DEVELOPING BOOK CLUBS IN HIGH SCHOOL ENGLISH CLASSROOMS

by

Ying Chen

A thesis submitted in conformity with the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts
Graduate Department of Curriculum, Teaching and Learning
Ontario Institute for Studies in Education
University of Toronto

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Abstract

This research examines the book club as a social context for literacy development. Students in book clubs perceive literature authentically by reading, writing and talking through a variety of interactions. Meanwhile, teachers, by observing students’ learning in book clubs, reflect on their language teaching and lead innovation in literacy instruction in schools, which can bridge to a community instructional change for language teachers.

In this research, I observed, videotaped, audio-taped, and interviewed high school students and their teacher who were involved in English classroom book clubs that replaced the traditional instructional mode of teaching literature in an urban Canadian high school. In this study, I strive to figure out an ideal structure for classroom book clubs by comparing them to extracurricular book clubs and by analyzing the diverse reading experiences of students both in and outside of school.
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Dedication

This research paper is lovingly dedicated to my respected father who has given me the drive and discipline to tackle any task with determination. Without his love and support this project would not have been possible.
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Chapter One
Introduction to My Research

This research project is inspired by my life experience: what I have experienced, have heard, have observed, and have learned. In this chapter, I describe the background of this research project by tracing my journey as a student, a teacher and a researcher. Also, I briefly introduce the research study, the context, the purpose, the research questions, and the methods, and give an overview of the remaining chapters.

My Path to Becoming a Researcher

I finished my bachelor’s degree in south-west China. At that time, I majored in Teaching English as a Second Language. In the last term, I was required to finish a research paper to graduate. Also, as an English major, I needed to write the paper in English. Like most undergraduates in China, I did not have a clue about research. What was research? How should I conduct research? What was the research for? I had a lot of doubts about the essence of research.

In my program, we did not have adequate courses or any practical guidance about conducting a research study. We did take two mandatory courses on how to write a research paper. However, even though we talked a little bit about research-related issues in those courses, they did not include enough information for me to answer my questions about the research process.

Many scholars at my university did not value the idea of including a research project as part of the undergraduate programs. They did not think undergraduates were equipped to conduct research studies yet. It was outrageous to conduct a research study with no preparation, not to mention writing up a research project in *English as a learner of English as a Second Language* (ESL).
With many doubts in my mind, I finished my first research project. Honestly, I did not enjoy much of the process because of the abstract research topics the department suggested to us (top-down suggestions) which did not make much sense to me, the negative and passive research context in which I studied, the time limitation to finish my research, and the pressure to go through the program routines passively.

Plagiarism was forbidden but still, under time pressure and with limited research instructions and skills, hardly any research was of absolutely original value. We even had to defend our paper, which I was not prepared to do mentally but somehow, I passed. Passing the thesis defence in order to graduate was the biggest motivation I had to conduct the research study.

This unpleasant memory of research drove my passion for research away until I took my first course, From Student to Teacher: Professional Induction at Ontario Institute for Studies in Education (OISE) with Dr. Mary Kooy, in which I conducted another research project about The Impact of Writing Journals on the Language Learning of ESL Learners. In that course, Dr. Kooy encouraged us to develop self-directed research questions while she revealed us to a variety of research methodologies by sharing her own research studies and experiences as a researcher herself. Most of the people in the class experienced conducting research studies for the first time, and by the end of that course, each of us presented a research project in class regardless of how much expertise we had as researchers. I personally enjoyed a lot of the process, from the development of a research inquiry to the end of the presentation, even though I did not actually conclude any structured implication from that research study.

That was a very refreshing experience which led me to understand what Dr. Kooy said: “Every teacher can do research”. Under her guidance and after my first research project at OISE, I started to realize the essence of research in general: research is about life—it comes from life,
it documents life processes as they go on and eventually it is to be applied to life. I ended up having so many questions that I wanted to research. For example, my life experience as a reader inspired my current research. Reading turned out to be the most urgent issue I desired to research, and it came to the top of my research agenda. In addition, the shift in my attitude to research stimulated me to believe that the inner voice of a learner matters and that learning is a process of self-direction.

Why Did I Want To Conduct Research in Reading and Why in High Schools Particularly?

Reading was the last area I thought I would connect with because I never considered someone who was always interested in reading from the very beginning. However, this perspective changed when I fell into reading and it changed more when I started researching reading. In the following section, I explain.

I grew up in the south-west of China, and my hometown of Meishan is a medium-sized city in Sichuan Province. Before I went to high school, my parents always said to me, “You better finish reading as many books as you can before high school, since once there, you won’t have spare time to read other than for taking tests.” Not only my parents, but also literacy teachers, commonly said this. Here, by reading, they particularly referred to reading nationally or world-famous literature because they commonly assumed that the amount of reading you did was positively related to your literacy proficiency. The value of reading literature, rather than other genres, was supposed to be particularly high, the reason for which was not clearly stated.

In the particular context of China where the National Entrance Exam for university admission at the end of the last year of high school was considered the ultimate evaluation of a student, the importance of reading was largely attached to how much weight reading was given in the National Exam. Literacy (Chinese), Maths and English were (and still are) the three main subjects tested in the National Exam, each of which took up 150 points out of 750 points of the
total. The other subjects were Politics, History, and Geography for the Stream of Arts, and Physics, Chemistry and Biology for the Stream of Science, which in combination made up the rest of the 300 points. Thus, because of the large percentage of points given to literacy on the National Exam, Chinese students had to develop advanced reading and related skills based on the standardized curriculum. Teachers and parents believed reading skills could be improved even more by doing large amounts of individual reading of canonical literary texts, which the standardized curriculum failed to satisfy.

Meanwhile, people in China are accustomed to seeing the three years of high school as a gap in literacy development because the high school students in China read for exams most of the time. The reasons people see it this way are various. Evaluation in China makes it hard for high schools students, parents, and teachers to ignore the importance of exams, especially the National Exam. All three years in high school prepare for that exam. Articles and textbooks used in high schools are not properly designed for developing literacy and other practical skills, and the crucial selection criteria for them is whether they may be chosen as part of the exam. Students are always being asked to read articles the teachers predict may be on the exam. Moreover, high school students give other subjects priority over languages as most of them think other subjects are more difficult and worth more time for getting higher grades. This leads to highly concentrated teacher-centered “training” of students and a focus on going through the texts and questions in a rotating mode to achieve the goal of a class of excellent exam-takers.

The classroom is the main learning context in which students cultivate reading skills. However, teachers try harder to cover the curriculum than to personalize their class content for students’ needs. Sometimes, teachers even fight among each other for extra time to lecture on the content which they could not finish within their own class time. Lunch time, class breaks, and even other classes assumed by teachers to be meaningless, like physical education and
music class, are taken up by formal teaching, when these are the only times students can really take a break from the intensive academic learning. Students, rather than active learners, are mechanic robots whose schedule and inner program are delicately designed by teachers, schools and parents. High school students stay in school all day long and are expected to take notes on the overloaded content of lectures in teacher-centred classrooms, having one small test or exam after another. They do not have choices or time to take breaks, not to mention time of their own to read or the opportunity to read in the way they may like. Furthermore, the pressure they have from society, their parents, their teachers and even themselves, makes learning passive and less enjoyable. The competition among the students makes an unhealthy learning context in schools. Interactions are limited in classroom learning among students, while out of class students are engaged in independent learning most of the time.

The problem is that students are blamed for underdeveloped literacy competency while they are not provided with enough opportunities for authentic literacy development in schools and they learn in a mechanical and negative competitive way which separates learners from each other. Literacy skills rarely improve by three years in high school. As long as students can still get high enough scores to go to university, most of them do not bother to change the situation.

I remember when I was a high school student my motivation for learning was destroyed by my teachers and parents. Especially during the last year of high school, doing simulation papers one after another was the only learning activity I did. I was not allowed access to anything my teachers and parents labelled as ‘unrelated’ to learning or a “waste of time”, such as reading magazines and novels, watching TV, or interacting with peers. The endlessness answering of chapter questions exhausted me and I did not get a chance to stop to think about the problems of what, why and how I was learning, even though I was aware that I did not
enjoy the school learning context and wanted something different and better. Although I survived the National Exam and went to a good university after I graduated, I have always pitied high school students and the learning context where once I suffered, especially those students who do not go to university because of the lower grades they get on the National Exam. Those who get high scores in the literacy test of the National Exam do not necessarily have advanced literacy proficiency; however, it is the only criterion people recognize as denoting whether the students are qualified to be accepted by universities.

As I grew up and developed more identities as a more critical learner, a novice language teacher and a researcher in the field of education, I kept wondering about how to make a change in the high school learning context to create a better learning experience for students and better learning outcomes. I wondered whether an approach existed that could achieve enhanced literacy development for high schools students. If there was, what is it, and how and why would it work? Why would it be important? What difference would it make? Since high school students in China are already extremely occupied with their curriculum studies, I assumed making changes like adding extracurricular reading activities would not be a better approach. Therefore, I was looking for possible changes to be made in classroom practice, teaching, and learning.

**My Teaching Practicum in High School**

I finished a four-year teacher training program in China, where I was trained to be an English teacher at the high school level. In the third year of my program, I went back to my old high school for a period of four months as a student teacher of English. During that period, I taught English, and also supported the head-teacher with other courses, including a Chinese Literacy Course. In that way, I became more familiar with the curriculum and developed a clearer sense of the problems in literacy teaching in both the languages of Chinese and English.
In teacher’s college, we were trained to use many activities to motivate student learning, which was an innovation compared to the traditional classroom instruction. More interactions between student and student, and teacher and student, should take place in class; students, not teachers, should be the center of the class; up-to-date and authentic reading materials in different forms were supposed to be incorporated into the curriculum content, instead of teaching only unquestioned knowledge from textbooks and so on.

However, it was very challenging to implement these changes in the real classroom. Teachers felt stressed about covering all the content in the official mandatory curriculum, not to mention adding more materials to the class. With more than 50 students in one class, teachers could hardly consider the individual differences among students, which made it more difficult to design thought-provoking activities to motivate all of them. To be fair, some teachers were trying hard to change the situation but their efforts were in vain. Teacher-centred teaching modes still dominate literacy courses in China. Students lack the time and flexibility to develop literacy skills.

To work toward a better school learning environment, the above analysis suggested that if there was a way to get students engaged in reading, it would be better to:

a. Include elements of new material related to the existing curriculum;

b. Engage most of the students in big classes simultaneously;

c. Provide plenty of opportunities for all kinds of interactions.

**Inspiration from My Experience of a Specific Learning Context in China as a Student**

When I trace my learning experiences of literacy development in China, I recall an incident in junior middle school, when I started to get interested in reading. I read a lot. At that time, my Chinese language (Literacy and Literature) teacher, Ms. Yang, suggested studying literature at her home once every week. With several other students, I volunteered to attend
every weekend initially for fun. Ms. Yang and her husband, also a Chinese language teacher at the secondary level, led the learning group. Every one or two months, we chose one fiction piece we liked to read from Ms. Yang’s home library, mostly nationally-renowned or world-renowned fiction plus magazines, or poems.

We read the fiction by ourselves on weekdays. Ms. Yang encouraged us to take notes on quotations and write summaries and reflections on what we read and thought about the book. Afterward, we had discussions during the weekend. Most of us enjoyed learning in that way. It was very new and quite different from our school learning. Our voices were heard and respected, and our learning needs were met. We felt more active and eager to learn. We developed a small community with the group members, had more meaningful interactions with both teachers and peers, and trusted each other and felt safe enough to share things like true feelings and thoughts, learning experiences and resources, which were very hard in big formal classes at school.

In that weekend literature group, we learned how to read and analyze fiction, what to learn from fiction, and how to connect the fiction to our lives and benefit from it. Undoubtedly, we achieved enhanced literacy development through that learning process. For me, it aroused an interest in reading and improved my comprehension skills, communication skills, inquiry skills, and writing skills. This reading experience eventually led me to think about the possibility of the development of this kind of learning context in high schools in China where most think literacy development can hardly happen.

Not long after this, I experienced the other end of the spectrum: an unpleasant reading experience as part of the English reading course I took in university in China. That course was constructed in a similar way, but I did not enjoy that learning experience like I did in the previous reading group in junior middle school. Although the two reading experiences seem
similar in construct, they genuinely differed in the following ways: (1) The level of flexibility: In the university course the class of nearly 300 students was assigned to read the same work of fiction every month regardless of expressed interest. Most of the works chosen by the team of teachers in charge of reading were considered part of the accepted canon in English literature. Also, regardless of the length of the text and the time available to the students, teachers required us to finish up one work after another within a fixed time. In other words, the students’ complaints and individual needs were not considered; (2) comparatively, the middle school reading was active, while the mandated texts led students to respond. We attended the first book club voluntarily and felt eager to learn more. However, for the university book club, we finished the readings more for grades and exams than for personal learning. In sum, the earlier experience was more informal and extracurricular study opportunity, while the latter was more a formal and mandated; (3) we read Chinese and used Chinese, our mother-tongue, throughout the whole process of the book club in middle school which made the context more relaxed and the students more open to learning, while English, a second language for the learners, was used exclusively in the university, which made every stage of the learning more complex and students more reluctant to engage; and finally, (4) the purpose of reading was differently set. The earlier group promoted literacy development, while the university aimed specifically at English language learning, mainly enlarging vocabulary and improving English communication skills.

