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Before the Conversations Become "Grand"

Literature circles, literature studies or book clubs. The professional literature is replete with various names for children and teachers coming together to discuss quality literature (Peterson & Eeds, 1997; Short, 1997). These discussion groups are quite different than the traditional reading groups described in the basal manuals, where the instruction focused on the acquisition of skills and comprehension was measured by commercially designed tests (Murphy, 1997). Instead, these literature discussions are intended to focus on the creation of meaning (Rosenblatt, 1994), personal responses to literature (Langer, 1995) and the analysis of the author's craft (Smith, 1998).

As teachers, we cannot assume that after simply handing a book to children they will be able to discuss literature in depth, make connections across different titles, and have insights into the author's style and be able to investigate the story world created. We also cannot assume that children will be able to successfully interact in small groups without support from the teacher and multiple opportunities to come together to discuss literature. Classroom teachers must remain cognizant of the social dimensions of these discussions and be willing to work at demonstrating the necessary social skills and providing support for children interacting in literature discussions.

Before children are sent off into small groups to discuss literature, primarily chapter books for older readers and picture story 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.

In this article, I will discuss from a practical perspective, the foundations that support literature circles. Building on the work of Brian Cambourne and his "conditions for learning" (Cambourne, 1988) and my own experiences as an intermediate multiage classroom teacher using a workshop approach to language arts and reading, I have created a conceptual framework for discussing the underlying structures of my reading workshop. These three frames of reference or "structures" are: (1) exposure, (2) exploration, and (3) interactions.

These structures or frames of reference are more of an ideological construct, something that helps me to conceptualize the way I conduct my reading workshop. These structures are not separate, linear stages that one progresses through in order to begin literature circles, rather they are ongoing structures that overlap and are put into practice from the beginning of the school year. I believe each one is necessary to create the foundation for effective literature circles to take place. These three structures of the reading workshop support teachers and students on their journey towards "Grand Conversations" (Peterson & Eeds, 1990).

Exposure

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 (Trelease, 1989). Reading books aloud exposes children to the language of stories and helps them to understand the differences between oral language and "book language" (Cullinan, 1992). Reading aloud also introduces children to a wide variety of children's literature, including new genres, authors and illustrators. 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.

Picture story books are an excellent genre to read aloud because they are generally short enough to finish in one sitting, include elegant illustrations and poetic language and have multiple layers of meaning. Reading a wide assortment of children's picture books allows

students to develop relationships with favorite books and authors, make connections from literature to their life experiences and find new titles to read independently. These read aloud experiences invite students to engage in conversations around children's literature and share in the enjoyment of reading.

Grouping picture books together around a common theme or other relationship, such as genre, author or illustrator, helps children to make connections across individual titles. It is this ability to connect books to student's lives and to other literature that helps them to be successful in their literature study discussions. (Gambrell, 1993).

A visual representation of the stories read during a particular unit of study can help children make connections across individual titles. Comparison charts and "story quilts" are two such devices. A comparison chart is a chart that lists the titles of the books read along the left hand column of the chart, and the elements of literature or "discussion points" across the top of the chart. Using various discussion points and elements of literature that have emerged during the read aloud, the comparison chart helps students to compare and contrast the differences and similarities between various titles.

A story quilt can be created on the classroom wall, where photocopies of the covers of all the books we have read together during the year are placed on construction paper squares in a quilt-like pattern. Reducing the photocopies of the book covers to 65% their original size, allows enough room to fit all of the titles that are read during the year. This makes a nice visual presentation of our shared literacy experiences, as well as providing a mnemonic device for students to recall specific titles and authors in order to make connections to new stories being read.

Another device used to expose children to new titles and authors is the "booktalk." On a daily basis, I give a "booktalk" about a particular title that I feel will interest my students. A "booktalk" is a short oral review of the book designed to entice my readers to explore various new titles on their own. A librarian once told me that it was her job to get children the books they wanted. It is important to introduce children to as many new titles, authors and illustrators as possible each year

so students can discover personal favorites and come to appreciate the variety of children's literature available to them.

It is important to be very selective about the books chosen to read aloud. They should be enjoyable, of superior literary quality, engage students interests, allow for good discussions and invite students to revisit them over and over again. There are so many good books being published nowadays, that there is just no excuse to read books of inferior quality. Time to read books of one's own choosing, the opportunity to revisit favorite titles and authors, a large selection of books in the classroom library, the opportunity to discuss books in a risk-free environment and the continuous introduction of new titles and authors to students exposes them to the world of literature. It is this exposure that lays the foundation for the exploration of literature.

Exploration

Before students are able to independently discuss books beyond the, "I liked the book" level, students need to be able to listen to each other during class discussions, understand the elements of literature that authors use to create stories, and respond on a personal basis to the stories read. As students learn more and more about the elements of story and the structures of literature, they will be able to discuss and understand books at a deeper level (Smith, 1997).

