

# **A Teacher Librarian's Initiation of Literature Circles in an Elementary School: a Reflection on the Process**

*by Anne V. Lyle*

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"Literature Circles, often called Literature Response Groups, Book Clubs and occasionally Transactional Literature Discussions, are an approach to reading instruction in which students read, write and talk about poetry, short stories and whole books." (Lyle, 1999). Through discourse students actively construct meaning by responding to a text and then by reflecting on their responses. Raphael and McMahon (1994) state the purpose of initiating this approach in teaching:

Current views of reading instruction are based in social constructivist theory, which emphasizes learning as a social process. Reading and writing develop through interactions with both adults and peers; students should not sit in isolation, working on individual worksheets to practice skills outside the social and cultural contexts of normal use. Instead, students should interact using oral and written language to construct meaning about what they have read. (p. 102)

This approach, according to Pitman (1997), "allows children to apply their natural socializing tendencies in a productive manner, making learning meaningful and hopefully internalized for additional future learning" (p. 4). Because this is a natural tendency for children, this method has a positive impact on them. Also, Pitman states, as "students have a more positive attitude and a personal connection to learning, it seems likely that the concepts taught will be retained and applied in future learning" (p. 5). When students have a greater retention of knowledge they have a measurable increase in their cognitive development which leads to higher academic achievement.

If Literature Circles are effective in increasing the cooperative learning of students, and as a result their cognitive development, then this technique appears to be one answer to the dilemma of teaching reading to reluctant multi-level classes of diverse students. The groups allow students not only to love reading, but to think actively and critically about what they read. If this is truly the situation, then this technique needs to be understood by teachers more widely.

I began to wonder whether or not there was a discrepancy between the research literature, which acclaimed this method, and the reality of teaching using Literature Circles in Prince George. Would there be difficulties in implementing this method? Would the enthusiasm and the success of the students be such that any inherent problems could be worked through and the program continued? Or would the students become frustrated, necessitating ending the program? What would the successes and the problems be? Because of these questions I decided to set up a

Literature Circle reading group with twenty grade four students to discover for myself whether or not the method would be successful.

## **Literature Review**

There are many variations of implementing Literature Circles, as each teacher has different ideas of what to emphasize and each teacher has a unique group of students with different interests and abilities. Grisham (1997) reports that each of six teachers, in implementing Literature Circles, set up the groups "in a unique and individual manner and within their own time frame" (p. 8). I searched the literature to find methods and variations that might suit the style I had in mind.

My goal in setting up a Literature Circle study paralleled Gambrell's (1996). She states, "the most important goal of reading instruction is to foster the love of reading" (p. 14). I did not want to belabor the students with reams of paper busywork, nor interrogative-style comprehension questions. For me, the importance of encouraging the love of reading to achieve the goal of becoming effective, lifelong readers was equally as important as nurturing the children in affective and cognitive aspects of literacy development (Gambrell, p.15).

Neamen and Strong (1992) suggest giving book talks to the students to whet their appetites for reading specific novels. As a teacher-librarian I felt confident beginning with book talks, but would I be able to read all the pre-chosen books before we began the study? Also, Neamen and Strong give projects for picture books and projects for novels. This I did not like, as it does not allow the students the freedom to have control over their own discussions. I felt there needed to be a focus on constructing meaning and shared ideas (Grisham, 1997, p. 4). Neamen and Strong also suggest a method for students to sign up for specific books. I liked the idea of having the students sign up for particular titles. This seemed to lend a sense of order to the possible rush of students in choosing titles.

Peterson and Eeds (1990) give book lists students might like at various grades. This was a helpful start, as I was not sure what interests the students had nor was I aware of their reading ability. Linda Gambrell (1996) suggests that the teacher could encourage students to form their own groups voluntarily through freedom of choice in peer groups and freedom of choice with titles. This allows the students of a lower reading ability to choose a title that is difficult for them. According to Gambrell, the peer pressure motivates them to struggle with the material (p. 15). Daniels (1994) suggests two methods -- either "quick training" for students who are adept at thought-provoking conversation in a collaborative setting, or a "careful training" method for students who need slower, more thorough training. Daniels also gives suggestions for specific roles to be used as guides for the conversation, ensuring the students all will be given an equal opportunity to speak. He offers other practical suggestions such as students wearing specific hats with their role marked on the front, or color-coded to represent their role (p. 73). Another suggestion I like was having students use self-adhesive notes to mark the places where they have something specific to mention to their group. Thus, they will not be slowed down in their reading but can quickly mark the place (Daniels, 1994; Dugan, 1997).

