approved by the University of Melbourne Ethics Committee and the Northern Metropolitan Region of the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development.</p> <p>You have been invited to completed this survey based on your consent to be involved in this project. Your participation is completely voluntary. Should you wish to withdraw at any stage, or to withdraw any unprocessed data your have supplied, you are free to do so without prejudice.</p> <p>The data from this project will be used in a Masters of Education thesis. At no time will your personal information be released. All participants included in the final report will be referred to by a pseudonym (false name). The data you provide will be kept securely in locked filing cabinets and/or password protected files and will be securely destroyed five years after the date of publication.</p> <p>Should you have any concerns or questions about this survey please contact Loren Clarke (em: l.clarke@student.unimelb.edu.au ph: 0430 5145)</p> <p>Should you have any concerns about the conduct of the project, you are welcome to contact the Executive Officer, Human Research Ethics, The University of Melbourne (ph:8344 2073).</p> <p>If you feel upset or distressed by any of the questions asked you do not have to answer. Ms _____ in the Student Welfare Office is available at any time if you would like to speak to her about issues arising from this survey.</p> <p>Thank you for your participation in this project.</p>

## Literature Circles Student Survey 1

### 2. Participant Information

**\*1. What is your gender?**

- ☐ Male  
☐ Female

**\*2. What is your age?**

- ☐ 13  
☐ 14  
☐ 15

**\*3. Have you had any previous experience with literature circles? This can include primary school, high school and other reading groups.**

- ☐ Yes  
☐ No

### 4. Behavioural Engagement

The following statements ask you to think about how you have worked in English so far this year.

**\*5. Please respond to each of the following statements.**

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
I try hard to do well in English.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I usually arrive with the correct equipment (books, pens, etc)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I usually submit my work on time.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
In class, I work as hard as I can.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
In class, I do just enough to get by.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I regularly participate in class discussions.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I pay attention in class.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
When a task is hard I keep trying until I get it right.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
When I'm in class, I listen carefully.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

**\*4. Please briefly explain your previous involvement in literature circles:**

## 5. Emotional Engagement

The following statements ask you to think about how you have worked in English so far this year.

**\*6. Please respond to each of the following statements.**

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
When we work on something in class I am interested.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
English classes are engaging.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I enjoy learning new things in class.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
When we work on something in class, I get involved.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

## 6. Cognitive Engagement

The following statements ask you to think about how you have worked in English so far this year.

**\*7. Please respond to each of the following statements.**

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
When I'm doing work in class I feel bored.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
When I'm doing work in class I stay on task.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
The tasks we do in English are too easy.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
The tasks we do in English are too hard.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
The tasks we complete in English challenge me to think about new ideas and concepts.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I regularly ask questions to clarify my ideas and deepen my understanding.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I regularly ask for feedback from the teacher and use it to improve my work.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I regularly plan and manage my own learning in English.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
In English I complete set tasks and extend my own learning.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Additional comments

## 7. Student Reading Habits

The following statements ask you to think about your reading habits.

**\*8. Did you engage with your set English texts at home?**  
**(2012 Set Texts: To Kill a Mockingbird or Love, Ghosts & Nosehair)**

- ☐ Yes - all set texts
- ☐ Yes - one set text
- ☐ No

## 8. Student Reading Habits

**\*9. I read these texts at home because:**

- ☐ The text(s) were engaging
- ☐ I was behind with my reading in class
- ☐ I needed to reread the text(s) because I did not understand sections
- ☐ I wanted to read ahead to see what happened next
- ☐ Other (please specify)

**\*10. I didn't read these texts at home because:**

- ☐ I did not like the set text(s)
- ☐ I completed all reading in class
- ☐ I did not remember to bring the text(s) home
- ☐ The text(s) were too hard
- ☐ The text(s) were too easy
- ☐ I was not engaged by the text(s)
- ☐ I did not have a place to read at home
- ☐ I did not have time to read at home due to other commitments (such as sport or music)
- ☐ Other (please specify)

**\*11. In a typical week, how often did you engage with these texts at home?**

- ☐ every day
- ☐ 3 or 4 days a week
- ☐ once a week

Other (please specify)