Using picture books to introduce and discuss concepts like setting, plot, character, tension and mood, enables students to use this vocabulary to investigate deeper levels of story structures in both whole group discussions, and eventually small group literature circles. The vocabulary used to discuss the elements of literature should not become an end in itself, rather it should be seen as a vehicle used in the discussions to bring students to a deeper understanding and appreciation of literature. The vocabulary used to discuss the elements of literature, setting, plot and theme for example, should not be directly tested, but rather it should develop through its use in the classroom discussions. The elements of literature are discussed until they become a part of the language of our classroom community. It is the social acquisition of ideas, rather than a teacher-directed lesson concerning the vocabulary of

literary elements that is important.

By carefully selecting specific books to teach specific elements of literature, we can introduce these elements and show how they effect the writing and structure of the story. It is not simply being able to identify the setting of the story that is important, but being able to talk about how the setting effects the story as a whole.

Picture story books are an excellent device to introduce these elements of literature because of the quality of the writing, their short length and the beautiful illustrations that support the reader's creation of meaning. To introduce the concept of setting for example, I would choose a book like Cynthia Rylant's, *When I was Young in the Mountains*, *Owl Moon* by Jane Yolen or *The Paradise Garden*, by Colin Thompson. These books rely on a strong sense of setting to pull the reader into the story and develop an emotional tone that supports the rest of the story. By choosing books that have multiple levels of meaning and make strong connections with my students, it becomes easier to talk about these elements of story. Figure 1 provides a list of books grouped together around various elements of literature.

When you read a new book that your students have not experienced every time you introduce a new element of literature, children tend to focus on the events and situations in the new story, and are so concerned about what is going to happen next, that they have difficulty digging into the literary elements you are trying to introduce. It is because of this situation that I like to use one book, a "cornerstone" book, to introduce these various elements of literature. I call them "cornerstone" books because they provide a foundation for understanding the elements of literature and are used to support the study of a particular genre or a specific author or illustrator. These cornerstone books should be books that you couldn't live without in your classroom. Books that are so wonderfully written with such beautiful illustrations that you revisit them again and again every year.

By revisiting a favorite cornerstone book over and over, students are able to get past the surface level of the story and begin to discuss the author's craft and their use of the various elements of literature. Afterwards, when introducing new books, students can take their

knowledge of the literary elements developed during the discussion of the "cornerstone" book and relate it to the new stories being read. Figure 2 is a list of my favorite "cornerstone" books, arranged by specific genres.

My favorite cornerstone book to use is *Where the Wild Things Are* by Maurice Sendak. I use this book because it contains multiple levels of meaning in a relatively simple story-line, is beautifully illustrated, has a strong central character that children can relate to and generates wonderful discussions. By introducing the elements of literature with this book, students are able to focus on the different literary elements, rather than having to worry about what is going to happen in a new book they have never read before.

I have spent as much as three to four weeks talking about the book *Where the Wild Things Are* during the school year. As we reread this book, we create new interpretations, listen to each others ideas and discuss a different element of literature. Cornerstone books should be complex enough to support long term discussions and extensive literary connections. Books with simple structures and trite illustrations do not support these types of discussions.

To support the discussions about the book *Where the Wild Things Are*, I have physically taken apart the book in order to hang the pages on the wall of my class in a "storyboard" fashion so that we could see all the illustrations at once. Looking at the book in this way allows us a new perspective concerning the structure and the design of the book. Seeing the book in this storyboard display has lead us to new insights that we would not have reached by reading the book in the traditional format.

By spending a longer period of time on one cornerstone book, I am trying to help my students understand the complexity of a quality piece of literature. By using a book that allows for multiple interpretations, I am also demonstrating the transactional nature of the reading process (Rosenblatt, 1978). I want my students to realize that there are multiple interpretations in a piece of literature, and that these interpretations are not only welcome, they are necessary to construct deeper meanings from a piece of literature.

Interactions

This interactional "phase" is not something that occurs after the first two structures are established. It is woven into the procedures and rituals of the classroom throughout the year. From the beginning of the school year, at the same time our read aloud discussions and free voluntary reading is being introduced, I begin to involve students in small group activities. I want students to be able to work in small groups and develop the kinds of behaviors and social skills that make the literature study interactions successful. I usually begin with more "structured" tasks, such as designing the library, arranging the room, deciding on wall decorations and deciding on classroom jobs. This allows my students to be involved in decisions about the classroom procedures and gets them involved in small groups from the first day of school. Though these activities do not necessarily involve literature, they nonetheless help students to become more successful at interacting with their classmates.

One way to support this social interaction is by allowing for students to share their lives and experiences into the classroom from the beginning of the year. I begin everyday by asking students about the things going on in their lives. By doing so, I hope to establish a community of listeners, children that care about each other and are willing to listen to the voices of their classmates. By promoting this community "share time" students learn that their experiences and their stories are important and that these stories are welcome in our classroom. By connecting the read aloud books with the events in children's lives. I can help students to see connections between the literature we read and our life experiences.

