

*Making a Difference to Middle Years Literacy: Using Literature Circles to Enhance  
Engagement and Celebrate Reading*

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## Introduction

As the world becomes increasingly global, a range of different cultural, social, and employment conditions have come to exist. For this reason today's schools are required to cater for a wider range of students; not only providing the 'basics' expected of a quality education but also preparing students to become active citizens who can address the important social issues of their time (Jones, 2010). However, despite the fact that schools now cater for a very different generation of students, secondary schools continue to be organised in much the same way that they were twenty or thirty years ago. As a result, students are becoming progressively more disengaged from the learning which is, in theory, preparing them for this future role. Growing student disengagement therefore presents a serious problem for education systems, teachers and families (Appleton, 2008; Bland & Carrington, 2009; Hawthorne, 2008).

This disengagement occurs for a variety of academic, cognitive and social reasons and has been found to significantly increase as students' progress through high school, with a particular escalation of the problem during the middle years of schooling (Lamb, 2004; Jones, 2010). In part this attitude can be connected to the 'factory model of learning and teaching' (Jones, 2010) that many perceive to be prevalent at middle school. Research by those such as Cole (2006) suggests that dissatisfaction and disengagement with school peaks at middle school as existing difficulties are exacerbated by different school structures; changing views of teacher-student relationships; the unique needs of adolescent learners and the different emphases students encounter as they progress through their education.

This is particularly the case in the Victorian government education system (DEECD, 2001). Within Victorian middle schools<sup>1</sup> the curriculum often shifts from being 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). The consequence of this is that students often feel a sense of distance from those creating and enforcing norms; a sense of being outside or at odds with the schools goals and are less committed to the rules governing their behaviour (Lee & Smith, 1995). Problematic here is the quantity of 'meaningless, low-level school work' students are required to complete and the impersonal relationships students perceive to exist with teachers (Newmann, 1981, p. 157). Perhaps as a product of this, middle school students are quickly able to identify the relevance of material, the pedagogies they find engaging and beneficial for enhancing their

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

learning (Yazzie-Mintz & McCormick, 2012). In doing so they become quick to disengage from learning if the right conditions are not present.

Within the Australian system, the middle years have therefore become known as the stage at which 'students either turn on or turn off school' (Jones, 2010, p. 17) and have become the point at which engagement, or lack thereof, becomes a primary issue in student learning and achievement (Pendergast & Bahr, 2005; Sullivan, et al., 2009). Addressing this issue through the use of innovative and student focused pedagogies has therefore become an important issue both across the education system as a whole and within specific subjects such as English.

In middle years English classrooms disengagement manifests itself in a reluctance and resistance to reading and writing together with dissatisfaction regarding traditional text study methods (Cole, 2006; Czernianwski & Kidd, 2011). With the impact of literacy skills felt across the curriculum, reengaging students in English, and in reading, therefore becomes an important issue for the education community.

Addressing middle years disengagement from English was the focus of a 2012 study undertaken in a Victorian government high school, investigating the effect of literature circles on student engagement in reading and English. The study arose out of teacher discussions at the research site regarding Year 9 student's engagement with set texts. Anecdotally teachers noted that students were often reluctant to read independently, needed consistent reminders to stay on task when completing text analysis and were generally disengaging from English. This project used the selected school as a case study representing broader systemic concerns regarding student engagement in the middle years, both in Australia and internationally. Its aims were derived directly from the experiences of teachers at the school and their desire to improve student engagement through changes to their pedagogical practice. The research aims to add to the existing body of research regarding pedagogical practice which foster engagement, with a particular focus on subject specific practices in English. It was anticipated that this study would add to existing bodies of work in the following capacities:

- Extending extensive research on general student disengagement and pedagogical practices (Appleton, Christenson, & Furlong, 2008; Bland & Carrington, 2009; Bridgeland, Dilulio, & Morison, 2006; Rose & Acevedo, 2006; Yazzie-Mintz & McCormick, 2012) to address subject specific issues, an area where there is currently a paucity of research.
- Providing an opportunity for the voice of participants, in particular students, to be heard to gain a greater understanding of factors contributing to student engagement.
- Providing insight into how pedagogical practices can be improved in English and applied across the curriculum.

## Methodology and Method

The study, constructed as a mixed method project, aimed to investigate the impact of literature circles on student engagement in English during the middle years of schooling. As a result the following key research questions were identified:

1. What possible impact might literature circles have on students' independent reading habits?
2. What possible impact might literature circles have on improving the level of student engagement in English?

English teachers and students were sought from Year 9 at a Victorian government high school. Year 9 students were targeted as anecdotal information from teachers suggested disengagement peaked at this point for students at the selected school.

All participants were involved in an 8 week research cycle, during which time literature circles were conducted for one lesson<sup>2</sup> a week in each English class. Six English teachers consented to take part in the study along with 110 students from their respective classes; this number was reduced to 106 by the end of the study.

