

action RESEARCH Insights

Sponsored by the Barrie Region MISA Professional Network Centre

Grand Conversations and Thoughtful Responses: Investigating a Literature Circle Approach to Improving Literacy

The concept of literature circles has been around in the field of education for some time. However, many classroom teachers have little exposure or understanding of the thought processes, structures and application of literature circles to classroom teaching practice within a balanced literacy framework.

Three years ago, intermediate level classroom teachers from Our Lady of Lourdes school made their first attempt to integrate literature circles into their classroom literacy instruction. Two years ago, literature circles were the focus of an intermediate level Student Success project for our school. A year ago, the school received funds through the Council of Ontario Directors of Education to work on junior literacy, with the integration of literature circles into the junior literacy framework in the school.

This past year, with the funds received from the Barrie Region Managing Information for Student Achievement Professional Network Centre, we have more closely examined the collaborative culture that could be created in a school by using literature circles within classrooms, among classrooms and with educators in the school. This project has also attempted to examine the impact of literature circles on student achievement to assess whether literature circles are an effective component of a balanced literacy program for students in Grades 2 through Grade 8.

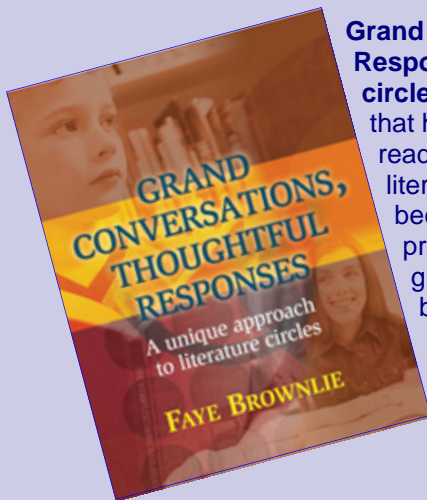


Literature Circles in Action: Students in grades two through eight at Our Lady of Lourdes school have learned how to work together in literature circles.

About Our Lady of Lourdes School

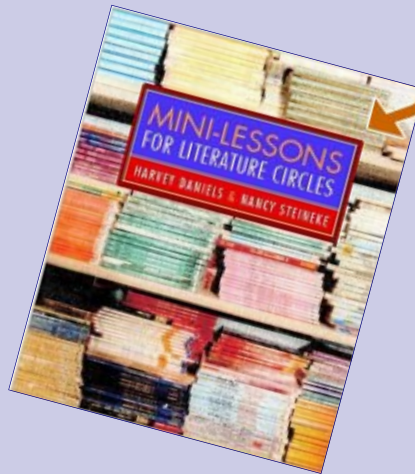
Our Lady of Lourdes School is located in Elmvale, Ontario, a small town with a population of 1700 residents, situated north of Barrie and south of Midland. The town is perhaps best known for its many boutique stores and restaurants and for two community events that take place year, including the Fall Fair and the spring Maple Syrup Festival. Both events attract many visitors from around the area and far away. Our Lady of Lourdes School was built in 1963. The school began with 72 students in two classrooms. In 2001, students from St. Patrick's School in the nearby community of Phelpston were amalgamated with students from Our Lady Of Lourdes. In 2006, the school was renovated to include a new office area, an expanded library and general upgrades to each class in the school. The school currently has a population of just over 200 students in Junior Kindergarten through Grade 8.

Resources Used

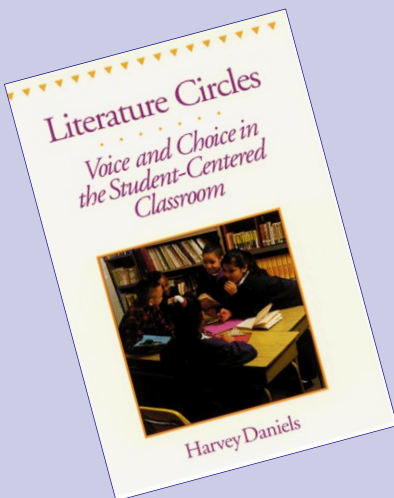


Grand Conversations, Thoughtful Responses: A unique approach to literature circles, by Faye Brownlie, provides techniques that help teachers build confident, enthusiastic readers. The author's approach to using literature circles encourages students to become active, independent participants and provides strategies for building discussion groups that empower participants. The book offers book lists and techniques to help students select appropriate books. The author also provides tips to help students write insightful responses to their reading.

Mini-Lessons for Literature Circles, by Harvey Daniels and Nancy Steineke, provides forty-five short lessons that are geared towards deepening student book discussions, creating an appreciation for reading and building respectful classroom community. The book contains numerous student examples, reproducible forms, photographs of students in action and recommended reading lists.



Literature Circles: Voice and Choice in the Student-Centered Classroom, by Harvey Daniels, provides a blend of theory and practice about literature circles which is useful for anyone who wants to know what they are and how they are to be used. The style is easy to follow and written in a light-hearted manner. This book is a good choice for teachers who want to encourage student-led grouped reading in their classes, encourage genuine discussion about books and nourish a love of reading among students.



Guiding Readers and Writers: Teaching Comprehension, Genre and Content Literacy, by Irene Fountas and Gay Su Pinnell

Language Curriculum Document, Ontario Ministry of Education, 2007

Literacy for Learning: Report of the Expert Panel on Literacy, Gr. 4 to 6 in Ontario, 2006

A Guide to Effective Literacy Instruction, Gr. 4 to 6, Volume One

Project Data Collection

What data was collected and how was it used?

