Building Background Knowledge within Literature Circles

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Purpose
The purpose of this article is to understand the role that literature circles play in student development of background knowledge at the middle school level.

The Article
Teachers have been familiar with literature circles for many years. Most conversations about literature circles focus on descriptions of the process, student conversation, and assessment. Rather than address these, we chose to examine the strength of literature circles in developing background knowledge, because for many students in intermediate grades, background knowledge is the sticking point in their development of text understanding. For instance, one student may understand the setting while another student may not be aware of its historical significance and thus may read a book as if it were set in today’s world. If a student does not have a combination of sufficient literacy skill and world knowledge, he or she will struggle with comprehension. While teachers routinely provide instruction in literacy skills and strategies, background knowledge is more difficult to shore up. Literacy circles can help to fill these contextual chasms.

What this Means for the Field
When members of a literature circle participate in their various roles, a rich, multifaceted discussion of text can result. In addition, literacy circles place the responsibility on students for developing the necessary knowledge. Group conversations and dialogue that occur during literature circles provide opportunities for individual and joint interpretations of the text. Another strength of literature circles is the accountability aspect. Students choose or are assigned roles, and each student is expected to contribute and respond to one another’s comments. Specifically, the investigator role helped expand background information and positioned students to be active readers, constantly rereading and searching for information to satisfy their curiosity. Moreover, classroom time and computer access limitations increased opportunities for home-school dialogue. Students read at home, often discussing the book with parents, used a computer to extend their reading, and then reported their findings to the other students in their literature circle. While finding time for literature circles can be challenging for teachers, failing to do so can be detrimental to the process of developing accomplished student readers.

Citation

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