

How Literacy Circles Improve Reading Skills

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### Abstract

This paper explores the important reading skills that are developed with the use of literacy circles. Literacy circles help build students' comprehension skills, critical thinking skills, and build an appreciation for texts that they may read. All of these skills can be accomplished by using literacy circles not only in reading classrooms, but also in content areas like science or history. The paper examines several different research articles that support the use of literature circles for various reasons. Wilfong's (2009) research looks at the improved tests scores of middle schools who used literature circles in their science classroom. Other research looks at literacy circles building students' self-esteem and strategies to use to implement literacy circles in all classrooms. Research indicates that literacy circles used effectively will improve students' ability to read and comprehend material.

### How Literacy Circles Improve Reading Skills

Mrs. Hanback's sixth graders quietly enter her reading classroom and quickly organize themselves into their reading groups. Divided into groups by different topics depending on the book they have chosen to read, students grab their materials and congregate with their peers. Mrs. Hanback provides students with three or four different books, and the students reading the same book place themselves into groups. In Mrs. Hanback's sixth grade classroom, each person in a literature group has a job to complete while reading. For example, Mrs. Hanback has a student assigned to one of the following jobs: discussion leader, word wizard, or summarizer. Mrs. Hanback calls these groups of reader's literature circles. One of the best practices for teaching reading is the implementation of literacy circles. When appropriately implemented, literature circles help develop a reader's comprehension, develop an appreciation for reading, and improve critical thinking skills.

To become an excellent reader, one must have exceptional comprehension skills which allow students to connect and understand different parts of texts while reading. Comprehending a text allows the reader to identify the lesson or information that the author wants the reader to understand. Literature circles teach students different reading strategies to help students comprehend the text along with making connections. Using literature circles across the curriculum will help students comprehend any text that they read (Wilfong, 2009). The same strategy used to teach literacy circles in a reading classroom, would look almost identical to strategies used in a content area classroom (Wilfong 2009). Teacher could place students in a literature circle and teach them how to use to literature circles to build comprehension among the

text found in any textbook. Teachers achieve comprehension in literacy circles if he or she models and describes the importance and duties of each student's role within a literacy circle (Wilfong, 2009). When implementing literature circles in a certain content area teachers should provide student with time to read the text and fill out the answers of their role sheet, collaboration time to meet with groups members to discuss the reading, and a time for the students to self reflect on what they learned (Wilfong, 2009).

Teachers must remember to plan class time for students to collaborate and self-reflect on texts that students read. Collaboration and self reflection time allows students to discuss difficult parts of the texts that students may have had trouble comprehending. Self-reflection allows the students to ask themselves if they comprehended the material read and if they actively participated in the literature circles (Wilfong, 2009). Students' collaboration time with the text will allow them to comprehend the text and fully understand the meaning behind the text. A key element of literature circles includes participation and group work because students have to take responsibility and complete their assigned duty or duties. Wilfong's (2009) research indicates that students take ownership of their reading when placed in literature circles because they do not want to let their other group members down. By fulfilling their roles in the literacy circle students test scores improve by 3.3% during the time the students' were studied (Wilfong 2009). Students were noted saying they put their "best foot forward" because they did not want to be looked down upon which is evident with the increase of test scores (Wilfong 2009). While using literature circles in the classroom the teacher should teach minilessons to help the students comprehend material (Wilfong, 2009). Topics of minilessons range from topics found in the

text, different reading strategies, or different discussion strategies. Literature circles across the curriculum will also improve students test scores on both chapter tests and other standardized tests (Wilfong, 2009). Improvements of test scores come from students comprehending the material they read by taking ownership of the material. Along with the improvement of tests scores literature circles also help students build up students' self-esteem and appreciation for reading texts of all kind.

Readers must appreciate texts that they come across to comprehend the material they read. The process of appreciating literature will take practice and not always occur the first time something a student reads a text. Appreciation develops through the use of various engagement strategies. Some of these strategies include asking the students questions and listening to their responses, explore different parts of a text to think more deeply, and pose different problems that need solved (Long & Gove 2003). These strategies help students extend their thinking skills and appreciation of the text (Long and Gove 2003). Appreciation towards a text develops when students engage in their reading. Literature circles build up and teach students to appreciate all forms of literature. Students feel more in control when they have the option to read and discuss texts that interest them. (Long & Gove 2003). Not only do literature circles make the student feel more powerful it allows students to discuss texts in supportive groups with their peers.

