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Abstract

This paper is a review of the literature concerning the use of literature circles in elementary classrooms. The purpose of this paper is to present all aspects of literature circles, both the pros and cons, within the context of elementary classrooms. The content of the paper deals with the historical aspect of reading instruction, variations of literature circles, advantages of literature circles, and suggested guidelines for successful literature circles. This paper concludes that literature circles are a unique format for successful book discussions in which· students and teachers work collaboratively to enable optimal educational success.

Literature Circles

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Abstract

This paper is a review of the literature concerning the use of literature circles in elementary classrooms. The purpose of this paper is to present all aspects of literature circles, both the pros and cons, within the context of elementary classrooms. The content of the paper deals with the historical aspect of reading instruction, variations of literature circles, advantages of literature circles, and suggested guidelines for successful literature circles. This paper concludes that literature circles are a unique format for successful book discussions in which students and teachers work collaboratively to enable optimal educational success.

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

It is evident from the thousand of books and articles concerning reading

instruction, past to present, that reading instruction is important today to many

researchers. Smith (1934) stated that reading was the most important subject

through the years of our national growth.

Background

The evolution of the reading process can be followed according to changing

teacher roles, available teaching materials, lesson content, and discipline. Robinson

(1977) observed that the first instructional reading materials for the colonists were

imported from Great Britain. Religious content was emphasized by using the Psalter

(a devotional psalm book) and the Bible for reading instruction. Huck (1987) stated

that teaching materials were limited:

> Children learned to read from *hornbooks;* a hornbook was really not a book at
> all but a little paddle to which was pasted a sheet of parchment printed with the
> alphabet, the vowels, and the Lord's Prayer. What made these little *books*
> unique was that the child could handle them and see the print close up, rather
> than merely look at a manuscript held by the teacher. First appearing in the
> 1440' s, they became the first books of instruction for young children for many
> years. Brought to this country, they were used by the Puritans and in Colonial
> Dame Schools. Children advanced from the hornbook to ABC books and
> primers. These had more text than the hornbooks but were still of a religious
> matter. (p. 98)

Mathews (1966) commented that the sole method of teaching English in

colonial America was the ancient model of first the mastery of letters, then syllables,

and finally words and sentences. He continued to say there were no professional

books, courses of study, or manuals to assist teachers with reading instruction.

Finkelstein (1989) described a country schoolhouse as an amphitheater where children sat on benches around a central stove in order to keep warm and watch each other. Students studied a portion of text and stood to recite their lessons. "When teachers taught children to read, they required them to memorize and speak. They were not expected to question or criticize, create or recreate meaning through the study of the written word" (Finkelstein, p. 12). She noted that students were ranked and classed according to how well they could recite Noah Webster's Blue-Back Speller, or how well they could spell words of two to three letters or syllables, read the primer introduction, or complete sentences from advanced readers. Smith (1934) stated that Webster' s American Spelling Book was most popular. The book, The American Spelling Book, contained lists of words and syllables, rules for reading and speaking, moralistic advice, admonitions, fables, stories, dialogues and poetry. The content of his book emphasized nationalism and the American language.

According to Shannon (1989), the first half of the nineteenth century reading instruction used Webster's spelling method. With this method students learned letter names, spelled and pronounced lists of syllables, words and whole sentences. Webster's American Spelling Book was the main text. Students were grouped according to their spelling ability.

"By the 1860's most urban teachers had shifted the emphasis of their reading instruction from the letter and speller to the syllable and pronunciation method" (Shannon, 1989, p. 7). The textbook used for phonics instruction was William McGuffey's Eclectic First Reader for Young Children in which spelling was used to

recognize words. Shannon described this method as one in which the teacher guided

students to the alphabet, pronunciation of words and on to simple sentences and

stories. He further stated that teachers used this method with phonics by "pronouncing

the word, by requiring students to repeat in unison, by breaking it immediately into its

phonic elements, by blending those sounds to its original pronunciation, and finally by

discussing its meaning" (Shannon, p. 9). Here too, the role of the teacher was as

overseer and drillmaster, for words were defined but not discussed as to content

within a story. The popularity of the McGuffy readers continued through 1844 (Smith,

1934). McGuffy was given credit for writing the first graded series of readers for the

elementary school. These books contained mostly simple sentences about children and

animals with emphasis on phonics. Nila Banton Smith (1965) stated the following:

> Every author of new reading books furnished generous instruction for the use
> of his material. Furthermore, authors of texts which had appeared during the
> preceding period without detailed instructions now came forth with
> manuals...to furnish rather definitely prescribed instruction. (p. 169)

Shannon (1989) affirmed that these books were for specific grades and contained

specific information and comprehension questions. The guide book was a specific

attempt to direct teachers' interactions with students daily using a scientific teacher's

guide book and was the beginning of basal reading materials similar to today's basals.

Directions for the mechanics of reading were sequenced to corresponding children's

developmental levels. Individual seatwork was invented to provide practice and

connections to silent reading. Workbooks became a part of daily reading. Grouping

was according to individual needs (Robinson, 1977). By 1960 the standardized use of

basals was in place and continued on for at least twenty-five years (Shannon, 1989). In

a typical elementary classroom in the 1960's, the teacher and students would be using commercially prepared materials. Students would be grouped according to their ability to read and write. Two groups would be at their seats doing worksheets relating to a reading skill. The teacher would be with group three, reading and discussing suggested questions relating to the text which they had read. The teacher would be in control, giving directions and listening to a student read, and modeling a skill lesson. This routine continued on to two more groups and would repeat itself each day (Shannon,1989).

