
Junior Great Books Programs in North Carolina

Carol J. Veitch

"How can I get my students to read 'good' books?" "Is there any way to teach discussion skills effectively through the use of literature?" "Does the Junior Great Books Program work?" "I'm thinking about starting a Junior Great Books discussion group, but I don't know what experiences others have had with it. Can you give me some information on the program?" These and similar questions posed by librarians and teachers around North Carolina were the catalyst for a study of the Junior Great Books Program which was conducted in the spring and summer of 1983. The study was funded by a Library Services and Construction Act grant from the North Carolina State Library which was administered by the Department of Library Science at East Carolina University.

Background

The Junior Great Books Program is one of interpretive reading and discussion for students from second grade through high school. There are eight series of readings beginning with Series 2 for second grade. Series 9 is for use with senior high school students, grades 9-12. These students could then move into the adult Great Books Program. Each of the eight series in the Junior Great Books consists of twelve or more works of high quality imaginative literature. Most of the readings are stories, but poems, plays, and a few short novels are included. All of the selected works were chosen because they lend themselves to different interpretations.

Students who participate in a Junior Great Books discussion group are expected to improve their ability to read interpretively, to think systematically, and to discover new meanings in a written work.¹ The main purposes of the Junior Great Books Program are to improve the students' ability to comprehend what they read; to encourage students to think for themselves about

the meaning of the author's words; and to develop in students the habit of reading for enjoyment.²

Adult group leaders attempt to accomplish these purposes through discussion of points in the written work which are open to different interpretations and for which the leaders themselves have no answer. This "shared inquiry" method serves to develop students' discussion skills such as listening, speaking, and documenting opinions from the reading in an atmosphere that is free from worry over having the "right answer."

Since it is necessary for adult leaders to acquire the same skills they want the students to develop, an important part of the Junior Great Books Program is the Basic Leader Training Course. This is a ten-hour concentrated learning program for both professional educators and volunteer group leaders. The training is required for any group: the Great Books Foundation will not sell the Junior Great Books Series to any school or library that does not have trained leaders. The Basic Leader Training Course was offered at various locations in North Carolina through the spring of 1983.

Methodology

Since no Junior Great Books discussion group can function without a trained adult leader, the researcher asked the Great Books Foundation for a list of the names and addresses of persons in North Carolina who had taken the Basic Leader Training Course during the years 1978 through 1983. The Great Books Foundation replied that this information was confidential, but the researcher was provided with the names and addresses of the persons who had served as registrars or coordinators of Basic Leader Training Courses in North Carolina.

Letters were sent to the eighteen persons who were identified as registrars of Basic Leader Training Programs during that five-year period. Two of these registrars no longer had any lists of participants' names, and seven persons failed to respond to either the letter or follow-up postcard. Letters and questionnaires were sent to the 310

Carol Veitch is now the Director of the Currituck County Library in Coinjock, NC. She was formerly an Assistant Professor, Department of Library Science, at East Carolina University.

persons whose names were obtained from registrars, and 124 usable responses (40 per cent response rate) were obtained. The response rate was considered good, as the questionnaires had to be sent out during the summer vacation for the public schools.

The initial portion of the questionnaires asked about the backgrounds of the discussion group leaders, how groups were selected, the length of time each session lasted, and the grade levels of the discussion group members. The main section of the questionnaires contained questions about the effect the Junior Great Books Program had on the reading comprehension, discussion, and critical thinking skills of the students who participated in the program. Other questions concerned the perceptions group leaders had of the overall effect of the Junior Great Books Program, the reading selections, leader aids, and the feasibility of conducting Junior Great Books Programs in public libraries.

Leader Backgrounds and Organizational Patterns

Of the 124 persons who returned questionnaires, volunteers were the largest group (fifty-four), with some of these indicating experience as school librarians, classroom teachers, or reading teachers. Classroom teachers (thirty-four) and school librarians (nineteen) made up the next largest groups of persons who had completed the Basic Leader Training Program. Only one of the respondents indicated that s/he was a public librarian. Others included school principals, reading specialists, and one college professor.

Forty-five of the persons who returned questionnaires had never led a Junior Great Books Discussion group. Seventeen of these persons had completed the Basic Leader Training Course during the 1982-83 academic year, so it is possible that they did not have to get involved with a Junior Great Books discussion group before summer vacation. Nine others indicated that they had participated in the Basic Leader Training Course to become aware of the program rather than to become group leaders.

