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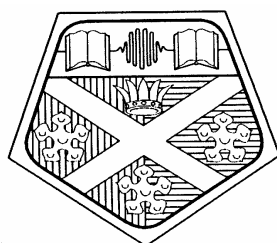
**Literature Circles, Gender  
and Reading for  
Enjoyment**

# Literature Circles, Gender and Reading for Enjoyment

REPORT FOR THE SCOTTISH EXECUTIVE EDUCATION  
DEPARTMENT

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Literature circles share many features of the adult book-group. Small groups of four to six children meet on a regular basis in class to discuss a book they are all reading. Often, the groups are mixed ability and formed on the basis of book choice rather than reading attainment and typically, the children are involved in choosing the book, rather than it being assigned to them by the teacher. The group decides how much to read before the next meeting and during meetings it is the group (rather than the teacher or worksheet questions) that drives the discussion.

Literature Circles offer the potential to promote reading for enjoyment by harnessing the social networks that exist within the peer group. The approach promotes reading as an active and desirable social activity, rather than an essentially private and individual one. The teacher encourages relatively free-flowing, expressive talk in which pupils articulate both literary and affective responses to their reading. These contribute to a richer understanding both of the text they are reading and of themselves as readers.

This project reports the experience of using literature circles in four schools across the P4-S1 age range. In particular, it reports:

- the teachers' and children's experiences of setting-up literature circles and working with them in Scottish schools, including practical advice and techniques to help others who would like to introduce and develop literature circles.
- how the literature circles impacted on the attainment and attitudes of the children involved, with particular reference to gender.
- the implications for teachers, school managers and policy makers in delivering, managing and framing the reading curriculum.

Four primary teachers and one secondary school teacher were asked to implement literature circles with their class. Each teacher was asked to keep a journal, noting observations, questions, thoughts and any issues that arose as they prepared for, introduced, managed, observed and evaluated the initiative. The teachers met regularly as a group with the research team for support and discussion. We kept detailed records of these meetings. We also interviewed each teacher and a representative sample of pupils at the end of the project. We sent a short questionnaire home to parents to assess the impact of the project on children's reading at home.

Pupils' receptive vocabulary was measured at the beginning and end of the project using the British Picture Vocabulary Scale II. We also measured their engagement and attitudes to reading using a short questionnaire.

The results showed that children in the literature circles classes gained autonomy and enthusiasm for reading. Teachers reported that children began to ask to set up additional groups and parents reported that their children had spontaneously been discussing the books at home.

The use of literature circles had a positive impact on several aspects of primary and lower secondary pupils' reading attitudes and behaviours. Both boys and

girls showed significantly more positive feelings about reading in school. Boys reported that they were more frequently reading for pleasure at home, recommending books to friends and getting totally absorbed in a book. These gains meant that the boys effectively 'caught up' with the girls in these aspects. There was an improvement in the number of books that all pupils reported reading which bordered on statistical significance.

The receptive vocabulary of the boys also improved. This is an interesting result because a wider vocabulary contributes to verbal reasoning ability and thus empowers children's ability to learn across the curriculum.

The project identified several implementation difficulties experienced by the teachers and generated practical solutions to them. Literature circles worked best when teachers had prepared the groundwork to facilitate purposeful collaboration, when pupils played a part in selecting the book and when the groups met on a regular and predictable basis. Children with the lowest reading attainment had a strong desire, and as much right as other children, to be included in the literature circles initiative, and they benefited from such inclusion. Implementing literature circles caused teachers to question and develop their views of how to foster reading attitudes and attainment. The project found that teachers need to be clear about their own purposes for using literature circles and ensure that they value talk that will develop these purposes. They need to empower children to work within the literature circle.

Head teachers need to be aware that literature circles can provide opportunities for staff development and an impetus to reconsider the reading curriculum, and in particular the constraints of current time allocations and curriculum frameworks. Allowing children book choice has financial implications. Policy makers and head teachers may need to consider how best to allocate funding to ensure multiple copies of up-to-date children's books.

In policy terms, literature circles have the potential to deliver across a wide range of the purposes and capacities on which *Curriculum for Excellence* is premised and are highly congruent with the philosophy and thrust of *Assessment is for Learning*. Teachers, head teachers and policy makers should be aware of the potential of the approach to bring about a change in classroom culture.

## **LITERATURE CIRCLES, GENDER AND READING FOR ENJOYMENT**

### **BACKGROUND**

In literature circles, children read and discuss a novel in small groups. Typically, literature circle groups are mixed ability and transient, formed to read and discuss a particular novel. The children choose the books they read and are wholly responsible for driving the group discussions. The teacher plays a crucial role in setting up and supporting each literature circle group but the emphasis is on the children taking responsibility. The literature circle

discussion has a structured format but members of the group determine its content and direction. Each week, children read to their agreed target page at home and use previously taught strategies to remind themselves of the questions and observations they want to bring to their group discussion. After each meeting, pupils may be asked to write a response to the discussion and the group sets itself a new target page for the next week. When the book is finished, the group chooses a final presentation/review task from a list of possible activities suggested by the teacher.

Literature circles originated in the USA and have been tried out by some local authorities in Scotland, including Aberdeenshire, West Lothian and South Lanarkshire. We were interested to see how teachers would adapt literature circles for implementation in Scotland. We also wanted to determine whether literature circles do contribute to a positive reading environment and promote reading for enjoyment and reading engagement both in and out of school.

### **Why reading engagement matters**

Children who say that they enjoy reading and who read for pleasure in their own time do better in school. Reading for enjoyment is positively associated with reading attainment and with writing ability (OECD, 2000). Pupils who read for pleasure also demonstrate a wider general knowledge (Wells, 1986), a better understanding of other cultures (Meek, 1991) and more complex insights regarding human nature, motivations and decision-making (Cunningham & Stanovich, 1998; Bruner 1996).

The recent PISA study showed that many pupils rarely read for enjoyment and almost a third do no reading for pleasure in their own time. (OECD, 2000). The Assessment of Achievement Programme shows that girls in Scotland are performing consistently better than boys in reading and writing at P4 and at P7.

