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# Establishing literature circles in one middle school teacher's classroom

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# Establishing literature circles in one middle school teacher's classroom

## **Abstract**

Literature circles are a popular method of reading instruction in middle school classrooms. Literature circles are when small groups of students choose one book to read and then meet to discuss it. Students are taught how to discuss a book and use response journals. Implementing literature circles into a reading curriculum requires a great deal of planning. A teacher must make decisions about structure, themes, response journals, discussion groups, assessment and final projects.

Literature circles are an evolving teaching method and will not always work the same way each time they are used. I found literature circles to be a positive experience but improvements need to be made in the quality of the discussions and in assessment. Students need more structure to help them prepare for discussion and also need to do more self-reflection. Despite setbacks literature circles are a valuable teaching method to use in reading classes.

ESTABLISHING LITERATURE CIRCLES IN ONE MIDDLE SCHOOL TEACHER'S  
CLASSROOM

A Graduate Journal Article  
Submitted to the  
Division of Middle Level Education  
Department of Curriculum and Instruction  
In Partial Fulfillment  
Of the Requirements for the Degree  
Master of Arts in Education  
UNIVERSITY OF NORTHERN IOWA

By

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Sept. 3, 2002

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has been approved as meeting the research requirement for the  
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## **Abstract**

The journal article, “Literature Circles: The Ups and Downs of My First Attempts,” relates how I used literature circles in my reading classroom for the first time. Literature circles are a popular method of reading instruction in middle school classrooms. Literature circles are when small groups of students choose one book to read and then meet to discuss it. Students were taught how to discuss a book and use response journals. Implementing literature circles into a reading curriculum requires a great deal of planning. A teacher must make decisions about structure, themes, response journals, discussion groups, assessment and final projects. I used literature circles three times during the school year alternating with whole class books. Literature circles are an evolving teaching method and will not always work the same way each time they are used. I found literature circles to be a positive experience but improvements need to be made in the quality of the discussions and in assessment. Students need more structure to help them prepare for discussion and also need to do more self-reflection. Despite setbacks literature circles are a valuable teaching method to use in reading classes.

## **Establishing Literature Circles in One Teacher's Middle School Classroom**

### **Chapter I**

As a middle school reading teacher, I am always looking for ways to make reading more interesting and exciting for my students. My reading program in the past consisted of the whole class reading one trade book and independent free reading. I felt my students were not as engaged in the books as they could be and they were finding reading to be a chore, not a pleasurable experience. Knowing this was not the way to develop lifelong readers, I began to examine other ways of sharing literature in my classroom.

Literature circles was a method I decided to find out more about. Literature circles occur when “small groups of students gather together to discuss a piece of literature in depth” (Noe & Johnson, 1999, p. ix). Since I did not know how to set up a literature circle when I began this project, I started by looking at the many articles and books that had been written on the subject. I took the information and recommendations from these sources to find a format that I thought would work best for my students and myself.

The purpose of my article is to share my students' and my experiences with literature circles. I also wanted to relate what I had learned, what I will keep, and what I will change about my initial attempts of doing literature circles. The information I found on literature circles related how well this strategy works, but the many steps and frustrations that come with setting them up were not often shared. I want readers of this article to understand the ups and downs of literature circles, while understanding that they

should not give up if by trying to follow the best laid plan, it was not always perfect.



## **Chapter II**

### **Methodology**

When I decided I was interested in trying literature circles with my students, I knew very little on how to set them up. I had learned of this method of reading instruction through the professional reading I had done and listening to teachers describe their experiences at teaching conferences. All of these accounts related positive experiences. I was intrigued with how literature circles gave students more power in deciding what they wanted to read, how they made reading a more social experience for students, and how discussions promoted higher order thinking skills. The way I had been teaching reading lacked these components and I wanted to add them.

#### **More Research**

My first task was to find books and journal articles that examined other teachers' experiences with literature circles. From the professional reading I had done, I knew Harvey Daniels was considered an expert on literature circles and so I wanted to find anything he had written on the subject.

#### **Validity of Sources**

I decided that I only wanted information that had been published since 1990, and I also wanted my sources to address the use of literature circles with upper elementary or middle school students since I knew they would be set up differently than with primary students.

