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Ryan Flessner

Butler University, rflessne@butler.edu

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Chapter Eight

Making the Work Interesting: Classroom Management Through Ownership in Elementary Literature Circles

Ryan Flessner

Mr. Ellerton sat wondering what was happening in his classroom. He had been told over and over again that he needed a *discipline policy* in his fourth grade classroom. He had always rejected this idea for two reasons. First, he never believed that one system of management could appropriately address the strengths and needs of every child in a given classroom. Second, he always felt that truly engaging students in authentic work proactively created an environment co-managed by all members of a classroom community. Reading *Stuart Little* (White, 1945) for a children's literature class in his teacher education program, he had come across the following quote:

"Do you think you can maintain discipline?" asked the Superintendent.

"Of course I can," replied Stuart. "I'll make the work interesting and the discipline will take care of itself. Don't worry about me." (White, 1945, pp. 85-86)

"Yes," Mr. Ellerton thought to himself, "That makes sense."

In his first few years of teaching, he had heard veteran teachers say things like, "Don't smile before winter break. They (the students, he assumed) need to know you mean business." He had rejected this advice, choosing the *Stuart Little* approach instead. He was making decisions based on what he knew about each child; he offered his respect to the children assuming they would respect him in return. As a reflective teacher, he was anticipating

problems and thinking through solutions prior to each lesson. To the chagrin of the veteran teachers, he often found himself smiling.

Thus far, his proactive system of management had seemed to be working. Yet, what had been happening for the past few days concerned Mr. Ellerton. While an outsider would say his students were well behaved, even teacher pleasers, he was frustrated. For the past several days, his students had been engaging in literature circle discussions.

As a class, he and his students had discussed the purposes and processes of literature circles. He had used his read-aloud time to model the types of thinking that he was doing as a reader. His fourth graders had shared their thoughts and ideas as they listened to the stories and seemed ready to engage in thoughtful conversations.

Unfortunately, what ensued was a series of what felt like *verbal worksheets*. Rather than capitalizing on the autonomy inherent in a literature circle discussion group, the students were reverting to practices in which they had engaged in previous classes throughout their educational experiences. They asked questions like, "What is the plot?" and "Who are the main characters?" To make things worse, the children were taking on traditional student/teacher roles. Rather than empowering themselves and their peers, they were exhibiting classic teacher-centered behaviors.

One child asked questions while the others raised their hands and waited patiently to be called on by the teacher. While students were respectful throughout the discussions, Mr. Ellerton knew the class was inching toward the slippery slope of boredom and, thus, disengagement. After watching these events unfold, Mr. Ellerton knew he had to make a change; he needed to *make the work interesting*.

THE EMERGENCE OF A PROBLEM: LACK OF STUDENT EMPOWERMENT

As a teacher, Mr. Ellerton wanted students to feel empowered and confident as readers and writers. He hoped to instill in his students a love for the written word. Because there are many examples of how literature circles promote student choice and control (Blum, Lipsett, & Yocom, 2002; Short, Kaufman, Kaser, Kahn, & Crawford, 1999), he decided to use this strategy as a key aspect of his reading instruction. Once he introduced the concept of literature circles, he assumed students would naturally engage in interesting, thoughtful dialogue. He was surprised that his students were unable to have authentic conversations when discussing a piece of literature.

Mr. Ellerton became concerned that students had misinterpreted the purposes of literature circles. Rather than experiencing literature circles as a form of self-empowerment, students used the time to reinforce traditional

notions of reading comprehension. While the children were not “running around like crazy” as he had been warned they would, Mr. Ellerton had a different problem on his hands. Gradually, he realized his instruction was perpetuating many of the stereotypical classroom practices that he was trying to address.

To examine how he might rectify the problem he was having in his classroom, Mr. Ellerton turned to the readings that had inspired him to utilize literature circles in the first place (Casey, 2008; Clarke & Holwadel, 2007; Daniels, 2002; Zemelman, Daniels, & Hyde, 2005). Repeatedly, other teachers and educational researchers confirmed that literature circles were, in fact, a way to *make the work interesting*.

Yet, for some reason, Mr. Ellerton’s initial attempts at implementation had failed to instill in his students the empowerment described in the literature. Therefore, he decided to rethink the ways that he could foster a community that empowered students and promoted thoughtful dialogue during literature circles.

RETHINKING LITERATURE CIRCLES

To begin, Mr. Ellerton had students write about their initial literature circle experiences in their journals. As he reviewed the journal entries, he realized that some students saw literature circles as a tool for understanding each other as learners. Others, however, seemed to emphasize more traditional aspects of reading instruction. As he reflected on the first round of literature circles, Mr. Ellerton repeatedly noted the difficulty children were having as they attempted to create natural discussions. Identifying this as the root of many of the patterns that seemed to be emerging, the teacher hatched a plan.

The following morning, Mr. Ellerton asked the children to take clipboards, paper, and a writing utensil with them during lunch and recess. Their task was to research how *real* conversations look and sound. Excitement mounted as students took on the task of investigative reporting. After their initial observations were captured, group journal entries were written and a classroom conversation ensued.