Hess (1991), in her study, worked with two classrooms at once and was very oriented to checklists and personal goal sheets. She also included students who were less capable, by using

such strategies as Books on Tape so those students could listen to the same book that their group was reading. I wondered whether the less capable readers would be keen or reticent. I also wondered if the controlling personalities would dominate the discussion. Would Daniels' role sheets guide or impede the discussions? Hess stated that students' discussions seemed to go off on tangents but that they eventually came back to the text (p. 7).

Pitman (1997), in her study of students' attitudes using non-fiction in Literature Circles, found that students were "observably more enthusiastic, attentive, and responsible for their own learning. . . .When students find a personal connection to the material they have read through discussion with their peers, the learning becomes meaningful and rewarding" (p. 19). I thought that my study would indicate similar results, although these students would be using fiction.

Raphael and McMahon (1994) conducted a collaborative study among university and school-based researchers involving reading, writing, whole-class discussion, and instruction (p. 104). Their research was quite different from what I envisioned doing. I wanted to give the students as much freedom as possible to read and then discuss on their own. If the students were as adept at conversation as I believed they were, then I felt that whole-class instruction in conversational skills was not necessary. These researchers, like Daniels, had worksheets to guide the students, but Raphael and McMahon's sheets were to be filled in with extensive vocabulary, log entries (which could be drawings), and "Think Sheets." I felt that the students would need guidance, but I really wanted them to have as much time to read as possible, rather than filling in sheets.

Samway, Whang, Cade, Gamil, Lubandina, and Phommachanh (1991) used a method of allowing the students to read for long stretches of time and then to have one group gather with their teacher for the discussion while the others continued reading (p.198). I liked the idea of the students reading for long periods of time, because I like to read for uninterrupted periods of time; however, I was concerned about the ability of the students to sustain a lengthy interest in their novels. Also gathering in groups with the teacher seemed too reminiscent of primary ability groups. I felt the students would be able to conduct their own independent discussions.

## **Method**

### **Planning**

For ease of implementation I planned to teach grade four students from Pinetree Hill Elementary School (pseudonym). The teacher was keen to try the technique when she heard about the success it was purported to engender. The students are in a split grade four/five classroom in a school situated in an upper level economic neighborhood. All the students speak English, and all are of white Anglo Saxon origin except one who is of African American ancestry.

Time-tabling was difficult as we both had commitments with other teachers that we did not want to change, yet I wanted to work with the students more than once a day. Because the teacher was committed to her students trying the method and because she was able to be flexible with her own timetable, we made time for the Literature Circle research group to happen. We decided the students would come to the library twice a day, four days a week for a minimum of two weeks.

## **Ethical Issues**

Sorting out the ethical issues included acquiring permission to do the research from the Director of Instruction for the School Board, the principal, the teacher, and the parents. Ethics clearance was also obtained from the university Research Ethics Board. While the permission forms were being gathered I prepared to introduce the concept to the students.

## **Motivational plans**

Wanting the students to be eager and enthusiastic, I planned to emphasize in my first "motivational" chat that they would not be required to write book reports, nor to answer comprehension questions, but that they would be able to discuss their chosen book with their peers in their group. Also, I planned to emphasize that they would choose the groups they would be reading with and they would choose the books to be read from a selection of previously gathered and approved titles.

## **Equipment and supplies**

The next step was to gather all the necessary novels, supplies, and recording equipment. To gather the sets of novels, I searched the bookroom, the District Resource Centre and the library office shelves. This search provided plenty of sets of novels. Then the electrical equipment was collected and checked, complete with tape recorders, extension cords, power bars and cassette tapes. For additional supplies I gathered sets of Daniels' quick start role sheets, self-adhesive notes, pencils, file folders, and paper clips.

## **Implementation**

First I talked to the students about Literature Circles, describing it as a method of developing their reading and conversation skills by allowing them to choose what to read and then to talk about their books in groups. They were very keen to try the method and immediately self-selected groups by embracing each other with clutching motions. But when it came to choosing their novels "Lila" was disappointed that her friends wouldn't read what she wanted to read. So she quietly decided to read on her own. I was concerned. But the others, having chosen their novel, began to read. As they were reading, one of the girls in a nearby group said quietly to Lila, "When you've finished that book, would you like to join our group?" It wasn't long before Lila decided to join the group even though the girls were "not reading my kind of book; I'm not a Beverly Cleary fan." Before they left the library, each group decided how much they would read that night.