Teaching for high reading engagement benefits attainment in literacy and in other curricular areas. High reading engagement differentially impacts on the reading attainment of pupils from the lowest socio-economic groups and can therefore mitigate the effect of socio-economic status (Topping et al., 2003). Moreover, because reading develops vocabulary, general knowledge and verbal reasoning skills, avid readers perform better across the whole curriculum, outperforming peers with the same basic cognitive ability but who read less widely. (Cunningham and Stanovich, 1998).

Several factors affect reading engagement. Although learning to read quickly and easily is important (Stanovich, 1986), reluctance to read is not confined to pupils with low reading attainment (Ofsted, 2004). In a meta-analysis of 22 experimental or quasi-experimental studies on reading engagement, Guthrie and Humenick (2004) found large effect sizes for four motivational classroom practices: teachers setting knowledge-based rather than performance-based goals or no goals at all; teachers providing pupils with choices about what to read, where and with whom; teachers supplying interesting texts and pupils collaborating whilst reading.

Although literature circles have the potential to contribute towards reading engagement, isolated initiatives are unlikely to guarantee reading engagement. Guthrie and Wigfield (1997) report that synergy between motivational, cognitive and conceptual aspects of the reading curriculum is important. They argue that engagement results from a *coherent* curriculum, which builds intrinsic motivation to read, creates a physical and social environment for reading, provides instruction about strategic reading and comprehension and provides sufficient pupil choice in all areas of reading (Guthrie and Wigfield, 2000).

OFSTED (2004) reports that teachers who successfully produce avid readers regularly read novels to the class; offer pupils a wide range of reading materials; regularly discuss books and give pupils, including those who struggle with reading, the freedom to choose their own books. Such teachers play a significant role in introducing pupils to new texts but also consult them about what should be in the library and don't make gender-based assumptions about reading. They actively promote reading in a variety of ways and intervene quickly to build both self-esteem and skills when children experience difficulties.

## **AIMS**

This project sought to:

- trial and describe teachers' and children's experiences of setting-up literature circles and working with them in Scottish schools.
- identify whether, and how literature circles impact on attainment and attitudes across P4-S1 stages, with particular reference to gender issues.
- generate practical advice and techniques that will help teachers to introduce literature circles smoothly into their classroom.
- detail any policy implications and wider curriculum and management issues that arise from introducing literature circles.

## **METHODS**

Four primary teachers and one secondary school teacher were asked to implement literature circles with their class. The teachers all worked within one local authority and all were in schools that were designated as areas of educational priority. The teachers self-selected into the project and represented a range of professional experience. Two had more than 20 years teaching experience, one had ten years experience, one was relatively new to the profession with less than five years teaching and one was just out of her probationary year. The teachers held different views about teaching literacy and taught at different stages of the school. One taught P4, one taught P5, two taught P7 and one taught S1.

All the teachers were told about the potential literature circles offered to deepen pupils' reading engagement and their ability to analyse and discuss texts. They were given practical advice about how to introduce, organise and manage literature circles but were asked to adapt and change this to make them work with their own classes and schools. The implementation model for



literature circles was deliberately open-ended to see what adaptations were necessary to implement literature circles in a Scottish context.

Each teacher was asked to keep a journal, noting their observations, questions, thoughts and any issues that arose as they prepared for, introduced, managed, observed and evaluated the initiative. The teachers met regularly as a group with the research team for support and discussion. During these meetings teachers talked about the implementation of literature circles, shared their observations of pupils' attitudes and progress, identified issues of concern and discussed their views of the approach. Detailed notes were kept of these discussions.

We were interested to find out how the teachers implemented literature circles and whether their experience of literature circles changed their beliefs about reading and learning to read.

To inform our understanding of the implementation and policy issues raised by the use of literature circles in Scotland, we did a content analysis of the teachers' journal entries. These detailed their ongoing observations and issues arising from them, and included the notes made during discussions between the teachers and the research team.

We also interviewed each teacher and a subset of pupils at the end of the project. The pupils were interviewed in pairs. We made sure that we interviewed both girls and boys from each class and that the interviewees represented the full range of literacy attainment in the class.

To determine the impact of Literature Circles on pupils' attitudes, reading engagement and attainment, we collected the following information from the target class at the beginning of the project and again after the literature circles approach had been operating for five months:

- Receptive vocabulary using the British Picture Vocabulary Scale II.
- Pupil responses to a short reading attitudes/ reading engagement questionnaire. This asked them about their thoughts and feelings about reading in school, their attitudes to reading out of school, the number of books they read out of school and whether they ever recommended books to friends.

We were interested to find out whether the experience of literature circles impacted on children's attitudes to reading in school, on how much reading they did out of school and on the amount of social interaction surrounding books. We were particularly interested in any differential impact on boys and girls.

Pupils were interviewed in pairs and asked to describe their experiences and views of literature circles and of reading more generally.

## **LITERATURE CIRCLES: RESULTS**

One school dropped out of the research project half-way through due to teacher illness and staffing difficulties. The results from this school have not been included in the analysis. The quantitative analysis is based on the information we collected from the remaining 91 pupils in the intervention classes. The qualitative analysis is based on the experiences of all the teachers who contributed to the project.

### **QUANTITATIVE DATA**

We tested the children's receptive vocabulary before and after the intervention using the BPVS II test (Dunn et al. 1997). We used a Paired Samples T. Test to test for significant differences.

We also administered a short questionnaire to explore the pupils' attitudes to reading and their levels of reading engagement before and after the literature circles intervention. We used a Wilcoxon Signed Ranks test to determine significant differences in pre and post intervention rankings.

In an open question, pupils were asked to write down how they felt when the teacher said it was time to do reading. Pupil responses to this task were coded as negative, neutral or positive. The coding reliability rating was 98%.

The remaining questions offered the pupils pre-coded responses which they circled. One set of questions asked pupils to tell us how often they:

- Were disappointed to have a book as a present
- Read for pleasure at home
- Read comics, magazines or newspapers

Another set of questions asked pupils to tell us how much they agreed with the following statements:

- Reading is fun and I wouldn't want to give it up
- I get totally absorbed when I read
- I often feel bored when reading in school

A final set of questions asked pupils to tell us:

- how many books they had read in the past two weeks
- whether they had recently recommended a book to a friend, or had a friend recommend a book to them.

