

Literature Circles in Library Class

By Nancy DeVault

Student-run literature circles within the classroom setting have been well documented in recent years. This past year I was given the opportunity to have my fifth grade library class for an additional library period each week to devote to literature circles.

BACKGROUND

The fifth grade students had been introduced to literature circles in the fourth grade so they were familiar with the format. Fifth grade students moved up to the middle school for the first time, and we were concerned that the independent reading in this grade would diminish with the additional activities associated with middle schools. Because of block scheduling and our rigorous language arts curriculum, the regular schedule did not include time to conduct literature circles. Given the initial success of the program in fourth grade, the administration supported my initiative to continue this program as part of a separate class. Reworking the schedule, a study hall was eliminated and literature circle period was launched. The administration did not wish to have additional homework associated with this class, so all reading, recording, and discussions were to be conducted within one class period per week. This time constraint presented many challenges in the type of reading material, the recording format, and the length and depth of the discussion sessions. But even with these constraints literature circles can work to keep students reading!

GETTING STARTED

The first step is to define the purpose of the literature circle for your students. For our program, the goal was to expand the student's pleasure in reading and share their experience with their contemporaries so as to develop a lifelong love of reading. As such, the level of difficulty for the reading material was generally at their reading level. It is important to offer reading material students find enjoyable and that lends itself to discussion. Build on your own knowledge, but also take suggestions from the students about the book choices. Next, obtain multiple copies from classroom sets and from the public library. Students should select the book they want to read, so provide them with choices (I provided five) and let them select the top three (in order). Students are then organized into book groups. Within the group, the students select a role for

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their discussion session: questioner, connector, literary luminary, or illustrator. The questioner becomes the group leader who formulates open-ended, discussable questions about a section of the book. The connector records connections between events or characters in the same section of the book and the students' own lives. The literary luminary records a significant or memorable quote from that same section of the book for the group to discuss. The illustrator draws a simple picture of a significant or memorable situation or character from the same section which the group could then discuss.

LITERATURE CIRCLE CLASS STRUCTURE

The 50-minute class period once a week proved to be a challenge for the group. The students were unable to read only a small part of the book once a week and still feel any continuity with the story. Immediately we restructured the class schedule so that literature circle classes were run twice a week for a month and then their regular library class was taught twice a week for a month. This schedule helped the students to retain the skills they were studying in their library research classes compared to when they had class once per week.

As you proceed, structure the class time into a reading time, role recording time, and discussion group time. Assign each group the number of pages to read for the day. When each student finishes they select one of the four roles for the discussion group and record their role entries. When the entire group finishes their discussion begins. Try to discourage students from reading ahead while their classmates are finishing by directing them to select and read a book for the independent reading program. Any extra time at the end of the class can be allotted for independent reading. Students rotate their roles as subsequent sections of the book are discussed

so that everyone experiences each role. As each student completes their entries for their discussion role, review their questions, quotes, connections, or illustrations to be sure that they are appropriate for the group's discussion. For the most part, the students will run the group discussions entirely by themselves, but intermittently listen in and redirect the group if they get off track or fail to include all members of the group. Before reading the last section of the book, each discussion group can make their predictions about the ending of the book. Other concluding ideas include discussing if there could be a sequel, how well they liked the book, and how they might have changed the ending.

It is also possible to vary the structure of the discussion groups by having all students be questioners and then, in addition, selecting any other role of their choice. If students never want to act as the literary luminary and select a quote to discuss consider eliminating or revising the role.

Groups including struggling readers might use audio books for their literature circle activities. One book we used in this way, *Shiloh* by Phyllis Reynolds Naylor (Atheneum, 1991), is a powerful story to which a dramatic reading brought an added depth to the story. The voice of the reader added dimension to the characters which enriched the story for all the students. It allowed readers of various skill levels to stay involved at the slower pace of reading aloud. It also helped the readers who tended to rush through the story, often missing pertinent parts of the plot and nuances of the characters and setting. This would be a good way to first initiate literature circles with students.

BOOK SELECTIONS AND DISCUSSION NOTES

It was interesting to observe the groups' formation and dynamics. During the first round

of selections, the groups tended to divide along boy-girl lines. The two boy groups selected *The Toothpaste Millionaire* by Jean Merrill (HMC Children's Books, 1972) and *The Hoboken Chicken Emergency* by D. Manus Pinkwater (S&S Learning Materials, 1997.) The students enjoyed the stories, they were easy for them to read within our time frame, and they had some interesting and imaginative opinions, especially about the six foot chicken in *The Hoboken Chicken Emergency*. Two of the boys in this group subsequently read Pinkwater's sequel, *Looking for Bobowicz* (HarperCollins, 2004) for their own enjoyment. The girls chose to read Konigsburg's *From the Mixed-Up Files of Mrs. Basil E. Frankweiler* (Atheneum, 1967) and *The Princess in the Pigpen* by Jane Resh Thomas (Houghton Mifflin, 1989.) The group reading Konigsburg's book were initially attracted to the idea of children running away and living in a museum, but ultimately did not enjoy the story. *The Princess in the Pigpen*, a time-travel story about an Elizabethan princess being transported to a modern day Iowa farm, proved to be a success. The girls had some lively discussions about the pros and cons of living in various time periods as well as losing the security of one's family and home.

Other successful choices included *Honus and Me* by Dan Gutman (HarperCollins, 1997), *Stone Fox* by John Gardiner (HarperCollins, 1983), and several of Andrew Clements' books.

During discussion times observation of the group dynamics provided thoughtful insights into the students' distinctive personalities. One surprising situation involved a shy, soft-spoken girl who in the initial book circle was grouped with three of her girlfriends. Her role with this group was quiet and she was reluctant to make any but minimal comments during the discussions. In a subsequent grouping, she was placed with three boys who were inclined to find humor in every situation. In this book circle she tended to assume the role of the studious leader who kept these three boys and their discussion on track, all in her own quiet way. The group of four boys who read *The Hoboken Chicken Emergency* included the class clown who made a humorous comment about every discussion point. My inclination when observing this group was to rein in this student so that the discussion would stay on track. However, when I really started to pay attention to what was going

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on with this group, I could see that this group was actually meeting my goals for the literature circles. They were having a good time discussing a piece of literature. They made outlandish scenarios about what they would do if they were to ever run into a six foot chicken on the street. They were interacting with each other in a positive way, building on each others' thoughts, and using their imaginations.

EVALUATION

Students were observed within their discussion groups to keep them on track, but since we were working in a collaborative culture to encourage a lifelong love of reading, evaluation of the individual students in order to give them a grade seemed counterproductive. The literature circles were deemed a time for these students to interact with their peers without competition while sharing their thoughts and feelings about a piece of literature they chose to read. Rather, it seemed more important at the end of the literature circle class to have the students evaluate their enjoyment of the works they had chosen, the value of their discussion groups, and the enrichment literature circles brought to the works they had read. You can easily put together a short survey to gather this information. 🌈

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