

The background of the cover is a light yellow-green color with a subtle vertical gradient. Scattered across the cover are several stylized, light green leaf motifs, each consisting of two leaves on a short stem, arranged in a diagonal pattern from the top left towards the bottom right.

EXPLORING DIVERSITY

Literature Themes and Activities for Grades 4-8

Jean E. Brown, Elaine C. Stephens

Exploring Diversity

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Exploring Diversity
Literature Themes and Activities
for Grades 4-8

Jean E. Brown
Elaine C. Stephens

1996
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*We dedicate this book to
Wesley L. Stephens
for his steadfast interest in and support of our work.*

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Introduction

This book is designed to help teachers develop various ways of exploring diversity through incorporating multicultural literature into their curriculum. Throughout this book, we describe books and authors that give us insights and understanding about the diversity of our schools, our communities, our society, our nation, and our world. We also present a multitude of activities and suggestions for providing meaningful student interaction with this literature.

The chapters are as follows:

Ch 1: Teaching About Diversity Through Literature

Ch 2: Implementing Multicultural Literature

Ch 3: Heritage: Understanding Our Past

Ch 4: Identity: Seeking a Sense of Self

Ch 5: Identity: A Sense of Belonging

Ch 6: Getting Along with Others: Family

Ch 7: Getting Along with Others: Friends

Ch 8: Celebrating Diversity: Books and Authors Too Good to Miss

The contents of the book at a glance are: Chapter 1 presents a rationale for using multicultural literature in the classroom. Chapter 2 provides instructional models for using this literature. The models are the reader involvement model and implementation model.

Chapter 3 begins a series of five chapters that use themes and activities to heighten student involvement with the reading of multicultural literature. Chapter 3 helps students to explore racial, ethnic, and cultural traditions and heritage through the use of both contemporary realistic fiction and historical fiction.

Chapters 4 and 5 share the theme of identity. In Chapter 4 the focus is on developing a sense of self; whereas, in Chapter 5, the focus is on developing a sense of belonging or a sense of place.

Chapters 6 and 7 help students to examine the most significant relationships that young people have: relationships with members of their families and relationships with friends and peers.

Chapter 8 presents outstanding books that contribute to enhancing the perspective of diversity and award-winning authors who are recognized as contributing to cultural understanding with their works. It also provides a brief discussion of several major awards and their recipients.

This book is designed to be descriptive rather than prescriptive. We do not advocate any one single approach to teaching any book. We do provide teachers with options and springboards from which they can proceed in any direction that they believe to be appropriate. For example, in each of the themes and activities chapters, Chapters 3-7, we present a number of ways to help students experience a book through a thematic view or by using one or more of the activities presented. Additionally, many of the books are listed in more than one chapter because of their broadly conceptualized plots and multifaceted characterizations. We also are inclusive in our definition of multicultural literature. We include works that span several cultures as well as those that represent the major cultural group of the United States, those of European American descendants. In all cases, our single most important criterion is quality literature that promotes an understanding and acceptance of all cultures.

1

Teaching About Diversity Through Literature

When somebody can look at you and insult you because you're old, or because you're young, or because you're black, or because you're . . . you're whatever you are, it's all the same. And what it's not is funny!

Myers, Walter Dean. *Won't Know Till I Get There*. (1982, p. 148)

We strive to be a nation that looks at individuals and make judgments about them as individuals, not as members of particular groups. As educators, one of our primary goals is to help young people develop a sense of respect for themselves and for others. We do this, in part, by identifying those commonalties that all people share as well as by exploring and learning to value differences. These complex understandings are fostered when we provide young people with opportunities to learn about their own heritages and those of others through reading multicultural literature. Through this literature, youthful readers share the experiences of other young people, their dreams, their struggles, their victories, and their losses. From these vicarious experiences, young people can learn the important lesson that no matter how unique our heritages, there is more that unites us than separates us.

In this chapter, we examine how quality literature, in general, and multicultural literature, specifically, contributes to the development of young people. We also describe the characteristics of readers in grades four through eight and relate these to themes for exploring diversity through literature.

Authentic Connections with Literature

Quality literature has a powerful effect on readers. This power is there for classroom teachers to use as they strive to help young people become literate, learn about their world, and make personal connections with the curriculum. We believe that there is no other area in the curriculum that has the potential to elicit such significant responses from students as does literature. This belief is reaffirmed in Suzanne Fisher Staples' novel *Haveli* (1993, p.126). In this book, a sequel to *Shabanu*, Shabanu and her daughter are being tutored, and their teacher tells them:

“I am taking you to a wonderful new world,” said the widow, whose name was Samiya, standing before them for the first time. “Once you’ve learned to read, adventures you’ve never even imagined will unfold. You’ll visit places you never knew existed. There will be no secret you cannot unlock.”