### **The impact of literature circles on children's vocabulary, reading attitudes and engagement**

The sample as a whole showed a significant improvement in the children's standardised receptive vocabulary scores pre- and post literature circles intervention. There were also significant improvements in:

- the number of positive feelings that children expressed about reading in school
- how often pupils reported reading for pleasure at home
- how often pupils recommended a book to friends
- the number of books pupils were reading

There were no significant differences in the overall cohort's responses to the other questions. Further details of the statistical analysis can be seen in Appendix 1.

## **Gender Differences**

A comparison of means at the start of the project showed significant gender differences in children's vocabulary scores and in the pupil attitudes towards, and engagement in, reading. At the start of the project girls were showing higher mean scores in their receptive vocabulary and in their engagement with and attitudes towards reading.

We therefore looked at the gender differences within the cohort.

A gender analysis of the impact of literature circles on vocabulary showed that the boys' vocabulary scores showed significant improvements but the girls' did not. Thus, only the boys contributed to the significant difference in scores seen in the whole cohort. A comparison of vocabulary scores showed that the advances made by the boys meant that they were outstripping the girls.

When we analysed the attitudes and engagement results by gender, we found a significant difference for both boys and girls. Both groups had become more positive about reading in school. However, boys, who at the start of the project expressed more negative attitudes towards reading in class than the girls, showed a bigger effect and the gap between boys' and girls' mean scores had narrowed. It is clear that both the boys and girls had developed more positive attitudes to reading in school at the end of the project, but the gain for boys was larger than that for girls.

Our analysis by gender also showed that only the boys demonstrated a significant increase in reading for pleasure at home and in recommending books to friends. In addition, the boys showed a significant increase in how frequently they reported getting totally absorbed in reading. This means that only the boys contributed to the significant differences in reading for pleasure at home and in recommending books to friends that we saw in the sample as a whole.

Finally, the gender analysis indicated a significant increase in the number of times boys reported getting totally absorbed in a book. This was not enough to make a significant difference to the sample as a whole. Details of the statistical analysis are in Appendix 1.

## **QUALITATIVE DATA**

We analysed the teachers' journals, which recounted their experiences of implementing literature circles. We also analysed semi-structured interviews carried out with the teachers and with the children. These gave us information about the organisation and management of literature circles in the classroom,

about the types of discussion, the range of topics and how the children had worked together.

There were four areas for which we collected qualitative data.

- a) ORGANISATION AND MANAGEMENT OF LITERATURE CIRCLES.
- b) CHILDREN'S RESPONSES TO THE LITERATURE CIRCLES
- c) CHILDREN'S ATTITUDES TO READING AND PERCEPTIONS OF THEMSELVES AS READERS
- d) REPORTED CHANGES IN CLASS ETHOS AND TEACHERS' ATTITUDES

We were seeking to find out:

- a) how the literature circles had been organised and managed in the classroom. We wanted to know what organisational decisions teachers made and why; and how these decisions affected the children's experiences.
- b) how the children had responded: what types of talk the literature circles generated amongst the children, and the impact that this talk had; and whether the children were more or less likely to discuss books informally with each other after experiencing literature circles.
- c) whether the introduction of literature circles affected children's attitudes to reading and feelings about themselves as readers; and whether the amount of reading the children undertook outside of the literature circles increased.
- d) whether the introduction of literature circles changed the teachers' views about reading and the process of learning to read.

## **a) ORGANISATION AND MANAGEMENT OF LITERATURE CIRCLES.**

### **Getting started: managing change**

It was particularly important for the class teachers to have the freedom to control and manage the introduction of the literature circles in a way that each felt comfortable with.

All the class teachers exercised control over: the number and composition of the groups; the process for choosing the texts; the pacing of the staggered introduction of the circles; the degree of their own observation and involvement in each literature circle; and when and how to withdraw from the circle.

One class teacher in P.4 maintained control of the management and organisation of the circle groups by appointing roles for the children within the circles (e.g. chairperson, timekeeper) and a teacher in S.1 maintained indirect control of the content areas for discussion by assigning aspects for children to consider (e.g. character, theme ).

All teachers nonetheless saw the project as an opportunity to give a measure of control over some key areas to the children.

## **Children's ownership and control of the circle**

The areas in which children were most commonly given control were:

- the choice of texts;
- the overall discussion agenda
- the pace and quantity of reading – the children decided how much of the text to read at home;
- establishing the ground rules for discussion

Both the children and the teachers reported that empowering the children by giving them control of key decisions had increased reading enjoyment and motivation.

What was very apparent was the teachers' commitment to seeing the process of choice as important in developing the type of social relationships on which the work would be premised.

## **Planning decisions for literature circles**

Teachers made planning decisions in three areas when considering the amount and nature of direct teaching about literature circles that might be required before starting the groups off.

Procedures for sustaining discussion:

For one teacher in P.7, an awareness of the importance of group dynamics led to an emphasis on combining the right mix of individuals and on the procedures that would facilitate and sustain meaningful discussion. For a teacher determined to minimise her own participation with the group, providing children with strategies to enable them to engage independently was seen as an essential prerequisite. During the literature circles work, she made extensive use of the readings on literature circles supplied by the project team to select and teach techniques such as "Question and quote", "Golden Lines", "Wonder Words" and the use of discussion prompts. One associated issue might be the proportion of time spent pre-teaching discussion techniques compared with that spent on children engaging with the literature circle, with the teacher introducing new techniques when required.

Single or mixed gender groups:

Another key decision that teachers made was whether to have single or mixed gender groups. Strong group solidarity and a club ethos seemed to emerge only from single gender groups. As one group of boys explained "ye cannae go roon tae the hoose and blether wi' a lassie". Boys also said that they thought some of the girls' book choices would be inappropriate for them. However, the same pupils also said that they appreciated working in mixed gender literature circles sometimes. Boys in particular felt that more 'work' got done when there were girls present, and that people attended to the task more assiduously. One group of boys actively requested that girls be included

in their second literature circle. Perhaps the answer is for teachers to ensure that pupils get a balanced diet of single gender and mixed gender literature circles.

Mixed ability groups or not:

The same balance of attitudes was displayed towards mixed ability groups. On one hand, children wanted to work with their friends and clearly got a lot of pleasure from this. On the other, pupils reported feeling frustrated that the more demanding reading targets they would like to see set by their group had to be modified to ensure that the target was attainable by everyone in that group. Perhaps, as with gender, the answer lies in ensuring that children get to work in a range of groupings over a period of time.

