

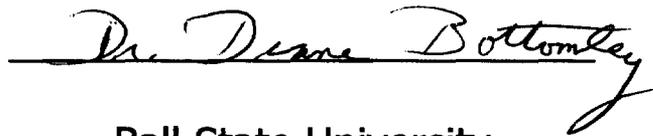
Exploring Literature Discussion Groups  
Through Children's Literature

An Honors Thesis  
(HONRS 499)

by

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A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Dr. Diane Bottomley". The signature is written in a cursive style and is positioned above a horizontal line.

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I would like to thank

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## **Exploring Literature Discussion Groups Through Children's Literature**

This project explored the how's and why's of literature discussion groups. It includes a history of literature discussion groups, research findings, benefits of, and different methods of literature discussion groups. It provides a systematic resource for teachers who want to incorporate literature discussion groups into their language arts curriculum. It also includes the National Council of Teachers of English & The International Reading Association standards for English/Language Arts and how literature discussion groups meet and exceed these standards.

The second half of my project is based upon my experiences implementing literature discussion groups. I have had the opportunity to learn from students while participating in three different literature discussion groups over the summer of 2001. I have also had opportunities to work with fourth grade students during my student teaching experience. I will use these experiences to talk about the benefits I have witnessed firsthand from literature discussion groups. One of my goals as an educator is to help all children gain an appreciation and a love for reading. I feel that literature discussion groups are one method of reaching my goal.

# **Exploring Literature Discussion Groups Through Children's Literature**

## **Part I - Research**

During a 1998 survey of literacy professionals, Commeyras and DeGroff discovered that 95% of these educators believe peer discussion to be a positive attribute in the literacy classroom and 77% were interested in incorporating literature discussion into their literacy program. However, only 33% of these same individuals admitted to using peer discussion in their classrooms (Almasi, O'Flahavan, & Arya, 2001, p. 96). If the majority of educators believe literature discussion is beneficial in the classroom, then why are only a small percentage of these educators using literature discussion in their classrooms? I believe the answer to this question is that most educators simply do not know how to effectively use literature discussion groups in their classrooms.

This paper addresses the issues of using discussion groups in the literacy curriculum. It will look at the questions of how literature discussion groups work and the benefits of using these groups in the elementary classroom. It will also look at both the educator and student roles in literature discussion groups and how to assess literature discussion groups.

### **Definition of a Literature Discussion Group-**

Before we can address the issues of how and why literature discussion groups work, we must first address the issue of what a literature discussion group is. Simply stated, a literature discussion group is a group that discusses literature. A literature discussion group is an opportunity for students to discuss literature.

Definitions and perceptions of peer discussion vary widely. The terms *literature circles*, *conversational discussion groups*, *grand conversations*, *book clubs* and *literature discussion groups* all refer to any group of individuals who come together to discuss a piece of literature. Frank, Dixon and Brandts all point out, that despite the title given to these groups, all are student centered and provide opportunities for students to discuss children's literature (Frank, Dixon & Brandts, 2001, p. 448).

Literature discussion groups have proven to be both beneficial to individual students and to the classroom learning environment. Their purpose is simple. Literature discussion groups provide meaningful learning opportunities for all students. "Dialogue is the best method for teaching and learning literature," (Peterson & Eeds, 1990, p. 6).

There are many different views on the purposes of literature discussion groups, but all come to the same conclusion. Literature discussion groups give students voice and choice in the literacy classroom.

"Reading and responding are the core of a literature circle. After students read-- they respond, they share their ideas, they ask questions to clarify misunderstandings, they talk about the book, and through this conversation they deepen their understanding," (Harris, Tompkins, Goodman, Chan, & Baker, 2002). "This idea ties back to reader response theory and Louise Rosenblatt's ideas about how students make meaning during reading. Responding is not something that students get all at once. Instead, as they read, and talk, and write about the ideas their comprehension is deepened in layers--layer upon layer" (Harris, Tompkins, Goodman, Chan, & Baker 2002).

Literature discussion groups have many purposes both inside and outside the classroom learning environment. Not only do literature groups emphasize the importance of reading and discussing children's literature or trade books (Reutzel & Cooter, 1999, p. 330) but "peer-led literature discussion groups have emerged as a potential forum in which students' voices can be heard; and they provide a means for allowing students to assume control over their literacy learning" (Evans, 1996, p. 194). Every teacher wants his or her classroom to be student-centered. A literature discussion group provides the perfect opportunity to give students some responsibility in their literacy learning.