Most of the discussion groups were enrichment programs or extracurricular programs for gifted and talented students or other students who were reading on or above grade level, these students were usually identified by the teacher, or they volunteered for inclusion in the program. A typical group met once a week for a semester or a school year with an average meeting time of forty-five minutes. Grades 3-6 had the largest number

of discussion groups identified; only one of the questionnaires was returned by a leader of a senior high school group.

Questionnaire respondents were provided with space to comment on any of the questions asked. Some representative comments concerning the selection and scheduling of discussion groups include the following:

I would like to see the program used with the entire class. The stories could be read aloud and discussed, at first, with the entire class while everyone is learning the techniques. Then small group discussions would be good.

Our school offers three electives per day (Mon-Tues and Wed-Thurs) for grades 3-5. JGB (level 4) was offered to 4th and 5th graders as an elective. Any 4th or 5th grader was allowed to take the course. This was a mistake! In the future we plan to have them nominated or approved by their teacher. Our class consisted of 14 students—about half of whom should not have been in there. The students who did belong in the class were average to good readers, interested in the class, and a joy to be with.

Since our student participants were pulled out of their classrooms on Friday afternoons for Great Books, they often missed special activities or outdoor play, and that was hard for them.

The teachers did not support us. Students could come if they wanted to. If a student doesn't read an assignment, he just doesn't come to class and no pressure is applied.

Effectiveness of Junior Great Books Programs

A total of seventy-nine persons who had led at least one Junior Great Books discussion group responded to the questions about the actual effectiveness of the Junior Great Books Program as it existed in their schools.

A majority of adult leaders reported either moderate or great increases in students' reading comprehension, listening, and discussion skills. Moderate to great gains in reading comprehension were reported by seventy-four (92.4 per cent) of the leaders. Similar gains were reported in these discussion skills: enhanced listening skills (seventy, or 88.6 per cent), ability to discuss a literary work (seventy-seven, or 97.5 per cent), ability to express their ideas and opinions more clearly (seventy, or 88.6 per cent), and ability to express their ideas and opinions more freely (seventy-seven, or 94.9 per cent). Leaders commented that

Most students had never discussed a work in this manner before. So although the improvement I saw was very small, it was a beginning.

Very heated and broad-minded discussion.

Our group was willing to talk, but had a difficult time listening to others.

Very willing to talk as not graded or taught by teacher.

The age I worked with are nervous about expressing their opinions.

Students' thinking skills were reported increased either moderately or greatly in the following areas: ability to think independently about the author's meaning (seventy-five, or 94.9 per cent), ability to think systematically (sixty-six, or 83.6 per cent), ability to document opinions from the reading (seventy-four, or 93.7 per cent), and openness to new meanings and ideas (seventy-five, or 94.9 per cent). Typical leader comments on the improvement in these skills included

It is the first time these students have been asked to read and think.

Often good "debates" developed.

When asked why, they had trouble being specific about a point and where that idea was in the story.

For many students it was the first time they have had any thought to the author's intentions and it was a difficult concept for them.

There was less agreement on the students' development of the habit of reading for enjoyment. While fifty-three (67.1 per cent) of the leaders reported a moderate or great increase, nineteen (24.1 per cent) said they didn't know if the Junior Great Books Program helped students develop the reading habit. Comments indicated that many of these leaders believed the students already had the reading habit or they wouldn't be in the Junior Great Books Program. Other leaders said their group members did not read for enjoyment and viewed the Junior Great Books reading as extra work or one more chore.

The "shared inquiry" concept is at the heart of the Junior Great Books Program; however, it is a concept that is new to many students who are accustomed to the adult teacher or leader knowing the "right" answer. Forty-nine (62.0 per cent) of the leaders reported this to be a moderately to greatly difficult concept for students, especially at the beginning of the Junior Great Books experience, although twenty-four (30.4 per cent) of the leaders reported no difficulty with the "shared inquiry" concept.

General Perceptions of the Junior Great Books Program

The last section of the questionnaire concerned reading selections, related aids, and the

Junior Great Books Program in general.

The "Short Course on Interpretive Reading," which is included in the back of each book in the Junior Great Books series, is designed to help students understand the discussion rules, "shared inquiry," types of questions, and the need to read each selection more than once for full understanding. Forty-two (53.2 per cent) of the leaders found the "Short Course" useful to their students; however, twenty-nine (36.7 per cent) did not use it with their groups. Some leaders commented that they did not use it because of time constraints, lack of instruction on the use of the "Short Course," or because they felt it was too difficult for their students.

The leader aids for each series contain sample discussion questions for each selection in the book and some possible answers for questions raised in the "Short Course." These leader aids must be purchased separately from the regular Junior Great Books reading series titles. Sixty-seven (84.8 per cent) of the leaders found the aids useful while seven (8.9 per cent) did not use them. Most agreed that the leader aids were especially useful for new group leaders who needed reassurance or guidance before branching out on their own.

