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Some Suggestions for Volunteers Facilitating Literature Circles

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As a former elementary teacher and now a literacy teacher educator, I like to get back into elementary classrooms. This year, I asked my child's teacher if I could volunteer one day a week for an hour in any way that could be helpful. She agreed, and I was particularly excited when this exemplary classroom teacher asked me to facilitate literature circles with a group of third grade students.

During their reading block, students work independently, or in groups at different literature stations in the classroom while the teacher works with small groups. It is during this time I come to her class. I have truly enjoyed observing the 20 plus children all on-task spread throughout the room engaged in literacy activities. When I walk in students in my literature circles see me, grab their books and folders, and meet me at the round table in the back office space, which is connected to their classroom.

I believe this is an effective way to incorporate volunteers into a classroom, school media center or library, or an after school program. Drawing from academic literature, my work as a literacy teacher

educator and now as a volunteer, I will share an approach that might assist teachers and volunteers to offer positive social and positive experiences to facilitate literature circles.

Where to Start

I met with five students, once a week for 30 minutes to read the book, *The Candy Maker* by Wendy Mass. Here are some suggestions that derive from this experience:

- Assemble a group of four-five- students. While most research describes literature circles hosting four-eight students, this may be too many voices for a volunteer to navigate. When my group and I review the week's reading, they are elated and can't stop talking about what we have read. For a volunteer, this can be exciting but also intimidating.
- I suggest meeting with your volunteer for the first time one on one. Many professionals, parents, and caregivers outside the field of education do not understand the demands of following a school's schedule and the requirements on teachers' time. For example,

arriving five minutes early, or departing five minutes late can disrupt the flow of the day. Describe how you will manage book storage, where folders, papers, and/or crayons can be stored. Also, discuss the best way to enter and leave the area where the literature circle will take place with minimal disruption to the flow of classroom routines. Discuss how to conduct literature circles. I found this website user friendly with free printable job description roles, <https://www.lauracandler.com/files/literacy/lit-circle-printables/>

- Let your volunteer know students will naturally use an important comprehension strategy entitled “Making Connections with Text”. They may connect the text to personal experiences or to what they learn at home or in school (Mills & Jennings, 2011). I found this true when reading, *The Candy Makers*. In the story, one of the characters believes a girl died by drowning. When the literature circle came together, the students explored this topic and many shared personal stories of how death impacted them or their family. One child bravely shared the story of how his beloved

uncle died because he was the victim of a DUI vehicle crash. As a volunteer, I wanted to make sure each child had time to express his/her thoughts and make connections. In addition,

- Let parents/caregivers know their child works weekly in a literature circle group with a volunteer.
- Select a picture book, or chapter book that is not too long, despite the reading level of your group. I enjoyed reading *The Candy Maker* with this group; however, it was long and sometimes not all students finished their reading assignment before we met again. In addition, since we only met once a week, it took us two months to complete the book.

Selecting Books and Strategies

Keep in mind there are many different types of books you can select for your literature circles. One place to start would be with children's literature award winners. The American Library Association recognizes children's literature with a variety of over 30 types of awards (see <http://www.ala.org/alsc/awardsgrants/bookmedia>). Some examples

are the Caldecott Medal, awarded annually to the most distinguished American picture book. Another example is the Coretta Scott King Awards that recognize African American Authors and Illustrators for outstanding books for young children.

Multicultural literature can be a good choice for literature circles as it allows children to establish a greater understanding of themselves and others. These diverse books allow the reader to explore the lives, realities, and experiences of people portrayed in the texts (Bennett, Gunn, Gayle-Evans, Barrera, and Leung, 2017). Some of these experiences may mirror their own lives while other pieces of the text may offer students opportunity to explore the lives and places of people who differ from them.

Books that provide students opportunity to discuss elements of social and emotional learning (SEL) or empathy are also good choices. These books give children opportunities to acquire knowledge, discuss emotions, make responsible decisions, understand positive relations and care for others.

I also suggest volunteers encourage students to select a book of their choice. The group might vote on choices also. Another idea is to ask students to write to you and explain what they want to read a certain book in the literature circle (Daniels, 2002). In this way, volunteers can encourage a reading/writing connection and writing for authentic purposes.

Volunteers might also ask teachers if students in the literature circle might tell the class about the book they have just read with their volunteer. Students might also engage in the visual, music, or dramatic arts to portray the story to the class (Richards & Bennett, 2015).

Conclusion

As you can tell, there are a multitude of activities associated with shared book reading. Providing children opportunities to engage in deep thinking around a text in a literature circle can provide opportunities for academic and social growth. Literature circles are spaces in which children can learn from one another and reposition their thinking with

guidance of volunteers and peers. Volunteers can promote children's love of reading and extend literacy in elementary classrooms..

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