Implementing Literature Circles in the Classroom

A presentation to model literature circles for teachers and students in grades 4-8

Presented by:
The State Personnel Development Grant
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In literature circles, small groups of students gather together to discuss a piece of literature in depth. The discussion is guided by students' response to what they have read.

1. Literature circles provide a way for students to engage in critical thinking and reflection as they read, discuss, and respond to books.
2. Collaboration is at the heart of this approach. Students add onto their understanding as they construct meaning with other readers.
3. Finally, literature circles guide students to deeper understanding of what they read through structured discussion and extended written and artistic response."

How to Apply the Strategy:

Structured Literature Circles – Works if time is allowed for reading and completing roles following teacher designed instructions and activities

Basic Literature Circle Model - a flexible approach to Literature Circles that does not rely on handouts and teacher guidance

Modified Literature Circles - this method can be highly effective with students who are not able to handle weekly assignments since the circle meets each day. However, it would be difficult to implement without a teacher assistant or reliable parent volunteer.

Literature Circles with Roles – The most interactive form of Literature Circles. You can find a simple version in this Power Point and literature.

Nonfiction Literature Circles - Literature Circles with nonfiction books!

Evaluation: As teachers evaluate literature circles, they should monitor that students are engaged and participating in the following areas:

- Focusing on the topic.
- active participation
- Asking and answering questions.
- Responding to others’ comments.
- Following rules of group discussion
- Constructive disagreement
- Clarifying opinions with evidence from the reading.
- class-generated rubric for journal
checklist or anecdotal records for discussion Determine what to look for first (e.g., participation, questioning, and/or listening)
response & extension project (culminating) show understanding of book, theme, characters, etc.

Modeling

Modeling is at the heart of successful literature circle implementation in the classroom. The discussion structures and strategies listed above should be modeled and practiced with students so they have a chance to observe what literature circle participation “looks like,” and so they may participate in guided practice of strategies.

Record Keeping:

Anecdotal notes and seating charts provide a way for teachers to track student participation. Some teacher recourse is allowed for students who refuse to participate or who do not participate in a meaningful way. By turning a student away from the group and requiring they take notes on discussions from the group, but do not participate, they still are exposed to the benefits of book discussion, but are not rewarded for failure to follow through with their responsibility in the group.
The following program on Literature Circles may be presented to classroom groups, grade level groups, or mixed audiences. The program is appropriate for grades 4-8. By asking questions and generating student responses, the program teaches the basics involved in participating in a Literature Circle.

What Are Literature Circles?

- When a group of students (usually 4-6) gather together to discuss something they have read
- Each student can have a role to play in the discussion

(Role refers to “job” rather than a “role” or part in a play.)

- Everyone has to be ready to perform his/her role when the circle meets
- To begin with, your teacher may decide for everyone to practice once doing the same role.

The Most Important Thing:

- Everyone has a role and everyone must be ready to contribute when the group meets.
- Anyone who is not ready with their role may be asked to turn their back on the group, not speak or participate, but only listen to the discussions going on in their group.
- Anyone who is not ready with their role may be asked to sit with the teacher and discuss what has been read.

Incorporating group responsibility through the use of roles often provides students with the incentive to participate and contribute to the discussion.
Today’s reading

Teacher: Today, we are going to read a story entitled “Rapunzel” a fairy tale written by The Brothers Grimm.

![Image of The Brothers Grimm](image.png)

The Brothers Grimm

Teacher: It is always interesting to see pictures of the authors of the books and stories we read. From the picture, when do you think the authors might have lived? Have you read any other Fairy Tales written by the Brothers Grimm?

Supplemental Author Information: The Grimm Brothers, Jacob (b.Jan. 4, 1785) and Wilhelm (b.Feb. 24, 1786) Grimm, were German academics who were best known for publishing collections of folk tales and fairy tales, and for their work in linguistics, relating to how the sounds in words shift over time. (Grimm’s Law). They are probably the best known story tellers of nevellas from Europe allowing the widespread knowledge of such tales as Snow White, Rapunzel, Cinderella, and Hansel and Gretel.