A substantive body of research on literature discussion groups has reported cognitive, social and affective benefits for children. Research has also shown that peer discussion provides valuable learning opportunities that are culturally and linguistically appropriate for diverse learners (Almasi, O'Flahavan, & Arya, 2001, p. 96). What does all this mean? It means that literature discussion groups are beneficial to students needs, both inside and outside of the classroom environment. Students who participate in literature discussion groups show more confidence in themselves, in and out of the classroom setting.

### **Literature Discussion Groups and Standards-**

Another issue to look at when using literature discussion groups is the curriculum standards. If literature discussion groups are beneficial to students' needs, are they meeting the curriculum needs of the teacher and student? Listed is the first English/Language Arts curriculum standard published by the National Council of

Teachers of English and the International Reading Association in 1996. All twelve of these standards can be viewed in Appendix A.

1) Students read a wide range of print and non-print texts to build an understanding of texts, of themselves, and of the cultures of the United States and the world; to acquire new information; to respond to the needs and demands of society and the workplace; and for personal fulfillment. Among these texts are fiction and nonfiction, classic and contemporary works.

All twelve of these standards are incorporated into literature discussion groups. Standard number one is acknowledged by the fact that students are reading for a purpose of understanding the literature and how they personally respond to that piece of literature. By choosing different genres of literature and by incorporating literature from many cultures into literature discussion groups, standard two is reached. This type of literature often leads to a deeper understanding and participation in literature discussion, because students draw upon their own background knowledge and the knowledge of others to really understand and appreciate the text. Standard three directly states that readers are interacting with others. Literature discussion groups use this interaction to build upon personal understanding and appreciation for the literature discussed.

Standards five and six directly relate as the students discuss, or document, their reaction to the literature. Standards seven and eight also correlate as the students are using technology to not only benefit themselves and their learning experience, but to research and discover new material. Standard nine discusses diversity and

understanding. The more students read and discuss, their understanding and appreciation to difference deepens. This can also apply to those students whose first language is not English (standard ten). These students learn more about the English language the more they use and interpret their classmates' discussions.

Both standards eleven and twelve are critical to literature discussion groups. These standards are the core of discussion. Students who participate and take an active role in their learning process are better learners. These students have made their learning process meaningful. As I have illustrated, all twelve of the English/Language Arts standards can be directly incorporated into the literature discussion process.

### **Systematic Process-**

The first obvious step to beginning a literature discussion group might be to choose the literature to be discussed. However, the first step is to get students excited about reading. Exposing children to interesting, well-written books will allow them the opportunity to become excited.

In a classroom setting, the teacher is in charge of creating this classroom learning environment. Before literature discussion groups are present in the classroom, a teacher's expectations must be clearly defined and shared with students. After a seven month study of literature discussion, Villaume, Worden, Williams, Hopkins, and Rosenblatt had this to say: "We believe that meaningful conversations will occur among students and teachers if contexts are created where students feel that their ideas are respected and valued by teachers and peers and where time is taken to reflect on and

talk about discussion expectations and strategies” (Villaume, Worden, Williams, Hopkins, & Rosenblatt, 1994, p. 482).

A literature discussion group can take on many different formats. The facilitator of a discussion group can be the teacher or students. Students may choose the novel they wish to discuss or they may be assigned a specific novel. All the students in the classroom may be reading and discussing the same novel or each group may be reading a different novel along the same topic. In his book, Harvey Daniels defined literature discussion groups as being “formed around several people’s shared desire to read the same book or article- not by reading level, ability group, teacher assignment, or curriculum mandate” (Daniels, 1994, p. 14). If students get a choice in their literacy learning, they become intrinsically motivated to learn.

Another view is that a book club is a heterogeneously mixed group that represents all views present in the classroom. If gender, race, ethnicity, economic background, and academic abilities are all brought to a literature discussion group, the students interacting in that group will have an enhanced understanding of the text because of their interaction with this mixed group (Small Planet Communications, 2002).

Because literature discussion groups revolve around lively discussions, books that deal with important and often controversial issues make the best choices. In addition, most teachers use themes to organize their reading instruction. This may mean that the books in the classroom library are thematically related to those that the students are reading in their small groups. Or it may mean that each small group is reading a different book, but all of the books share a common topic or theme. Using literature

discussion groups in the classroom can increase your options for interdisciplinary instruction when you select books that develop themes from your social studies, science, or other curriculum areas (Small Planet Communications, 2002).

Many discussion groups begin with the teacher presenting a short book talk on each selection and then allowing the students to look through each piece of literature before choosing. It is important to choose literature that is at a variety of reader ability levels but still maintain the common theme. It is important that all students, not just the best readers in the class, read high-quality literature. Teachers who use literature discussion groups have found that every student has something to contribute to a book discussion when given the opportunity and appropriate support (Small Planet Communications, 2002).