**\*12. In a typical reading session, how long did you engage with these texts?**

**\*13. Do you engage with other texts at home (ie: not your English set texts)?**

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No, I engage with other texts (magazines, comics, etc)
- ☐ No, I do not read at home

**\*14. I don't read at home because:**

- ☐ Reading does not engage me
- ☐ I struggle to understand what the texts are about
- ☐ I do not have time to read at home due to other commitments (such as sport or music)
- ☐ I do not have anywhere to read at home
- ☐ I do not have access to appropriate texts at home
- ☐ Other (please specify)

**\*15. What texts do you usually read? Please select the top 2 texts only.**

- ☐ Magazines
- ☐ Comics
- ☐ Novels
- ☐ Newspaper
- ☐ Poetry
- ☐ Non fiction books

Other (please specify)

**\*16. In a typical week, how many times did you engage with these texts at home?**

- ☐ every day
- ☐ 3 or 4 days a week
- ☐ once a week

Other (please specify)

**\*17. In a typical reading session, how long did you engage with these texts?**

**\*18. Please respond to each of the following statements.**

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
I discuss the fictional books I read with my friends outside of class (at recess or lunch)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I discuss the fictional books I read with my friends/family outside of school (at home, before or after school, on the weekend, etc)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I do not discuss the fictional books I read with anyone	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I discuss the fictional books I read using social media (facebook, twitter, etc)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I discuss the English set texts with my friends outside of class (at recess or lunch)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I discuss the English set texts with my friends/family outside of school (at home, before or after school, on the weekend, etc)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I discuss English set texts using social media (facebook, twitter, etc)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I do not discuss the English set texts with anyone	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Additional comments				
<input type="text"/>				

## Student Survey 2

### Literature Circles Student Survey 2

#### 1. Introduction

PROJECT TITLE: 'Do literature circles impact student engagement in Middle Years English classes?'

The aim of this project is to investigate the possible impact of literature circles on student engagement in Middle Years (Year 9/10) English classes. This project has been approved by the University of Melbourne Ethics Committee and the Northern Metropolitan Region of the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development.

You have been invited to complete this survey based on your consent to be involved in this project. Your participation is completely voluntary. Should you wish to withdraw at any stage, or to withdraw any unprocessed data you have supplied, you are free to do so without prejudice.

The data from this project will be used in a Masters of Education thesis. At no time will your personal information be released. All participants included in the final report will be referred to by a pseudonym (false name). The data you provide will be kept securely in locked filing cabinets and/or password protected files and will be securely destroyed five years after the date of publication.

Should you have any concerns or questions about this survey please contact Loren Clarke  
(em: l.clarke@student.unimelb.edu.au ph: 9430 5145)

Should you have any concerns about the conduct of the project, you are welcome to contact the Executive Officer, Human Research Ethics, The University of Melbourne (ph:8344 2073).

If you feel upset or distressed by any of the questions asked you do not have to answer. Ms I [redacted] in the Student Welfare Office is available at any time if you would like to speak to her about issues arising from this survey.

Thank you for your participation in this project.



## 2. Participant Information

### \*1. What is your gender?

- ☐ Male  
☐ Female

### \*2. What is your age?

- ☐ 13  
☐ 14  
☐ 15

### \*3. Have you regularly participated in literature circles during English this term? This means that you have been present in class and taken part in the literature circles when they are conducted.

- ☐ Yes  
☐ No

## 3. Behavioural Engagement

The following statements ask you to think about how you have worked on the literature circles in your class so far this term.

### \*4. Please respond to each of the following statements about your work on literature circles in English.

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
I try hard to do well when we work in literature circles.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I usually arrive with the correct equipment to participate in my literature circles (books, pens, etc).	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I usually submit my work on time for the literature circles.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
When participating in literature circles, I work as hard as I can.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
When participating in literature circles, I do just enough to get by.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I regularly participate in class discussions.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I pay attention during literature circle work.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
When I find the literature circles work hard I keep trying until I get it right.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
When I'm participating in literature circles, I listen carefully.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Additional comments

## 4. Emotional Engagement

**\*5. Please respond to each of the following statements about your work on literature circles in English.**

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
When I participate in literature circles I am interested.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Literature circles are engaging.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I enjoy learning new things in my literature circle.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
When we work on something in our literature circle groups, I get involved.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Additional comments	<div></div>			