After We Read:

- We will talk about the roles of participants in a Literature Circle
- We will answer questions and offer suggestions about the roles according to the story we read.
Read the following story. We suggest showing the Power Point on a projector or giving each student a copy of the text to read along. The teacher should read, using character voices and dramatic tone so that students will become involved and interested in the reading of the story.

Rapunzel

Once upon a time there lived a man and his wife who were very unhappy because they had no children. These good people had a little window at the back of their house, which looked into the most lovely garden, full of all manner of beautiful flowers and vegetables; but the garden was surrounded by a high wall, and no one dared to enter it, for it belonged to a witch of great power, who was feared by the whole world.

One day the woman stood at the window overlooking the garden, and saw there a bed full of the finest rampion: the leaves looked so fresh and green that she longed to eat them.

The desire grew day by day, and just because she knew she couldn’t possibly get any, she pined away and became quite pale and wretched.

Then her husband grew alarmed and said: “What ails you, dear wife?”

“Oh,” she answered, “if I don’t get some rampion to eat out of the garden behind the house, I know I shall die”

The man, who loved her dearly, thought to himself, “Come! Rather than let your wife die you shall fetch her some rampion, no matter the cost.” So at dusk he
climbed over the wall into the witch’s garden, and hastily gathering a handful of rampion leaves, he returned with them to his wife.

She made them into a salad, which tasted so good that her longing for the forbidden food was greater than ever. If she were to know any peace of mind, there was nothing for it but that her husband should climb over the garden wall again, and fetch her some more.

So at dusk over he got, but when he reached the other side he drew back in terror, for there, standing before him, was the old witch.

“How dare you,” she said, with a wrathful glance, “climb into my garden and steal my rampion like a common thief? You shall suffer for your foolhardiness.”

“Oh!” he implored, “pardon my presumption; necessity alone drove me to the deed. My wife saw your rampion from her window, and conceived such a desire for it that she would certainly have died if her wish had not been gratified.”

Then the Witch’s anger was a little appeased, and she said:

“If it’s as you say, you may take as much rampion away with you as you like, but on one condition only – that you give me the child your wife will shortly bring into the world. All shall go well with it, and I will look after it like my own child.”

The man in his terror agreed to everything she asked, and as soon as the child was born the Witch appeared, and having given it the name of Rapunzel, which is the same as rampion, she carried it off with her.

Rapunzel was the most beautiful child under the sun. When she was twelve years old, the witch shut her up in a tower, in the middle of a great wood, and the tower had neither stairs nor doors, only high up at the very top a small window. When the old Witch wanted to get in, she stood underneath and called out,

“Rapunzel, Rapunzel, Let down your golden hair,” for Rapunzel had wonderful long hair, and it was as fine as spun gold. Whenever she heard the Witch’s voice she unloosed her plaits, and let her hair fall down out of the window about twenty yards below, and the old Witch climbed up by it.

After they had lived like this for a few years, it happened one day that a Prince was riding through the wood and passed by the tower. As he drew near, he heard someone singing so sweetly that he stood still spell-bound, and listened.

It was Rapunzel in her loneliness trying to while away the time by letting her sweet voice ring out into the wood. The Prince longed to see the owner of the voice, but he sought in vain for a door in the tower.
He rode home, but he was so haunted by the song he had heard that he returned every day to the wood and listened. One day, when he was standing thus behind a tree, he saw the old Witch approach and heard her call out, “Rapunzel, Rapunzel, Let down your golden hair.” Then Rapunzel let down her plaits, and the Witch climbed up by them.

So that’s the staircase, is it?” said the Prince. “Then I too will climb it and try my luck.”

So on the following day, at dusk, he went to the foot of the tower and cried, Rapunzel, Rapunzel, Let down your golden hair,” and as soon as she had let it down the Prince climbed up.