### **Introducing the literature circles**

In S1 the teacher used short stories to teach discussion skills and key concepts for literary analysis before introducing the literature circles to the class. She felt that this enabled her to introduce the circles to the whole class at the same time and successfully had five circles going at once.

Two teachers in P.4 and P.7 paced and staggered the process by introducing literature circles to the top ability group and then used this group to model the concept, expectations and the way of working to others in the class. That the top group began first possibly made literature circles a high status activity. However, it also meant that the best readers spent more time in a circle than others, were able to read more texts and had longer to explore and develop ways of working within their circle.

One teacher in P.7 introduced literature circles to mixed ability groups after much discussion with the pupils about how to keep the conversation going.

All these approaches worked well.

One teacher tried to introduce literature circles to several mixed ability, mixed gender groups but was unsuccessful. The able (girl) readers engaged with the task and the less able boys opted out. The diversity of the group and the strangeness of the task meant that she was unable to harness any social dynamics to hook sceptical or disaffected children in and grow their interest. The initial introduction of literature circles to this class was unsuccessful. Unfortunately, the project had to be abandoned by the school due to staffing difficulties within the class before alternative ways could be explored.

### **Choosing texts**

Texts were chosen by a variety of means. These included children browsing through catalogues and examples of texts by the group's favourite authors (P.4), visiting a bookshop (P.7), teachers presenting a selection of books and reading the back cover blurb and first page to the whole class who then listed their preferences in order of priority.(P.7) The class teacher then constructed

the groups guided by her knowledge of the children and their stated book preferences. Where groups were allowed almost total freedom to choose the text, lower attaining groups found it harder to come to a decision. They tended to have less knowledge of authors and texts and less experience of choosing, justifying and discussing their choice of text. The teachers had to help them to acquire this knowledge and experience.

### **Keeping going: supporting and focusing discussion**

All the class teachers took a strong lead in determining the types of activity the children were to undertake to guide their reading and help focus the discussion. These included:

- Finding the best/worst character and explaining why
- Identifying the puzzling parts of the story
- Bringing their own questions about the story
- Finding the best/worst part of the story, and explaining why
- Finding favourite quotes and discussing each as a group, before revealing why each was chosen
- Finding two quotes; one that stood out and one that genuinely puzzled them
- Noting something appealing about their favourite character on post- its
- Illustrating particular scenes
- Discussing the story events whilst in role as characters

When introducing literature circles to the first groups, the teachers modelled how specific activities could be used to generate genuine discussion. They reported that the first five activities were particularly good for encouraging the group to take responsibility and shift the social dynamics of the literature circle away from the class teacher and towards the pupils. The children enjoyed discussing the moral dilemmas within the story - could it have gone a different way? They were surprised at the different views they formed of the main characters and the reasons for these. For example, some children in one P.7 group liked the main character because he read books and knew a lot whereas other children disliked the character for this same reason. The teachers reported that the children's comments and questions, often in the form of "did you read about the bit where..." prompted others to reflect more thoughtfully on their reading.

### **Practical issues in running the circles**

Choosing the books:

The children's ownership of their reading within the literature circle extended most significantly to the choice of books. The practicalities of book choice were complex. How to take account of individual preferences and yet reach a consensus; how to give pupils access through the internet, catalogues, visits to the library and to bookshops; how to build and sustain a selection of books for future use; how this might impact on the free or more limited choice of subsequent classes to be involved: all of these were confronted and will

continue to engage the professional judgment of the teacher. Allowing children book choice has financial implications. Schools may need to consider how funding is allocated to allow the supply of children's books to be constantly refreshed, including the purchase of multiple copies of books.

#### Inclusion:

Some teachers initially had misgivings about offering literature circles to all children in the class, although eventually, all attainment groups were involved in all classes. In particular, they were concerned that those with the lowest reading attainment lacked the reading ability, motivation and social skills to benefit from the approach. In some classes, these children were initially excluded from the project. In two classes, the teacher was surprised and delighted when the children from this group formed a literature circle themselves. The teachers found that lower attaining readers required more direct involvement to keep them on track. Whereas two teachers felt that all these children benefited from the experience, another saw benefits to individuals but not the whole group. This teacher felt that motivation and attitude were the key issues that determined whether children would benefit from the literature circle, rather than simply reading ability. It may be important that struggling readers are **not** excluded from literature circles work. Stanovich (1986) reports that struggling readers are given less autonomy in their reading, are exposed to less text and have fewer and more limited opportunities to practise than more skilled peers. They can enter a downward spiral in which they are slower to become fluent, find reading unrewarding, avoid or do not engage with reading tasks and so fall further behind their more skilled peers. More recently, Ofsted (2004) observed that often the lowest attaining readers in England are still given no freedom to choose and discuss books; they have little intrinsic motivation to read and consequently see reading as a chore.

#### Choosing which types of talk to foster:

Literature circles can be used as a vehicle both to develop children's reading engagement and their skills of independent literary analysis. Different types of talk contribute differently to each of these purposes. The teachers differed in the type of talk they regarded as legitimate and particularly in the number of personal and anecdotal diversions from the text that they were prepared to tolerate. For example, one teacher who wanted to promote reading engagement, was pleased when a child commented "I think she (referring to a character in the novel) is a bit like your mum". This led to the group recalling things the real-life mother had said and done, before they returned to thinking about other characters in the novel. However, teachers who wanted to focus more on independent literary analysis, sought a more focused and detailed analysis of the texts. To ensure this happened, it was necessary to tighten the task structure by allocating discussion topics and themes for the children to identify and explore.

The teachers helped us to understand the importance of being clear about the potential of literature circles to develop the twin purposes of engagement and literary analysis. Once clearly spelt out, the teacher can make a conscious decision about her own purpose, or purposes and the type of talk required to achieve this. Many of the American publications, present literature circles as



'pre-packaged' activities and assume a literary purpose for the work. Scottish teachers who use such packages may be missing literature circles' potential to promote reading engagement.

