

Literature Circles: An Alternative to Traditional Reading Groups

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A student's journey to lifelong reading competence begins in the elementary classroom; therefore, programs that will foster reading achievement are essential to the elementary school curriculum. Because some students do not have positive attitudes toward reading, they turn away from it and turn to stimuli such as television, recorded music, and video games. Noll (1994) suggested that our fast-paced society inhibits students' reading willingness:

There are an incredible number of distractions which are imposed on society, many of which are the result of the explosion of technology. Lifestyles are greatly affected by this overstimulation of things to do, places to go, and tasks to perform. Too often, this leaves precious little time for pastime reading (p. 88).

Teachers must provide viable alternatives to such compelling stimuli to encourage students' affective abilities, such as social interaction and self-confidence, and to stimulate academic growth.

In order for children to excel academically, they must feel confident about themselves and their self-worth. This should be the major concern of educators. As educators, we must nurture the 'whole child,' not just areas pertaining to academia (Canterford, 1991, p. 288).

Attending to the whole child is necessary because students need affective as well as cognitive nurturing. Teachers need to create strategies that will motivate students and encourage the development of masterful readers by the time they complete elementary school. A quality

education is one that ensures affective, cognitive, and social growth for all students.

The purpose of this research report is to provide evidence that will support the instructional strategy of literature circles as an alternative to traditional reading groups. Hill, Johnson, and Noe (1995) stated that,

Literature circles are not a variation on reading groups. They are not a better way to teach reading. They are a place to think and inquire. This is not to say that students do not learn about language and explore reading strategies during these groups. They do, but the primary focus is not on the reading process but on life and inquiry (p. xi).

This paper will discuss the development of literature circles from an initial classroom experience (Short & Pierce, 1990) to a structured, cooperative approach of literature response (Daniels, 1994). The components of the various literature circle models and procedures that are part of each model will be discussed and compared.

There are various interpretations of the term literature circle and instructors may have subtle differences in their approaches. The definition below

gives an initial understanding of the concept of literature circle.

Literature circles are small, temporary discussion groups who have chosen to read the same story, poem, article, or book. While reading each group-determined portion of the text (either in or outside of class), each member prepares to take specific responsibilities in the upcoming discussion, and everyone comes to the group with the notes needed to help perform the job (Daniels, 1994, p. 13).

After discussing the various models, the benefits of literature circles will be outlined and discussed. The main thesis will evolve from the collected information; hence, the reader will be able to understand how literature circles can aid in students' affective, cognitive, and social development and how literature circles can be viewed as a viable alternative to traditional reading groups.

Components and Procedures of Various Models

In the Beginning with Kathy Short

Kathy Short was a graduate student at Arizona State University. She found a box of books in her

room and just placed them in a corner. The books were soon discovered by her students. They informally started selecting books from the box and started forming their own discussion groups around various books (Short & Pierce, 1990).

These informal sessions evolved into elaborate, interactive response groups with minimal interaction from the teacher. Short was fascinated with this spontaneous literature discussion phenomenon and decided to have some of her doctoral committee members and other graduate students observe the students. With their guidance and repeated observance, Short was able to create a method that would allow her to join the students' book talks without dominating the discussion.

This initial interaction evolved into Short's *Community of Learners Model* (Short & Pierce, 1990). Her model consisted of a series of stages which will be explained in detail.

Personalizing the classroom community

In order to personalize the learning community, the teacher has to give up some control of the class

and allow opportunities for free talk time. In the beginning of the year, small groups and partners are used in a variety of situations. This exploratory period allows for interactions with various peers on many different topics and in many situations. "Not only do these

activities help children get to know each other, but they also support them in working at small group processes such as taking turns, asking questions, and giving ideas" (Short & Pierce, 1990, p. 37).

These informal group settings allowed the students to begin exploring how to work with others in a group and signaled to them the importance of literate talk about what they were reading and writing.

Valuing diversity within a community of learners

The purpose of this step is to recognize and honor the uniqueness of each student.

One of the paradoxes of a collaborative community is that individuality and 'groupness' are both highlighted at the same time. A successful community is built on the different

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contributions that each member brings to that group. Each person contributes diverse talents, experiences, and perspectives" (Short & Pierce, 1990, p. 39).

Activities that foster diversity awareness must be opened so that students can draw upon their experiences which are uniquely different. Strategies such as show and tell, brainstorming, and role playing enable students to take on perspectives other than their own and to value the diversity within their community of learners.

