

Welcome to my journey...

This is the story of how I explored other avenues than the traditional guided reading groups, and I found engagement, challenge, and literacy success for my students, as well as myself. My story is not one heavily rooted in reading, research, or strategies. It is one of innovation, instinct, and intuition. It is simply my story.

WHO AM I?

I am a 5th year teacher. All 5 years have been in the first grade at the same school. I am not your average 5th year teacher, since this is my second career. I was 32 when I started-10 years older than your average first year teacher.

WHAT IS MY DISTRICT LIKE?

I teach in Whitehall City Schools, the same district I attended. It is a suburban suburb that is becoming more urban in its demographic make-up. There is a great amount of diversity, and we have a large, primarily Hispanic, ESL community. The children I work with come from various home environments.

WHAT IS MY CLASSROOM LIKE?

I have 24 students. In my class, I have a group of higher level students, special education students, students who receive speech, occupational therapy, and physical therapy. I have ESL students. I have students who receive Title 1 reading (in my room) and Reading Recovery. I have parent volunteers, church volunteers, student volunteers, and a book cart book borrowing program. My students come and go all day, and I often feel as though I have a revolving door!

WHEN DID THIS ALL BEGIN?

Like many teachers, my first year, was a –well, it was an opportunity for growth! I spent my summer after my first year doing the following things:

- organizing all the papers and activities into categories, slipping them into plastic protectors, and then into binders

- writing notes of everything that went well that year, ideas to try next year, and things I had to include the next year-I put these notes in a small notebook that I still use today-5 years later
- reading and highlighting two books: Guided Reading by Fountas and Pinnell and Literacy Work Stations by Debbie Diller. These two books became the foundation of how I ran my class my 2nd year.

After incorporating the ideas into my second year, I found that laying the structure and routine are the keys for my students' subsequent success. Without this foundation, my ideas for new adventures COULD NOT happen. Some people can work in loud environments...I cannot. It was important for me to be aware of my "triggers," and to manage my classroom in a way that would not invite those behaviors.



Kaitlyn working with a math sorting mat



Writer's Workshop



Painting animals

THIRD YEAR: LITERATURE CIRCLES-HOW DID THEY JUST "HAPPEN?"



Mia and Sarah in Buddy Reading



Writer's Workshop



Bobby helps Yaremi with math

As I headed into my third year, I had some tricks in my bag. By now, I was able to spend less time banging my head against the wall thinking of lessons, and start using ideas that had worked well in the past, and stretching them into new areas. For example, using interactive writing used to be a chore—“what should we do” ...until I began using it in math and science and social studies (it is amazing what children remember when they pen it themselves). So I started to think about my reading groups. Within my groups, I had these 2 groups that were troubling me. One was high in all areas: they could decode, make inferences, and they could make meaning. The other was high in decoding but lacked fluency and the ability to simply talk about the book. I had heard about literature circles, and I had seen some charts and diagrams in my ESL classroom, but that was all I knew.



Mason, Gabe, and Anthony in Solo Reading



Puzzle Station



Kaysi gets measured by Daisy



Independent Class Work

BUT...AREN'T LITERATURE CIRCLES FOR THE INTERMEDIATE GRADES?

I thought that literature circles were mentally too high for my first grade students to become engaged. So, being an internet junkie, I started to surf the web. I knew I needed to do something else to engage and motivate my students, but I didn't know what to do. Quite frankly, I saw them bored with word work and small talk about characters and setting. While these are critical aspects of an emergent reader's guided lesson, even I was a little disengaged with this format by the springtime.

A BORED TEACHER = BORING LESSONS AND BORED STUDENTS

I knew that if I was bored, then I wasn't going to be able to engage my students. This was what set me to look at how I could make literature circles happen.

- After surfing the web, I found some basic discussion questions.
- I cut and pasted them and put them into several formats (see attached).
- I also kept dozens of others in a word document for later use.
- I showed my ideas to Tammy, my literacy coordinator and mentor, and she offered to come and videotape me and the students. At this point of the journey, I had no idea what I was doing, but I was willing to try.