Students, for the most part, should be placed in the group of their first choice. However, that may not always be possible. A student will bring more to a discussion group if they have an interest in the literature being discussed. By allowing students to choose their own piece of literature, they have a voice in the classroom environment. They choose literature of interest to them and discuss topics that are relevant to their everyday lives.

Gail Tompkins offers approaches to using both literature circles and grand conversation in her book, 50 Literacy Strategies. Her step-by-step process for grand conversations includes six steps. Tompkins' version of a grand conversation involves reading or listening, writing or drawing, reflecting, sharing and discussing, and then writing or drawing again. Tompkins adds that it is not necessary to assign a grade for

students' participation, but all students should participate by sharing comments and being supportive of classmates' comments (Tompkins, 1998, p. 46).

Her process for literature circles also includes six steps, which are choosing trade book(s), presenting a book talk on each, students setting their reading and discussion schedule, student participation in a literature discussion, students sharing their book with others, and students using a form of self-assessment to assess their participation in the literature circle (Tompkins, 1998, p. 67).

Tompkins makes a distinction between grand conversations and literature circles in the writing process. The communication in a grand conversation takes on a written form while communication in a literature circle is verbal. Tompkins also offers advice on beginning a literature discussion group. She recommends that a teacher begin with only one literature discussion group. With only one group, the teacher can actively participate and model each step of a literature discussion group. Once a teacher has met with each group and the students are familiar with the process, the groups can then meet all at once with the students leading and the teacher observing (Tompkins, 1998, p. 67).

### **Student Roles-**

Once the teacher has modeled the literature discussion group process, the students can then meet on their own and take an active role in their learning process. There are defined roles that students can take on. It is suggested that each role be modeled with all the students participating before the students are allowed to step into the role singly and lead their group. One such role is the *discussion director*. This role encourages the

students to think about and document questions that can be brought to the discussion group. The *Passage Master* focuses on the literary elements of the book. This student chooses several memorable passages to share with the group and tells why the passage was chosen. The *Words Wizard* member of a group looks for and documents key words in a piece of literature. These words can be hard words that require discussion or can simply be words that made the student laugh, cry, scared, or excited about the literature (Tompkins, 2002, p. 60).

The *Connector's* role is one of the most important roles that make the experience meaningful. This student makes connections between the book and the students' lives. The connector can also make comparisons among books with similar themes or same authors. A summary of the reading is prepared by the *Summarizer* to convey main ideas to the group. The *Investigator* role locates information about the book, author, or topic to share with the group to enhance the learning experience and deepen the background knowledge of the material being discussed. Tompkins also offers the roles of discussion leader, harmonizer, wordsmith, and illustrator (Tompkins, 2002, p. 60).

The *Artful Artist* chooses part of the story that inspired him/her and draws that scene to share with the group. The group members can then guess what scene is represented before the artful artist gives the answer. This allows students who are creative in ways other than written communication to share and participate within the group. Another role is the *Character Captain*. This role focuses on one character in the story and helps all group members to understand that particular character's role, strengths, and actions in the story.

During the literature discussion process, students can try on many different roles. Roles can vary from group meeting to group meeting, or roles can alternate each time a new book is chosen and discussed. The most important thing is that the students all share these roles and that they are participating.

### **Teacher Roles-**

I have outlined several roles that students can use when participating in a literature discussion group; however, students are not the only members in these groups. Teachers also play an important role. In an intensive, two-year research project, five teachers examined the question of teacher roles. Short, Kaufman, Kaser, Kahn, and Crawford examined the teacher role in the literature discussion group and came up with four distinct teacher roles. They are teacher as facilitator, teacher as participant, teacher as mediator, and teacher as active listener. All four of these roles play an integral part of the literature discussion group. These roles are not discrete or rigid. It is possible to move in and out of them throughout the discussion in response to student interactions and the topics under discussion (Short, Kaufman, Kaser, Kahn, & Crawford, 1999, p. 379). A teacher may move from role to role in a short period, or may stay in one role throughout the length of a literature discussion group.

The facilitator role is the role most frequently assumed by teachers. In this role, the teacher encourages and monitors student interaction and participation within the literature discussion group. The facilitator role can be broken into five main types of facilitating. The first role type is encouraging students to extend or expand their ideas. The teacher uses Bloom's Taxonomy to ask questions at different levels such as, "What

do you think?" or "What do you mean?" The second role type is where the teacher provides additional information to clarify details related to the story. A teacher is going to have an expanded knowledge on topics that students may not have and needs to share that knowledge with students. Teachers in this role will also clarify misconceptions that students may have (Short, Kaufman, Kaser, Kahn, & Crawford, 1999, p. 381).