My search began in the Educational Resources Information Center (ERIC) database at the University of Northern Iowa's library. I entered "literature circles" as the

key words and I received a list of many journal articles and books. As expected, I found Daniels' book, *Literature Circles: Voice and Choice in the Student-Centered Classroom* (1994) in this search. This search also led me to two books I eventually purchased. They were *Getting Started with Literature Circles* (Noe & Johnson, 2001) and *Literature Circles Resource Guide: Teaching Suggestions, Forms, Sample Book Lists, and Database* (Hill, Noe & Johnson, 2001). The journal articles that proved most informative were those in which teachers described how literature circles worked in their classrooms. Articles such as "Changing the Classroom Climate with Literature Circles," (Burns, 1998) and "Literature Circles in the Middle School Classroom: Developing Reading, Responding, Responsibility" (Scott, 1994) dealt with my topic and most often came from journals that dealt with reading or working with adolescents.

I knew that I would need to have a selection of books from which my students could select books to read. *Literature Circles Resource Guide* (Hill, Noe & Johnson, 2001) proved very helpful as it provided sample book lists organized into three levels: primary, intermediate, and upper intermediate/middle school. The levels were further subdivided by themes, genres, time periods, and author studies. Since the guide had a recent publication date of 2001, the book lists were very up-to-date.

### **Discovering Students' Attitudes Towards Reading**

At the beginning of the school year, I asked my students open-ended questions regarding their attitudes toward reading. I wanted to know why so many of my students seemed to dislike reading and also what elements they did like about it. I felt my students were ready to try something new in reading class. As a follow-up, I asked the students questions about their literature circle experience at the end of the year. I wanted to know

if literature circles based on my students' responses were something I should pursue again the following school year.

### **Sharing My Experience**

At the end of the school year it was time to decide how to best share my experience with literature circles. A journal article seemed to be the best option, because I wanted to share my experience with literature circles with other teachers especially focusing on the ups and downs of my experience. The literature I had read prior to my own experience consistently told of a smooth, easy process. My experience showed that managing literature circles well takes a lot of practice.

When deciding to what journal to submit my article, I wanted one that was interested in issues relating to reading with middle school students. *The Journal of Adolescent and Adult Literacy* published by the International Reading Association fit my criteria (see Appendix A). According to their author instructions, they desire articles that relate a professional experience and should explore the topic of the article in some depth. The article should be between 1,000 and 6,000 words and no more than 20 double-spaced pages. My article has approximately 3,350 words and is 11 pages.

In the article I explain how I set up literature circles for my classroom using some of the recommendations and suggestions found in books and journal articles. My students did three rounds of literature circles during the school year. At the end of the school year I reflected on my experience and went back to the books and journal entries to find ways to improve my use of literature circles. I share my ideas for establishing literature circles at the end of the article.

## Chapter III

### Literature Review

Literature circles have become an important component of a balanced literacy program. Spiegel (1998) cautions that literature circles should not be the “silver bullet” that is the solution to all students’ reading needs. Literature circles should be just one part of a reading program. Whole class reading of books and independent reading should continue to be part of the literacy program (Speigel, 1998). Noe and Johnson (1999) believe that literature circles’ “value comes from the opportunities they provide readers and writers to *apply* literacy skills and strategies learned through other components of the literacy curriculum” (p. 1).

#### **What are Literature Circles?**

Literature circles occur when small groups of students choose one book to read and then meet to discuss it. One reason literature circles have been successful in classrooms is because they empower students (Scott, 1994). Students are allowed to decide which book they would like to read rather than having a teacher tell them what book they will read for the next few weeks. Noll (1994) felt literature circles worked well in her seventh grade classroom because “students directed their own learning from their initial selection of books and formation of the literature through their discussions, investigation and final presentation” (p. 92).

This does not mean that the teacher has no control over what the students will be reading. Rather, the teacher selects 5-10 books related to a particular theme and then the students make their choices from those books. This allows for the teacher to be sure that there will be books for the various reading levels found in every classroom.

Many teachers will give book talks on the book choices (Scott, 1994). A book talk is very similar to the previews that are shown before movies. The teacher highlights the plot and teases with a few exciting scenes from the story to get the students interested in the book. Book talks offer students the opportunity to learn about all the choices before making a selection.

### **Social Interaction is Essential**

In order for literature circles to be successful, social interaction among the group members is key. “Sharing a personal response to literature is essential to understanding it” (Scott, 1994, p. 37). For most students this is not a problem, in fact, it is a motivating factor in the success of literature circles (Burns, 1998). Students who are reluctant to share their thoughts and opinions in a large group discussion often feel more comfortable sharing in the small group atmosphere of literature circles (Simpson, 1995). Samway, et al. (1991) supports the idea that social interaction is important if we want students to better understand books. “When we do not allow or provide time in class to talk about books and the thoughts and emotions they generate, we are denying children and adults opportunities to learn about and understand the world better” (Samway et al., 1991, p. 204).