## 5. Cognitive Engagement

**\*6. Please respond to each of the following statements.**

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
When I participate in literature circles I feel bored.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
When I participate in literature circles I stay on task.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Literature circles are easy.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Literature circles are hard.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Participating in literature circles challenges me to think about new ideas and concepts.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
When participating in literature circles, I regularly ask questions to clarify my ideas and deepen my understanding.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
When participating in literature circles, I regularly ask for feedback from the teacher and use it to improve my work.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
When participating in literature circles, I regularly plan and manage my own learning.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
When participating in literature circles, I complete set tasks and extend my own learning.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Additional comments	<div></div>			

## 6. Student Reading Habits

The following statements ask you to think about your reading habits and your preparation for your literature circles.

**\*7. Please respond to each of the following statements about your work on literature circles in English.**

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
Each week I complete all my literature circles homework	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I enjoy preparing for literature circles each week.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Each week I complete all my other English homework.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I read my literature circle book at home.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
My literature circle book is interesting.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
My literature circle book is enjoyable.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I look forward to participating in literature circles each week.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Additional comments

**\*8. In a typical week, how many times did you engage with your literature circle text at home?**

- ☐ every day
- ☐ 3 or 4 days a week
- ☐ once a week
- ☐ never

Other (please specify)

## 7. Student Reading Habits

**\*9. In a typical reading session, how long did you engage with your literature circle text?**

**10. I did not read my literature circle text at home because:**

- ☐ I did not like the text
- ☐ I completed all reading in class
- ☐ I did not remember to bring the text home
- ☐ The text was too hard
- ☐ The text was too easy
- ☐ I was not engaged by the text
- ☐ I did not have a place to read at home
- ☐ I did not have time to read at home due to other commitments (such as sport or music)

**\*11. I read my literature circle text at home because:**

- ☐ The text were engaging
- ☐ I was behind with my reading in class
- ☐ I needed to reread the text because I did not understand sections
- ☐ I wanted to read ahead to see what happened next
- ☐ Other (please specify)

**\*12. What has engaged you from your involvement in the literature circles so far and why?**

**\*13. Is there anything that has disengaged you during the literature circles so far, if so why?**

**\*14. Any other comments you would like to make about the literature circles so far...**

## Student Survey 3

### Literature Circles Student Survey 3<br>

#### 1. Introduction

PROJECT TITLE: 'Do literature circles impact student engagement in Middle Years English classes?'

The aim of this project is to investigate the possible impact of literature circles on student engagement in Middle Years (Year 9/10) English classes. This project has been approved by the University of Melbourne Ethics Committee and the Northern Metropolitan Region of the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development.

You have been invited to complete this survey based on your consent to be involved in this project. Your participation is completely voluntary. Should you wish to withdraw at any stage, or to withdraw any unprocessed data you have supplied, you are free to do so without prejudice.

The data from this project will be used in a Masters of Education thesis. At no time will your personal information be released. All participants included in the final report will be referred to by a pseudonym (false name). The data you provide will be kept securely in locked filing cabinets and/or password protected files and will be securely destroyed five years after the date of publication.

Should you have any concerns or questions about this survey please contact Loren Clarke  
(em: l.clarke@student.unimelb.edu.au ph: 9430 5145)

Should you have any concerns about the conduct of the project, you are welcome to contact the Executive Officer, Human Research Ethics, The University of Melbourne (ph:8344 2073).

If you feel upset or distressed by any of the questions asked you do not have to answer. Ms I [redacted] in the Student Welfare Office is available at any time if you would like to speak to her about issues arising from this survey.

Thank you for your participation in this project.

#### 4. Emotional Engagement

**\*5. Please respond to each of the following statements about your work on literature circles in English.**

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
When I participate in literature circles I am interested.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Literature circles are engaging.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I enjoy learning new things in my literature circle.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
When we work on something in our literature circle groups, I get involved.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Additional comments

#### 5. Cognitive Engagement

**\*6. Please respond to each of the following statements.**

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
When I participate in literature circles I feel bored.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
When I participate in literature circles I stay on task.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Literature circles are easy.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Literature circles are hard.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Participating in literature circles challenges me to think about new ideas and concepts.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
When participating in literature circles, I regularly ask questions to clarify my ideas and deepen my understanding.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
When participating in literature circles, I regularly ask for feedback from the teacher and use it to improve my work.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
When participating in literature circles, I regularly plan and manage my own learning.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
When participating in literature circles, I complete set tasks and extend my own learning.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Additional comments

## 6. Student Reading Habits

The following statements ask you to think about your reading habits and your preparation for your literature circles.