Focusing on inquiry and consensus in decision making

Students must become problem solvers and decision makers in order to interact successfully in Short's *Community of Learners*. These skills are necessary as they try to relate vicariously to the problems of book characters and when they must discuss in a rational manner their difference in opinion about book events.

As students begin to work in literature groups, they need to know how to come to consensus.

When the focus is on inquiry and not on final solutions and right answers, then consensus becomes a key process for working at

new insights into problems. Instead of using authority or compromise to make decisions, consensus involves exploring the diverse perspectives available within the group without creating winning and losing sides" (Short & Pierce, 1990, p. 43).

Individual responses, knowledge, and experiences are pooled and reworked by the group until consensus can be met. Through consensus students are able to create knowledge and understanding that goes beyond the current capabilities of any individual within the group.

Sharing responsibility for creating a learning community

All members of the class are a part of the learning community; therefore, all members must take on the flexible roles of learner and teacher. Short (1990) states, "When roles are flexible, they can be generated by the needs of a particular project and filled as individuals recognize what they can contribute to that project. Because learners, including the teacher, is not 'type cast,' there is a better chance that none of their talents or knowledge will go unused" (p. 43).

This sharing responsibility takes place as the students interact in their literature group. Each

student must learn to respect the thoughts and input of each other. Each group member must have a time to speak and each group should listen attentively. Each member must decide the topic, the amount, and the time to read. The teacher shares his or her abilities by modeling appropriate questioning strategies and by becoming a learner as the facilitator's role is passed on to the students. Sharing responsibilities in the literature group allows students to feel ownership of their environment and their own learning potentials.

Learning through action, reflection, and demonstration

In the beginning, the teacher must demonstrate to students how a collaborative classroom should operate. Instead of telling students what to do, the teacher leads by example and actively engages in activities along with students. If students are asked to read independently or write a composition on a specific topic, then the teacher does the same while the students complete their assignments. Once students are engaged via demonstrations, they must be guided to reflecting on their

learning. When students reflect on what they are learning, how they are learning (process), and why they are learning, they become more conscious of their learning strategies and develop a wider range of strategies as they engage in future experiences.

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Establishing a predictable atmosphere that offers real choices

The most important step in developing a *Community of Learners* is to make sure the classroom environment is inundated with opportunities for

students' choices. These choices can be as simple as where to sit, what materials to choose when completing an art project, or how to organize the classroom space. This freedom of choice is best expressed when students choose their own books to read. Individual book selection assures that the discussion that flows from the reading is based on students' personal connections and not a teacher's prescribed agenda.

Students in literature groups do not have to second guess why they were assigned the book or try to figure out the teacher's agenda. Students know they are personally invested in the reading and that the connections they make are their

own. They also freely experience the comfort of their group members' knowledge and realize that diverse interpretations strengthen their initial ideas.

Kathy Short's *Community of Learners* model established the ground rules for others who wanted to use literature circles in their classrooms. Short firmly believes that students will perform academic tasks at a more superior level if they are engaged in activity and have ownership and choice in their learning experiences.

Short's beliefs are manifested as a classroom environment that is rich in inquiry, discovery, collaboration, and endless reading.

Literature Circles in Lieu of Ability Grouping

Suzi Keegan and Karen Shrake (1991) decided to use literature circles in their fourth grade classrooms as an alternative to ability grouping. They were encouraged to pursue literature circles as an instructional strategy after reading portions of Nancy Atwell's *In the Middle* (1987). As touted by Atwell, Keegan and Shrake (1991) wanted their students "to develop a dining room table atmosphere in which they come together as friends who are enjoying a good book. They laugh; they

disagree; they share their opinions and questions; they build on each other's backgrounds and understandings" (p. 542).

Keegan and Shrake were tired of traditional classroom reading instruction that placed students in homogeneous reading groups which met daily to read from a basal textbook and to work on worksheet skills. They felt that students in the low groups were spending far too much time circling and filling in the blank and not enough time actually reading. Furthermore, they felt these students in the low group were never challenged or encouraged to read beyond their controlled, basal text.

In order to remedy the traditional problems, Keegan and Shrake transformed their classrooms into literate environments in which discussion, interpretation, collaboration, and actual reading took place.

Initial procedures

In each of the teacher's classrooms, heterogeneous groups of students meet at least three times a week to read a particular novel. Each group of seven sits in a circle around a tape player. One member starts the discussion by reading and asking an open-ended question. The students' responses are recorded as they share their ideas (refer-

ring to their books is permitted). After discussion of the open-ended question, students then read the pages they have assigned themselves. Finally, students react to the group's discussion and the novel in their literature logs.

