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Circles of literary learning in the kindergarten classroom

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Circles of literary learning in the kindergarten classroom

Abstract

This study examined the effects of literature circles on literary learning for kindergarten students. Fourteen children were divided into groups for the purpose of reading and discussing several different fictional stories over a 6-month period. A wide variety of literature was used that reflected the units of study for each month. The children met in literature circles weekly to discuss a story with their peers. Anecdotal records and observations indicated that the students were demonstrating an increased interest in literature. A comparison of pre- and post-tests showed growth in the students' abilities to analyze and interpret stories. (Real names of the students were not used in this paper.)

Circles of Literary Learning in the Kindergarten Classroom

A Graduate Research Paper

Submitted to the

Division of Reading and Language Arts

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of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts

UNIVERSITY OF NORTHERN IOWA

by

Jayne Purdy

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Abstract

This study examined the effects of literature circles on literary learning for kindergarten students. Fourteen children were divided into groups for the purpose of reading and discussing several different fictional stories over a 6-month period. A wide variety of literature was used that reflected the units of study for each month. The children met in literature circles weekly to discuss a story with their peers. Anecdotal records and observations indicated that the students were demonstrating an increased interest in literature. A comparison of pre and posttests showed growth in the students' abilities to analyze and interpret stories. (Real names of the students were not used in this paper.)

Introduction

Adults have been meeting in small social gatherings to discuss pieces of literature for many years. In the 1920's, the Round Table, meeting over lunches in the Algonquin Hotel in New York City, was an inspiration to writers, journalists and artists (Slaughter, 1994). And in a more general sense, with the advent of whole language, educators have come to realize the value of literary discussions for children as well. According to Roser (1995) talking about books provides readers and listeners the opportunity to explore and augment their own personal responses to literature. Through conversing about books, children discover that the text can be interpreted in a number of ways and that they can negotiate meaning with one another.

Dixon-Krauss (1996) makes the claim that through a collaborative study of literature, children enhance their own writing abilities. By brainstorming together to make their own stories, they can create exciting adventures and use vocabulary beyond their grade level.

Talking about books together in small groups has been given many names. Some choose to call it book clubs or literature discussions. In this article it will be referred to as literature circles. The purpose of this paper is to illustrate how one kindergarten teacher and her class discovered the many valuable lessons learned through the literature circle experience. Throughout the article, many instances will be cited to demonstrate that literature circles can be used successfully with children as young as five and six years old.

Getting Started

I was first introduced to the reader response theory developed by Louise Rosenblatt (1978) as a student in a Reading and Language Arts Master's degree program. The theory describes the relationship between the reader and a literary piece as a

transaction from which meaning is evoked, rather than as the reader's simple reaction to the text as led by the author. According to Rosenblatt, the reader brings past experience, prior knowledge, and preconceived notions to his/her reading, which directly affect the meaning of the text for that reader. This transaction involves critical thinking on the part of the reader. My question then became, how do I encourage this type of thinking from my kindergarten students and lead them away from simple recall statements? At first, I worked on open-ended questioning during group discussions, making predictions about stories as we read them, and encouraging my students to express their interpretations and opinions of the pieces we read. This did work to enhance critical thinking about reading, but as with every large group discussion I have experienced, only certain children were comfortable responding in front of the group. Even when everyone had something s/he was willing to contribute, we just didn't have the time or the attention necessary for everyone to have a turn.

As I evaluated my students to discover their awareness of literature in general, I uncovered another area of concern. Part of my school district's reading assessment asked children to identify their favorite book or books (Rhodes, 1993). Of the 14 children in my class, one told me all about a cartoon she saw on TV, two couldn't think of any stories they particularly liked, seven named one story, and four were able to describe two stories. None of the children could give me titles, but those who did describe stories could name the series, such as Barney books or Clifford books, and only two could tell me details about their favorite stories. None of my students were yet able to read on their own. My concern was this: How could I ensure that my students would get the opportunities to share and talk about books more thoroughly compared with customary discussions about literature?

I found an answer from Clausen's (in Hill, Johnson & Noe, 1995) explanation of her use of literature circles with her first grade students. One point she emphasized was the need for quality books. Her criteria for selection impressed me enough to use her suggestions when I chose books for my class. The criteria included a well-crafted story with well-defined characters, plot, setting, and theme. Another point to look for was that the content reflected the children's understandings of their world and the lives of others. The illustrations should match the text to enhance understanding of the story. The language should exemplify the way people really talk. And finally, the characters should show the diversity found in the real world. I also felt that it was important to choose books that corresponded with each month's unit of study. Using these criteria, I selected the following trade books:

A Chair for my Mother by Vera Williams (1982)

Johnny Appleseed by Steven Kellogg (1988)

The Biggest Pumpkin Ever by Steven Kroll (1984)

The Happy Trick-or-Treaters by Mary Packard (1996)

