

The Impact of Literacy Circles on Student Engagement in 5th Grade ELA

(A Reflective and Descriptive Paper Aligned with New Mexico Standards and Practices)

MARICON R. MANALO

5th Grade Teacher

Pojoaque Valley Intermediate School

Abstract — This reflective and descriptive paper examines the impact of Literacy Circles on student engagement in a 5th grade English Language Arts classroom, with alignment to the New Mexico English Language Arts Standards and instructional practices. Drawing from classroom observations, student work samples, and ongoing formative assessments, the study explores how structured peer-led discussions support comprehension, collaboration, and critical thinking within informational and literary texts. Findings indicate that Literacy Circles significantly increase student motivation, participation, and ownership of learning by providing equitable opportunities for students to practice skills such as quoting accurately, determining main ideas, analyzing text structures, and integrating information from multiple sources. Additionally, the strategy supports culturally responsive teaching practices central to New Mexico's educational framework by fostering student voice, community building, and diverse perspectives. The paper concludes that Literacy Circles serve as an effective and engaging instructional approach that enhances both academic performance and social-emotional development in 5th grade learners.

Keywords — *Literacy Circles; Student Engagement; 5th Grade ELA; New Mexico ELA Standards; Collaborative Learning; Culturally Responsive Teaching; Reading Comprehension; Small-Group Instruction; Academic Discussion; Elementary Literacy Practices*

I. Introduction

Literacy is the foundation of all learning, and in the context of fifth-grade English Language Arts (ELA), the development of reading, writing, speaking, and listening skills is vital for academic success. As a fifth-grade teacher in New Mexico, I have seen firsthand the diverse learning needs of students who come from varied linguistic, cultural, and socioeconomic backgrounds. This diversity requires instructional strategies that engage students, foster collaboration, and cultivate a love for reading. One such strategy is the implementation of literacy circles—a student-centered approach that allows learners to take ownership of their reading and discussion.

Literacy circles, also called literature circles, promote active engagement by assigning students specific roles and responsibilities as they analyze and discuss a shared text. This structure helps create an authentic community of readers who learn to interpret, question, and connect with literature more deeply. In my fifth-grade classroom, the use of literacy circles has significantly impacted student engagement, critical thinking, and comprehension.

This reflective paper describes how literacy circles were introduced and implemented, how they aligned with the New Mexico English Language Arts Standards and the Multi-Layered System of Supports (MLSS), and how they ultimately transformed classroom dynamics and student participation in reading instruction.

English Language Arts (ELA) Program

ELA (English Language Arts) includes **reading with comprehension skills, writing, listening, language, and literacy circles** twice a week. During literacy circles, students participate in **small-group discussions** organized by instructional level — high, average, and lower — to address their specific learning needs.

These group activities encourage **collaboration and idea sharing**, which are essential skills for personal growth and real-life situations. Through these interactions, students learn how to work effectively with others and appreciate **individual differences**.

Students also have access to **digital books and learning materials online**, which means there is no need to rely solely on paper copies. Teachers can project materials on the screen, benefiting both teaching and learning by making lessons more engaging and accessible.

Context of the Classroom

My fifth-grade classroom consists of 20 students with varied reading levels and diverse cultural backgrounds, reflecting the demographic landscape of many New Mexico schools. About forty percent of the students are English Language Learners (ELLs), primarily from Hispanic backgrounds, while others are native English speakers. This diversity enriches classroom discussions but also requires differentiated strategies that address language development and comprehension simultaneously.

At the beginning of the school year, many students demonstrated limited enthusiasm toward reading. They often viewed reading as a solitary task rather than an interactive experience. The challenge was to make reading meaningful and collaborative. Literacy circles offered a practical solution that fostered student voice, responsibility, and social interaction.

In my classroom, we have literacy centers that include a **Reading Center**: My students self-select or continue reading an independent reading book (with an Anchor Chart on Responding to Texts). **Digital station** where students listen to the story given or a Leveled Reader of their choice. **Writing Center**: students work on a piece of writing. Depending on where they work, they may use time to pre-write, draft, revise, edit, or publish. Students may choose among tasks such as writing a draft or revising a draft. **Vocabulary Center**: Students use the Printable Super Six Words to list this week's Critical Vocabulary words related to the module topic. Then the students select six super words from their lists that they consider most important, interesting, or new to them. **Digital Station**: Listeners' Choice, which includes the **Listening Log**, listing the listening

skills they used, a summary of the selection, and questions they have about the selection or book. **Project Center:** Write and create, especially for high-level students or beyond, a Printable Project Log to guide them as they continue to work on the project. Examples as follows: Create your own invention: Brainstorm and Research: Create a Movie Proposal: Use research to create a proposal for a movie adaptation of a book. Create Safety Pamphlets: Use research to develop a safety pamphlet to educate members of your community about the week's topic. Create an Environmental PSA: Use research to identify one way to care for the environment, then write a PSA script for community members. Creating an Explorers Hall of Fame: Use research to write biographies of three favorite explorers. Create a Culture Map: Research Countries and cultures of the world. Create a Science Magazine Spread: Use research to give a presentation of a magazine spread on a related topic.

