Changing the classroom climate with literature circles

Kenneth is leading a discussion using questions that he developed himself. Four other students in his group are answering his questions, giving their opinions or predictions, and finding proof. Suzanne is silently reading *Island of the Blue Dolphins*. Libby is reading *The Light in the Forest*, and Evan is reading *Julie of the Wolves*. In 20 minutes, Kenneth’s small discussion group is finished, and soon Suzanne is sharing some of her favorite passages in *Blue Dolphins* with four of her classmates while Evan and Libby continue reading their own books. The class (all students' names are pseudonyms) is using Literature Circles to strengthen literacy skills and change the climate of the classroom.

Literature circles incorporate several features that can change the classroom climate to be more cooperative, responsible, and pleasurable while encouraging growth in reading. These features include student choice, groups of mixed ability, student management of small interactive groups, and substantial time to read during the school day.

Literature circles offer to students a limited selection of books around a central theme, not just a random offering of novels. Six titles seem to be a perfect number. The sixth-grade unit described was based around a survival theme using *Sign of the Beaver*, Sarah Bispel, *Hatchet*, *Julie of the Wolves*, *The Light in the Forest*, and *Island of the Blue Dolphins*. The entire class had previously read *The Cay* and was familiar with the survival theme.
The students in this class, located in an affluent, middle class, suburban U.S. area, were all able to read near or above grade level. The class represented a variety of ethnic backgrounds; some were inclusion students and several participated in programs for academically talented students. Most had benefited from a stable education in a single school district. In a classroom with a wider range of reading abilities, books of diverse reading levels would need to be offered.

The power of choice

The teacher began with short book talks that included information about the characters and plots and the length and complexity of the books. The class was familiar with Sarah Bishop and Sign of the Beaver as they had previously read excerpts. After testimonials were given by a few students who had read some of the other books, students chose two possibilities to read. For middle school students, it seemed to work better to have them make rapid choices so that students really picked a book that interested them, rather than wait until after they had seen what their friends had chosen.

With literature circles, students are able to make several of their own decisions, which is motivating to many reluctant readers and gives students a feeling of control over a part of their learning.

Tamika: For once we acted like a teacher and made decisions of what we wanted in class.

Antoine: The positive thing about the literature circles is that we got to pick the story we wanted to read. The teacher didn't have to make us read a book because when you pick your own, you seem more interested in it and no one has to make you read.

The next step was for the teacher to determine groups and balance them with a mix of students whenever possible. Because each child had made two initial choices, it was relatively easy to honor choices and establish groups of four or five students. Gender of the main character seemed to have only a moderate effect on choice so each literature circle was composed of fairly equal numbers of boys and girls. With heterogeneous groups, when a section was challenging, there was always someone who could help. The exciting, can't-wait-to-see-what-happens-next plots also helped. Strong interest can transcend reading levels (Hunt, 1997).

Ashley: I thought the literature circles were good because if there was a part I didn't understand, then usually someone else knew it.

Elbaum, Schumm, and Vaughn (1997) concluded that middle grade students, both good readers and poor readers, preferred working in mixed-ability groups and in mixed-ability pairs over either whole-class instruction or individual work. The students perceived that in mixed-ability groups, students helped one another more, learned more, and enjoyed being in the group more.

When the groups met for the first time, their job was to determine their own homework assignments for the next 2 weeks. Some groups chose to read shorter amounts each day for the full 14 days, but other groups chose to read more daily so that they did not have homework over the weekends or on a holiday that occurred during this time period.

Jason: The good side of this was that we read the book on our own schedule so if we didn't want to read on the weekend we didn't have to.

Some groups divided by pages, and some divided by chapters. Everyone then copied the agreed upon schedule into his assignment notebook.

Julia: I like how we made the chart of when and how far we should read.

Choosing roles in the literature circles

Each group next received a packet of role assignments. Each student chose one of the five different...
roles: Discussion Director, Vocabulary Enricher, Passage Picker, Illustrator, or Quotation Chooser.

The Discussion Director had to develop four discussion questions, which could not be answered just by finding the "right" passage in the book. They were "Why did..." "What do you think..." or "Predict what..." types of questions. The class had practiced developing higher level questions with a previous story. Formulating higher level questions was not a skill that came easily to many students; instruction and practice were necessary.

Brian: I liked how we got to see other people's opinion of the book. I liked making discussion questions and having the group discuss them.

The Vocabulary Enricher chose five unknown vocabulary words, found the definitions, and taught them to the group. Four interesting, surprising, or significant passages were chosen by the Passage Picker who could share them with the group in a variety of ways.

Lynn: In literature circles you tell people how you feel about the book. People tell you from their point of view.

The Illustrator drew a favorite scene, and the Quotation Chooser chose several quotations and asked the group to identify the speaker.

Ashley: Everyone in the group got a different sheet. That way it didn't get boring listening to the same thing over and over.

After roles were chosen, the teacher laid out a schedule for the days the groups would meet with their discussion circles. On a typical day, everyone read silently for the first 5 minutes. This was really a necessity to allow for transition, for everyone to settle in, for minor problems to be solved, and for establishing a quiet atmosphere in the room. Then Group A met with the teacher for 20 minutes while the other five groups read silently. Group A returned to reading while Group B met with the teacher. Groups C, D, E, and F read silently for the entire period.

Mark: I think this way worked well. It helped me read a lot more so that I could get the book done. The papers that we had to do were great because it helped me to understand the book.

The next day, Groups C and D met with the teacher while everyone else read silently, and the pattern continued for two weeks.

The power of social interaction

The social interaction that takes place in a literature circle is a key component of its success. To be able to verbalize the content, to listen to other modes of thinking, and to hear other perspectives all contribute to deepening comprehension.

