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## From Skeptic to Believer: One Teacher's Journey Implementing Literature Circles

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with

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### Abstract

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This is the story of one middle school teacher's journey of implementing literature circles with English language learners. Theory and research suggest that literature circles are valuable and important for young adolescents yet many teachers are still skeptical about implementing them. During this three-month study 22 sixth graders, 12 of them English learners, were involved in reading and discussing books. Areas that helped this teacher become a believer in literature circles included: students were able to talk about books in the literature circles, students naturally discussed the major themes and literary elements, students made sense of the texts, and students were actively engaged and excited. In conclusion, implications for teachers and teacher educators are addressed.

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*My former school district didn't allow us to do literature circles because they weren't focused, intentional teaching. I took that to mean that literature circles might be good for advanced readers, but weren't appropriate for students reading below grade level. My current principal contacted me about having someone work with me in my reading classroom using literature circles. I was skeptical, but I agreed to give it a try.*

This reflection was written by Glenna, a middle school English teacher who was adept at using reading programs incorporating lessons on grammar, spelling, and vocabulary. She was skeptical about implementing literature circles in her classroom because most of her students were reading below grade level and were considered English language learners. She was afraid that literature circles were too advanced for her students.

Glenna is not alone in her doubts about literature circles. Even with the abundant amount of research on literature circles there are still many middle school teachers who are not implementing them. Some assume children and adolescents, particularly those still acquiring English as a second language, are unable to discuss a piece of text. While others believe that struggling readers cannot have critical dialogue or deep discussions about books because they have difficulty comprehending texts. A number of school districts even discourage conversations with literature because they believe children need to be working on predetermined sets of skills before they are able to engage in talk about books (Martinez-Roldán & López-Robertson, 1999/2000). Unfortunately, as many researchers have found, teachers and society often have low expectations for English language learners with immigrant backgrounds (Nieto, 2002).

I began working in Glenna's classroom to discover how to implement literature circles with her English language learners. Gradually, the research evolved into understanding how a teacher's beliefs changed about literature circles. This article shares the story of Glenna, who began as a skeptic and is now a believer in using literature circles in her classroom.

## Literature Circles

Literature circles or grand conversations are a way for students to practice reading, writing, conversing, listening, and interpreting (Peterson & Eeds, 1990). Within small groups students share their own ideas, opinions, and personal experiences in response to literature. In this community like setting reluctant students or novice speakers of English are given an opportunity to hear a wide range of cultural perspectives, language, and points of views in a non-threatening environment. Together students collaborate, think critically, and negotiate meaning (Short & Klassen, 1993).

The underlying theories that support literature circles include the socio-cultural theory (Vygotsky, 1978) and the transactional theory (Rosenblatt, 1938).

Vygotsky (1978) believes that children learn language and literacy by participating in meaning-centered and culturally valuable literacy activities. In collaborative social atmospheres students, alongside adults or more competent peers, reflect, listen, theorize, and create new knowledge. Similarly, Rosenblatt (1938) maintains that in collaborative discussions about literature, teachers and students take an active role in engaging with a text to create meaning. Each reader brings his or her emotions, concerns, life experiences, and knowledge to a text, often resulting in a new way of thinking and meaning.

Short (1997) asserts that through literature circles, readers have the opportunity to become literate. As students are reading they are actively thinking and learning. In discussions, they engage in ongoing dialogue discussing insights, raising questions, and sharing their interpretations, helping them to become critical thinkers and readers. Hepler (1991) claims that literature circles help teachers create communities of readers, where children discover what they think about literature. Students learn to explain, clarify, and define meaning for themselves. Organizing these types of conversations around literature in our classrooms support Vygotsky's and Rosenblatt's theories and are an essential part of making readers.

Since more than half of Glenna's students were English language learners, we tried to organize a classroom for language acquisition to occur. Collier (1995) emphasizes a highly interactive environment where language is taught through problem solving, negotiation of meaning, and discovery learning as both academic language and cognitive development flourish in this kind of supportive environment. Similarly, Krashen (1993) promotes learning language naturally by using it for real communication and thinking about past experiences. He also emphasizes meaningful interactions with native speakers. Literature circles build on this language and literacy learning, where students think back on their own language, culture, and life experiences to share feelings, thoughts, and opinions in small groups. These social settings can provide students with the means to construct new language and knowledge.