The Doorbell Rang by Pat Hutchins (1986)

Whistle for Willie by Ezra Jack Keats (1964)

Too Many Tamales by Gary Soto (1993)

The Christmas Blizzard by Helen Ketteman (1995)

Latkes and Applesauce a Hanukkah Story by Fran Manushkin (1990)

The Snowy Day by Ezra Jack Keats (1962)

The Big Snow by Berta & Elmer Haden (1948)

City Mouse-Country Mouse and Two More Mouse Tales-Tales from Aesop by John Wallner (1970)

Corduroy by Donald Freeman (1968)

Peter's Chair by Ezra Jack Keats (1967)

Valentine Friends by Ann Schweninger (1988)

Little Rabbit's Loose Tooth by Lucy Bate (1975)

If You Give a Pig a Pancake by Laura Numeroff (1998)

The Frog Prince retold by Edith Tarcov (1974)

The Three Billy-Goats Gruff (no author specified, 1984)

The Little Red Hen (no author specified, 1985)

Hill et al. (1995) also provided a schedule that I believed would work with my kindergarten students. I divided the class in half to create two groups of seven. As per Hill's et al. suggestion, I introduced the books to the children on Fridays. I asked them what they thought the stories were about from the pictures on the cover. We went through a few of the pages and discussed the illustrations so that they could get a feel for the story. I then put a copy of each book in a pocket folder with a supply of post-it notes for each child. The children took the books home over the weekend to read with their families. Parents were instructed to discuss the books with their children and mark the parts the children especially liked with post-its.

On Mondays and Tuesdays, I met with one circle group to discuss their books while the other group worked on another activity. We would pull our chairs into a circle, books in hand. I sat on a child-size chair too, hoping to encourage the students to view me less as the teacher and more as a member of the group. The first time we met, some of the children had marked every page with a post-it. I could see that we would never make it through everyone's favorite parts if all the pages were marked. After that first week, I limited the number of post-its to five per child. We would start our discussion by having one of the children volunteer to share his/her marked pages. At first, all we did was share our favorite pages in the story. After the first few times, I asked each child to

choose one favorite part so that we would have time to discuss those pages in more depth. I asked open-ended questions such as: How did that make you feel? Have you ever experienced something like that yourself? What do you think the characters were feeling when that happened? These questions would serve to launch the discussion.

Wednesdays were set aside for writing responses to the books we read in our reading journals. I started out by giving the children suggestions about what to write, such as illustrating personal experiences that were similar to those being experienced by the characters in their books. Later in the year, I brainstormed with the children for ideas of what to write. Eventually, the children became confident enough to choose their own topics.

Every Thursday, the children presented their books to the rest of the class. Their presentations could take the form of drama or artwork. As the school year progressed, I allowed the children some choice of the books they read, and the circle groups became smaller.

The Home School Connection

In Engaging Families (Shockley, Michalove, & Allen, 1995) the authors emphasized how very important it was to children's school success to have their parents/guardians involved in their learning. When parents took an active part in their children's learning, the children believed it to be important. Because children saw their parents reading and writing at home, they came to realize how critical those abilities were to everyday living, not just in the school setting. The children in Engaging Families were given a reliable homework format. They did not have spelling words one night, math problems the next, and a science report the next night. The children and the parents/guardians could count on consistent homework. Each night, they shared storybooks and journals establishing their own routines. Reading and writing together

provided the children with some stability in their home lives. It also provided the parents/guardians with a dependable connection to the children's school community.

I wanted to develop this same kind of rapport with my students' families. I knew from past experience that I needed to start simply and not require too much of their time. All of my students came from homes where all of the adults worked, and I suspected that they would not be willing to take much time out of their busy schedules for any prolonged homework assignments.

I had some trepidation about sending the books home with the children. It had been my experience in the past that books tended to disappear once they left my classroom. Because it was so important for the children to share these books with their families and return them for discussions, I held a meeting with the parents to explain how crucial it was to read the books to the children before we discussed them in class. I emphasized that the children would need to refer to their books during the discussions so it was necessary for them to make sure their children brought their books back to school. I also asked that the parent or family member who shared the book with the child discuss the story and help that child choose his/her favorite part. As I mentioned previously, post-it notes were placed in each of the folders so the family member could help the child mark the part s/he wanted to discuss.

I soon discovered how beneficial it was to have the family member not only read the book to the child, but also discuss it with him/her and mark the pages. Occasionally, children would come to school without having read their books. I would then ask an older student to read the books to those children before the discussion. Even though the children had the books read to them, they did not have much to contribute to our literature circle. The post-its seemed to help trigger each child's memory about what s/he had chosen to share. The family contributions to our groups were very helpful in

providing more in-depth conversations and saved us a lot of time trying to find the parts we wanted to discuss.

