Inquiry in Pre-Service Teacher Literature Circles

Mary Ellen Oslick
University of Central Arkansas, Conway, Arkansas

Literature circles are often used in language arts classrooms as forums for discussions about a book. In this article, I examine the inquiries that pre-service teachers pose in an introductory children’s literature course during a realistic fiction literature circle discussion. Through their inquiries, I argue that pre-service teachers are making important connections to themselves, to the text, and to the world.

Introduction

Whenever I hear the word inquiry, I am reminded of a slogan from my childhood days. The tabloid National Enquirer posed this purpose to its readers, “What inquiring minds want to know.” When I began this study in my university-level children’s literature class, there were many things I wanted to know, but I also wanted to know what my pre-service teacher students wanted to know.

There is much debate right now about the knowledge level of new teachers entering the classroom: How much should they know about their specific teaching fields? How much should they know about pedagogy? How much should they know about the specific populations of students they will be teaching? While all of these areas of knowledge are important in teacher education, I would also argue that training in inquiry is necessary. Inquiry can be understood as the act of someone turning to someone else to go beyond what she already knows (Lindfors, 1999).

These acts can have the purpose of seeking information or of wondering. Through these acts, people make sense of the world. I think that especially in today’s classrooms where we face questions about politics, religion, the economy, and technology, we need teachers who strive to make sense of their world and who help to promote inquiry acts of their students.

Inquiry Event: Literature Circle Discussion

To study the inquiry of pre-service teachers, I chose a specific event in my children’s literature class: literature circle discussions of contemporary realistic fiction. Literature circles are a discussion procedure where students can talk about books in a group
setting (Moen, 2005). In them, students are asked to read with a purpose and then discuss what they read, determining themselves what is important and why (Blum, Lipsett, & Yocum, 2002). They are student-centered and student-directed, but facilitated by a teacher.

This means that the pre-service teachers in my class were allowed to choose their own book to read from a list of nine possibilities. (Some chose their book based on the brief introduction I gave in class, the appeal of the cover, or because of other group members.) The discussions themselves were completely student-centered. At the beginning of the class I merely gave the vague direction to “talk about the book.”

Literature circles create the opportunity to be significant events of inquiry. The context that supports inquiry talk is social, as well as intellectual (Lindfors, 1999). Students are turning to each other to go beyond their own understandings of the book they read. In this setting they also have the confidence to inquire. In his study, J. T. Dillon found that being afraid is the major reason why students do not ask questions in the classroom (Dillon, 1981). The context of the literature circle helped alleviate this fear.

Inquiry Topic: Realistic Fiction

The children’s literature genre of realistic fiction refers to stories that could actually happen to people and animals (Lynch-Brown & Tomlinson, 2008). Further, the books discussed in this project fall under the title of contemporary realism. The stories take place in the present time, and they portray the attitudes and ways of life of the present culture (Lynch-Brown & Tomlinson, 2008).

The book, Rules, by Cynthia Lord was published in 2006 and won the Newberry Honor. The protagonist is a preteen girl who struggles to find normalcy in her life with her autistic brother. The Year of the Dog by Grace Lin and published in 2006 portrays another preteen girl who struggles with finding her identity as a Taiwanese-Chinese-American living in New York. Both novels offer the readers a chance to practice critical inquiry, which focuses on larger systems of meaning and connects the personal with the political as the readers explore issues in the world around them (Laman, 2006).

Because these novels deal with social-cultural issues (multicultural identity and students with disabilities), they also provide an opportunity for readers to encounter realities different from their own. Pre-service teachers need this chance because they will most likely be teaching students who come from backgrounds different from their own.

The Inquirers

The spring children’s literature class was the first education course that many of the students were taking. They came from various educational backgrounds; some had completed common curriculum courses from the large university and others came with an associate’s degree from community college.

