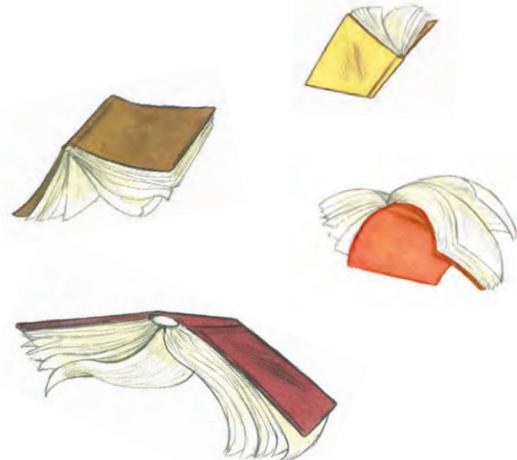
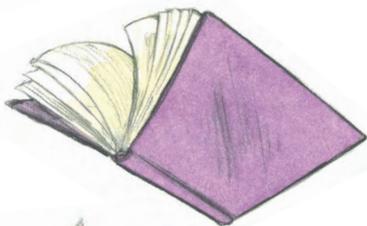
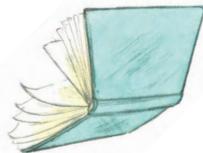
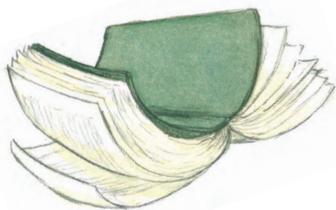


Renewing Curiosity in Grades 3–8 Readers: Breathing New Life into Book Clubs



By Sonja Cherry-Paul
and Dana Johansen



At the start of each new school year, we arrive rested, energized, and ready to apply our renewed inspiration and vision to launch a successful year ahead. And this year, as we plan to enhance student engagement and enthusiasm across our upper-grade classrooms, how can we intentionally create more student interest and—dare we say—authentic joy for reading?

We know that adolescence is an especially critical time for reading. Nancie Atwell writes, “Reading necessarily takes a back seat as teenagers’ worlds become impossibly full . . . When reading doesn’t happen at school, it’s unlikely to happen away from school, which means it’s unlikely to happen at all” (1987, 156). Students may also disengage from reading due to the chasm that can exist between what they are learning and their lived realities. We believe that book clubs have the potential to mitigate such dissonance and safeguard time for reading. Rather than journeying through texts as busy commuters, students become explorers of their own lives and of the world around them.

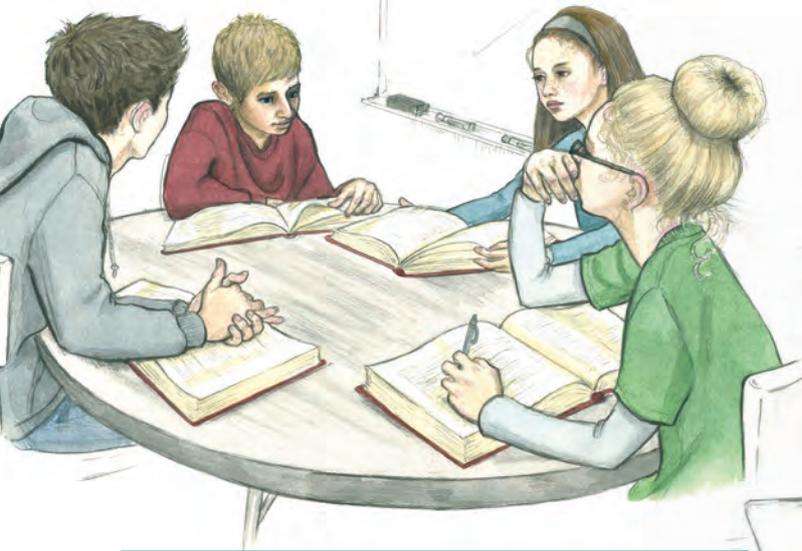
Book clubs provide opportunities for readers to pause, notice, and respond to texts in authentic ways with peers. We have seen, firsthand, that book clubs are where students fall in love with reading, and it is within these spaces we witness humanity at its best. Through powerful, self-generated discussions, students come to understand texts, as well as each other, deeply. Students discover more about who they are as readers, and they feel the joy of curiosity that binds them together as a club. Dr. Mary Howard (2017) tweeted, “We don’t *teach* reading; we *inspire* readers by making room for opportunities that BECKON kids to live readerly lives in AND out of school.” This is our goal: for our students to live authentic, readerly lives.