LIT CIRCLES: STEP ONE:

Spring 2006

I took my first group, and we sat around the table. We started talking about a book. I introduced the book, and then I introduced the questions. I encouraged Mia, Jose, Sherilyn to discuss the book, and then I gave them the framework of questions. We spent weeks going over each of the discussion guides and practicing. Then I let them go on their own. First they would go off and read the book on their own. Then they would engage in the lit circle, first without a framework, then with a framework. By the time we got to City Mouse and Country Mouse, I was ready to introduce a new person in the group. I did this with the second group, as well. Then they went to work. As the group began to discuss the book, issues among the group began to surface. After redirection, the group got back on task. There were many layers in these groups. It is important to also note that the personalities of the children remained a constant. For example, it is evident that Mia does not say as much because she fears being wrong, which is consistent with her classroom personality.

LIT CIRCLES: STEP TWO

The next book the group did was Fox and Friends. Alec was not ready for that book and had to sit out. The group worked without prompts. I allowed the kids to freely talk before I gave them the structured prompts. Jose was able to tell the group what page he was on, and he was able to talk about the book. It was the sheer negotiations and discussions between them that got the lit circles off the ground. They were able to talk without wondering what an "adult" might say. Mia, who says little, disputes some of the discussion, which is equally as powerful as Jose who talks the most. They dispute if the story is non-fiction or fiction. Jose keeps the group on track by reminding Sherilyn of what they are talking about. They do occasionally get off track, but they come right back to the topic. It is important to note that they pay little attention to Tammy who is taping them. Jose also takes time to tell the group about a part he does not understand.

Once the groups were off and running, and they understood the sheets, Tammy and I were sure to model who would go first as the moderator, and how to ask the rest of the group if they had other ideas. It was important that the children understood that everyone's voice was important in the discussion. In the discussion with Alec, Mia, Jose, and Sherilyn, they used the discussion guides that I typed for them (book Fox and Friends). They were sure to ask each time, "anything else." This concept came from *what I knew* about these children, and I wanted to give them the vocabulary to make sure each person had a turn. It is natural that they did not always agree with one another, and it is also natural that sometimes their reactions to one another weren't always patient. Jose tells Alec, "ok, we get it" so Alec will stop talking. This is a natural interaction. I also encouraged them to stay on the same page as each other-which did not always happen. Jose tried to maintain the group by reminding them what I said to do/not do. He also did not appreciate when he was interrupted. This transcends into so much more than literacy!

LIT CIRCLES: STEP THREE

Once the processes were in place, the students were working on their own during regular work stations. I gave them a spot to work in, and then I "let go." This was VERY hard for me. I am typically a micro-manager with my class all the time. I am VERY aware of what is happening. Although, I have to admit, in reviewing the videos, there were a few things I missed (kids are sneaky!)

WHAT WAS I DOING WHILE THEY WERE ON THEIR OWN?

I continued to pull groups, and I continued to monitor the room as usual. AGAIN, the classroom needs to have the environment established with the expectations maintained.

WHAT HAPPENED?:

In the two different groups, I witnessed several things. One, the students were very much on-task and willing to re-direct one another. Two, at the end of the year, things changed. Speaking to the data-the children moved up reading levels, became more fluent, and began to enjoy reading for the art-not just what reading level they were on. Third, the interactions with the children as a whole changed. They became more verbal.

WHAT ABOUT ALL THOSE OTHER QUESTIONS I SAVED?

I was fortunate to have a FEEP student who took all the questions I had saved and put them on index cards and laminated them. My plan was to use them the next year for an earlier introduction into lit circles...but, plans change.

YEAR FOUR-BOOK CLUBS???

At the beginning of my third year, I was at a professional development day and I heard one of the speakers on a video say, "book clubs." In my little notebook, I wrote down "book clubs-January." That is where it all began.



Puzzle Station with a FEEP student



ABC Word Study Station: Choose, Write, Build



Poetry Station: Poetry Circle



Some of my organizational tools

BOOK CLUB BEGINNING:

January 2008

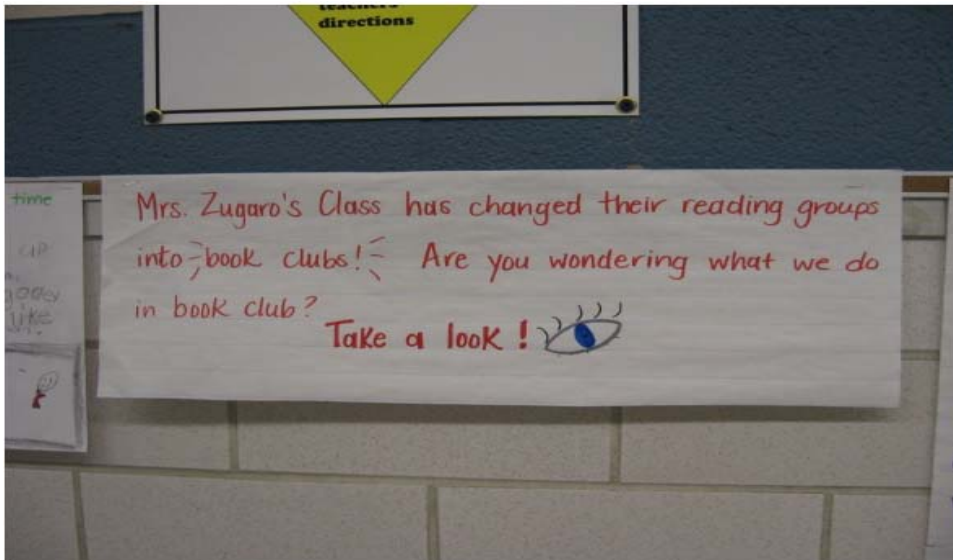
After working half of the year, grooming my class-which I must interject was a tough group-I told them that reading groups would now become "book clubs." At the point I told them this, I had no idea where I was going with it. I just liked the idea of the name.

BOOKMARKS, POSTERS, DISCUSSIONS

I started with the standard reading groups. I told them that now we were book clubs! I asked them if they knew what book clubs were, and we talked about what people did in books clubs (without the coffee). Once we started our discussions, they began as follows:

- Some groups talked about what characters they liked from other books we have read.
- Some groups talked about their favorite books.

- Some groups talked about stories that they read that they could make connections with (Reading with Meaning by Debbie Miller). We began by talking, simply talking.
- Then different groups made bookmarks of their favorite books, posters of their favorite books, and posters of connections to various books.





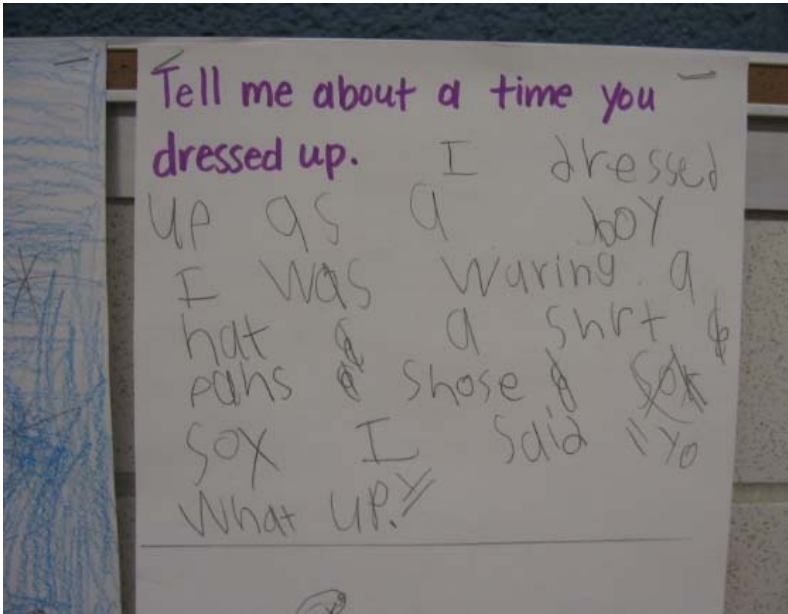
Kaylee shows her bookmark



Wing Loong's favorite book, Owl Babies



Jason's favorite book, I'll Fix Anthony



Caitlin's connection to Dressing Up



Jacob's connection to Dressing Up



Our sign in the hall to tell everyone what we were doing

HOW DID THE BOOK CLUBS EVOLVE INTO BIGGER PROJECTS?

I was working with a group of struggling readers. Instructionally, they were reading G-H (12-14), but they were not fluent decoders, and they lacked an interest in reading. Two of the students had been former Reading Recovery students, and they were missing that intense instruction and intense attention. This group had the promise of strong readers, but also some of my biggest behavior issues. That's when we worked on the spinning snake.