During conferences, I questioned many of the parents on their reactions to the books that I had been sending home. All of the parents I talked to made very positive comments. One mom said that her little boy loved to read until he started attending preschool. Bringing these books home to share and prepare for literature circles had renewed his interest in reading. Another mother said she was surprised at the thought-provoking questions her child asked. One said that her child enjoyed it so much, she had to read the whole book through once and then read it again so her child could decide which parts s/he wanted to mark.

The very best validation I received, however, was from Robby's two-year-old brother. It was right before Halloween, and when he and his mom walked into the room one afternoon to pick up Robby, he saw the big class pumpkin sitting on the table. He exclaimed, "It's the biggest pumpkin ever!" Robby's literature circle book for that week was Kroll's The Biggest Pumpkin Ever (1984).

Becoming a Community of Learners

According to Vygotsky as cited in Hausfather (1996), higher mental functions originate during social activity. Children learn from each other by stimulating one another's thinking through social interaction. Much to my surprise, my students did initiate discussions, listen to one another's opinions and observations, and demonstrate their understanding of appropriate social interactions as a group. An example of this type of conversation follows:

Teacher: What was your favorite part of the story and why?

Trent: My favorite part was the money. I like ten-dollar bills!

Pat: Counting money, I count money, I like it. All people were nice to them. All their

friends. I like the chair.

Rachel: I like the chair with roses all over it. Never seen one like it. I would buy one like it. I'm going to be a fire fighter!

Briann: OK! Who's next?

(No response)

Teacher: Anyone have an idea why the house caught fire?

Robby: There could have been a spark. In one of my Franklin books Mrs. Morse's house caught fire from a spark! Oh, I laughed at the chair-when they buy it, it's colorful!

Mitch: The jar is full of money. I kept money in a jar. I take it out before it gets too full.

Robby: (opens the double picture page where the neighbors are helping out the family)

Nice page! I want a motorcycle.

Mitch: (at the picture of the Blue Tile Diner) It's fun to bake!

Teacher: Anything else?

Briann: Why wasn't there a daddy? I think maybe he was killed, or she wasn't married and just had a baby.

Rachel: He's at work!

Robby: He was fighting--and got old and died.

Mitch: Yeah! He died.

Pat: I think he was killed in the fire.

These children chose the direction the discussion would go and worked at constructing meaning for themselves. They spent a lot of time studying the pictures and trying to discover what had happened to the father. There were no hints in the illustrations or the story itself to explain where dad was, so they drew their own conclusions. Jewel & Pratt (1999) described this type of discussion as speculation. Because of these children's knowledge of the story, personal experience, and/or prior

knowledge of families without dads, they were able to speculate about dad's absence and guide one another to a better understanding of the story.

As we continued to discuss stories we had read, the children mutually decided taking turns was the best way to talk about their favorite parts. When we met, one child would say, "Who wants to start?" and another said "I'll go first" and the conversation began. It became a part of our routine to first discuss favorite parts of the story, and then choose one of those parts and discuss it in greater depth. If the conversation began to lag, I asked a question to get it started again.

Samway & Whang (1996) describe their approach to literature circle discussions as popcorn style. Initially, the children were taught socially acceptable behaviors for a discussion group, including no put downs, mutual respect, attentive listening and the right to help each other. Children were allowed to speak whenever they wanted to as long as they only spoke one at a time. In this way, the students were having real conversations about books in a very comfortable, risk-free community.

In contrast, Daniels (1994) discusses literature circles as small temporary groups meeting to derive meaning from books while working together as collaborative learners. He believes that in order to accomplish this task, members of the group should be assigned certain roles. The discussion director thinks of discussion questions to keep the conversation going, holds the meeting of the members, and asks for member's responses to the discussion. The literary luminary reads aloud the important passages from the text. The connector makes connections from the text to the real world. The illustrator makes graphic responses to scenes from the text. These roles act to encourage students to work collaboratively to construct meaning while holding each member of the group accountable for his/her contribution. Just as the members of a community have certain roles, so do the students in literature circles. However, Daniels (1994) advises against

assigning roles with primary age children. He believes that due to their level of maturity, they should have only two jobs: to share something about their books, and to join in an open discussion of ideas in those books. Although these authors' approach literature circles in different ways, they are each working with their students to build a community of readers who work collaboratively to construct meaning.

Peterson & Eeds (1990) suggest that becoming a community of learners entails the teacher and the children working collaboratively to construct meaning. They claim it is a messy process involving guessing, questioning and putting forth ideas for others in the group to complete. I felt that we really did become a community of learners in this way. I worked together with the children, and they worked together with one another to share our interpretations of the stories and to create meaning from the text. We all made personal connections to our stories and learned from each other's explanations and insights into the stories we shared. Although we did not have assigned roles, each of the children assumed the responsibility of contributing to the group.

Meaning Makers

Although my students were not assigned structured roles during our discussions, they did assume a variety of roles throughout the learning process. One of these roles was that of meaning makers.