**\*7. Please respond to each of the following statements about your work on literature circles in English.**

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
Each week I completed all my literature circles homework	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I enjoyed preparing for literature circles each week.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Each week I completed all my other English homework.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I read my literature circle book at home.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
My literature circle book was interesting.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
My literature circle book was enjoyable.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I looked forward to participating in literature circles each week.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I want to read/am reading more books by the same author as my literature circle text.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Additional comments

**\*8. In a typical week, how many times did you engage with your literature circle text at home?**

- ☐ every day
- ☐ 3 or 4 days a week
- ☐ once a week
- ☐ never

Other (please specify)

## 7. Student Reading Habits

**\*9. In a typical reading session, how long did you engage with your literature circle text?**

## 8.

**10. I did not read my literature circle text at home because:**

- ☐ I did not like the text
- ☐ I completed all reading in class
- ☐ I did not remember to bring the text home
- ☐ The text was too hard
- ☐ The text was too easy
- ☐ I was not engaged by the text
- ☐ I did not have a place to read at home
- ☐ I did not have time to read at home due to other commitments (such as sport or music)



**\*11. I read my literature circle text at home because:**

- ☐ The text were engaging
- ☐ I was behind with my reading in class
- ☐ I needed to reread the text because I did not understand sections
- ☐ I wanted to read ahead to see what happened next
- ☐ Other (please specify)

**\*12. What has engaged you from your involvement in the literature circles and why?**

**\*13. Is there anything that disengaged you during the literature circles, if so why?**

**\*14. Please respond to each of the following statements.**

I discussed my literature circle book with my friends outside of class (at recess or lunch)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I discussed my literature circle book with my friends/family outside of school (at home, before or after school, on the weekend, etc)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I do not discuss my literature circle book with anyone	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I discussed my literature circle book using social media (facebook, twitter, etc)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Additional comments

**\*15. Any other comments you would like to make about the literature circles...**

## Teacher Survey 1

### Literature Circles Teacher Survey 1

#### 1. Introduction

PROJECT TITLE: 'Do literature circles impact student engagement in Middle Years English classes?'

The aim of this project is to investigate the possible impact of literature circles on student engagement in Middle Years (Year 9/10) English classes. This project has been approved by the University of Melbourne Ethics Committee and the Northern Metropolitan Region of the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development.

You have been invited to complete this survey based on your consent to be involved in this project. Your participation is completely voluntary. Should you wish to withdraw at any stage, or to withdraw any unprocessed data you have supplied, you are free to do so without prejudice.

The data from this project will be used in a Masters of Education thesis. At no time will your personal information be released. All participants included in the final report will be referred to by a pseudonym. The data you provide will be kept securely in locked filing cabinets and/or password protected files and will be securely destroyed five years after the date of publication.

Should you have any concerns or questions about this survey please contact Loren Clarke  
(em: l.clarke@student.unimelb.edu.au ph: 0430 5145)

Should you have any concerns about the conduct of the project, you are welcome to contact the Executive Officer, Human Research Ethics, The University of Melbourne (ph:8344 2073).

Thank you for your involvement in this project.

## 2. Participant Information

### \*1. Have you previously used literature circles in your English class?

☐ Yes

☐ No

Please briefly explain why/why not.

## 3. Behavioural Engagement

The following statements ask you to consider the degree to which each statement applies to the students in your Year 9 English class BEFORE their involvement in the literature circles.

### \*2. Please consider the following statements as they apply to the majority of your Year 9 English class over the past 3 terms. For each statement, complete your response based on what you have observed them do, say, make or write.

