The Importance of Literature Circles in Literacy Instruction

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Abstract

Often, teachers are searching for new and effective ways to teach literacy and reading to their students. While it is not a miracle solution, literature circles are being found to be an important component to a balanced literacy program. The research and observations of classrooms that have adopted literature circles discussed in this paper show that teachers find students begin to respond more critically to what they read, make useful connections, and are able to learn from their experiences and their peers when utilizing literature circles. This student centered approach to literacy allows students to grow as readers, responders, and as individuals.
According to Walt Disney, “There is more treasure in books than in all the pirate’s loot on Treasure Island,” but how teachers make sure that each and every child gets to experience that treasure remains a mystery for many. When teaching literature, today’s teachers use many different methods and strategies in their classrooms, each with its own benefits and shortcomings. Many teachers choose to use literature circles because they provide an exceptionally good option for literacy instruction in any classroom because they allow a student to not only read the text, but also to explore it on a whole new level. They provide students with the opportunity to read and respond to authentic, meaningful texts. Literature circles encourage students to engage in their reading, respond critically, make connections, and learn from their experiences and their peers. They also inspire students to take charge of their education and become life-long learners. Because they have the ability to take reading and literacy instruction to a whole new level on many different playing fields, Teachers must incorporate this crucial part of teaching literacy into their classrooms. (Brabham, Villaume, 2000)

Before teachers can even think about integrating literature circles into their literacy instruction, they must first have a clear understanding of what literature circles are and how they function. According to Tompkins (2010), literature circles consist of small groups of students who read and respond on a book together. Teachers offer students several different books, usually with the same theme or topic, and the students choose what book they would like to read. In order to maximize the amount of participation and student involvement, instructors traditionally limit group sizes to around four to six students. Once the teacher has determined and set up the groups, the students take charge of their learning by setting a
schedule or timeline for their reading, in addition to planning out what days they will meet to discuss their book. Each student reads independently and takes responsibility for sticking to the schedule they decided upon with their reading group. Students also choose roles to complete in order to better facilitate their learning experience. These roles often include jobs such as a Discussion Director, Passage Master, Word Wizard, Personal Connector, Story Elements Correspondent Summarizer, Illustrator, and an Investigator. (Beed, Stien, 2004) Roles rotate each session which allows each student to have the opportunity to learn from each role. When the group meets, the Discussion Director leads them in a grand conversation about the book. Students share their opinions, personal connections, predictions, new vocabulary words, and explore different points of view during this time. Overall, the main components to literature circles are choice, literature, and response. (Tompkins, 2010)

Teachers face an extremely difficult task when they try to get all students to fully engage in their reading and responding to a book. When they integrate literature circles into their literacy instruction they provide an effective way to get students to engage and enjoy taking part in reading. In a fourth grade impoverished urban school, teachers introduced literature circles in an attempt to improve literacy instruction and student’s interest in reading. The teachers for this study carefully selected books that would spark curiosity and allow students to become emotionally invested in the reading and ideas presented. With a study group of sixteen African American students, the teachers decided to use three books that reflected the student’s heritage while exposing students to the issue of the history of racism in the United States. Because these books were an authentic and meaningful text selection, the students engaged and were more active in their reading, discussion, and analyzing the stories, the
characters, the themes that were present, as well as considering the multiple perspectives that were present in the books they chose. Allowing students to make their own book selection also added to the level of active participation because students took interest in what they were reading. (Gove, Long) Being able to make personal choices can motivate even the most reluctant readers to get involved and really enjoy their book choice. One sixth grade student involved in literature circles explained that “The teacher didn’t have to make us read a book because when you pick your own, you seem more interested in it and no one has to make you read.” (Burns, 1998) Because literature circles incorporate both a choice in book as well as a rich and authentic text for students to read, they provide an opportunity to let students envelop themselves into the book and be more engaged readers. (Burns 1998)

When students read, it is important that they know how to not only draw information from the text, but also that they can respond critically to what they have read. Students should be able to take what they have read and view it from multiple perspectives, make judgments about the characters and their actions, about what they believe is right or wrong, and why things happened in a story. (Spiegel, 1998) Students should question characters motivations and beliefs, and be pushed to think in new, deep and meaningful ways. (Gove, Long 2003) According to Brabham and Vallume (2000), “literature circles serve as launching devices or scaffolds that help students generate ideas and their own thoughtful conversations about what they have read.” This can be seen in the previously mentioned fourth grade classroom where students participated in literature circles and were given choices of three books by Mildred Taylor that centered around the theme of racial injustice in United States history. Their book choices were Song of the Trees, The Friendship, or The Cold Cadillac: A Fancy New Car and an
Unforgettable Drive. While reading these books and participating in literature circles, the teachers noticed a change in how students were responding to the text. When they discussed the books in the reading groups, students moved away from summarizing and retelling just the important parts in the plot, and started to evaluate the content more critically. In one instance when students were discussing whether or not they liked the book and why they did or didn’t, students made decisions and backed them with information they had learned from the text. A student in one group was even willing to take a risk and disagree with the rest of his group, stating that he did not like the book because of the injustice that the black family in the story faced. Rather than just responding based on the facts presented in the story, the student was able to respond critically to the ethical issues present in the book. That instance, and many others in the study, showed how students were beginning to learn to respond critically shortly after they had been exposed to literature circles, which was something that the teachers had struggled to get students to do before they introduced literature circles (Long, Glove 2003). Literature circles partnered with meaningful texts proved to be an effective way to get students to respond critically to what they had read.

When students read, they use their schema to help them fully understand and comprehend what they read. Students in a literature circle can help others in their group by sharing a connection between something they read and something that they have done or experienced in real life. In one instance of introducing literature circles into a sixth grade suburban school, groups were formed with a variety of different ethnic backgrounds, academic levels, and life styles. In these heterogeneous groups, each student had different bases of knowledge. One student said “I thought the literature circles were good because if there was a
part I didn’t understand, than usually someone else knew it.” (Burns, 1989) If a book is talking about a topic that a student has not encountered and does not have a schema to draw information from the student will often have problems fully understanding the topic. When using literature circles, in this situation a classmate who does have experience with that topic can share their knowledge to build up and supplement their group’s schema. When a student has the opportunity to step up and teach their group, students take more pride in their work and enjoy their lessons more. Literature circles can also open children’s eyes to the opinions and feelings of others as they discuss the books they read. In these settings, “half-formed ideas are explored and readers gain new lenses through which to view what they have read.” (Spiegel, 1998) Readers bounce ideas off each other in an attempt to fully understand the text, and through this process they have the opportunity to grow as students and as individuals.

While Literature circles provide just one component that makes up the collection of teaching strategies that teachers have available to them, many have discovered their usefulness and the importance of having them as a component in their literacy development. Literature circles can’t make up the whole of a literacy instruction plan, but they do provide many unique opportunities for students to learn. Based on observational studies in many different locations, teachers and school systems have seen distinct improvements in student’s literacy development when literature circles became part of their instruction. Teachers have noticed that while using literature circles their students are engaged in their books and their discussion groups. They respond critically and make connections with the book which allow them to learn not only from their experiences, but also from their peers. When educators allow students to take control during their literacy circles, students are motivated to read and do
well, thus creating learners who know how to focus their learning and become life-long learners.
References