The pre-service teachers all hailed from the same state and their ages spanned 20 to 21 years. They have not had any formal experience in the classroom, but they were currently participating in an afterschool program where they read to a student throughout
the semester. The group that discussed Rules consisted of two male students and one female student, two participants were Caucasian and one was African-American. To protect their identities in the transcript, they were given pseudonyms: Jake, Katie, and Nick. Two female, Caucasian students discussed The Year of the Dog. Their pseudonyms were Kelly and Anna.

Method

After choosing their realistic fiction books, students had five weeks to find and read them. The assignment also required students to use sticky notes to mark any issues or questions they wished to discuss in their groups. I collected those notes at the end of the class to include as part of my data set.

The literature circle discussions for the nine different books occurred simultaneously in the classroom and lasted about 30 minutes each. After acquiring consent from the whole class, I placed a tape recorder in plain sight before two groups of students.

For the Rules group, I had a student volunteer to have his discussion taped. I chose the group who read The Year of the Dog because of its participants: they were extremely enthusiastic about each of the genres in children’s literature that we had discussed in class and came prepared each week.

At the end of the discussions, students were asked to write a short summary and list the main issues of the book on chart paper to share with the rest of the class. The two taped discussions were transcribed to examine specific examples of inquiry.

Three weeks later I gave the students a midterm examination with a question about the realistic fiction books they read:

- Provide a short summary of your realistic fiction literature circles book.
- What were your aesthetic responses to this book?
- Describe at least two roles of the literature circles discussion group and explain how this book could be used in a literature circles discussion in your future classroom.

Their responses from this question also provided me with insight into their inquiries, so I used them for the study, as well.

Once all of my data were collected, I spent many hours examining and trying to find themes. I first looked at interrogative forms of inquiry. Although they are not necessarily examples of true inquiry, they were the easiest to hear and read. They could be the starting point for looking at inquiry.

Lindfors describes the three basic types of canonical interrogative forms:
• Yes/no questions, which (formally, at least) seek an affirmative or negative response

• Wh-questions, which begin a “question word” (e.g., what, where, when, why, how, who)

• Polar questions, which offer a choice (Lindfors, 1999, pg. 83)

After identifying the interrogative forms in the discussions and notes, I then looked at what the student was really asking. If s/he was turning to the group or to me in an attempt to go beyond present understanding, then the question was deemed an act of inquiry.

The next challenge I faced was looking for inquiries that were not posed as questions to the group or to me. Often these inquiries can be lost or go unexplored because they are not correctly interpreted. Again, Lindfors offers two distinct characteristics to listen for in conversations that signal inquiry (Lindfors, 1999, pg. 107).

One is the articulation of uncertainty. Indicators of uncertainty include phrases like: maybe, perhaps, I think, I guess, and ‘kinda’. I needed to look at ways that my students were using what they knew to push further into what they wanted to know. The other characteristic of inquiry is invitation. Signals of this invitation include: you know, remember how, and like. To invite someone to be the role of helper in an inquiry, makes the act social.

There were some limitations of the study. I chose to analyze all of the data as-is without follow-up conversations with the students. While a written or face-to-face interview after the discussions would have been helpful, I wanted to examine the inquiries as they occurred with their peers.

Because of my position as instructor, I did not want some students to feel that they had to have definite answers. I think that the event of the literature circle allowed them to voice their inquiries without the fear of judgment by me. Another limitation was that I was only able to record two literature circle discussions.

I would be interested to look at patterns across the class of 28 preservice teachers. In a future study of the same event, I might try to record at least four conversations, as all of the books discussed have the potential to lend themselves to inquiry. A wider range of participants might show different themes of inquiry.

**Results and Discussion**

In the theory of transactional reading, Rosenblatt (1978) asserts that what the reader brings to the reading act—experiences, personality, and current frame of mind—is just as important in interpreting the text as what the author writes. Reading is a fusion of the text and the reader. Another aspect of the theory deals with the purposes for reading: efferent and aesthetic.