The next day they began to discuss their reading. Each group, having different dynamics as well as different novels, created very different discussions. The tape recorders were humming, and voices blended together in a busy chorus;

Rose: You guys, you guys, did you think there was a funny part yet?

Doopy: We...ll not really.

Rose: Socks is funny....He got mailed in the mailbox.

Soon organizational concerns were expressed regarding how much to read:

Daffodil: We've read chapter one. We'll read half a chapter. OK you guys?

Lila: We'll read up to page 45.

Daffodil: When we come to the library we'll read half a chapter. OK you guys?

Doopy: Then we'll finish the chapter at home.

Then organizational concerns developed regarding the self-adhesive notes and how to use them, as well as how to assign roles:

Rose: Where will we keep the stickies?

Daffodil: Write the page number on the sticky. Read to that page.

Lila: What's our group name?

Rose: Who's going to be the travel tracer?

Doopy: Not me. Not me. I'm....

*(They decide by use of a fist game similar to 'one potato two potato'.)*

Doopy: I want to be the illustrator.

*(Several voices indicate they want to be the illustrator.)*

Daffodil: We'll decide that later.

Rose: I don't want to be the investigator.

Daffodil: OK we'll figure that out at lunch

Lila: I'm gonna do the. . . . connector.

Daffodil: We'll do this later.

It quickly became apparent the next day that the students did not want to be impeded with their reading by having to stop and discuss. They preferred to read straight through and then to answer comprehension questions or summarize their reading.

Daffodil:...OK you guys, I'm gonna tell you what's happened so far.

*(She proceeds to summarize the entire section.)*

Lila: This part is the funniest. . . .

*(reads section -- lots of laughter).*

Lila: I have a question. Does anybody know how a cat's eyes change color from blue to the color of new leaves? . . . Why cats' eyes change color. . . .*(leaves to find an encyclopedia)*

Rose; Hey you guys in this. . . . the owners (*unintelligible*) Where did they go?

Doopy: They went to the hospital.

Soon it became apparent they could begin to ask questions and delve deeper into the text. They began to help each other construct meaning through conversation.

Doopy: I thought it was kind of sad at the start. She didn't want to give her little kitten away.

Lila: I still can't find out why. . . Why the cat's eyes change color.

Daffodil: I think it's just because, it's just because he changes color when they get older. It's the way they get born or something.

Rose: I thought Socks. . .

Doopy: When does it say what the new pet is.?

Rose: The workers might love. . . the new pet more than him.

Doopy: What is the new pet?

Daffodil: What page are you on?

Lila: 43

Rose: The baby.

Daffodil: Oh he thinks he's a pet because because of the wrinkly face. . .

Daffodil: Would you like to read next? We're going to read.

Doopy: Is there a funny part yet?

With this group, the initial summarizing of the story changed as the students became more comfortable with the conversations. They began to move from their more formal summarizing to questions that they were actually pondering, such as the query, "What is the new pet?" As they answered each others' queries and struggled to find meaning, they were sharing their knowledge, teaching each other, and pondering together.

From the initial conversations, it seemed that Literature Circles were a great reading method. The students were keen and eager readers. They chose the number of pages they were going to read and then read many more. One student finished the allotted book the first night. This however caused an organizational problem. I wanted the students to read as much as possible, thus if they had finished the book, I encouraged them to read another book. But then they were not on track for the discussions with their group. How could this be sorted out? I did not want to hold them back in their reading, but for ease of organization and control it would be much easier if they were all reading at the same pace.

The reading and discussions continued fairly well for the first week. My concerns were the uneven pace of reading, especially the amazing speed with which some students read. One student said: "I didn't pay any attention to the sticky that we put in place. I just read, and read. It was exciting. I just kept going." However another child said: "I have a very busy schedule; I have very little time to read. I go to day care, and I can't read there, and then I go swimming, and then it's dinner time and then I have half an hour to read, before I go to bed. I can't read thirty pages in half an hour."

