

Summary of Literature Circles Research



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The Research

Literature Circles is an effective, proven strategy based on the principles of collaborative learning, independent reading and group discussion. This paper surveys and synthesizes the academic research related to Literature Circles and its components for the purpose of meeting the standards for research-based instruction as set forth in NCLB.

Our Product

Classroom Teacher's Resource Kits: Literature Circles, is a comprehensive solution to hassle-free implementation and management of the Literature Circles strategy in your classroom. Each kit includes field-tested components specially designed to be user-friendly and enjoyable for both students and teachers. For more information about the kits, visit our website at

www.chasepheifer.com.

Our Authors

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Literature Circles is an effective literacy strategy that combines the principles of cooperative learning, independent reading and group discussion. The purpose of Literature Circles is to promote reading and to foster literary discussions. The strategy is based on the model of an adult book discussion group.

Judith Langer in her book *Effective Literacy Instruction* (2002) describes programs that effectively support student learning based on her recent five-year study of classes in 25 urban and suburban schools (Excellence in English project from the National Research Center on English Learning and Achievement). The literature circles strategy and its components are identified as effective literacy instruction throughout the book.

Component 1: Cooperative Learning

The power of collaborative grouping on learning is well documented. In fact, collaborative learning has been defined as a key ingredient of "best educational practice" (Zemelman, Daniels, and Hyde, 1993). Collaborative learning is open-ended and student-centered. It fosters democracy, community, and shared responsibility in the classroom. The limited size of the groups compels each member to be an active participant and imbues each member with responsibility and investment.

The research and theory on cooperative learning is cited as one of nine effective strategies in *Classroom Instruction That Works: Research-based Strategies for Increasing Student Achievement* (Marzano, Pickering & Pollack, 2001). The authors recommend the use of cooperative group strategies like literature circles. Anyone interested in the research on cooperative learning should consult Chapter 7 of this book which outlines the powerful effect of cooperative groups on learning.



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Component 2: Independent Reading

Research also shows that independent reading is the single factor most strongly associated with reading achievement (Anderson, Wilson and Fielding, 1988). Students who choose books for themselves, who read books on their own, become the strongest readers.

The Literature Circles strategy takes these two powerful ideas, collaborative learning and independent reading, and integrates them into a powerful, interesting and open-ended classroom activity. As defined by Harvey Daniels (1994):

Literature Circles are small, temporary discussion groups who have chosen to read the same story, poem, article or book. While reading each group-determined portion of the text (either in or outside of class), each member prepares to take specific responsibilities in the upcoming discussion, and everyone comes to the group with notes needed to help perform that job. The circles have regular meetings, with discussion roles rotating each session. When they finish a book, the circle members plan a way to share highlights of their reading with the wider community; then they trade members with other finishing groups, select more reading, and move into a new cycle. Once readers can successfully conduct their own wide-ranging, self-sustaining discussions, formal discussion role sheets may be dropped. (p.13)

Component 3: Oral Language

Literature Circles is an organizational model that gives structure to discussions about literature. Learning is a social activity. Vygotsky (1978) theorized that social environments provide learners with an opportunity to observe higher levels of cognitive processing. From this perspective, discussions of literature may be viewed as social environments in which students can witness how group members work together collaboratively to construct meaning while also participating in the process. Therefore, in a situation like this, learning can occur as the learner observes and exchanges ideas with the other members of the group. Literature Circles discussions give students the opportunity for structured social interaction. It helps them feel comfortable and confident about expressing themselves in front of others. They are given practice in defending their ideas orally while “thinking on their feet”—all of which are skills necessary for many careers (Langer, p.97).

In order to encourage students to think critically, we need to provide opportunities for cognitive and affective responses to literature. We want to develop discriminating readers who will turn to quality literature for lasting, memorable and satisfying reading experiences. It is important, then, that we teach children how to talk about literature. Literature Circles is one of the vehicles that enables us to accomplish this goal.

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Recent Research on Literature Circles

from *Literature Circles: Voice and Choice in Book Clubs and Reading Groups*
by Harvey Daniels (Stenhouse Publishers, Portland, ME: 2002)
www.literaturecircles.com

Research has linked Literature Circles to improving student achievement scores. Between 1995 and 1998, the Center for City Schools received a grant from the Chicago Annenberg Challenge to support the development of instruction in a group of struggling Chicago schools. The intervention focused on helping teachers to implement literature circles, as part of a reading-writing workshop approach. Training involved summer institutes and school-year support, delivered by peer consultants, veteran Chicago teachers who had used these strategies in their own classrooms. School-wide results were encouraging. In reading, schools outstripped citywide test score gains by 14% in 3rd grade, 9% in 6th grade, and 10% in 8th grade. In writing, they topped citywide gains by 25% in grade 3, 8% in grade 6, and 27% in grade 8. Teachers were convinced: their literature circles were working, not just to help kids become readers, but also to prove they are readers on the mandated measures of proficiency.

A 1998 study of fourth graders by Klinger, Vaughn, and Schumm found that students in peer-led groups made greater gains than controls in reading comprehension and equal gains in content knowledge after reading and discussing social studies material in peer-led groups. This effect was confirmed through a standardized reading test, a social studies unit test, and audiotapes of group work. Interestingly, the researchers found that students small-group talk was 65% academic and content-related, 25% procedural, 8% feedback, with only 2% off-task.