Efferent reading is taking knowledge from the text, while aesthetic reading involves living through a literary experience, in the sense of assuming the identity of a book
character (Lynch-Brown & Tomlinson, 2008). The notes and transcriptions show that students were involved in this transactional process through inquiry. Specifically, they used utterances of inquiry to make connections to themselves, to the books they read, and to the world.

**Connections to Self**

A connection to self occurs when a reader applies something in a book to his life. This connection can be both efferent because of the knowledge that is sought, and aesthetic because of the feelings one can imagine. In the *Rules* discussion, Nick asked about how typical the protagonist’s feelings were about her autistic brother and her family situation. Jake went beyond his own understanding by connecting the situation to his own experiences.

**Nick:** Do you think her feelings are like typical in, like, in possibly any family that would have maybe a sibling that, you know, was okay and then a person with disabilities?

**Jake:** I think yes it is, but I think that normally those families with children that are disabled would be more upset. Like she was in pretty good high spirits, like I said about, like, how she still was there for David, her little brother. That’s what she wanted was for him to be normal. I think if it was me, I would be a little more upset and not as close to my siblings with disabilities because of their attention, but she’s taking it pretty well, for sure.

The inquiry posed by Nick invited the members of the group to connect with the main character, Katherine. He wanted to know if her feelings of frustration, neglect, and jealousy were the norm for kids who had family members with disabilities. Jake responded by using uncertainty markers such as “I think.” Although he did step into Katherine’s place, he was still not sure exactly how he would have reacted in that situation and how different his feelings would have been from Katherine’s.

In *The Year of the Dog* discussion, Kelly and Anna talked about the differences in the eating habits of the two Taiwanese-Chinese-American families.

**Kelly:** I also liked, um, I know we already talked about the, um, food stuff, but I liked how Melody’s mom was, like, so healthy, like health food orientation and Grace’s mom was like, oh I don’t really care-- you can eat all this, like, candy and stuff and then…

**Anna:** Like you can put sauce on your, like, whatever.

**Kelly:** I think that a lot of kids, like, um, my household was, like, junk food, candy. Not like all the time, but, you know, and then I had friends who would come over purposely to eat, like, cookies cause their mom was like no sugar.
Anna: Well, like, actually my mom-- Morgan has had a couple of friends say that they don’t like eating at my house because my mom had health food and I, like, laugh because my mom did not have health food that much. Like if you want a snack she’s not gonna give you, like, you know, a cupcake but, like, she’ll be, like, here have some carrots or have a pretzel or ...

Kelly: Yeah. My mom was, like, here have some crackers or chips

Anna: Yeah. But Morgan has said that and I’ve never even thought about that and it’s funny the differences even in, like...

Kelly: Yeah cause it’s, like, they’re, even though they’re both Chinese but they’re just like every other family household, like kids’ stuff is like kids’ stuff, just like junk food.

In this episode, Kelly and Anna articulated invitations to each other to expand their knowledge. They connected the differences between the two families in the book to the differences between their own families. Kelly had already thought about this concept and documented it on a sticky note. She wrote, “Maybe food = love?” This question, though, was unable to be discussed when she was reading the book independently. Only when she could turn to Anna did her inquiry come to the surface in a conversation.

Kelly did not use the same question she wrote before, but she used information that she formed with Anna to make a generalization at the end. When families with kids are examined, she asserted that you can see that some issues are cross-cultural (like the balance between healthy foods and junk foods).

Connections to Text

When making a connection to the text or to other texts, the reader examines the characters or situations presented in the book. The students in the literature circle groups used specific details from their books to inquire about things they did not understand. Because those details were unclear in their books, they turned to the members of the group for help. The purpose of these connections is efferent because the readers are seeking information.

The group discussing Rules wanted to know about the disability that the character, Jason, had. This character becomes good (almost romantic) friends with the protagonist, Katherine, after they meet at her brother’s occupational therapy appointment. The author shares that Jason is in a wheelchair and must use flash cards with short phrases to communicate.