Thus some organizational dilemmas developed. As students who read quickly were choosing new books to read, other students took advantage of the freedom of choice, and began to choose new books also. It wasn't until a few days had passed, that I realized these latter students had not finished their respective books. They were bored with their books and just started new ones. I

also think that these students did not want to appear to be slow readers, so to have a new book already in hand gave them a sense of being among the more capable students. Soon several students were openly bragging about the number of books they had read.

"Mrs. Lyle, I've read two whole books already," said Ace, on the fourth day. His teacher had said he had never read a fiction book. And so the race was on. Keeping the students interested in the discussions proved to be difficult. Although some mature, responsible, and capable girls were able to carry on no matter what the others were doing, they were interrupted by social dilemmas that developed. As students changed books they were without a discussion group. Thus, they wanted to join a group that was discussing the novel they had just chosen. The problem then became one of group social dynamics. Group members had become understanding with each other. Their discussions ebbed and flowed as they questioned and pondered meanings and predicaments. When a new member was admitted to the group, the dynamics were jostled and stretched causing several dilemmas. Some students complained, "Mrs. Lyle, she hasn't read as much as we have," or, "She's bossy and won't let me have a turn."

All these difficult social interactions surprised me. They had not been mentioned in any of the literature I had read. Was this group of students different than the others? Was I doing something quite different from the others' research? Perhaps I was not following the same pattern. My digression from the formal roles, my encouraging the students to read at their own pace, and my inexperience with the students' abilities and reading preferences all led to these difficulties.

I felt I was losing control; the Literature Circles research project was taking on a life of its own. Thus, to regain control, I brought the students to the story corner in the library to have a whole-group discussion. As we were nearing the end of the time planned, I had the students think of what they had liked and disliked about the method. Later, I gave the students a questionnaire called "Thoughts." Their comments were very positive. Spike liked to be able to "read a book in a couple of days and you could talk about it." Lilac said, "I liked the reading because it was fun and help[s] people to read better." Ace, who had never read a fiction book before, said, "I liked talking about the books and reading because I like to talk about stuff and like to read." Lila commented, "It was nice to talk and explain the book to talk about your feelings about the book." Charizard, who had seemed very hesitant to talk at all, said, "I liked reading with my friends, because it's a time when I can really talk to them." All these comments seemed to parallel the comments made by Wollman-Bonilla (1993) in her research when she quoted an eleven-year-old saying, "It's really special because you get to think" (p. 47).

However, several students expressed some of the frustration with regard to the group dynamics. Miac expressed her feelings by saying, "One concern I had was fighting with each other, because [then] we wouldn't be a group," and also, "One thing I didn't like was deciding who I would go with because lots of people wanted to go with me." Charizard showed his concern regarding friendships with his statement, "One concern I had was if we were going to get into fights because I didn't want fights to wreck our friendship."

These comments indicate the importance of friendships to the students. Group dynamics were most important. In fact, group dynamics were of greater importance than what was said. Students were hesitant to state their "real" thoughts for fear of offending their friends. Thus the

importance of the discussions became secondary to their need for friendship. This need for friendship and atmosphere of trust seemed necessary before the students had the confidence to open themselves to honest conversation and discourse. With confidence, the students were eager to share their thoughts.

The findings from this mini-study echo statements made by Carollyne Sinclair (1994), who says of her students, "it is in the act of being together with someone they trust that they can fully 'be,' to be themselves" (p. 38). If, in Literature Circles, the students have enough confidence to share their innermost feelings, then the reading will be followed with honest, open, meaningful dialogue for most of the students. However, I also think that the security of friendships will develop through struggling with the discussions. Students need to persevere through the difficult concepts, and to persevere with a book to the end. Because of this, students need careful guidance in how to have a meaningful discussion. They need practice. They need experience in giving reasons for their thoughts. Students need to know they can agree to disagree without losing each others' friendship.

## **Interpretation**

I felt there was a discrepancy between the research literature, which acclaimed this method, and the reality of teaching using Literature Circles. It was very difficult for all the students to be successful with all components of the method in this quick study. Some students were adept at the reading, some were adept at the discussions, and some were adept at deceiving their peers about their awkwardness at either the reading or the discussions. They all needed more guidance.

Literature Circles would be easier to implement in a classroom within which the teacher knew the students well, and in which the classroom atmosphere was open and trustful so that each student could be successful. The teacher needs to know the social dynamics of the class, the reading ability of each student, and the reading tastes of each student.