This intense connection between the reader and the printed page has the ability to change readers as they are transported into the world of the book. When the reader and the book merge, an authentic connection is made, resulting in increased knowledge, deeper understandings, or new insights. Perhaps the power of literature is most widely recognized for its ability to evoke strong feelings from readers. The plight of characters whose lives are totally removed from their own can make readers understanding and sympathetic. Through literature, readers may recognize that characters experience the same kinds of challenges or victories that they have. Those kinds of connections allow readers to establish a one-to-one experience with characters and empathize with them. Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, in his 1972 Nobel Acceptance Speech, discusses that type of connection as an affirmation of the inherent value of literature:

“... [it] can overcome man’s unfortunate trait of learning only through his own experience...recreating in the flesh what another has experienced, and allowing it to be acquired as one’s own.”

Our role as teachers is to provide many and varied experiences for students to interact with significant books and to encourage them to read widely so that they may create for themselves these authentic connections. When we consider the powerful benefits of using literature in the classroom, those benefits become even more exciting as we explore the opportunities that literature provides to help students to look beyond and understand more than their lives. Linda Hart-Hewins and Jan Wells (1992, p. 17) in their work with language arts programs for grades four through nine remind us that:

Books are not to be prescribed like medicine to make students better people, or even to improve their reading skills . . . ; they are encounters with ideas that somehow leave readers transformed. A good book should leave us thinking or feeling differently than we did before we read it.

Multicultural Literature in the Classroom

Multicultural literature is an effective avenue to help young people understand themselves, recognize their heritage, and acknowledge and value the cultures of others. The literature taught in our schools needs to reflect the diverse nature of American society. Students need to and have a right to read about people who share their cultural heritage. Author Nicholasa Mohr (1990, p. 79) describes her experiences:

Growing up, I had never seen or read *any* book that included Puerto Ricans (or Hispanics, for that matter) as citizens who worked hard and contributed to this nation. In American letters, we were *invisible*.

Eleanora Tate in her novel, *The Secret of Gumbo Grove*, addresses the issue of young people needing to know about themselves and their heritage. The main character of her book, Raisin Stackhouse, loves history and wants to know why they never read about any black people when they study local history. She undertakes a project cleaning up the old church cemetery and discovers a great deal about the past that she shares with her community. Like Raisin, all young people should have opportunities to read about others like themselves.

Understanding one's heritage is only one facet of the benefits of using multicultural literature in the classroom. Students also gain an understanding and appreciation of the diverse groups within our pluralistic society. Cross-cultural understanding can help to eliminate confusion about and mistrust of anything that is different. When cultural differences remain hidden or misunderstood, fear and suspicion frequently overcome rational understanding. Learning about the customs, beliefs, and traditions of others helps students become more open to differences. This openness, when nurtured and developed, fosters tolerance. As a Hispanic student in Doris Walker-Dalhouse's (1992, p. 421) fifth grade class stated, "People need to know more, because some people treat us like we are not regular people."

Tolerance is a goal for all people because we can no longer assume that our lives will not be affected by the actions and policies of people across the world. We live in a global village; students cannot afford narrow, monolithic perspectives of the world, especially as they enter the twenty-first century. Doris Walker-Dalhouse (1992, p. 416) describes how she used African American literature to increase ethnic understanding in her fifth grade classroom whose composition was predominately students of Norwegian origin. She cites research that incorporating multiethnic literature into the curriculum expands students' awareness and decreases negative stereotyping of individuals from other cultures.

Crawford (1993, p. 25) identifies four contributions that multicultural literature makes to the classroom:

1. it provides students from diverse populations with reading materials, characters, themes, and plots that are more closely related to their life experiences.
2. it provides students with reading materials that challenge misconceptions and stereotypes and develop awareness and understanding of other cultures.
3. it gives students from diverse cultures positive role models who have overcome problems dealing with life and society. Story role models assist culturally diverse students in developing better self-concepts; they provide dominant-culture students with images of people from diverse cultures that assist in overcoming stereotypical biases.
4. it assists students to "walk in the shoes" of book characters from another culture to begin the process of gaining a new perspective.

