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The Power of Literature Circles in the Classroom

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Elena Aguilar

Transformational Leadership Coach from Oakland, California

My six-year-old son has finally, really started reading. It's thrilling to watch him grab book after book off his overflowing shelves and read stories he's been hearing for years. Now he wants to take books to school so that during recess, he can entice his friends to sit together and read. He says it will be called the "Reading Club."

"I was in a book club once," I said, explaining how a group of friends read the same novel and then discussed it over dinner. My son loved the idea and immediately started brainstorming who he'd invite, when they'd meet, what they'd read, and what they'd eat.

But the rabbit hole of nostalgia that I tumbled into was of my experience as a teacher facilitating literature circles. I get kind of giddy and dreamy-eyed when I remember what it felt like to circulate through a class of seventh graders meeting in lit circles, when I remember their arguments about a character's actions, or the post-its covered in notes that stuck out of the pages, or the pleas for a few more minutes when I'd say we were out of time. During literature circle meetings my classroom vibrated with learning, passion, and joy.

Why Literature Circles?

I promise to provide practical resources on the how, when, where, what of lit circles, but let me first make a case for why every K-12 classroom should institute some version of literature circles.

Reason #1: Literature circles can be a place for cooperative learning. Students help each other understand a text and make sense of it. Lit circles teach kids how to use each other as resources and become independent learners. Of course, in order for them to be an effective structure for cooperative learning, the teacher needs to intentionally develop them as such. Without guidance, modeling and support, they aren't automatically places of collaboration.

Reason #2: Literature circles allow students to make choices about their learning. Students are usually given the opportunity to select one of several books that they'd like to read. They can also have a say about who to be with in a book group. All children desperately need more opportunities to make choices in school. Choice leads to deeper engagement, increased intrinsic motivation, and an opportunity for guided-decision making.

Reason #3: Literature circles are fun, in part because they are social experiences. Students are *expected* to talk a lot, (in contrast to the rest of their time at school) to debate and argue their ideas. Students are invited to bring their experiences and feelings into the classroom and to share them. Reading *has to be fun* some of the time; if we don't make the experience enjoyable, our students are not likely to continue it once they're released from our grip.

Furthermore, when we experience joy or pleasure, we feel more connected to a place, and to the people in that place. It was an imperative that my middle school students felt connected to school and had positive academic interactions with their classmates. As in many urban districts, the drop out rate in Oakland, California is terribly high; research reveals that students drop out primarily because they don't feel connected to a place or its people.

Therefore I'll argue that a structure like literature circles, when functioning as a place of connection and fun, can serve to anchor our kids in school. Our students will not master standards and perform on exams if we cannot keep them in our classrooms; lit circles can help do that.

Reason #4: Finally, because they are fun, because students have choice, and because they are a cooperative learning structure, literature circles are powerful experiences for reluctant and/or struggling readers. Literature circles have to be differentiated; by nature each group will read books at different levels on different topics. Struggling readers can select a text at their level; the teacher can provide direct support to that group or can include a couple of higher-readers.

One important note (now moving into the details): students should be offered many genres -- "literature circles" does not imply only fiction. My struggling readers (often boys) wanted mostly non-fiction. (A fascinating book on this topic is *Reading Don't Fix No Chevys: Literacy in the Lives of Young Men* (<http://www.heinemann.com/products/0509.aspx>).

Resources for the "Who, What, When, and Where"

Of course, in order for lit circles to be fun places where students learn cooperatively, there's a lot that a teacher needs to do. Fortunately, there are many resources for creating high-functioning literature circles. To start with, try checking out these resources:

- Some years ago, I created a Web site about literature circles (http://gallery.carnegiefoundation.org/collections/quest/collections/sites/aguilar_elena/literature_circles) It's not a comprehensive guide, but provides some ideas about how to get started.

- My favorite book is the classic, *Literature Circles* (<http://www.stenhouse.com/shop/pc/viewprd.asp?idProduct=333&r=>), by Harvey Daniels.

Readers: I'd love to hear about your experiences with literature circles. Why and how have you established them in your class? What happened? What were some challenges? There's so much more to say on this topic (perhaps in a future blog post!)

In the meantime, I'm off to cook up some green soup for my son's first book club meeting. They're starting with a classic: *Green Eggs and Ham*. My son plans to debate the ethics of eating animals. I can't wait to hide in the hallway and listen.

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