## **Background**

Glenna had previously taught in another part of our state, where the philosophy was structured and teachers used a scripted reading program. She explained, "I realize now that in my former district we were oppressed teachers. We were afraid to do anything outside of the program." Now in a new school district where she was

allowed her to teach with much more freedom, she still felt an enormous obligation to make sure her English language learners and struggling readers improve in reading, so she relied on her past understandings. During the 60-minute reading period at this new school, Glenna supplemented the adopted reading anthology with leveled books that she borrowed from a neighboring elementary school. She set up stations where she and two classroom paraprofessionals taught small groups that rotated daily. These stations included: guided reading, phonics work sheets, English language development worksheets, and fluency instruction.

Beginning in March, I began teaching and observing in Glenna's classroom during an afternoon reading period for two or three days a week. Glenna taught the same students for language arts earlier in the day. Initially I implemented the literature discussions with the sixth grade students while Glenna observed. We gradually began to collaboratively work together and on the days I wasn't in her classroom, she continued with her normal reading program.

## Method

### Setting and Participants

The setting for this research was in a growing rural school district in the Pacific Northwest. The middle school contained grades five through eight with a population of 679 students and 39 certified teachers. The students came from a largely white, middle-class neighborhood. The school's mission was described as creating a learning environment that inspires and motivates students, holds students accountable in order to achieve at their highest potential, and equips students to become responsible members of society.

The 22 young adolescents in Glenna's reading class ranged from eleven to thirteen years old and were reading from second to low fifth grade. She remarked, "These students are some of the lowest readers in the sixth grade and in the entire middle school. Most of them have never finished a chapter book in their lives and readily admit they 'hate' reading." Twelve of her students were English language learners, immigrants from Russia and Ukraine, who were at diverse proficiency levels in their learning of English. They had been in the United States from four months to six years. Additionally she had four other students who qualified for special education services and one who was diagnosed with a behavior disorder.

## **Data Collection Procedures and Analysis**

My original research questions focused on how to implement literature circles with English language learners and how to support them in their reading and discussions. I collected data such as student work including journals and sticky notes, conducted student and teacher free writes, took observational field notes, transcribed 18 audio-recorded literature discussions, and interviewed Glenna. Analysis began with reading each piece of data, focusing on the initial questions. After sharing portions of the transcripts with Glenna and taking notes on her thoughts about the discussions, I added the question: What characteristics can change a teacher's beliefs about literature circles?

The preliminary analysis answered my original questions but a deeper examination was required when my inquiry focus developed. Erickson (1986) suggests including a systematic review, coding, constructing of categories, and interpretive analysis. Rereading the data a couple of times, plus coding the interview transcripts as well as Glenna's free writes helped me create tentative categories showing her transformation. I continued to review the data to confirm or question the evidence and met with Glenna a couple of times for her input and suggestions.

## **Journey to Believing**

### **Talking About Books**

As a teacher educator, I have heard many graduate students and teachers share doubts about English language learners participating in literature circles. They worry that English language learners are not proficient enough in English to discuss books, and that there will be a language barrier between the English language learners and the native English speakers. Likewise, teachers are also concerned about struggling readers. How does a teacher motivate these students to read, to continue reading, and to talk about the books? Glenna was bothered by these same issues and was uncertain if literature circles would be successful. We found the following four areas that assisted the sixth graders to feel comfortable and confident to talk, which aided Glenna in noticing her students' abilities to discuss books.

*Use of picture books.* Our literature circle experience began by reading aloud quality picture books (See Figure 1 for a list of books used in this study). I chose books that would stimulate discussion and had compelling themes such as racism and poverty. I had multiple copies of each read aloud to better match students

with partners for rereading and discussion. To assist the students in talking about the books, I gave them two open ended prompts – What do you think about the book? and How do you feel about the book? Sometimes we came back together as a whole class, where I invited students to share what they talked about, and other times I formed small groupings of students to discuss the books. I used these picture book discussions to model how to talk about a book, to teach reading and decoding strategies, and to give students opportunities to practice conversing. These picture book discussions, along with our guidance, helped these struggling readers grow in their confidence and ability to read, talk, and participate in the literature circles.

