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READING: THE CONFERENCES

Jeanne M. Jacobson

Literacy for the New Millennium
First International Conference
Australian Reading Association
Melbourne Australia — July 1993

The role of writing in literacy development was highlighted at the first international, and nineteenth national, Australian Reading Conference, held from July 5-9 at the World Congress Centre in Melbourne Australia. Lucy McCormick-Calkins, in her plenary address on "The writing workshop: A place for thoughtfulness" urged flexibility in writing instruction (moving away from an unending cycle of plan-write-revise-plan-write-revise). Offering her audience guidance on ways to encourage young writers, she suggested avoiding the stock phrase, "Tell me more about this," and instead using some form of the statement, "This is very important, isn't it?" — recognizing that a child's choice of a particular piece for the topic of a writing conference signals its importance to the young writer, even though the value of the piece may not be immediately apparent to an adult.

"Literature circles: Children talking and writing about their reading" was the topic of a presentation by two educators who collaborated in research: Paula Willson, teacher of a sixth

grade class in a suburb of Adelaide, and Anne Simpson, professor of literacy and language education at the University of South Australia, who observed in Willson's classroom regularly for a year. Willson's interest in engaging her students in collaborative reading stemmed from her dissatisfaction with the individualized language arts instruction she had been providing, with students self-selecting the books they read, conferring with her, and completing a book review or another agreed-upon culminating project. Students, she said, enjoyed this, but she had come to believe that their text-based meaning making was narrowed because participation in each conversation was limited to two people (teacher and one student). Another motivation for change was her desire to broaden students' reading interests.

Literature Circles became the basis for a new language arts program. Following a month of individual conferencing and assessing students' reading ability and interests, Willson grouped her 31 students into five Literature Circles (to allow for one conference with each group per week), and presented each group with a choice of novels for their first reading assignment. Literature Circles met for half an hour, as the first activity of the day; the group's primary role was to discuss their reading, but had also to agree how much was to be read for the next week.

Students' written responses to their reading were made in two forms: a weekly entry in their individual Reading Response Books (into which Willson had glued the guidelines for their responding), and "stickums" — post-it notes which students attached to the pages of the novel as they read, or reread. These notes served as the basis for Literature Circle discussions, and as one method Willson used to document student effort. After the notes were used in discussion, students pasted them into their Reading Response Books.

Both Willson, the teacher, and Simpson, the observer, stressed the importance of the post-it notes. Students were

told to use them to note interesting descriptions, unfamiliar words or puzzling events, questions, predictions, feelings and opinions. Students came to value the notes as an aid in discussions — a source for comments to make to the group, and a documentation for points they wished to make.

Simpson commented on the extent and effectiveness of Willson's written responses to students' weekly entries in the Reading Response Books, citing these examples: "I'd also like to read what you think about certain characters in the story so far," "It's great when you put yourself and your family into the story. You certainly would know how he feels," "I like to hear about your feelings, especially, Craig," "It's good how you're talking to me on paper" and "It's good when you give me an example to back up your comment." Responding to students in writing was time-consuming, but productive. After Literature Circles had been a class activity for many months, Simpson noted that the students' comments, and their teacher's responses, focused increasingly on the author's role as shaper of the story, and not solely on the events and characters within the novel. In evaluating the Literature Circles, all students said they enjoyed this method of learning and all but two of the students said they were reading more than they used to, and thought their reading had improved.

Books which Willson recommended for use in Literature Circles with 11- and 12-year-olds included *This Place Has No Atmosphere* (P. Danziger), *Misery Guts and Worry Worts* (M. Gleitzman), *From the Mixed-Up Files of Mrs. Basil E. Frankweiler* (E. L. Konigsburg), *Mama's Going to Buy You a Mockingbird* and *The Whispering Knights* (J. Lively), *Toby's Millions* (M. Laurie), *Clancy's Cabin* (M. Mahey), *Creeps* (T. Schoch), and *The Return of the Nimbin* (J. Wagner).