The students want to know more, though. They consistently make connections with the text in order to better understand one of the characters. Jake begins the discussion by commenting on a part of the book that he liked.
Jake: I think it was pretty cool though with the words, she’d have, like, questions for, uh, Jason and she actually like had to write the questions out and she’d write one that she was hoping he would say and one that he wouldn’t say. I thought that was pretty cool.

Nick: Yeah. At first, like, I didn’t even really know how, like… Jason was confusing to me. Like I didn’t know how severe it was. Like, was, like, he had cards and, like, put the cards together or was he, like, did he, like, put the cards out? Did he set them out?

Katie: Mm-hm.

Nick: It’s kinda like you see people and you see them on the outside and you don’t really know who they are on the inside. So, like, I was expecting, like, Jason to be, like, but he was comprehending everything she was saying and she was, like, talking fine and he was understanding everything she was saying which I thought that was pretty cool.

Katie: Did it say what he had? What Jason had?

Nick: No. I wouldn’t even take a guess at it. Mm-hm… like in a wheelchair?

Nick admits to the group that the character of Jason was confusing to him, and he references specific details in the book when asking for the help of his peers. Katie wants to know the exact name of the disability that confined Jason to a wheelchair. She asks this with uncertainty, as if perhaps she missed that information in the book. Nick responds by affirming this uncertainty, but cannot contribute anything else and so the episode ends.

When Kelly and Anna were trying to formulate a brief summary of *The Year of the Dog* for their presentation, they inquired about details that were still unclear to them. The protagonist’s age is never explicitly given and the reader does not know what grade she is in at school. They use the text to ask about this detail as they move toward completing the assignment.

Kelly: Yeah. So overview… Okay. So story begins, we’re introduced to a Taiwanese-American family or Taiwanese dash Chinese dash American cause you know she says she’s all of these together…

Anna: On the Chinese New Year?

Kelly: Yeah, on the Chinese New Year, the year of the dog. Um, we meet Pacy and then maybe, like, in parenthesis put Grace.
Anna: Did we ever find out how old she is? Like did it say what grade she’s in?

Kelly: Like I don’t, I don’t remember, I don’t think they explicitly say.

Anna: Yeah.

Kelly: I don’t think so either. But, like, we can say we meet Pacy (Grace) who is a...

Anna: Spunky girl trying to find herself in the year of the dog?

Kelly: Yeah.

Together they work through a succinct summary of the book, but it takes both of them reaching for new knowledge. Anna asks about Pacy’s age (which is unknown) and then about her grade in school. I think she does this to make a guess at Pacy’s age. When both Anna and Kelly realize that this inquiry is futile, they turn their efforts toward the bigger picture of capturing the main ideas for their presentation in class. This is truly a collaborative effort to go beyond what is presently known independently.

**Connections to World**

Making a reading connection to the world means taking aspects from the book and applying them to real life. In this way the book can have substantial meaning for readers beyond its pages. The students made several connections between their books and the world, and they all focused on how those books could be used in future classrooms.

The assignment for a college class became a springboard for lesson planning. These connections, though, were riddled with uncertainties. The future classrooms of these students are still a far-off reality and I think this shapes their connections as inquiries rather than absolutes.

In response to the midterm question, Nick seemed to turn to me as his instructor to go beyond what he presently knew.

“In a future classroom I might want to create an activity after reading the book. Maybe have the class make silly rules and we follow them for a day.”

He knew that children’s literature can have an impact on literacy learning in the classroom and therefore knew that a follow-up activity to reading the book would be beneficial for his students. *Rules* is a great book and could just be experienced aesthetically, but Nick has learned that the efferent response to the novel is also important.

He was uncertain, however, as to what that activity should be. He suggested making up silly rules to be followed in class which shows me that he might not necessarily understand how this book could be used to discuss students with special needs. Conversely,
though, the midterm question is a very different source of information and his response might just indicate a student who did not spend as much time preparing an answer for this question as for all the others on the test.