Models and demonstrations

When Keegan and Shrake first started their literature circle investigation, they realized that

students needed pre-circle group activities. Before they actually started to read and discuss a novel, they needed to learn think-aloud strategies, discussion techniques, and cooperative skills.

The teachers demonstrated think-aloud strategies which taught the students how to verbalize their thoughts as they are thinking. A variety of think-aloud activities such as making predictions, visualizing during reading, integrating new knowledge with old, talking through a confusing passage, and applying strategies to clarify misunderstandings were demonstrated by the teachers and practiced by the students.

Assigning students to groups

Keegan and Shrake felt a need to assign students to groups as opposed to having the groups

form around a particular novel choice.

In order to determine groups, students were given a short narrative to read and discuss. While the students were practicing the skills of cooperation, decision making, and effective discussion,

the teachers evaluated group dynamics.

The teachers looked for personality clashes, leadership qualities, reluctant readers, exuberant readers,

introverts, and extroverts. From their observable data, they formed literature circle groups that would work together the remainder of the year.

Once groups were established, the teachers book-talked several novels and had the groups decide on which novel they wanted to read first. The book talk session was repeated once the groups finished their first book and before the group chose their second book.

Designing discussion questions

When Keegan and Shrake first started using novels, they created worksheets to support the text. They soon discovered that a worksheet only focused the students on what the teacher felt was significant in a book. With this worksheet approach, they felt as if they were "basalizing" their novels.

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They realized that if they wanted students talking about books and if they truly wanted to value personal insights into novels, then open-ended questions were needed to guide meaningful discussions.

The teachers developed several categories of questions that dealt with content, reading strategies, and authors' writing styles. Some of the questions were book specific, while others were generic. The open-ended question provided direction for the groups' discussions.

Group roles

Students were assigned particular roles in order to keep them engaged in the literature circle group and to accept more responsibility as participating members of the study group.

The *reader* was responsible for providing the group with the teacher feedback from the previous session, and for initiating the discussion.

The *coordinator* ensured that each member got a chance to talk and that no one reader monopolized the discussion.

The *mechanic* connected the tape player and recorded responses. The teacher used the tape responses to provide feedback to the group since it was sometimes difficult to meet with each group during discussion time.

The *notetaker/secretary* recorded the next meeting's job assignments and the pages and chapters the group decided to read.

Conversation in literature logs

Since most of the feedback students received about their reading and interaction was in group form, Keegan and Shrake felt a need to provide individual feedback. They used the students' literature logs as a vehicle for individual feedback. The teachers would respond to a student's reaction toward a book, discuss their feelings about a passage read, ask students additional questions to encourage elaboration, or praise the students on their response.

The feedback was an interactive, personal dialogue between the teacher and the student. "When we respond to the children's literature logs, we teach through our individualized comments and questions. We also write as friends sharing thoughts about a good book" (Keegan & Shrake, 1991, p. 547).

Keegan and Shrake gave quarterly grades to students. Fifty percent of the students' reading grade came from the literature log because it provided concrete evidence of the readers' growth. Participation in group discussion counts as 30 percent, while appropriate use of reading time

earns 10 percent. The other 10 percent of the reading grade came from activities such as independent reading, expository reading, and monthly book projects.

Keegan and Shrake (1991) concluded their report by stating, "We are convinced that literature study groups offer a framework for allowing children opportunities to discover what they know, to extend their thinking, and to develop strategies that will make them lifelong readers."

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Harvey Daniels' Ingredients of Literature Circles

Daniels (1994) realized that most students on a daily basis met in some sort of small group to work on reading. The groups used a variety of structures, but most groups participated in teacher-dominated round-robin reading.

With the buzz of the term "literature circles," many teachers renamed their reading groups as such, but did not provide in structural change in the dynamics of the reading session. Students were reading novels instead of basals, but the teachers were still dominating the reading process and students were inhibited from

searching for personal connections to the text.

According to Daniels (1994), "Literature circles is not just a trendy label for any kind of small-group reading lesson—it stands for a sophisticated fusion of collaborative learning with independent reading, in the framework of reading response theory" (p. 18). Daniels states twelve distinctive features that constitute literature circles.