A third role type comes when teachers restate comments from students when it is felt others in the group have missed something important or when the teacher wants to encourage students to consider a comment in greater depth. Conversational maintenance and maintaining order is the fourth facilitator role type. A teacher may initiate a change in topics or invite silent students to participate. The final facilitator role occurs when the teacher challenges a student's comment during literature discussion. This role involves a relationship between student and teacher where the teacher can feel comfortable enough to challenge a student's comment, and the student feels comfortable enough to accept that challenge. This challenge is not meant to put down a student's view, but to initiate group conversation on the challenged comment (Short, Kaufman, Kaser, Kahn, & Crawford, 1999, p. 382).

The second teacher role discussed in their research article is teacher as participant. This role allows the teacher to remove him/herself from the role of keeping students on task, to a role where the teacher is an integral part of the discussion. A teacher in this role shares their own connections to the literature discussed and talks about personal, related experiences. A teacher participating can also make broad thematic statements.

An example might be a statement such as, "People should all be treated equal, regardless of skin color" when discussing a piece of literature focusing on diversity (Short, Kaufman, Kaser, Kahn, & Crawford, 1999, p. 385).

A teacher in this role also expresses personal opinions and evaluations. The researchers did note that in this study, students accepted their teacher's comments and opinions as part of the group. "One function of the teacher's comments was to raise issues that built from students' ideas, but also to push the group to consider other perspectives on or connections to that idea" (Short, Kaufman, Kaser, Kahn, & Crawford, 1999, p. 385). It is important to model exactly how we expect our students to participate in literature discussion groups. How better to model this, than to participate ourselves? Teachers also need to be mindful not to "hurry" the discussion to get on to other subjects or duties present in the classroom.

The mediator role involves the teacher using facilitator or participant talk to encourage students to connect their discussion about the book to their own life experiences and values. The mediator role also uses literature discussion as a place for students to work through personal issues and to share and discuss values. Literature discussion groups allow teachers to understand children's thinking and to challenge them to consider other possibilities. This role moves past the literature piece itself, and moves into discussion relating the literature to the students' personal lives (Short, Kaufman, Kaser, Kahn, & Crawford, 1999, p. 386).

The fourth and final teacher role is the active listener role. In this role, the teacher not only acknowledges students' statements with background comments such as "yeah"

or “hmm,” but the teacher also affirms students’ thinking. It is important to remember that affirming students’ thinking should not be thought of as affirming the power of the teacher. In this role, it was noted by Short, Kaufman, Kaser, Kahn, and Crawford, that in groups where teachers engaged in significant amounts of active listening, students more frequently interrupted each other and talked on top of each other, competing for attention from the teacher (Short, Kaufman, Kaser, Kahn, & Crawford, 1999, p. 386).

There is no right or wrong role and not all of these roles may be appropriate for the type of literature discussion group taking place in a classroom. The teacher involved in the literature discussion groups needs to choose the role that is right for them, the role where they feel the most comfortable.

Short, Kaufman, Kaser, Kahn, and Crawford have only defined some of the roles where teachers find themselves. Teachers must also turn to Vygotsky’s theory of modeling and scaffolding (Almasi, O’Flahavan, & Arya, 2001, p. 96) to lay the foundation for their students. Scaffolding is defined as the assistance provided that allows students to complete tasks they cannot complete independently (Eggen & Kauchak, 2001, p. 58). This is also referred to as the zone of proximal development. This is a range of tasks that a child cannot do alone but can accomplish when assisted by an adult. In a classroom setting, it is the teacher’s responsibility to work with students in this range so they may become successful on their own. When working in a literature discussion group, expectations must be laid before students can take on leadership roles within their groups (Eggen & Kauchak, 2001, p. 56-58).

In her book, The Art of Teaching Reading, Lucy McCormick Calkins made a list of issues teachers repeatedly encounter when working with literature discussion groups in their classrooms. Below are some of the issues Calkins mentioned.

- Dealing with management issues
- Bringing out all the voices
- Staying grounded in the text
- Exploring versus answering questions
- Finding and pursuing a focus
- Learning the value of disagreeing with each other and learning to do so in ways others can hear
- Moving between one text and another
- Using advice from mini-lessons and conferences (Calkins, 2001, p 240-241)

Once these issues are identified within a literature discussion group, Calkins identifies five directions teachers have available in order to assist the group.

