

REL Southwest Ask A REL Response

Literacy

June 2018

Question:

Provide information about the impact of literature discussion circles on student achievement, engagement, and/or motivation.

Response:

Thank you for the question you submitted to our REL Reference Desk. We have prepared the following memo with research references to help answer your question. For each reference, we provide an abstract, excerpt, or summary written by the study's author or publisher. Following an established Regional Educational Laboratory (REL) Southwest research protocol, we conducted a search for research reports as well as descriptive study articles on the impact of literature discussion circles on student achievement, engagement, and/or motivation.

We have not evaluated the quality of references and the resources provided in this response. We offer them only for your reference. Also, we searched the references in the response from the most commonly used resources of research, but they are not comprehensive and other relevant references and resources may exist. References provided are listed in alphabetical order, not necessarily in order of relevance. We do not include sources that are not freely available to the requestor.

Research References

Coffey, G. (2012). Literacy and technology: Integrating technology with small group, peer-led discussions of literature. *International Electronic Journal of Elementary Education*, 4(2), 395–405. <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=EJ1068622>

From the ERIC abstract: “This review examines research of computer-mediated small group discussion of literature. The goal of this review is to explore several instructional formats for integrating print-based and new literacies skills. First, the theoretical foundations for the shift from teacher-led to student led discussion are outlined. Research exploring ways in which technology has been infused into several common elements of literature discussion groups are presented next. Benefits and challenges of such integration are highlighted and suggestions for future research are presented.”

Elhess, M., & Egbert, J. (2015). Literature circles as support for language development. *English Teaching Forum*, 53(3), 13–21. <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=EJ1077926>

From the ERIC abstract: “There are many instructional approaches for helping English language learners improve both reading comprehension and overall language proficiency. One such approach, the literature circle—which is somewhat like a student book club in the classroom—has drawn a great deal of attention in recent years (Schlick Noe and Johnson 1999). Many teachers champion the strategy and use it consistently in their classrooms (Daniels 2002). According to the Standards for the English Language Arts published by the International Reading Association and National Council of Teachers of English (1996, 32), the instructional practices realized by literature circles embody quality educational standards and are used by teachers ‘who are bringing out the best in their students day by day.’ To shed light on the many ways that literature circles improve English skills, this article defines the term, provides a brief theoretical foundation for the use of literature circles, describes their benefits, and then presents a four-lesson unit that applies the approach to the teaching of a literary text.”

Grisham, D. L., & Wolsey, T. D. (2006). Recentering the middle school classroom as a vibrant learning community: Students, literacy, and technology intersect. *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy*, 49(8), 648–660. <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=EJ737968>

From the ERIC abstract: Technology reshapes our thinking about learning in multiple ways. This article proposes that middle school students can use asynchronous online discussions to improve their responses to literature, increase their engagement with the classroom community, and recenter the classroom around student voices. Working in small groups, students read the same novel. They are prompted to post their responses to the young adult literature in a closed, egalitarian online network. The authors examined online transcripts, interviewed students, and observed lesson sequences in eighth-grade humanities classrooms over three years. They found that threaded discussions helped these middle school students to: (1) Engage with and learn new literacies; (2) Examine literature through a more critical lens; and (3) Socially construct knowledge to create a more authentic community of learners. The authors also found that the role of the teacher is transformed by technology to scaffold instruction through participation in online conversations.”

What Works Clearinghouse. (2010). *Book clubs*. What Works Clearinghouse Intervention Report. Washington, DC: Institute of Education Sciences, U.S. Department of Education. <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED511825>

From the ERIC abstract: “Book clubs provide a reading framework designed to supplement or organize regular classroom reading instruction for students in grades K-8. This review focuses on ‘Book Club’ (Raphael & McMahon, 1994) and ‘Literature Circles’ (Daniels, 2002), but it uses the general lowercase term ‘book clubs’ to embrace both ‘Literature Circles’ and ‘Book Club’ activities, as well as small-group discussion activities that closely resemble either strategy but may leave out one or more key elements of these originally conceived instructional paradigms. The book club framework

aims to improve students' comprehension skills and ability to interpret and think critically about text. The What Works Clearinghouse (WWC) identified 284 studies of book clubs for adolescent learners that were published or released between 1989 and 2009. Eleven studies are within the scope of the Adolescent Literacy review protocol but do not meet WWC evidence standards. Eight studies do not establish that the comparison group was comparable to the treatment group prior to the start of the intervention. Two studies have confounding factors, such as combining book clubs with other interventions, which makes it impossible to attribute the observed effect solely to book clubs. One single-case design study did not meet the minimum threshold of at least three attempts to demonstrate an intervention effect. Two hundred seventy-three studies fall outside the Adolescent Literacy review protocol. One hundred thirty-one studies have an ineligible study design. One hundred eighteen studies do not have a comparison group. Thirteen studies are meta-analyses or literature reviews. One hundred forty-two studies are outside the scope of the Adolescent Literacy review protocol for reasons other than study design. Forty-nine studies do not measure the effectiveness of book clubs in a manner defined by the WWC. Forty-two studies do not evaluate the impact of book clubs on student literacy outcomes. Thirty-five studies feature a sample that does not include students in grades 4-12. Fifteen studies feature a sample that is less than 50% general education students. One study occurred outside the geographical area covered by the Adolescent Literacy review.”