Participants were selected using purposive sampling to ensure that representative samples of subgroups in the population were involved. This included:

- An even gender split between male and female student participants;
- 26 student participants who represented students with low literacy and engagement in English prior to the study;
- 26 student participants who represented students with above average literacy and engagement in English prior to the study;
- 53 student participants who represented the middle band in terms of skills and engagement prior to the study;
- 3 graduate teachers and 3 experienced teachers<sup>3</sup>;
- 3 teachers who had previous experience with literature circles prior to the study and 3 who had no prior experience.
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The sample size was justified as it permitted generalizations to be made from the sample to the population it represents. It further allowed the documentation of important common patterns (Patton, 1990; Opie, 2004). In a study of this scope 5-6 individual interviews was an appropriate number (Opie, 2004). It is manageable in terms of time constraints for interviews as well as in reducing the transcription of irrelevant data that may obscure the identification of patterns and themes.

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<sup>2</sup> A single lesson runs for 55 minutes at this school.

<sup>3</sup> For the purposes of this study classification of teacher experience is based on Victorian standards. Graduate teachers are defined as teachers with 1-2 years of experience whilst expert teachers have at least 10 years experience.

To ensure consistency in the teaching approach adopted an education course was run for all teacher participants prior to the commencement of research. Although literature circles had been run at the research school over the past two years, teachers came into the research with varying degrees of experience and knowledge. For this reason, teachers were asked to follow the same literature circle structure in all classes and all classes used the same range of texts<sup>4</sup> to complete the exercise<sup>5</sup>. A slightly modified<sup>6</sup> version of the Harvey Daniels (2001) literature circle model was used across all classrooms.

Data collection was carried out across all six English classes using a combination of surveys, interviews and field observations to triangulate data. Teachers undertook two online surveys in their own time. Teacher surveys were modeled on the Reading Engagement Index (Wigfield, 2008) and the Engagement Versus Disaffection with Learning (EvsD) teacher survey (Skinner, Kindermann & Furrer, 1991) and focused on students' cognitive, behavioural and emotional engagement in English, together with their reading habits. The initial survey focused on student engagement prior to the study to provide baseline data whilst the final survey assessed engagement during the research cycle.

All students involved in the research completed three online surveys. Student completed the surveys in their English classes during weeks 1, 4 and 8 of the research cycle during their English classes. As far as practically possible all students completed the survey in the same week. The focus of each survey was on engagement in learning, reading habits and perceptions of English, with the first survey providing baseline data regarding current engagement and the following two surveys focusing on engagement during the research cycle. Student surveys were also modeled on the Engagement Versus Disaffection with Learning (EvsD) student survey (Skinner, Kindermann & Furrer, 1991).

Semi structured interviews were also conducted with teacher participants and were held between 1<sup>st</sup> February 2013 and 1<sup>st</sup> March 2013, 1 month after the completion of literature circles in classes. Each interview asked teachers to reflect professionally on the outcomes of literature circles in their classrooms and their effect on student engagement. All interviews were conducted at the school site. To preserve the anonymity of teacher participants, pseudonyms were used. Each interview lasted approximately 30 minutes and was recorded. The researcher transcribed these and a

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<sup>4</sup> See Appendix 1 for text list.

<sup>5</sup> In line with the parameters of literature circles, texts chosen for this study were recommended by the students across all classes and audited by teachers to ensure their suitability and the appropriateness of content. Only one text 'The Perks of Being a Wallflower' was removed from the texts offered due to the nature of content within the story.

<sup>6</sup> Students were given the roles outlined in the Daniels' model (discussion leader, insight note taker, discussion contributor) however were not required to strictly prescribe to these as there is evidence that strict adherence to these stifles genuine interactions and should only be used a 'transitory, temporary device' to facilitate early discussions (Daniels, 2001).

final copy of the transcript was sent to each participant for personal comment and verification. All teachers involved confirmed their acceptance of the transcripts without annotations.

To triangulate the data collected for teacher and student surveys and interviews, the researcher undertook field observations in all classes and teacher participants undertook guided observations during each research session<sup>7</sup>. The focus of each observation was on the observable behavior exhibited by students whilst involved in literature circles. All field and guided observations were conducted using the International Centre for Leadership in Education's classroom walkthrough protocols (Jones, 2009). This model provided a standardised assessment tool that was administered across the six classes involved in the study. The researcher also regularly visited each research classroom to ensure the consistent use of the classroom walkthrough protocols across all classes.

### **A Review of the Literature**

This research draws on literature in three key areas to situate current understandings surrounding student engagement within this study. The research canvased included:

- Current local and international studies regarding student engagement and engagement in English;
- Studies investigating the link between student engagement and student voice;
- Literature surrounding the theory and use of literature circles in classrooms.

#### *Student Engagement and Student Voice*

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 positively with desired academic, social and emotional learning outcomes and is considered the primary theoretical model for understanding and promoting school completion and achievement (Klem & Connell, 2004). Internationally, student engagement has become a key mediator of academic achievement in terms of both assessment results, grade promotion and student retention (Perry, 2008; Perry, Liu, & Pabian, 2010). Students who are highly engaged show better results across all 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).

