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An Unbirthday Gift: Giving Reading Back To Readers

Jodi Harris

It hit me on a Sunday as I stood in the checkout line at Barnes & Noble with my latest stack of novels by Jonathan Kellerman, Mary Higgins Clark, and John Grisham. I couldn't give the cashier my money fast enough, knowing I had to drive only a short distance before I could become lost in a great story. That's when I heard the voice in my head saying: These books don't come with questions, theme summaries, or vocabulary handouts, so why would you give them to kids with the books they read?

Introducing Literature Circles to My Students

The following Monday, I called my fifth grade students to the corner of the room where we meet for oral reading, pep talks, and chats. I told them that I had an "Unbirthday Gift" for each of them, and it would be the most special gift they would ever receive. Several sets of eyes looked at each other suspiciously, while others were envisioning gifts of Star Wars action figures or Beanie Babies. I began to explain that I would not be giving questions with the class novels anymore. I told them that I wanted to invite them to try something new called literature circles. I explained that with literature circles, they would have the freedom to see, think, and feel what was true for them while reading a book.

"Huh?" several students replied.

"Instead of telling you," I answered, "let me show you." I heard various grumblings while they were asked to take their seats.

I had come off of an incredible summer as a participant in the Red Cedar Writing Project at Michigan State University where I had made a commitment to give the children I teach the best in literacy education practices. I had spent the month before school cataloging a bibliography of readings to assist me in refining my skills. I had created a professional library for myself for improving the way I would teach spelling in a child-centered classroom, vocabulary development without the use of a text, and the implementation of literature circles. I had set improvements in motion in the areas of spelling and vocabulary yet still had not made the leap into literature circles. It was time.

While reading through NCTE's *Notes Plus* (March, 1997), I had run across a literature circle strategy in an article titled "Small Groups for Enlarged Understanding" by Margaret Mortenson. She divided her class into small groups of three or four and gave each group one of the following investigation activities to use with a particular novel. I modified these strategies for use with my fifth grade students:

Literary Luminary—The group finds segments in the text to read aloud. These segments should highlight important issues, themes, or questions.

Illustrator—The group draws a picture to represent the reading in a meaningful way.

Connector—The group finds connections between reading and real life, other books we have read, etc.

Director—The group formulates a few questions from the reading that will help lead a discussion of the big ideas or issues in the text.

Summarizer—The group gives a brief written summary of the reading that includes the key points or highlights.

Vocabulary Enricher—The group lists important, interesting or unique words from the text. The students should define these words using their own vocabulary and provide synonyms.

Travel Tracer—The group uses maps, timelines, etc. to show the setting of the story. They track where the action is taking place.

When the students returned to their seats, I divided them into small groups, explained each investigation segment, and randomly distributed them among the groups. We had just finished reading the first chapter of *Number the Stars* by Lois Lowry. I told them to give their tasks a try, and we could work out any kinks as we went along.

In all honesty, I was anxious. I believed literature circles worked from what I had been reading. I believed that giving children teacher-directed questions for literature growth was probably an oxymoron. Yet, I still hesitated to change how reading instruction was generated in my classroom. I wrestled with several questions. How will I be able to tell if they actually read the text? How will I know they have engaged with the text and the subtext as well? What will my place be in the discussions when each small group presents their tasks? How will I be able to teach them about literature if I don't give them questions as a way to guide them to those things I want them to discover and learn?

To test the validity of some of my fears, I made a list of questions that I would have used for the chapter had I not jumped into literature circles. I was curious to see how many "hits" I would have when I compared my list of questions to issues they would bring out on their own. After each group presented their tasks, I shook my head and grinned. "What's the matter, Miss Harris?" Pete asked.

"You amaze me. I can't believe what an awesome job everyone did," I answered. I unfolded my list of chapter questions and told the class how I was a little anxious to try this brand new thing

because I was wondering if they could dig into literature without my steering the way. I shook the page of chapter questions above my head and told them that every single question I had planned to ask, they had generated on their own through literature circles. I tossed the questions in the waste basket and many of the students clapped. I asked them why they were glad to see me throwing away the questions.

They replied, "Questions limit my thinking. There isn't room for my own thoughts."

"Sometimes I can't find the answer, but when I talk about it with my group, I see new things."

"Literature circles make me think. I used to just skim the chapters for the answers, but now I have to read."

"This is a really cool idea, and it's fun, too."

"I never looked forward to questions, but I'll look forward to this."

Working Through the Bumps

We had been engaging in reading through literature circles for several weeks. As a class we were working through the bumps together. One trouble spot we needed to address came about with the Travel Tracers. When discussing a large section of a work or an entire piece, the Travel Tracers bring the setting of the story into clear view. We were, however, presenting a few chapters of *Number the Stars* at a time. We were all growing tired of each Travel Tracer group pulling down the world map and showing us the location of Denmark. I was planning on addressing this with the class when a group of students brought it up to me. They were scheduled to be the Travel Tracers for the following day, and they asked if they could do something different. I asked them to explain what they had in mind.

"We could talk about how the characters travel in their mind, not just in places on a map," they replied.

"Give me an example of how the characters travel in their mind," I requested.