At first Rapunzel was terribly frightened when a man came in, for she had never seen one before; but the Prince spoke to her so kindly, and told her at once that his heart had been so touched by her singing, that he felt he should know no peace of mind till he had seen her.

Very soon Rapunzel forgot her fear, and when he asked her to marry him she consented at once. “For,” she thought, “he is young and handsome, and I’ll certainly be happier with him than with the old Witch.” So she put her hand in his and said, “Yes, I will gladly go with you…. only how am I to get down out of the tower? Hmmm…every time you come to see me you must bring a skein of silk thread with you, and I will make a ladder of the thread, and when it is finished, I will climb down by it, and you will take me away on your horse.”

They arranged that until the ladder was ready, he was to visit her every evening, because the old witch stayed with her during the day. The old Witch, of course, knew nothing of what was going on, until one day Rapunzel, not thinking of what she was about, turned to the Witch and said, “How is it, good mother, that you are so much harder to pull up than the young Prince? He is light and climbs very quickly up to see me.”

“Oh! You wicked, wicked child,” cried the Witch. “What is this I hear? I thought I had hidden you safely from the whole world, and in spite of it you have managed to deceive me.”

In her wrath, she seized Rapunzel’s beautiful hair, wound it round and round her left hand, and then grasping a pair of scissors in her right hand, snip snap, off it came, and the beautiful plaits lay on the ground.

And worse than this, she was so hard-hearted that she took Rapunzel to a lonely desert place, and there left her to live in loneliness and misery.

Then, on the evening of the day in which she had driven poor Rapunzel away, the Witch fastened Rapunzel’s plaits on to a hook in the window, and when the
Prince came and called out, “Rapunzel, Rapunzel, Let down your golden hair,” she threw them down, and the Prince climbed up as usual, but instead of his beloved Rapunzel he found the old Witch, who fixed her evil, glittering eyes on him, and cried mockingly, “Ah, ah! You thought to find your lady love, but the pretty bird has flown and its song is dumb; the cat caught it, and will scratch out your eyes too. Rapunzel is lost to you forever – you will never see her more.”

The Prince was beside himself with grief, and in his despair he jumped right down from the tower, and, though he escaped with his life, the thorns among which he fell pierced his eyes.

Then he wandered, blind and miserable, through the wood, eating nothing but roots and berries, and weeping and lamenting the loss of his lovely bride. So he wandered about for some years, as wretched and unhappy as he could well be, and at last he came to the desert place where Rapunzel was living.

Of a sudden he heard a voice which seemed strangely familiar to him. He walked eagerly in the direction of the sound, and when he was quite close, Rapunzel recognized him and fell on his neck and wept.

Two of her tears touched his eyes, and in a moment they became quite clear again, and he saw as well as he had ever done. Then he led her to his kingdom, where they were received and welcomed with great joy, and they lived happily ever after.

Now let’s pretend we’re in a Literature Circle group

First let’s be the Discussion Director.

- The discussion director writes four to six questions about what we have just read.
- These questions will be used for group discussion during the next literature circle reading session/meeting

The most important things to remember about the questions are:

- The questions cannot be answered with just a “yes or no.”
- The questions cannot require just a one word answer
- The questions must stimulate an opinion or discussion among the participants of the group

Let’s make some questions:

Let’s use the word “Who” to begin some questions such as:

- Who was your favorite character in the story and why.
Who was more evil: the witch for taking Rapunzel or the father for agreeing to give away his child in return for food

At this point, ask the students to think of questions about the story beginning with the word WHO that meet the requirements. After students make up and share their own discussion questions, allow them to orally answer one or both of the above questions. Opinions will vary. Some students believe the father is more evil and some students believe the witch. Ask them to explain their choice.

Let’s use the word “What” to begin some questions such as:

- What was the climax of the story?
- What was the purpose of hiding Rapunzel in a tower?