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<sup>7</sup> All teacher participants were provided with training regarding the application of the guided observation protocols prior to their implementation.

Noted in the literature is the lack of definitional clarity regarding the central tenets of engagement. The resulting discordance continues to hinder efforts to research and enhance engagement through pedagogical intervention (Christenson, Reschly, Appleton, Berman, Spanjers, & Varro, 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, Blumenfeld, & Paris, 2004). To define and examine the components of engagement individually would result in an artificial separation of dynamically interrelated factors. Any successful construct therefore requires an understanding of the range of factors influencing engagement. This includes the affective conditions of the academic environment, such as positive teacher and peer relationships and active student behaviour such as attendance and participation (Appleton, Christenson, & Furlong, 2008) together with recognition of the social, emotional, cognitive and cultural aspects of engagement.

Consequently this research adopts the definition presented by Fredricks, Blumenfeld and Paris (2004). Engagement is defined 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’ definition accounts for both the importance of academic achievement and the range of interconnected factors that influence students’ attitude and willingness to participate in 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.

This definition draws on the observable, measurable elements of engagement described in the influential engagement models of Skinner & Belmont (1993) and Sullivan et. al. (2009). In both models engaged students show behavioural involvement in learning through exhibiting positive body language, such as attentiveness to instructions, eye contact, and open postures, which indicates interest and attention (Skinner & Belmont, 1993). They are consistently focused on learning and are actively engaged in sharing opinions, asking questions and reflecting on their progress (Sullivan, et al., 2009). Emotionally, students appear enthusiastic, happy and persist when faced with challenging tasks. Wilhelm’s (2007) ‘engagement continuum’, modified from Morgan & Saxton’s (1994) Taxonomy of Personal Engagement, further builds on this by highlight 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 complete these in a cooperative environment. It also appears as a desire to explain, interpret, and apply information to develop a deeper understanding and new insights; the ability to apply new understandings and skills to other areas; and willingness to critique and refine understandings as part of the learning process.

In contrast, disengaged or disaffected students are passive, do not try hard, appear bored, give up easily and display negative emotions such as anger and denial (Skinner & Belmont, 1993; Sullivan, et al., 2009). They frequently appear off task and employ work avoidance strategies such as distracting other students, make limited progress on a task and are reluctant to persist if a task is difficult.

In keeping with this a multidimensional approach to dealing with disengagement is required. At middle school disengagement occurs for a variety of academic, cognitive and social reasons however as Chadbourne (2001, p. iii) correctly notes 'middle schooling refers more to a particular type of pedagogy and curriculum than a particular type of school structure'. As such the focus needs to simultaneously be on the development of curriculum, pedagogy and assessment that meet the needs of young adolescents in a range of ways.

#### Middle Years Disengagement

Middle school students are those who spend the most time learning superficial information and completing assignments for the sake of keeping up rather than meaningful learning (DEECD, 2001). As a result they report that passive compliance and the understanding that an appearance of motivation is sufficient (Crick, 2012) leads to high levels of emotional and academic disengagement. What students and researchers suggest is required is a focus on consolidating and internalising students' deep understanding of new information and skills and on the recognition of middle school students' voice in the learning process.

Indeed, the connection between student voice and student engagement has become more significant as views about the place young people play in schools and society have changed. As a result of the current neoliberal framework of western education students increasingly expect schools, like businesses, to be responsive to the market place, including being flexible in meeting their needs. As Rudduck & 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. This means 'validating and authorising students to represent their own ideas, opinions, knowledge and experiences throughout education' (Fletcher, 2005). Doing so provides opportunities for students to become active participants in their education, making decisions about what and how they learn and how their learning is assessed (Fielding, 2003; Johnson & O'Brien, 2002).



Recent research conducted by the Victorian Department of Education and Early Childhood Development (DEECD) further supports the importance of student voice in any discussion of student engagement and builds on the findings of international research. The Department's report on student voice in Victorian classrooms concluded that students were more engaged in their learning, particularly at a middle school level, when they saw that their opinions were listened to and used to transform pedagogical practices and the classroom environment (DEECD, 2007). It further lead to increased self esteem, improved learning outcomes and more positive attitudes towards learning, leading to a strong positive increase in overall engagement.

### Engagement in English

In English disengagement occurs as students struggle to deal with the sharp increase in demands on literacy skills, one of the biggest challenges students report in their transition to this level of schooling. Due to the pedagogies utilised by teachers and text complexity prevalent at this level, many students therefore find the middle years a problematic time for literacy learning and engagement. In concert with this, students increasingly place value on reading and writing to please themselves and the ability to choose their own reading materials.

A central issue here is the influence of instructional practices associated with reading and text selection at middle school. As McRae and Guthrie (2009) note, instructional practices which promote the relevance of reading; student choice in text selection; and collaboration to facilitate successful reading experiences result in significantly higher levels of motivation in terms of reading and, more generally, engagement in English. However these practices are often absent at middle school (Pendergast & Bahr, 2005). Consequently middle years' students often find the reading tasks they complete highly fragmented and less interesting. Overall they 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). As a result, middle school students suggest that there is a lack of depth, rigour and challenge in English.