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
In my class, students usually work as hard as they can.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
In my class, students usually arrive with the correct equipment (books, pens, etc).	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
In my class, students submit their work on time.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
When I explain new material, students listen carefully.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
When I explain new material, students appear interested.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
In my class, students often do more than is required (for example read ahead, complete extra questions or tasks).	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
When faced with a difficult task most students persist.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
In class discussions, most students regularly contribute.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
In my class, students appear to be engaged.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Additional comments

#### 4. Emotional Engagement

The following statements ask you to consider the degree to which each statement applies to the students in your Year 9 English class BEFORE their involvement in the literature circles.

**\*3. Please consider the following statements as they apply to your Year 9 English class over the past 3 terms. For each statement, select the number of student who fit into each category based on what you have observed them do, say, make or write.**

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
In my class, students seem enthusiastic.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
When we start something new in class, students seem interested.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
When working independently students are usually on task.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
When I provide feedback students don't take this on board.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
For most students, learning seems to be engaging.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Additional comments

#### 5. Cognitive Engagement

The following statements ask you to consider the degree to which each statement applies to the students in your Year 9 English class BEFORE their involvement in the literature circles.

**\*4. Please consider the following statements as they apply to the majority of your Year 9 English class over the past 3 terms. For each statement, complete your response based on what you have observed them do, say, make or write.**

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
In my class, students say they find work easy.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
In my class, students say they find work challenging.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
In my class, students regularly plan and manage their own learning.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
In my class, students regularly complete set tasks and extend their own learning.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
In my class, students ask questions to clarify and deepen their understanding of topics/concepts.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Additional comments

**\*5. On a regular basis, how many students have not completed their set homework for English? Please use your own records of student work submission to complete this question**

**\*6. On a regular basis, how many students have submitted their set homework/class tasks late? Please use your own records of student work submission to complete this question**

## 6. Student Engagement in Set Texts

**\*7. In their end of term reflections, how did students respond to the set texts for Year 9 English (To Kill A Mockingbird and Love, Ghosts and Nosehair)?**

	Number of Students
Overwhelmingly positive	<input type="text"/>
Somewhat positive	<input type="text"/>
Neutral	<input type="text"/>
Negative	<input type="text"/>
Overwhelmingly negative	<input type="text"/>
Don't Know	<input type="text"/>

What comments did your students make that have lead you to this conclusion?

## Teacher Survey 2

### Literature Circles Teacher Survey 2

#### 1. Introduction

PROJECT TITLE: 'Do literature circles impact student engagement in Middle Years English classes?'

The aim of this project is to investigate the possible impact of literature circles on student engagement in Middle Years (Year 9/10) English. This project has been approved by the University of Melbourne Ethics Committee and the Northern Metropolitan Region of the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development.

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(em: l.clarke@student.unimelb.edu.au ph: 9430 5145)

Should you have any concerns about the conduct of the project, you are welcome to contact the Executive Officer, Human Research Ethics, The University of Melbourne (ph:8344 2073).

Thank you for your participation in this project.

## 2. Participant Information

**\*1. Have you used literature circle in your Year 9 English class this term?**

☐ Yes

☐ No

Please briefly explain why/why not.

## 3. Behavioural Engagement

The following statements ask you to consider the degree to which each statement applies to your class as a whole, whilst they have been involved in literature circles this term.

**\*2. Please consider the following statements as they apply to your Year 9 English class over the past 3 terms. For each statement, please base your response on what you have observed your students do, say, make or write.**

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
In my class, students usually work as hard as they can in their literature circle groups.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
In my class, students usually arrive with the correct equipment for their literature circle (books, pens, etc).	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
In my class, students submit their work on time.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
When I explain new material, students listen carefully.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
When I explain new material students appear interested.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
In my class, students often do more than is required for their literature circle (for example read ahead, complete extra questions or tasks).	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
When faced with a difficult task in their literature circle most students persist.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
In literature circle discussions, most students regularly contribute.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
In my class, students appear to be engaged in the literature circles.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Additional comments

#### 4. Emotional Engagement

The following statements ask you to consider the degree to which each statement applies to your class as a whole, whilst they have been involved in literature circles this term.