However, the enthusiasm and success the students garnered from their experience with literature circles in this research study was tremendous. I feel the success far outweighed the difficulties. The students showed signs of disbelief at the beginning as they realized they could read at their own pace, as fast as they wanted. They could really "get into" books unhindered by worksheets. Unfortunately because of their inexperience with the dialogic technique they became bogged down and their reading pace slowed down. Then the heady thrill of the fast paced reading dissipated.

The next time I implement Literature Circles, I will begin with whole class discussions to help the students realize what is entailed within the specific parts. I will model many short pieces of literature, such as short stories or poems. Then I will divide the class into smaller groups, with each group discussing the same piece of literature. Then I will bring the whole class together for a discussion of the same piece of literature. This gradual introduction to discourse style of learning should help the students feel more comfortable with the technique of literature discussion.

As a teacher-librarian, I recommend that this method be used again and again in spite of the difficulties. The problems can be overcome with scaffolding the whole class discussions sequentially, demonstrating the specific discourse roles to be used. Students were unfamiliar with roles such as "connector," and "travel tracer." However I am sure they have all made some "connections" to what they have read, or perhaps checked maps to follow the "route" of a story.

I was surprised that some students did not seem to be able to pick up on clues the author gave, such as where a story took place. These students did not seem to care about the possible investigations that could be done to find background information. They seemed reluctant to think. Or, perhaps they were just reluctant to put a voice to their thoughts. They read for the sheer pleasure of reading. They seemed to be searching for the thrill of the emotional content, either in the novels, or with their friendships within the individual Literature Circle group.

Students knew what vocabulary enrichment was, but most just skipped blithely over words they didn't know. For instance, three boys who were zipping through a series of three books about a haunted mansion, did not know what a mansion was, and did not bother to find out. This may have been a result of their joy over not being impeded by worksheets and basal readers. Although the students' curiosity needs to be piqued, this should not be at the expense of the freedom to really read their chosen novels, at their chosen pace.

I suggest that after several whole class demonstrations of Literature Circles, students work with partners to practice the technique together. This way they are not unduly hampered by a multiplicity of difficult social interactions. They can then monitor their speed of reading by planning how much to read and reminding each other during the day, on the playground, and by telephone in the evening. Developing camaraderie would enhance the development of the technique and lead to faster, more quantitative reading with an increased emphasis on the discussions. Then, when the pairs are comfortable with each other and the technique, the groups could be increased in size gradually.

Because of the excitement among the children to read whichever novels they wanted, a frenzy took place, as they rushed eagerly to get their chosen novel first. To avoid this frenzy and to help the students to develop perseverance and accountability, I suggest that each individual sign a form signifying their desire to read that particular book. This might help them be more discerning at the beginning -- to really scan the book, its cover, its flyleaf, its illustrations, and the writing style before committing themselves to a definitive choice. Then I would advocate that the teacher put the other books away so as not to tempt the students from their present choice of novel, if the reading becomes a little slow with difficult passages such as description or explanation. Students today are used to "changing the channel" at the slightest hint of boredom. A boring book is easily tossed aside if the students are not encouraged to persevere.

I think the benefits far outweigh the difficulties and I encourage teachers to implement this method with their students. Students do have natural socializing tendencies and, applied in a productive manner, learning will become meaningful. Thus when students interact with adults and peers in the real world, they will have a personal connection to learning. It is this personal connection, which allows the concepts learned to be retained. Then, "when students have a

greater retention of knowledge they have a measurable increase in their cognitive development which leads to higher academic achievement" (Lyle, 1999).

If Literature Circles create a positive impact on students they will have a more positive attitude, leading to greater cognitive development. What are we waiting for? We, as educators, need to embrace this technique and hone it to perfection with each group of students we teach. These students were eager to read without being hampered by worksheets, workbooks, and busywork. This showed their desire for learning that is personally meaningful. Students need to read material of their own choosing, and they must be given wide choices from which to select their material. Basal readers do not give students a sense of ownership of their reading material. Worksheets, if they are used at all, must be meaningful -- not just given to keep students busy. I would like to see worksheets eliminated from language arts lessons. "If we want to maintain *illiteracy*, worksheets are perfect" (Fox, 1993, p. 67). Basal readers, workbooks, and worksheets are archaic devices that need to be tossed out of our schools along with previous archaic devices such as the dunce cap and corporal punishment.

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