- Using a how-to book, How to Make a Spinning Snake the students had to master reading this text. The reward-we would all make spinning snakes! Memory alone could not influence fluid decoding, strategy use or comprehension (in this case, a step by step re-tell).
- Once the students in the group spent time reading this book alone, and in small circles, and mastery was assessed, the group made spinning snakes.



Khylie colors her snake



Jamir threads the string on his snake

- The time needed to prepare the spinning snake production was under 5 minutes, but the engagement and excitement were long-lasting. It energized the group.



The Book Club's spinning snakes



Tristen's snake

THE NEXT STEP: MORE COMPLEX PROJECTS:

In the weeks that followed, the groups became more interested. Here is what some of the groups were doing:

Each new book that was administered in a book club had the following directions:

(as you will see, there was rarely a plan)

- After individually reading the book and then reading it in a group, they were given discussion cards-remember the ones my FEEP made-aha-they came in handy.
- When I initially met with the group, I used 2 organizational tools (both of which came to me in that exact moment):
 - a paper folder
 - a spiral notebook (both were already in the room)
- In the spiral notebook, I would give them timelines for each task (read book by yourself by 4/3, read together by 4/6, etc)
 - one person in the group was responsible for the folder and notebook
- Using the discussion cards that I gave them (strategically chosen, of course), they were instructed to sit and discuss their thoughts and ideas-this was also on a timeline
- Then I would meet with the groups to see where they were and check their progress. NO NEED TO MONITOR ALL THE DIFFERENT GROUPS AND THEIR VARIOUS TIMELINES, THEY WOULD LET ME KNOW! NO RECORDS FOR ME TO TIRELESSLY KEEP TRACK OF.

- They would then write down the ideas (sharing the pencil of course) of the direction they were headed (even though they didn't know where they were headed-that is where the discussion cards were helpful). I LET THEM MAKE THE PLAN...by listening to what they said, all I had to do was slightly guide them into an appropriate activity:
 - let's write to the zoo

**for this, I gave them this simple instruction sheet:

BOOK CLUB DIRECTIONS:

Use the chart paper. There are markers for you to share. Write a letter to the zoo.

Ask some of the questions that you decide AS A CLUB. Remember that a great letter has:

Dear..... It has the date. It has an opening. It tells about you and it asks questions. It is signed by all of you.

Talk out the letter TOGETHER first, like Patricia Polacco before you write anything.

Write a practice letter, then re-copy it neatly for me to send.

****Remember, I have the stamp, and Mrs. Eblin has the envelope. GOOD LUCK!**

- let's look for a video on jellybean making on the internet
 - let's write to our librarian
 - let's write our own book on the next chapter of this story
 - let's make a diorama of animal feet
 - write down your ideas (sharing the pencil of course)
-
- With each new task that I wrote in their notebook, a timeline was given. They would remind me when their timeline was up (no record-keeping for me). I would meet and discuss what their thoughts were, and then I would think quickly of how we could extend their ideas (all that stuff about teachers being quick on their feet-so true).
 - Instantly, their ideas would become projects to further research or develop something.

- Here is a sampling of the projects:
 1. One club wrote a KWL on lemurs. They wrote to the librarian because they were fascinated with the guided book on lemurs, and they wanted more.