Anna also expressed an inquiry with her response to the midterm question, but she did have a better idea of how to use the book in her classroom.

“I could maybe use this book in my classroom to talk about different cultures we have in the class. To show my students a different way of growing up and the different celebrations by different people.”

She knew that *The Year of the Dog* gives readers a portrayal of a non-mainstream family. The book is an excellent example of multicultural literature because of its representation of minorities as main characters (Lynch-Brown & Tomlinson, 2008). Anna also knew the power of using this book in class.

While the make-up of her future classroom is still uncertain, she knew that it will probably not be homogeneously Euro-American. She thought that this book could provide a way to start a conversation in the classroom about differences in cultures.

In their literature circle discussion both Anna and Kelly turn to each other when inquiring about future uses for the book.

**Kelly:** It seemed to me that like the mom was supportive and she had a good sibling rivalry between her and Li Li, Lingie? Whatever the little sister’s name was. Wait her little sister’s name was Kiki. I thought that was cute how that the Americans didn’t know how to say it-- her sister’s name so they called her Beatrice.

**Anna:** Beatrice.

**Kelly:** It’s, like, okay, did she choose that name or did they choose that name? I don’t know. I mean, that could be something interesting, too, when, like, you do have names from other cultures... They have to come, cause, like, I have a friend, who, um, like, him, his two younger brothers and his dad are all named Bob because they got to choose when they came here and they all chose Bob-- the four Bobs.

**Anna:** Or like our friend Sarah, you know Sarah Lin, like in her family they’re all named Sarah. Something like Sarah Ann.

**Kelly:** It’d be interesting, though, like, if you read this book and someone was having trouble adjusting...

**Anna:** Yeah. And you could be, like, what name would you have if you got to choose? Like, most people don’t get to choose their own name.
Kelly: Yeah, that’s true. That could be something you could do with the whole class and like that day or whenever you’re teaching, like, the book you could call them by their name that they want to make up. That’d be really cute because you could experience what it’s like coming from different culture and that’s not, like, really your name but, like, other people are calling you that and, like, you know you’d have that kid who wants to be called Unicorn for the rest of the day and you’d call Unicorn and I mean it’d be cute too.

Anna: I don’t know what I’d be called-- I don’t know Princess?

Kelly: Or you could take something from their culture, like, if the majority of your class is, like, you know, of European descent and you have, like, Hillary, Jacob, Ben, you know things like that, then you could do okay now your name’s gonna be Pacy, your name’s gonna be Ling Ling, and you’re gonna be Pujol. You know, like, things, like, that. I knew a bunch of Indian girls named Pujol. But I think that’d be something interesting to do because so they can feel, you know, to put them in another culture’s shoes or another student’s shoes.

They both recognized that coming from a different cultural background can be difficult for students, so they were inquiring to each other how to help those students. This episode is especially lengthy because Anna and Kelly have some personal experience with friends from other cultures.

They drew on those experiences to support the idea of potential tension in the classroom. They suggested a classroom where the majority participates in activities to experience what someone from a different culture might experience when coming to America. I think this shows that Anna and Kelly will work in their future classrooms to know their students as individuals and celebrate those differences.

Implications

From the transcripts and notes collected, I was able to learn about the inquiries that pre-service teachers have about specific pieces of children’s literature. Those inquiries frame the connections they make as readers: to themselves, to the text, and to the world. This study suggests important teaching implications for literature circles, children’s literature, and inquiry.

Literature circles have been recognized by educators for their benefits in the classroom (Moen, 2005; Blum, Lipsett, & Yocum, 2002; Levstik, 2001; Long & Gove, 2004; Silvers, 1999). They fulfill students’ needs to connect to texts in a personal way and connect with others (Williams, 2001). In this study literature circles have been shown as safe events of inquiry. The participants were able to share their uncertainties with each other in the pursuit of understanding the book and what it meant to them. Inquiry is an act of imposing on another because you need help going beyond what you know. The setting of a literature circle discussion, however, minimizes the factors of imposition: power, distance,
The students in the class have relatively the same status of power; they are all experiencing their first semester in the Pro-Teach program. Because of their association within a cohort of education students, they are close socially. (In fact, side conversations in class usually involve making plans for social engagements at night or on the weekend.)