- Suggest a strategy for the group to try
- Launch students into an inquiry to gather more information on a problem they are having
- Point out something someone is already doing (or almost doing) and ask everyone to try it
- Ask students to replay a conversation and try a different way of doing it

- Whisper to specific students, helping them to make a particular move in the group's conversation (Calkins, 2001, p 241-242)

Even though the students are leading the literature discussion group, the teacher is the overall facilitator, even if he or she is unseen during the process. Calkins calls this process prompting. She writes that it is important to coach students into making the moves we want to become habitual. However, these moves have to come from the students. As a teacher, we cannot make these moves in the student's place (Calkins, 2001, p. 242).

### **Assessment-**

Benefits, strategies, roles, and practices have all been identified, but nowhere has the word assessment been used. Schools need to be able to assess their students. If students are in charge of their literacy learning through literature discussion groups, then how can a teacher assess them? "Very adequate documentation of kids' growth in this activity- or any other classroom structure- can be achieved by occasionally sampling their performance, by collecting the raw material of their efforts in portfolios, by talking to kids regularly and keeping track of what they say" (Daniels, 1994, p.165). If students use a discussion log or reading journal (Seely-Flint, 1999, p. 52) they can be assessed. If students use a self-evaluation form (Tompkins, 2002, p. 609), they can be assessed. Assessment does not have to be a paper and pencil form. Students can turn in a quick-draw or quick-write and receive a participation score.

Portfolios are another excellent way to assess students' growth and performance in this area. Students can submit journal entries, discussion logs, drawings and

illustrations, and notes and samples from their various roles to be kept in a working portfolio. This portfolio offers the classroom teacher an easy way of seeing students' participation in the literature discussion group process.

To point out another aspect of assessment, the ISTEP testing program includes questions related to standards concerning literacy response and analysis. Schools seem to be focused on testing scores and if literature response is involved, literature discussion groups are an excellent way to meet the standards and prepare students for testing questions.

Many educators connect literature discussion groups with upper elementary or older students. However, literature discussion groups can be used in all grades, even a kindergarten setting. What better way to foster social and communication skills in the young, than to have students discuss literature with each other? In younger classrooms, teachers or volunteers can read trade books to groups of students before turning them loose to discuss. Younger students can use their reading logs to do a quick-draw about their stories. They can share their likes and dislikes as easily as older students can. The term literature does not have to be reserved for a particular group of students. All students can benefit from the setting and experience of a literature discussion group.

I have worked with literature discussion groups in two separate and unique settings. I have seen first-hand the benefits students have when participating in these groups. Students themselves have told me that they find these groups challenging but

also stimulating. The chance to leave their desk, to leave the teacher instruction for a while, and to really participate in their literacy learning excites children.

However, I have also seen the dedication and hard work required on the teacher's part. Students cannot be expected to participate and succeed in a literature discussion group without guidance and modeling.

## **Exploring Literature Discussion Groups Through Children's Literature**

### **Part II – Practice**

I have outlined the history of literature discussion groups and the how's and why's to using them in the elementary classroom. Now I will discuss the practice of using these groups with literature and children.

During the summer of 2001, I worked with three separate literature discussion groups, or Book Clubs, at Danner's Books and Coffeeshop in Muncie, Indiana. The Book Clubs began on Saturday, June 16, 2001 and ended Saturday, August 4, 2001 and lasted for approximately an hour. There was a separate Book Club for third graders, fourth and fifth graders, and sixth graders and older. The storeowner, Susan Danner, and I led the groups and participated in each week's discussion. The groups were very informal, but the expectations for student participation were still present.

Before we began the groups, Susan and I sat down and decided which books we would like to read with each group. Our selection differed from a classroom setting selection. We had to keep in mind that we were a business. We also had to remember that each week, different students may show up and each member could potentially be at a different reading level.

We based our choices upon reading level, length of the book, interest level, appropriateness, readability, and award winners. We wanted literature that we had some knowledge about, but also wanted to read or read again. We did not want to choose any material that could be considered questionable, as we were running a business. We chose books that would not only interest the students, but also allow

them to read the book within a week. We also tried to choose books that alternated between a female and a male lead character.

Literature selections for each group are listed below.