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**First Round of Literature Circles—Picture Books:**

- Bunting, E. (1994). *A day's work*. New York: Houghton Mifflin.  
 Bunting, E. (1994). *Smoky night*. Orlando, FL: Harcourt Brace.  
 Castañeda, O. S. (1993). *Abuela's weave*. New York: Lee & Low.  
 Golenbock, P. (1990). *Teammates*. Orlando, FL: Harcourt Brace.  
 Fox, M. (1989). *Feathers and fools*. Orlando, FL: Harcourt.  
 Krull, K. (1996). *Wilma unlimited*. New York: Harcourt, Inc.  
 Levine, E. (1995). *I hate English*. New York: Scholastic.  
 Lorbiecki, M. (1998). *Sister Anne's hands*. New York: Dial.  
 Miller, W. (1997). *Richard Wright and the library card*. New York: Lee & Low.  
 Wiles, D. (2001). *Freedom summer*. New York: Simon & Schuster.

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**Second Round of Literature Circles—Whole Class Novel:**

- Hesse, K. (1998). *The music of dolphins*. New York: Scholastic.

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**Third Round of Literature Circles—Identity and Survival Novels:**

- Clements, A. (2002). *Things not seen*. New York: Penguin Putnam.  
 Paterson, K. (1978). *The great Gilly Hopkins*. New York: Harper Collins.  
 Smith, R. (2001). *Zach's lie*. New York: Hyperion.  
 Spinelli, J. (1997). *Wringer*. New York: Harper Collins.  
 Spinelli, J. (2002). *Loser*. New York: Harper Collins.

**Figure 1.** Books used in the study

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*Encouraged native languages.* To facilitate the students' journeys in literacy, we encouraged them to speak in their home languages with their partner during the small group discussions. We worked on creating an environment in which students supported each other in their first and second languages (Russian, Ukraine, and English). When students misunderstood something or needed clarification, they

often spoke in their native languages to each other. By supporting the English language learners in this way, they were more willing to take a chance and converse in English in the small and whole groups (Freeman & Freeman, 2000). Our classroom community respected these exchanges of ideas in different languages, which assisted students in verbalizing their thoughts and opinions about the books. One English language learner commented, “I thought I would barely talk. I would just nod my head. But, no, I talk and talk. One boy in the group said later that I did good.”

*Organized partner reading.* To support the young adolescents in their reading we paired each student with a partner for the length of the first whole class novel *The Music of Dolphins* (Hesse, 1998), a story about a feral girl raised by dolphins and captured by scientists to be studied. Li and Nes (2001) found that paired reading helps English language learners read more accurately and fluently. Glenna matched two students who would work well together, support each other, and who she believed would complete the book. Most of these pairings were students who spoke the same primary language. As these students read the book to each other they dialogued using the strategy “Say Something” where they responded according to what the passage meant to them—a connection, question, prediction, or comment (Short, Harste & Burke, 1996). At the close of each day students did a free write in a journal discussing their opinions and thoughts about the text. At first a few students balked at reading with a partner because they didn’t think it was necessary, but later many admitted that they got more out of the book. Students commented that they gained confidence in articulating their views with a partner first before sharing in a larger group. By organizing partner reading students read the text actively and reflectively, controlled the pace of the reading experience, and were prepared to participate in the discussions.

*Arranged small groups.* When students had completely finished the novels, we formed small group literature circles. Garcia (1991) advocates that small groups work well for English language learners and Krashen (1993) suggests that learning to read occurs effortlessly when students feel they are members of a small group or club. Krashen also proposes that students are more relaxed and willing to take risks in small groups, thus causing their affective filter (the student’s level of anxiety), to lower resulting in more language learning. We carefully formed small heterogeneous groups of five or six students to make sure there were at least two native English speakers and two English language learners in each group. It was noticeable that students felt much more comfortable talking in these groups versus the whole



class. Students commented that the small groups allowed them more opportunity to participate. Two paraprofessionals, Glenna, and I moved from group to group participating and listening to the discussions which supported the students' efforts to speak out (Pransky & Bailey, 2002/2003).

