Discovering New Ways to Support Student Readers

BY NANCY MINTZ

An Urban Sites mini-grant to the New York City Writing Project (NYCWP) gave five teams of on-site consultants and participating teachers the opportunity to document and write about the ways in which teachers were building in supports for a range of reading activities in their middle and high school classrooms. My project focused on classroom study and TC discussion on the use of literature circles with second language learners.

For about a year prior to receiving the grant, I had been working as an on-site consultant with Grace Raffaele, a sixth grade communication arts teacher at IS143. The school is located in the Washington Heights section of Manhattan, a predominantly Dominican area, and nearly 90 percent of the 1900 students are second language learners. The mini-grant has allowed us to learn more about what it means to change students' reading behaviors.

In December 1997 the school administration, worried about upcoming reading tests, divided one of Grace's sixth grade classes for reading. She decided to take a risk and use what seemed to be a top-down decision to her advantage. With only eighteen students, Grace and I took the opportunity to experiment with literature circles, an idea we were both interested in exploring as a way to increase students' responses to literature. I would be at the school two days a week, not only to help plan, but also to support the work being done by the students. I was excited by the prospect of working with her this intensively.

We were surprised to learn that this would be the first time most of Grace's students had discussed literature. Almost all of their prior reading work had been teacher-directed.

We both realized that we first needed to change student expectations about what reading in school could be like and establish some new habits. We also had to give students clear and usable strategies for thinking about what they read. In addition, we both believed that students needed to take charge of their own reading and had to be given the opportunity to make choices about what they would read.

We began by letting the students select a name for the group: “Spice Reading World” was born. Members received their own reading response log in which they could record their personal responses to the literature they would be reading. We hoped that the journal writing would be the springboard for collaborative talk.

We started by talking, writing, and sharing our reading histories and our attitudes toward reading. Both Grace and I were active participants and shared our own reading with the group. We selected Nicholasa Mohr’s El Bronx Remembered to introduce the students to the different ways they could respond to literature. We adapted Harvey Daniels’ literature circle role sheets to meet the needs of the class and became aware of how much modeling we needed to do in order to get students ready to work in groups.

CONTINUED ON PAGE 11
When we felt they were ready to strike out on their own, we rummaged through the book room and selected four full-length novels, *Matilda*, *The Witches*, and *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* by Roald Dahl and *The Cricket in Times Square* by George Selden. Students chose the novel they wanted to read, and Grace and I designed the groups so that each student got either their first or second choice. We also made sure that there was a range of ability levels in each group.

Grace and I both sat in on the reading and discussion. We provided writing prompts, modeled ways to talk about literature, and pushed our talks to greater sophistication. We documented our work in our teaching journals. At first I wrote about the work we did together after each class meeting. Later I began to record my observations of students as they read.

Having a mini-grant has helped us to find the time to revisit this work and look carefully at what we learned. One important theme concerned the nature of the collaboration. All of us—Grace, the students, and I—were in the position of learners. Grace was shifting her role and practice and helping me to discover ways of working within someone else’s classroom.

Our data suggest many other ways to support the collaborative talk needed for middle school students to become careful and reflective readers. For instance, sharing this work with the other on-site consultants at our regular weekly meetings and with our adolescent literacy group has helped us to continue to look closely at issues of literacy, learning, and professional development.

The Urban Sites mini-grant provided other NYCWP on-site consultants with the opportunity to help design and implement similar projects with teachers at their schools. What we’ve learned has helped us to expand our understanding and knowledge about ways to successfully support students as readers.