The rank of the imposition (its heftiness) is also decreased because the class assignment is to discuss their books. It is not uncommon that a discussion includes some acts of inquiry. Because these factors have been minimized by this event, teachers should turn to literature circles discussions to promote literacy and inquiry in their classrooms. These events can also be used across the curriculum in science, math, and social studies classrooms by using other genres of children’s literature such as non-fiction.

Just as the event of inquiry is significant, so is the topic of inquiry: children’s literature. Another important teaching implication from this study is the importance of children’s literature to the act of inquiry. Although the academic value of children’s literature is often considered, other values include: imagination and inspiration; vicarious experience; understanding and empathy; heritage; moral reasoning; and literary and artistic preferences (Lynch-Brown & Tomlinson, 2008). The values of imagination and inspiration and vicarious experience lend themselves to making sense of the world, to inquiring. Teachers should be using children’s literature as topics of inquiry in their classrooms.

Because children’s literature has the potential to be a powerful topic for inquiry in all classrooms, pre-service teachers have a responsibility to develop their knowledge about and pleasure in literature (Cremin, Mottram, Bearne, & Goodwin, 2008). Reading a wide range of children’s authors can help educators with this challenge. Teacher educators have the responsibility to encourage this practice of reading for knowledge and pleasure. When teachers can recommend books to individual learners with accuracy and confidence, then those learners can excite their imaginations and enhance their pleasure in reading, both of which lend themselves to inquiry.

A final implication from this study is the importance of giving pre-service teachers opportunities to practice their own personal acts of inquiry. In the discussions, students were able to making reading connections to themselves and to the text. I think the most powerful connections they made, though, were to their future classrooms. They were imagining their students: Who would they be? What differences they might have? How could they create communities of learning where everyone was welcome? These reflections are healthy and necessary.

Pre-service teachers do not need to worry about their future classrooms, but they do need to wonder. They need to imagine the make-up of their classrooms in order to wonder about how to meet the needs of diverse learners. Wondering about the novels they read gave them ideas for lesson activities. The event and topic of inquiry gives pre-service teachers the chance to imagine and wonder about their classrooms.

Because of this positive experience with inquiry, I would hope to see these pre-service teachers become advocates of inquiry in their own classrooms. Some teachers feel
that they are giving up power in their classes when they pose true inquiries or engage in
inquiries with students (Lindfors, 1999). My desire is that these pre-service teachers
recognize the power they could gain when participating in inquiry, specifically a better
understanding of the thinking of students. They can then use inquiry as a tool in their
classrooms to “empower students” and “involve {them} in interaction that is abundant,
diverse, and authentic” (Lindfors, 1999).

Final Thoughts

With the educational implications of this study, I believe that more research should
be done to examine other pre-service teacher responses to children’s literature. Future
questions for research might include:

• What types of children’s literature facilitate the most inquiries for pre-service
teachers?
• Do literature circles as an event generally promote inquiry?
• How do pre-service teachers practice/promote inquiry in their internships?

Based on my research, I wonder if this particular group of students is unique in how
willingly they turned to each other for help in going beyond what they already knew. I
would like to think that other groups would also wonder about themselves, the book, and
their future classrooms. Fortunately, I have the opportunity to study another class of pre-
service teachers next semester. While the books may not be the same, hopefully the setting
and the content will inspire their imaginations and lead to more utterances of inquiry.

Literature Circle Books


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Author Note

Mary Ellen Oslick, Ph.D is an Assistant Professor in the College of Education at the University of Central Arkansas, Conway, Arkansas.

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