**Book Clubs in Ontario/Canada**

In 2010, as I started professional learning in Curriculum Studies and Teacher Development at OISE/University of Toronto, I became interested in teaching and learning issues mainly because of interacting with in-service teachers from diverse backgrounds in my classes and with scholars in the field of education in my department. Since then, I have become
particularly interested in topics around teacher education, teaching of literacy, student learning, and development of learning communities, mainly through the influence of the courses I have taken, the people with whom I have worked and my own experiences as a teacher and learner.

*From Student to Teacher: Professional Induction* with Dr. Kooy was the very first course I took at OISE, which inspired and completely changed my research interests. That course was a treasure to me as a novice English teacher from China who hoped to get more professional learning and also it introduced me to a brand new concept—book clubs as communities of learning, Dr. Kooy’s field of study, which she drew from in the course. Meanwhile, I read her book *Telling Stories in Book Clubs: Women Teachers and Professional Development*, which talked about how teachers learned in groups by reading, writing and talking with each other. That clearly resonated with me. By learning more about book clubs from both the professor and the research literature, I learned book clubs are also used for student learning, especially for literacy development, as well as for teachers’ professional development. Relating to my own teaching and learning experiences, I wondered how book clubs function as learning contexts for students particularly.

Although still new to the educational context in Canada, I realized the educational contexts of Canada and China share a lot of similarities, regardless of multiple differences. For example, evaluation is a debated issue in both the Canadian and Chinese education systems. More specifically, in Canadian high schools students are evaluated by standardized tests and in secondary school, this is a literacy test (Grade 10), which is similar to what Chinese students have as part of the National Exam.

When I first heard of book clubs, I became curious about this kind of learning community but did not think I had experienced it before when I was a student in China until I observed a real one in a local high school as part of Dr. Kooy’s research project. It consisted of
two teachers and about 10 students from different cultural backgrounds. It differed from the traditional school learning; students talked freely and far more than they usually do in classes, even more than the teachers, which was very unusual to me. Most of the time, the teachers stepped back and let students facilitate the group, raising their own questions and leading informal discussions. They talked about a range of issues and ideas in the book and their lives.

Both teachers and students in that club spoke highly about its impact on their learning and even teaching. This never happened to me when I was a high school student and impressed me a lot, and I started imagining developing the same learning context in high schools in China.

**Book club connections**

Surprisingly, I found out that the process of the book club was very similar to the reading group I had in junior middle school except that all the students read the same book in that Canadian book club and the target languages differed. That was how I got a vague notion of the definition of a book club. The group I had in junior middle school was a book club with slight differences. I started questioning the significance of a book club; how a book club impacted learning; whether all book clubs work the same way and if so, what that way is.

**Connections between the Chinese and Ontario/Canada Contexts of Literacy Development**

Talk about the context of literacy development in Ontario can hardly exclude the *Ontario Literacy Test*, as I learned from my Canadian colleagues who teach high school English. Issues around assessment and evaluation in schools are never out of the conversation in OISE classes. For high school English, the core curriculum, teaching and learning facilitate achievement of high marks on the *Ontario Literacy Test*.

**Ontario Literacy Test**

The first time I heard about the *Ontario Literacy Test* was in my first class at OISE. I heard more and more about it in other classes too, and most of the comments were negative. A
lot of teachers in my class complained about all sorts of things related to this test which every high school student in Ontario must pass for graduation. The test takes place once a year and each high school student has only two opportunities to take it. If they cannot pass it after two times, they have to take the Ontario Literacy Course to graduate.

I learned that most high school teachers and students become stressed about the test. The high school English curriculum tends to prepare students for this provincial test. I was very curious and wondered whether the literacy test was as scary as the teachers described. This test seemed as important to Ontario high school students as the National Exam to Chinese students.

Afterwards, I learned more about the test and the attitudes among high school teachers and students during my visit at the same school where I observed my first Canadian book club. This was in an urban high school in Toronto, which I call Downtown Collegiate in this paper.

**Researching in the Canadian context**

For the current study, I focused on the Canadian context as I wanted to get involved in an authentic Ontario literacy context. This may benefit my future research plans to compare the contexts of literacy development between high schools in China and Ontario. I started my visits to Downtown Collegiate in late February 2012 after I received approval from the University of Toronto Ethics Board.

As an international student in Canada, I did not know a network of teachers in school boards in Ontario. Dr. Kooy introduced me to Sandra (teacher who had been in her studies) in April 2010 when we went to Downtown Collegiate to visit her school-based lunch-time book club. I contacted Sandra in December 2011, asking about the possibility of visiting her school for my research. She welcomed me. So did her new principal. She planned to use book clubs for all of her three classes in the term from March to June 2012, which was the exact research context I was looking for.
Downtown Collegiate has been using book clubs since 2004 or earlier. They were introduced by Sandra and supported by Dr. Kooy. At that time, Sandra, as a master’s student of Dr. Kooy and also a participant in Dr. Kooy’s research project about teacher learning in book clubs, was inspired to develop an extracurricular book club in her school at lunch time so as to create a new outlet to encourage active learning in a student-centered learning context. Meanwhile, a school-based community of learning has expanded in recent years within the English department as the book club phenomenon has flourished. Sandra also mentioned that more and more English teachers got involved in book clubs over the years and some of them started to convert book clubs into English/Literacy classrooms. Meanwhile, Sandra introduced me to the fact that students in her school came from multicultural backgrounds and had a big diversity in reading abilities with a lot of ESL learners and some Special Education students.

The three courses Sandra taught included English at the Applied/College Level, English at the University Level, and the Ontario Literary Course. Book clubs took up an important section in each of the three courses, and the details of the classes and participants are described in Chapter Three, Methodology.

I started visiting the classes before the book clubs began. In this way, I wanted to get familiar with the teacher and students and know more about the situation of the school, including the students’ learning abilities, the curriculum, the literacy test. I took notes while I observed the classes and after talking with the students and teachers. I visited the school every day during the weekdays since the end of February. By doing this, I assumed that student would act typically despite my presence in the book clubs.

**Purpose of Research**

This research aims to examine how book clubs in secondary classrooms influence literacy development among students from multicultural backgrounds, and provides the
“intellectual, social, and material resources” (Kooy, 2006) for the construction of authentic learning contexts—book clubs as an alternative approach to literacy instruction in school practices to achieve “the goal of enhanced literacy development for all” (McMahon & Goatley, 1997).

**Research Questions**

Based on my observation of the school-based book club, my reflections on my book club learning experiences in China and the existing research studies, I came up with the following research questions which I wanted to examine closely using book clubs in a Canadian high school:

1. What kind of learning context does a book club present? (What connections exist between learning through book clubs constructs and social learning contexts?)
2. What aspects of a book club have a beneficial impact on literacy development for learners? What are the benefits?
3. What role do teachers play in book clubs? How does it differ from teachers’ roles in traditional school learning contexts and does it make any difference in students’ literacy development?
4. Does the presence of teachers in book clubs have an impact on teacher learning and literacy instruction? If so, how, and what impacts can be identified?
5. How can book clubs be applied to classroom teaching? How is that different from using book clubs as an extracurricular activity? What are the challenges of in-class book clubs?

**Methodology**

Observation, surveys, interviews, audio/videotaped and field notes were used as the main methods to collect data. Also, data were collected from informal discussions with teachers and students. Data consisted of: (1) Audio-taped and video-taped book club discussions; (2) Written Reading Response Logs (*RRLs*) from students for the book clubs; (3) Key words and written responses to a list of interview questions; (4) Audio-taped and transcribed formal
interviews with students/the teacher; (5) Classroom and book club observations recorded electronically/manually; (6) Field notes from informal conversations with students/teachers.

**Layout of the Thesis**

The thesis consists of five chapters. Chapter One stages and introduces the research. Chapter Two provides a Literature Review of the existing research and findings about book clubs, reading, learning in social contexts, and the relationship among the components of book clubs. It concludes with the gaps in the past research, describes possible issues to pursue and research, and clarifies the significance of the current research. Chapter Three details a description of research methods: the location of the research, the participants and the data (its collection and analysis). Chapter Four presents the findings of the research and includes a careful analysis. Chapter Five, the last chapter, consists of the researcher’s interpretation and reflection on the findings and explores the implications for the role of book clubs in multicultural classrooms and makes further recommendations for new research.
Chapter Two
Literature Review

Background and Context of the Study

Reading, text, literature

What is reading and why do we read?

Reading is a way to know the world (Kooy, 2006). We read syllables, words, and sentences to make meaning of the world. Through critical reading, we build knowledge within our minds to develop a world for ourselves. We read to connect ourselves with others and to the outside world. We read to know what the current world is like and to keep ourselves updated. In addition, reading is also seen as a type of problem solving (Adam, 1986, 103). The process of problem solving is carried out by filling in the text with what is lacking or needed in it that is also felt by the reader, for example, when there is “an affective structure in the text which is relevant to the reader’s life” (Adam, 1986, 104).

As an ESL learner, I always looked at “reading as a way to build vocabulary and learn languages” (Matsuoka & Hirsch, 2010; Horst, 2005; Laufer, 2003). Reading was the major source of vocabulary growth in both L1 (Matsuoka & Hirsch, 2010) and L2 (Horst, 2005) for me, and it was also of great importance in the development of language proficiency in general (Horst, 2005) as I was taught in University as a major in Teaching English as a Foreign Language. Therefore, I suppose that the meaning students assign to reading, and students’ valuation of reading and their predilection to read are largely influenced by their school experience. Nevertheless, my assumptions about the importance of reading were limited to building vocabulary and developing language proficiency. This did not changed until the last two years when I entered OISE and read more research literature around reading and literacy issues, and constantly interacted with scholars and researchers in these areas.
What is text?

The definition of text in a broader sense includes not only written forms such as novels, newspapers, and fairy tales, but also contains oral, visual and virtual forms of language expression, such as television programs, online media (Adam, 1986, 3). Text is “a coherent, integrated structure that depends upon the dramatic structure of language” which offers “directional indicators on where to go to find its coherence, either in the text itself or externally in the reader’s experience” (Adam, 1986, 105). Meaning is grasped from a text when the social world presented by both the reader and the text are actively connected to each other, and literature is one aspect of this social world (Adam, 1986, 5). In this research study, I focus on written not oral text, and on novels particularly. Novels, no other genres of literature, play a central role in the learning context of book clubs. (More details about this are described later in this chapter.)

Stating the problem

Reading in school

In school, reading is usually taught as a part of the English/Language Arts classes, one of the most important mandatory subjects in school. The ultimate purpose of literacy courses in school is to prepare students to become critical thinkers with advanced reading skills in a complicated society (Rosenblatt, 1983). However, the current learning context in schools separates students from the outside world (Barnes, 1990).

School reading materials are usually chosen based on curriculum and test guidance rather than students’ interests and needs, which results in less engagement by students and a passive attitude on their part towards their learning. This also limits students’ exposure to authentic texts. Reading for school is usually work that “does not do anything with the students in any personal way”, and in which the “students feel distracted instead of feeling involved”,


which negates the fun of reading. Therefore, most students and even some teachers think that school-assigned readings are “have-to’s”, not “want-to’s” (Atwell, Vasey, 1998).

School curriculum often emphasizes “hierarchies of skills to be learned, often in elaborate scope and sequence charts, and teaching testing emphasize those skills—the parts rather than the whole” (Langer & Applebee, 1987). Also, the activities and exercises in school readings predominantly emphasize review and evaluation (Langer & Applebee, 1987). Evaluation of student learning largely depends on the exercises and activities that “accompany commercially published curriculum materials” (Langer & Applebee, 1987). Reading texts in school are rarely updated and are repeatedly used for years regardless of individual differences in students and changes in the outside world. David Booth once commented on school reading within Ontario when he was invited for an interview with a writer from Education Today, saying that “Other kinds of literacy should be introduced into high schools as not much change has been made to how the novel is taught, also student have been ‘stuck with the one novel a year round, and it is a novel written in the 1940s or 50s, or even two centuries ago’” (Schofield, 2006).

School reading often lacks materials as quality that labels text as communication from one person to another. It also neglects the dialogue between the reader and the text. Rather than speaking to a reader, the style of school reading materials creates a greater distance between the reader and the information in a text, a distance that may inhibit a reader’s construction of knowledge from the text (Beck, McKeown, & Worthy, 1995). The students’ voice is not heard in most school learning contexts, and they do not have a choice of what they read. “Students have historically been left out of the dialogue on learning” (Kooy & Colarusso, 2012) and their uses of language are very limited in school learning contexts (Barnes, 1990). Teachers assume that private reading has an authentic quality that cannot be matched in a public setting like
school and continue to emphasize that reading in private is a world apart from reading in school (Atwell-Vasey, 1998).

Meanwhile, due to an overload of teaching tasks and curriculum content, most high school teachers rarely reflect on or revise their reading instruction; instead, they stick to a rather mechanical model that tries to spoon-feed students with target knowledge and reading skills derived from the readings. Instructional change has not been practiced when it conflicts with institutional values, particularly as those values are shown in the testing system (Langer & Applebee, 1987). In this traditional teacher-centered mode, teachers are often ask a list of prepared questions adopted from the curriculum guidelines, while students are supposed to reply to those questions with official answers (Kooy, 1991). In this case, teachers retain “the role of planner and initiator of classroom activities and are viewed as the provider of information traditionally”. This model of instruction emphasizes the teacher as transmitter of knowledge, rather than the students as “active agents who must interpret and reinteract what they are learning”; it emphasizes testing and evaluation, rather than work in progress; and it “emphasizes declarative rather than procedural knowledge (knowing that rather than knowing how)” (Langer & Applebee, 1987). As a result, literacy may not necessarily be a tool for gaining knowledge or for communication but rather a series of events that must be endured (Jackson, 2005). This rote method of classroom learning leaves no space for more interaction between readers and texts, and among teachers and students, which actually conflicts with the ultimate goal of cultivating critical readers.