Again, ask the students to think of questions about the story beginning with the word WHAT that meet the requirements. After students make up and share their own discussion questions, allow them to orally answer one or both of the above questions. Students might believe the climax of the story to be when the witch finds out Rapunzel is secretly seeing the Prince; others will argue it is when the Prince hears Rapunzel’s voice in the desert. Ask students to qualify their answers.

Let’s use the word “Where” to begin some questions such as:

- Where do you think the setting for this story would be?
- Where do you think Rapunzel lives after the witch drives her away to the desert?

Ask the students to think of questions about the story beginning with the word WHERE that meet the requirements. After students make up and share their own discussion questions, allow them to orally answer one or both of the above questions. Ask students if they believe the setting for the story might take place in ____________, TN. Why or why not? Are there any clues in the story that might indicate, other than a forest, where the location of the story might be? Discuss Rapunzel’s plight, having lived most of her life in a tower, suddenly finding herself alone in a desert. How did she survive?

Let’s use the word “When” to begin some questions such as:

- When do you realize that Rapunzel and the Prince will live happily ever after?
When do you think the husband told his wife he had bargained away their baby?

Ask the students to think of questions about the story beginning with the word WHERE that meet the requirements. After students make up and share their own discussion questions, allow them to orally answer one or both of the above questions. Some students might believe the story indicates Rapunzel and the Prince will live happily ever after the first time he hears her singing, when she accepts his proposal of marriage or even when the story actually states they lived happily ever after. More in depth thinking would come up with the answer that the story really indicates all will be well when the Prince finds Rapunzel in the desert or when Rapunzel's tears cure the Prince's blindness. Students usually share their opinions that the husband either did not tell his wife about his bargain with the witch until after the baby was born, or he didn't tell her at all. That can lead to discussions about taking responsibility for one’s actions, fear prompting people to do things, or even child abuse.

Let’s use the word “Why” to begin some questions such as:

- Why does the witch want a baby in the first place?
- Why does the witch want to keep Rapunzel hidden away?

Ask the students to think of questions about the story beginning with the word WHY that meet the requirements. After students make up and share their own discussion questions, allow them to orally answer one or both of the above questions. Answers to the first question might include that the witch is lonely, she wants someone to raise to be a witch and with whom to share her powers, she wants to punish the parents for their audacity in coming into her garden. Some students think the witch hides Rapunzel away because she is jealous of her beauty, she doesn’t want the parents to find her, or she doesn’t want to lose her company if someone should find her.

Let’s use the word “How” to begin some questions such as:

- How did the Prince survive all that time alone and blind in the forest before he found Rapunzel in the desert?
- How did Rapunzel's tears cure the Prince's blindness?

Ask the students to think of questions about the story beginning with the word WHY that meet the requirements. After students make up and share their own discussion questions, allow them to orally answer one or both of the above questions. Answers may vary to each of the above questions. Some answers might include ideas about blindness, the other senses, determination and
fortitude. Some students might determine that Rapunzel’s tears were magical or that her tears were filled with true love. Other, more pragmatic answers would indicate that the Prince might have had something lodged in his eyes that the tears washed away.

Let’s use the words “What if…" to begin some questions such as:

- What if the parents had not surrendered the baby to the witch?
- What if the Prince had not been able to climb up on Rapunzel’s hair?

Ask the students to think of questions about the story beginning with the words “WHAT IF" that meet the requirements. After students make up and share their own discussion questions, allow them to orally answer one or both of the above questions. Some answers might include the witch would punish the parent or, cast a spell on the parents. If the Prince had not been able to climb up on Rapunzel’s hair, he might never have seen her and fallen in love with her, she might never have been released from the tower, or they certainly would not have lived happily ever after.