**\*3. Please consider the following statements as they apply to your Year 9 English class over the past 3 terms. For each statement, please base your response on what you have observed your students do, say, make or write.**

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
In my class, students seem enthusiastic about literature circles.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
When we work on literature circles in class, students seem interested.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
When working independently in literature circle groups, students are usually on task.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
When I provide feedback students don't take this on board.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
For most students, literature circles seem to be engaging.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Additional comments

#### 5. Cognitive Engagement

The following statements ask you to consider the degree to which each statement applies to your class as a whole, whilst they have been involved in literature circles this term.

**\*4. Please consider the following statements as they apply to your Year 9 English class over the past 3 terms. For each statement, please base your response on what you have observed your students do, say, make or write.**

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
In my class, students say they find work easy.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
In my class, students say they find work challenging.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
In my class, students regularly plan and manage their own learning.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
In my class, students regularly complete set tasks and extend their own learning.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
In my class, students ask questions to clarify and deepen their understanding of topics/concepts.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Additional comments

**\*5. On a regular basis, how many students have not completed the set homework for their literature circle? (This includes reading the required sections each week and completing any other preparation designated by their group)**



## 6. Student Engagement

**\*6. In their end of term reflections, how did students respond to the literature circles?**

	Number of Students
Overwhelmingly positive	<input type="text"/>
Somewhat positive	<input type="text"/>
Neutral	<input type="text"/>
Negative	<input type="text"/>
Overwhelmingly negative	<input type="text"/>
Don't Know	<input type="text"/>

What comments did your students make that have lead you to this conclusion?

## 7. Teacher Experience

The following questions ask you to consider your own perceptions of conducting literature circles in your Year 9 English class this term.

**\*7. What have you liked about running literature circles in your class?**

**\*8. What have you disliked about running literature circles in your class this term?**

**\*9. In what ways do you think literature circles have been beneficial to your students?**

**\*10. In what ways do you think literature circles have not been beneficial to your students?**

**\*11. Would you run literature circles in your English class again?**

- ☐ Yes  
☐ No  
☐ Maybe

Please briefly explain why/why not.

**\*12. Any other comments you would like to make about the literature circles...**

## Guided Observation Chart

Date:	Time:
Number of Students Present:	Number of students involved in study (to be completed by researcher):
Participant Code (to be completed by researcher):	Guided Observation:



The *Student Engagement Walkthrough Checklist* focuses on the degree to which students are exhibiting engaging behaviours. This observation is meant to help define high degrees of student engagement. As you observe the students conducting their literature circles the checklist should be used to rate the level of overall student engagement in each category. The first part is based on direct observation of students whilst the second part requires talking to students to determine more about their mental engagement.

There are several questions for each criterion to gauge the level of student engagement. Each criterion is rated on a scale from 'very low' to 'very high'. An overall level of student engagement can be determined using the compilation of criteria ratings.

Each time you complete this guided observation allow time for students to begin their literature circles before you commence observations. As a guide, begin taking notes 5-10 minutes after the literature circles commence.

### STUDENT ENGAGEMENT CHARACTERISTICS – PART 1

- Positive Body Language: Students exhibit body posture that indicate listening and attention to the teacher/other students. Eye contact, head position, leaning forward or backward, and positions of arms all indicate a student's level of interest and attention.
- Consistent Focus: Students are focused on the learning activity with minimum disruptions. Consider these questions to guide your observation: Are students focused on the learning experience? How often does their attention waiver? Do they often become distracted?
- Verbal Participation: Students express thoughtful ideas and answers. They ask questions that are relevant or appropriate to the task. Student participation is not passive, it involves sharing opinions.
- Student Confidence: Students are able to initiate and complete learning activities with limited coaching or approval seeking and actively work as a team.
- Fun and Excitement: Students exhibit interest and enthusiasm, using positive humour and language.

### STUDENT ENGAGEMENT CHARACTERISTICS – PART 2

- Individual Attention: Students feel comfortable seeking help and asking questions.
- Clarity of Learning: Students can describe the purpose of the activity or lesson in terms of their learning.
- Meaningfulness of Work: Students find the work interesting, challenging and connected to their interests.
- Rigorous Thinking: Students work on complex problems, create original ideas and solutions and reflect on the quality of their work.
- Performance Orientation: Students understand what quality of work is and how it will be assessed. They can describe the criteria by which their work will be evaluated and understand how to achieve these standards. Students set realistic goals which challenge them to strengthen their skills.