Pace and quantity of reading:

The pace at which the group progressed through their book was decided by the children within the group. This generated two related issues. What to do about the pupil who failed to keep up and what to do about the pupils who wanted to read more than their peers? In the first instance peer pressure seemed to be effective for some children: "Read the next chapter instead of watching television" has a different currency when suggested by a fellow pupil rather than the teacher. With one pupil in P.7 it was helpful to explain the purpose of the literature circle to his parents and enlist their support for his reading. One P.7 teacher simply gave children a choice: she explained that she would also be running a more traditional reading group at the same time as their literature circles work. Any children who did not keep up with their literature circles reading (or who did not engage productively in the group discussions) would simply be transferred to her teacher-directed group. She was rather stunned when one child said that, actually, he would rather be in her group because he didn't like reading and wouldn't have to think about it if he was doing the reading scheme books.

Pupils could empathise with other group members who were eager to read on, but found it frustrating if knowledge accruing from this was brought to the discussion. One P.7 pupil suggested that fast readers should read another book in parallel with their literature circles book and should read the Circle book at the same pace as other group members.

Pupil absence:

One very practical problem arose about how to handle children who are off school, particularly those who are frequent absentees. The teachers handled this in different ways. All felt that it was important for the child to remain part of the group. However, such children may not be strong readers, and it may be inappropriate to ask them to read double the number of chapters to catch up. On one occasion, the P.7 teacher asked the rest of the group to 'perform' a reading of the chapters to the child. At other times, they either read the chapter to the whole class as part of a 'taster' session about the book or enlisted the support of other adults to simply read the missing chapters to or with the child.

Disruptions to timetable:

It was important that the literature circles met regularly. Disruption to classroom routines from school events such as concerts and sports days affected the smooth operation of the Circles: pupils forgot to bring books; pupils would be called for rehearsals and miss the reading; pupils' attention was diverted elsewhere. Perhaps these events in the school calendar need to be factored in when identifying the optimum times in the year to use the approach.

When to withdraw:

The ultimate aim for the teachers was to withdraw so that literature circle discussions were self-sustaining and independent. Children and teachers both had ambivalent attitudes to the teacher being present during the literature circle. Teachers felt that they wanted to know what was going on, that they wanted to ensure that children were on task and that they needed some feedback about how the circles were working, both in terms of the social dynamics and the cognitive challenges. In P.7 children liked the teacher being present and when she initially withdrew, felt insecure and reported that they didn't think the literature circle was as good. One group actually asked the teacher to return after their first 'solo' discussion. However, after a few meetings on their own, this same group reported that in fact, they felt she wasn't so necessary. The children liked the teacher to be there both because they felt she kept control by reining in individuals and so removing the responsibility for doing this from them, and because they wanted her to hear their thoughts about the novel. However, the teachers recognised the value of withdrawing from the group and that this was necessary for the children to learn to work independently and drive their own thinking and discussion of the text.

Accountability:

Literature circles developed understanding and skills in many areas of the language and PSD curriculum. However, teachers are acutely aware of their responsibilities and see themselves as highly accountable to all stakeholders in education. The project teachers in primary classes were pleased at the depth of involvement children showed in the discussion but also expressed a degree of anxiety over the unpredictability of the time taken for literature circles, partly resulting from this involvement. In a culture where the balance of the curriculum is managed and monitored by fixed time intervals the variability of the sessions was seen as problematic. A more flexible and creative approach to time management, premised on the professional judgement of the teacher, would help to eliminate such concerns.

Another concern raised in relation to accountability was centred on the assessment evidence required to track the progress of individual pupils. Literature Circles demand concentration on talking and listening and may consequently produce fewer written outcomes. The ephemeral nature of what pupils produced was seen as a difficulty, albeit it one that the teachers felt could be resolved. The cognitive benefits in developing a deeper understanding of the complexities of the text are, and should remain, high on the agenda. They should also be set alongside the importance of increasing the pupils' engagement in reading and the need to develop positive attitudes to reading and to themselves as readers. The assessment issues that teachers need to clarify are therefore not only around how to track progress but also what it is that is to be tracked.

## **b) CHILDREN'S RESPONSES TO THE LITERATURE CIRCLES**

**The literature circles prompted a number of types of talk**

From our analysis of what the children and their teachers told us about the literature circle discussions, four main types of talk were evident across all stages of the P.4 – S.1 range

- *Text talk* was focussed on the text itself and centred on particular scenes and characters, their motivations, dilemmas and exchanges, and on significant sentences and descriptive phrases.
- *Affective talk* recaptured the children's feelings as they read and emphasised the children's reactions. It was sometimes elicited by questions such as 'How do you feel about this character, have your feelings changed since the beginning?' 'Which parts did you like best?' 'Were there any parts you disliked?' 'What were your favourite quotes?' 'Were there any parts that puzzled you?'
- *World to text talk* drew upon the children's experiences outside of the text and involved the children in comparing events or characters in a story with events and people known personally to them.
- *Critical literacy talk* drew on critical literacy skills and involved children evaluating the authors' craft and comparing the text with other books.

### **The cognitive benefits of the talk**

From both the children and the teacher interviews, it was clear that the talk fulfilled several functions.

Firstly, it gave children a welcome and valuable chance to go over the story again and this enabled them to achieve a fuller reading of the text.

The more the children talked about the text, the better they got to know it.

They became better 'spectators' of its various scenes (Fox, 1993), taking in more and deepening their understanding of what was going on.

Through talk, the children became more involved with the characters. They became more appreciative of the humour and comic ironies of the text; children reported that, although they had thought something was funny on their first reading of the text, it became even funnier when they shared the joke with friends.

The children welcomed the opportunities their literature circle discussions provided to bring up anything that puzzled them and they felt that they emerged with a more confident grasp of the text's meanings. Both teachers and children noted that the children persisted better through periods of uncertainty about meaning. Meek (1988) notes that persistence through periods of uncertainty is a feature of more competent and confident readers.

Their talk also fostered an emerging critical faculty: in one literature circle in P.4 an agreed sense of what the text *failed* to do prompted the group to write an alternative ending for the story.

## **Talking their way through the story led to a deeper imaginative immersion in it**

Discussion allowed children to become 'immersed' in the text. This word was repeatedly used by the P.4 teacher, and by being 'immersed' she meant that the children could begin to see the characters in their head and hear its scenes in action – it began to become alive for them. Full inner possession of the characters and scenes was helped by playing them over in playground games, imitating key characters' accents and adopting catch phrases.