We value book clubs because of their indelible influence on students as they develop into critical thinkers, lifelong readers, and change makers in the world. In book clubs, students develop critical literacy skills. Engagement in reading increases as discussions about and beyond the text lead students along a path of self-discovery. By shining a light on some of our classroom experiences, we invite you to envision the possibilities of making book clubs the heart of your reading curriculum.

Critical Literacy

Book clubs are spaces where students can deconstruct and critique norms and social constructs, as they learn from various perspectives and develop empathy for others.

“Let’s make a list of all of the things that Sunny can do. Then we can make a list of how this differs for Raymond.” Four of Sonja’s sixth-grade students from The Civil Rights Book Club were meeting to discuss Revolution by Deborah Wiles (2014). She observed this club while they created their lists. For Sunny, the white character, the students included actions such as swimming in the town pool, going to the movies, and feeling safe when walking through the neighborhood. In contrast, the group noticed that Raymond, the African American character, could not swim in the town pool, could not go to the local movie theatre, and always worried about being harassed by the police when walking in town. Sonja suggested that club members make a list about themselves. They determined that they were a lot like Sunny; they could easily list actions that they didn’t realize before were privileges, and they felt safe in their town. Sonja asked this club of all white students if they felt that their peers from various racial backgrounds felt similarly. One club member responded, “We don’t have racism here. Everyone is treated the same.” Two others agreed. Then Leo, a quiet and pensive student, asked, “How do we really know?”



Paulo Freire said, “Reading is not walking on the words; it’s grasping the soul of them” (2013, 410). As students journey through texts together, they develop critical literacy skills that enable them to unveil what may have previously been hidden. Through consciousness-raising experiences, like The Civil Rights Book Club meeting described, students become aware of injustices that affect people’s lives. In book clubs, students develop critical literacy skills that lead to the disruption of normative thinking as they interrogate the world around them. In this way, students do not allow the words of a text to simply wash over them. They grab hold of the words and use them to examine not only the lives of characters, but their own lives as well.

Engagement

Book clubs improve students’ attitudes toward reading, especially when students have choice and autonomy.

One February morning, Dana noticed Tina, one of her fifth graders and a regular book-abandoner, thumbing through the pages of her book club text. Tina and Dana had spent large chunks of time together searching for a book that Tina wanted to read from beginning to end. As the year progressed, Dana felt increased pressure to help Tina find a book match—a text that would magnetically pull her into the pages and never let go. They roved through the class collection of high-interest texts—graphic novels, mysteries, humorous books—to find a book that would ignite the fire of the reader inside Tina.

But now, as Dana looked over at Tina with her book club copy of Fuzzy Mud by Louis Sachar (2015), she smiled. Tina wasn’t a “book abandoner”; Tina had been disengaged. She was like so many students—a social reader. She needed peers to talk to about the text. In her book club, Tina was reading voraciously and talking to her peers about her insights.

Participating in a book club brought out the best side of Tina as a reader. She was committed to keeping up with her nightly reading and working toward the goal of finishing her book with a strong support team. It turned out that Dana and Tina had been looking in the wrong place for the “perfect match.”

It wasn’t about the book; Tina needed people.



Students’ engagement in reading increases in book clubs because of the camaraderie that is kindled. This support system encourages each member to find success, and students celebrate their reading achievements together.

Discussion

Students have more in-depth conversations in book clubs as bonds between peers strengthen.