Using any pre-selected reading program raises the question of suitability with a specific group of students. Thirty-six (45.6 per cent) of the leaders agreed that the selections were suited to the students; eight (10.1 per cent) did not feel that the selections were suited to their students, and thirty-four (43.0 per cent) stated that the selections were usually suited to their students. Representative comments include

We felt some were very unsuitable, especially the first ones. It was difficult to deal with more than one story per session. We had above average kids but vocabulary was difficult for them in some stories.

Why are the lengths so varied? However, I recommend no selection be longer than 25-30 pages—students have much other work to do and when they're asked to read 100 pages twice, they don't like it. I don't blame them.

The reading level was fine. The moral and value questions of the selections were beyond my age group.

When asked whether they would recommend the Junior Great Books Program to public libraries, fifty-six (70.1 per cent) of the leaders said they would; thirty-one (39.2 per cent) would not, and four (5.1 per cent) responded with a "maybe." Those who felt Junior Great Books would be good for public libraries stressed the program as a summer reading activity, one which would provide a unique experience for the students

involved. Negative comments centered on leader perceptions of the library (not a place to take a course, lack of contact between leader and group members), scheduling or transportation problems, and parental pressure to participate.

The final question in this section concerned the overall value of the Junior Great Books Program. Forty-one (51.9 per cent) of the leaders rated the program as excellent while twenty-nine (36.7 per cent) perceived the value as good. Only nine (11.4 per cent) rated the program as fair or poor. Maybe even more important than the statistical data are some of the comments made by the leaders. They include

As far as I can see, it is the only type of creative, non-graded, fun, exciting, laughing, education available in reading designed to have them *think* rather than memorize. It is an equalizer.

It's been a tremendous asset to our program.

Value depends to a great degree on leaders. This year both of us were new at it. Next year we'll be better and so will our program.

Exposes children to stories they would never know of otherwise—also new authors.

Feel there could be more flexibility in reading selections (more selections of various difficulty for each grade level—leader could then select according to group).

The selection of material seemed to be the greatest drawback to student interest.

Space was provided for leaders to make any additional or general comments about their experiences with the Junior Great Books Program. Many of these comments are important for persons who are considering establishing Junior Great Books Programs in their school or libraries and are included here.

I found leading my Junior Great Books group to be a very rewarding and enjoyable experience. We also received a lot of positive feedback from the children. The only problem we had was with the children who would come to the group without reading the story. They knew they could not participate in the discussions but I found they usually became bored and disrupted the group.

At the end of the series I got notes from most of the children—one said and I quote: "Thanks, for doing super, fantastic, tremendous, fabulous, exciting (sic); *great, great, great* books teacher!"

The program is excellent. The material is good. Maybe, the school is not the place to do it, as the red tape gets longer and longer.

All teachers with participating students should be required to take the training course. Teachers should

evaluate the program and students with the volunteer leader.

I feel there should be more contact between the schools or libraries where the program is going on and the parents of the participants. The parents need to be informed about and encouraged to help with this program.

Conclusions

It would seem from the data that the Junior Great Books Program is effective. Elementary schools appear to have more programs than secondary schools. One reason for this might be the fact that reading is taught as a separate subject in the elementary grades. Other possible reasons could include the practice of initiating a program in the lower grades and expanding it as the participants advance in school or the fact that there are probably more gifted and talented programs on the elementary school level that would lend themselves to this type of reading program.

Volunteers have a significant role as discussion leaders: over half of the groups which participated in the survey had volunteer leaders. No consensus emerged as to how participants should be selected or who should participate, but careful scheduling appears to be imperative for a successful Junior Great Books discussion group. Careful preparation on the part of both students and adult leaders is also important. Communication between students, teachers, parents, and adult leaders seems to be another important factor in the success or failure of a Junior Great Books Program.

The data also suggest that the Junior Great Books Program is moderately to greatly successful in achieving the goals of helping students improve their reading comprehension, critical thinking, and discussion skills. It is less certain from the data whether the Junior Great Books Program does develop the habit of reading for enjoyment, but with concern over low reading test scores, any program which has success in improving reading skills is worth a second look.

All in all, it seems that the Junior Great Books Program is one which makes a positive contribution to reading. It would be one that both school and public librarians might want to consider implementing in the libraries—time and money allowing.

References

1. Richard P. Dennis and Edwin P. Moldoff, *A Handbook on Interpretive Reading and Discussion* (Chicago: The Great Books Foundation, 1978), 1.
2. *Ibid.*