Martinez-Roldan and Lopez-Robertson looked at the effect of literature circles in a first-grade bilingual classroom. They found that "young bilingual children, no matter what their linguistic background, are able to have rich discussions if they have regular opportunities to engage with books." Interestingly, they found that many of the Spanish-dominant children were more eager and ready to make personal connections with stories than the English speakers, who tended to stick closer to the text on the page. The Hispanic children manifested their connections through the telling of extended stories, a style of response which the English speaking kids rarely utilized.

Dana Grisham of San Diego State University has been an indefatigable recorder of emerging Literature Circle research. Her 1999 bibliography was a major contribution to the field, and can be found in its entirety on the Literature Circles website at www.literaturecircles.com. She also organized the first panel at the American Educational Research Association to focus on literature circles. Grisham has catalogued literature circle research documenting benefits for inner-city students (Pardo, 1992); incarcerated adolescents (Hill and Van Horn, 1995); "resistant" learners (Hauschildt & McMahon, 1996); homeless children and children living in poverty (Hanning, 1998); second-language learners (MacGillivray, 1995); and English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners (Dupuy, 1997). Various versions of book clubs and literature study circles have been found to increase student enjoyment of and engagement in reading (Fox and Wilkinson, 1997); to expand children's discourse opportunities (Kaufmann, et al, 1997; Scharer, 1996); to increase multicultural awareness (Hansen-Krening, 1997); to promote other perspectives on social issues (Noll, 1994); to provide social outlets for students (Alvermann et al, 1977); and to promote gender equity (Evans, Alverman, and Anders, 1998).

Benefits of Literature Circles on Student Learning

Title: Literature Circles. ERIC Digest.

Note: Digest number 173.

Document Type: Information Analyses---ERIC Information Analysis Products (IAPs) (071); Information Analyses---ERIC Digests (Selected) in Full Text (073);

Available From: ERIC Clearinghouse on Reading, English, and Communication, 2805 E. 10th St., #140, Bloomington, IN 47408-2698. Web site: <http://eric.indiana.edu>. Family Learning Association, 3925 Hagan St., #101, Bloomington, IN 47401. Tel: 800-759-4723 (Toll Free); Web site: <http://www.kidscanlearn.com>.

This Digest will focus on benefits of literature circles which some studies have identified. These include: (1) stronger reader-text relationships, (2) improved classroom climates, (3) enhanced degrees of gender equity and understanding, and (4) a learning environment more conducive to the needs and abilities of English language learners.

Reader and Text Relationship

Some studies identified skillful readers as those who not only recognize words while reading, but for whom the text resonates through association with related life experiences or literary experiences which are familiar to other members of the same learning community (Brabham & Villaume, 2000; Peralta-Nash & Dutch, 2000). Vygotsky (1978) theorized that effective learning takes place when learners recognize their own needs and are in charge of their own learning through collaboration with more competent peers and adults. According to these studies and theory, in literature circles students have opportunities to create connections between texts and personal experiences, to listen to various interpretations presented by others, as well as to monitor and take ownership of their own learning through discussion and sharing with each other, thereby deepening their understanding and heightening their enjoyment of the texts.

Classroom Climates

Literature circles promote classroom climates which are cooperative, responsible, and enjoyable because students are given the responsibility for working with each other to make decisions in accordance with their needs and interests (Burns, 1998). In addition, as students learn to work cooperatively with each other, to be responsible for their own learning, and to respect multiple perspectives on topics and issues, they also learn to be better listeners and more honest with peers (Burns, 1998; Farinacci, 1998; King, 2001). According to these views, the classroom then becomes a place that is conducive to democracy and diversity.

Gender Equity

Gendered issues, especially the "silenced" adolescent girls in language arts classrooms, have been a concern among some literacy educators (Benjamin & Irwin, 1998). Johnson (2000) studied the "girls only" literature circles in the middle school level and found that adolescent girls in such discussion groups are more likely to sustain their voices and maintain their sense of self compared to traditional ones, in which boys often dominate the discussion as well as draw more attention from the teacher (Orenstein, 1994). Johnson's study also indicated that girls in such literature circles are more likely to critically examine gender issues and to question extant female stereotypes in the society (Johnson, 2000).

English Language Learners

According to Peralta-Nash & Dutch (2000), literature circles provide a low-risk learning environment for children who are learning English as a second language. When the teacher selects both English and non-English texts to reflect the needs and abilities of the learners in the same circle, students from both English speaking and linguistic minority background benefit. Some authors believe that these students are able to make use of the linguistic resources and knowledge they possess in order to make sense of the text, to relate it to their life experience, and to participate in the group discussion in meaningful and functional ways (Peralta-Nash & Dutch, 2000).

Conclusion

Students' insights and reflections, rather than ready-to-use questions from the teacher, drive the learning in literature circles. Students and teacher work together to break away from the traditional literature teaching methods. These learners also generate their own ideas and contribute to thoughtful conversation about what they read. This kind of practice helps to develop thoughtful, competent, and critical readers (Brabham & Villaume, 2000).

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