Ultimately Glenna's worries were for naught. She noticed that the English language learners felt safe taking risks with their evolving language and received direct responses from others. The struggling readers were also supported by a partner in helping them read and complete the books. Students felt empowered to talk freely and to share in the small groups as this comfortable and familiar structure provided opportunities for both social and academic language development. Glenna realized that these young adolescents were capable of talking about books as in seen in her reflection:

*What really impressed me was the growth of my lowest English language learners. These students usually sit back and listen, rarely offering anything more than one or two word answers and appear afraid of trying to contribute to any discussion. But during the literature circle discussions, I saw these same kids bursting to share their ideas and opinions. They became so focused on sharing that they seemed to forget that they even had a language barrier.*

### **Discussing Major Themes and Literary Elements**

Peterson and Eeds (1990) believe that a text's meaning is embedded in the mood of a story, in the ordering of time in the creation of place, in the development of character, in the story structure, in the point of view taken, and in the use of language and symbols. According to Wolf (2004) when teachers demonstrate and give plenty of background knowledge on the elements of literature, students will begin to talk about them in small group discussions. Using her grade level reading program, Glenna discussed the following literary elements: character, setting, plot, point of view, style and tone, much as Wolf advocates.

Our final round of literature circles was based on the theme of identity and survival. After everyone was finished reading their selected texts we began the small group discussions. Glenna was pleasantly surprised to notice that in each discussion students openly conversed about the major themes, literary elements, and vocabulary words in the texts.

One example is from the discussion about *Loser* (Spinelli, 2002) where students discussed the main character in depth. Charity began, “I think a lot of people have the same problem as Donald Zinkoff. Everybody has been made fun of or has made fun of people like Donald.” Students explored different scenes where they empathized with Donald and shared similar personal stories. Relating to Donald helped them make sense of their own lives and the text. Daniel concluded, “Every day is different [in *Loser*]. Sometimes he [Donald] was a loser and sometimes he was a winner. Sometimes we are losers and sometimes we are winners in life.”

When another group discussed *The Music of Dolphins* (Hesse, 1998) they talked about the writing style:

Katerina: Why are the letters big at the beginning and they get smaller in the middle and then big?

Teacher: What do you think?

Matthew: Oh, I think I know. In the beginning they start off, you know, so we’re thinking, ‘Oh, this is easy. This is easy, I can read it. I can read this really fast.’ And in the middle they get littler and littler, so they’re all, ‘I’m halfway through, so I should already read it all the way, you know.’

Katerina: I have an idea. Maybe it’s like how she’s [Mila] just learning the easy words. They’re big and there isn’t that much. And then the more she learns; the more words there are on the page. Then, she knows a lot in the middle. And then she, the less she has to learn, the bigger the words get.

Students immediately picked up on the fact that this text had some brief chapters and the font sizes were different throughout. These textual variations helped the students feel confident in completing the novel as Matthew discussed. In the transcript Katerina also realized that the font size reflected how Mila slowly became more proficient in English. In her journal she wrote, “I think Mila is a fast learner. I’m surprised that Mila learned human language so quickly. I’m not that fast [of a] learner.”

During their discussions, there were numerous instances where students tried to understand vocabulary words or questioned expressions of speech. Examples such as, “On page 45. What does blunt mean?” or “What does ‘dolphins live for

today and humans live for tomorrow mean?” We encouraged students to return to the texts to find clues to help them figure out the meanings. The native English speakers or the more fluent English language learners often helped students figure out questions of vocabulary and expressions of speech. For example, in one discussion Oksana asked, “What’s an orca?” Students in her group exclaimed, “A whale!” while other students shared stories of watching orcas swim at Sea World. Another found a photograph in the classroom that gave Oksana a visual. Sharing connective stories and working together as a group helped this English language learner acquire a new word (Díaz-Rico & Weed, 2006). Giving students opportunities to ask questions also helped them make connections, create meaning, and develop new vocabulary (Peregoy & Boyle, 2005).

Glenna didn’t expect her students to talk about the themes of the novel or to delve into a character’s life as they were still novices at discussing literature, and many were still acquiring English. Students chose to actively talk about these elements of literature even though we did not specify that they discuss them. We believe the students read closely and carefully in order to notice these elements which helped make the discussions more meaningful and dynamic. Glenna mused:

*I went from being the teacher to more of a reading guide. They used each other as resources for information and to problem solve. It just amazed me that they remembered so many of the reading strategies and concepts I had taught them through the year and then easily and naturally applied them to the texts they were reading.*

### **Making Sense of Texts**

Many teachers seem to be hesitant to initiate literature circles in their literacy programs because they aren’t convinced that student discussions will help them understand texts. They worry that without their continual support students won’t be able to independently gain meaning. In addition, some teachers question if talking about a book is as valuable as answering comprehension questions or retelling a story. Glenna particularly wondered if a discussion would show that her students understood the books and if this was a good use of their time. We found that encouraging students to ask questions and share personal connections assisted them in making sense of the books, which in turn helped Glenna notice that her students were actively comprehending the texts.