As reading instruction evolved, children's literature became the basic model for instruction (Raphael & Au, 1998). "By the early 1900's the student anthologies of all major American basal reading series were composed almost entirely of unadapted works of children' s literature" (Raphael & Au, p. xiii). However, literature based reading is more than simply reading different texts. It involves understanding how children respond to literature. It recognizes the value of reading for pleasure and shares knowledge and content using literature to teach reading. It also involves various assessment (Raphael & Au, 1998).

Kenneth Goodman, Donald Graves, and Frank Smith are largely responsible for this new approach to reading instruction. Their literature- based instruction falls within a larger theory, which is called *whole* language (Shannon, 1989). "This literature- based reading program, rooted in the whole language movement was in full swing . . . in the mid-to-late 1980' s" (Raphael & Au, 1998, p. 356).

Kenneth Goodman (1986) stated in his book, What' s Whole in Whole Language, that we need to involve children to keep language whole. He wrote that

whole language integrates oral and written language in natural ways that are functional

and purposeful:

> Invite pupils to use language. Get them to talk about things they need to
> understand. Show them it's all right to ask questions and listen to the answers, and
> then to react or ask more questions. He suggested that they write about what
> happens to them, so they can come to grips with their experiences and share them
> with others. Encourage them to cope with the print that surrounds them
> everywhere, to enjoy a good story. (p. 7)

"The body of research on literature groups is growing quickly" (Daniels, 1994, p. 46).

These small groups have been called book talks, book clubs, grand conversations,

reading groups, and literature circles. This paper will examine the literature concerning

literature circle.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to review the literature concerning literature

circles within the reading environment of a classroom. In order to achieve this

purpose, the following questions will be addressed:

1. What are literature circles?

2. What are the advantages of literature circles?

3. What are the problems of literature circles?

4. What are the guidelines for effective literature circles?

Need for the Study

In order to define the need for my study, I decided to do an ERIC search. I

used the following time frames as reference; 1966-1981, 1982-1991, and 1992-12/97.

Next I decided to use three different sets of descriptors Set 1 used Literature and

Circles and Elementary. Set 2 used (Groups or Group) and (Discussion and Literature

and Response) and Elementary. Set 3 used (Groups or Group) and (Discussion or

Response) and Literature and Elementary. After totaling up all articles and book

entries, averaging them per year, I discovered there has been an increased interest in

this area from 7(during 1966-1981) to 21(during 1982-1991) to 48(during

1992-12/97). The variety and points of view within these topics is endless and shows

increased interest for my study.

Limitations of the Study

A major difficulty was the lack of books and resources concerning this topic.

Much time was spent trying in locating books that had not been returned or were missing.

Lack of time to work on this paper was also frustrating. Locating information, writing,

editing, and rewriting take endless hours. It was also difficult to locate primary sources.

When primary sources were not available, secondary sources had to be located and used.

Definitions

The following terms will be used in this paper according to these definitions:

Literature circles: A small group of children gathered for literature discussion.

Literature based curriculum: Instruction and content based on literature.

Whole language: The integration of reading and writing within a literature format.

Reader response: According to Raphael & Au(1998) the meaning isn't in the

text but in the reader's personal interaction with the text. They used Louise

Rosenblatt's term *transaction* with the text.

Engagement: Lee Galda (Raphael & Au, 1998) referred to engagement as the

power of reading. Engaged readers create meaning for themselves to share with

others.

Scaffold: Instructional support provided by the teacher.

CHAPTER 2

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Differing Views of Reading Groups

Radencich and McKay (1995) stated that ability grouping for reading

instruction is pervasive in U.S. schools. These ability groups are common particularly

in primary grades. "The American graded school found its inception in the Quincy

Grammer School in Boston in 1847. (Otto, 1932, p. 3). Also at this time, the first

graded readers were written by Samuel Wood and William McGuffey. As graded

schools and reading materials evolved, new problems developed. Radencich &

McKay (1995) declared:

> Teachers began small reading groups in their classes grouped according to
> children's abilities. The Story Hour Readers Manuals suggested to form groups
> for children that were "slow and need more assistance" and those who
> "progress rapidly". (p. 3)

As groups changed so did the materials. At the lower levels preprimers were

introduced in order to simplify reading. Radencich & McKay (1995) referred to Nila

Smith who stated that by limiting the number of new words introduced and repeating

them, it was believed, stories could be made easier.

Salinger (1993) stated that around 1925 reading success was measured

scientifically in terms of quantity, not simply describing reading behavior. "Most early

assessment methods (many of which are still widely used) depended primarily on

counting children' s errors in oral reading or eliciting nearly verbatim recall of what

was read silently" (p. 2). Reading proficiency was through repeated skill practice.

Salinger (1993) reported:

The basal series came into prominence at this time; it is a complete instructional package, designed with the intention of making teaching easier and more efficient. However, when students do read in a basal reader series, they often encounter texts that "look like real language and yet . . . do not correspond to any real language form . . . They also sound like real utterances in spite of transmitting no information and lacking any communicative context". (Ferreiro & Teberosky, 1982, pp. 274-275)

Lee Galda, professor at the University of Georgia, (Raphael & Au, 1998) presented another aspect of reading. She referred to the power of reading as *engagement*. Galda also stated that reading is social, cultural, temporal, and transactional, and she further contended that people create meaning for themselves as they read and share that with others. Because of the readers' cultural experiences, individual readers create their own meaning. These readers mediate those experiences and feelings through language which is socially constructed. As readers share meanings, they become part of a socio-cultural interpretation of literature. Raphaell & Au (1998) declared that we make meaning by using our own images and ideas and those of others with whom we have shared a book. Every time we share a book and discuss it with our class, we derive new understandings and meaning from the text.