From a curriculum perspective the increased difficulty and length of reading material presented to students also becomes an issue (Szymusiak & Sibberson, 2001). The texts students encounter require them to work harder to decode, interpret and analyse meaning. In English, narratives introduce large numbers of characters and students often have difficulty switching between flashbacks, changes in viewpoint and shifts in subplots (Maclean, 2005).

Together, these factors significantly impact students' motivation to read and their engagement in literacy (Aronson, 2001). As a result, literacy achievement tends to plateau or go backwards as many students disengage from English and become reluctant to read or write even if they are able to do so (Daniels, 2011; Daniels, 2001;

Pendergast & Bahr, 2005). 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).

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

One such approach that has been posited to increase engagement is the use of literature circles. Traditional literature circles are believed to have originated in America during the 1980's (Daniels H. , 1994) and were first described by Harvey Daniels in the early 1990's. Regardless of the model, literature circles focus on student working in small groups to read and analyse texts they have selected. Students meet on a regular basis to discuss agreed upon sections of their text, with students assuming roles that guide their reading and discussion (Burns, 1998; Peterson & Belizaire, 2006; Daniels H. , 1994).

Literature circles bring together powerful research based theories of literacy education (Raphael, Florio-Ruane, & George, 2004). Since 1998 studies into the academic affects of literature circles have continued to grow. There is now a significant body of evidence to suggest that literature circles assist students to make greater gains in reading and that discussion is often purposeful and critically minded (Latendresse, 2004; Sandmann & Gruhler, 2007), often more so than when students study texts as a whole class. Furthermore, literature circles empower students to work independently; allow student voices to be heard and valued; and increase students' sense of responsibility toward their own learning (Raphael, Florio-Ruane, & George, 2004; Johnson H. , 2000; Sandmann & Gruhler, 2007).

Despite these benefits there is a scarcity of research exploring the correlation between literature circles and student engagement (Daniels E. , 2011). As a result, although literature circles contain many of the vital elements for enhancing engagement, this notion has not been investigated in any depth.

### **Key Findings**

The focus of data collection and analysis<sup>8</sup> was on the impact of literature circles on students' perceptions of English, students' reading habits and overall engagement in English. Engagement in English was measured through three domains: cognitive, behavioural and emotional engagement.

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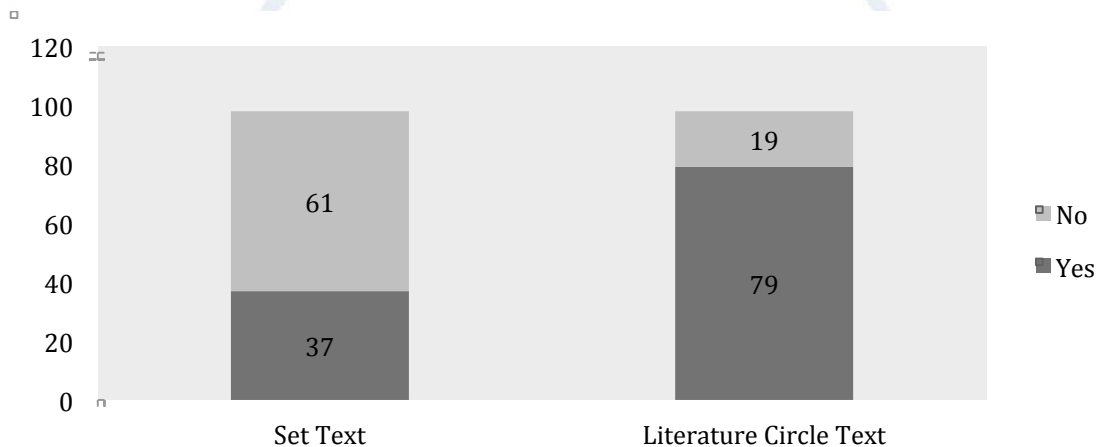
<sup>8</sup> Data was analysed according to the conventions of qualitative and quantitative analysis. Units of analysis were produced after the researcher was familiar with the survey, interview transcripts and field observations. Codes were used to identify and track themes, causal relationships and patters of engagement through the research cycle. Simple initial codes and concepts were refined and modified over the course of the research. A theoretical framework drawing on constructivist pedagogy principles was used to interpret the data.

An approximately even gender spread of students was achieved through the research 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, with comments indicating that this was through primary school reading circles. No students indicated they had participated in literature circles during secondary school.