According to Raphael et al. (1992), literature circles provide a non-threatening environment where children can express their views, clarify points of confusion, discuss the main theme of the story, relate to other texts, and relate the text to personal experiences or feelings as well as to prior knowledge. Through these discussions, they discover that their ideas and opinions are valued and that there isn't always one right answer. By experiencing other students' points of view, they enhance their own

understanding of the story being discussed. I have found this to be true for my younger students as well.

Clarifying Misconceptions

Raphael et al. (1992) transcribed several book club sessions during their research conducted with two elementary classrooms over a two-year period. They discovered several purposes for students to engage in a book club discussion. Among those purposes was clarification of points of confusion or misconceptions.

Throughout our many discussions, I discovered my students making clarifications for one another on the books they had read. During a discussion of Too Many Tamales (1993) by Gary Soto, Mitch made the observation that Maria had a gun in her hand. (The illustration was of Maria and her cousins cutting out pictures from magazines.) Mitch didn't understand why she had a gun in her hand unless she was so upset about losing her mother's ring. The other children quickly turned to the page in question and examined that picture closely. They all came to the consensus that it wasn't a gun at all, but a pair of scissors! While Mitch wasn't asking whether or not Maria had a gun, the other children felt it was very important that Mitch recognize the object for what it really was.

While discussing Steven Kellogg's book Johnny Appleseed (1988) one of the children wanted to know if it was really about animals. There were several animals in the illustrations and the children spent much of the time looking for all the different types of animals they could find throughout the book. Leah finally suggested that the reason there were so many animals in the book was because Johnny was kind to them and took care of them. It was concluded from this observation that the story was really about Johnny's kindness and consideration of all living things, one central theme of the story.

Intertextual Connections

Another area of discussion discovered by Raphael et al. (1992) was that of relating to other texts, or intertextual connections. This was evident in my students' observations of illustrations and stories. In one session, as we were discussing Whistle for Willie (1964) by Ezra Jack Keats, Pat noticed that Peter was leaving footprints. We discussed how we thought those footprints were being made, when suddenly Alex got a big smile on his face and exclaimed, "That's like in that other book!" After some searching, he found the book he wanted, Peter's Chair (1967) also by Ezra Jack Keats. He turned to the page where Willie stepped in the pink paint and tracked it across the floor. He proudly displayed his discovery to the rest of the class.

Prior Knowledge and Personal Experience

According to Leal (1993), allowing students to express their personal knowledge or experiences activates other students to share what they know. Sharing these thoughts stimulates further ideas and views from other members of the group, which results in the collaborative construction of meaning for the whole group.

I witnessed evidence of this occurring in a discussion of A Chair for my Mother (1982) by Vera Williams. The children in the group were discussing the chair that was purchased by the girl, her mother and her grandmother.

John: We bought a sofa. The whole family saved money and I carried it with the lid on it and brought it to the sofa place. We saved for a long time.

Teacher: Remember when I brought the big rocker to class?

Alisha: We all wanted to sit in it. We took turns.

Jacob: I had a chair I really liked and it tipped over and broke! I was sad!

John: We all sat in a chair together, me and my dad and my brother and Grandma took our picture, just like this one in the book!

Vocabulary

In a discussion of The Secret Garden by Frances Burnett (1987) in Eeds & Peterson (1991) fifth graders pondered the meaning of the word “wickered”. One student questioned the meaning of the word, and another student with some knowledge of plants explained the meaning. I wondered how to incorporate vocabulary into my group discussions, and if I even should. Leah, one of my more inquisitive students, solved this problem for me. After reading Whistle for Willie, one of her post-its marked the page where Peter “scrambled” into the box to hide from Willie. Leah started our discussion on that day by asking what scrambled meant. Mitch explained that it was to mix something all up like you do with eggs. Joey suggested that it meant hiding in a box since that was what was shown in the picture. After much careful study of the illustration, we came to the consensus that it meant he hurried so that he could hide from Willie in the box. This is just one example of the many times the children came in with vocabulary questions and drew their own conclusions from discussions with their peers.

Forms of Response

Hickman (1983) suggests that asking children for their reaction to a book would usually prescribe a verbal response. However, when young children are allowed to respond spontaneously, other forms of response are observed. She cites the following example: Two first grade boys approached their teacher with the poem “The Acrobats” from Where the Sidewalk Ends (1974) by Shel Silverstein. The boys insisted that the teacher read the poem near some steps so that they could act out the antics of the trapeze artists in the poem. When she came to the last line-“Don’t sneeze”- the two boys rolled down the steps in fits of laughter.

During a discussion of The Doorbell Rang by Pat Hutchins, the children were observing that one of the characters brought his bicycle right into the kitchen. Kati said

she knew all about bicycles, leaned back in her chair, and started to pedal with her feet up in the air.