According to Roser & Martinez (1995), "research supports our belief in the need for reform in the methods we use to teach students to read and, specifically, talk about text" (p. 67). They contended that the theories of Gavelek and Vygotsky suggested that language is fundamental to thinking and therefore through classroom talk students come to experience the social, collaborative nature of literacy (Wells, Chang, & Maker, 1990). It is necessary then to create classrooms in which students

engage in meaningful talk if we are to develop higher level thinking which is important to success both in and out of school (Roser & Martinez, 1995).

The Book Club program is a framework for literature-based instruction in some classes. It involves four inter-relating contexts: reading, writing, literary circles or student-led book clubs, and whole-class discussions (McMahon & Raphael with Goatley & Pardo, 1997). The goal is to integrate languages arts and create opportunities for students to take ownership for meaningful discussions of literature texts. A typical day of *Book Club* is discribed by Kathy Highfield according to McMahon & Raphael:

> My students begin by reading their Book Club book and then respond to literature through written entries is their response logs. Students then discuss their ideas in the small student-led discussion groups, called Book Clubs, that the program is centered around. There, among peers, they relate to the literature in meaningful and powerful ways. The Book Club session ends with the class participating in a teacher-facilitated discussion called *community share*. During community share, I help students connect ideas, provide closure, and support their learning instruction. (p. 173)

Book talk is another form of literature circles used within a literature-based classroom. Roser & Martinez (1995) wrote they believed that book talk promotes deeper insights, builds children' s literacy and language experiences, and brings life experiences to the surface. They believe it gives children a chance to say what they think, share text connections, and collaborate in group- constructed meanings. Good book talk involves children's honest reactions to stories. These authors declared the following practices necessary for effective talks:

> Good book talk happens when books are drawn together into instructional units that share a focus, topic or theme.

> Better book talk is fueled by writing opportunities.

Many teachers are finding that better book talk is a result of having a plan.

Good book talk seems to depend on a conversational setting.

Book talk is sometimes dependent on returning to the story.

Good book talk depends on having experienced models who offer genuine responses to the story (pp. 33-34).

They elaborated that we all clarify our thoughts when we talk with others. Children also use talk to clarify their thinking and deepen their learning. "We discovered long ago that silent classrooms are not the best kind for learning: Children talk to learn; teachers talk to teach" (p. ix).

Another grouping strategy for literature discussion is referred to as grand conversations. Raphael & Au (1998) stated that through careful planning and thoughtful interaction with children teachers can involve their students in good book conversations. These book talks should be natural and lively conversations that could occur at the dinner table. Eeds and Wells (1989) researched literature discussions among fifth and sixth graders and stated that much of today's discussions were a form of inquisitions by teachers, but what is needed is grand conversations: Raphael & Au (1981 stated:

> *Grand conversations* focus on child-centered talk and personal response that reflects aesthetic reading. One of their important findings was that "the element of literature can be expected to emerge naturally as children and teacher talk about books together" (p. 23). Eeds and Wells highlighted the importance of the teacher taking of *teachable moments* in the conversation to point out literary elements (p. 47).

Peterson & Eeds (1990) contended that this dialogue model is the best system to use for text interpretation. " It is the interaction of the elements of literature that brings the story into existence" (p. 25). They added that it is natural and a way of co-

producing meaning. "Dialogue partners need one another's patience, ideas, and encouragement. The give-and-take nature of the system depends on other participants to take up an idea, expand it, and add to it" (p. 21).

Literature circles, as defined by Hill, Johnson & Noe (1995), are discussion groups in which children meet regularly to talk about books. Although structure and organization varies, several common threads can be recognize. These small groups include a wide range of abilities, interests, and are heterogeneous.

> You'll often see students huddled in groups on the floor or around a table, leaning forward and listening intently. Children read questions from their dialogue journals, make predictions, and ask for clarification. Ideas are tossed around-sometimes quietly, at other times with great animation. The level of passion is often tied directly to how much they love the book. Children discuss a wide range of topics-from author's craft, to a character's motivation, to connections to their own lives. (p. 2)

Literature circles, book talks, book clubs, and grand conversation all involve literature discussions. Kathy Short (1997) stated that literature circles enable all reader's opportunities to become literate. The discussions develop readers into critical thinkers. She quoted Hanssen (1990) who said that "although dialogue lies at the heart of all literature circles, there is no *right* way to integrate the circles into the curriculum. Both teachers and students make different decisions that influence the focus of the groups" (p. 65).

Advantages of Literature Circles

Daniels (1994) stated that literature circles are small, temporary, discussion groups which meet regularly, and are based on children's specific book choices. He observed that if we want reading to be a life long habit, reading must be voluntary

with feelings of power and pleasure. He referred to Zeleman, Daniels, & Hyde (1993) when they wrote the following:

> They (children) need substantial opportunities to develop and pursue their own tastes, curiosities, and enthusiasms in the world of books. In fact, choice is actually a matter of educational standards and rigor. Students must learn to take full responsibility for locating, selecting, pursuing books, rather than always expecting teachers or other adults to choose for them.... By providing structures and schedules to promote student-chosen reading experiences at all levels; activities like literature circles, reading workshops, and sustained silent reading offer a way to redress our schools dangerous imbalance between assigned and independent reading. (p. 21)

Nancy Atwell (1987) agreed saying, "If we want our adolescent students to grow to appreciate literature, another step is allowing them to exert ownership and choose the literature they will read" (p. 161). She commented that her students' book choices increased, about thirty-five books per student, because of their power to choose them. Their freedom of choice had turned them into readers. This advantage of literature circles, the freedom to choose ones books, is also agreed upon by Sarah Owens (Hill et al., 1995):