**Teaching of literature in school**

Literature instruction remained stuck in the past decades, with little thought of what counts as success in literature classes (Langer, 1990). The traditional approach to literature teaching still dominates in schools, especially in inner city schools, which conflicts with the aim
of achieving democratic (Dewey, 1916) and humanistic goals (Rosenblatt, 1983) in education as in this approach literary learning “is treated as primarily a body of knowledge about literary works rather than as a series of experiences” (p.71). Teachers of literature focus superficially on the art of words and literary matters as independent objects without relating them to students’ life experiences or drawing lessons from the literature for social relations in the real world (Rosenblatt, 1983; Atwell-Vasey, 1998). The teaching of literature also largely neglects the role of literature in the development of the sharp and critical mind (Langer, 1990).

**Specific context in Ontario high schools—How do I situate my study?**

**General context in Ontario high schools**

High school students in Ontario are mostly assigned readings by teachers following a curriculum delivered in a top-down method. Due to the pressure of passing the Ontario Secondary School Literacy Test, high schools in Ontario tend to use a curriculum compatible with the test requirements. In-class activities often consist of mock test questions. Students mostly read specific plays by Shakespeare and short stories in assigned books. Not only do students not have enough choices of readings, but also they do not have an adequate total amount of reading, especially compared with the amount at the elementary level. However, reading theories have not been fully proved in high schools, compared with the earlier grades in schools (Rosenblatt, 1991).

The schools and teachers all have their reasons for valuing of the curriculum: the Ministry of Education believes the designed curriculum will result in the best student learning outcomes, which can guide students both to pass the Literacy Test and succeed in their future learning or career; teachers generally feel pressure to complete the demanding workload expected in their classes. Meanwhile, many activities unrelated to learning interrupt the normal teaching schedule, which makes it harder to finish the curriculum. Following the curriculum is a
way to guarantee teaching to schedule and it makes it easier to keep students on their regular tasks. Do students agree with the above perspectives? How do students like the school reading context, such as the reading materials, the instruction? How would students want to change the school reading context if it were open to student voices?

My research site—an urban high school in Toronto, Ontario

Downtown Collegiate is an urban public high school in Toronto, Ontario, which shares the typical issues of most Ontario high schools. Some teachers at this school began to adopt book clubs as an extracurricular activity a couple of years ago with a realization of the problems in school learning contexts related to reading, and the value of book clubs for literacy development (Kooy, 2012). Students participated voluntarily in book clubs focused on novel reading during the lunch hour once a month or every other month, which created more opportunities for students of all grades to read. Every semester, participants chose a book from a list they had proposed, read the book on their own, and then met to talk about the book. Meanwhile, no major changes were made in the content of the curriculum or the traditional teacher-centered model of instruction in class. As the reputation of the book clubs spread, more and more teachers got involved in this activity. They gathered together voluntarily in spite of time limitations, study stress, and other restrictions. Having one meeting once a month or even less frequently seemed not enough for learning, and neither did one or two meetings of 30 minutes per semester meet their needs. However, there was a question of how to make more time for book clubs and get more students involved in them without interfering with their other school activities.

Since my first observation of the book club at Downtown Collegiate, I could not get the image of a group of students discussing a novel out of my mind. The strong eagerness of the students to read and the heated dialogues among them made me very excited and inspired me to
think constantly about questions like: How can we involve more students in book clubs? Where can we find more time for book clubs in schools if they are so beneficial?

With my Chinese background, I could not ignore the availability of time for book clubs in school because high school students in China are under extreme pressure to prepare for the National Exam throughout three years and it is almost impossible to spare any time for extra-curricular reading activities. School life occupies Chinese high school students, no matter whether they are inside or outside school. Here in Toronto, although high school students have fewer school hours compared to high school students in China, time is still an issue considering students’ family and other personal concerns. Many students have to work after school to support their families as well as finish homework. Plus, teachers are not likely to assist learning after school, as they also have a life outside of work. Thus, adding tasks to students outside school is not an ideal solution.

Given the situation outlined above, I followed through on the idea of using book clubs in class, making most of the school time for book clubs. What would it look like to use book clubs in class? While I wondered about this question, a female teacher in Dr. Kooy’s Communities of Learning class used book clubs in her elementary-level class under the inspiration of what she learned from the course. I became very interested to hear whatever she shared about her experience of using book clubs in class for the first time, replacing her traditional model of instruction and using new reading materials instead of mandatory content from the curriculum. All the surprises she heard from her students and the way this experience benefited her professional development made me very curious and I could not wait to start my own study.

At the end of 2011, as I struggled with where to observe and do my research, Dr. Kooy suggested that Sandra, the teacher whom I had met at the initial book club, planned to use book
clubs for all three of her courses. I was thrilled finally to gain learning experience in book clubs with high school students in Ontario.

Conceptual Framework

Reading and text (literature)

How do adolescents read?

Reading is “a social process—a means to participate in and establish a community or social group” (Bloome, 1994). The social nature of reading determines that “how we interpret a text, and how we use written language depends a great deal on the group we are in and on what we are doing” (Bloome, 1986). “We cannot separate what is to be known from ourselves; also we cannot separate what is to be known from those around whom we have formed ourselves” because we come to know something as we form ourselves around it (Atwell-Vasey, 1998). Reading is also regarded as an “embodied action” (Sumara, 1996), meaning that reading by interweaving readers’ personal experiences with each other benefits the construction of knowledge (Bandura, 1977) and the development of thoughts (Vygotsky, 1992). From a cognitive perspective, reading proceeds as a reader forms a representation of what is read by connecting text information with outside knowledge and continually updating the representation as more text is encountered (Beck, McKeown, & Worthy, 1995).

The place of written literature in learning and reading

Literature is “a promising medium for extensive reading for language learning purposes” as literary texts are usually “rich with innumerable authentic tokens of language for the development of reading, writing, speaking and listening skills” (Khatib, Rezei & Derakhshan, 2011). Because of its interesting nature, its authenticity and the meaningful context it provides, students get highly motivated in the process of literature reading (Horst, 2005), which benefits language learning and learning as a whole. Literature can touch one’s
own personality while “concentrating on the more analytical, more appropriate and fruitful realm of language” (Atwell-Vasey, 1998). “Literature may be one path to greater literacy, but studying literature has to be done with engaging material, and with active, physical, project-based inquiry” (Schofield, 2006).

Writing

The relation between thought and word (Vygotsky, 1992) as a continual movement back and forth emphasizes the importance of writing in the process of learning. Activities involving writing lead to better learning than activities involving reading and studying only (Langer & Applebee, 1987), as upon writing and closer reflection, student analyze deeper within the texts and obtain more meaning from them. This is a way to take discussion of the text to another level of thinking, which is more reflective (Jackson, 2005). Also all students, and particularly those who are reluctant to speak up during class discussion, get a greater chance to express their opinions when writing out their individual thoughts (Jackson, 2005). In addition, writing can help students to learn how to think better, organize better and ask better questions as written language has been proven to make a large contribution to content learning and support the more complex kind of reasoning that accounts for successful performance (Langer & Applebee, 1987).

Social models of learning—the book club phenomenon

The four elements framing a typical book club (McMahon & Raphaed, 1997)—community sharing, reading, writing and talking—make the book club program a promising approach for literacy instruction as it matches the basic theories of building a social learning context. Instructional support in book clubs guarantees access to the texts and opportunities to participate in all aspects of learning for all students (McMahon & Goatley, 1997). This encourages and enables them to “make an active and critical attempt to relate texts to their own
concerns and understanding of the world” (Barnes, 1990). A reader engaged in active processing is highly attentive to the information and ideas presented in a text; he or she reacts to those ideas and deals with them in order to make them meaningful (Beck, McKeown, & Worthy, 1995). The power of the book club also lies in the members’ voices and in their own learning (Pelletier, 1993). Students learn through generating multiple interpretations and realize that a text’s meaning is not fixed (Jackson, 2005). In book clubs, students are authors of their own questions and strategies for reading rather than just answering questions posed by others far removed from the particularities of individual classrooms (Forest, 1994).

As book clubs allow more “voice and choice” (Daniels, 1994), and provide opportunities for students to participate in meaningful, authentic, and personal conversations about literature, they have become an effective approach to reading and discussing literature in classroom (Daniels, 1994; Harste, Short, and Burke, 1988; McMahon & Rapheal, 1997).

**A community of learning**

The book club as a learning community allows learners to have more interactions with all members, both teachers and peers, which enables the maximization of the zone of proximal development (Vygotsky, 1992) of learners. This happens through observing or working collaboratively with more knowledgeable others in dealing with a problem around literary texts. Book clubs provide an intellectual social forum where people can share ideas, thoughts, feelings and reactions to a piece of literature; as people interact with each other they are continuously building and rebuilding literacy (Jackson, 2005). Through their interactions with the text and with one another, the members of the book clubs begin to develop an awareness of similarities among themselves, their colleagues, and their students despite their different cultural backgrounds (Flood and Lapp, 1994).
**Reading and writing**

Book clubs provide learners the opportunity to engage in a variety of reading activities (McMahon & Raphaed, 1997) (reading individually, with partners and in small groups) through which a lot of literary skills and strategies can be applied, like personal reading skills, communicative skills, comprehensive skills and interpretation skills.

Writing in book clubs as an alternative way to respond to literature other than verbal language provides learners a space to develop thoughts as unique readers entering into the world of reading, people who become part of that world instead of being privileged visitors (Smith, 1994). Also, writing in book clubs as a way to support both reading and discussion (McMahon & Raphaed, 1997) is an excellent method for encouraging members to reflect on their readings and on the follow-up discussions (Flood & Lapp, 1994).

“The vital link between reading and writing” is rooted in that fact that “both reading and writing are based upon the structure of language which allows, in a more or less constraining way, possible reading” (Adam, 1986, 38).

**Discussion**

The shifting and social nature of the discussion in book clubs can lead to a more focused interest in the oral dialogue that follows the reading (Kooy, 1991). There is no singularity of voice, but rather voice involves the simultaneous presence of social, cultural, and political influences that have contributed to the speaker’s perspective and world view (Beck, McKeown, & Worthy, 1995). Students’ commentary enables teachers to see the texts from a different perspective. Students’ choices of discussion topics demonstrate the ideas they bring to the story and the ways they make meaning out of what they read as individual authors of their own texts of writing (Jackson, 2005). Critical literacy comes into play not just in the multilayered awareness and interpretation of texts but in talk around texts (Wallace, 1998). Students’
understandings of texts continue to change and develop during discussion (Langer, 1990) and they feel more willing to engage in book clubs and draw maximally on shared resources to achieve not definitive but illuminating interpretations of texts (Wallace, 1998).

**Significance of the Study**

In comparison to the current research, the importance of this research mainly lies in three aspects.

First, it aims to emphasize clearly the problems in the current high school English/Language Arts classes that conflict with authentic learning theories (Vygotsky, 1978). The conflicts between literary instruction and authentic reading in school are particularly addressed in this study and proved through evidence. Some teachers are still not sure about the ways to interpret texts: “Are the ‘facts’ of the text negotiable? Does an individual have the right to an interpretation? Who controls the interpretations? Is the teacher (text) open to interpretations?” (Atwell-Vasey, 1998). Those questions still remain to be explored and answered.

Secondly, regardless of the social phenomenon of book clubs and the significance of book clubs to their participants, they have remained invisible to school educators (Kooy, 2006). This research study aims to reveal fully the value of book clubs as communities of learning, particularly their value for the literacy development of high school students. Considering the importance of *Ontario Secondary School Literacy Test* (Cheng, Klinger, & Zheng, 2009), reading is among the most important issues in Ontario high schools. This also adds to the importance of this research study.

Thirdly, this research study tries to contribute to the guidelines for and knowledge base about replacing traditional literacy instruction with book clubs in a class teaching context. Book clubs have been applied in schools as an informal voluntary activity for years. Quite a few
research studies have been done around extracurricular book clubs. This provides a certain knowledge base for developing book clubs as part of the literacy development in schools. However, many educators have found it very different and difficult to implement book clubs in the classroom.
Chapter Three
Methodology

In this chapter, I describe the issues around the research methodology in detail, including research methods used, and why, where and when the research was conducted, the participants in the research, the role of researcher in this research.

A Qualitative Study

This study is a qualitative rather than quantitative or mixed-method study. Creswell (2013) has defined qualitative research as follows:

Qualitative research begins with assumptions and the use of interpretive/theoretical frameworks that inform the study of research problems addressing the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem. To study this problem, qualitative researchers use an emerging qualitative approach to inquiry, the collection of data in a natural setting sensitive to the people and places under study, and data analysis that is both inductive and deductive and establishes patterns or themes. The final written report or presentation includes the voices of participants, the reflexively of the researcher, a complex description and interpretation of the problem, and its contribution to the literature or a call for change (p. 44).