CASI Assessments

- collected three times over the course of the year
- informed decisions about student group composition
- informed choice of reading resources and levels
- focused teaching strategy

Student Interest Inventory

- collected mid-year through the use of SENTEO
- informed decisions about student group composition
- informed choice of reading genre, books choices and levels
- informed purchase of library resources and book sets

Student Surveys

- conducted at end of school year
- informed decisions of next steps for literature circles duration and timing
- informed choices of roles to use and how to use them at division levels
- informed choices of text and reading materials to be used; format of reading structures (i.e. quiet space, more talk time, more reading time, less writing time)

Peer and self-assessments

- ongoing use and collection
- rubrics created and used to inform evaluation
- video recording of literature circles in action for student and staff review and reflection

Teacher observation, reflection and discussions

- ongoing process to inform support needed for groups and individuals
- inform future directions for lit circles
- informed choices for books and roles to be used (adding or removing a role)
- informed the flexibility and structure of group discussions and tasks to be completed

Key Findings from Our Investigation into Literature Circles

AREAS OF INVESTIGATION	PLUS	MINUS	INTERESTING
Teacher practice and collaboration	All teachers in this project have been engaged in more focused, consistent conversations about what and how they are teaching. Discussions have spanned grade levels allowing for a greater understanding of the continuum of learning to emerge among staff.	Not all teachers / grade levels at the school were involved in this project, creating a slight sense of alienation. Future efforts will focus on the inclusion of teachers of junior kindergarten, senior kindergarten and grade 1.	Collaboration and support has occurred in both structured and unstructured ways across grades. Additionally, a small school environment seems to enable conversations to happen freely and easily.
Students' social interactions	All teachers found that most students were actively engaged in a positive manner during literature circle activities. Student self-confidence was observed by all teachers to have improved. Literature circles engage multiple intelligences as students displayed strengths in non-traditional roles.	Most teachers reported that a few students were unable to work effectively in the literature circle structure. These students often required modifications in terms of time, location and materials.	Many students reported that they would like to have more time to talk and meet with their groups and have less teacher involvement. Teachers felt that the modeling of literature circles for students, especially in the early stages, was very important.
Student engagement and motivation	The majority of students indicated they enjoyed the literature circle experience. Literature circles were seen by teachers as an excellent vehicle for engaging students into reading and oral language tasks. Some teachers observed that some students gained more appreciation for unfamiliar genres. The roles provided differentiation of expression and interpretation of texts. Teachers observed that some students actively engaged in the reading experience with more enthusiasm for the first time.	Most students indicated that they preferred talking over writing. Therefore literature circles did not appear to be effective in engaging students into writing tasks.	Many students indicated they enjoyed / needed quiet spaces for reading and talking. It can be challenging to find suitable spaces within a single classroom or within a small school.
Student achievement (CASI assessment data)	CASI assessments provided valuable quantitative information that was easy to use as starting point for assigning student group structures.	The administration of the final CASI assessment was difficult, especially amid EQAO timeframes in grades 3 and 6. CASI was not seen as a useful tool for summative assessment purposes.	There were no significant or identifiable increases or decreases in student achievement on CASI that could be attributed to the use of literature circles.
Accessibility and Inclusion (opening doors and closing gaps)	Some teachers observed that students in lower reading levels were able to join and participate well in literature circles grouped by reading interest (rather than reading ability). Literature circles also provided opportunities for students to engage in a variety of ways with the text and each other.	Some students had to be supported more directly with reading strategies and technology with the reading material	Literature circles provided opportunities for students to engage in a variety of ways with the text and each other in the group discussions. The roles provide differentiation of expression of interpretation of texts. Some students actively engaged in the reading experience with more enthusiasm for the first time
Classroom management, maintenance and resources	Most teachers reported that having additional adults available to support and engage with students helped with management. The flexibility of combining classes helped meet students' needs	Most teachers and students found that the physical space available negatively affected the lit circle experience	All teachers agreed that sufficient reading resources are critical to the success of literature circles.

What do teachers think about their professional learning through and about literature circles?

“This is an excellent way to network with principal, resource teacher, colleagues to come up with strategies to focus on student language development.”



“The reading and discussions have been inspirational and informative; collaborating with colleagues has been helpful in generating ideas.”



“I like being able to talk to someone who is doing the same thing at the same time as I am, but may have other ideas or ways of doing it. We have a common topic and language.”



Our Reflections and Next Steps

The team feels that the fact that CASI achievement scores did not change did not mean that the literature circle experience was not effective, nor that continued use of literature circles would not eventually impact student achievement. It was felt the project time frame may not have been long enough and that the focus was still on implementation rather than summative evaluation.

The team is collectively more aware of the intricacies of literature circles and what questions to ask at the end of the process.

It is thought that the literature circles will become more student-directed and less teacher-directed as the students progress through the grades and are more experienced with literature circle structures.

Some teachers used reading materials based on student interest inventory results. This approach provided opportunities for engaging students in more fluid literature circle experiences.

Can students use outside spaces to engage in literature circles effectively?

The team believes that having book introductions and book talks as part of the introduction and continuing work of literature circles would add to their overall effectiveness.

Can literature circles be used across the entire school, from Junior Kindergarten to Grade 8?

Can technology (e.g. wikis, blogs) expand or engage students in the literature circle experience?

What quantitative assessment tools can be used to assess literature circle effectiveness on student achievement?