> Literature circles can promote choice in several ways: students choose their own books, decide on the number of pages to read, select a group facilitator, and determine their questions, responses, and extension projects. Choice can be the wild card that makes students embrace tasks with greater enthusiasm. It is a powerful motivational tool and a first step toward developing independence. (p. 7)

Another advantage of literature circles stated by Daniels (1994) is the fact that *kids* develop and control their own discussions. They are required to find and develop their own topics. Hill et al. (1995) quoted Vygotsky when he said the following:

> Through literature circles, students bring to their discussions the questions closest to their hearts. They can learn to explore their own reactions and value others' opinions. The teacher's role is to provide the environment in which such discussions can flourish, and artfully extend students' responses. (p. 6)

The goal of literature circles according to Hill et al. (1995) is not to explain and dissect literature but to make meaning based on diverse experiences and contributions that each reader brings and shares. Discussions should increase comprehension and lead to deeper reading. Rosenblatt (Raphael & Au, 1998) reiterated that these circles are based on a belief that reading is a transactual process where students actively construct understandings by bringing meaning as well as taking meaning from a text. Kathy Short (Hill et al., 1995) said that within these discussion groups students must think collaboratively not just cooperatively. She continued:

> Within a cooperative learning format, tasks and roles may be divided; shutting down the talking and thinking, which is at the heart of the dialogue. Children do not simply contribute their part of completing a task; they listen carefully and think deeply with other group members to create understandings that go beyond those of individual members. The dialogue in these groups lead children to new perspectives on literature and their lives. (pp. x-xi)

Daniels (1994) added that within these discussions the aim is for open, natural conversations not objective questions based on facts. With our personal responses "we connect with one another around divergent, open-ended, interpretive questions-questions of value" (p. 23). He concluded that it is not necessary to analyze all the literary components of a work, but say: "That's great. Let' s read another one" (p.23).

An additional advantage of literature circles is the new role of the teacher. This role is varied. According to Radencich & McKay (1995), "making these groups gradually learn to be independent as possible allows the teacher time to act as troubleshooter, facilitator, and participant, as needed" (p. 76). They added that sometimes teachers need to read a first chapter to a new group, establish group

guidelines and rules, or listen carefully to oral reading, questions, and discussions. In some rooms, teachers may elect to take on the role of a reader. "A teacher' s becoming a fellow reader, honestly reading, responding, predicting, and sharing meaning-making processes right along with the students, offers a radically different and powerful demonstration of how mature readers really think" (Daniels, 1994, p.76). Daniels (1994) agreed and stated that teachers delighted in their natural role in literature circles. "They are invited by the very nature of the structure to leave behind the position of taskmaster-teller and become a fellow reader, a coach, and a colleague" (p. 16). Research on family interaction (Daniels, 1994) including Jerome Bruner's 1961 work on scaffolding, showed that "caring, playful adult-child relationships are crucial to nurturing learning" (p. 27). Daniels continued on:

> Teachers who implement literature circles in their classrooms are recreating for their students the kind of close, playful interaction that scaffolds learning so productively elsewhere in life. They develop their classrooms as a kind of analogous family, a substitute lap, another kind of dining-room table. It's no surprise, then, that teachers are energized by literature circles, that they so often comment on how much they and their students enjoy the time together. (p. 28)

Literature circles also give children the opportunity to take advantage of reader response theories. Roser and Martinez (1995) stated that there are many purposes for talking about literature. Theorist, Louise Rosenblatt (1978), said that talking about books gives both readers and listeners space to expand and explore their unique responses to literature. Roser & Martinez (1995) quoted her when she said, "all readers, but especially children, should have many opportunities to discover that reading stories and poems can be an intense personal experience" (p. 107). Short (1997) agreed saying that children should learn about life and their world by entering

the world of non-fiction and fiction, not to just answer a series of questions. As

children bring their tentative understanding of books to literature circles, they are able

to share their experiences and feelings with others while they critique connections and

other interpretations. Kathy Short (1997) referred to Gloria Kauffman's nine-year-old

student, Chris, who talked about his experiences in literature circles when he said:

> Everyone has a chance to give their opinion and even if you don't agree with
> that person, you keep talking because you know that you will get more ideas.
> You aren't trying to figure out one right answer. In reading groups, when
> someone gave the right answer, we were done talking. In literature circles, we
> keep on going. We try to come up with as many different directions as
> possible. (p. 64)

Louise Rosenblatt (1978) stated that reader response can be efferent and aesthetic.

She clarified this by saying, " To designate this type of reading, in which the primary

concern of the reader is what he will carry away from the reading, I have chosen the

term *efferent,* derived from the Latin, *efferre..." (p.* 24). She continued saying that as

the reader reads, his attention is toward retaining concepts, testing ideas, and

performing actions. In contrast, aesthetic reading, is concerned with what happens

during the actual reading (Rosenblatt, 1978). "...the reader's attention is centered on

what he is living through during his relationship with that particular text" (p. 25).

Hill et al. (1995) concluded that if we ask students to respond to questions about

story sequence or plot the purpose is for efferent reading. On the other hand, an

aesthetic stance begins with the reader' s personal involvement with the text.

Readers who take an aesthetic stance make connections to their own lives and react

emotionally" (p. 6).