Characteristics of qualitative research

I define my research as a typical qualitative study as it has all the common characteristics (Creswell, 2013, 45) of a qualitative study:

a. Natural setting: As “qualitative researchers often collect data in the field at the site where participants experience the issue or problem under study” (Creswell, 2013), the data for this research were collected in daily classes at a school where book clubs were experienced by the participants and where school learning took place, rather than in a designed research context.

b. Researcher as key instrument: Data were collected through examining reading response logs from students, observing behavior in book clubs, interviewing participants and other methods. The interview questions were open-ended and were originally designed by the researcher rather than adapted from an existing research scheme/theory developed by other researchers.
c. Multiple methods: Multiple forms of data, such as interviews, observations, field notes, and written response logs from students were gathered rather than relying on a single data source.

d. Complex reasoning through inductive and deductive logic: Themes and categories of data emerged and were established by organizing data and through the process of collaborating with the participants interactively. Meanwhile, emergent themes were constantly checked against different forms of data.

e. Participants’ meanings: In the research process, a focus was kept on learning the meaning that the participants ascribed to school learning and in-class book clubs, not the meaning that the researcher brought to the research or that was ascribed by other writers in the literature.

f. Emergent design: All phases of the research process, such as the research questions and the forms of data collected were changed to various extents and in different ways after the researcher entered the field and began to collect data rather than the researcher sticking tightly to a predetermined research plan.

g. Reflexivity: The background (such as learning/reading/teaching/life experience and cultural background) of the researcher helped to form the interpretation of the data. The importance of the researcher was never neglected throughout the research.

h. Holistic account: Rather than choosing specific perspectives/topics/aspects from the data to prove an assumption, most of the data that emerged from the variety of participants was used to sketch a complicated theory of the in-class book club experience in the school learning context. Multiple perspectives were emphasized.
Reason for choosing qualitative research

A qualitative research design was chosen mainly because it fit the research issues, research purpose and research questions of the study (Creswell, 2013, 50).

Purpose of research

The purpose of this research was to examine how book clubs influence literacy development among secondary school students from multicultural backgrounds, and to provide the intellectual, social, and material resources for the construction of authentic learning contexts—book clubs as an alternative approach to literacy instruction in school practices to achieve “the goal of enhanced literacy development for all” (McMahon & Goatley, 1997).

Research questions

The Main Question: What is the structure of a classroom book club?

Related Questions:

1. What kind of learning context does a book club present?
2. What is new in the book club learning experience for students, compared to the general school learning/reading context?
3. What are the benefits of using book clubs in school learning with students?
4. What role does a teacher play in book clubs? How does it differ from the teacher’s role in traditional school learning contexts and does it make any difference in students’ learning?
5. How can in-class book clubs be developed and how do in-class book clubs differ from extra-curricular book clubs? What are the challenges?

The complexity of the research problem, purpose and questions required a complex, detailed understanding of the learning/living experiences of students and also teachers in the school learning context and in book clubs. The design of a qualitative study allowed more face-to-face interactions between researcher and participants. Having participants collaborate with the researcher throughout the entire research process, including data analysis and interpretation, was key to developing a clearer, more complete view of the research issues and to achieving
more valid research findings without “overlooking the uniqueness of individuals” in the study (Creswell, 2013, 48). Moreover, qualitative studies permit flexibility in processing the research, which proved a powerful aspect of this study. This positioned me at a relevant starting point which led me to more possibilities and surprises. I benefited from listening willingly to students’ voices without influencing the participants’ perspectives with my predetermined assumptions.

**Grounded Theory Research**

Grounded theory research, as one of the five main qualitative approaches to inquiry as defined by Cresswell (2013), was chosen as my primary and only research approach in this study. Narrative inquiry, phenomenological research, ethnographic research, and case study research are the other four approaches.

Creswell (2013, 83) defined grounded theory as qualitative research design in which the inquirer generates a general explanation (a theory) of a process, an action, or an interaction shaped by the views of a large number of participants. My research ultimately aimed to develop a theory for using book clubs in class as a different learning context from the traditional school learning context which is problematic. Since the popularization of book clubs in education, they have often been used outside of class or researched as an extra-curricular activity; there has been very little research or complete theories that have referred to the use of in-class book clubs. Also, as a researcher, a flexible approach such as grounded theory research allowed more creative work and ideas to be generated throughout the entire research process. Particularly, the flexibility of grounded theory research in the procedure of data analysis allowed me to code data in a more open way, which encouraged a more creative way to present multiple perspectives.
Study Context—Why was the Particular School Chosen as the Research Site?

In April 2011, I visited a Canadian school for the first time. During that period, Dr. Kooy was working in the school to support a teacher’s research into book clubs outside of class. It was around lunch time when Dr. Kooy, Yan (a colleague from Dr. Kooy’s class) and I arrived in the classroom where the book clubs took place. Sandra was there, organizing the tables and the pizza for the members of the book club. An English teacher, she was one of the leaders who introduced book clubs. She was a master’s student of Dr. Kooy at OISE and participated in Dr. Kooy’s research in 2000 for the first time. She learned about book clubs by being involved in a teacher group that met over the course of their first 4 years of teaching to read, talk and write to understand. This shared induction experience which built up the professional knowledge of its participants caused Sandra to realize the importance of these types of groups in school practice and she decided to apply them in her teaching. While we greeted each other, several students and another English teacher showed up. The group ended up with all female members, both students and teachers.

To start with, the teachers briefly asked students how much they had read of the book so far and then gave the authority to the students, encouraging them to discuss organically their favorite parts in the book, the most concerning issues they had with the book, and their personal connections with the book. Throughout the discussion, the students talked emotionally about the story in the book and their personal links and stories. They shared personal experiences they had not shared with each other before, exchanged different perspectives on the same issue, and debated issues on which they disagreed. They seemed to have more to say but they were stopped because of the time limitation of their lunch hour. Before they finished, the teachers took out several novels for the group members to choose from for the next book club discussion. Multiple choices were provided. Students were briefly introduced to the plots of all the novels,
and given time to consider. They then voted for the one they were most interested in reading.

During the summer of 2011, I was brainstorming about the topic for my research. Before my visit to Downtown Collegiate, I had a lot of interesting topics I wanted to research, such as language teaching, language learning, book clubs, professional development for teachers, the problems of reading in high school. However, I was not sure how to connect the above elements and found it difficult to narrow my key words down to a primary research question. As I majored in Teaching English as a Foreign Language and had taught English in high school in China, I always paid special attention to English teaching and learning. In addition to my language learning experience, I have always been concerned about the problems in the school learning context. I was hoping that my visit to Downtown Collegiate could provide me with some insights. What I observed in the book club discussion at Downtown Collegiate did largely contribute to narrowing down my research focus.

Here are the thoughts I had after the observation: Teachers at Downtown Collegiate started the book clubs as a new model of literacy instruction to encourage students to read more and to cultivate more active and critical readers. Their primary purpose was to create a student-centered community as an outlet in the school for students’ voices to be heard, as Sandra said during an interview on July 9th, 2012. However, as book clubs were only used as an extra-curricular activity, only a small portion of students were involved voluntarily and there was limited time for book club commitment. Therefore, extra-curricular book clubs did not seem ideal for significant change or likely to have an extensive influence on student learning.

My main question was: “What if book clubs were implemented in the classroom as part of the Secondary English Curriculum?”

Many studies of book clubs I had heard of or learned about involved book clubs used outside of class. In the Communities of Learning course, the female teacher’s experience of
using book clubs in her grade 5 English class led me to wonder how using book clubs in class differed from using them out of class. I would use them myself if I were teaching a class of students, but as I was a full-time international student here it was very hard to make this happen. I talked to Dr. Kooy about my thoughts and interest in using book clubs in class, and I expressed my interest in conducting research in this area, my preference for the high school level rather than the primary level. Meanwhile, I talked to several teachers I met either at OISE or at Dr. Kooy’s research meetings to determine the possibility of conducting my research in any of their schools.

One day in December of 2011, Dr. Kooy emailed me, saying that she had met Sandra from Downtown Collegiate and learned that Sandra was planning to use book clubs in the coming winter semester in all of the three courses she was teaching. I was thrilled to hear that and thought that it could not be a better research opportunity. With the help of Dr. Kooy, I emailed Sandra to ask whether it was possible to conduct my research in her school. She replied and expressed her willingness, as did her principal. Meanwhile, I worked on an Ethics Review to submit to the Ethics Board of the University of Toronto before I officially started my research at Downtown Collegiate. By the time I got the approval from the Ethics Board, I had already heard from Sandra’s principal, saying that she would give me permission to conduct research in the school as well. That was early February 2012.

Participants

A meeting was arranged on February 20th at Downtown Collegiate with the principal, Sandra, Dr. Kooy and me. The purpose of the meeting was to introduce myself and my research to the principal and Sandra face to face, and also to ask official permission from both the principal and Sandra, the teacher of the potential participants. After that, Sandra and I met separately to talk more about my research, the courses she was teaching, the school context, the
students in her classes, and a lot of other issues that might concern me before I actually started the data collection.

Sandra was teaching three different courses for the semester and she was planning to use book clubs in all of the three classes. Before I continue, it is necessary to describe briefly the four streams in the school. There was an “academic” stream, which was used in grades 9 and 10; when students in the academic stream got to grades 11 and 12, it was called the “university” stream. Students in this stream ended up going on to university. Also there was the “applied” stream, which was used in grades 9 and 10; when students in the applied stream got to grades 11 and 12, it was called the “college” stream. Students at the applied level in the college stream were basically considered to be more concrete thinkers who did not have the analysis skills sometimes required to move forward, while students in the university stream did have these skills. Sandra did not quite agree with this assessment and more details about this will be provided later in the discussion section.

The basic situation of the three courses was as follows:

**English at the applied level**

This was a small class of six grade 10 students in total. One was absent every now and then. Among the five who attended the class, two students developed comparative competence in learning independently, and one was a special education student. Sandra said the very disparate learning abilities and levels of engagement of the students made this class the most challenging of the three she taught. The poor attendance of students made it even harder to keep them progressing at the same pace and it always took longer to get tasks done and then to move on to the next teaching phase.

**English at the university level**

This was a class of 28 sociable grade 11 and 12 students who demonstrated various
levels of literacy skills. Most of them were graduating from high school after this semester and most of them got accepted in high-ranked universities. Many of them were ESL students who had various language and cultural backgrounds, such as Chinese, Japanese, Korean, Portuguese, and South American. The curriculum required students at this level to read Shakespeare’s *King Lear*.

**Ontario Literacy Course (OLC)**

This course was constituted of 13 grade 10 and 11 students. This course was offered either for those students who had failed the *Ontario Literacy Test* twice and had to take this course to graduate from high school or for those who preferred to take it as an alternative to taking the *Ontario Literacy Test*. Students who failed the *Ontario Literacy Test* were regarded as under-performing in literacy. However, according to Sandra, some of the students in the OLC actually had quite competent literary skills, and students took the course just because they did not care about the test. As a typical multicultural class in an urban Ontario school, students in the OLC had a variety of backgrounds, including three black students, five Tibetan students, and some middle-easterners students.

After Sandra briefly informed me about her classes, I realized that even though all of the three courses applied the same activity—book clubs took up an important section of the courses—they differed from each other in many aspects. Therefore, I decided to invite the students from all three courses to participate in my research because I did not want to limit my focus at that point. Instead, I was eager to see how book clubs impacted this variety of students which I supposed would be interesting and surprising.

**Planning and Organization of Book Clubs**

Sandra’s purpose for using book clubs in her classes mainly emerged from her teaching experience as she realized that there was a lot of “teacher teaching” in the course and a lot of
teachers were still teaching in the traditional way where the teacher’s interpretation of the texts was central to the class. However, by using book clubs, Sandra was trying to move away from a teacher-centered mode to give students ownership of their tasks by letting them choose their books and by getting feedback from the students and thus providing a space for students’ voices to be heard.

Generally, course evaluation was attached to the book club programs in all of the three classes. Given the particular situation of each of the classes, the designs of the book clubs were different as outlined below:

**English at the applied level (Grade 9/10)**

Sandra selected two novels, *The Maze* and *April Raintree*, for students to choose from to read in book clubs. The students voted for *April Raintree*, which Sandra had used once in the previous English class she taught at the applied level. She was reluctant to use it again in the beginning because one female student in this class had read it once before. However, as all the students expressed their strong enthusiasm to read it, she could hardly say no to them. The book clubs started in early May after the *Ontario Literacy Test* was finished and when most of the curriculum tasks were finished.

The typical procedure for doing book clubs includes three major steps: first, participants read individually; second, they write down their thoughts in a reading response log; third, they discuss in groups according to their reading response logs. However, a significant change was made to the first step in this class. Instead of giving students the time to read individually, the teacher read out loud to the students. By reading to the students, the teacher wanted to model good reading as she had learned in a professional development session for teachers about how modeling good reading can benefit readers, especially poor readers who had never experienced effective oral reading before, and she believed that was a good way to get less engaged readers
started.

Except for the first step, the book clubs followed the rest of the typical procedure: students wrote a reading response log, an entry of several sentences after reading every one or two chapters, and discussion normally occurred right after the writing. In the end of the book club program, students were required to write a one-page reading response log by using the short logs they wrote after reading each chapter. Detailed instructions of each step were given at the beginning of May and the book clubs lasted throughout almost every school day until mid-June when the exam week started.

**English at the university level (Grade 12)**

For this class, Sandra gave students two choices of books, *A Thousand Acres* by Jane Smiley and *The Stone Angel* by Margaret Laurence. Both had a similar plot or involved topics related to Shakespeare’s *King Lear*, especially *A Thousand Acres*, which is generally seen as a modern version of *King Lear*. A third book called *The Wars* by Timothy Findley was added later to respect particular interests of some students who did not like either of the books initially provided by the teacher. Students were divided into three large groups depending on the different novels they had chosen. As too large a group of students chose *A Thousand Acres*, they were further divided into three sub-groups. Each novel was divided into three sections and read and discussed throughout three book club sessions which were scheduled on three dates within one month. The dates for the book club sessions were April 5th, April 20th, and May 3rd.