While discussing Peter's Chair by Ezra Jack Keats (1967), Pat jumped up and walked around in a circle saying, "Dip, dap, dip, dap, dip, dap." She was demonstrating for the rest of the group what happened when Willie walked through the wet paint and left sloppy pink paint prints all across the floor.

I have also observed a developing awareness of print as some of the children have chosen to discuss their responses by looking for the words in the text or on the post-its. They would then either proceed to point to the words as they "read" their responses or spell out the words for me to interpret. If those spelled words were the ones they were looking for, they would continue their discussion from that point. All of these children were demonstrating their understanding of the literature in very effective forms. I didn't structure these responses; each of these children was spontaneously responding to the text.

Reading Response Journals

Recording their thoughts and impressions about the books they had read was another role assumed by my students. The reading response journal is a crucial component of literature study circles. According to Fulps & Young (1991) a primary benefit of reading response journals is increased comprehension. They allow students to use their own prior knowledge to build personal meaning. By recording their own thoughts and feelings about texts, students can express their personal connections to what they have read. Writing extends their thinking about what has been read and boosts their confidence in their own abilities as literary critics. By putting what they have read into their own words, they take ownership of the material.

When engaging children in written response to literature, it is crucial to emphasize the need not only to retrieve information from the text, but more importantly, to interpret what has been read. Students need to be encouraged to respond to the text, not just regurgitate information.

For me, this was the most difficult requirement for literature circles. My students didn't know how to write yet, except for sounding out a few words. How was I going to have them respond to text in a written form?

Neu (1991) suggests that children's drawings can express their ideas, sometimes better than their writing. This is especially true of young children who really don't know how to "write" yet. Their writing vocabulary is very limited, even when using invented spelling. Children use drawing to communicate their ideas and also to elaborate on their writing. Young children are not taught to draw, but engage in drawing innately to help them explore their world. Drawing is their first graphic representation of their experiences. The author cites an example of a young boy who has drawn a picture of a snowball fight with a friend. Even though the written words say that the snowball fight was fun, the picture shows the two boys with frowns on their faces. It would appear that he really didn't know how to express in writing that there were two sides to the snowball fight, but he could show his displeasure in the picture.

Neu (1991) also makes the point that children's drawings express their thoughts and help them make sense of language. Drawing invites oral discussion and social interaction as the children explain their drawings to the teacher or other classmates.

I soon discovered that my students could indeed express their thoughts and feelings in their drawings. In fact, there were times when their journals were better indicators of the children's responses than the discussion groups, especially on those days when the children just didn't have much to say about their books. (That did happen on

occasion!) When the children indicated that they were finished with their writing, I had them dictate to me what their pictures were about. What didn't show in the picture, came out in the dictation. We would discuss their drawings in detail, including their personal feelings about what they had drawn. This was a perfect opportunity for me to get into each child's head and find out about his/her interpretations and conclusions drawn from the story. As the children became more confident in their writing, they actually began composing their own written work, seeking the words from the text to label their drawings or copying words from the book to include in their discussions. For example, in Figure 1 Alisha has labeled her own drawings of her favorite part in The Little Red Hen (1985).

I witnessed my students' emerging awareness of print as they actively searched for the words they wanted to include in their reading journals. They would still want to discuss what they had written with me, but sometimes would tell me I didn't need to write anything as it was already done!

Writing prompts are another important factor to consider when asking children to write in response journals. Although I didn't want to influence what the children chose to write about too much, I did want to avoid simple illustrations taken straight from the book that didn't show engagement in interpretation of text. I wanted them to become involved in thinking critically about the stories and how they related to their own lives. Because this was one of the first relatively free writing experiences my students had, I felt the need to provide guidance. After careful study of the literature on reading prompts, (Hancock, 1993, Pritchard, 1993) I chose a few suggestions from these authors to get the children started. Each week, I would make a recommendation to the students about what to write in their journals. Among these suggestions were things such as: When a certain incident happened in the story, how did it make you feel? Pretend you

are one of the characters in the story. What would you have done if you were that character? What do you think happened to the character after the story was over? Try writing a new ending to the story. What happens after the end of the story, what comes next? What was something you wondered about that happened in the story? Did you like the way the story ended and why or why not? What did you like most about this story? As the children began to show more confidence in their own abilities to interpret and interact with the texts, I asked them to make their own choices about what to write. The results were very insightful.

In her interpretation of The Doorbell Rang, Leah chose to write a new ending to the story. She drew Grandma coming into the kitchen with a huge tray of blueberry muffins! To emphasize the fact that they were blueberry muffins and not chocolate chip cookies, the entire picture was drawn in blue! (See figure 2.)

Kati chose to illustrate herself and her mother at the restaurant where her mother used to work in response to the story A Chair for My Mother (1982). She explained that she would often go to the restaurant with her mother and help her, just like Maria in the story. (See figure 3.)