## **Talk increased pleasure in reading**

Children enjoyed sharing their responses to the text. They told us that they found pleasure in recalling events and favourite moments as well as in telling others about these. The pleasure came both in the act of articulation and in communicating with friends. They liked to find that their individual responses from their reading at home were shared by others in the group, but they also took pleasure in gaining access to a friend's *different* response and having their attention drawn to enjoyable parts of the story they'd not noticed. Many children reported that they liked arriving at a group consensus about certain parts of the story

## **Talk prompted creative responses to reading**

Reading becomes more attractive to children when it is interwoven with their own active invention in forms of response that are of their own choosing. One striking aspect of the children's accounts is that, for them, a grasp of the text was not the end of the process, but the beginning of their creative interplay with it.

Once they had begun to visualise scenes from the book they could recreate and reconstruct these in different modes – by acting out, drawing scenes and characters and by making things. They mined their books for material they could repeat, be creative with, and be inventive with. They came to realise that a fuller inner possession of the characters and scenes is helped by playing them over and reconstructing them in different modes.

In P.4 the children's active responses to the text spread beyond the literature circle and were recorded in other contexts. In the playground the book served as the subject of one group's games. The class teacher reported that "They wanted to talk about this wee frog all the time, and you could see them in the playground, they were playing games – playing at *Glubbslyme*" and the children told us: "We used to be the characters.... someone would be Glubbslyme and hop about...someone would be Rebecca..."

Several groups reported making drawings of characters and scenes from the stories they read within the literature circle. They made soft toys of the characters from pieces of scrap material and felt and read sections of the text

aloud to brothers and sisters and to each other. Several children accessed author websites and shared the information with the other group members.

During 'golden time' in school the children made bookmarks and folders to put all their pieces of work in

To summarise, the opportunities for talk afforded by the literature circle drew the children beyond solitary passive absorption of someone else's words. They reviewed these and answered back in their own modes which involved playing with the text, drawing it, modelling it and acting it out

### **Belonging to a group deepened engagement**

The appeal of the literature circles was strengthened when the literature circle took on the social dynamics of a club or a clearly defined group. Single gender groups in particular seemed to offer the strongest possibilities for this, developing a strong group identity that arose from the joint talk about the text. This manifested itself in different ways.

After a few sessions younger children began to treat the literature circle as a kind of club. A feature of children's clubs is shared tokens of membership – badges and cards - and these P.4 children explained that in their circle "We decided that everybody should have a bookmark and that these should be the same." They designed bookmarks with frogs when they were reading *Glubbslyme* and made peach coloured bookmarks depicting characters from *James and the Giant Peach* when reading that novel. A social identity was formed: "We're the Glubbslyme Group" they told the researcher. In this way the children built up the idea that they were members of a particular circle or club.

An older group of children in P.7 consolidated their membership of the literature circle by conducting a widespread and rigorous investigation of the design features of the Lemony Snicket books they were reading. They consulted fan and author web-pages and discussion sites to develop their knowledge so that it could be shared with the whole group. They were concerned, not just with knowledge of the characters, the story and its mysterious author, Lemony Snicket, but with the design features of the text and the pictorial clues and jokes buried within it. This shared endeavour served to increase the group's knowledge-base, promote a sense of group membership and propelled the children to read further books in the series.

The liking children have for clubs comes from a number of things. Club membership bestows a sense of identity and of belonging; it offers the backing of other members; it promises agreeable self-devised activities; and may look to escape adult direction or interference.

Within the literature circle it seems that the children's identity as members of a specific group or club served to increase their liking for the circle, to bond them more closely together and also to create a protected kind of intimacy which enabled them to talk more freely. One boy explained that although

others in the class had read the same novel, “you can discuss deeper” with those from the literature circle because “you began and went along together”.

It is interesting to note that the most striking examples of the group bonding around the text were only observed in single-gender groups. This is not to say that literature circles should always be single gender groups. Mixed gender groups offered different ways of relating within the group, which were also of benefit, and recognised as such by both the children and teachers.

### **c) CHILDREN’S ATTITUDES TO READING AND PERCEPTIONS OF THEMSELVES AS READERS ALTERED**

In the Primary 7 classes there was evidence from the teachers’ journals and interview and from the pupils’ interviews that there was a change in how the children saw themselves as readers. Craig is cited by one teacher as a pupil who is an able reader but has a disdain for reading at the beginning of the project; an archetypal “can read but doesn’t” to use Gemma Moss’ (1999) classification. From a very early stage in his involvement with the group he became enthusiastic and indeed wanted to read beyond the targets set by others. His contribution to discussions was also significant and his new-found enthusiasm was sustained throughout the project.

In interviews P.7 pupils reported: being surprised by how much they enjoyed reading; being able to help each other to understand the text in the group; discovering that reading could be a leisure pursuit; buying more books to read individually; sharing the books they were reading with their parents and even reading books because their parents were reading them. The enthusiasm of all children interviewed seemed to reflect at least the beginnings of a community of readers being developed.

In Primary 4 the improved attitude of one boy was noted by his Early Intervention Support Teacher. The children also gave evidence of more commitment to reading during ERIC time, when children were observed to be reading with greater concentration and interest.

The parental questionnaires indicated that most primary parents were aware of the project because their children had talked about it at home. Parents noticed more enthusiasm for reading and more reading happening at home. Some parents said that their children were taking an interest in the books they themselves were reading and were discussing their literature circle books with parents and siblings. Two children in P.7 had set up their own, family based literature circles with younger brothers and sisters.

### **d) REPORTED CHANGES TO CLASS ETHOS AND TEACHERS’ VIEWS**

#### **Class Ethos**

As more children became involved in reading, the ethos in the classes changed. There was evidence of more enthusiasm for, and commitment to,

reading. The class teachers reported more of a 'buzz' about reading with children recommending books to each other, children joining the local library for the first time and children choosing to set up and run a literature circle independently with no teacher involvement at all.

The analysis of children's responses to the questionnaires before and after the project also provides evidence for a change of ethos, particularly amongst boys.

### **Changes in Teachers' Views of Teaching Reading**

The implementation model for literature circles was deliberately open-ended to see what adaptations teachers found it necessary to make for the approach to operate effectively in a Scottish context.