Woodruff, A. H., & Griffin, R. A. (2017). Reader response in secondary settings: Increasing comprehension through meaningful interactions with literary texts. *Texas Journal of Literacy Education*, 5(2), 108–116. <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=EJ1162670>

From the ERIC abstract: “A fresh look at the reader response theory to enhance student comprehension through meaningful interactions with literature, this paper explores the instructional implications of a reader response approach in secondary classrooms and examines its role in fostering students' critical reading and thinking skills. The approach promotes transaction between readers and texts as readers are given the freedom to analyze literary pieces based on their personal experiences, diverse cultures, and unique perspectives. A selective review of recent literature on the positive effect of the reader response approach in secondary settings is included, demonstrating how this approach yields positive results with students becoming both more critical readers and thinkers. The paper also addresses best practices or strategies that help secondary students increase their reading comprehension and interactions with literary texts through a reader response approach. Implications for instruction include reader response journals, reading workshop, and literature circles, which encourage students to respond to literature as a means of interacting with various texts in meaningful ways.”

Additional Organizations to Consult

Center for the Collaborative Classroom: Effective Literacy Circles and Book Clubs - <https://www.collaborativeclassroom.org/blog/effective-literacy-circles-and-book-clubs/>

From the website: “This is the first installment in a [series of seven posts](#) with ideas and suggestions for running effective literacy circles or book clubs with students from second grade through high school.”

Edutopia: How to Create a Classroom Literature Circle - <https://www.edutopia.org/literature-circles-classroom-book-discussion-how-to>

From the website: “Teachers who want to try out literature circles need to know one thing—no two circles look the same.

‘It’s an approach that’s so different in every classroom,’ says Katherine L. Schlick Noe, an education professor at Seattle University who has written extensively about literature circles. ‘So many people use them in different ways.’

The keys to success are simplicity and adaptability. And although it might seem that the most logical subjects in which to use literature circles are those heavy in reading, such as language arts, history, and English, they can be used in other subjects. A high school science teacher in North Carolina, for example, uses literature circles to help her students understand complex scientific terms.”

Literature Circles Resource Center - <http://www.litcircles.org/Overview/overview.html>

From the website: “The Literature Circles Resource Center web site is based on the premise that there is *no one way to do literature circles*. Literature circles look different in every classroom; they change from teacher to teacher, grade to grade, student to student. Literature circles have no recipe, they are not a specific ‘program’, and they never look the same from year to year—or even from day to day. The reason? True engagement with literature within a community of learners can’t possibly be prescribed—it can only be described. And that’s the goal of this web site.”

ReadWriteThink: Literature Circles: Getting Started - <http://www.readwritethink.org/classroom-resources/lesson-plans/literature-circles-getting-started-19.html>

From the website: “This lesson provides a basic introduction to literature circles, a collaborative and student-centered reading strategy. Students begin by selecting a book together then are introduced to the four jobs in the Literature Circles: Discussion Director, Literary Luminary, Vocabulary Enricher, and Checker. The teacher and student volunteers model the task for each of the four roles, and then students practice the strategies. The process demonstrates the different roles and allows students to practice the techniques before they are responsible for completing the tasks on their own. After this introduction, students are ready to use the strategy independently, rotating the roles through four-person groups as they read the books they have chosen. The lesson can then be followed with a more extensive literature circle project.”

Methods

Keywords and Search Strings

The following keywords and search strings were used to search the reference databases and other sources:

- (Literature discussion circle
- OR Literacy discussion circle
- OR Literature circle
- OR Literacy circle
- OR Literacy discussion
- OR Book club
- OR Discussion Groups
- OR Discussion (Teaching Technique))
- +
- (impact
- OR intervention
- OR program effectiveness
- OR skill
- OR ability
- OR growth
- OR achievement
- OR engagement
- OR motivation)

Databases and Resources

We searched ERIC for relevant, peer-reviewed research references. ERIC is a free online library of more than 1.6 million citations of education research sponsored by the Institute of Education Sciences (IES). Additionally, we searched Google Scholar and PsychInfo.

Reference Search and Selection Criteria

When we were searching and reviewing resources, we considered the following criteria:

- *Date of the publication:* References and resources published from 2003 to present were included in the search and review.
- *Search priorities of reference sources:* Search priority is given to study reports, briefs, and other documents that are published and/or reviewed by IES and other federal or federally funded organizations, academic databases, including ERIC, EBSCO databases, JSTOR database, PsychInfo, PsychArticle, and Google Scholar.

- *Methodology:* The following methodological priorities/considerations were given in the review and selection of the references: (a) study types—randomized control trials, quasi-experiments, surveys, descriptive data analyses, literature reviews, policy briefs, and so forth, generally in this order; (b) target population, samples (representativeness of the target population, sample size, volunteered or randomly selected, and so forth), study duration, and so forth; and (c) limitations, generalizability of the findings and conclusions, and so forth.

This memorandum is one in a series of quick-turnaround responses to specific questions posed by stakeholders in the Southwest Region (Arkansas, Louisiana, New Mexico, Oklahoma, and Texas), which is served by the Regional Educational Laboratory (REL) Southwest at AIR. This memorandum was prepared by REL Southwest under a contract with the U.S. Department of Education’s Institute of Education Sciences (IES), Contract ED-IES-91990018C0002, administered by AIR. Its content does not necessarily reflect the views or policies of IES or the U.S. Department of Education nor does mention of trade names, commercial products, or organizations imply endorsement by the U.S. Government.