### **Student and Teacher Roles During Literature Circles**

When first using literature circles, students can be asked to assume roles that help get the discussion going. “If students are not taught the patterns and the responsibilities of literature circles, they tend to lose focus and wander off task” (Burns, 1998, p. 127). Roles include but are not limited to: discussion director, passage master, connector, illustrator, researcher, summarizer, character captain, word master, scene setter (Daniels,

1994). The roles should provide structure; there are no right or wrong answers. Each student has a role and often will rotate roles each time the group meets so they learn each one. Noe and Johnson (1999) caution teachers to be sure the students are not so focused on the role sheets that they do not engage in natural, meaningful conversation.

It is critical that students are taught or shown examples of good discussions. Noe and Johnson (1999) offer suggestions to help students learn good discussion behavior. Students should brainstorm behaviors that should be present in a discussion group. From this list the teacher and class can formulate discussion group rules. It can also be helpful for students if the teacher selects a few students to help model a good discussion. After discussion it is important to ask the students what went well and what needed improvement. One or two students should not dominate discussion in a literature circle. Evans, Alvermann, and Anders (1998) state, "Instruction needs to be designed that teaches and promotes collaboration" (p. 119).

There will be situations where the teacher is a member of a literature circle. The presence of a teacher will have an impact on the discussion. Short, Kaufman, Kaser, Kahn, and Crawford (1999) examine how the contributions of the teacher influenced discussion in student literature circles. These researchers noted four different roles that teachers take during discussions: facilitator, participant, mediator, and active listener. They concluded that each role is appropriate at different times.

When teachers are not part of a discussion group, it is important to trust that the students are talking about the literature, not issues unrelated to the books. "We need to truly believe that the students will talk about what is important to them and will relate the literature to their own lives" (Scott, 1994, p. 40). Simpson (1995) found that discussion

went better when the books used brought up issues students could relate to or contained social, cultural, or moral issues for students.

### **Student Grouping**

When forming literature circles in the classroom, heterogeneous grouping is recommended. Even though the book may be difficult for struggling readers, they can still benefit from being a participant in a literature circle. Just because reading is difficult does not mean that struggling readers cannot offer complex ideas and thoughts based on what they have heard in the discussion. Some ways to help challenged readers be successful participants in a literature circles include: (a) giving more time to complete the reading, (b) listening to the book on tape, or (c) asking special needs staff to read the book with the student (Noe & Johnson, 1999).

### **Assessment and Evaluation**

Evaluation should be an ongoing process throughout each book used in literature circles. There are many different ways to assess how students are doing in literature circles. The first is teacher observation. Some teachers use a checklist that lists behaviors the teacher expects to see in a literature circle. The teacher simply marks yes or no if the student demonstrates the behaviors (Daniels, 1994). Another way to record observations is through anecdotal notes. Some observable behaviors that may be recorded include reading strategies the students are using, types of thinking, and actions of the students that positively or negatively affect the discussion (Noe & Johnson, 1999). The role sheets students complete to guide the discussion can be collected at the conclusion of the discussion and then assessed as a third method (Scott, 1994). And finally, conferences with individual students can also help a teacher assess how the student is doing.

“Teachers can talk with students about their own role in the group, the circle’s problems and pleasures, and about the group’s handling of specific books and ideas” (Daniels, 1994 p. 163).

### **Culminating Activities**

When students have completed their literature circle book, it is important to do a final project or presentation. These individual or group projects offer students a chance to share with their classmates what they have learned (Daniels, 1994; Noe & Johnson, 1999; Scott, 1994). “Extension projects are most valuable when they continue readers’ responses, often involving readers in the process of creating their response through the arts” (Noe & Johnson, 1999, p. 91). Examples of possible final projects include: an ABC book, creating bookmarks, dramatizing a scene from the book, writing or acting out a new ending for the book, or writing book review (Daniels, 1994; Noe & Johnson, 1999).



## **Chapter IV**

### **Journal Article**

#### **Literature Circles: The Ups and Downs of My First Attempts**

Discussion rises from all corners of the classroom. Seventh and eighth grade students are busily counting chapters and pages in their books trying to determine a reading schedule. Occasional arguments burst forth and I wander over to assist. These students are just beginning their current round of literature circles. Literature circles, “small groups of students gather together to discuss a piece of literature in depth” (Noe & Johnson, 1999, p. ix), is a reading method that was introduced recently to these students.