Joe chose to respond to this book from personal experience also. "I bought a remote control car that would tip over and keep going with the money in my jar." His illustration showed jars full of money!

These children were actively engaged in deriving meaning from the stories through their artwork and explanations of their drawings. They were becoming authors by relating the texts to their own experiences and interpretations.

Presentations

Research suggests many forums for children to respond to literature (Roser & Martinez, 1995 and Hill et al., 1995). Children can respond through dramatization, artwork, reader's theater, letter writing, role-playing, etc. I chose artwork and dramatization as our main mediums for response due to the young age of my students. As the children acted out their books for one another, they assumed the roles of actors, directors, and producers. In their artistic endeavors, they became illustrators of the printed word.

Dramatization

Vygotsky (1978) is quoted in Book Talk and Beyond (Roser & Martinez, 1995, p. 184) as saying, "In play a child always behaves beyond his average age, above his daily behavior; in play it is as though he were a head taller than himself". Roser et al. says that children who are involved in dramatizing develop narrative abilities, increase their understanding of literature in general, grow in their ability to comprehend text, develop oral language skills and learn empathy for the characters they portray. They also develop an understanding for the sequence of a story, discovering the need for a beginning, middle and end. Dramatizing a story gives the child a chance to express him/herself in a safe, non-threatening environment. By "being" someone else, they can discard their inhibitions and become that character, knowing that their behavior will be accepted. Dramatizing also allows the child to gain a better understanding of the physical and emotional characteristics of real life. Dramatization involves all of the types of communication – reading, writing, speaking, listening and gesturing, while at the same time promoting creativity in the children.

Pantomime was our first experience with dramatizing a literature circle story. After explaining what a pantomime was and demonstrating a few examples of the act of

pantomiming with some of the students before the whole group, I allowed the students to pick a partner or partners to create their own pantomime. They went to various parts of the room, book in hand, to decide which part of the story they would act out and how to go about it. After several minutes of practice, all the students returned to the large group. Those students who were the audience had to guess which story, and what part of the story was being acted out. Joe and Mitch performed the one I especially liked. Joe sat on the floor with his legs and arms stretched out and Mitch walked all around him appearing to carry something in his hand. Finally, he sat down in Joe's lap with a big smile on his face. Of course, the rest of the children were calling out, "A Chair for my Mother" by Vera Williams (1982). It was unanimously decided that the part presented was where the girl and her mother and grandmother went to the furniture store and purchased their chair.

My students were very creative as they acted out plays for their stories, as well.

One particular play made me see the story from the child's eye view. In this instance, the whole circle group worked together to create their play. One of my major concerns with this was how the children would select their parts. I wanted to leave them on their own to formulate their ideas, but I also assumed that everyone in the play would want to be the main characters. At first this was the case. Everyone wanted to be the two mice in The Biggest Pumpkin Ever by Steven Kroll (1984), but after some discussion, it was decided that those weren't the only good parts to play. Someone had to be the biggest pumpkin, or in this case two someones, and there were several people needed to play the part of the little pumpkins growing in the patch. I never considered the biggest pumpkin or the little ones in the patch to be characters, but they were a very important part of the story and the children wouldn't leave them out!

Artwork

As stated earlier in this article, drawing is the first form of written communication for young children. They show their thinking and express their feelings about their world through their artwork. My students participated in many art experiences as response to the literature we explored in our literature circle discussions. Sometimes they created posters to depict their favorite part of the story, sometimes they worked with their discussion group to create a mural of some aspect of the story, and at other times they created their own individual interpretations of the story through an art media. Always, they were allowed to present their creations to the rest of the class and discuss what they had chosen to illustrate.

Upon completion of a discussion about The Doorbell Rang by Pat Hutchins (1986), one group of children created a mural of what happened after the story ended. We had experienced a tornado drill earlier in the day and the excitement of that experience was still present in their discussions and thoughts. The mural showed all of the children, the mother and the grandmother in the basement eating chocolate chip cookies while hiding from the tornado. Of course, there was an oven in the basement so they could bake more cookies if required. As the children were illustrating their mural Robby kept saying that they were a team and this was great teamwork. I heard him tell his circle group, "Great job teammates!"

Another favorite art project for the children was creating posters depicting their favorite parts of the story. Two of the girls were illustrating The Biggest Pumpkin Ever by Steven Kroll (1984). They chose to reproduce the one hundred mice on motorcycles hauling the biggest pumpkin ever to the contest. Leah drew a sign at the top of the poster saying "pumpkin contest" that she had copied from the text. When I approached her poster to have her and her partner dictate what it was about she informed me that I didn't

need to write anything because she had already done the writing herself. She and her partner then proceeded to use that writing as a reference when presenting their poster to the rest of the group.

