

Literature Circles: Better Talking, More Ideas

Contents

Introduction	1
1. Where it all began	2
2. Setting up literature circles	10
3. Literature circles with younger children	22
4. Literature circles with 8-11 year olds	30
Bibliography	40

Introduction

“The most effective talking and learning will take place when adult and child engage together collaboratively in the negotiation of meaning.”

(Wells, G. 1985, p.25)

Literature circles are an exciting way to explore children’s understanding of text, improve their reading skills, and encourage the development of positive attitudes towards reading. This book describes the use of literature circles in England, and some of the ways in which they benefited teachers and children.

In the first chapter, we describe what a literature circle is, and explain some of the benefits they offer to teachers and to children. In the second chapter, we explain one way to introduce the idea of literature circles to a class, and suggest how to get them established as a way of working and discussing books in the classroom. The third chapter provides a detailed example of young children working in a literature circle, with an analysis to show how the literature circle moved forward their reading skills, understanding and attitudes. The final chapter describes the use of literature circles with older children and focuses on how the teacher worked with the group, using reading journals and discussion to develop the children’s understanding.



Chapter 1

Where It All Began

In 1986 a group of year 6 children recorded themselves talking about their favourite author, Judy Blume, and her books.

Kate *'It's not the end of the World' is good*

Liz *Well, her parents get divorced*

Esther *I think it's good. It sort of helps you doesn't it?*

Sally *It helps you as it acts as though in real life sort of..*

Esther *It makes you... There's you thinking like you're the only one...*

Sally *It's real life*

Esther *...And no one understands how you feel but when you read the book you can understand that other people feel the same way as you*

Mark *Yeah*

Sally *And you feel, "Oh I feel sorry for them. ...Imagine if it was real and although it hasn't got any pictures, you could imagine it in your mind. Sort of imagine it...*

As these children share their intimate knowledge of Blume's work, so they support each other in exploring both the texts they read and themselves as readers. Esther, whose parents had recently divorced, has clearly valued Blume's writing as a way of reflecting her own feelings and Sally supports her in this. The children bring their life experiences to the text to picture, empathise, and assess. This exploratory talk evolves from their affective engagement with the texts they have read and enjoyed.

When I realised how sharing their reading of the same texts had enabled these young readers to discover and articulate so much about the power of literature for making meaning in their own lives, I determined to introduce group reading into my next class. From there came the research project

at Brighton University and the ensuing work with students and teachers over the years that has been so productive.

What is a Literature Circle?

Emanating from the work of Harste, Short and Burke (1989), who first coined the term, a literature circle is a way of encouraging children to read and enjoy talking about books. In a literature circle, a group of children all read the same text and, sometimes with the support of reading journals and/or their teacher, come together to talk about their reading and to read more of the text together. With children aged 8 and over, they operate like adult reading groups where the text itself is read mainly independently and most of the circle time is spent discussing the group members' responses to the text, with or without the presence of an adult. Children aged 5-7 tend to read the text aloud around the group and then talk about it.

Why are Literature Circles Important?

Reading, as the introductory dialogue shows, is a complex process where the experiences and attitudes of the reader are likely to be as important as the strategies used to 'read' the words. Reading is also a social process. In this respect, the literature circle is an extension of most children's earliest reading experiences, which are essentially social in nature; when adults read to and with young children they tend to discuss the story and the pictures as they go, and through this process jointly negotiate the meaning of the story. We know that when adults read to children, the child's agenda is often paramount and governs the way the text is read and re-read, and also the amount of time spent looking and discussing the pictures.

As teachers, we cannot replicate the intensity and responsiveness of this experience all the time in busy classrooms. It is simply not possible when specific content has to be covered in shared reading lessons, or when the teacher reads aloud to the class. However, we can recognise the importance of children having time to read and to talk about the texts with each other, and with adults. In doing this, we are acknowledging that reading is, indeed, an active creative social process, and that teachers and schools need to promote this.

How Literature Circles Support Developing Readers

Experiences and attitudes

Recursive learning refers to that kind of learning which is ongoing and revisited. In one sense we are all recursive learners when it comes to reading because we continually read new books, which challenge us to read in new ways. However, many children stall as readers, often because they do not know what to read. If they only ever read familiar texts, children do not really develop. It's rather like always driving the same car around familiar streets; to find new challenges one needs to drive different cars, and go to new and different places. The literature circle helps children to read and to enjoy new authors and genres. When I asked my son, aged eighteen, why he alone of his contemporaries still enjoyed reading fiction, he suggested that it was because I had always helped him to find new authors to read. Good teachers of reading know this. They continually update their knowledge of children's fiction and ensure that they know their children well enough to know which books to recommend to which readers. What do you recommend when a child has read every book by Anne Fine or Michael Morpurgo?

Being a member of a literature circle helps to develop positive attitudes about reading, and especially positive attitudes towards trying new texts. Children need to develop the ability to persevere with texts that initially lack appeal and develop the reading stamina necessary to complete the reading of longer texts. The confidence to try new reads is developed when friends share their enjoyment of a text, hence the popularity of Harry Potter and Lemony Snickett. Children want to read and talk about these books so that they can be members of the 'in' group.

Discussion of the books with others in the group, helps children to stretch their understanding in ways that may not happen in quiet reading on their own. The group discussion prompts them to ask new questions, to wonder and to make connections with their own experiences and with the experiences of others in the group. When children are encouraged to read widely and to talk around texts with their peers as well as with adults, it can also help them to develop a healthy scepticism about what they read.