The most natural way to respond to literature is by talking and this talking about books is vital to any literature based classroom (Almasi, 1996). When people leave a movie theater after seeing a good movie, they talk to each other. As human beings, we don't need to be taught that oral language is a way to share our experiences, it is a natural human response. We use language to extend and deepen our understanding of the world, to communicate our ideas to others and to express ourselves (Holdaway, 1984). Getting children together to discuss a good book and share their experiences in much the same manner as

leaving a movie is essential to supporting literature circles. It should be as comfortable as sitting around your kitchen table and having a talk about the events of the day (Atwell, 1998).

After reading aloud a book to the class I simply ask "Well, what do you think?" The students usually have their hands up as soon as I finish reading the book anyway. Other than that prompt, I do not ask many questions during our discussions. It is important to allow students the opportunity to openly state their opinions and I find that questions tend to limit their responses. Personal response is important if we are going to promote student involvement in the discussions about the books we read together. As the school year evolves, we begin to feel more comfortable sharing our experiences and ideas about the books we have read.

By allowing multiple voices, multiple perspectives to be heard, students are more likely to share their deeply held beliefs with each other. I have to work very hard to establish an atmosphere of trust and respect. As soon as someone's ideas are allowed to be ridiculed, discussion shuts down. It is my responsibility to create a safe place for students to openly share their ideas.

Another strategy I use to support interactions, is to invite students to turn to someone sitting next to them where they are sitting on the floor, and share with that person what they think about the story I have just read. Each person is expected to share their ideas about the reading with their classmate. This procedure allows more voices to be heard and for students who may not feel confident speaking up in the whole group, the opportunity to say something to a peer in response to the book. After we do this, we regroup and students are allowed to share any ideas that came up in their paired discussions. By doing this, students seem to have more ideas to share when they return to the whole group setting.

When I feel that these whole group discussions are progressing, I begin to work in small groups with short pieces of writing. For example, I photocopy a short poem or quote and have students gather in small groups to discuss what they think about the piece. If students cannot discuss a poem effectively, they will have greater difficulty in sustaining a

a discussion throughout the entire length of a novel.

As these small groups get underway, I frequently stop and ask each group to think about what is helping their discussions. We make charts about things that support our discussions and other charts about things that detract from our discussions. I observe the groups and share my ideas with them and listen to their ideas about the things they feel are supporting the discussions.

There is not a set amount of time that must pass before students are ready to begin literature circles. I usually can tell when my class is ready by the way they listen to each other's ideas, the quality of the responses to the books we are reading, the ability of the class to sustain independent reading time and their ability to make appropriate decisions about which books to read. This lets me know that I will be able to sit with a literature group without interruptions. It is now time to choose several books to offer the class and start to formulate our literature circles. Let the Grand Conversations begin!

Figure 1
Picture Books for Elements of Literature

Setting:

Owl Moon - Jane Yolen
When I Was Young in the Mountains -
Cynthia Rylant
Smoky Night - Eve Bunting
What You Know First - Patricia MacLachlan

Character:

The Library Dragon - Carmen Agra Deedy
Tacky the Penguin - Helen Lester
Snowflake Bentley -
Jacqueline Briggs Martin
The Stranger - Chris Van Allsburg

Plot:

Black and White - David MacCauley
The Straight Line Wonder - Mem Fox
Voices in the Park - Anthony Browne
Ouch - Natalie Babbitt

Mood:

The Faithful Elephants - Yukio Tuschia
Night of the Gargoyles - Eve Bunting
The Krazees - Sam Swope
The Wall - Eve Bunting

Theme:

Just a Dream - Chris Van Allsburg
Swimmy - Leo Lionni
Starry Messenger - Peter Sis
Winnie the Witch - Korcky Paul

Figure 2

Favorite Cornerstone Picture Books

Personal Narrative:

The Relatives Came - Cynthia Rylant
Tar Beach - Faith Ringgold
The Table Where Rich People Sit -
Byrd Baylor
Daddy Played Music for the Cows -
Mary Ann Weidt

Fictional Story - Adventure

My Life with the Wave - Octavio Paz
The Bunyip of Berkeley's Creek -
Jenny Wagoner
Bub, Or the Very Best Thing -
Natalie Babbitt
June 29, 1999 - David Weisner

Folktales/Legends

The Flute Player - Michael LaCapa
Golem - David Weisnewski
*Everybody Knows What A Dragon
Looks Like* - Mercer Meyer
Mufaro's Beautiful Daughters -
John Steptoe

Humorous Stories

A Day with Wilbur Robinson -
William Joyce
Just Another Ordinary Day - Rod Clements
Hooway for Wodney Wat - Helen Lester
Squids Will Be Squids - Jon Scieszka

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