The typical book club procedure was followed: the instruction session was given around mid-March before the spring break which left students enough reading time for the first discussion session; students were asked to write one-page reading response log entries for each discussion, and students who did not write a reading response log were not allowed to participate in the discussion, which was made very clear by the teacher. The reading response
log was submitted to the teacher after each discussion for evaluation. By the end of the third book club session, students got all the three reading response logs back and were required to complete a polished reading response log for final evaluation.

**Ontario Literacy Course**

The method of doing book clubs in this class was very similar to the one used in the English at the applied/college level class as the students shared a similar background in those two courses. Again, three choices of books were provided and the students voted for *The Hunger Games*. Book clubs started in early May when the curriculum was finished.

**Data Collection**

Data collection began in early March, 2012. I began my observation, with interviews, audio/video-tape and field notes as the main methods used to collect data. Also, data were collected from informal dialogue with teachers and students.

The data for this study consisted of:

a. Audio-taped and video-taped book club discussions

For the university-level English class, I got three cameras set at different angles at the same time and videotaped all three book clubs discussions. Meanwhile, a voice recorder was used to audio-tape each group in order to have a clearer copy of the conversations and in case I failed to videotape any of them. For both the applied-level English class and the Ontario Literacy Course, discussions took place quite flexibly, normally after reading every one or two chapters. I audio-taped most of these book club discussions.

b. Written Reading Response Logs (*RRLs*) from students for the book clubs

For the university-level English class, all the submitted *RRLs* (including the polished finals) were photocopied and kept as part of the data.

c. Key words and written responses to a list of interview questions
After all the book club discussions, I handed out a survey sheet of four questions (see Appendix) to all the participants. Most of the participants returned the sheet to me with their written responses, which were kept as part of the data. The purpose of this step was to get some personal feedback about book clubs, deeper views and understanding of participants’ personal reading lives and experiences, and their opinions of the school reading/learning context.

d. Audio-taped and transcribed formal interviews with students/the teacher

Most of the students who returned the sheet of questions had a “face to face” formal interview or informal conversation with me after I analyzed the responses in detail in order to clarify their answers to the questions. All the interviews were between 5-15 minutes per person and were transcribed to text.

e. Classroom and book club observations recorded electronically/manually

Whenever discussions related to reading, reading *Shakespeare*, the curriculum, learning in school, and the literacy test, took place in daily classes, I turned on the voice recorder and typed in notes on my net-book. Also throughout the book club discussions, I wrote notes down in my notebook when I heard anything significant to the research topic. All the above was kept either electronically or manually.

f. Field notes from informal conversations with students/teachers

I took notes while I observed the classes, after talking with the students and teachers, and after every observation of the classes, noticing the changes in or special behavior of every student which might be useful for book club observations. I also took notes about my feelings and made comments based on what I had observed and heard anywhere at any time at the research site.

**Role of Researcher—Participant Observer and Student Teacher**

When I first introduced my research to the participants at the end of February, I made it
clear that I would be in their English/literacy classes until the end of the semester to observe their daily class behaviors, not only in the classes where book clubs were applied (even though my primary purpose was to study the book clubs), and participants were informed that class discussions might be voice-recorded and all the book clubs sessions would be either audi-taped or video-taped. Afterwards, I participated in almost every learning activity taking place in their classes, which made me a participant observer; meanwhile, assisting the teacher with most events happening in the school and with the participants made my second role that of a student teacher.

Being both a participant observer and a student teacher around the participants benefited the research in different ways. It allowed me to know the participants better personally as more interactions occurred in and out of classes, which helped build better rapport with them and led to more concrete data. Participants felt more secure sharing their honest perspectives with a familiar human being; when I chatted informally with the participants, surprising and meaningful ideas which could hardly have emerged from formally designed interviews usually popped up naturally and enriched my database undoubtedly. Assisting the teacher with daily teaching events and supporting students’ learning helped build a positive collaborative relationship between the teacher and me, and the students and me, which greatly enhanced their engagement in the research. Both the teacher and the students were more willing to and generous about contributing their time and effort to the research. Moreover, being present in the daily classes for at least four weeks before the book clubs started reduced the influence of my presence in the actual book clubs as participants did not see me as a complete stranger in the classes. This resulted in more natural behaviors from the participants.

Data Analysis Procedures

The general data analysis steps of a qualitative study were followed and the data
analysis spiral provided by Creswell (2013, 182) is referred to in this section.

1. Organizing the Data: All forms of data were organized and managed in order: all interviews (25) with either students or teachers were transcribed into text and saved electronically; all videotapes (9) were transferred from the tapes into videos and saved as particular computer files; photocopied documents of students’ reading response logs were scanned and saved as computer files, and photocopies were kept as well; hand-written field notes were typed into electronic files.

2. Reading and memoing: After organizing all forms of data, I read through the database, made sense of it, and wrote down notes or memos as I read through. At this point, being objective about the data was crucial, meaning that any interpretation was not noted.

3. Classifying: The notes and memos were grouped into five or six major categories. This step was beneficial for drawing out the main themes for the data representation (Creswell, 2013, 184; Mackey and Gass, 2005, 241).

4. Coding: The categories were coded. The codes used emerged from the data rather than being predetermined, and sub-categories/codes were applied when necessary. Evidence to support the codes was sorted into categories.

5. Interpreting the Data: By linking to the larger research literature developed by existing research studies (Creswell, 2013, 187), the deeper meaning of the data was made sense of and interpreted.

Validity

Validation in qualitative research is defined as “an attempt to assess the ‘accuracy’ of the findings, as best described by the researcher and the participants” (Creswell, 2013, 249). The six validation strategies I used in this research were as follows:

1. Prolonged engagement and persistent observation: The duration of data collection lasted for
four months in total from the end of February until June, during which time I observed throughout the classes with or without book clubs and interacted with participants in and out of the class within the research site. This allowed the most general and common behaviors of participants to be observed and reduced the risk of participants assuming behaviors to please the researcher.

2. Triangulation: In total twenty-five interviews were completed with different participants and various methods were used for collecting different forms of data, which allowed for the development of more concrete themes and findings by comparing evidence from multiple perspectives.

3. Clarifying researcher bias: No matter how hard I tried to be objective about the data and results, it is still hard to avoid subjectivity and personal opinions in a qualitative research study where the researcher usually plays a crucial role in contributing to the research throughout the entire process. There was a personal tendency for the research focus and research questions to pay extra attention to various areas depending on my personal interests and preferences; also there were themes that I discarded because I did not see their value based on my background, which does not negate the importance of the excluded data or themes.

4. Member checking: In the middle of the data collection, further confirmation was made between the researcher and the participants about the collected data. Misinterpretations were corrected and revised based on further clarification with participants.

5. Rich, thick description: As a typical qualitative research study, every aspect of the research was described and represented in detail. This enables the readers to adapt and make the most of the research for personal application. Also, thick and contextualized description avoids the mislabeling of practical settings.
6. External audits: My thesis supervisor who was not present on the data collection site played the role of checking the accuracy of every step of my data analysis, constantly providing me with feedback and revision advice. With the assistance of a research supervisor like her, the validity of my research was enhanced.

Ethics and Confidentiality

As this was a qualitative research study which involved a large number of human participants, ethics were a very crucial and sensitive issue throughout the entire research process.

After the first meeting with the principal and Sandra, I got all the consent forms ready and met all the students in Sandra’s class. I introduced myself and the main issues in my research in front of all the students. (For those who were absent at that time, I did it one by one when I gave them the consent forms.) Time was given for potential participants to consider their involvement. All the students signed the consent forms and gave them back to me before I started any form of data collection. I started visiting the classes even before the book clubs began, right after I had all the signed consent forms from the principal, the teacher, the students and their parents (for those students who were under the age of 18). In this way, the influence of my presence on participants’ behaviors in book clubs was largely reduced as I was not a stranger to them anymore and they started to feel comfortable with my presence in their classes after weeks of daily class observation.

Teachers and students joined this research project voluntarily as I had no prior relationship with the teachers or students and there was no pressure to participate in my research as I had no influence on their careers or course evaluations. However, I did realize the vulnerability of young students and I tried hard to make sure they were treated professionally and with special care during the entire study.
Throughout the data collection, I emphasized consistently that participants would provide either consent to use the data collected during their participation or signify their desire to exclude all or any part of the data; participants would have the right to see/listen to all documents/data (written and video/audio data) in which they were involved; all the collected data would only be used for academic and professional submissions, publications and conferences; pseudonyms would be used to protect the participants identities so that no identifying materials would be included in any presentation (written or oral); any identifiable data would be kept encrypted for the period of five years and then be destroyed completely; identifiable data of individuals, locations, artifacts and schools would be replaced with pseudonyms throughout the data; all transcripts and video/audiotapes would be stored in a password-protected computer file; and no hard copy media with identifiable data would be kept.

Contact information was asked of all the participants at the end of the study and was kept for further confirmation and for ethical reasons. Participants were asked to confirm the data I collected, any data with which they disagreed was discarded and changed in the report, and participants were asked to provide informed consent for the dissemination of any results of the study.
Chapter Four
Findings and Discussion

This research examines the book club as a social context for literacy development. Students in book clubs perceive literature authentically by reading, writing and talking through a variety of interactions. In this study, I strove to figure out an ideal structure for classroom book clubs by comparing them to extracurricular book clubs and by analyzing the diverse reading experiences of students both inside and outside school. From March to June, 2012, I observed, videotaped, audio-taped, and interviewed high school students of three different levels of English classes and their English teacher, who were involved in classroom book clubs that replaced the traditional instructional mode of teaching literature in an urban Canadian high school.

The ultimate purposes of this study were to examine the learning experiences of secondary school students of various literary abilities from multicultural backgrounds in book clubs (a newly introduced program) compared to the traditional school learning context and teaching instruction/mode and to explore how book clubs were developed as part of class teaching. Also, this study further aimed to determine the intellectual, social and material resources required for the construction of authentic learning contexts, using in-class book clubs as an alternative approach to literacy instruction to achieve “the goal of enhanced literacy development for all” (McMahon & Goatley, 1997).

In this chapter, I present the findings in the order of the following themes to elaborate how the above research purposes were fulfilled:

I. Comparison of students’ diverse reading experiences inside school and outside school
   A. Reading inside school
   B. Reading outside school
   C. Participants’ suggestions on changes in the school reading context
II. Book clubs as an alternative teaching instruction in high school English classroom

A. Students as inquirers

B. Reading response logs (RRLs)

C. Discussion: Building a community of learning

D. Group members and group division

E. Choice

III. Uniqueness of classroom book clubs compared to extracurricular book clubs

A. Differences between a classroom book club and extracurricular book club

B. Design of the reading section of a classroom book club

My first idea for data presentation was to present the data in two major categories:

(1) English at the university level (4U);

(2) English at the applied level (2P) & the Ontario literacy course (OLC).

I initially decided to present the data using these categories because the designs of the classroom book clubs differed from each other significantly between these two groups, especially in the design of the reading section: in the 4U course, students read individually first outside of class; in both the 2P course and the OLC, either the teacher read to the whole class or the students took turns to read to others in the class. As well, the frequency of discussion and writing were different between those two categories, as I have described in detail in the chapter on methodology: the university group had a one-hour discussion after each of the three reading periods, while both the applied class and the literacy class had ten to fifteen minutes of discussion after each reading of one or more chapters. However, after I went through the data, I found the two groups actually shared a lot of perspectives and comments around the same issues and themes. Therefore, I present the data of all of the three classes together in this chapter. Nevertheless, for those significant and unique findings that differed from one group to
another, I add to the general arguments at some points where necessary. Throughout the data presentation, I quote the statements of the participants very extensively to help elaborate the findings and to achieve a more valid and authentic presentation of the data. For those interviews done in Chinese with three of the participants who preferred to use their first language in the interviews, I translated the interviews.

The methods of survey and interview closely connected to each other as the two main methods of data collection. In early June, I gave out a survey of four questions (see Appendix) to all the 44 participants, asking participants to write (briefly) their points of view and comments around four major themes: reading inside school, reading outside school, change in the school reading context, and book clubs. Thirty-five out of the forty-four participants completed the survey questions and returned them to me: four from the 2P course, eleven from the OLC, and twenty from the 4U course. I then invited all the participants for personal interviews after I analyzed each of their surveys. Twenty-four students participated in the interviews: three from the 2P course, eleven from the OLC, and fourteen from the 4U course. The interviews further clarified the most significant and frequent statements in their surveys. Three critical questions were emphasized in each interview:

a) What is your favourite part of your book club experience in the class?

b) Do you have any suggestion for the improvement of the classroom book club?

c) What is the meaning of having choices in school for you?

Students’ Reading Experience

Students’ experience of reading inside school differed from their experience with reading outside school in various ways. Most of the participants consistently agreed on this regardless of their interest in reading, level of literacy development, language ability, cultural
background and engagement in school learning. The main differences that affected the students’
experience are as follows:

a. Reading motivation: reading for marks vs. reading for pleasure
b. Reading choice: mandatory vs. optional
c. Reading context: noisy vs. quiet
d. Reading materials (such as genre and content): limited vs. various; old vs. new.

Reading inside school

General comments

Many students defined reading in school as mostly being for the purpose of doing
quizzes, getting marks, and passing tests and exams. Kent stated, “Everyone has to read at
school or you can’t even do tests….” Andrew mentioned, “For reading at school, I only read
what’s necessary to achieve a high standard of marks.” David defined “reading in school as
mandatory reading towards an eventual good mark.”