KWL is started

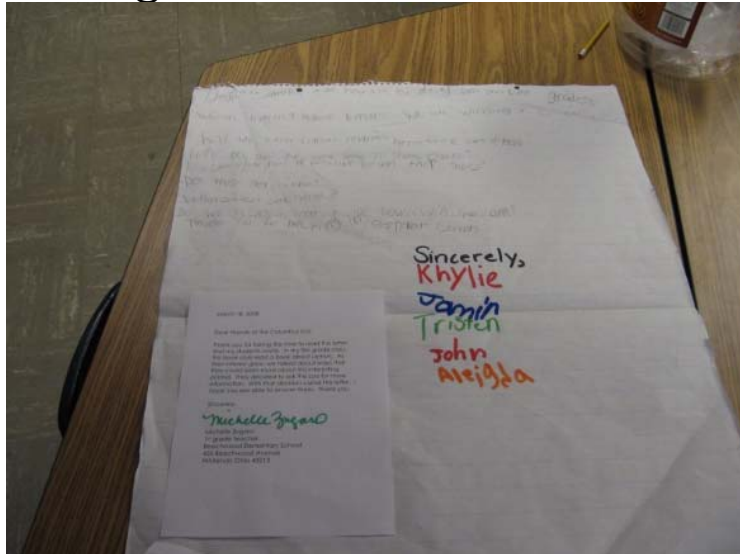


Writing a letter to Mrs. Poe, the librarian

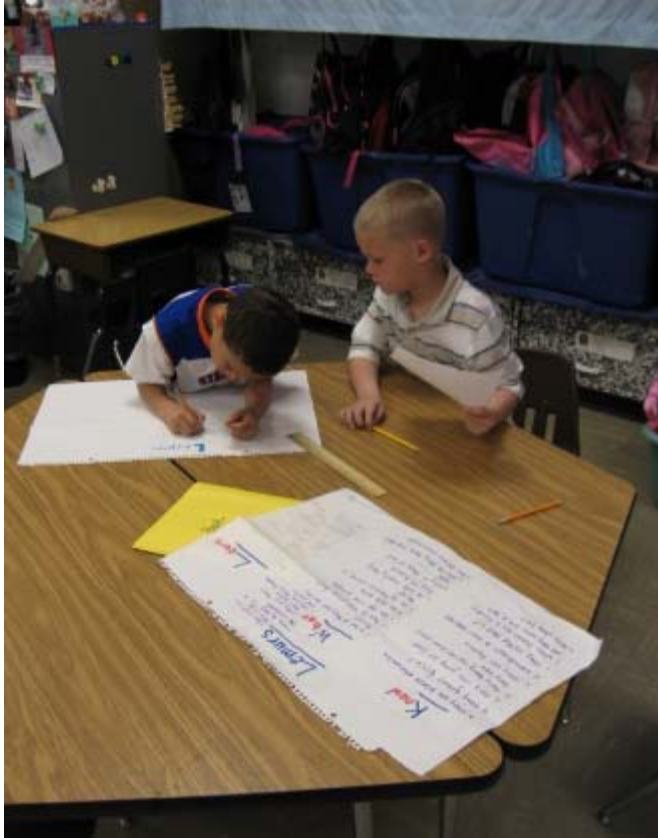
Then they had me look up things on the internet, and they got pictures of other species of lemurs. They wrote to the Columbus Zoo (who promptly wrote back), and they finished their KWL.



Writing to the zoo



The finished letter



Finishing the KWL—the L part



Reading the zoo letter to finish the L

Then they made NEW books about lemurs for other kids to read!



The club writing the first draft



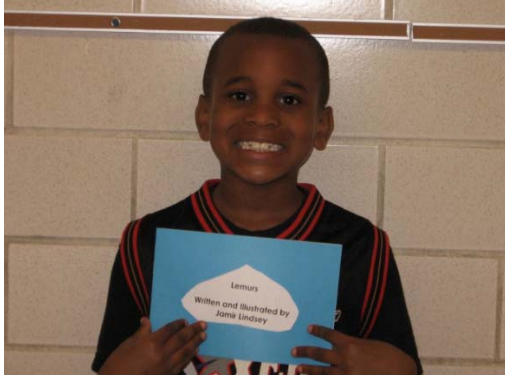
John makes his Lemur book



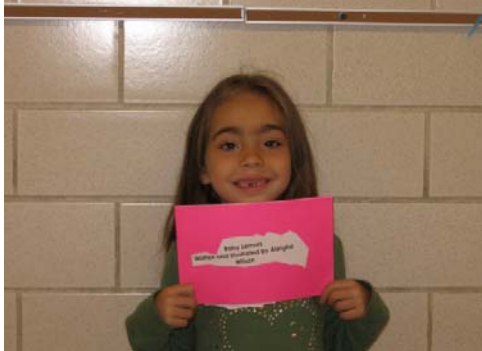
John and Tristen work on their Lemur books



Tristen works on his Lemur book



Jamir's book, Lemurs



Aleigha's book, Baby Lemurs

2. Another club read a guided reading book called Corn From Farm to Table. After reading individually, I met with them and went over several discussion cards. The ones I chose are italicized in the discussion cards section at the end of this handout. The book club used these cards to begin discussing the book.