Cooperative groups not only make students feel more powerful they also help students comprehend the text. Understanding the material presented in the literature circle will help build students' self-esteem and interest in reading. Reading may become frustrating to a student if he/she has difficulties comprehending a text. Once a student becomes frustrated they may decide

to give up on reading. Using literature circles will decrease the number of students that get frustrated and give up on reading (Stringer, Reynolds, & Simpson 2003). When students participate in literature circles and interact with text their self-esteem will remain high. Students learn better by doing something as opposed to listening to a lecture or just reading the text solo (Stringer et al., 2003). Allowing students to work together in literature skills will help them understanding the message of the text and keep their self-esteem high. Students with disabilities occasionally have low self-esteem which will improve with the implementation of literature circles (Blum, Lipsett, & Yocom, 2002). Literature circles used in inclusive classrooms will allow students with disabilities to feel like a part of the classroom (Blum et al., 2002). Students with disabilities keep their frustrations levels down by being part of the literature circles since they comprehend the material they read with the help of their group members (Blum et al., 2002) Teachers should encourage all students to participate in literature circles to ensure everyone in the group feels needed which will help keep students' self-esteem level high.

Along with building and keeping students' self-esteem built up students will also build an appreciation for the text that they read. Students must appreciate the text and do their jobs within literature circles to avoid letting their classmates down. By working together, students will comprehend the texts they read. Appreciation of the texts comes from the students picking materials that interest them and they want to read. While building self-esteem and appreciation of texts teachers must select books that will interest students in their classroom. When selecting books for literature circles, teachers should know their students interests to ensure the reading choices engage the reader. Choosing books that engage students in the classroom will allow

students to appreciate their literature circle books and actively participate. The use of literature circles helps build students' self-esteem by having them engaged in with the text they read (Stringer et al., 2003).

Literature circles not only teach students comprehension and text appreciation skills, but they also teach students critical thinking skills. During content instruction, critical thinking skills improve during the use of literature circles. When using literacy circles effectively in a classroom, students' discussions will lead them to questions that make them think critically (Devick-Fry & LeSage 2007). These types of skills can be developed by becoming an expert on the various materials that students in a literature circle must read in a content area classroom, such as science. In a science classroom, critical thinking skills develop while students question why a particular outcome of an experiment occurred (Devick-Fry & LeSage 2007).

Thinking critically helps people solve problems that may arise in their life. Students may experience several problems while reading which include identifying difficult, comprehending the text as a whole, or identifying the meaning of the text. With the use of literature circles students are able to discuss this questions and come up with an answer to their question in a collaborative way. Students will also pose their problems with the text which make the students within the literature skills think critically about the problem. While thinking critically each student in the literature circle will share their point of view on a question before students reach a final solution to the problem (Devick-Fry & LeSage 2007). Not only can students create critical thinking questions on their own but the classroom teacher can also give the literature circles

questions that make them think critically. Teachers should encourage and teach student to think critically so they can create solutions to outcomes throughout their lives. With the use of literature circles students think critically in a cooperative setting.

Literature circles have been proven to be effective in teaching and reinforcing students' comprehension skills, appreciation of texts skills, and critical thinking skills. Taking responsibility and ownership of a text will help students build and maintain a high self-esteem and improve their test score when actively participating in literature circles across the curriculum. Imagine Sally in a seventh grade history class where the teacher only lectures to the students and then tests their knowledge at the end of each chapter. Sally needs were not met by the structure of the classroom because the low scores she was receiving on test. When Sally got to eighth grade, her history teacher used literature circles to teach students history content. Sally's test scores increased over her eighth grade year because she took ownership of the text that her history teacher used and was able to discuss parts of the reading that she did not comprehend with members of her literature circle. Her eighth grade teacher also noticed that Sally seemed more comfortable reading history material by the end of the school year. With the use of literature circles, Sally's teacher gave students time to collaborate with one another and take responsibility for the text that they were required to read. From this scenario, it is evident that literature circles help students improve their comprehension skills the more they become involved in the texts they read.

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