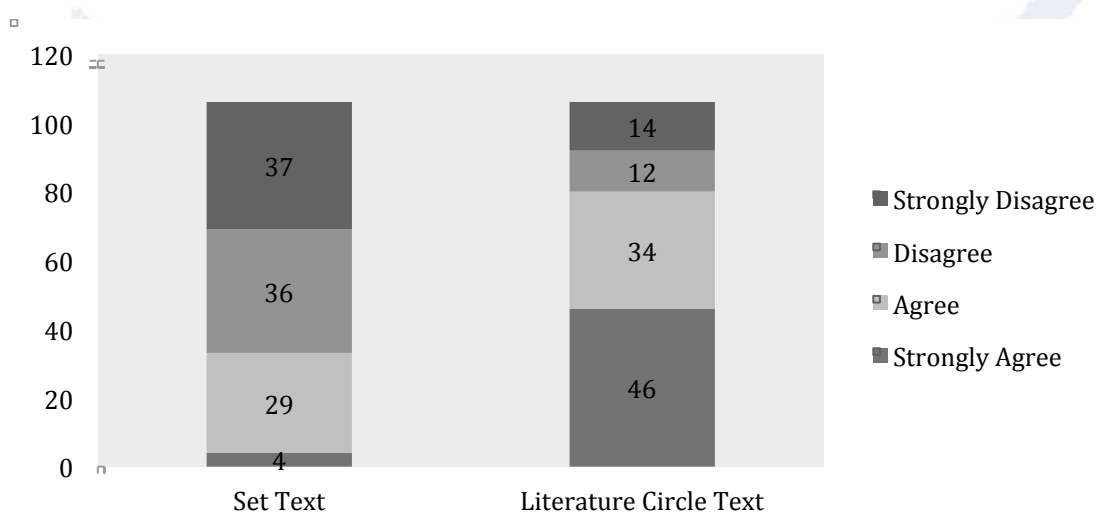
Reading Habits

Base line data collected at the start of the research period indicated that students did not consistently read at home or discuss their texts outside of class. When discussions did take place these were largely focused on students’ dislike of the texts. As one student commented:

*Student H: ‘...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.’*



**Figure 1 - Student Engagement with Text at Home**

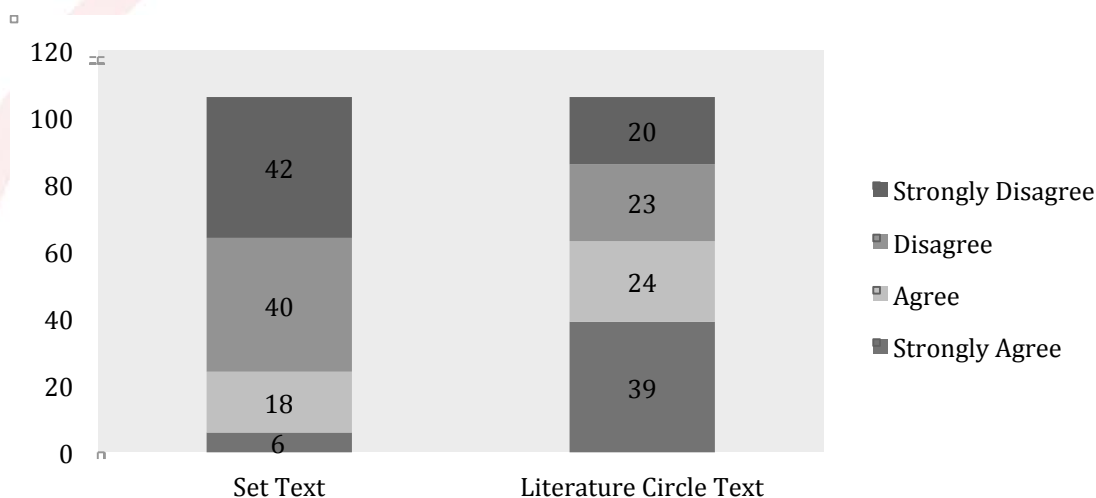


### Figure 2 - Student Discussion of Texts Outside Class

In contrast, students more regularly read their literature circle text at home and were significantly more engaged in discussions outside of class, particularly on social media sites which students used in a range of ways:

*Student A: '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 E: 'We set up a page to discuss our books and have started passing Gone around to our friends.'*



### Figure 3 - Use of Social Media to Discuss Texts

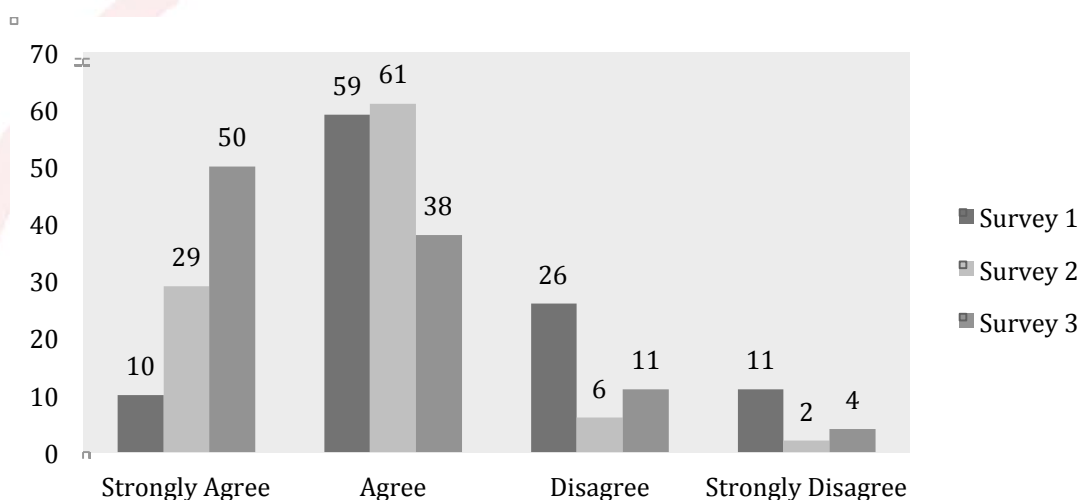
For many students the popular culture references within the texts they chose and the group nature of the task was a factor in continued reading, leading 75% of students to read more texts by the author of their literature circle text. In addition, the nature of text selection meant that students overwhelmingly selected texts that were part of a series, which further increased their capacity to continue reading. The process of literature circles therefore appears to have engendered a reconnection with reading for many students who commented that:

*Student C: 'Lit circles have changed the way I think about the benefits of reading. I am surprised by that.'*

*Student D: '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!'*

### Engagement in English

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



**Figure 3 - Student Ability to Stay on Task**

Importantly however 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. All teachers noted students were highly engaged during literature circles and 83% of students responded in the same manner, an increase of 47%. Teacher and student comments alike noted this change:

**Teacher 1:** *‘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 2:** *‘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*

<sup>9</sup> Teacher 1, 3 and 4 interview comments.

*conducting the discussion and this flowed on to other aspects of the class and the students' learning.'*

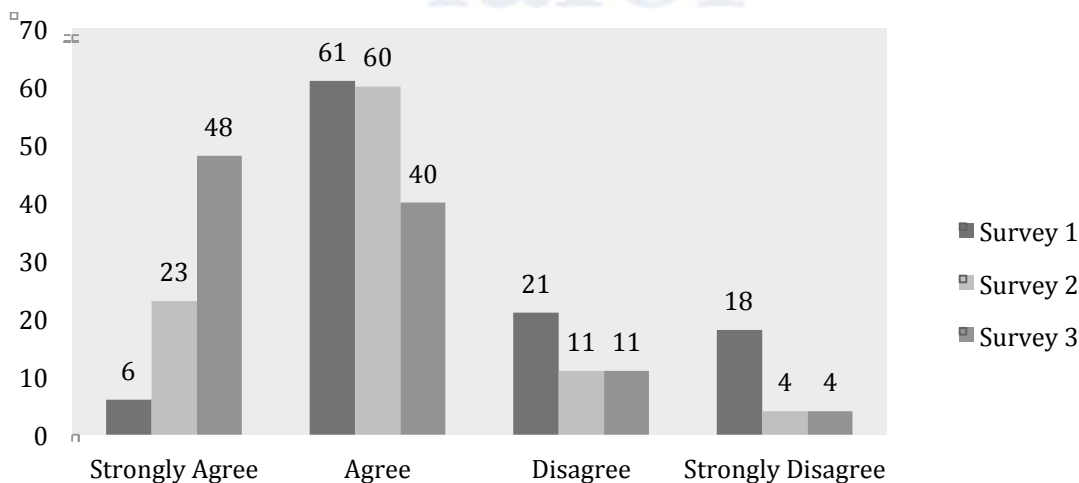
**Teacher 3:** *'During the literature circles there has been a marked difference in students' attention, organization and general enthusiasm'*

**Student A:** *'This was like electric! It was impossible not to be involved.'*

This increase in on task behaviour further supported students to plan manage, clarify and deepen their own learning. 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. As teachers noted:

**Teacher 3:** *'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 on student to read aloud to the whole group and sometimes they would take turns. A couple of them tracked down audio too.'*

**Teacher 5:** *'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.'*



**Figure 4 - Student Motivation to Complete Tasks and Extend Learning**

This was largely as a result of the sense of agency that students derived from the process of text selection and peer led discussion. A predominate trend across both staff and students comments was the effect that this had on students participation as it was noted that:

**Student I:** *'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 K:** *'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.'*

**Teacher 1:** *'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 3:** *'Allowing students the choice is actually a really powerful thing'*