The many ways of responding to literature is another advantage of literature circles. Regi Routman (1991) stated that "a literature response log is a journal for recording reactions to literature" (p. 103). Whether it is called a reading response log, literature log, reading log or reading journal she contends it is an excellent tool for connecting writing to reading. This is also a way for extending text meaning and for providing ownership to readers' literary experiences. " Responding in writing to a question, impression, mood, or reaction generated by the reading seems to promote critical thinking" (p. 103). She elaborated:

> Students' written responses can be used as a springboard and reference point for group discussion. Additionally, the literature response log can be an effective evaluation instrument. The teacher, student, and parents have an on going, visible evidence of the student's reactions, interpretations, and thinking regarding a particular book. Finally, the literature response log is a meaningful alternative to answering traditional comprehension questions and writing lengthy, mandatory book reports. (p. 104)

Daniels (1994) suggested the use of role sheets, specific jobs for students to do before their groups met, to help during discussions. He stated that drawing and writing are vital to literature circles. "During reading, the role sheets encourage readers to stop and use prose or drawings to capture, record, crystallize, and play with their thinking and responses to the text" (p. 22). He contended that this makes their writing personal and open-ended. Students are free to generate their own original language, and they do not have to give specific answers to workbook blanks or story prompts. As students meet in their groups, their writing and drawings enable them to share and be involved in group conversations. After using the role sheets, Daniels (1994) explained that "reading logs take over the writing/drawing function, serving as a repository of readers' responses to

their reading.... a source ready to be drawn upon for discussion questions and ideas". (p. 22)

Problems of Literature Circles

As teachers began implementing literature circles in their classrooms they faced various problems. According to Daniels (1994), one of the most prevalent problems is that of patience. He stated, " many teachers try to do too much too soon, prematurely intervene, panic, and lose faith in the *kids* and the process" (p. 176). He contended that teachers have a need for personal display, for performing, being the center of attention and in control. Daniels considered this problem to be an ego problem of the teacher and it could be an " unseen iceberg that has sunk thousands of instructional innovations" (p. 177). Hill et al. (1995) commented that teachers face problems as simple as when to start, what books to use, and how to elicit more in-depth writing and meaningful conversations.

My friend and teaching colleague, L. Ashby (personal communication, June 5, 1998) shared her difficulties with literature circles in her first-second grade class:

> I often directed the conversations too much I think. It was a struggle because I know the teacher should model good questioning and thinking but yet not control the topics and direction. I never could find the balance. I was quite uncomfortable being simply a "participant" (especially with younger kids) and I may have given more guidance than necessary and stifled the kids' ideas as a result.
>
> Setting up rules and guidelines for productive discussions also caused me problems. Little kids (grades K-4) don' t know how to discuss politely or how to build off of each other' s ideas and questions in a conversation (i.e. one child gives his idea and the others listen but don't know how to stay on the same topic.) They simply give a new idea of their own.

Planning for a substitute also caused concern. How does one explain the group process of literature group interactions sufficiently for a sub to successfully lead one?

What to do with other children? Ideally they are reading and writing about their own literature group books while I'm participating in a discussion group but it is impossible to insure that. With primary-age kids it is nearly impossible to fully concentrate on the discussion because the other kids often need assistance and direction.

What can one do with children that continually choose books that are either too difficult or too easy for them to read? It doesn't really harm them to read an easy book or to read a more difficult book with a partner, but is this teaching them to be better readers? How can I individualize their instruction?

Scheduling time effectively was frustrating for me. I either didn't get the conferencing in or I didn't get the discussion groups in. I didn't want to be too rigid and structured. I was afraid I wouldn' t be able to pursue longer discussions or more conferences if I stuck to a time schedule too carefully.

Another teacher-friend, P.Vincent (personal communication, May 30, 1998)

discussed her frustrations using literature circles in her nursery-kindergarten class:

How can I purchase multiple sets of appropriate books? Budgets are set and extra money is difficult to find.

My kids sign up for their books on Wednesday. Parents are asked to read as often as possible with their child and return the books on Monday. How do I encourage parents to be involved in the reading and return books on time?

Discussion groups don't go well because of the developmental ability of the students. In what ways can I encourage and develop good discussions in these very young children?

My students do projects in connection with their book discussions. How do I find space for the materials for project work?

M. Betterton, teaching colleague (personal communication, June 25,

1998) added her concerns while conducting literature discussion groups. She has

been involved with these groups since the mid 80's in her fifth grade classes.

I knew one of my personal goals in involving students in literature discussion groups was to enable them to " enter the world of the story" and its characters, events, situations etc. In other words, to enable students to make meaningful connections. In order to do that, I needed to be able to pose open-ended questions which invite the student to verbalize and relate his life experiences and knowledge base to the readings at hand. How can this be done?

A second concern involved my participation in the discussions. As a teacher of the basal, the students often parroted answers that agreed with those of the basal. My role oftentimes was that of information giver or receiver. In the literature discussion groups I wanted to participate in the "talk" with my students BUT from the perspective of a reader, not as their teacher. How can this be done?

Lastly, the issue of assessment/ evaluation was a concern. If students were to actively engage in fruitful discussions I needed to be adept at watching and listening to responses. Likewise, I decided that assessment should be/ needed to be directly related to the readings. How can this be effectively done?

Another concern that was voiced was that of equity of discussions within literature circles. Many assume that within peer-led discussion groups that all students' voices will be equally valued and heard in a democratic context. Evans (1996) stated that factors of status, gender and cultural background effect whose ideas are expressed and listened to. Evans (1996) referred to King who said that high achievers were more likely to assume leadership and dominate discussions during cooperative learning groups in math activities. Evans (1996) also referred to Mulyran's (1995) study of high and low achievers during small group math instruction which revealed differences related to gender. Mulyran discovered that " boys gave significantly more information than girls, while girls asked significantly more questions than boys" (p. 195). She concluded that the roles of helpers and helped are well defined and may depress the participation of low-status students therefore only creating inequity in a new form. Evans (1996)

referred to Harre' and VanLangenhove who suggested that positioning within roles creates inequity. They contend that people position themselves through discourse or are positioned by others. As a result of positioning individual contributions to the groups' discussions will be inequitable.