*Asking questions.* During a mini lesson at the beginning of the study when we discussed picture books, I explained that there was not a single standard way to interpret a book (Rosenblatt, 1938). I encouraged them to construct their own meaning(s) by connecting the textual material to their own lives and experiences and to raise questions. This invitation gave students permission to wrestle and discuss topics or questions they wanted to explore more deeply. Students often initiated their own queries within the discussions such as, “How could Mila like those who locked her door?” “Do you really think Papi is her real dad?” and “What will happen to Shay when she leaves the house?” Students hypothesized, looked back at the texts, and related the texts to their own lives to help them think about these inquiries. This discussion from *The Music of Dolphins* (Hesse, 1998) begins with a question:

Jason: On page 20 Dr. Beck says, ‘Soon we’ll all go home, Mila. Soon, we will all move to a home together where we eat, sleep, and play.’ Does he mean that or is he just saying that to make her happy?

Isabell: It’s a her. Dr. Beck is a her.

Michael: Yeah, but in the beginning we didn’t know that, because Dr. Beck sounds like a boy because mostly doctors are boys.

Teacher: Okay, the question is, ‘Soon we’ll all move to a home together where we will eat, sleep, and play.’ Why do you think she is saying that?

Michael: So she would not be worrying, you know, like I’m going to be living here for the rest of my life, you know? So, she’ll know that she’s going to live in a good house without mean people.

Isabell: Well, I think, because it’s sort of like dolphins, they’re going to live, play, have fun, sort of like a dolphin. She might have a life sort of like she had with the dolphins.

Jason’s question caused a couple of students to contemplate Dr. Beck’s reasoning where they shared their interpretations. The group continued to discuss the doctor’s intentions with wonderings such as, “Why would Dr. Beck bring in a punching man?” and “I wonder why Dr. Beck won’t let Mila go back to the ocean? Is she scared of breaking the law?” A few times students put themselves in her place

stating, “If I was Dr. Beck I wouldn’t unlock the door. Mila could do the same thing as last time.” Jason’s final question was, “Do you think Mila felt scared when Dr. Beck was watching her?” This conversation reflected what Martinez-Roldán (2005) characterized as collaborative inquiry. Students collaboratively worked together by eliciting each other’s help, sharing their thinking and wonderings, clarifying their misunderstandings, and interpreting and introducing new perspectives. Students also often referred back to the text to verify their ideas, even reading aloud self-selected passages. Some conversations helped Glenna notice that her students were able to ask thought-provoking questions and could assist each other in understanding the text.

*Making connections.* Colby and Lyon (2004) stress that students need to be able to connect texts to themselves in order to promote understanding. Sharing connections came easy for the students when they discussed Hesse’s *The Music of Dolphins* (1998). Many of the English language learners connected to Mila who was also learning English. Isabelle commented, “A connection of my life to Mila’s is when I just came to America, I couldn’t understand people when they talked in English.” Another student shared, “I really want to move back to my old house where my friends are. Mila tells Justin that she wants to go back to the sea, to where she does not feel the crushing of her heart. I feel the same way.” These connections helped the students see into and reflect on their own world. They brought their own cultural backgrounds to the text yet also tried to acknowledge the insights and experiences of others in their small groups.

One literature circle wondered how Mila swam in the frigid water with ease, which enabled some students to make the following connections:

Cindy: Wouldn’t she be cold when she went swimming in the rivers or the ocean?

Matthew: It’s probably warm water you know, and there’s things like seaweed for her to lie down on.

Teacher: That’s possible. I bet she did have times when she was cold. But, I think altogether it was a lot warmer.

Matthew: Like the Lewisville River. I went fishing there in the hottest month, June. I was walking through and my feet were freezing. It felt like needles of ice poking me.

Katerina: Or if you go into the ocean here, it's freezing. Even if you go to where the Columbia River meets the ocean it is freezing.

Cindy: On page 45 it said, 'Dolphins don't live in the river.'

Katerina: Of course they don't.

Matthew: I heard once in California a whale swam into a river and got stuck. And then they helped it out. Sometimes dolphins could swim into them, but then they come back.