"Well, like Kirsten likes to hear fairy tales and she talks to her dolls. This is a way for her to escape from thinking about the Nazis, at least in her mind."

I told the group of students that I was glad others were tired of seeing Denmark pointed to on the map and was glad they had thought of a different route for Travel Tracers. When their group presented, I told them to share with the rest of the class what they had discussed with me the previous day. I asked other students if they had any other ideas for ways Travel Tracers could do their task. We generated several ideas:

1. Focus on the character's view of the setting; what he/she thinks.
2. Extend the setting. Give more details. (Ex: When the Johansens travel to Uncle Henrick's in the country and we find out he is a fisherman. Extend the details of what it would be like to do that for a living in Denmark by adding a little research.)
3. Discuss why we think the author chose a certain setting for each chapter since a writer writes everything for a reason.
4. Focus on mental or emotional travel—playing, singing, running, etc., and what the characters are doing.
5. Discuss what other choices the author might have made for each setting or situation and why the choice in the novel was a good one.

I applauded the class on their excellent ideas and told them I was even more excited to hear from the Travel Tracers in the future.

A second situation arose during a small-group presentation. The presenters seemed flat, disinterested, and out of sorts. I had my suspicions that they had not read the chapter. After the presentation, I talked with the members of the group. I told them that they just didn't seem focused today and asked what the problem was. After a little prodding, they admitted that they hadn't read the chapter. In many ways, I was glad this happened, because it proved to me that I could recognize if students had been reading or were trying to "wing" it. One student said that he read the chapter once but really didn't under-

stand what he had read. I told him that this was an important lesson to take back to the whole class and that I would do it without mentioning names.

I pulled the class together and asked them what good readers do when they are reading and don't understand something. They generated a list of suggestions: reread the chapter, talk it over with a friend, read it out loud so you can hear yourself, read the chapter with a friend. I reminded the students that it was very important to remember this because these are strategies that good readers use no matter how old they are.

Many fascinating responses have been generated by my students through literature circles. One student who was given the task of making connections between the text and other books we have read said, "I connected this book with *The Magic Eye* books because in those books you look hard to find the picture inside the picture. It goes with *Number the Stars* because when you look at Anna Marie and Ellen, you think they have a good life, but when you really look at them, you see they don't because they are always running from the Nazis."

Another student connected by saying, "There is competition in every sport and you compete against another team by using teamwork. The Danish were using teamwork to help keep the Jewish people safe from the Nazis."

A third student found connections by noting, "In *Julie of the Wolves*, Miyax kept thinking how far away California was and in *Number the Stars*, Ellen looked across the water to Sweden and thought about how far away freedom was."

One student connected the novel with life by holding up a basketball and stating, "In the NBA playoffs, the only goal is to win and in our novel, Ellen's only goal is to survive."

Other fascinations literature circles have brought forth have been what we have decided to call "wonderings." The Directors had come up with questions that have led to intriguing discussions. One group posed the question, "Why is so much of the chapter written about the cat?" This was something I had not wondered about, yet this group of students brought it out for class discussion.

We generated a variety of responses.

One student answered, "The cat is being forced to drink water when it wants milk, just like the characters in the story are being forced to eat bread and tea when they want coffee, cream, butter, and oatmeal."

Another student responded, "I think the author is trying to use the cat as a symbol for what is going on—doing something you do not want to do."

Other thoughts were, "Maybe the cat is another way the girls escape their fears of the Nazis, by playing with it all the time."

A second group of Directors posed the question, "Why was Mr. Rosen silent in Chapter 10 when the Nazis were questioning and yelling at the women about who was in the casket?"

One student's comment was, "Maybe the soldier thought he could trick the women and children easier than the men."

I asked the student what would make him think that and he replied, "Well, the soldier hit Mrs. Johansen just to make her be quiet. So they don't seem like they have very much respect for women."

A second student added, "Maybe Mr. Rosen knew that he could trust the women to lie to the soldiers and save all of their lives because they had done it before, so he just stayed quiet."

These are the types of "wonderings" that do not need to have an official answer, yet they allow us to probe, analyze, justify, reason, and suppose the intentions of the author and the text. We have had some of our best discussions from great questions such as these, originating from students.

With literature circles, my role has shifted in other ways as well. I am no longer the only deliverer of knowledge; we all are. I nudge, question and "what if" with the rest of the class. My physical placement in the classroom has changed also. I used to pull my chair to the front of the room or sit behind my desk when students delivered their responses to my questions. Now, when each literature circle presents, I find myself seated among the other groups on the floor. I become excited each day we have a literature circle discussion, anticipating what innovative and cre-

ative turns their presentations will take and wondering where in the text their curiosities will focus and expand.

The Core of the Program

Will I ever go back to distributing teacher-directed questions? Never! They were dead for me the day I tossed them in the wastebasket. I am continuing to read more about student-generated reading approaches such as *Lively Discussions: Fostering Engaged Reading*, but know that literature circles will remain at the core of the reading program. The greatest lesson I have learned by making the transition to literature circles is trust. I feel safe turning reading over to my students and know that their innate need to learn will lead all of us into a vast variety of new discoveries within the subtext and text and beyond.

Funny, I planned the unbirthday gift for my students. The gift seems to have found its way back to me.

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