I, too, struggled trying to implement literature circles in my first-second grade classroom. My students had learned to politely raise a hand and wait patiently before sharing their thoughts and ideas. This was a major problem during literature circle time. My students wanted my approval before they would add to their group's discussion. Encouraging them to contribute their opinions and comments along with others' ideas was difficult for them and myself. They wanted me to be in control and hesitated to take risks. Another problem was locating sufficient reading books which would address the diverse reading abilities in the classroom. Challenging the higher ability readers and developing the lower ability readers within meaningful literature books became an exhausting experience. Naturally, I found it exasperating to motivate the students to develop higher level discussions. Young children tend to focus on what they like about a story. I wanted their talks to be open-ended questions, real life experiences, creating an awareness of the authors' style and meaning within a friendly conversation.

CHAPTER 3

GUIDELINES FOR EFFECTIVE LITERATURE CIRCLES

Today's educators in early childhood classrooms recognize the power of

literature. Charlotte Huck (Short & Pierce, 1990) stated that we acknowledge

literature's influence on our feelings and thoughts traditionally, but discovering the

role that literature plays in helping children to learn to read, thus creating readers, has

been slow. She stated that literature has the power to " make us more human, to help

us learn to empathize width characters, to crawl inside the skins of persons very

different from ourselves" (p. 3). Huck reaffirmed that the power of literature enables

readers to journey through many worlds vicariously, to provide knowledge for

foundations of civilizations-reflecting the past's influence on today and the future-to

develop our own imagination in terms of what if..., and finally the power to transform,

"to take you out of yourself and return you to yourself- changed self" (p. 4). Kathy

Short (1997) expressed Huck's feelings that the power of literature is seen as a mirror

and a window on life. As children read literature they discover other experiences

sometimes finding themselves reflected in books. Because of the power of literature

today's teachers must consider their role in selecting appropriate books. Each teacher

must create her specific plan that will best accomplish her goals, thus meeting the

needs of her students. "Choice is at the heart of literature circles" (Hill et al., 1995, p.

28). Choice of real literature in the first priority for successful literature circles.

Hornsby, Sukarna & Parry (1986) referred to real literature as that which adds quality

to ones life, develops insights, arouses feelings and stimulates thoughts. This happens

when the reader is actively involved with the book and its author. They continued:

> Children's literature must be the core of every reading program because it is
> real literature which touches the lives of children in special ways and it is real
> literature that is asked for time and time again. With real literature, children
> don't learn how to read; they choose to read. (p. 8)

Margaret Meek (Hornsby, Sukarna, & Perry, 1986) referred to reading as

something beginners do as play because they like it. They discover how to be

more than themselves..."to sink into a story" (p. 8). She continued to say that

the first material used during the first day of school must be real literature:

> It must be something that children can sink into, something that will put another
> world inside their head. It must engage their imaginations and stir their
> emotions that they will laugh, feel sad or sit in wonder. It must extend their
> understandings. (p. 8)

According to Lee Galda (Raphael & Au, 1998), teachers must select the best

books because that is what children deserve. Teachers must consider their students'

reading ability, curriculum content, world issues, and the author's style and writing

craft. Dianne Monson (Hill et al, 1995) specifically recommended selecting books

with themes children care about. She stated she asks herself these questions " Does the

book succeed in arousing my emotions and will it arouse children's emotions? Is the

book well written? Is the book meaningful?" (p. 113). In reference to picture books

she stressed that the illustrations must be beautifully designed in terms of line, color

and the balance of pictures and text. "Since we want students to have book

experiences that involve the senses and evoke images, it is especially important that

the illustrations match the form of the story" (p. 114).

As teachers select appropriate literature for their classrooms they must realize

their role in providing a rich literature environment. Hornsby, Sukarna & Parry (1986)

emphasized that teachers need to introduce children to unlimited authors and titles

and must "give daily invitations to discover the rewards within the covers" (p. 10).

They encouraged teachers to immerse themselves in children's literature and share

new discoveries with their students. As books are shared and discoveries made, the

teacher's enthusiasm and love of books can be seen. Short & Pierce (1990) stated "It

is a teacher' s best and most important work to reveal to young learners the joys to be

had as a practicing member of a literate community that loves and knows books" (p.

79). Norton (1991) agreed saying "When children discover enjoyment in books, they

develop favorable attitudes toward them that usually extend into a lifetime of

appreciation" (p. 2).

Having surrounded the students with quality literature the second priority for

successful literature circles is the students' self selection of specific texts. "Choice is

essential to learning. Through choice, learners are able to make connections to

interests and experiences that are significant to them. They take ownership of their

learning" (Short, 1997, p. 14). Daniels (1994) concurred that within independent

reading the deepest spirit of literature circles is evident, therefore student choice for

reading is imperative. He urged teachers to provide two types of independent reading:

individual reading as in sustained silent reading and readers workshop and also

independent reading when kids select, read and discuss their choices within literature

circles. In this way teachers meet the students' need for genuine choice and

self-direction. Hornsby, Sukarna & Parry (1986) agreed that self choice is essential.