This discussion and many others gave students an opportunity to participate in what Cummins (1980) refers to as two dimensions of language proficiency, Basic Interpersonal Communicative Skills (BICS) and Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (CALP). Within the small groups students took responsibility for developing and discussing their own wonderings and sharing their different experiences, assisting in social language growth. Focusing on the texts helped enhance the students' academic language. This give-and-take transaction between native and non-native speakers helped students attain a more complex understanding of the text, themselves, their peers, and the world.

By listening and participating in the small group discussions, reading portions of the literature circle transcripts, and reading the student journals, Glenna came to realize that her students were negotiating and making meaning. Even though many of her students were still working on the mechanics of learning English, they were able to participate in meaningful conversations (Samway & McKeon, 1999). Glenna spoke to this in the following reflection:

*In the literature circles students went below the surface, and like experts they hit the tougher issues of the books. I was amazed at the level of thinking they did during the discussions and the way they transitioned from one idea to the next. Everyone contributed to the discussions with opinions, questions, analysis and inference that showed a deep understanding of the characters and issues of the story.*

### **Actively Engaged and Excited**

Teachers who work with English language learners or children with reading difficulties sometimes question if literature circles will motivate and keep students on task. Glenna was concerned that her sixth graders wouldn't remain focused in

the discussions for more than 15 minutes without getting bored and would require a lot of teacher prompting. Spiegel (1996) talked about these same qualms and encouraged teachers to trust their students.

Glenna's fears were unwarranted. A high level of enthusiasm and excitement flourished when the literature circles were introduced, maybe because this was the first time the young adolescents had ever been given this opportunity. Students who were normally reticent to participate in class and reluctant to read were motivated to talk in small groups and even requested more time for reading. One third of the students commented that when the literature circles began, they became more interested in reading books. In addition, we found that the sixth graders conversed about the novels for over 45 minutes each day and their discussions were frequently focused and insightful.

*Using "real" literature.* Some of the excitement transpired because students were invited to read "real" literature versus textbooks or leveled books. Students remarked that they were tired of reading leveled books that they had been reading since elementary school. They were ecstatic to read books they had never seen before and were about issues that they were experiencing. In their journals, ninety percent of the students mentioned that they were much more interested in reading the literature circle books than reading their textbooks. We also witnessed reluctant readers eagerly reading books.

*Incorporating social interaction.* Young adolescents love to talk and the literature circles promoted purposeful reading and talking in this sixth grade classroom. Allington (2002) and Gambrell and Almasi (1996) agree that student talk is a primary way to motivate students to read. In Glenna's class students commented that they enjoyed the opportunity to converse with their peers, develop and ask their own questions, and share personal thoughts, feelings, and interpretations. Students conversed more in these discussions than they ever did when Glenna had instructional conversations with them. By being able to discuss the content of the books and hear other students' perspectives, their comprehension was also deepened. One English language learner shared, "What I like about literature circles is that you get to know ideas from other people and what they feel about the book you read."

*Providing choice.* A critical factor in motivating students to read and talk in literature circles is student choice (Short, 1997). Students self selected books from six or more titles and chose how they wanted to respond and interpret the books in journals. They talked about topics that came from them not from the teachers

and were much more engaged in the reading of the books and participating in the discussions because of this element of choice. Giving the students freedom to interpret the texts and talk about what they wanted also increased their motivation and interest in learning.

*Closing with a celebration of learning.* The final round of literature circles concluded with a celebration of everyone's learning. Each book group presented their growth from their respective books. For instance students who read *The Great Gilly Hopkins* (Paterson, 1978) painted a mural depicting Trotter's home showing family and love as the most important things. The group reading *Zach's Lie* (Smith, 2001) wrote and performed a script about how complex lives can be. This celebration of literature caused a ripple effect in the classroom, where students requested the books their peers read (Cox, 1988). In addition, the students realized that reading was a pleasurable activity and that it might be something they would want to do on their own.