Sandra: I liked how we could discuss things that happened in the book and we would all get to say something about it.

Literature study moved from an individual act of creating meaning to a social act of negotiating meaning among students. The main character in The Light in the Forest initiated the most discussion, as his acts were interpreted as everything from being bratty to simply trying to adapt to changing cultural expectations.

The students liked the intimacy of the small reading group because it allowed for more opportunity to participate.

Jamie: I liked literature circles because there were only four people in my group and you get more chances to say your opinion about the book.

Since most of these sixth graders had never been taught in small, ability-level reading groups, but had only experienced whole-class instruction, being with a teacher and peers in a small group was appealing even if it meant there was no place to hide.

Daniel: One more thing is that you do it in small groups, and people get more attention from the teacher because the groups are smaller.

Smaller groups clearly allow more opportunity for active involvement which also changes the classroom climate.
Emily: Everyone gets a chance to talk. The teacher can focus on the individual students more.

Students enjoy the more relaxed atmosphere of belonging to a “book club,” and working in a congenial setting where discussion is allowed and even encouraged. Because relationship goals are very important to preadolescents, a program designed to attend to both social and academic goals can be very engaging (Hicks, 1997). Samway et al. (1991) found that students who are socially comfortable begin to feel free enough to take the risk of sharing their ideas. For students who have had fewer positive and successful experiences with reading than this group had, small group discussions may be even more beneficial.

Daniel: An interesting part was that when you presented in your group, everything seemed to open up and everybody discussed the topics.

Literature circles also help to vary the routine of daily instruction as well as making school more fun and interesting.

As each group finished its discussion, the students received a packet for the next round, and each student had to pick a role that had not been done before. They were reminded of their next meeting date, and they wrote down their new assignments. Much to the teacher’s surprise, many students had completed their books in 6 school days, and several started another book that their classmates were reading.

Mary: It was interesting that we got to choose our own homework, we had 40 minutes to read every day, and I finished my book a week early.

**Finding time for a pleasurable book**

Appreciation of literature and time to read in school often appear in curriculum guides but seldom appear in lesson plan books. Literature circles are an opportunity for both, as well as for social interactions about literature. If teachers really want to develop lifelong readers, then they need to allow students an opportunity to experience reading interesting books just for the pleasure of it.

Liam: I liked literature circles because we could read alone and then talk about what we read. I also like that we had time to read in class.

The students were able to read the books in this unit independently. They were not the kinds of books that involved heavy symbolism or those that required extensive background knowledge. Those types of books needed mediated reading with a teacher to activate prior knowledge and to guide interpretation. Literature circles work best when the books are meant to be enjoyed.

Robert: One good thing about Literature Circles is that it is a pretty independent project. I like that because the whole class isn’t reading the same book and there wasn’t a lot of homework.

**The teacher’s role**

Because this was the class’s first encounter with literature circles, the teacher was a part of each circle. She kept the group on task, established a pattern for taking turns, encouraged students to talk with each other rather than to her alone, and sometimes answered when called upon by the Discussion Director who generally took charge of the group. As students demonstrate an understanding of how literature circles operate, the teacher should release the leadership to the students (Sanacore, 1992). If students are not taught the patterns and the responsibilities of literature circles, they tend to lose focus and wander off task. Brown (1997) suggests that even with experienced groups, the teacher should hold a short debriefing at the end of each session for students to assess listening behaviors, interactions, and the types of questions that were asked.

For literature circles to run smoothly, much preparation is needed. Six sets of related books must be available in sufficient quantities, role sheets must be ready, and expectations for students’ responsibility must be clarified. The process also works better when the teacher has read all of the books. Although there are experts who say it
is not necessary for the teacher to read the books to be able to facilitate a good discussion, assessment of the comments and facilitation of the discussion proceed with much greater grace and accuracy when the teacher knows the books well.

Damon: It is good to have this because it helps people read and it shows who likes to read, and who’s reading.

**Using literature-based programs**

Teaching with literature has many advocates and advantages. The language is more natural and predictable (Goodman, 1988), and the more whole text that is read by children, the more their reading improves (Anderson et al., 1985). Rasinski and Deford (as cited in Tunnell, 1998) found that children perceive reading to be more of a meaningful related activity, students show a marked improvement in attitude (Tunnell, 1998), and perhaps best of all, literature offers models of ethical responsibility, inspiration, aesthetic experiences, and social cohesion (May, 1998).

Reading programs that use literature may use one of three basic patterns: whole-group instruction, the novel focus unit; small-group instruction and discussion-literature circles; and independent reading, readers’ workshop or silent sustained reading. Each has its place. The novel unit allows for the most direct instruction and for guided reading at an instructional level. Although teacher instruction is diffused as it is with any small-group activity, literature circles allow for choice, for student control, for learning appropriate techniques of social interaction and exchange of ideas in small-group discussions, and for provision of extended periods of uninterrupted reading. Readers’ workshop allows for the greatest choice, the most opportunity to read, and the least direct instruction and peer interaction.

Literature circles should be one of several organizational patterns in a teacher’s repertoire because so many aspects of building a positive classroom climate are incorporated into this method of sharing literature. When students are allowed to make their own choices about what they read, to prepare their own lessons, and to take charge of discussions with their peers, it changes the climate of the classroom. The teacher is no longer the sole commander of the students’ fates.

Daniel: Another good thing is that you can read a book that you want to read, not just some book your teacher assigns you.

Student choice, social interaction in a heterogeneous group, and a substantial amount of time to read during the school day lead to motivation which has a very powerful effect on achievement.

Antoine: The interesting thing was that I was actually excited about reading.

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