My reading program has always consisted of whole class reading of one trade book and independent free reading. I felt my students were finding reading to be a chore rather than a pleasurable experience. Knowing this was not the way to develop lifelong readers, I began to examine other ways of sharing literature in my classroom. Literature circles was the method I decided to try with my students.

#### **My Teaching Setting**

I teach in a small, rural school district in the Midwest. My three sections of seventh and eighth graders are in multi-age classroom settings that are not ability-based. The students are reading on a variety of levels. A quick survey at the beginning of the school year showed none of them had ever been in a literature circle.

At the beginning of the year I asked my students questions about their attitudes toward reading. I was curious about what my students liked about reading. Many talked about how books encouraged them to use their imagination and they could “get into” the story, but there were a few that could find nothing they liked about reading. At the end of

our discussion one thing was clear: students most enjoyed reading when they were able to pick their own books.

I also asked the students what they disliked about reading and the overwhelming response was long, boring books. Short was always better in their opinion. A final question I asked was what would make reading better for them. In typical middle school fashion, some wanted no assignments. Stacy (not her real name) summed up the views of many of her classmates by saying, "Reading would be better if we had more choice on what to read as a class." My students seemed ready for literature circles.

Since my three reading sections were larger than I had been used to, and I was concerned that I might have a more difficult time getting to know my students, I thought literature circles might be a way to create "small learning communities" within my classroom. The possibility that the seventh graders might be less likely to volunteer in whole class discussion because of being intimidated by the eighth graders in my multi-aged classroom was another concern and reason for considering the use of literature circles. Simpson (1994/1995) stated, "Small groups are less threatening for many students who may volunteer opinions they would be reluctant to voice in front of a class. They also allow the teacher and students to engage in more intimate and personal discussions" (p. 290). Literature circles sounded like the way to make my students and myself more comfortable in our learning setting.

### **In the Beginning**

Literature circles would not be the only method of instruction in my reading classroom (Spiegel, 1998). Whole class books and independent reading would still be part of the literacy program. Therefore, I decided that the first book of the school year would

be a whole class book. I decided to alternate between whole class books and literature circles for the entire school year. To set the stage for literature circles to be successful, I decided to have the whole class work on one goal: how to discuss a book.

Discussion is a critical component of literature circles (Scott, 1994). Previously when my students had read a whole class book, I did not allow enough time for students to talk about their reactions to the book. “When we do not allow or provide time in class to talk about books and the thoughts and emotions they generate, we are denying children and adults opportunities to learn about and understand the world better” (Samway et al., 1991, p. 204). I wanted my students to learn to interact with the reading.

To set the stage for future discussions, I asked the students to tell me why we talk about books. Some of the student responses included: to make sure we understand the book; to ask questions; to express thoughts, ideas, and opinions; to give recommendations; and to share the parts we liked or were confused about. During these initial discussions, we also decided on good discussion group behavior. The students thought everyone should: participate; take turns speaking; be a good listener; use soft voices; and talk about the book, not other non-related items.

An important component of literature circles that I began during this first whole class book reading was the use of response journals. These journals gave students a place to record their thoughts and questions about the books. “Sharing personal response to literature is essential in understanding it” (Scott, 1994, p. 37). To help the students understand how to write a journal entry (a new experience for most of them) I modeled how I would write a journal entry for a chapter in our whole class book. The students were provided with prompts they could use to begin their journal entries. Examples of

prompts were: I noticed...; I wonder...; I liked \_\_\_\_\_ because...; This story makes me think of ...; and I was surprised by.... In the first semester students were expected to write three journal entries per week, with each entry having a minimum of six sentences. I used these journal entries as a way to have an ongoing dialogue with the students about the story since time often limited the chance to have individual discussions.

### **The First Try**

After our first whole class book, I felt the students and I were ready to try literature circles. As suggested by Hill, Noe and Johnson (2001), I chose the first theme, "Survival." I gave an oral overview or "book talk" on each of the five books from which the students could choose. The books were *The Fear Place* (1994) by Phyllis Reynolds Naylor, *Downriver* (1991) and *Far North* (1996) by Will Hobbs, *The Transall Saga* (1998) by Gary Paulsen, and *My Side of the Mountain* (1959) by Jean Craighead George. Because of the various reading levels of my students, I deliberately included a variety of reading levels for the books I selected.

Students were given a ballot and asked to list their top three book choices. I then assigned students to groups. As I assigned students, I considered the size of the group and students' reading abilities. I was pleased that I was always able to honor their first or second choice.