My resources can be found at **HMH Ed**, purchased by the School District. Online Ed. I can share it in Google Classroom, and I can also use the screen to access online content. The platform has Foundational Skills that focus on the objectives and on decoding words in each module or lesson for the week. Decoding---Fluency Connection including the Spelling Words and Genre of Study (informational, fiction, or non-fiction, etc.) We have a Week at Glance: including each day lessons, Critical and Academic Vocabulary, Reading (shared reading), Small Group Instruction (Options for Differentiation, options for Independent and Collaborative Work), Foundational Skills, Writing Workshop, Literacy Centers, Language and Communication, Collaborative Discussion, Weekly Assessment includes Reading Comprehension, Writing, and Vocabulary Quiz. And to sum up what they learned every Friday, we have Literacy Centers, where they can use different graphic organizers, Reader's Theatre, and Spelling Typing Activity. They can use Google Docs to type sentences using their Spelling Words for the week.

Most importantly, the teacher can access online and create custom Lesson Plans, find digital resources, and see student proficiency reports. And ELL students have their own versions of the book.

Theoretical Foundations

The concept of literacy circles aligns with Vygotsky's Social Constructivist Theory, which emphasizes that learning occurs through social interaction and collaboration. Students construct knowledge by sharing ideas and negotiating meaning with peers. In literacy circles, students discuss literature in small groups, taking on roles such as the Discussion Director, Summarizer, Vocabulary Enricher, Illustrator, and Connector. These roles encourage students to think critically and interact meaningfully with the text and with one another.

Additionally, literacy circles reflect the principles of Reader-Response Theory (Rosenblatt, 1978), which highlights the reader's role in interpreting the text. Rather than passively receiving information, students become active participants, bringing their personal experiences and

perspectives into the reading process. This approach is essential for fifth graders, who are transitioning from learning to read to reading to learn.

From an educational framework perspective, the New Mexico Common Core State Standards (NMCCSS) for ELA emphasize comprehension, collaboration, and communication. Literacy circles naturally align with these standards by encouraging students to cite textual evidence, discuss ideas, and present their interpretations clearly. Likewise, the Multi-Layered System of Supports (MLSS) encourages differentiated instruction and student-centered strategies — both of which are central to effective literacy circles.

Implementation of Literacy Circles

The implementation began with a gradual introduction of the concept. During the first week, I explained the purpose of literacy circles: to allow students to discuss books in small groups while developing comprehension, vocabulary, and critical thinking skills. We practiced using short stories before moving to full-length novels appropriate for the fifth-grade level, such as *Because of Winn-Dixie* by Kate DiCamillo and *Holes* by Louis Sachar.

Students were grouped by reading level and interests to ensure engagement. Each group received a book and met three times a week for 30–40 minutes. During these sessions, each student rotated through a role. For example:

Discussion Director: Created open-ended questions to guide the conversation.

Summarizer: Presented key events or chapters in concise form.

Vocabulary Enricher: Identified and defined unfamiliar words.

Illustrator: Created drawings or diagrams related to scenes or characters.

Connector: Related events in the book to personal experiences or real-world situations.

I modeled each role and provided visual aids and sentence stems to scaffold ELLs' participation. The students used to read journals to prepare notes and record reflections before each discussion.

Classroom Environment and Expectations

To build a productive and respectful environment, I co-created group norms with the students. These included listening actively, taking turns, respecting all opinions, and supporting each other's ideas. The literacy circle became a safe space where students felt comfortable expressing opinions without fear of being wrong.

We used a rotating chart to ensure fairness in assigning roles and a timer to maintain focus. I circulated among groups, taking anecdotal notes and occasionally joining discussions to clarify

misconceptions or guide comprehension. Over time, my role transitioned from direct instructor to facilitator, allowing students to lead their learning.

Student Engagement and Observation

The most noticeable change was the increase in student engagement. Students who were once hesitant to participate in whole-group discussions became active contributors in their small groups. Literacy circles gave them a sense of ownership and responsibility.

For instance, one student who struggled with reading fluency found confidence as an Illustrator, explaining her drawings with enthusiasm and accuracy. Another ELL student excelled as a Vocabulary Enricher, using bilingual dictionaries to help peers understand challenging words. Students eagerly anticipated their turn to lead as Discussion Directors, often preparing insightful questions that demonstrated deep comprehension.