Conclusion

At the end of the first semester I administered the reading assessment again (Rhodes, 1993). I asked each student to identify his/her favorite story or stories and tell me about them. The goal of this assessment was to have the children be able to name at least three stories they could discuss in some detail. All but one of the students was able to fulfill this requirement, discussing books they had listened to as far back as the beginning of the school year. All of the children chose to discuss literature circle books as at least one of their stories. No one talked about TV programs and 10 of the 14 children were even able to recall the titles of their favorite books. I was convinced that their ability to discuss books came about through our work with literature circles. There was no hesitation when asked about their favorite books, and everyone understood what I was asking them to do.

At the beginning of the year, when I asked the children to make predictions or comments about the books we were reading, I often heard, "Could we just read the book!?" Now, when we read a book as a whole group, we frequently stop at various places throughout the reading to discuss what will happen next, what certain characters are doing, or what particular words look like and where they are located on the page. The children come to these whole group gatherings expecting not only to read the book, but also to thoroughly evaluate and analyze the story and all of its parts.

Of course, our literature circle discussions were not always successful. There were times when the children were not interested in talking about their books with the rest of the group. Some days they were just too restless to sit still even for the fifteen or

twenty minutes that had been set-aside for the discussion time. When they started using their books for hats on their heads, or tents for their hands, I knew it was time to quit! Realizing this, and considering Daniels' (1994) recommendation for literature circles with young children, I chose to dispense with assigning roles. I have experienced assigned roles with cooperative learning groups in previous years without much success. The children spent most of the time trying to remember what their roles were called and what they meant, at the expense of the activity itself. While assigning roles to groups of older children has proven successful, I preferred to use the time I had to get the children interested in good quality books and to help them develop a love of reading. I believe this was Samway and Whang's (1996) goal for their students as well. Many of Whang's students were non-native English speakers who felt they were poor readers and didn't like reading. Literature circles gave them the confidence they needed to believe in themselves as readers and writers. I wanted to establish this kind of confidence and enjoyment in my students. As with Samway and Whang (1996) I believed that allowing my students to carry on relaxed conversations about books was the best way to build their interest in reading. I felt that introducing roles into the groups at this age and developmental level would have given them one too many things to think about, creating a stifling condition. In the more casual atmosphere I tried to create for my students, they discovered less structured roles for themselves as meaning makers, actors, artists and writers.

As we all worked together to create meaning for ourselves from the literature we shared, we did grow as a community of learners, in much the same way as Peterson & Eeds (1990) suggests. We bounced ideas off one another throughout our discussions and each member of the group expressed his/her opinions and ideas when we planned our drama or our artwork. Robby expressed it best when he said, "Great work, teammates!"

As the year progressed, I saw my students and myself becoming a community of learners who worked together assuming a variety of roles and conducting casual conversations to create meaning from all the literature we shared.

Illustrations played a major part in my non-reading students' understanding of the texts. Whenever we discussed our stories, the children thoroughly examined the illustrations, looking for the smallest details. They searched for the ring on every page of Too Many Tamales (1993) by Gary Soto, looking for the place in the book where it actually disappeared. They checked the cat throughout The Doorbell Rang (1986) by Pat Hutchins to see if he had stolen any cookies when no one was looking. They even discovered shapes in the snowflakes that fell in The Christmas Blizzard (1995) by Helen Kettman. I am convinced that not only should the illustrations depict the text, but they should also stimulate the imagination.

I discovered, much to my surprise, that not everyone always liked the books they read. Just recently, I asked Trent what he thought of his book. He had been absent when we discussed it, so I wanted to give him a chance to express his opinion. He let me know in no uncertain terms just what he thought! "My mom liked the book, my dad liked the book and all of my brothers and sisters liked it, but I didn't like it." When I asked why he exclaimed, "It just wasn't a very good story!" This was in reference to Corduroy (1968) by Paul Freeman. I thought everyone liked that little bear's antics! However, Trent has become a literary critic, exactly what I have been hoping to foster in my students.

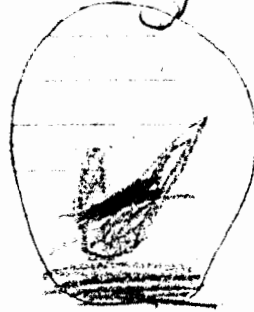
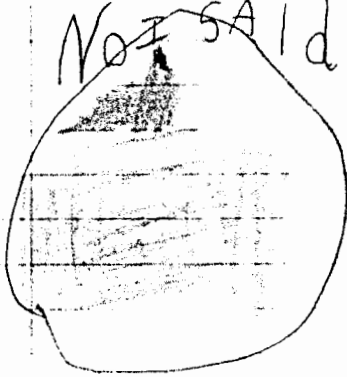
Our second set of parent/teacher conferences took place just recently. Due to early dismissals and missed school days in preparation for conferences I had not been sending books home with the children. Every parent who attended conferences asked when we would get started with the literature circles books again. Many commented on

the fact that their child would no longer go to bed without a story and most of their children wanted to discuss the story when the reading was done.