Finally, let’s use the words “In Your Opinion…” to begin some questions such as

- In your opinion, what was the conflict in the story?
  - man vs man
  - man vs. nature
  - man vs. society
  - man vs. himself/herself

This is an excellent opportunity for a mini lesson on types of conflict and discussion about how each type of conflict is used in the story and how the over-riding conflict in the story is man vs. man. Students should also be told that “man” refers to mankind, not gender, and that the word “character” can be substituted for “man." Examples of man vs. man would be the conflict between the husband and the witch, the witch and Rapunzel (by holding her captive in a tower) and between the Prince and the witch. Examples of man vs. nature would be the woman wanting the rampion from the garden, Rapunzel surviving in the desert and the Prince surviving alone and blind in the forest. Examples of man vs. society would be the witch holding Rapunzel captive, and the father trading his baby for rampion. Examples of man vs. himself/herself would be the father
making the decision to give away his baby and Rapunzel deciding whether or not to go with the Prince. Any or all of these answers may lead to further discussion about “right and wrong,” “conscience” and “survival.”

Ask the students to think of questions about the story beginning with the words "WHAT IF" that meet the requirements.

Next, let’s be the **Wild and Crazy Word Finder**

The Wild and Crazy Word Finder:

- Finds four to six interesting, powerful or tricky words from the reading
- Writes them on a form with the page number they’re on in the story also
- He/she can also use sticky notes to mark them
- When the group meets, the group tries to decide what the words mean, using a dictionary for help if the group cannot come up with a working definition from the story or passage.

Let’s look at some interesting words from the story:

- “She pined away and became quite pale and wretched” (page 5)
- “her longing for the forbidden food was greater than ever” (page 5)
- “How dare you,” she said, with a wrathful glance, “climb into my garden and steal my rampion like a common thief? You shall suffer for your foolhardiness.” (Page 5)
- Whenever she heard the Witch’s voice she unloosed her plaits, and let her hair fall down out of the window about twenty yards below, and the old Witch climbed up by it. (page 6)
- The Prince longed to see the owner of the voice, but he sought in vain for a door in the tower. (page 6)
- As he drew near, he heard someone singing so sweetly that he stood still spell-bound, and listened. (page 6)

The teacher can discuss with the students the meanings of these words in context. To “pine” means to become physically ill from wanting something. Ask students if they have ever really wanted something like a video game, a bicycle, a telephone, or something else age related and been denied their request. That feeling of obsessing is what it means to “pine.”

Students probably already have a schema for the word forbidden, and will be able to discuss things that are “forbidden” to them by their parents.

Ask students to show you the “face” they make when someone makes them angry. Have them share instances when they have felt “wrathful.”
Students will probably recognize the root word “fool” in “foolhardy.” Have them suggest meanings and then share experiences when they have done something that was foolhardy.

Some students may recognize the word “plaits” as another word for “braids.” Share with them the European origin of the word and that this might be a help in determining where the setting for the story would be.

For the phrase, “sought in vain” have the students remember the description of the tower. Ask if the prince was able to find a door and then ask if they can determine what the phrase might mean.

The use of the word “spellbound” is very fitting because one of the main characters is a witch and students can associate spells with witches. Ask students if they have ever been so engrossed in a television program that they did not hear someone calling for them. If so, they were held spellbound by the television. Explain that spellbound means mesmerized or enchanted.

Next let’s learn about the Selection Director

The Selection Director:

- Picks the most interesting part of the reading to read to the group at the next meeting
- Writes down
  - Book or story/title
  - Pages to read
  - Today’s date
- Then writes down “Why I chose this part”

For example:

My favorite parts are: Once upon a time there lived a man and his wife who were very unhappy because they had no children. These good people had a little window at the back of their house, which looked into the most lovely garden, full of all manner of beautiful flowers and vegetables; but the garden was surrounded by a high wall, and no one dared to enter it, for it belonged to a witch of great power, who was feared by the whole world.