They implied that when students select their own texts they become more enthusiastic, enterprising, industrious and persevering. Self selection develops independence in students. "Children can only learn to choose wisely when they are given the opportunity to choose. Returning a poorly chosen book and replacing it with a more appropriate one is a sign of development, not failure" (p. 10). The teacher's role within students' self choice is evident. They need provide a rich literature environment (Hornsby, Sukarna & Parry, 1986). They emphasized:

> Start reading now!... books allow you to enter other people's worlds. They are to be relished, possessed, wallowed in. In them, you will recognize people and places you know, gain new understandings, detect aspects of yourself in others, witness personal feelings that are usually hidden, explore relationships between people and learn of things you never even imagined. Share this with the children; help them to make discoveries too! (p. 11)

Next, after books have been chosen, children have formed small, temporary groups in which to meet on a regular bases. The third priority for successful literature circles is the discussion process within these groups. Daniels (1994) suggested that the kids pick the topics and talk openly and naturally. Short (1997) elaborated that "Children share their favorite parts, retell sections, discuss parts they find confusing, make connections to their own lives or other literature, and engage in social chatter" (p. 72). Within these discussions students can take on specific roles to "guide kids thinking while they read" (Daniels, 1994, p. 25). Possible roles to enhance discussions could be discussion director, literary luminary, illustrator, connector, and other student suggestions.

Within these discussion groups children must trust each other and feel free to take risks. " Children learn best in low-risk environments where exploration is

accepted and current efforts are socially supported and understood (Harste, 1990, p. 317). According to Peterson and Eeds (1990), children need to analyze critically the literary elements and extend themselves beyond plot readers. " We believe that awareness of literary elements and of their function in a story nurtures the development of children's ability to respond imaginatively to a text" (p. 25). These story elements consist of character, place, mood, point of view, time, layers of story meaning, symbol and extended metaphor. Discussing these elements creates a foundation for children to build on in terms of lifelong readers (Tiballi & Drake, 1993).

As students meet in groups discussing their books, they construct meaning (Rosenblatt, 1978). They go beyond the text or transcend it, thinking about what they have read in relations to their own experience and discover a deeper level of understanding of the story (McConaghy, 1990). Peterson and Eeds (1990) stated "The dialogue model is the best system for students to use in text interpretation... because it is a natural way for people to learn and construct meaning" (p. 21). They continued emphasizing that in group discussions students notice shifts in thinking as various interpretations evolve; experiences and feelings of others are heard. Two simple rules promote effective dialogue:

> The first is to respect the interpretations of others and help in their development whenever possible. It is not necessary to adopt other interpretations, but everyone must be obliged to listen to them and give them full consideration. The second rule is that participants-teachers or students- must not enter dialogue with a plot in mind. Spontaneity is essential. It is the immediacy of the responding, and the listening, hat moves participants to insights that cannot be realized through solitary thinking. (p.22)

Daniels (1994), however, disagrees somewhat with literary analysis. He stated that simply "sharing responses is enough" (p. 23). He elaborated that if students have read a book, listened to passages, shared views, discussed vocabulary, connected events to their own lives, searched out common questions and shared drawings then the author's craft has been studied. Reading and responding to many books has its own value. In these discussion groups students simply share their experiences and enjoyment with books (Short, 1997).

Today's teachers serve many roles during small group discussions. The main role, according to Daniels (1994), is that of facilitator. They need to collect books, adjust group arrangements, observe and assess group meetings, confer with struggling students, orchestrate sharing sessions, and encourage self-evaluation. Short & Kaffman (Roser & Martinez, 1995) indicated the teacher's roles were to establish a sense of community, initiate extensive book experiences, develop a broad thematic context, model effective book talk, and organize group logistics.

In some literature circles teachers choose to be a fellow reader (Daniels, 1994). "A teacher's becoming a fellow reader, honestly reading, responding, predicting, and sharing meaning-making processes right along with the students, offers a radically different and powerful demonstration of how mature readers really think" (p. 26). In this way teachers can teach a great deal simply by joining a group. Roser & Martinez (1995) stated that they saw their role as providing open-ended questions to keep discussions going and to encourage deeper thinking. However, the discussion focus was still on themselves and inhibited the students from developing strategies for critical thinking. They decided to reduce their questions and instead

contribute connections and opinions. " We want to collaborate with our students in ways that support them in their current thinking and challenge them to consider new possibilities" (p. 149).

Another aspect of the teacher' s role is that of scaffolding. "By scaffolding teachers provide temporary and adjustable support as students engage in literate behavior" (Raphael & Au, 1998, p. 126). During lessons, students learn new skills, such as reading strategies, as teachers provide guided instruction. Gradually, students internalize this skill and eventually learn to complete the skill independently (Applebee & Langer, 1983). Daniels (1994) suggested that scaffolding might be *thinking aloud,* actually pausing during reading to voice thoughts and *wondering on paper,* where students thoughts are spontaneously written on sticky notes to be revisited during discussions. Basing new knowledge on old, discussing confusing passages, using new strategies to clarify meaning, making predictions, and explaining what we visualize as we read are more scaffolding techniques (Close, 1992).

The fourth priority for successful literature circles is integrating writing. Daniels (1994) stated that during literature circles writing and drawing is vital at all sees. Students using role sheers, write or draw in order to record, capture and play with their thinking. Their writing is personal and open-ended. This writing enables them to share their ideas and thoughts during discussions. "Across the whole cycle of a literature circle then, writing and drawing are used to drive-and to record-the meaning constructed and the ideas shared" (p. 22). Keegan and Shrake (1991) reported they used literature logs as a vehicle for individual communication. They continued:

A literature log, in which children write to us and we write back, gives us the
opportunity to talk about books with them. The log is a collection of friendly
letters filled with thoughts, reactions, questions, and observations about
books and authors. Over the school year we have seen children develop into
critical readers as evidenced by the depth evolving in their responses.
(p. 547)

Christy Clausen (Hill, Johnson & Noe, 1995) discussed her students writing in

terms of response journals. She stated this writing enabled her students to internalize

and reflect on stories' meanings. Students could choose to retell a story, link a personal

experience, describe a character or favorite part, and react enthusiastically to an

exciting event.