<b>Title</b>	<b>Author</b>
<b>Third Grade Reading Selection</b>	
<i>Mr. Popper's Penguins</i>	Richard and Florence Atwater
<i>Freckle Juice</i>	Judy Blume
<i>Ralph S. Mouse</i>	Beverly Cleary
<i>George's Marvelous Medicine</i>	Roald Dahl
<i>How to Be Cool in the Third Grade</i>	Betsy Duffey
<i>Scrambled Eggs and Spider Legs</i>	Gary Hogg
<i>Pearl Harbor is Burning!</i>	Kathleen V. Kudlinski
<i>The Flunking of Joshua T. Bates</i>	Susan Shreve
<b>Fourth &amp; Fifth Grade Reading Selection</b>	
<i>The True Confessions of Charlotte Doyle</i>	Avi
<i>Tuck Everlasting</i>	Natalie Babbitt
<i>Frindle</i>	Andrew Clements
<i>See Behind Trees</i>	Michael Dorris
<i>The Whipping Boy</i>	Sid Fleischman
<i>There's an Owl in the Shower</i>	Jean Craighead George
<i>The War with Grandpa</i>	Robert Kimmel Smith
<i>Wringer</i>	Jerry Spinelli
<b>Sixth Grade &amp; Older Reading Selection</b>	
<i>The Watsons Go to Birmingham- 1963</i>	Christopher Paul Curtis
<i>My Side of the Mountain</i>	Jean Craighead George
<i>Out of the Dust</i>	Karen Hesse
<i>When Zachary Beaver Came to Town</i>	Kimberly Willis Holt
<i>From the Mixed-Up Files of Mrs. Basil E. Frankweiler</i>	E.L. Konigsburg
<i>Number the Stars</i>	Lois Lowry
<i>The Westing Game</i>	Ellen Raskin
<i>The Cricket in Times Square</i>	George Selden

To prepare for each week's discussion, I read each Book Club's selection and made notes for myself. I tried to pick out some vocabulary, foreshadowing, and key

elements in the story that would not only develop good discussion, but would be points that the students themselves might have questions about.

Each book club meeting started with each member rating the literature selection on a scale from one to ten. Most ratings were around six-eight, meaning the students really enjoyed the piece. This rating system allowed each member to feel comfortable to participate from the start, and allowed Susan and I to gauge the reaction and feelings about each piece. Each member was then asked to share what they remembered the most or enjoyed about the story. At times, members also shared why they did not enjoy reading the story.

I took on the facilitator role and led each discussion. I would ask specific questions directed at all levels of Bloom's taxonomy. I would start out with questions at the lower levels such as main character, setting, etc. I would also try to include questions that required the students to think about their own lives and related certain aspects of the book. For example, while reading Konigsburg's From the Mixed-Up Files of Mrs. Basil E. Frankweiler and George's My Side of the Mountain, I asked the students to place themselves in the characters' shoes. What actions would they have taken. Would they act the same way that the characters in the book? Would their reactions be the same? The types of questions allowed me to not only gauge the depth of understanding, but also allowed me to catch a glimpse of who the students were.

I also added knowledge to the group when the students did not understand a particular story. One observation that stays in my mind was the reaction of two of the fourth grade female Book Club members. After discussing Michael Dorris' Sees Behind

Trees, it was apparent that neither girl really understood the novel. This particular novel is a Native American story about a young boy reaching his adulthood. Both girls rated the story very low.

After we discussed the story and their reaction, I understood their reaction a little better. Neither girl had background knowledge of Native American culture, and could therefore, not relate to the story, the characters, or the events that took place. My role as a facilitator was important because I could add that background knowledge they were lacking. An instance like this could be taken care of, or even prevented, in a classroom setting. Literature that complemented the course study would allow each student to learn about the literature as they read each piece.

The sixth grade and older book club read some historical fiction novels such as Curtis' The Watstons Go to Birmingham- 1963 and Lowry's Number the Stars. Again, acting in the facilitator role, I brought background knowledge to the group to bring understanding.

Occasionally I would take on the role of active listener. Most groups did not develop a deep enough conversation where this role was possible. Most groups needed a facilitator to provide questions, thoughts, and someone to decide when to move on.

The Book Studies were my first interaction with literature discussion groups and were a great opportunity for me as an employee and as an educator. I learned how to choose appropriate literature and how to format a discussion group. The store setting was very different from a classroom setting. The participants were also very different from a classroom of children. The members of our Book Clubs volunteered their

Saturday mornings because they enjoyed reading. In a classroom setting, not all children would choose to pick up a novel and read and discuss this novel over their summer vacation.

I feel that the Book Groups could have been even more beneficial if the students held a more active role in the discussion process. Using the discussion roles would give the students a leadership role in the process and would help them know what type of ideas and comments to bring to the discussion.