Next, I gave students a calendar showing the amount of time allowed to complete their literature circles' books. Typically we spent four weeks reading and one week working on a final project for the book. As a class we decided when their discussion groups would meet, when journal entries were due, when we would do whole class activities, and when they needed to have the book completed. Students then met with

their literature circle group to decide how many pages of their book they would read each day. According to Simpson (1994/1995) “reading within a group context is a valuable support for many reluctant readers and can provide incentive to finish set chapters, particularly if the group itself sets these limits” (p. 290).

They were encouraged to do most of their reading during class time as I only had a class set of books and all three sections of students were doing literature circles. I offered assistance, if asked, on how to best divide the reading assignments. I was impressed on how well they divided up their books and it was evident that they enjoyed controlling their assignments. Some groups even took days off from reading their book; which I felt was perfectly acceptable as long as the book was read by the deadline.

### **Discussion Groups**

Discussion groups began after the students had been reading for three or four days. The discussion groups met once a week. I wanted our literature circles to have a minimum amount of paperwork, so the students were not asked to have anything prepared for discussion groups. I simply asked them to come to the group and talk about the book. I chose to sit in on the discussion groups to be sure the students stayed on task, and did not talk about topics that were unrelated to the book.

I know my presence had an impact on their discussions. Short, Kaufman, Kaser, Kahn, and Crawford (1999) examined how the contributions of the teacher influenced discussion in student literature circles. These researchers noted four different roles that the teachers take during discussions: facilitator, participant, mediator, and active listener. Teachers facilitate when asking for volunteers to contribute and making sure students stayed on task. As a participant the teacher shares personal reactions to the book. When

acting as a mediator, the teacher guides the students to make connections to their personal experiences. Teachers actively listen when they acknowledge students' comments with a brief comment. I definitely found myself taking on each of these roles.

### **Final Projects**

When the students completed their literature circle reading and discussions, they did a final project for the books. "Extension projects are most valuable when they continue readers' responses, often involving readers in the process of creating their response through the arts" (Noe & Johnson, 1999, p. 91). The final projects for the "Survival" literature circles were based on Noe and Johnson's (1999) suggestions for projects. The students had a choice between two options: (a) they could make an accordion book which involved choosing five or six important scenes from their book and illustrating those scenes and writing a caption, or (b) they could create four bookmarks with the front of the bookmark containing an illustration of a significant character, and on the back they explained the traits of the character, why the character was important, and their feelings about the character.

### **Assessment**

Assessment was a challenging component of literature circles. Prior to using literature circles I assessed the students using the traditional methods of comprehension study guides, quizzes and tests. During our use of literature circles, I assessed the weekly journal entries with a rubric I created (see Appendix). An excellent journal entry had the required number of sentences and entries, made predictions, inferences, comparisons, evaluations, and made connections to other books or their own lives. Susan, a seventh grader, did an excellent job of connecting the characters to her life when we read *The*

*Outsiders*. She compared Ponyboy to herself, Sodapop to her sister, Johnny to her good friend, and Darry to her dad.

Evaluating discussions was more challenging. Noe and Johnson (1999) recommended writing brief, observational notes that record things the students said that could be used for assessment. I specifically looked for the good discussion behaviors the students had decided upon, connections they made, and questions they asked.

### **Subsequent Literature Circle Experiences**

My students and I did literature circles two more times during the school year. The themes were “Friendship” and “Mysteries/Thrillers.” Each time went slightly smoother than the previous attempt. I did not make a lot of major changes as we continued working on improving discussion. I continued to sit in on the discussion groups.

Changes were made with the response journals. With the second and third literature circle attempts, I required eight sentences per journal entry. The students were also given the option of replacing one written entry with an illustration of a scene from the story each week. The illustration option really appealed to the artistic students. Students were not required to color their illustrations, but they had to show detail. A caption explaining the illustration was also required.

With later rounds of literature circles, we tried different final projects. One was the making of an ABC booklet. Students created an alphabet booklet in which they chose an event, character, or theme to represent each letter of the alphabet. On each page they presented an illustration and wrote a caption explaining how the word and illustration connected to the book.

The most popular final project was creating a CD cover. Students had to design the front and back cover of a CD with an illustration or design that related to their book. Next, they chose at least six songs that had a connection to their book. They had to explain why each song related to the story. This project definitely appealed to seventh and eighth graders' love of music.

### **Recommendations**

At the end of the school year when I reflected back on our experiences with literature circle, I recognized components that needed to be improved. Since I thought my students should have a minimum amount of paperwork to prepare for literature circles, discussions did not go as well as I would have liked. The discussions were often stilted and focused more on summarizing what had happened in the story rather than reflecting on what it meant for them personally. My recommendation for improvement would be to assign the students roles.