"Written conversations," according to Short (1997, p. 66), is a shared writing

activity in which partners discuss a book in writing. They share a pencil and paper and

no talking is allowed except with younger children. This activity teaches children to

listen actively as they read each others comments before they respond - a difficult task

during oral discussions.

Roser & Martinez (1995) stated that students represented their isles via charts,

pictures and maps as they responded to story events, characters, author's language,

funny sections, character maps, and story sequence charts. After they reflected on

written responses, they could plan their focus for the coming discussion.

The teacher's role within the writing format continues to be facilitator. Raphael

& Au (1998) pointed out that early in the year teachers need to provide instruction

using the many and varied forms that written response could take. These approaches

could be a character map, personal connections to the text and critiques of chapters. As

students gain experience, they synthesize ideas concerning the whole novel instead of

specific chapters. As teachers review the responses they recognize what students understand and what areas need examples of reflective writing and good modeling. She begins each journal writing day with a mini-lesson on how and what to write:

> During this lesson, I model how I get my ideas, what I decide to write, and how I make connections with the story. I do this by thinking aloud. After I read my entry, I ask for a volunteer to explain what they are going to write about that day. As a few children begin to share, more hands fly up as children volunteer their ideas. Their responded provide additional models. (p.19)

Christy also referred to her use of journal prompts such as I feel..., I wonder..., I noticed..., I wish...., That reminds me of..., and I think... as her way to scaffold her students' writing.

As students complete selected, reading teachers introduce extension projects. These projects could be individual or whole group. Hill, Johnson & Noe (1995) stated the purpose of the projects is to enhance children's enjoyment, understanding and appreciation of literature- " to give them a chance to revisit their book, make, connections between the literature and their own lives, and gain a clearer picture of how all the books in literature circles were connected by a common thread" (p. 143). Projects could be a Dioramas Mime, Mural, Song, Pop-Up Book, Commemorative Stamp, Story Quilt, Talk Show, Story Wheel, Dance, Sculpture, Cooking Demonstration, and Poetry. Ideas could be endless as the enthusiasm of children is released.

CHAPTER IV

SUMMARY, CONCLUSIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Summary

The purpose of this study was to review the literature concerning literature circles. The intent of this study was to define various types of literature circles, to recognize advantages and disadvantages, to be aware of concerns while implementing literature circles, and to consider suggested guidelines. The following questions were addressed:

1. What are literature circles? There are many researchers/proponents of literature circles. Leaders in this field are Harvey Daniels; Maryann Eeds & Deborah Wells; Barbara Hills, Nancy Johnson & Katherine Noe; Taffy Raphael & Katheryn Au; Jerry Harste; and Ken Goodman. These authors cited various examples of literature circles such as book clubs, book talks, and grand conversations. Their simple premise was that literature circles were a small group of students discussing their books. The framework of these discussion groups was the students' self selection of books, student led discussions, teacher as the facilitator, and journaling to enhance the discussions.

2. What are the advantages of literature circles? The researchers stated that self-selection of books was extremely motivational for students. The student led discussions also encouraged students to take risks, share their insights, and be in charge of their own learning. The new teacher role, facilitator, enabled teachers to share ideas and experiences as they too contributed and acquired new meanings from books.

3. What are the problems of literature circles? Implementing literature circles proved frustrating for many educators. Simple logistics such as group size, time constraints and rules to guide discussions needed to be refined in terms of student needs. Selecting appropriate literature, journaling activities to stimulate discussions and possible culminating projects necessitated teachers taking risks as they attempted new teaching strategies.

4. What are the guidelines for effective literature circles? For literature circles to be successful authors suggested guidelines. Having recognized the power of real literature, these authors stated that the teacher's role of selecting literature was the number one priority. This literature must be meaningful and interesting to children. It must be well written, displaying unlimited authors and their writing styles within many genres. It must enable students to become book characters, to discover personal experiences in books, to arouse feelings and stimulate new thoughts. As students are immersed in good literature, their teacher's love of books will be contagious.

Having realized the power of good literature and wanting to enjoy books, students were ready for the second priority of successful literature circles. They wanted to select their own literature! Reading books that they had chosen heightened their eagerness to share. Within a calm, safe atmosphere students retold stories, related their own personal feelings, and examined characters, story line and plot. As a reader within the group, the teacher scaffolds ideas encouraging new meanings. The fourth guideline integrated writing/drawing to strengthen these discussions. Writing could be a

favorite story part noted on a sticky tab, webbing of character traits, journal entry to summarize a plot, or an illustrated story setting. Writing and drawing organized students thinking, recorded new meanings, and shared their feelings.

Literature circles, as with any new teaching strategy, must be tried repeatedly. To be meaningful, there must be collaboration between students and teachers.

Conclusions

Literature circles are used through out many classrooms today for the purpose of discussing good literature. This study made these conclusions:

1. Literature circles enable students to be exposed to the world of meaningful literature.

2. Literature circles allow students to relate their personal life experiences and events within a text.

3. Literature circles develop a true awareness of author's creativity and style.

4. The implementation of literature circles is facilitated by the willingness of teachers to try new strategies and research other teachers' successes with literature circles.

Recommendations

The following recommendations are suggested for implementation ~ literature circles in today's classrooms.

1. Further research need be completed to strengthen and increase the value and lasting effectiveness of literature circles.

2. There needs to be more communication between teachers who feel success with their literature circles and those who are just beginning them.

3. The use of literature circles within the classroom needs to be explained to administrators, principals, and parents to inform them of its educational outcomes.

4. Adequate in-service training and resources are needed to successfully implement literature circles.

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