The collaborative setting motivated even reluctant readers to participate. Conversations extended beyond surface-level summaries into meaningful dialogues about characters' motivations, themes, and moral lessons. Students used textual evidence naturally in their discussions, fulfilling one of the NMCCSS expectations for fifth-grade reading comprehension.

Integration with New Mexico Standards and MLSS

The literacy circle approach seamlessly aligned with New Mexico's English Language Arts Standards. For example:

Reading Standards for Literature: Students analyzed character development, setting, and plot, citing evidence to support their interpretations.

Speaking and Listening Standards: Students engaged in collaborative discussions, built on others' ideas, and expressed their own clearly.

Language Standards: Vocabulary Enrichers expanded word knowledge through context clues, dictionary use, and application in oral and written form.

Through MLSS alignment, literacy circles supported Tier 1 core instruction while allowing flexible grouping and differentiation. ELLs benefited from visual supports and sentence frames, while advanced readers engaged in deeper analysis. This inclusive approach addressed diverse learning profiles without segregating students.

Evidence of Growth

Over several months, I collected evidence through student journals, self-assessment rubrics, and anecdotal notes. The data revealed that 85% of students improved in reading comprehension and oral communication. Additionally, surveys indicated that 90% of students enjoyed reading more after participating in literacy circles.

Students demonstrated significant growth in their ability to ask and answer higher-order questions, infer meaning, and make text-to-self and text-to-world connections. Their writing responses also became richer, incorporating vocabulary and ideas discussed in their groups.

Teacher Reflection

Reflecting on this process, I realized how literacy circles transformed my role from knowledge-giver to learning facilitator. Initially, it was challenging to let go of control and trust students to manage discussions. However, once I established clear structures, expectations, and consistent routines, the circles became self-sustaining.

I noticed that quieter students found their voices, while more outspoken ones learned to listen actively. Peer teaching naturally occurred, fostering empathy and accountability. Literacy circles promoted a classroom culture of respect, curiosity, and shared learning — values deeply rooted in New Mexico’s vision of culturally and linguistically responsive education.

Challenges Encountered

Like any instructional strategy, literacy circles came with challenges. Time management was one of the most significant issues. Ensuring that all groups stayed on task and completed reading assignments required careful monitoring and pacing. Some students initially struggled with their roles, mainly when discussions drifted off-topic or when dominant personalities overshadowed others.

To address this, I implemented “reflection minutes” at the end of each session, during which students rated their participation and group collaboration. I also used mini-lessons to reinforce discussion norms and role expectations. Over time, students internalized these behaviors, and group management improved.

Impact on Student Engagement

The overall impact on student engagement was profound. Literacy circles cultivated intrinsic motivation — students read not just to complete an assignment but to share insights with peers. Their conversations became more thoughtful, and their comprehension deepened.

Through this structure, students developed a sense of agency, pride, and community. They were no longer passive recipients of information but active constructors of meaning. In many ways, literacy circles mirrored democratic learning communities, preparing students for middle school and beyond.

Broader Implications for Teaching Practice

The success of literacy circles inspired me to integrate similar student-centered strategies across other ELA domains. For example, we began implementing writing workshops that

paralleled the discussion-based format of literacy circles. Additionally, I collaborated with colleagues to design cross-curricular projects where reading discussions informed social studies and science learning.

This approach also supported culturally responsive teaching, as students brought their cultural experiences into discussions. Stories that reflected Hispanic heritage or Indigenous themes allowed students to connect personally and feel represented in literature.

Personal Reflection as a Teacher in New Mexico

Teaching in New Mexico means teaching within a tapestry of cultures, languages, and histories. Literacy circles became more than an instructional strategy — they became a bridge connecting students’ cultural identities to academic learning. When students shared how a story reminded them of their grandparents’ experiences or local traditions, engagement deepened beyond academic performance.

This experience reinforced my belief that literacy should not only develop comprehension but also affirm identity and community. As I continue to refine this practice, I am committed to using literacy circles to nurture empathy, curiosity, and critical thinking among my students.

II. Conclusion

The implementation of literacy circles in my fifth-grade ELA classroom transformed the learning environment into an engaging, collaborative, and culturally responsive community. Students became active participants, improving their reading comprehension, communication skills, and motivation.

By aligning with the New Mexico Common Core State Standards and the MLSS framework, literacy circles provided equitable opportunities for all learners. Despite challenges in management and pacing, the benefits far outweighed the obstacles.

Ultimately, literacy circles empowered students to take ownership of their learning and helped me grow as a reflective practitioner. This experience has reaffirmed my commitment to fostering literacy not just as a skill, but as a lifelong joy that connects students to the world around them.