The teachers' views at the start of the project about the content and function of the school literacy curriculum influenced how they interpreted and implemented literature circles in their classrooms. Those who explained literacy development primarily in terms of skill development tended to adopt tighter task structures, providing a lot of up-front guidance on the types of questions and topics that might be discussed and allocating fixed roles to ensure that children remained on task and on topic during discussions. They tended initially to have a much tighter definition of the sort of talk about the books that they wanted to see happening in the class.

Teachers operating with a more social definition of literacy tended to focus on the dynamics within the group and had less fixed ideas of the type of talk and of the topics that might be worthwhile. These teachers tended to focus on ensuring that the children had the social skills for discussion to use literature circles effectively.

All the teachers reported that the experience of literature circles had made them more aware of the social dynamics surrounding literacy in their class.

Teachers reported that being involved in the project and using literature circles in the classroom had changed their views of literacy teaching and learning to read. Some of the changes they reported were:

- Realising that reading aloud to the teacher wasn't always helpful and sometimes made pupils needlessly anxious.
- Realising that pupils could benefit from discussing a book without the teacher present
- Recognising the types of questions and tasks that generated productive discussion
- Learning to hold back and allow pupils to raise their own questions
- Realising they should not overestimate children's comprehension at a first reading
- An increased awareness of the amount of time that children need to talk about parts of the text that puzzle them

- Realising the importance of finding ways to give more control and ownership of the reading process to the children and the link between this and motivation to read.

## **LITERATURE CIRCLES AND A CURRICULUM FOR EXCELLENCE**

A Curriculum for Excellence is based on design principles which include both “challenge and enjoyment” and “personalisation and choice”. This project has highlighted the extent to which a literature circles approach is able to engage pupils in their reading and learning by providing challenge, enjoyment, personalisation and choice. Empowering pupils to make choices about what and how they learn and providing them with ownership of the process is highly motivational and its significance should not be underestimated. The corollary of this for teachers is that they must relinquish their traditional role of being the sole arbiters of choice. The approach promotes the “respectful and constructive relationships” which underpin the practice advocated by a Curriculum for Excellence.

The new curriculum model places emphasis on developing a broad set of capacities that will be required to produce successful learners, confident individuals, responsible citizens and effective contributors. Clearly a model that takes a more holistic approach to the development of learners will be concerned to ensure that the full range of capacities will be given prominence in assessment. Scrutiny of these capacities should enable teachers to generate criteria for assessment that will take account of both the cognitive and affective development that this approach to reading is able to deliver for young readers. It is of equal importance, for example, to ensure that children are given opportunities to develop the disposition to be “open to new thinking and ideas” as it is for them to be competent in the use of literacy skills.

## **CONCLUSION**

Literature circles do seem to afford children the space to talk about books and, through such talk, to define themselves as readers with particular interests and insights. This was particularly important for boys, whose current social networks do not seem to offer many such opportunities. A powerful aspect of the approach is that it does not require the teacher, or any adult, to ‘second-guess’ the pupils’ preferences but encourages children to define their own. By participating in a variety of literature circle groupings, children can learn to become adventurous and wide-ranging readers and see reading as a social activity through which they can form and cement friendships.

The literature circles approach may not sit completely easily with current assumptions about learning and teaching reading, or with the curricular frameworks and organisational patterns that have come to be adopted in many Scottish schools. However, it fits very well with current policy initiatives and thus offers a vehicle for both staff development and curriculum development.



## RECOMMENDATIONS FOR TEACHERS, HEAD TEACHERS AND POLICY MAKERS

### Recommendations for teachers

- **Teachers need to be clear about their own purposes for using literature circles and ensure that they value the talk that underpins those purposes.** Literature circles can develop children's skills in literary analysis; improve their attitudes to reading; help children reflect on, and better understand, their lives; and allow children a social and emotional 'space' to define themselves as readers with distinct preferences. Each outcome is developed by a different kind of talk. Teachers need to ensure that they recognise, promote and support talk that achieves their desired outcomes.
- **Teachers need to make decisions at each stage of implementation.** Literature circles need active management and there is no single 'correct' way to do them. When making management decision teachers need to take account of their purposes for using literature circles, the previous experience of their pupils in reading and discussion, the physical circumstances of the classroom and other available teaching areas, the range and quality of books available and the ways in which they organise space, time and pupils for teaching
- **Teachers need to empower children to work within the literature circle.** We found that literature circles are most successful when:
  - there are regular times for meeting within the circle – at least once a week;
  - there are clear explanations at the outset about the nature of literature circles, the importance of coming well prepared, keeping the discussion focused, helping each other and taking responsibility for getting the discussion started, keeping it going and reviewing ideas;
  - children are highly involved in selecting which book they will read;
  - children have time, and enough control of the content of discussions, to share their understandings and responses to the book and to talk about those parts that interest and puzzle them. This deepened their understandings of, and responses to, the text and encouraged social interactions around reading.
- **Teachers should be flexible in the criteria used to form and re-form groups and take account of pupils' recommendations for groupings.** There are advantages to both single gender and mixed gender groups. Children benefit from working in both types of groupings over the course of a year. Similarly, mixed ability groupings provided social and emotional benefits which impacted on children's identity, confidence and self-efficacy as readers. At other times, the quantity that children wanted to read made ability grouping more appropriate.

- **Teachers should recognise that the least able readers have a strong desire and a right to participate.** Literature circles benefit all abilities of reader. Teachers should adapt their role in working with groups according to their pupils' experience of choosing and discussing books. Teachers may, in some cases, need to provide more initial support and modelling of how to choose suitable books and how to start and sustain discussion.