Many other students agreed that reading in school was usually mandatory, a ‘have-to’
where they were often assigned/required to read; they did not have a say in choosing materials
in which they were really interested. Kent mentioned, “I read the books that are given to the
students for class….” A classmate of his added, “I only read when I have assignments to do; the
kinds of reading we got depending on what the teachers want. Most of the time I did not choose,
and it is normal.” Sabrina argued quite emotionally when I asked about how she liked the
reading materials in school, saying that “I don’t like the books that they pick for us. What if I
don’t like the book? How am I supposed to enjoy and how am I supposed to write if I don’t like
the book? It is harder for me if I don’t like the book.” Shirley explained how students usually
got reading materials at school:
Teachers just gave the books to us… (in English class). For Shakespeare, obviously we can’t choose, we have to read it; in some other course, we don’t have choice at all. I guess they just got it from the school board and gave them to us.…

Michelle felt passive and that she was being forced in school reading and her friend Zane said:

High school reading is like it is not related to you and I can hardly apply it to daily life. Neither it was interesting nor for long-term learning…. I may think about the problems while I am reading, but I forget most of the stuff in a second. It won’t be kept in my long-term memory as it is not really related to me.

Many participants mentioned that too many interruptions in school limited the time and opportunities for reading. When talking about the reading experience in school, many students automatically directed the conversation to their reading experience in English classes as most of them considered English classes the exclusive reading context in school. They found it rarely met their individual reading needs. Tasha observed, “I find my reading at school is very limited,” and when she was asked to clarify her statement, she said, “English class would probably be the only class where we actually read… we never got a chance to read in school (except in English classes)….” Keegan also wrote, “School reading is being carried away sometimes,” and he did not think his reading needs were satisfied in school as he said, “I don’t think I am learning anything; it [learning in school] is like watching a movie by answering the set questions after reading.” James noted, “Actually I am not always reading in school… because I need a quiet circumstance to reading,” and he added, “I seldom read in class and it is too noisy to read in school… also there is no time to read.” Uriah noted a different between high school and elementary school reading:

In Elementary school, you read a lot, but in high school, I don’t think like one book for person is enough, because most students just read one book, that’s very easy for them, but it doesn’t really help them get better at reading… from English class mostly of the reading, most of the time….
Students generally considered reading materials in school out of date and limited to certain genres, which did not challenge them to learn. Jasmine complained, “We use the books over and over again within the same course.” Shamus also thought, “In school we rarely get new stuff; like King Lear, every book has been used for at least for more than 3 to 4 years.” Trevor commented, “Reading at school is easy to understand—it is much easier than reading at home, the content and language is easier.” Shirley said, “They don’t really give us enough reading materials in school; we only get it in class,” and she added, “Reading at school is basics of knowledge, analyzing and understanding; while reading outside school give me the opportunity to expand my thinking.”

_Shakespeare in high school_

Many students mentioned Shakespeare whenever talking about school reading. Several of them even labelled the literature of Shakespeare as representative of the high school reading curriculum. As the core mandatory reading material in high school, students had various attitudes towards Shakespeare’s literature. Generally, students thought Shakespeare should be replaced by more modern literature reading selections, while some of the participants thought Shakespeare was irreplaceable because of his distinctive importance in the process of English learning. Uriah was one of the exceptional Shakespeare devotees, saying, “Shakespeare is the core reading material in school and should be.” He liked Shakespeare very much and recommended keeping his work in school reading because he believed that “Shakespeare represents the original English, which English learners should study for sure.” He detailed, “Now students text all the time, but they don’t really know where English comes from. It is good experience and they can learn enough….” Catherin was a big fan of Shakespeare and also advocated the reading of Shakespeare in school, saying “Shakespeare is classic literature, which has unique value in the history of English literature.”
**Reading outside school**

**General comments**

Students read for pleasure outside school in contrast to reading inside school, mainly because they had more freedom in choosing whatever they liked to read and how to schedule the time for reading. When asked about their attitudes towards reading outside school, many students used the word “love” to describe their feelings about reading outside school, compared to using the words “like”, “ok”, or at most “enjoy” which described their experiences of reading inside school. Jasmine said, “Outside school, I feel as though I enjoy it a lot more. The reason for this is because I have the freedom to read whatever it is that I want to.” Shirley added, “I love reading outside school because I can choose what books would interest me and have satisfaction from reading books that I like.” Karen also expressed, “I really enjoy my reading life outside school since I can sink my teeth in what I want to read.”

Students rarely read outside school due to a variety of reasons, and the limitation of time was the most common one. Aaron specified that how much reading he did outside school largely depended on the time he had. He rarely had time to read because he always had “other stuff to do”. Hardy also detailed his reason not to read outside school: “I have work after school; and I need to rest after a day of study and work; also I felt too tired to read after working-out in the gym or school.” Miles found it became harder to spare reading time outside school especially since his family had started a private business which he helped to take care of.

**The use of the Internet to assist reading: Reading online vs. paper books**

Many students mentioned the use of the Internet for reading on their own time outside school. Some of them said they preferred reading online to reading paper books as they could access more recent information from all over the world. Also reading online provided more support for their reading as they could link to endless information which helped them
understand better and expand their knowledge, in a way that paper books can hardly achieve. Keegan said, “I don’t read physical books, instead I read on Internet. I can search stuff, and I can read comments, reviews [or other] information to help me choose the book and the focus to read the book….” James added, “By the use of Internet, you can search the Internet to assist you read; for example, if I have one book and I can search for more information and it is not convenient without the Internet for learning if there is no Internet access in school.” Shamus also believed, “It [ipad/Internet] is better because it links you to more and more information, but for paper books, it is hard to do the same thing. That’s why I feel more engaged [in online reading].” Michelle was a big fan of online reading, “Online reading is tiring for eyes but the novels online are up to date mostly,” and she read in Chinese, her first language, mostly.

**Participants’ suggestions on changes in the school reading context**

In the analysis of students’ experiences and comments on the differences between reading inside and outside school, the participants’ main suggestions for changing the school reading context were as follows:

Most students unsatisfied with in-school reading suggested improving the school reading context by making it more similar to their reading outside school, which they assumed would strongly increase their motivation in school reading. Shirley, who was a big fan of autobiography, suggested they could “read more realistic novels about people’s lives in schools so we understand from other experiences.” Sabrina suggested allowing students’ voices to be heard in schools: “The way I would change the reading in school is allowing the students to have a say in what they read. Let us read more “teen” books, books that we will enjoy.”

Nevertheless, while most of the students shared their dissatisfaction with school reading, some students expressed their ideas from different angles, thinking school reading should be kept the way it was. Particularly, some students believed that school reading was supposed to
be different from reading outside school. For instance, Catherin did not think a change in the school reading context was necessary. She said:

Because I have my own reading habits, they are my personal style and I don’t feel like it would be something I need to change to reading at school. Reading in school is different to reading outside school, so I’d like to keep it that way.

She further clarified this opinion in the interview:

They [reading inside and outside school] should stay separate. When you read outside, that is literally your choice. In school, it is part of the curriculum. They limit the type of readings we do… but outside reading is really about your choice, but in school the teacher will give you a mark on reading, I need you to read something….

Also, some students believed that no matter how school reading was taught and what was chosen for students in school, it was for the students’ best. Miles stated, “I wouldn’t change anything because I think every teacher wants their students to read every day so [in] that way they can read and write better. Not just now in future it will help to achieve the thing they want in their life…” Catherin also specified the benefits of school reading: “School reading can benefit your skills in the way to be a starting point to impact us to read, it can lead to more kinds of the reading.” Sherwin added, “In-school reading can be good in the way of forcing students who don’t like reading to read, for those students whose reading habits need to be changed.”

**Change the reading materials in school**

Some students particularly remarked on the importance of changing materials in reading for better motivation. Catherin said, “I enjoy the reading or not, largely depending on the material.” Karen also added, “Reading at school is somehow bad (if the materials are boring) or fun (if I like them very much).”

Meanwhile, participants provided major suggestions for choosing materials to meet their personal interests and individual needs as follows:
Students enjoyed reading more when they could relate to the material. Trina thought, “Teen stories are missing in school reading material, I like *The Hunger Games* [what we are reading in book clubs in English class] because it is kind of related to teen life.” Shirley added, “If it is towards the teenagers, and also related to realistic elements or related to real lives, it would be more interesting.”

Students liked a great variety of genres to read to meet their individual needs. For instance, some of them preferred fiction to non-fiction, some preferred autobiography, and some preferred short stories. Even though students had their various preferences in terms of the genres and topics of reading materials, most of them were more interested in reading and felt more motivated to read when the material was more contemporary and newly released, practical and useful, diverse and unpredictable. This was especially useful for engaging those students who did not like reading.

“We should read more recent things in the world,” Dale stated, “more things going on in the world, [so that we are] more aware of the world; in the textbook and the thing we read is not recent enough.” Andrew “had no feelings for reading” and he thought “reading is drudge work”, and he was “only reading what’s necessary in order to achieve a high standard of marks”. However, he would “read anything related to using technology” on his own time. Perry did not like reading either. He expressed that he rarely read unless he felt the material was practical and he could apply it. Zane assumed, “It [reading] is all about words, but if it is too long, I am not patient enough to finish reading; if I am not motivated enough, interested in practical stuff and necessary and interested in….”
**Book Clubs as an Alternative Teaching Instruction in the High School English Classroom**

When asked about the differences between book clubs and traditional literacy instruction, the teacher, Sandra, stated her point of view:

Book club is very student-centred, whereas the traditional way of teaching literature is very teacher-centered and guessing what is inside the teacher’s head. And the teacher has their own agenda to put forth, and students basically take notes. The teacher is the bearer of knowledge, the traditional classroom setting where you teach literature; whereas in book clubs, every student has a voice, which is very unique, and as a result of that you get a very diverse response to the books, which is just an amazing thing to see students who are very quiet will come out and start to share experiences in smaller groups. And they can build on each other’s responses; they can share experiences; they can comment, question: In that way you are creating communities, where each student has responsibility to the group and has their own interpretation of what they are reading…

For most of the participants, this was their very first time being in a book club. Compared to traditional group reading contexts, reading in book clubs differed from other models in terms of the new identification of students, the cooperation of writing and discussion, and the role of the teacher.

**Students as inquirers**

In traditional school reading contexts, students often “read the stuff teachers gave to them, and they were required and evaluated to answer the questions listed right after the piece of reading,” as Jane compared this to the situation in book clubs, “You are writing the questions. You have to express your own thoughts, and you talk about the questions in the discussion with other members. In that way you get others’ thoughts as well.” Orson also reflected on his past reading experience in a traditional classroom as he said, “We read individually and there was no follow-up discussion except asking the teacher directly…teachers ask questions in the book….” Shirley explained why she did not like the questions to be answered after the reading selections in school:

It is just repeating and you only need to get through…for those teachers who read the material to you and explain to you directly, it is easy but I was told and not challenged. It was not really learning. That is why I like the book clubs…we ask our own questions
and then talk with the teacher…I remember in one class before, the teacher did all the stuff by herself. Everyone has their own kind of learning and there are individual differences, but in that class, there was only verbal learning. For those students who are not good at it, it would be really hard and cannot engage them….

**Reading response logs (RRLs)**

Requirements for the *RRLs* differed between the university-stream course, and the other two classes of the *2P* course and *OLC*. In the *4U* course, students wrote one *RRL* for each of the three discussions, which consisted of two main parts: a page of response to the reading, including their comments on the book, their own experience and reflections, and two questions they had based on the reading. In the *2P* course and *OLC*, the students wrote *RRLs* on sticky notes after each reading session in class about their thoughts and comments on the previous reading.

Participants generally regarded writing response logs as a multi-functional task in the whole process of book clubs, which helped organize their thoughts, remind readers of points for participating in later discussion, and improved their writing skills; the response logs helped them read better and build up their knowledge. Before each discussion session, teachers informed the students to make sure they had their reading response logs (RRLs) ready for the discussion. For the university-level class, those who did not have the *RRL* were prevented from participating in the discussion until they finished their writing.

In the university-level English class, students were given the first ten minutes of the book clubs to exchange and read *RRLs* within their groups. Afterwards, they started discussion by taking turns asking group members the questions they wrote in their *RRLs*. I observed that students constantly went back to read their RRLs whenever they forgot what they had read about or wanted to talk about. Shirley said, “*RRL* can be a reference to what to discuss with peers.” Also, whenever they were out of topics in the discussion, they could always find something else to share by looking through their RRLs. This kept the dialogue going and
stimulated more thoughts.

Many students generally liked the experience of RRLs for different reasons. For example, Sherwin thought, “When you write, it makes you to think about the reading, read better and you write better. It addresses your own ideas and help to discuss.” Uriah added, “Reading response log is good because you compare to your own experience, and connect to the book, also learn from the professional writing [skills].” Dale also noted, “[writing RRLs] makes me think over the book again, go back to the book and better understand, force you to read and understand.” Jasmine commented, “[Writing RRLs] pull out what we really feel about the book, [it helps] long time memory about the book; help to remind you about how you felt about the book; it is great within schools….”