Jacob uses the discussion cards to start the book club chat

Next, I sat with the group to talk about their discussions. Originally, in my mind, I thought they would make a web about all the things corn could become, but they had another idea. They were fascinated about the concept that corn was later turned into jellybeans. So, that is the path we took. The group began brainstorming ways to get more info on the jellybean process. Their ideas ranged from calling a farm to getting on the internet to going to the jellybean factory.



The Corn Club in discussion



Jason was surprised to learn that jellybeans came from corn

The group, facilitated by me decided to make a list of all the ways they could get information about how jellybeans were made. They had a deadline for this. Once we met and went through the list, we talked about what would work.

One idea was to call the farm. My literacy coordinator (and subsequent videographer) had this connection, but we didn't get enough information. We wrote a letter to the librarian, but she only had one book. Next, I found a video clip on the computer that showed the whole process. Actually, the whole class watched it. The club then had to write down what happened in the video step by step.



Caitlin writes down what happened in the video

From this, they wrote a book telling the tale of how the jellybean goes from farm to the mouth. We even bought some Jellybelly jellybeans and posed while eating them for our books. Once the children finalized all the writing, the books were assembled.



Amanda writes her book



The club assembles their books



Wing Loong poses with the jellybeans



Jason in his pose



Jacob in his pose



Amanda with her book



Briana with her book

3. Another group had a very different dynamic. Brandon was a student who skipped kindergarten, and he was reading on a level K. Joseph was a student whose voice was through a Vanguard Machine, and he was reading level H. The two students had become friends, and they were partnered in other aspects of the day (particularly buddy study and writing share-outs). We sat and talked about how I wanted them to help me choose their next books to read. First they made a list of things they were interested in. Then, I chose 2 books based on their interests. Brandon's was How to Build a House, and Joseph's was Animal Feet. I gave them the same materials and some timelines.

Then I had them write the most important parts of the books. One thing that I noticed is that both boys tended to re-write the book. After, talking with Brandon, he understood what I meant to do, but Joseph was having trouble doing this. This was one of those times, where I had no plan, but I jumped up and grabbed my skinny highlighter tape, and I showed him how to highlight the most important parts of the book.



Brandon and Joseph take notes

Next, after the notes were finished, we talked about our next step. For this activity, I knew in my mind that we were going to make dioramas.

I had not done this before, but I remember how much I enjoyed this as a student in elementary school, and I thought that both students would enjoy such a different project. After explaining to them what this was, I sat with them and talked about writing a letter to their parents to get a shoe box, and then we talked about getting the materials.



Joseph writes the letter to his mom to ask for a shoebox



Brandon works on glueing the wood



Brandon uses popsicle sticks to make his diorama



Joseph assembles his diorama



Joseph's clay feet



Joseph's Animal Feet diorama

After the dioramas were completed, we took photos.



Brandon and Joseph pose with their dioramas

4. Another group was rather diverse. One student was reading at a K/L, and an ESL student. He was not always there for group. Another student was reading at a J/K, and she had been very sick and absent quite often. The other 2 girls were reading at a J/K/L. I decided to use a K book, The Green Dragons. After reading and mastering this book, they were given discussion cards (underlined at the end of this document, as well).

They were given a notebook and folder and timelines. Once they were reading for their extension, we decided to write an advertisement for the book. The club discussed and decided what should be included in the poster. On chart paper, I drew the gridlines of the newspaper for them, and showed them where to put each section. Next, they made a mock-up of the newspaper, and then they made the final copy. Their key selling point was what struck me the most: "You should buy this book!"

5. The final group was my Title I group and also had one Reading Recovery student who was also an ESL student. This book club was still receiving more formal guided instruction, as well as individual work with me. This group was reading a book in guided group called the Hippo in the Pantry. The story tells about a character that comes home to find a hippo in the pantry.

After group discussion, the group wrote extensions to the book by telling their own silly tale.

Three of the students wrote about finding a parrot in their own pantry, and one wrote about finding a hippo in his shower!



Reading in group



Yaremi works on her book, The Hippo in the Pantry



Kirsten and Nicole write their books

THE END OF THE YEAR!