I found the students needed a more concrete structure as they learn how to engage in literature circles. "If students are not taught the patterns and responsibilities of literature circles, they tend to lose focus and wander off task" (Burns, 1998, p. 127). Each student should have a role and should rotate roles each time the group meets so they learn each role. Roles might include, but are not limited to: discussion director, passage master, connector, illustrator, researcher, summarizer, character captain, word master, and scene setter (Daniels, 1994).

Another simple device I advocate using is a literature circles discussion log. This log simply asks students to pick a part to share in their groups, such as a question about the reading or any vocabulary words that are confusing (Hill, Noe, & Johnson, 2001).



Although I advocate the use of scaffolds to promote discussions, I now share Scott's (1994) goal as a teacher: "To teach them to discuss literature intelligently and creatively without any artificial prompts" (p. 39).

Another way to improve discussions may be through the book choices. "For literature circles to be successful in terms of students' commitment to the discussions and to completion of written responses, texts are needed that deal with issues which students care about, and which raise significant social, cultural, or moral issues" (Simpson, 1994/95, p. 293). I will continue to seek out my students' opinions about books they like and read professionally to learn more about books that raise issues my students care about.

I also believe it is important for the teacher eventually to not be a participant in the discussion groups. I found Scott's (1994) sentiments to be consistent with my own: "The students certainly can't learn responsibility if they are never given any. As the teacher lets go, the students use their own choices more and more successfully and make the literature circles their own" (p. 40). Daniels (1994) echoed this statement saying that he believes an authentic literature circle does not have a teacher as a member.

I was most concerned with the organization of literature circles this school year. Because I am happy with that component, a focus for the second year will be more anecdotal note taking to use for assessment (Noe & Johnson, 1999). In the area of discussion assessment, I will follow Noe and Johnson's (1999) suggestion of designing a checklist of behaviors I would like to see during discussions. I can then take brief notes about the behaviors on the list that each student exhibits. An expansion of this idea is to have a chart of the students' names and then keeping track if they are doing a variety of

behaviors. For example, I would want to observe whether a student was making predictions during discussions, but rarely making connections to other books or real life.

As teachers it is crucial we teach our students how to critically evaluate their work, so I know it is important to add a self-reflection element for journals, discussions and final projects. “Because self-monitoring is such a key ingredient in the reading process, it only makes sense that kids in literature circles are regularly asked to write and talk evaluative about their own goals, roles and performances in literature circles” (Daniels, 1994, p. 27). Hill, Noe, and Johnson’s *Literature Circles Resource Guide* (2001) offers sample self-reflection forms as a place to start.

In the survey the students filled out at the end of the year, I asked for their recommendations to improve literature circles. Some thought it would be better if they could choose the books without me being involved at all. They also wanted better, more exciting books. One girl thought that groups would be better if we had “longer meetings or more often and asking each individual their opinion on everything.” Another girl echoed the idea of getting everyone to talk by suggesting “we should take an extra minute for the students to ask each other about their favorite parts.”

## **Conclusions**

At the end of the school year, I asked the seventh graders (since I will have them again for reading) if we should do literature circles again. Twenty-four of the 35 seventh graders responded positively, while eleven said they were not interested. Interestingly, the majority of the students who enjoyed their literature experience were girls. Marcy wrote, “I liked them a lot because you got more individual attention and your thoughts got across more clearly. You understand the book a little better.” Andrea said, “I liked them

because you got to read a book that you actually liked and you got to interact with other classmates.” One of the few boys to enjoy the experience, Ryan, wrote, “I liked them because you got to pick the book you wanted to read and had a lot of freedom. Groups could make their own decisions.”

The root of the boys’ dislike of the experience seemed to go back to their original unfavorable feelings about reading. Tim said, “I didn’t like it. All we did was read and that’s it.” Mark wrote “Hate them, I hate to read.” Chad said, “They were not the best because you had to remember what pages or chapters to read and the groups sometimes weren’t the best either.” Many of the boys who disliked literature circles had one suggestion when asked how literature circles could be improved: they wanted better book choices.

While I did not give a formal pre-test and post-test to assess student learning, I do believe that student learning improved. With literature circles students took more responsibility for their learning. Instead of reading what I chose, each student decided what book was best for him or her. They worked with other group members dividing up a book into manageable reading assignments. They also increased their higher order thinking skills. Summaries were not permitted in response journals. Students had to make comparisons, draw inferences, make connections to other books or personal experiences, and offer critical evaluations. Finally, students learned how to discuss a book with other classmates.