**Discussion: Building a community of learning**

Discussion formed the core of the book club process, and most participants regarded it as their favourite step of the book club experience because they could understand the story better by listening to others’ comments; the book club provided a place to share personal thoughts and express ideas which they rarely experienced in the school learning context, and it provided opportunities to get others’ insights about the novel they had read which helped them to understand it better and expand their knowledge. For many participants, especially ESL students, the discussion in the book clubs benefited their language skills, including speaking, writing, listening and other communicational skills. Discussion about the book with peers even motivated students to read even though they did not like the book itself. Jasmine said:

By discussion in the group I understand more, especially for something I didn’t notice but others may pay attention to and then I can go back to see; see others point of view… help click in to something different when you get others insight….
Jane said: “If I don’t get it, someone else would help you to clarify [in the discussion].” Uriah also stated, “[By discussion, you] get others different opinions, and it benefits learning in ways that forces you to think from different point of view; sharing is important…” Trina said:

Everyone has a different story and then come to groups to share with each other, we get more stories; [discussion is my favorite part in book clubs], I like it because I get to know what others think and also it is cool when we share the same thoughts…expand your knowledge and get to know things that I didn’t notice while reading….

Tasha expressed, “It [discussion] expands the creativity of the book. We can have narrow thoughts and insights if we read by ourselves without talking about the book in a group….” Shirley added:

It is fun talking about why and the characters in the same reading material, get some social aspects of the book and connect with your own thoughts, and get different perspectives, beneficial in ways that more open-minded….

Trevor remarked:

[Discussion is] good because we have time to communicate with each other and it beneficial in ways that it help communicational skills, thinking skills; [we can] get more experience by dealing with others, communicating with other….

**Group members and group division**

In the university-level class, over half of the students in the class chose to read *A Thousand Acres* and were divided into three discussion groups accordingly every time the book clubs met. (They did not have the exact same group members every time.) The rest of the class members, who were reading *The Stone Angel* and *The Wars*, had two discussion groups every time with the same group members.

The findings showed that reading group members played a crucial role in group discussion. For a better reading experience, Aaron suggested that we “change the people I read with every week,” because he “can get new ideas from different group of people if they switch people and groups they read every day.” Catherin believed, “Groups should be divided more evenly,” specifying, “we spoke to more different people by changing different members to
discuss with but for the other books with fewer people they were always talking to the same people; [for the current classroom book clubs] too many people chose one from the other two books.” Shamus also complained, “Some people don’t talk that much, you can’t have two people dominating while others being quiet.” Sherwin suggested, “For students who are shy and quiet they don’t contribute to the discussion, teacher should sit beside and support more for those who don’t talk.” Dale did not enjoy much of the discussion because he had a tiny group of four members, in which “only one group member showed up; it was hard to talk about it and he didn’t talk about it.” Therefore, he suggested “making sure the students have good attendance.”

**Choice**

Students were generally very pleased about having a choice and being able to vote for the books to read in the book clubs. In the exit interviews, the meaning of choice for in-school reading was included. Most students recognized choice as a very important element in motivating reading in school. Jane believed:

> We should all have our say in choosing the book. The ones they chose were boring mostly. We are students. We would know what we would like to read….

Dale did not think they had enough choices in school. He specified:

> I prefer more choices. We are always assigned to book, or given about four books to choose from. …Certain books we’ve already known about and read before. We can do something different and learn more. It can broaden your mind and make sense of the world….  

Hardy also mentioned:

> [It is good to] take on a vote on the book we read. Some people want to read other things. That will make people to read, and more people will show up [if we can choose the book we like].  

> He preferred to choose his own book, saying “I’d rather choose by myself [than be assigned] because everyone has different interests, and I will be more encouraged to read.”
Keegan also expressed his idea of choice by reflecting on his unpleasant reading experience in the past:

We had one group reading experience in another English class as well… [I] did not enjoy the book [because] it was chosen by the teacher and for the whole class. I prefer to get the chance to choose. It is important… [I would] choose things that have never read before and relevant for you, and you can get more information for yourself, and also we know ourselves better.

Miles thought, “Optional is the best thing you can do. It is much better than forcing you to do, whatever your mind is into…” Shirley assumed that she “would analyse it more and understand more if I like the book and chose it by myself, but for the ones I don’t like and I don’t feel motivated and when I finish it I would feel finally I’m done the mandatory….”

Meanwhile, several students did not think having reading choices in school would matter for them. Aaron said, “It doesn’t matter,” when he was asked about whether he would like to choose books to read by himself or have others choose for him.

Also, some students believed the school curriculum did not permit the space for students’ choice, which they thought reasonable and understandable. For instance, Catherin understood why students did not have many choices in reading materials in school, specifying “I understand because it is related to the curriculum, even though I still think it is kind of limiting.” James also explained that he would not prefer to have a choice of reading materials in school because he believed which books he should read depended on what the students were to be tested on: “If it is tested, then I will have to read the particular stuff.” Trevor strongly stated, “I prefer teachers to choose for me. I am too lazy to read it so I would just choose the easiest one, which is not good.”

However, Trina believed flexibility is importance in the matter of choice, saying, “Choice is important when you want to read the thing you like. I like the voting part of book clubs. However, for tests, we need to read particular books according to the curriculum.” Uriah
agreed with her, “It depends on the time and what the teachers wanted you to learn, it is ok to not have choices if it is for the course.” Miles believed that whatever he had to read in school must be beneficial to his learning to some extent: “Last time [reading The Hunger Games, what we are reading now] it wasn’t optional. The English department said it was the way it went. It is not that they forced you to do it, but it is for your own good for English learning. I see the importance of it.” Derek personally believed that voting for a book “can be inappropriate in school” as it would cause some conflicts among students. “If someone want to choose, there would be violence. What if some kids don’t like the books, or won’t want to read a book like that? So it is good if the teacher can choose the book for the students.” He further explained his perspective by sharing a related experience he had the year before in a writing exam when some religious students felt defensive about reading an article which went against their culture. He felt sorry for those students but still believed they should just have read whatever they were given and not necessarily have argued and fought because passing the exam should always be the priority for them as students.

**Uniqueness of Classroom Book Clubs**

*Differences between a classroom book club and an extracurricular book club*

In an interview, I asked the teacher Sandra to compare the book clubs in class to the extracurricular ones: What are the benefits, challenges and other differences? She elaborated as follows:

I find that taking the book club inside the classroom means you are attaching the evaluation to it. When you attach evaluation to something it loses its authenticity almost. I feel that I’ve experienced them both. I think students are kind of afraid to express themselves fully. They still feel there is an evaluation side to it. They still have to kind of impress the teacher. I don’t think it is as organic as it can be outside the classroom. I think it is a great thing using it inside of the classroom because it is student-centered, student has the voice, but I still think it is still the difference when you attach the evaluation to it. Unfortunately, because you are teaching a course, you have to evaluate the student…Student doesn’t participate freely as they would as an extracurricular activity.
As the teacher assumed during the stage of planning a classroom book club, the attachment of the book club to the curriculum changed their authentic nature and their value to students’ learning. Students were evaluated at every step of the activity involved in the book clubs. For example, those students who did not write a Reading Response Log were not allowed to participate in the discussion. Also, the teacher’s criteria for choosing the selection of books for the book clubs were closely connected to the school curriculum. Therefore, students paid much attention to grades/tests throughout the process. This influenced their choices of books to read in the book clubs as well as their judgements and comments on the model of the book club itself.

For instance, Catherin suggested updating the books read in the book clubs mainly because she worried about someone possibly cheating by getting resources from the higher grades which was not fair for other students: “If the same book was used for the same course continuously for years, it may lead students to cheating if students have siblings who have taken the same course.” Meanwhile, Jasmine expressed her perspective on RRLs: “Personally I won’t write it down when reading; in terms of marks RRL is really good.” Shamus also said, “Some people don’t talk that much. You can’t have two people dominating while others being quiet. That is also not fair for them to get good marks.” Uriah thought attaching evaluation to book clubs was fair for all students as he said:

For those who didn’t do RRL cannot attend the discussion, which is how it should be! It will be a problem [without evaluation]…if it [the book club] is for fun they won’t do it. It is good to relate to marks by motivating the students to do their work; …It is a bad [learning] habit from hearing others instead of reading by themselves… Book club is better [than the traditional reading context]. It is not fair for those students who don’t work but get the answer….

The teacher put *A Thousand Acres* in the selection for the book clubs in the university-level class mainly because of the curriculum considerations, since the next task for that level was to read Shakespeare’s *King Lear*. *A Thousand Acres* is recognized as a modern version of
King Lear because the plots of those two works share a lot of similarities. Sandra assumed that reading A Thousand Acres would greatly help the students to understand King Lear.

More than half of the students chose A Thousand Acres over the other two books to read for the book club discussion. Many among those made the choice because they hoped it would benefit their reading of King Lear and they wanted to explore why A Thousand Acres was called a modern version of King Lear. Shirley talked with me about her struggles to choose from the books to read for the book clubs, saying that she did not like A Thousand Acres and thought she might choose another book instead. However, she chose A Thousand Acres eventually because she was hoping reading it would benefit her later reading of King Lear. Shamus also chose A Thousand Acres as it related to “curriculum materials”, which he supposed would smoothly “blend in to the next part” of school learning.

Design of the reading session

University-level students were quite satisfied with the reading part of the whole process of the book clubs. However, both the applied-level students and the OLC students had various perspectives on how they want to read for the book clubs. Therefore, in this section, there are no data from the university-level students.

Many students mentioned that they would concentrate better if they were to read individually before discussion because they got distracted easily while being read to by the teacher or by peers in a big group. Sabrina stated:

I don’t like reading in groups anywhere in school because I can’t focus. The teacher or the students read to me is the worst part for me. I prefer to read by ourselves first….

Hardy added, “Reading by yourself help understand better…build the picture in my mind, memorize better in my mind, without interruptions by talking to people while reading.” Trevor also preferred to read by himself: “It is easier for me because you do it by yourself. It is
hard to concentrate and get distracted; it is better that I read first by myself and then come back to group discussion.” Trina also specified, “I can read a lot more and focus better, if I have friends there and I can hardly read instead I talk with friends.”

Nevertheless, some students liked being read to by the teacher as they thought it was effective and teachers could answer their questions right away throughout the reading. Aaron said that his favorite part of the book clubs was that the “teacher started off and student took turns to read to each other.” Derek specified, “When I missed some classes and chapters, it is still ok that somebody else can tell me what they read and I can catch up with the class,” which he said when asked to clarify his statement that “Reading in group is efficient and I get back on track easily”.

Chapter Five
Interpretations, Implications and Future Research

This chapter concludes the research study with interpretations of the data on calling for changes in school reading and outlining the benefits of reading in book clubs, as well as the implications of the research findings for the improvement of the current school reading context and the structure of a classroom book club, and suggestions for future research. Limitations of the research are reflected upon by the teacher involved in the study and the researcher as well.

The structure of this chapter is as follows:

I. Research Questions

II. Interpretation of Findings
   A. Call for changes in school reading
   B. Book clubs as alternatives to school reading contexts
      1. Critical readers
      2. Teacher’s role
      3. Materials
      4. Choice
      5. Development of a learning community
      6. Equal opportunity for participating

III. Structure of Book Clubs in School
   A. Vote and choice
   B. Group division
   C. Design of the reading

IV. Limitations of the Research
   A. Teacher’s reflection
   B. Researcher’s reflection
1. Instructions about the study

2. Voice recording and videotaping

3. Data collection

V. Future Research

A. Particular groups of participants: ESL in English book clubs

B. Alternative potential research sites

1. Within Ontario

2. International and comparative

C. New literacies

D. The possibility of limiting the effect of curriculum in book clubs

VI. Summary

The focus of the study and the main issues in the findings are consistent with the research questions as follows:

**Research Questions**

The main question of the study was, “What is the structure of a classroom book club?”

Related questions:

1. What kind of learning context does a book club present?
2. What is new in the book club learning experience for students, compared to the general school learning context?
3. What are the benefits of using book clubs in school learning for students?
4. What role does a teacher play in book clubs? How does it differ from the teacher’s role in traditional school learning contexts and does it make any difference in students’ learning?
5. How can in-class book clubs be developed and how do in-class book clubs differ from extra-curricular book clubs? What are the challenges?
Interpretation of Findings

Call for changes in school reading

The research findings showed a lot of problems with school reading: school reading materials were mostly limited to a small variety of genres, abstract topics unrelated to students, and out-of-date literature to meet the requirements of the curriculum; students felt passive and assigned to reading in school most of the time; students did not get enough reading in school and they felt the reading process for learning in school did not challenge them for the purpose of improving learning; interactions among students and teachers rarely occurred in the school reading context; students’ learning and reading rarely satisfied students and their voices were seldom heard.

Book clubs as alternatives to school reading contexts

Meanwhile, the findings indicated that students benefited from the book club experience in different ways which filled up the gaps in the traditional school reading context.

Critical readers

In book clubs, students asked questions of their own instead of mechanically answering the standard list of questions in the curriculum. In this way, they questioned themselves and thought thoroughly about issues they had doubts with. Students came to the book club discussion with two critical questions mostly starting with “Why” or “How”, searching for the relationships between the characters and many causal issues of the events, and raising problems they wanted to solve together with their group members. In the questioning process, students were the core inquirers and they solved their own inquiries by arguing with group members. Also, students learned by building on each other’s knowledge. Moreover, they related the reading to their own lived experience by criticizing the moral issues in the stories. In a word, students thought and grew as critical human beings in the book clubs.
**Teachers’ role**

In book clubs, the role of the teacher was to monitor the learning process. In this study, the teacher walked around the classroom, auditing each group discussion in turn. She listened to students’ talk very attentively and only jumped into the discussions when the students asked her questions or she felt the necessity to add on to students’ conversations to stimulate their thinking and further discussion. Before the discussion started, she always remembered to inform students to ignore her existence in the classroom throughout the discussion. The teacher’s stepping back from the learning process greatly increased the chances for the development of the students’ learning. It gave students the freedom to learn in their own ways, develop their thoughts organically and also develop a sense of leadership in learning.