### **Student Teaching Experience-**

My second interaction with literature discussion groups was during my student teaching experience. Upon meeting my supervising teacher, I inquired as to whether she already used some form of literature discussion groups in the classroom. I was excited to learn that she did, and she was excited to learn that I had new knowledge and ideas to bring to her literacy program. My supervising teacher, Mrs. Nesseth, and I used literature discussion groups with the novels, Number the Stars by Lois Lowry and Marie McSwigan's Snow Treasure. Mrs. Nesseth had already chosen these two novels because of their common theme. The setting of each novel is during World War II and the main characters are children. Both plots relate in that the children in the novels have to become heroes in their own way to benefit their countries during a time of war.

Our literature discussion groups were held every day for about three weeks. Each meeting with the group lasted anywhere from ten minutes to 45 minutes. To begin the unit, Mrs. Nesseth and I gave a book talk on each novel and a short introduction. We then allowed the students to look through both novels, to get a feel

for the language used, and to decide which novel would be right for them. After the students named their preference, we met with our groups for the first time. Mrs. Nesseth met with the students reading Number the Stars, and I worked with Snow Treasure.

During the original meeting with my group, I outlined what would be the role of the students in the literature discussion process and what would be my role. Our particular book study groups did not have defined student roles within the group. At the beginning of the study, the teacher role was more defined. I would mainly start out in the facilitator role to lead each discussion and would then take on a participant role when the students would do more of the facilitating. As a participant, I always brought some questions to the group, but was more interested in hearing them respond to my thoughts, and to the thoughts of each other.

My facilitator role was again required due to the depth of the novel. The time period of Snow Treasure is during World War II. My students had some knowledge of the German soldiers and war, but they needed help and guidance in other areas. This novel used a lot of unfamiliar language. I would use this opportunity to have the students look up vocabulary in the dictionaries and we would all record the word in our journals. This allowed us to understand the novel and allowed the students to take a leadership role at the same time.

Each member of the group, including myself, set aside approximately ten pages in a notebook specifically for the book study. Each chapter was listed and this was a place to write vocabulary, figurative language, interesting quotes, or questions. It was

the students' job to write a short summary after reading each chapter and to have something to share with the group during the next meeting. Sometimes we would simply share our summaries, other times we would share an illustration drawn after reading a selection from the book. I would collect these notebooks periodically and a grade was assigned. My assessment was based not only on students' participation through the notebook, but also on their group participation. If students had a short summary, required illustrations and captions, and vocabulary recorded in their notebook, they received full credit for the notebook. I would then look at their group behavior for assessment. Did the student participate in discussion? Did he/she ask questions or remain silent? Was he/she asked to leave a discussion due to behavior? These factors all contributed to the students' final grade.

Mrs. Nesseth and I found it easier to work with two larger groups where we could each be a member of one group. Our next book studies will concentrate on the student roles. In order to do this, each role will have to be modeled before the students are ready to take on the role themselves. Our plans include choosing one novel, but having several smaller groups. This will allow teacher instruction focused to the group as a whole before each group separates and works on individual work.

Working with a classroom of fourth graders was different from working with discussion groups in a bookstore setting. Not all students were eager to participate and to take the active role. Some students need more guidance than others need and cannot handle too much freedom in their learning. I spent a lot of my time in these groups managing student behavior. Some students chose to participate by interrupting

and bringing insignificant points to the discussion. This was simply not tolerated. Many sessions, students would end up at their own desk reading the literature on their own.

By using the different roles, I believe that these issues could all be addressed and handled. When students are assigned a role, the meaning of the literature discussion groups becomes clear. They have a specific job to do and their classmates depend on them to participate and share in the discussion.

Assigning roles should be done carefully. Roles are assigned to students who will succeed and excel in their particular role. Allowing the students to succeed in one area will allow them to feel more comfortable working with their peers in other leadership roles.

### **Conclusion-**

This thesis is simply a starting point for literature discussion groups. I have identified many choices and formats available when using a literature discussion format in the elementary classroom. When deciding to use a literature discussion group in the classroom, the most important thing to remember is that there is no right or wrong way to use a literature discussion group. Each group is uniquely formatted to fit the needs of the classroom environment, teacher, and students. The flexibility of literature discussion groups allows the reading curriculum to be shaped according to practical requirements of the school day as well as the individual needs and interests of students (Raphael, Pardo, Highfield, & McMahon, 1997, p. 10).

The classroom teacher has a great deal of choice in the literacy program when using literature discussion groups. Students can be working in groups on other projects

while instruction is given to one group. This allows the teacher to spend more quality time with one or two groups each day, instead of the class as a whole.

With all the demands, preparation time, and cooperation required, are literature discussion groups really worth it? I believe that if students can share their thoughts and ideas while creating meaning and taking an active role in their literacy learning, then yes, literature discussion groups are well worth it.