At the end of the year, the students began doing book reviews. Based on the great one-liner from the Green Dragons club: "You should read this book," the students were given time to write their own recommendations for next year's class (2008-2009). This gave me the freedom to do final book club work, final assessments, and kept the students engaged and energized as June came closer. This also gave the students ownership to next year's class...they were making some fantastic suggestions for my new readers. On the last day of school, we shared all of our book club projects and book reviews!

You Should Read This Book!

A book suggestion by: _____

Title _____

Author _____

You should read this book because _____

A picture of my favorite part:



Working on book reviews

THE JOURNEY IS NOT OVER:

My class now, December 2008:



Work Station Time



Work Station Time



Work Station Time

These are just a few snapshots of the current environment in my room during workstations

Currently, I have 23 students. My highest reader is reading on a level L. My lowest reader is reading on a level A. I have small projects started with 2 students who are writing letters to the librarian to investigate skunks and why the ocean is salty. Their timelines are on post-its (I recommend the Super Sticky kind). I am writing letters back and forth with a level J student from another 1st grade class. We are writing responses back and forth about the book I gave her. Two other students just read a book in group. They are on levels G/H. One is a retention from last year (from my class), and she excitedly began questioning the story.

Instantly, I grabbed a post-it and wrote her ideas down. We will be exploring her “questioning of the story” and “possible ending change” when we come back from Winter break. It is their excitement that keeps me motivated and energized. Even on the craziest of days, I know I can count on this energy. Again, this was only my story, my experience, my uncharted path with a tiny map in my brain. As you can see the time I took to organize and plan was VERY minimal because I often let the spontaneity of the moment be my guide. I have heard many times that the best teaching comes from the smallest unplanned moments...and I can say with full certainty this is true.

If you would like to contact me for any of the stories that were written by the students or a copy of the power point with the video clips (that will be available after my presentation on February 10th), or if you have any questions, please e-mail me at btzugarom@whitehall.k12.oh.us

Thank you!

And don't forget to read!

Discussion Sheets:

Characters

1. Which character reminded you of someone you know? How?
2. Did this character do things that you think are good?
3. Did this character do things that you think are wrong?
4. If you could be friends with this character, do you think you would want to be? Explain your answer.
5. Does this character change in the story? In what ways?

Setting

Leave a sticky note by one setting.

1. Where does the story take place?
2. Tell me what this place was like:
3. When did this story take place? Long ago, now, or in the future?
4. Have you ever been to a place like this? If not, would you ever like to visit a place like this?

Problem/Solution

Leave a sticky note where the problem begins.

1. Who has a problem in this story?
2. Describe the problem this character had:
3. Was the problem solved? How?
4. How would you have solved this problem?

Beginning, Middle, End

Leave a sticky note at the beginning, the middle, and the end.

1. How did this story begin?
2. What happened in the middle of the story?
3. How did this story end?
4. Can you think of another way this story might have ended?

Non-Fiction

1. What was the book telling the reader about?
2. What new facts did you learn?
3. Which fact was most interesting?
4. Have you ever been to the place the book is talking about or seen the things that the book is talking about?
5. What new words did you learn?

Reading response cards:

I wonder what this means

I really don't understand this part

I really like/dislike this idea
because

This character reminds me of
somebody I know because

This character reminds me of me
because

This character is like (name of the character) in (title of book) because

I think this setting is important because

This scene reminds me of a similar scene in (title of book) because

I like/dislike this writing because

This part is very realistic/unrealistic because

I think the relationship between _____ and _____ is interesting because

I like/dislike (name of character)
because

This situation reminds me of a
similar situation in my own life. It
happened when

The character I most admire is
_____ because

If I were (name of character) at
this point, I would

What you liked or disliked and
why

What you wish had happened

What you wish the author had
included

Your opinion of the characters

Your opinion of the illustrations,
table and figures

What you felt as you read

What you noticed when you read

Questions you have after reading

I began to think

I love the way

I can't believe

I wonder why

I noticed

I think

I observed

I wonder

If I were

I'm not sure

I felt sad when

I like the way the author

I wish that

This made me think of

I was surprised

It seems like

I'm not sure

This story teaches

I began to think of

Activity Cards:

Make a poster about the book!

Make a bookmark about the book!

Write an advertisement for other people who might want to read this book!

Draw a favorite character!