*At a distance, Dana observed a book club that was reading *Front Desk* by Kelly Yang (2018). As she took note of how the conversation was going, she noticed one fifth grader, Emilia, sitting silently. Emilia was an active, engaged listener in discussions. Dana knew Emilia was absorbing everything that her club mates were saying, and Dana wished they knew her thoughts. Reading Emilia's reader's notebook was like taking a trip into her heart, as she often bared her soul across the pages.*

Dana wondered how she could help Emilia add her insights to her club's conversation. She decided she would ask all the students if they were interested in writing blogs on Padlet. Her students were familiar with the platform, and they eagerly began creating Padlets for their book clubs. After a few days, Dana checked the progress of her students. She was stunned by what she saw. Emilia had made more posts on her book club's Padlet than any other student. In addition, she had written lengthy responses to her club mates' posts.

Dana's heart burst; Emilia was part of her club's discussion. Discussion is not about who is the loudest talker; it is about an exchange of ideas.

Self-Discovery

Book clubs allow students to see themselves in a text, examine their own lives, and explore their identities.

The poet Adrienne Rich once said, "When someone with the authority of a teacher, say, describes the world and you are not in it, there is a moment of psychic disequilibrium, as if you looked into a mirror and saw nothing" (1986, 199). The books we make available to students to read and discuss in book clubs send explicit messages to our students about who counts and who doesn't. Books are the most profound way in which we describe the world.

*Sonja remembered feeling confident about having a substantial amount of books in her classroom that described a world that was inclusive of all of her students. To be certain, she decided to audit her library. Sonja thought about one of her sixth graders who was transitioning. She found *George* by Alex Gino (2015) about a student who is transgender. But that was it. And she thought about several of her students from multiracial backgrounds. She located *Full Cicada Moon* by Marilyn Hilton (2015) and *Blended* by Sharon Draper (2018). Surely she had more . . . she didn't. Sonja wondered what messages children were receiving as a result of the books they had access to in her classroom, during, as Rich might argue, this naming of a world where some are included and others aren't.*

Sonja also discovered a troublesome trend; she had an abundance of historical fiction books. She wondered how her students saw the significance of their lives in the world today and in the future if the only reflection of themselves was from the past. Where were the contemporary books that help all children feel visible and valued?

Through book clubs, we see the many layers of what makes a strong discussion. Every club is different, and all voices, quiet and loud, are welcome. Kara Pranicoff, author of *Teaching Talk*, reminds us, "The depth of ideas is not measured by the speed of their creation." Kara teaches us that dialogue isn't just about contributing insightful ideas, but about actively listening (2017, 45). Book club discussions are a microcosm of society; there are a variety of voices and perspectives, and students learn the ability to converse with one another.





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Our students' ability to see themselves in the books they read is a right, not a privilege. Movements such as #weneeddiversebooks and #ownvoicesbooks have galvanized educators to think more carefully about the books in our classrooms. We can choose not to be complacent with our collection and, instead, to include books that spotlight the identities of our students. And when these books are available to be read and discussed in book clubs, students have opportunities to explore questions and engage deeply with topics that matter to them. Adrienne Rich reminds us that as teachers, we hold a powerful platform. And from this platform, we have the power to include, affirm, and celebrate our students by making conscious decisions about the books we make available in our classrooms and in book clubs.

We encourage you to see book clubs as a way to ignite a passion for reading in your classroom. By breathing new life into them, we are able to cultivate joyful reading experiences for all of our students.

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Read More:

Breathing New Life into Book Clubs: A Practical Guide for Teachers by Sonja Cherry-Paul and Dana Johansen, who provide essential strategies for creating, managing, and sustaining classroom book clubs.

Dana Johansen has taught elementary and middle school for more than fifteen years. Dedicated to the ever-expanding applications of technology in the classroom, she presents at national conferences on the use of blogs, digital texts, and flipped learning in literacy instruction. She is the coauthor, with Sonja Cherry-Paul, of several books including their newest release, *Breathing New Life into Book Clubs*, which informs this article.



Sonja Cherry-Paul has taught middle school English for twenty years. She is a literacy consultant who served on the Jane Addams Children's Book Award committee for ten years. Sonja leads presentations about literacy at national conferences and provides professional development for educators on reading and writing instruction and racial literacy. She is the coauthor, with Dana Johansen, of several books including their newest release, *Breathing New Life into Book Clubs*, which informs this article.

To continue to engage with Sonja and Dana on this topic, please go to www.heinemann.com/pd/journal.