Children choose their own reading materials

Student choice is essential because the deepest spirit of literature circles comes from independent reading. The traditional reading program consists of teacher-directed assignments, texts, and books. Daniels feels that school reading should mirror home reading. At home, when parents read a story to their children, they do not adhere to any particular curriculum guidelines. Parents simply ask, "What do you want to read?" Teachers who want to present an atmosphere of freedom of choice and self-direction must provide a classroom library filled with a variety of books—single copies for independent reading, pairs of books for buddy reading,

and multiple copy sets for group reading. There should be two types of independent reading—1) “sustained silent reading (SSR) and reading workshops; and 2) time for independent reading in groups, as when kids select, read, and discuss books in literature circles” (Daniels, 1994, p. 19).

Small temporary groups are formed, based on book choice

Students’ shared desire to read the same book or article is the driving force for determining the group members. Students are not placed in groups based on reading level, ability grouping, teacher assignment, or curriculum mandates. The groups are temporary and task oriented. The students cluster around the one book of common interest; they read and discuss the book; and then the group disbands and individual members find their way into new, different reading discussion groups by selecting their next book. The group size can range from two to seven, but an optimal number would be four or five students. A group of four or five guarantees a variety of perspectives. Daniels realizes that in the real school world, students would not be choosing from “all the books in the world” (1994, p. 19), but will be limited by those books that are in the classroom, school, and public

libraries. In the beginning, teachers might have to limit student choices to a few books or even might have to assign a single title to all groups in order to focus students on learning the structure and dynamics of literature responses. Daniels realizes that there might have to be compromises due to imperfections in the availability of a variety of titles and the fact that students may initially form groups around friend pools and not interest and genuine curiosity. Teachers need to let these friend groups occur because eventually the students will branch out and even if students are working with their friends they are at least engaged and motivated to read. Sometimes teachers have to guide, motivate, and encourage students to get groups formed or to make sure no one is left out and groups are even.

Different groups read different books

A societal reading concern is that students are going through the process of schooling and are coming out not illiterate, but alliterate. Alliteracy is when students can read, but choose not to read. To combat this ill, literature circles provide for choice and variety. Students get to explore their interests as they choose what book, article, story, poem, or play they want to read. Because each

person is different, each person should have the option of reading what is enjoyable. Daniels (1994) does recognize the need for students to read certain materials because it is necessary to become learned in other areas that will allow intellectual interactions with others beyond the group.

Daniels thinks

... if we do not require students to be constantly assigning reading to

themselves, we have set our educational standards too low and are nurturing dependency and helplessness . . . Activities like literature circles, reading workshops, and sustained silent reading offer a way to redress our schools’ dangerous imbalance between assigned and independent reading (1994, p. 21).

Groups meet on a regular, predictable schedule

Literature circles must meet continuously throughout the school year. Literature circles cannot be a one time only event. Teachers and students need time to internalize the process. Because there are a variety of roles that each participant must take, students need time to try all

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the roles and warm up as readers. The students need to be able to schedule weekly or preferably daily meeting to discuss their books. A large chunk of time from 45 minutes to an hour needs to be set aside for literature circles. When time is too short, students rush

mechanically through the roles. If students are assigned by the group to read a part of their book, read with purpose, make notes in their reading logs, and come ready to

play their part in discussion, then a predictable schedule is necessary. Daniels (1994) suggested that a group can meet every second or third day which would allow time for students to read bigger chunks of text. Another alternative was to have students do their reading and role work on nonmeeting days during the same class time that circles ordinarily meet. Intermittent time is also needed for teachers to go over literature logs, to model open-ended questions, and to have individual conferences with students.

Kids use written or drawn notes to guide reading and discussion

Writing and drawing are used to guide students through the reading. A series of response sheets initially focus the students on

concept development and guided reader response, but eventually the students will graduate from the sheets and start making their own self-generated responses in their literature logs.

The response sheets are focal points for group discussions. Eventually, students will respond to texts by presenting projects to the class in the form of book reviews, missing chapters of a book, book posters, or a script for readers theater. "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" (Daniels, 1994, p. 22).

Discussion topics come from the students

One of the signature features of literature circles is that students develop questions and guide their own discussion. The teacher does not provide the questions, worksheets, and any other intrusive guidance.

Sometimes this self-direction is viewed as permissiveness, but what is actually happening is that students are taken charge of their own learning and are setting the purposes for reading. In traditional classrooms, teachers have had lower expectations of students in specific groups and have provided students with spoon-fed

materials that directed them to circle the word, underline the noun, or fill in the correct response.