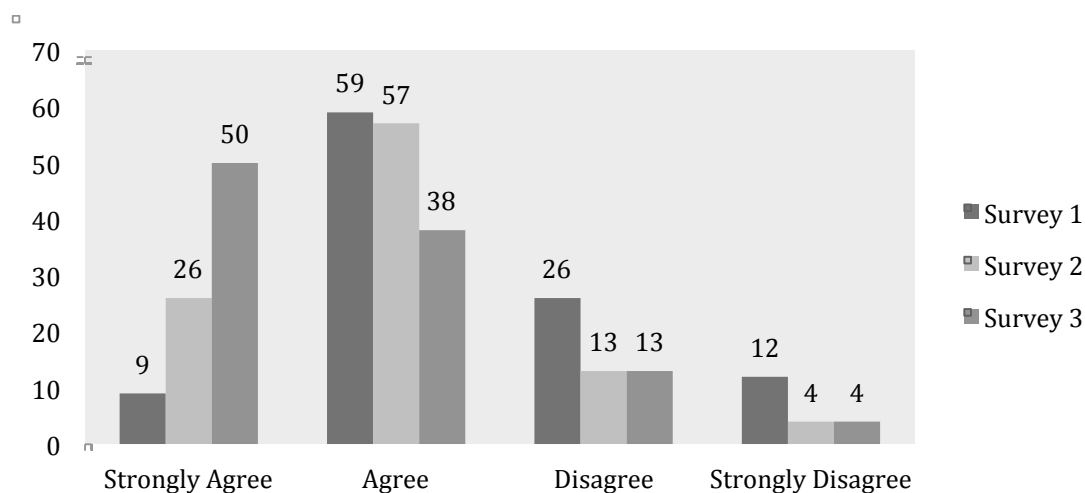
For students and teachers alike this fundamentally shifted the way they viewed the role of the teacher, to the extent that one teacher commented 'we had an agreement that my job was basically to be invisible'<sup>10</sup>.

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 that impacted on students' ability to make generalisations regarding this aspect of their experience. Further investigation in this area would therefore be required to accurately determine the perceived ease or difficulty of literature circles.

In terms of emotional engagement students reported that they found literature circles more interesting and enjoyable than previous activities in class. Student interest rose from 64% to 82% with enjoyment also rising by 28%.

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<sup>10</sup> Teacher 1 interview comment.



**Figure 5 - Student Interest**

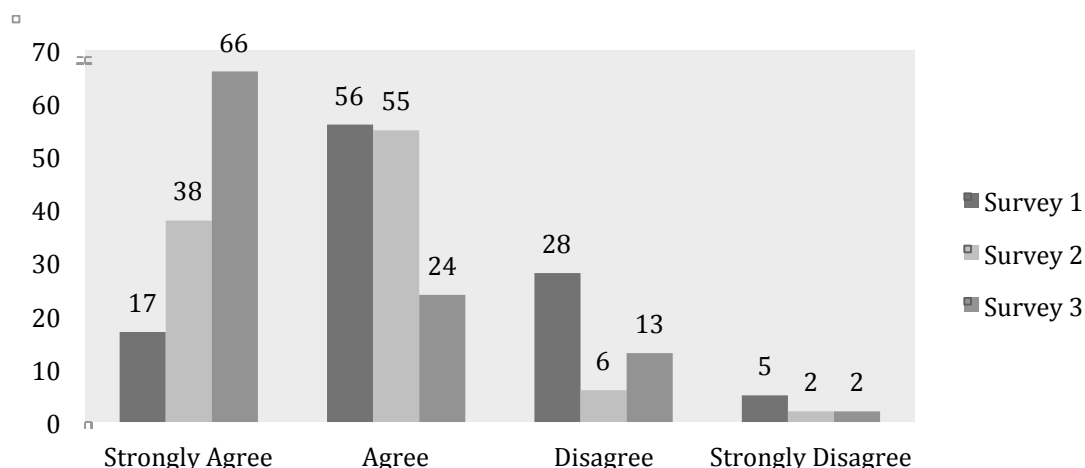
These increases corresponded to an improved willingness to get involved in class activities and engage with reading, both in class and at home. Due to this rise in positive emotional engagement the percentage of students who indicated they ‘felt bored’ also decreased by 25%. In many cases, students who continued to indicate boredom suggested this stemmed from the complexity of their chosen text, with a correlation evident between text satisfaction and overall emotional engagement, suggesting that text selection is an integral part of engagement in literature circles. The issue of text satisfaction and engagement was a strong trend prevalent across teacher and student comments with a clear connection between the two. As teachers suggested:

**Teacher 2:** *‘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’*

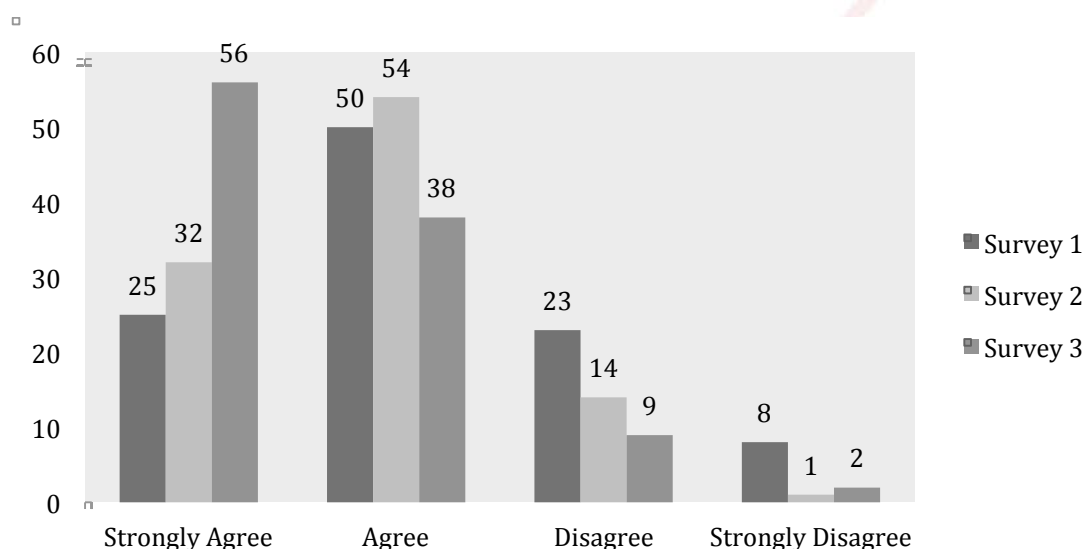
This also impacted students’ behavioural engagement, particularly their desire to work hard with an 88% increase in this area at the conclusion of the study.