## **STUDENT ENGAGEMENT CHARACTERISTICS OBSERVATIONS**

### **Part 1:**

**Positive Body Language:** Students exhibit postures that indicate they are paying attention.

Very High	High	Medium	Low	Very Low	Not Shown
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**Consistent Focus:** All students are focused on the activity with minimum disruptions.

Very High	High	Medium	Low	Very Low	Not Shown
-----------	------	--------	-----	----------	-----------

**Verbal Participation:** Students express thoughtful ideas, reflective answers and questions relevant to discussion.

Very High	High	Medium	Low	Very Low	Not Shown
-----------	------	--------	-----	----------	-----------

**Student Confidence:** Students can initiate and complete the task with limited coaching and work together as a group to complete task and problem solve when necessary.

Very High	High	Medium	Low	Very Low	Not Shown
-----------	------	--------	-----	----------	-----------

**Fun and Excitement:** Students exhibit enthusiasm and use positive language/humour.

Very High	High	Medium	Low	Very Low	Not Shown
-----------	------	--------	-----	----------	-----------

### **Part 2:**

**Individual Attention:** Students feel comfortable seeking help and asking questions.

*Questions to Ask: What do you do if you need extra help?*

Very High	High	Medium	Low	Very Low	Not Shown
-----------	------	--------	-----	----------	-----------

**Clarity of Learning:** Students can describe the purpose of the lesson/unit.

*Questions to Ask: What are you working on? What are you learning from this work?*

Very High	High	Medium	Low	Very Low	Not Shown
-----------	------	--------	-----	----------	-----------

**Meaningfulness of Work:** Students find the work interesting, challenging.

*Questions to Ask: Is this work interesting to you? Do you know why you are learning this? How does this work link to your own interests*

Very High	High	Medium	Low	Very Low	Not Shown
-----------	------	--------	-----	----------	-----------

**Rigorous Thinking:** Students work on complex problems and generate original ideas.

*Questions to Ask: How challenging is this work? Does this work require you to think about complex subjects and ideas?*

Very High	High	Medium	Low	Very Low	Not Shown
-----------	------	--------	-----	----------	-----------

**Performance Orientation:** Students understand what quality work is and how it will be assessed.

*Questions to Ask: How do you know you have done good work? What are some elements of quality work? What goals have you set for this task?*

Very High	High	Medium	Low	Very Low	Not Shown
-----------	------	--------	-----	----------	-----------

### **Overall Level of Student Engagement:**

Very High	High	Medium	Low	Very Low	Not Shown
-----------	------	--------	-----	----------	-----------

### **General Comments:**

(please make and relevant comments regarding the criteria above or any further observations not covered by the criteria).

## Teacher Interview Outline

Date:	Participant Code:
Interview Conducted by:	Consent to Record provided: YES / NO
Number of students involved in study:	Length of Interview:



Why do you run literature circles in your class?

How long have you been running literature circles in your class?

Had your students had any previous experience with literature circles outside your class?

Briefly describe how the literature circles operated in your class.

How would you characterise the level of engagement in your class prior to the literature circles?

How would you characterise the level of engagement in your class during the literature circles?

Are there particular students in your class who you feel benefited from being involved in the literature circles (names do not have to be provided)? In what ways were the literature circles beneficial for this/these students? Why do you think this was the case?

How would you characterise the ability of students to stay on task during the literature circles? Was their concentration and time spent on task any different than in other English classes? (Use guided observation notes here)

How did students respond to the accountability and somewhat self directed nature of the literature circles?

Have students made any comments to you about the literature circles?

What has been your overall perception of literature circles as a teacher? What positives and/or negatives do you think they have?

How did the literature circles impact on your students' text analysis and comprehension skills?

Has there been any different in student achievement during the literature circles?

Did students generally come prepared for their literature circles, having done the required reading and associated tasks at home?

Was this behaviour any different than normal (eg: were there students who usually did their work and didn't prepare for the literature circles or who usually didn't do their homework and did prepare for the literature circles)?

How did students work together as reading groups, were they able to effectively organise and manage their work, conduct fruitful discussions, problem solve etc?

Are there any other comments you would like to make about the literature circles?



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