**Materials**

In book clubs, students had a chance to read different and new collections of books other than those required by the curriculum, which were more likely out-of-date, overused, boring to the students and of limited variety. The findings indicated that most students did not think they had enough reading materials in the curriculum, and even some students who liked reading the least asked for more readings to help them become better readers. Every student could only choose one book at a time for book clubs; they got access to more books by looking through the list of books and getting recommendations about the books for later reading. I observed in the instructional session for book clubs that when the teacher gave out the books for students to choose, one student said, “They looked all interesting! Can I bring this book home and read it just for fun tonight? I will read another one for book clubs.” Reading materials in book clubs provided guidance for students to make better choices of reading on their own.
Choice

In the book clubs, most students first experienced the fun of making a choice in school rather than being assigned a book they could not reject regardless of how they liked it. The right for students to have a choice strongly motivated them to read better and enjoy the reading more, and it gave students ownership of the book they chose. In the school context, for so long students’ voices have been neglected. Giving the choice back to the students encouraged them to take responsibility for their own learning and be more active in the process of learning.

Development of a learning community

In the book clubs, by extensively interacting with group members around issues in the text and talking about the connections between the books and their own lives, students became more familiar with each other as people, got to know more about each other’s thoughts and found connections with one another, which helped develop a community of learners who united in actively working on the same learning problems. This learning community constituted a change from the traditional school reading context where students were too occupied with figuring out their individual learning issues to connect to and learn from others.

Equal opportunity for participating

Book clubs provided the space for all students to participate freely, especially for those who were usually quiet learners in a big classroom learning context. They engaged better in talking to learn and contributed more to the discussion and learning process in the smaller learning groups. They regarded the book club as a more secure context for sharing their thoughts, in contrast to teacher-centered traditional classrooms where specific answers to questions were often expected and creativity and flexibility were not valued.
Structure of Book Clubs in School

Extracurricular book clubs and classroom book clubs are the two distinct types of book clubs in use in the school context. In this study I focused on exploring the structure of a classroom book club. Using book clubs in the classroom, where they are attached to the curriculum, is very challenging. As the teacher, Sandra, stated:

When you attach evaluation in the book club, it loses authenticity of it. Students are afraid of expressing themselves fully in class. It is not as organic. Students try to please the teacher and get the grades...Students does not participate it freely....

However, even though Sandra realized the negative effects curriculum attachment may have on book clubs, she thought it was almost impossible to eliminate evaluation when a book club is used as part of a course in the classroom because “there have to be expectations”.

Sandra kept the traditional book club structure for the university-level class, while she changed the way reading was done for the 2P and OLC classes. In the university-level class, students read independently outside of class, while in the 2P and OLC classes, the reading was done out loud in class, either students were read to by the teacher or peers took turns to read to the whole class. The findings indicated that the university-level students were generally very satisfied with the whole structure of the book clubs. However, some of them thought it could have been a better experience if the teacher had made some changes, for example, in the process of voting and the division of groups. Meanwhile, a lot of the OLC students had different opinions on the design of the reading process. In the following sections, I provide some suggestions that arise from the findings of the study.

Vote and choice

Students generally liked the idea of voting for the books in the book clubs. However, the findings showed that having two or three books to choose from was not nearly enough to meet individual needs, especially for big classes as there were more diverse individual preferences
for the types of books among a big number of students. For example, some of them preferred adventurous stories to family topics, while others preferred autobiographical topics. Therefore, for a better selection the books for book clubs should include a greater variety of topics.

Moreover, a very good suggestion was made by some students about changing the process of voting. Usually in book clubs the teacher gave students a selection of books to vote on. Instead of that, what if the students built their own selection of books first, and then voted on them after the teacher went through and narrowed down the selection list? I wonder whether students in this way would take more responsibility for their learning and what other differences it would make in their book club reading experience.

**Group division**

Whether it is better to keep the same group members in the book clubs in every discussion or to switch group members for every discussion are the main issues of debate in this section. Also, I discuss how changing the number of students in each discussion group could achieve a better book club experience. The advantages and disadvantages for both of the methods of group division are as follows:

For groups which had the same group members for every discussion, as in the university-level class groups that discussed *The Wars* and *The Stone Angel*, the advantages included that group members gradually got more familiar with each other which helped the development of trust and a sense of security within the group. This led to more open and honest discussion and was more likely to convert a group of random members into a united community of learners who depended on each other to learn and grow together. For example, three of the members in the group that read *The Wars* were comparatively quiet learners in the class who were not active participants in classroom discussions. Eventually they initiated their own discussion and engaged in dialogue with each other within the group without the teacher’s
involvement. However, one of the biggest disadvantages of having the same group members for all the discussions was the tendency for there to be a lack of topics to talk about. This happened to both groups that read *The Wars* and *The Stone Angel* where they were supposed to have four members in each group but always ended up with two members in the discussion because the other two usually did not show up. Maintaining the same group members also would possibly limit the expansion of knowledge as it eliminates contributions from new members. The biggest advantage of switching group members for every discussion is that it invites new perspective and experiences.

Having the same group members would result in a better learning experience if the number of participants in each group was set properly. The 2P class had around five or six members in the discussion and this worked nicely. This was also the case for the three groups that read *A Thousand Acres* in the university-level class. However, for the OLC, whenever the number in each group exceeded seven or eight, students had limited chances to engage in conversations and started to get distracted. Therefore, I suggest keeping the group size between five and eight members, no more.

**Design of the reading**

The findings showed that students in the OLC did not have enough discussion time for each reading and they felt too tired whenever they read more than one chapter at a time. For the first few chapters, students had one discussion of 10 to 15 minutes after each chapter of reading, which was not enough to get every student to contribute their reading response. In addition to that, the frequency of discussion was halved so there was only one discussion for every two chapters as the school schedule got tight and the teacher was rushing to finish the whole book. It is suggested that students should be given a certain amount of time to discuss after each chapter of reading so as to make sure every student have the chance to talk. In this way,
problems could be solved as soon as possible before the students moved forward to the next reading phase, and also the students could think deeper. Also, for big groups like the OLC class had, it might be better if students were divided into sub-groups to read according to their preferred ways. For instance, those students who prefer to read on their own should be separated from the students who prefer to be read to as a whole group.

**Limitations of the Research**

**Teacher’s reflection**

Sandra reflected on book clubs in her classes, saying that the time could have been scheduled better for the book clubs and more teachers are needed for a big reading group in book clubs.

The OLC did not get to finish reading their whole book by the end of the semester due to time limitations. Sandra stated that she should “have started the book clubs earlier in the OLC” or she “should have chosen a shorter text”; “There are unexpected interruptions in the school and the timing was off for that course.” Also she said it was “challenging reading to students in one big class” as she was the only teacher to read to them, and “especially when students have poor attendance,” it was hard to keep all students on the same pace of reading. “It is hard to read the same piece to each student again and again to make sure everyone has read it.”

When asked about the interruptions in school, Sandra said as they had a new principal who was dedicated to engaging the whole school with a variety of activities, so there were more interruptions than usual in this semester.

**Researcher’s reflections**

I kept reflecting on what would have made for a better research study if I could re-conduct this project, what influences the research had had on the students, and how I could limit
the negative influences on participants. I felt I could conduct a better study in the future by improving the instructions about the study, including research methods such as voice recording and videotaping particularly, and rethinking the procedure of the data collection.

**Instructions about the study**

Even though all of the students signed a consent form to indicate their willingness to participate in the research, some of them were still confused about the basics of the research, such as the research purpose, research focus, my role in their classrooms. To make it clear, I was always open to answering every question they had about the research and my role as a participant observer. Also, as many students had concerns about whether what they were recorded saying in the discussions would be heard by their teacher and influence their grades in return. Their dialogue was not as organic and free as it was supposed to be, especially for the first discussion in the university-level class. I noticed that some students lowered their voices or put their hands on the voice recorder to avoid being recorded in the discussion. Some of them even came to me and asked me to delete some parts they did not want the teacher to hear. That was why the teacher and I constantly repeated that everything they said was confidential and would not be used other than for the purpose of the research without their permission. What I learned from this was the importance of giving students clearer instructions and more detailed information about the study at the beginning and making sure they felt safe enough to be part of it.

Another confusion some students had was the definition of book clubs. Even though they were in the middle of a book club, some of them still thought “they had never been in a book club”. In the interviews at the end of the study, some of the students still did not know what a book club was, and those students who had heard about the extracurricular book clubs thought book clubs only took place in the form of an extracurricular activity. Again, this
indicates the essential importance of instructions throughout the study to which I should pay more attention to improve future research.

**Voice recording and videotaping**

For the purpose of getting a clearer sense of how students engaged in the discussion, I set up four cameras for the university-level class every time their book clubs met, hoping to observe how the students engaged in discussions from their body gestures and facial expression; for getting better sound quality to hear their conversations, I also used a voice recorder for each group. Even though no student asked to be excluded from the process of videotaping, what I observed was that some students tried to face their backs to the camera suggesting that they did not want their faces to be videotaped.

Catherine was honest to me in the interview, saying “I don’t mind being voice recorded but being filmed was a little uncomfortable.” She considered it an individual difference from others and just wanted to express it. I learnt that the next time I use videotape I will get to know more from the students before the research begins about what would be the best way to set up the cameras in order to limit their influence on the participants and hopefully make the experience less unpleasant for them.

**Data collection**

Other limitations of the research would be the time limitation for the data collection and the limitation of after-class interaction with the participants. If I had had more time to get in touch with all the participants and interview them informally, I would have gotten more detailed perspectives and gotten more clarification of statements from their surveys. In future research I will have a better schedule for data collection and start it earlier.
Future Research

The current study serves as a pilot study for my future research projects. I could improve their design and make them more valid based on the experience of this study. Also the findings of this study suggested several particular questions to research in the future.

Particular participants: ESL in English book clubs

Throughout the book clubs, I observed that for some ESL participants, language was the one main issue influencing all phases of their book club experience, from reading and writing to discussion. ESL learners spent more time reading the novels and making sense of the text rather than thinking critically within the text, and they confronted difficulties with expressing their ideas freely and communicating clearly with peers. They tended to be quieter in book club discussions. I wondered how a book club could be designed particularly to fit ESL learners to achieve a better reading and learning experience. What differences should we make to book clubs to accommodate ESL learners? Would the purpose of reading be changed as well in such book clubs? If so, what would the changes be?

Alternative and potential research sites

Within Ontario

Book clubs have been gradually developed at Downtown Collegiate as part of its school culture since their first use in 2004 or earlier. Many of the participants in this research study had heard a lot about the extracurricular book clubs, and some of them had either experienced the extracurricular book clubs or the classroom book clubs in their previous years in the school, perhaps gives them comparatively positive reading experiences. I wondered whether the reading experiences of students in other high schools where book clubs had never been heard of or used could be significantly different from the ones at Downtown Collegiate. This might be a very interesting focus to explore in future research.
International and comparative study

Since the school learning context in Ontario high schools is very similar to the one in south-west China and since because this study was inspired mainly by my learning experiences in Chinese school contexts, I wondered how the school reading context could be changed by applying book clubs in high school classrooms in China. How interesting it would be to do a comparative study between the school contexts across these two countries.

New literacies

In this study, many students advocated the use of the Internet to assist their reading and learning. Most of the participants who suggested this were male students. What is the meaning behind this?

During the study, a senior male teacher at Downtown Collegiate talked to me about his idea of starting an e-book club with the boys in the school. I wondered whether gender difference was a significant variable in using technology in reading and it would be also interesting to see how book clubs develop with the combination of technology: What is reading and what is text in a technological society? How do we define literacy on the Internet?

The possibility of limiting the effect of curriculum in book clubs

Even though the teacher in this study believed it was hard to not evaluate and test students on the book club experience as long as it was used as part of a course, I still wondered about the possibility of doing this. I assume it would be worthwhile to pursue related questions such as: What happens when students are not evaluated in classroom book clubs? How can students be motivated in classroom book clubs when they are not evaluated?

Summary

I started this study with the motivations to examine problems in literacy instructions in high schools, driven by the curiosity of implementing book clubs in English/Language Arts
classrooms as alternative literacy instructional models to fill the gaps in the school learning context where the lack of authentic learning elements leads to less engaged learners, and an eagerness to explore the differences between classroom book clubs and extracurricular book clubs.

The most influential themes gained from my study include: critical benefits book clubs bring to learners, the importance of students’ voice in learning, and the importance of communication school learning—both teacher-student and student-student communication promoting both student and teacher learning. My passion for future research would to include the further exploration of the structure of book clubs for all levels of schools to improve students’ learning, the ways to let students’ voices benefit school learning and how to bridge teacher learning from student learning.
References


Appendix:

Survey Questions:

1. Your reading life INSIDE SCHOOL (what materials do you read; under what circumstances do you read—in class, for a test, and so on; how do you read—in what ways: individually, in pairs, or in groups; how do you like the reading inside school how do you define reading inside school; your comments, and so on.)

2. Your reading life OUTSIDE SCHOOL (what materials do you read; under what circumstances do you read; how do you read—in what ways: individually, in pairs, or in groups; how do you like reading outside school how do you define reading outside school; your comments, and so on.)

3. If you could change the reading INSIDE SCHOOL, what would you change and how? (suggestions, and so on.) Is there anything related to your reading life that you want to add? (ie. your reading habits, favorite books, and so on.)