## **Exploring Literature Discussion Groups Through Children’s Literature**

### **Appendix A-**

The Standards for the English Language Arts

### **Appendix B-**

Lesson Plan for Student Teaching Book Study

### **Professional Resources**

### **Children’s Literature Resources**

## **Appendix A**

The National Council of Teachers of English & The International Reading Association

### *The Standards for the English Language Arts*

- 1) Students read a wide range of print and non-print texts to build an understanding of texts, of themselves, and of the cultures of the United States and the world; to acquire new information; to respond to the needs and demands of society and the workplace; and for personal fulfillment. Among these texts are fiction and nonfiction, classic and contemporary works.
- 2) Students read a wide range of literature from many periods in many genres to build an understanding of the many dimensions of human experience.
- 3) Students apply a wide range of strategies to comprehend, interpret, evaluate, and appreciate texts. They draw on their own prior experience, their interactions with other readers and writers, their knowledge of word meaning and of other texts, their word identification strategies, and their understanding of textual features.
- 4) Students adjust their use of spoken, written, and visual language to communicate effectively with a variety of audiences and for different purposes.
- 5) Students employ a wide range of strategies as they write and use different writing process elements appropriately to communicate with different audiences for a variety of purposes.
- 6) Student apply knowledge of language structure, language conventions, media techniques, figurative language, and genre to create, critique, and discuss print and non-print texts.

7) Students conduct research on issues and interests by generating ideas and questions, and by posing problems. They gather, evaluate, and synthesize data from a variety of sources to communicate their discoveries in ways that suit their purpose and audience.

8) Students use a variety of technological and informational resources to gather and synthesize information and to create and communicate knowledge.

9) Students develop an understanding of and respect for diversity in language use, patterns, and dialects across cultures, ethnic groups, geographic regions, and social roles.

10) Students whose first language is not English make use of their first language to develop competency in the English language arts and to develop understanding of content across the curriculum.

11) Students participate as knowledgeable, reflective, creative, and critical members of a variety of literacy communities.

12) Students use spoken, written, and visual language to accomplish their own purposes.

## Appendix B

**Jenny Wilson**  
**Grade 4**

**Subject/Topic** Book Study- Snow Treasure  
**Date Taught** March 2002

### Objective:

- The students will be participating in and leading small group discussions over their particular book.

### Standards:

- English/Language Arts:
  - 4.1.1, 4.2.3, 4.3.2, 4.3.5, 4.5.2, 4.5.4, 4.6.1, 4.7.1, 4.7.2, 4.7.3, 4.7.8, 4.7.11, 4.7.13

### Materials:

- McSwigan, Marie. Snow Treasure. New York: Scholastic, Inc., 1942.
- Lowry, Lois. Number the Stars. New York: Bantam Doubleday Dell Publishing Group, Inc., 1989.
- IDEA Book for each student with a section of approximately 10 pages set aside for Snow Treasure.

### Motivation:

- Present a book talk on both books to the students. Before starting, explain that both Number the Stars and Snow Treasure have a common theme. Both books are about children who lived during World War II. The children in these stories had an important role in helping their countries during the war.

## **Lesson Content:**

- The first day, present a book talk on both books, Snow Treasure and Number the Stars. Then pass out copies of each book so that the students can read the back cover, look through the book, and become familiar with the language used in the book.
- After the students have had a chance to look through both novels, have them ask any remaining questions they may have about the books and then write their name and choice on a piece of paper. Collect the slips and decide if each student will get his/her first choice.
- Pass out a copy of the students' book choice and a bookmark. Have the students also get their IDEA book.
- Record the title and number of each students' book. Have them write their name on their bookmark and their book number in their IDEA book.
- The students will set aside approximately ten pages in their IDEA notebook to record vocabulary, figurative language, short summaries from each chapter, illustrations, and questions that they want to bring to group discussion.
- Each group will decide how much that will read each day. Students are responsible for recording information in their IDEA notebook.
- Some of the reading will be done in group and some will be done individually. As the groups progress, the amount of student participation and leadership will increase.

**Practice/Application:**

- The students will be reading, writing, and discussing in small groups over a novel of their choice.

**Closure:**

- The students will lead a group discussion over the book. Help them lead the discussion and answer some basic questions. *Did you like the book? What was your favorite part? Did the story end as you predicted?*

**Evaluation:**

- The students will be given a grade for their participation in book study groups.
  - This grade is based on participation in discussion and completion of notebook activities.
- The students will be graded on their IDEA notebook, including their vocabulary, summaries, and anything extra they wrote down to bring to discussion.

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