

Book Discussions

BY FRANK SERAFINI, Ph.D.

Book clubs (McMahon & Raphael, 1997), grand conversations (Peterson & Eeds, 1990), and literature circles (Daniels, 2001) are just some of the terms used to describe literature discussion groups in elementary and middle grade classrooms. Regardless of what they are called, book clubs involve young readers selecting texts to read and discussing these texts with other readers. Sounds simple? Maybe not. In order to effectively organize, facilitate, and evaluate literature discussions, classroom teachers need help making decisions about who selects the texts to be read, what contributions are expected of each reader during the discussions, when time will be provided for students to talk to one another, and how best to facilitate these unpredictable discussions. Teachers need support to make these literature discussion groups successful and to provide effective ways of helping readers understand and enjoy novels and other contemporary texts (Serafini & Youngs, 2006).

WHAT ARE BOOK CLUBS?

Book clubs or literature discussion groups are quite different from the traditional reading groups often convened in elementary classrooms. Traditionally, students were organized into three levels of readers—low, middle, and high—and instruction focused on the acquisition of discrete skills often measured by multiple-choice quizzes (Almasci, McKeown, & Beck, 1996). Instead, book clubs are intended to focus on the construction of meaning in transaction with works of literature (Rosenblatt, 1978). They are also used to support individual readers' responses to literature (Marshall, 2000), the sharing of ideas in small groups (Short, 1997), and a deeper analysis of the author's craft (Gambrell & Almasi, 1996).

Book clubs or literature discussion groups serve particularly valuable purposes by allowing students of all backgrounds and reading abilities to engage with books and by providing a supportive space for rich discussions and opportunities for teachers to value all students' voices (Martinez-Roldan & Lopez-Robertson, 1999). In addition, careful selection of texts to read and extensive time to talk facilitates deep thinking among young readers and provides opportunities for teachers to introduce and support reading strategies, such as inferring, asking questions, and monitoring comprehension (Moses, Ogden, & Kelly, 2015).



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Readers respond to stories because stories are a way of understanding one’s experiences and the world in which we live. Therefore, discussing literature with fellow students can serve as a window into the lives and experiences of other people and as a *mirror* into one’s own life and identity (Cullinan, 1989). Readers, as members of various communities of readers, share their feelings and experiences with texts in the company of other readers, and construct meaning during the social interactions in a particular community of readers. Literature study discussions are both cognitive and social events, where readers bring their individual interpretations and responses to a discussion group in order to negotiate meanings and ideas in the company of other readers (Raphael, Pardo, & Highfield, 2002; Serafini, 2009).

Book clubs are part of a workshop approach to reading instruction where the focus is on the construction of meaning by individual readers participating in small-group discussions (Serafini, 2001). These discussion groups also provide an opportunity for young readers to share their ideas with other readers and develop the skills and strategies for reading more proficiently on their own.

RESPONDING TO LITERATURE

Understanding how young readers respond to written texts has an extensive history in literacy research (Marshall, 2000; Meek, 1988). Rosenblatt (1978) suggested, “a better understanding of how children ‘learn to mean’ in specific contexts should yield signals for those involved in all aspects of reading, especially research on response to literature and the teaching of literature” (p. 41). Additionally, Sipe (2008) has asserted that young readers respond in a variety of ways, including analytical, intertextual, personal,

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transparent, and performative responses. It is important for teachers to provide support and opportunities for readers to respond to texts in a variety of authentic ways and contexts.

Children do not become better readers simply by building a diorama of one particular scene from a book or creating a mobile by cutting out pictures from old magazines to resemble the characters from their readings. As schools continue to display banners announcing their commitment to the development of *lifelong readers*, educators and administrators need to ensure they no longer require readers to do things with books in school that lifelong readers would never tolerate outside of school. When lifelong readers finish a book, they share ideas with other readers, make recommendations to their friends, read another book connected in some way to the one they read, or simply move on to something else.

The “enrichment” activities teachers assign readers after they have read a book in preparation for a book club discussion need to align with the kinds of things readers outside of school might do to prepare for a discussion at the local library or bookstore. When students trust their interpretations and contributions will be heard and valued, when teachers listen to what students have to say, and when teachers minimize the mindless activities surrounding the reading of books, literature discussions will improve in quality and effectiveness (Urzua, 1992).

BEFORE THE CONVERSATIONS TURN GRAND

Before children are sent off into small groups to discuss literature, primarily chapter books for older readers and picture books for younger readers, children need to be exposed to a wide variety of literature, explore the structures and elements of story, and learn how to successfully interact in small groups as they discuss their ideas about literature (Eeds & Wells, 1989). There are different ways to expose children to literature and provide demonstrations and opportunities for discussion; however, for many teachers the most effective way seems to be reading aloud to children and discussing books on a daily basis (Serafini & Giorgis, 2003).

Reading aloud is the foundation of a successful reading program (Atwell, 2007; Galda & Cullinan, 2006; Laminack & Wadsworth, 2006). It exposes readers to a wide range of genres, topics, formats, stories, and information. Reading aloud serves as an advertisement into the world of books, inviting readers to sample and select for themselves that which is relevant and interesting. It is an important experience for young readers that exposes them to the language of stories and helps them to understand the differences between oral language and “book language” (Cullinan, 1987). Besides the academic benefits of reading aloud to children, it is an enjoyable way to build community through the shared experience of listening to and talking about stories together. These experiences are vital for the success of book clubs.