However, it must be noted not all of the students were enthusiastic and engaged in the literature circles. Two students did not complete their last novels and missed some of the discussions. A couple of other students mentioned in a final free write that they did not like the discussions when, "People talked too much and didn't give others a chance to talk" and "It was sometimes hard to work in the groups with some people." These concerns need to be worked out for future literature circle discussions. Despite these students' lack of involvement and worries, Glenna was still convinced that literature circles overall helped her students learn and become better readers:

*After a few days, the kids were totally hooked on their books and were begging me for extra time to read. It was amazing to watch them read. They were totally absorbed in the process of preparing for their upcoming literature circles. By the time they finished the books, they were bursting at the seams to talk about them. During the literature circles the kids were actively engaged in the discussions—talking, listening to one another, and learning.*

### **Glenna is a Believer**

Glenna's voyage began by admitting that she was out of her comfort zone in initiating literature circles in her sixth grade reading class. She thought literature circles were only for students who were proficient readers, and she wasn't convinced



that struggling readers and English language learners could participate in such activities. Some of this skepticism was because of her previous teaching experience and lack of confidence in her students' abilities.

Glenna is now a believer in literature circles because she saw first-hand that her students were capable of discussing books. Talking about books in a community helped her students participate (Vygotsky, 1978). Within these conversations students naturally discussed major themes and literary elements (Wolf, 2004). Together they asked questions and made connections to the texts helping them understand the texts more deeply (Rosenblatt, 1938). Finally, the majority of the students were engaged and excited throughout this experience. Even with the constraints of teaching a required curriculum, Glenna was able to incorporate literature circles and engage her students in thinking about important topics. All children deserve to be challenged, to have opportunities to participate in fun and dynamic reading experiences, and to have chances to critically think in literature circles. Glenna noted:

*The most amazing thing that I discovered from watching my students in literature circles was that they are far more capable of producing higher level thinking on their own than I ever thought possible. I didn't have to pull it out of them, threaten them, bribe them or even ask the perfect questions. They came up with the synthesis and analysis pieces all on their own, through their own student-led discussions. I might have expected this from gifted students, but certainly not from English language learners and special education students.*

## Conclusion

Using literature circles is not new, but many teachers, like Glenna, continue to be skeptical about incorporating them in their literacy programs. With the many restrictions often put on curriculum some teachers feel they do not have time for literature circles. We encourage you to think about these ideas and suggestions:

*Capitalize on the social tendencies of students.* All adolescents (especially English language learners) need opportunities for successful social interaction in school. By working cooperatively together in literature circles students often learn to listen and respond to each other, think about divergent opinions, and take ownership of their dialogue.

*Connect literature circles with required curriculum.* Discussions can fit into required reading curriculum and students can talk about the stories they are reading in anthologies or other programs. In addition, the required stories can be matched with other literature that explores the same themes or issues for small group discussions.

*Have rigorous, high expectations for all students.* Accept and validate your students' backgrounds, including languages and cultures, and believe that they are capable, intelligent people. Many studies have shown that English language learners can participate in meaningful discussions about texts, where they can construct meaning about what they are reading (Cox & Boyd-Batstone, 1997; Samway & Whang, 1996; Urzúa, 1992).

*Partner with a literacy coach and/or reading specialist.* Attempting literature circles on your own can be overwhelming so partner with a literacy coach who will encourage and support your journey and who can model many of the necessary processes in your classroom. Watch how someone else initiates literature circles with your own or their students, and then work along side them.

*Read professional books and articles on literature circles.* There are numerous articles and books available on implementing literature circles with young adolescents such as *Literature Circles in Middle School: One Teacher's Journey* (Hill, Noe, & King, 2003) and *Content Area Literature Circles: Using Discussion for Learning Across the Curriculum* (Johnson & Freedman, 2005).

Not only did Glenna become a believer, but so did many of her sixth grade students as many became believers in themselves as readers and learners. They found reading meaningful and purposeful and for some this was the first time they had ever finished reading an entire novel while others found reading to be more satisfying as they became absorbed in a book. In addition, when Glenna's students returned to school in the fall, they were tested and many of their entry-level scores jumped two to three grade levels. Glenna accounts this increase to the literature circle experiences they had the last few months of sixth grade.

Glenna, once a skeptic about the benefits of literature circles, is now a fervent believer in their ability to engage students and foster classroom discussions. She has started to enthusiastically incorporate more literature circles in her classroom and will never be a "doubting Thomas" again. As Glenna reflected on the experience she said:

*I am excited about planning for next year as I organize thematic units on World War II, Greek Mythology and the Civil Rights Movement. I am looking for children's and young adult literature to help me incorporate literature circles into my Social Studies curriculum.*

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