I feel that I have grown as a teacher just by observing the children as they explore the text creating meaning for themselves and their peers. Literature circles have given me many new insights into how children interpret text by relating their reading experiences to their own lives and the lives of people they know. I have learned that even young children can be their own best teachers. Given the chance to explore literature with a little guidance from the teacher opens up whole new worlds of learning for these children. Allowing the children to express their understandings through drama, writing and artwork further advances their understanding and ownership of the literature. Exploring literature through literature circles has provided my students with a window to the world outside their immediate community. Hopefully, it has also opened their minds to the variety of lifestyles and diversity of cultures that exist in their world.

3-9-00

NO I SAID - is he goose



NO I SAID THE CAT

NO I SAID dog

It was funny that the goose and the dog and the cat said, "Not I."



Figure 1. Alisha's own labels for her drawing of The Little Red Hen.

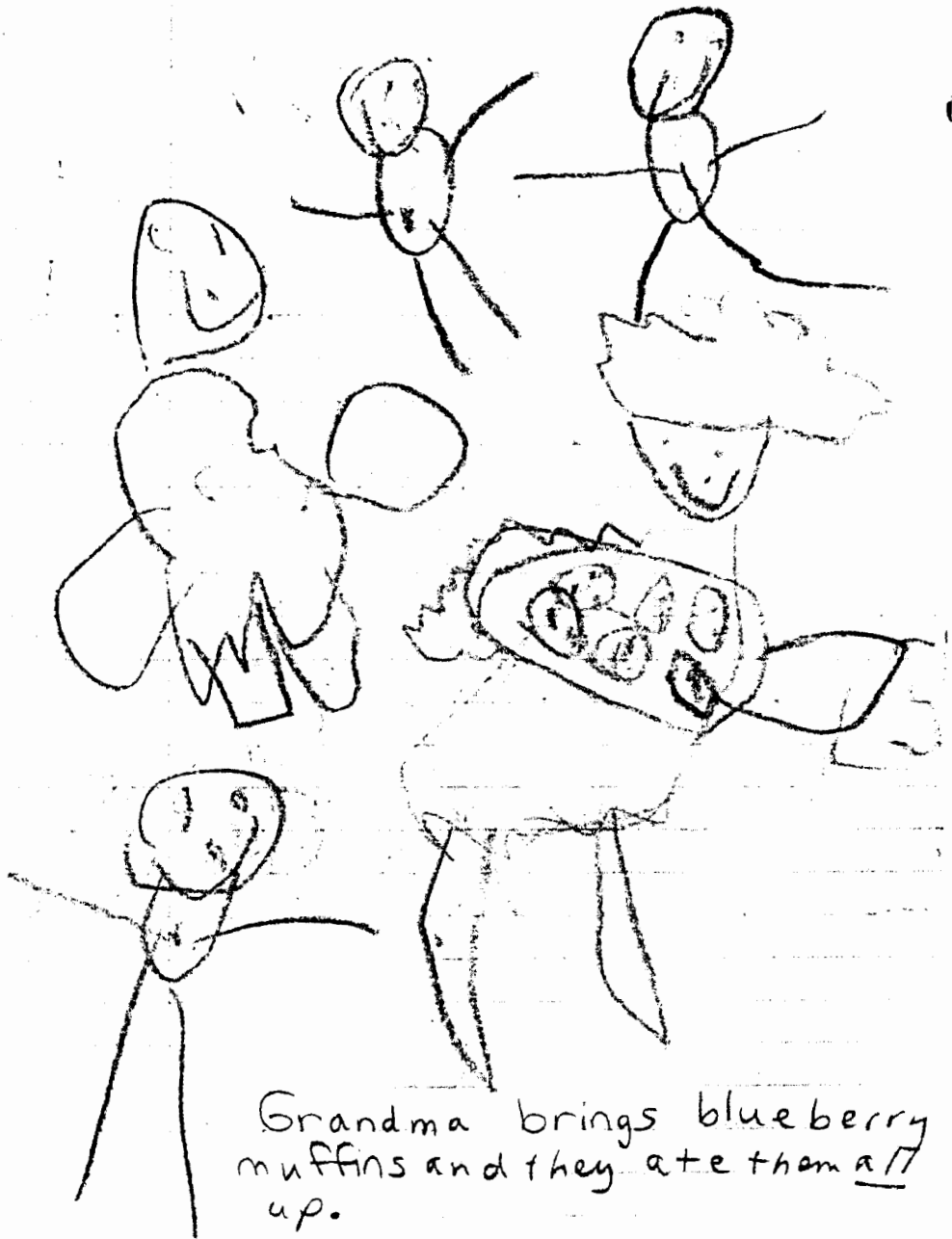


Figure 2. Leah's blueberry muffins



Figure 3. Kati and her mother at work.

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