In addition to the elements of literature that readers need to support quality literature discussions, they need to know how to talk to one another respectfully. During the first few months of school, teachers need to pay close attention to the ways their students respond to the literature read aloud and discussed to see whether students listen to each other’s ideas, respond to other students’ comments, and incorporate the literary terms introduced during whole-group discussions. Two parallel developments signal whether students are ready for

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book clubs: (1) an increasing respect for other readers’ ideas and interpretations, and a willingness to listen to these diverse ideas, and (2) an expanding level of knowledge of the elements and structures of literature necessary for progressing discussions beyond personal preferences and anecdotes (Serafini & Youngs, 2006).

There are numerous signs that indicate these concepts are beginning to develop within one’s classroom—for example, when students begin responding to each other in group discussions, not just directing all of their ideas toward the teacher; when students don’t interrupt each other as frequently and are listening more deeply; and when they have begun to consider ideas different from their own interpretations. As the content of the discussion grows more complex and the respect for each other’s ideas increases, teachers are ready to set up book clubs that have a better chance of being successful.

QUALITY LITERATURE DISCUSSIONS DEFINED

Although there are many ways to evaluate the quality of a book club or literature discussion, there are some fundamental aspects that separate an informal chat from a quality, in-depth literature discussion. In a quality discussion, readers are deeply engaged with the books they read and are eager to generate, share, and negotiate meanings with the other members of their group. This sense of investment in the reading itself

and in the group discussion is an important factor in determining the quality of these literary experiences.

Dillon (1994) described a quality literature discussion as a particular form of group interaction where readers come together in addressing questions of common concern, exchanging and examining different views to inform their opinions, and enhancing their own understandings of the text being discussed.

The research by Nystrand (1997), Mercer (2000), Myhill (2006), and others has indicated that creating quality discussions requires a different stance or role on the part of the teacher to enable students' voices to take a more prominent role. It is necessary for teachers to respect what students have to say, provide support for students to learn to interact effectively with one another, and deepen students' understandings of what has been read to enhance their responses and contributions to literature discussions. Student-led discussion formats allow for increased student responsibility and more room for student voices, and they may lead to more complex responses from students, the valuing of multiple viewpoints, and more engaged discussions (Almasci et al., 1996).

Literature discussions usually take place in small groups, usually made up of five to seven students that meet for several days to discuss what they have read and thought. Students read and prepare for discussions knowing they will have to share what they are thinking and experiencing as they are reading. This requires different ways of engaging with text rather than simply reading for enjoyment. Being a member of a book club demands commitment, not only to the book being read, but also to engaging in discussions and negotiating and reconsidering potential interpretations with other group members. These responsibilities are not to be taken lightly. It should be an enjoyable experience, but it is an intensive one as well. Classroom teachers need to support the responses of young readers and help them prepare to discuss literature with fellow readers if our book clubs are to be successful.

Theoretically, the books themselves create the groups. Children select books that they really want to read and sign up to discuss that book. Teachers should provide numerous titles, genres, and formats for students to select from in order to ensure readers can find something to read that truly interests them. Being able to choose what one reads helps sustain the types of discussions we are working toward. The more choices readers have, the better the chance they will find something that is engaging and something that is worth discussing more deeply.

Quality literature discussions are filled with a variety of readers' perspectives and opinions about the books being read, and readers in the discussions are interested in the meanings they construct and those meanings offered by other readers. It is the diversity of ideas present in literature discussions, rather than the group's ability to reach consensus and agreement, that is essential for quality literature discussions. The subjugation of group members' interpretations to a single main idea should not be part of these proceedings. Book clubs should support conversations

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where engaged readers passionately share and negotiate their understandings and interpretations concerning a piece of literature (Serafini, 2001).

FACILITATING QUALITY DISCUSSIONS

As facilitators of book clubs, the teachers' role in literature discussions is to help readers notice things they didn't notice for themselves and to help them experience a work of literature in greater depths than they could on their own. To do so, teachers need to offer their ideas later in the discussions and then, quite tentatively. Teachers want their expertise to sneak into these discussions, not come charging in through the front door. It is important that our grand conversations don't turn into *not-so-gentle inquisitions*.

There are a variety of opinions on the use of roles or discussion jobs in book clubs (Daniels, 2001; Eeds & Peterson, 1997). Assigned roles may reduce literature discussions to a set of disconnected pedagogical

procedures, where students blindly follow a particular role without thinking about connections to the text, their wonderings, or personal interpretations of a text. It can be suggested that assigning roles is more of a crutch for teachers, trying to bypass the difficult work of deeply knowing a piece of literature and supporting students' often unpredictable interpretations, than it is a support for students. Usually when literature study groups are not working, it is because of the lack of a solid foundation established during read alouds and whole-group discussions before the book clubs ever meet. Not all conversations will turn grand, but assigning roles won't guarantee it will happen, either. Without an extensive knowledge of the elements and structures of literature, a deeper commitment and level of engagement with texts, and students' willingness to listen and negotiate meanings with other members of a community of readers, the quality of the literature discussions in our classrooms will never improve.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

Teachers need to keep in mind that the primary goal of literature discussions is to invite students into the world of stories, first so they can lose themselves in it, and second so they have the opportunity to examine their responses in the company of other thoughtful readers (Eeds & Peterson, 1997). Because of the limitations in the amount of time available in the school day, teachers are required to make choices about what to teach, how much time to spend teaching reading, and the range of instructional experiences they provide their students. These choices are always value laden. In other words, teachers give time to what they themselves value, what is mandated through district and state standards and curriculum documents, and what their students demonstrate they need to know and learn. To create time and space for discussing children's literature, teachers must begin by finding value in the reading and discussing of literary texts. If teachers don't value children's literature itself and the possible roles that children's literature may play in the reading curriculum, they won't find time for reading and discussing it.

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