**Figure 6 - 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. Importantly, this increased the rate of student participation in class with 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. This 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’. Teacher field observations regarding persistence also noted an increased student ability to independently problem solve and to resolve difficulties rather than giving up.



**Figure 7 - Student Reported (Regular) Participation in Class**

## Conclusion

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. This study highlights that effective middle school pedagogies need to focus on creating motivating learning environments where students are actively involved in decision making (Pendergast & Bahr, 2005). Harnessing the power of student voice through text selection and student lead discussion is a powerful way to achieve this.

This is largely a product of the 'pedagogy of voice' (Ranson, 2000) contained within literature circles. In order to engage fully in English students need substantive opportunities to develop their own enthusiasm, interests and opinions about what they read. Literature circles facilitate this by providing a means of addressing the imbalance between teacher assigned and student driven tasks (Daniels H. , 2001). They promote value in student's opinions, both regarding text selection and critical analysis of literature more broadly. Importantly, 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 the real life experiences of students (Appleton, Christenson, & Furlong, 2008; Bland & Carrington, 2009; Yazzie-Mintz & McCormick, 2012). Taking account of these pedagogical preferences is an important step in addressing issues of disengagement at middle school.

Moreover, this study highlights the important impact of pedagogy on student engagement. As such the historical tendency to attribute lack of engagement to student inadequacies, either developmentally or as a result of individual characteristics such as intelligence, underestimates the powerful influence of teaching methods (Turner, Christensen, & Meyer, 2009) must be addressed. This study clearly highlights that 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.

Students in this study were provided with pedagogies which address their stated interests and the increase in engagement was almost immediate. The findings of this study therefore support previous research that students learn best through group projects and through pedagogies that involve discussion and debate. These practices provide forums for students to interact collaboratively with peers and teachers and to learn and generate knowledge as active participants in the learning process.

Fundamentally, the experiences of both students and teachers suggest that our current text study practices need to be reinvigorated. The importance of text selection in terms of engagement highlights that at middle school, where students are increasingly

concerned with their own input into learning decisions, complete teacher control over text selection is unlikely to result in the same degree of engagement. As such, whilst there is no doubt that teachers have a vital role to play in text selection, and that not all decisions can or should be influenced by students directly, text selection is a significant means of increasing student voice, levels of active participation in learning and as a consequence, overall engagement in English.

As a pedagogical approach, literature circles bring together peer-led discussion in conjunction with active involvement in learning and decision making, creating the conditions to enhance student engagement. They position students to generate, rather than passively receive, knowledge (Daniels H. , 2001), assisting students to strengthen their confidence and skills in order to deal with the complex literacy demands of middle school.

Since middle school students place increased emphasis on developing relationships with peers and teachers and on group work that facilitates discussion and debate (Yazzie-Mintz & McCormick, 2012) it is important that the pedagogies teachers employ reflect this. This is not to suggest that literature circles should become the sole means of text work in English, rather that they are a powerful tool which, alongside other pedagogies, can be used to reengage students in reading and in English.

As a result it becomes clear that aside from the academic benefits of literature circles, including improvements in reading skills and the depth of text analysis, the pedagogy contains many of the essential components required to develop engagement and motivation within middle years' students.

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## **Appendix 1**

### *Texts for Literature Circles*

- Austen, Jane – Pride & Prejudice  
Carmody, Isabelle – Obernewtyn  
Carver, Raymond – Shortcuts  
Collins, Susanne – The Hunger Games  
Earls, Nick – 48 Shades of Brown  
Golding, William – Lord of the Flies  
Grant, Michael – Gone  
Green, John – The Fault in Our Stars  
Hartnett, Sonya – The Children of the King  
Hartnett, Sonya – Wilful Blue  
Hinton, SE – The Outsiders  
Lowry, Lois – The Giver  
Moloney, James - Silvermay  
Pullman, Philip – Northern Light  
Salinger, JD – The Catcher in the Rye  
Wells, HG – The War of the Worlds  
Westerfield, Scott – Leviathan  
Westerfield, Scott – Uglies  
Zuzack, Markus – The Book Thief