Through these creative activities, the children generated a checklist of what they hoped to accomplish during their literature circles. Though Mr. Ellerton was hesitant to standardize the literature circles even more, the students argued that a checklist would simply give them guidelines as they prepared for literature circles—it did not have to be used as a grading tool. In addition, the class (teacher *and* students) decided that the checklist could be used to assess what the groups were doing well and to identify areas where they needed further support. Topics on the checklist included the following:

- **Getting Ready:** Look for important ideas and examples of creative writing, be able to prove your point, ask divergent questions that have more than one answer.
- **Group Work:** Work together, debate—don't argue, focus on the group while doing your personal best.
- **Discussions:** Everyone speaks and participates, have a discussion—not a question/answer session, avoid interrupting.
- **Speaking:** Consider and add on to others' points, offer new ideas instead of repeating, stay on topic.

Once the checklist was finalized, the students were ready to begin analyzing their discussions. As a next step, students reviewed a videotape of a previously recorded literature circle. After viewing the videotape, students sat silently. When Mr. Ellerton asked how they thought the group had done, they erupted in laughter. This was not quite the response the teacher had expected. As he had feared, the students were using the checklist as a way to judge their peers.

Some students wrote about *power* in their journals. For instance, Jake stated, “[When I watch a videotape], I feel like I am the teacher and I get to grade kids on what they do.” Others felt uneasy about the added responsibility of the checklist: “It is very hard to evaluate your friends because you don't want to say they're bad, but you don't want to lie when you are evaluating because it's to help them improve on literature circles,” confided Callie.

After these comments from the students, Mr. Ellerton reminded the class that they had designed the checklist as a way to identify needs that would improve the literature circles. However, they had also discussed the importance of identifying areas of student strength. After this brief reminder, students became more willing to look for both needs and strengths in the literature circles.

Another problem encountered was that the students were providing no insight into how they had reached their judgments. They were simply placing a *yes* or *no* next to each item on the checklist. Early checklists contained little evidence to support evaluative claims made by the children. Students often had opinions about whether or not the groups were successful but could rarely support their claims.

After reviewing an early videotape, Mr. Ellerton asked his students to share their findings. Few raised their hands to offer comments. When asked why this was so, they commented that they were not sure they had given enough proof. Immediately, Mr. Ellerton changed his tactic. He collected the completed checklists and quickly glanced through the comments. As he came upon an evaluation that included justification, he read it to the class as a successful model. Therefore, students became more aware of what an exem-

plary response entailed. Mr. Ellerton hoped that this would make the children more willing to share their ideas.

Later, Mr. Ellerton identified this moment as a turning point in the classroom. Shortly after the conversation, students were running out of room to write on their sheets. Mr. Ellerton smiled as students asked for extra time to complete their checklists. He chuckled as some students took their papers to recess so they could squeeze in final comments. While personally gratifying for him as a teacher, Mr. Ellerton quickly realized that the true power came from the students themselves. The children were beginning to internalize the elements of a quality discussion—which they, *themselves*, had constructed—and were working to achieve this quality.

Beyond the students' increased abilities to identify important aspects of quality dialogue, literature circles improved in other ways as well. For instance, students regularly commented that interruptions were ruining the flow of the conversations. More conscious of this problem, the children began to listen to each other rather than interrupting their peers and showed enhanced lines of communication. When students listened, they began to consider each other's points, which led to friendly debates related to the readings. At one point, the following discussion took place:

Zoe: Do you relate to Charlie?

Tommy: I have this afterschool program that I go to. I've always just been the quiet kid. . . . I don't talk much.

Zoe: So you're shy, kind of?

Tommy: Yeah.

Zoe: Well, I don't think that Charlie was really shy. . . . No one really likes him because he's poor. So he probably feels like an outsider.

J.J. & Loren: Yeah.

Tommy: Yeah, I guess I see what you mean.

As this example shows, students were able to discuss their perceptions of the story, debate certain issues, and come to a consensus—or agree to disagree.

Other advantages were evident as students became more attuned to their peers and more empowered by the process. Many times, students were unable to debate because they all agreed with the comments of their classmate(s). In these situations, piggybacking became a useful tool. Students began to naturally experiment with this technique:

Starr: Ms. Trunchbull is so mean. I'd loathe having her as a headmistress. Why do you think she was so mean?

Callie: She's mean, and she just doesn't care. She seems to want to make you feel bad.

Jake: They said in the book that a good principal has to respect children and love them, but she has none of that. She pins them to the wall and tortures them like they're dolls or something.

Starr: She treats them like voodoo dolls.

Callie: Yeah, it reflects her life.

Students were moving away from a question/answer session, responding to one another, and creating effective dialogue through the use of the piggy-backing strategy. As the semester progressed, Mr. Ellerton was pleased to realize that his work *with* the children was helping to *make the work interesting*.

CONCLUSION

Typical discussions of classroom management often revert to an examination of discipline policies. Teachers are often forced to take on the roles of authoritarians. Children are reduced to names on the board or marbles in a jar. Mr. Ellerton intuitively knew that there was more to managing a classroom. He knew that trust, respect, and empowerment were essential aspects of a strong learning community. He wanted students to understand that they could have power over their learning and that choice and control are not simply the responsibility of the teacher.

The story of Mr. Ellerton and his students highlights one example of a teacher examining his philosophies of educating children, rethinking his teaching, and empowering students to create mechanisms that would help them feel successful, accomplished, and engaged. Following Stuart Little's lead, Mr. Ellerton reimagined ways to proactively manage his classroom. Even when his attempts to support children seemed doomed, he stayed true to his beliefs.

As this narrative reveals, no longer does the phrase *classroom management* need to translate to *discipline plan*. Teachers everywhere can trade in sticker charts and penalty hall slips for lessons that are authentic, relevant, and engaging for students. In effect, teachers can *make the work interesting*.

Author's Note

All names are pseudonyms to protect the identity of those involved.

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