Despite some of the negative feelings of my students, I feel that literature circles were good experiences for my students and me. I was challenged to move away from the comfortable routine I was used to and work collaboratively with my students to find a new

approach. Many of my students were ready and very happy to direct parts of their learning. This has made me realize I need to continue to work toward a more student-centered classroom rather than teacher-directed. I also learned that literature circles are not something that comes together the first time. It takes practice to find a format that works best for both the students and teacher. One format will not work for every teacher, so it is crucial to keep experimenting.

**Appendix**  
**Response Journal Rubric**

**Response Journal Rubric  
1<sup>st</sup> Semester**

**Name:**

**Date:**

<b>EXCELLENT</b>	<b>AVERAGE</b>	<b>NEEDS IMPROVEMENT</b>
Has three entries	1-2 entries	1 entry
6 complete sentences per entry	3-5 complete sentences per entry	Less than 3 complete sentences per entry
Made connections to other books or own life	Made no connections to other books or own life	Made no connections to other books or own life
Used 2-3 examples from the story	Used 1 example from the story	No examples from the story
Each entry had at least one of the following: inferences, comparisons, or critical evaluation	One or two entries had at least one of the following: predictions, inferences, or critical evaluations	Only one of the following: predictions, inferences, or critical evaluations
Legible--easy to read	Illegible--hard to read	Very messy

**Comments:**

**Article  
References**

- Burns, B. (1998). Changing the classroom climate with literature circles. *Journal of Adolescent and Adult Literacy*, 42 (2), 124-129.
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- Scott, J. (1994). Literature circles in the middle school classroom: Developing reading, responding, and responsibility. *Middle School Journal*, 26 (2), 37-41.
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- Spiegel, D.L. (1998). Silver bullets, babies, and bath water: Literature response groups in a balanced literacy program. *The Reading Teacher*, 52 (2), 114-124.

**Children's Books Cited**

- George, J.C. (1959). *My side of the mountain*. New York: Dutton's Children's Books.
- Hobbs, W. (1991). *Downriver*. New York: Dell-Laurel Leaf.

Hobbs, W. (1996). *Far North*. New York: Avon Books, Inc.

Naylor, P. R. (1994). *The Fear Place*. New York: Aladdin Paperbacks.

Paulsen, G. (1998). *The Transall Saga*. New York: Bantam Doubleday Dall Books  
for Young Readers.



## **Chapter V**

### **Recommendations and Conclusions**

#### **Summary of Journal Article**

The journal article, "Literature Circles: The Ups and Downs of My First Attempts," intended for submission to *The Journal of Adolescent and Adult Literacy* relates how I used literature circles in my reading classroom for the first time. Literature circles were alternated with whole class books. Students were taught how to discuss a book and use response journals. The first round of literature circles used "Survival" as a theme. Students chose one book from five choices and worked with others in their groups to determine a reading schedule. Discussions were held weekly and the students had nothing to prepare for discussions. I was a participant in every discussion group. Final projects were the culmination of literature circles. Students were assessed on their response journals, discussion behaviors, and final projects. I used literature circles two more times during the school year. Literature circles were a positive experience but improvements need to be made in the quality of the discussions and in assessment practices. Students need more structure to help them prepare for discussion and also need to do more self-reflection. Despite setbacks literature circles are a valuable teaching method to use in reading classes.

#### **Discussion Recommendations**

At the end of the school year when I reflected back on our literature circle experience, I recognized components that needed to be improved. Discussions did not go as well as I would have liked. They focused more on summarizing what had happened in the story rather than relating to it on a personal level. I will assign the students roles.

Students need a more concrete structure as they learn literature circles. “If students are not taught the patterns and responsibilities of literature circles, they tend to lose focus and wander off task” (Burns, 1998, p. 127). Each student will have a role and will rotate roles each time the group meets so they learn each one. Roles can include, but are not limited to: discussion director, passage master, connector, illustrator, researcher, summarizer, character captain, word master, scene setter (Daniels, 1994).

As an alternative to role sheets, I will use literature circles discussion logs as a framework for discussion. This log requires students to: pick a part to share in their groups, create a question about the reading, and present any vocabulary words that are confusing (Hill, Noe, & Johnson, 2001).