### Recommendations For Head Teachers

- **Head Teachers should recognise that literature circles offer opportunities for staff development.** Literature circles may challenge teachers' understanding of the breadth of the reading curriculum and the importance of cognitive, social and emotional engagement in reading. Head Teachers should identify staff who are keen to give books a higher profile in the classroom to pilot the introduction of literature circles and then extend the approach throughout the school through teacher-led discussion, coaching and mentoring.
- **Head Teachers should encourage teachers to be flexible in how they group children for literature circles.** Some teachers may introduce literature circles to their most able readers and use this to model the process to others. Initial success will stimulate teacher confidence and encourage a preparedness to experiment with other, mixed ability groupings as they grow more confident about the process.
- **Head Teachers will have to take account of the resource implications when apportioning funds to introduce and support literature circles.** Literature circles require multiple copies of fairly up-to-date books.
- **Head Teachers should be aware that teachers will benefit from regular and ongoing opportunities to discuss the implementation decisions they have made. This will support each teacher's shifting role in promoting learning through literature circles.** In-house opportunities to participate in such discussions are essential.
- **Head Teachers have to, with their staff, review current time allocations and constraints on the curriculum.** Literature circles require a curriculum model that allows flexibility in terms of time, curricular integration and learning outcomes.
- **Head Teachers should be mindful of these cross-cutting capacities when planning such an initiative and recognise their relevance for the aims of *A Curriculum for Excellence*.** In empowering children to make choices about how they learn, the

approach can contribute towards children's engagement and self-efficacy.

### Recommendations for policy makers

- **Policy makers should be aware that literature circles have the potential to deliver across a wide range of the purposes and capacities on which *Curriculum for Excellence* is premised.**
- **Policy makers should be aware of the formative assessment opportunities for the whole language curriculum that are embedded in literature circles and the congruence with the philosophy and thrust of *Assessment is for Learning*.**
- **Policy makers should highlight the distinct purposes for which literature circles can be used within the reading curriculum.** Traditionally, literature circles have been presented in the USA as an activity in which the methodology focuses on developing literary analysis skills. However, in the Scottish context, teachers should be encouraged to adapt the methodology to capitalise more directly on the potential for promoting social, cognitive and emotional engagement in learning and in reading.
- **Policy makers should be aware of the potential of the approach to bring about a change in classroom culture.** This can encourage boys to 'buy in' to reading as an activity, even where reading had previously been considered 'uncool'.
- **Policy makers should be aware of the funding implications of the introduction of the approach and that some pump priming funds would be required to promote its successful implementation.**

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## APPENDIX 1

### STATISTICAL ANALYSIS

#### Questionnaire Results

91 children told us about their attitudes to reading before and after the use of literature circles in the classroom.

Pupil responses to an open question about how they felt when the teacher said it was time to do reading were coded as negative, neutral or positive. The coding reliability rating was 98%.

The remaining questions invited pupils to circle pre-coded responses. One set of questions asked pupils to tell us how often they:

- Were disappointed to have a book as a present
- Read for pleasure at home
- Read comics, magazines or newspapers

Another set of questions asked pupils to tell us how much they agreed with the following statements:

- Reading is fun and I wouldn't want to give it up
- I get totally absorbed when I read
- I often feel bored when reading in school

A final set of questions asked pupils to tell us:

- how many books they had read in the past two weeks
- whether they had recently recommended a book to a friend, or had a friend recommend a book to them.

We used a Wilcoxon Signed Ranks test to determine significant differences in pupil responses before and after the literature circles intervention. The results are summarised in Table 1.

In the sample as a whole, there were significant differences in:

- the number of positive feelings about reading in school
- how often pupils reported reading for pleasure at home
- in how often pupils recommended a book to friends
- 

There was a borderline significant difference in the number of books pupils were reading.

There were no significant differences in the overall pupil responses to the other questions.

## Analysis of results by gender

When we analysed the results by gender, we found that both boys and girls showed a significant difference in their positive feelings about reading in school

However, only the boys showed a significant increase in:

- reading for pleasure at home
- recommending books to friends

In addition, the boys showed a significant increase in how frequently they reported getting totally absorbed in reading.

This means that although both girls and boys showed significantly more positive attitudes to reading in class, only the boys contributed to the differences in reading for pleasure at home and in recommending books to friends seen in the sample as a whole. Getting absorbed in a book was not different in the sample as a whole, but there was a different pre and post literature circles intervention for boys only.

**Table 1: Pupil Attitudes and Engagement: Difference for boys, for girls and for the whole cohort pre and post intervention.**

|                                                                                              | Boys    |            | Girls   |            | Sample as a whole |            |
|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------|------------|---------|------------|-------------------|------------|
|                                                                                              | Z score | Sig. level | Z score | Sig. level | Z score           | Sig. level |
| Difference in feelings about reading in school pre and post intervention                     | -3.17   | p< .05     | -2.68   | p< .05     | -4.13             | p<0.001    |
| Difference in amount of reading for pleasure at home reported pre and post intervention      | -2.71   | p< .05     | -1.00   | NS         | -2.83             | p<0.005    |
| Difference in how frequently pupils recommend books to friends pre and post intervention     | -2.72   | p< .05     | -0.91   | NS         | -2.55             | p<0.01     |
| Difference in how frequently pupils got totally absorbed in a book pre and post intervention | -3.00   | p< .05     | -0.91   | NS         | -1.73             | NS         |
| Difference in number of books pupils were reading pre and post intervention                  | -1.7    | P<0.09     | -0.90   | NS         | -1.73             | p<0.058    |

## Receptive Vocabulary Scores

We tested the children's receptive vocabulary before and after the intervention using the BPVS II test (Dunn et al. 1997).

We used a Paired Samples T. Test to test for significant differences in the standardised vocabulary scores before and after the literature circles intervention.

The results are summarised in Table 2.

The sample as a whole showed a significant improvement in vocabulary. However, when we looked at the differences by gender, the boys' vocabulary scores showed a significant improvement but the girls did not. It is clear that only the boys contributed to the significant difference in scores seen in the whole sample.

**Table 2: Differences in pupils' receptive vocabulary for boys, girls and the sample as a whole pre and post intervention.**

| Boys    |                  |                   | Girls   |                  |                   | Whole cohort |                  |                   |
|---------|------------------|-------------------|---------|------------------|-------------------|--------------|------------------|-------------------|
|         | Mean scores      |                   |         | Mean scores      |                   |              | Mean scores      |                   |
| t-score | Pre lit. circles | Post lit. circles | t-score | Pre lit. circles | Post lit. circles | t-score      | Pre lit. circles | Post lit. circles |
| -2.31   | 96.03            | 98.39*            | -0.72   | 95.66            | 96.05             | -2.08        | 95.66            | 97.10*            |

\* significant at  $p < .05$