In literature circles, all students must perform acts that real readers do such as choosing their own books, expressing their own views, pacing their own reading, and selecting issues for discussion.

Group meetings aim to be open, natural conversations

Traditional reading groups favored objective tasks with answers based primarily on fact recall. Literature circles rely on the generation of open-ended responses that stimulate thinking. Students respond after reading, processing, savoring, and analyzing the question. Students then share their responses with the group. By looking over each others drawings, sharing responses, discussing particular vocabulary, and connecting the work to their own lives, students begin to perfect the craft of being a functioning member of a literate community. "Literature circles embody the idea that kids learn to read mainly by reading, and to write mainly by writing and by doing so in a supportive, literate community" (Daniels, 1994, p. 24).

Students play a rotating assortment of task roles

Because students are not initially accustomed to working in

groups, specific task roles are necessary to provide structure to the interactions.

Once students have mastered the initial roles, they can then converse with each other in a mature, organized fashion because the structure has been internalized.

Daniel (1994) states:

One of the key mechanisms for making co-operation work in all sorts of

groups is assigning specific, structured roles to the different group members. This way, each person has a special individual responsibility, a job to do, a piece of the puzzle to contribute if the group is to succeed (p. 24).

Basic roles are designed to invite different cognitive perspectives. Daniels listed a variety of roles with accompanying role sheets that entertained the various cognitive perspectives.

An example of a certain role is the *reader*. This person is asked to read certain passages aloud to the class. The *literary luminary* is responsible for pointing out any key literary conventions that the author is using such as use of metaphors and similes.

The teacher's responses are entertained and treated on the same level as other members'.

The teacher as facilitator

The teacher's main role during literature circles is not to teach, but to guide students through their individual group discussions by modeling appropriate practices through whole class demonstrations. Once students are working in groups, the teacher visits all groups and slides in and out of groups as an active participant.

As the teacher visits, the students soon realize that the teacher is like any other member: the teacher interacts, gives opinions, and answers group-generated questions. The teacher's responses are entertained and treated on the same level as other members'.

"The teacher joins the group not as a teacher but as an equal, reading right along with kids in a book they haven't previously read and want to read (Daniels, 1994, p. 26).

Evaluation is by teacher observation and student self-evaluation

The traditional evaluation practices of collecting papers and grading worksheets does not fit when using literature circles. Daniels (1994) suggests that teachers gather observable data via "tools of kidwatching" such as "narrative observational logs, performance assessment, checklists, student conferences, group interviews, video/audiotaping, and the collection in portfolios of artifacts created by circles" (p. 27). Daniels also states that the evaluation of circles is not just the job of the teacher, but that students take responsibility as they keep record of their group's progress and self-monitor their own achievement. Students also talk evaluatively about their goals, roles, and performances in literature circles.

A spirit of playfulness and fun pervades the room

A classroom environment that is based on the concept of playfulness engages readers. Readers are more apt to take risk and to feel more self-assured if the pressure of performance is removed and replaced with an attitude of enjoyment of reading.

When children first begin to interact with books, it is usually in the lap of a loving, nurturing parent.

When children start to interact in meaningful conversation, it is around the dining room table. Daniels(1994) feels a need to simulate this lap-like, dining room table atmosphere in the classroom which will keep the students energized about literature circles.

Benefits of Literature Circles: Summary

After viewing the three perspectives of literature circles, the researcher realizes that this instructional practice is an alternative to traditional reading groups. Even though each person had individual modifications on the approach, it was still evident that the main focus was on student engagement.

During traditional reading groups, students are anchored to teachers' directives. Students spend much of their time trying to figure out how the teacher wants them to respond. They spend little time interacting with other students and strengthening their own interpretation of text materials. Teachers of traditional reading groups spend most of their time grading worksheets and little of their time observing students or actively participating in students' learning.

Students are given actual choices. They get to choose their own books and cluster with

students who share the same interest. These groups are not permanent, but fluid and the students can pair and share with others once the book reading and discussing task is complete.

In these groups, they can define and refine their voices which are usually lost in a large classroom group. Students realize the benefit of enhancing their learning by sharing their initial response to a group-generated, open-ended question and having that be the

foundation of a wider more integrated response that is the collaborative efforts of the entire group.

Perhaps the most significant advantage to using literature circles is their personal approach. Students involved in literature circles live with their books and characters. Students learn that literature is not just on a text page, but a wonderfully alive story waiting for their interaction and response.

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