I chose this part because “once upon a time” usually indicates a fantasy or fairy tale that will end with “happily ever after” and that usually makes the reader feel good. Also explain the irony in the fact that the ugly witch had such a beautiful garden but was so mean she wouldn’t share it with anyone else.
The next part I liked the best is: “Ah, ah! You thought to find your lady love, but the pretty bird has flown and its song is dumb; the cat caught it and will scratch out your eyes too. Rapunzel is lost to you forever – you will never see her more.”

I chose this part because of the pretty figurative language used here.

Who is the pretty bird?

What does the word “dumb” mean? Explain to students that the original meaning for the word in this context is “silent.”

Who is the cat?

The next role to discuss is the Art Director

The Art Director:

- Draws a picture of what happened in the reading
- Includes details from the story in the picture
- Writes down what he/she includes in the drawing and why it’s included

Ask students if they ever choose a book to read based on the book jacket cover art or the illustrations? Explain that visual impact sometimes entices the reader to read a book based on the details that are included in the artwork.

For example: for the story, Rapunzel, we could draw:

A garden

Have students discuss the importance of drawing a garden and explain reasons why the garden plays a central role in the story.

We could also draw:
A Witch

Ask for explanations about choosing the witch to draw. What other details could be included with the witch?

We could draw;

Rapunzel in a tower. Ask students why they would draw a picture like this and what other details could be included in the drawing.

Ask students to share their own ideas for art work for the story of Rapunzel and to explain why they would choose to draw their ideas.

The Connector Director
The job of the Connector Director:

- Writes how the story is like real life
- Connects what was read to something that might happen or has happened in real life

Explain that even though this story is fiction or a fairy tale, and is a fantasy that originated strictly in the mind of the author, there are certain aspects of the story that are like real life. Many things in the story might happen or have happened in real life. For this reason, the reader can identify with many of the things that take place in the story.

For example:

- Sometimes people want something so badly they are willing to trade anything for the thing they want just as the father traded his baby.

![Image of a baby sleeping]

Ask students if they have ever wanted something a friend had and traded something of their own for it. Then ask if anyone regretted the trade.

- People fall in love just as Rapunzel and the Prince fell in love.

![Image of a wedding couple]

- Sometimes people are held captive just as the witch held Rapunzel Captive.
- Sad, but sometimes children are mistreated

- Sometimes people who are in love get separated

- Princes really do exist today

Ask students to think of other aspects of the story which can be connected to real life. Some examples might include:

- People really can go blind
- Some parents do give up their children
- Sometimes people grow gardens
- People can grow their hair really long

**Summary Director**

The role of the summary director:
■ Writes two or three paragraphs summarizing the reading or writes the main ideas from the reading
■ Uses a graphic organizer to do this

For example:

In the Beginning:

■ The mother wants rampion
■ The father trades the baby
■ The witch takes the baby and hides her away

Ask students to supply details that have been omitted.

In the Middle:
The Prince Finds Rapunzel
The Prince hears Rapunzel singing
He watches and finds a way to meet Rapunzel
They plan to marry
The witch finds out and ruins their plans

Ask students to supply details that have been omitted.

In the End:

The prince wanders for years
He eventually finds Rapunzel
Her tears cure his blindness
They return to the Prince’s castle and live happily ever after

Following the presentation on Literature Circles, a discussion might be held to discuss the roles, which ones the students find most interesting and how each student will be able, over the course of time, to perform each role.

How can you tell if a book will work for use with Literature Circles? Here are some specific considerations that teachers make when choosing books for literature circles:

- Compelling content -- action, suspense, dialogue, humor, controversy: Most teachers look for books in which the story blasts off from the first few pages. Books with action and conflict automatically prompt response. As Janine King said, "If students disagree with what the characters are doing, they'll talk. If they think the character's making some bad choices, they can get pretty riled up and want to talk about that, too."

- Realistic characters: As readers, we all want characters we can come to know, characters so real that they could walk down the street with us.

- Picture books with strong, colorful illustrations that support the story: Illustrations can be as important as story content in sparking response, particularly for beginning readers.

References