Students felt another way to improve discussions was through the book choices. In an end of a year survey some students wrote they wanted better, more exciting books. “For literature circles to be successful in terms of students’ commitment to the discussions and to completion of written responses, texts are needed that deal with issues which students care about, and which raise significant social, cultural, or moral issues” (Simpson, 1994/95, p. 293). I will continue to use *Literature Circles Resource Guide* (Hill, Noe, & Johnson, 2001) as a source for books related to a particular theme or genre, but I also will ask the students for recommendations. It is important I continue to read young adult literature to find books that raise issues my students care about.

Students must be given the opportunity to discuss the books without my participation. I need to trust my students to use the time for book discussion, not social discussion. I will instead be an observer rather than an active group member. This will allow me to take notes on what the students to discuss and then assess their observations.

## **Assessment Recommendations**

I need to improve my assessment and evaluation techniques. I will use more anecdotal note taking for assessment and design a checklist of behaviors I would like to see during discussions. Examples of behaviors could include good listening; taking turns speaking, predicting, and making personal connections to the story. I can then take brief notes noting the behaviors on the list that each student exhibits.

As teachers it is crucial we teach our students how to critically evaluate their work, I will add a self-reflection element for journals, discussions and final projects. Hill, Noe, and Johnson's *Literature Circles Resource Guide* (2001) offers sample self-reflection forms as a place for me to start. Students can fill out the same response journal and final project rubric the teacher uses as a way to self-reflect. The discussion self-reflection form simply asks the student to write examples of what went well and what the student could do better next time.

## **Conclusions**

My students completed a survey about literature circles at the end of the school year. The majority of my returning students were in favor of doing them again. They enjoyed the freedom of choice and social interaction that literature circles offered. The girls enjoyed them more than the boys. The root of the boys' dislike seemed to go back to their original unfavorable feelings about reading. They felt literature circles could be improved by offering better, more exciting book choices.

Despite some of the negative feelings of my students, I believe that literature circles were a good experience for my students and me. Student learning increased as they used higher order thinking skills in the discussions and response journals. They also

learned to be more responsible as my classroom become more student-centered than teacher-centered. I was challenged to go away from the comfortable routine I was used to and work collaboratively with my students to on a new approach to reading. We discovered that literature circles are not something that come together the first time. They take a lot of practice to find a format that works best for both students and teacher. Hopefully the readers of my article will want to attempt literature circles since I related how they will not go perfectly the first few rounds.

I plan to continue to seek out information on literature circles. There are many educators using this method and each one has a way that works best for them. I feel my students and I can benefit from their experiences. As long as I continue to teach reading, I plan to incorporate literature circles.

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- Burns, B. (1998). Changing the classroom climate with literature circles. *Journal of Adolescent and Adult Literacy*, 42 (2), 124-129.
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Naylor, P. R. (1994). *The Fear Place*. New York: Aladdin Paperbacks.

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## **Appendix A**

### ***The Journal of Adolescent and Adult Literacy Author Guidelines***



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### **Articles should be:**

about practical, theoretical, or research topics

1,000 to 6,000 words

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have a clear purpose

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All submissions must be prepared using a computer word processing program. Submissions must follow the style of the *Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association*, 5th edition, 2001.

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**Appendix B**  
**Letter of Article Submission**

Month Date, Year

Kristin M. Gehrke  
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Eldora, IA 50627

Journal of Adolescent and Adult Literacy  
International Reading Association  
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PO Box 8139  
Newark, DE 19714-8139

To whom it may concern:

Literature circles are just one of the many strategies teachers can use in a balanced literacy program for adolescents. Students feel greater ownership in their reading because they get to pick what book they will read in a small group setting. Students are provided with opportunities to discuss their book with their classmates and teacher. It does take a great deal of practice and organization to use literature circles effectively in a reading classroom.

The enclosed article, "Literature Circles: The Ups and Downs of my First Attempts" relates my experiences of using literature circles in my reading classes for the first time. I share the process I used to set up literature circles and also the changes I would make when I use them again. Please consider this article for publication in your journal. Thank you for your time and consideration.

Sincerely,

Kristin M. Gehrke

Enc.

**Appendix C**  
**Article Cover Sheet**

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**Summary:**

“Literature Circles: The Ups and Downs of My First Attempts,” relates how I used literature circles in my reading classroom for the first time. Literature circles occur when small groups of students choose one book to read and then meet to discuss it. I share my decisions about structure, themes, response journals, discussion groups, assessment and final projects. Everything did not go according to plan but literature circles were a positive experience. Improvements could be made in the quality of the discussions and in assessment practices. Despite setbacks literature circles are a valuable teaching method to use in reading classes.

*Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy*

September 3, 2002