The benefits of using multicultural literature become even more significant when we examine current conditions in our nation. Literature and the understandings that can be nurtured by reading about people from different cultures are significant tools in confronting persistent social problems: bias crimes and bigotry. During the last ten years we have witnessed an increase in the number of hate groups who target members of ethnic groups or other minorities. Their attacks often go beyond name-calling; they have destroyed property and even assaulted and murdered people for their ethnicity or beliefs. Education is the best weapon against violent acts. Using multicultural

literature will provide younger readers with insights and ideas so that they can make thoughtful choices and take responsible actions. Kathryn H. Au (1993, p. 189) speaks to the value of multicultural literature for fostering a democratic society:

In discussions of multiethnic literature, teachers guide students not only to interpret the text but also to reflect upon the ways that they might carry democratic values forward in their own lives. Teachers with a commitment to the values of democracy and diversity accept the challenge of using new patterns of literacy instruction to help the students who are in their classrooms today. Through their positive actions and those of their students, they also work toward a future when the United States will be a more just and fully democratic society, offering all children a wealth of educational opportunities.

Characteristics of Readers, Grades Four Through Eight

Young people in grades four through eight are eager to learn about the world. They are intensely curious and generally receptive to exploring new things. They undergo significant changes during these years, physically, emotionally, and intellectually. Accompanying these changes is an increased need to create their identities and define who they are and where they fit in with family, friends, and society at large. They feel tremendous pressure to belong and to find approval with their peers. They are concerned with questions of right and wrong and may become deeply interested in social and political issues.

Most students in grades four through eight are beyond the initial stages of literacy acquisition and are able to use reading and writing to learn new information and for personal enjoyment. They are able to make ever-increasingly sophisticated connections between their experiences and what they are reading. Still there is great variation among young people of this age. Many upper elementary school students become avid readers who “get lost in a book,” while some still need lots of “easier” books to help them develop their reading potential. Numerous studies (Gallo, 1984; Bintz, 1993) indicate that after elementary school, however, many students’ reading abilities no longer continue to grow and their interest in reading seems to decline during middle school and high school, especially their interest in school reading assignments. At this age students need to see “real” reasons for reading and writing and make authentic connections with what is important to them.

The themes described in this resource guide reflect some of the important needs and interests of young people, grades four through eight: identity, relationships, and heritage. These themes are explored in a variety of ways, by a variety of characters, and in a variety of settings in the books we recommend. As author Sandy Asher (1992, p. 79) states:

Generally, adults choose books that reflect and reinforce attitudes they already hold. Young adult readers, on the other hand, are actively searching for ideas, information, and values to incorporate into their personalities and into their lives. The books they read become a very real part of them.

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2

Implementing Multicultural Literature

No area of the curriculum lends itself more readily to a multicultural approach than the teaching of literature.

ASCD Curriculum Update (September 1993, p. 4)

Reading multicultural literature provides students with two facets of learning about diversity. First, students have opportunities to discover and explore their heritages, cultures, and traditions. Second, they have opportunities to gain insights and perceptions about other cultures. These two facets complement and reinforce one another. As young people learn to value and respect themselves and their ethnic and cultural heritage, they have a basis for valuing and respecting others. This sense of connectedness is an important support for young people as they sort out who they are.

Teachers must be sensitive, however, to the need of young people to feel as if they “fit in.” Students need to feel that they have a sense of control over what they do. A student should not be singled out and assigned a book for the sole reason that it matches the person’s cultural or ethnic heritage. Neither should a student be forced to read about a different culture simply because it is different. Choice is crucial to the success of a multicultural literature program. Tolerance and understanding evolve through positive experiences, not through mandates. Some minority students are more comfortable reading initially about the dominant culture; others connect immediately with books that reflect their culture. Moreover, some students from the dominant culture may respond initially with disdain to stories reflecting experiences different from theirs, especially if they have no choice in selecting what they read. The most powerful inducement to get young people to read a book is the recommendation of a friend, classmate, or valued adult. A wealth of quality literature and engaging activities helps teachers to cope with the complexities of these situations.

The process of implementing a multicultural literature program in upper elementary and middle school classrooms is similar to planning and organizing for any student-centered literature program. The key is recognizing that students should have a variety of experiences that will allow them to have choices in what they read and how they interact with literature. They also need a variety of opportunities to respond to their reading and to share their responses. In this chapter, we present information, models, and guides for implementing multicultural literature. We begin by describing the Reader Involvement Model (Brown and Stephens, 1995), which

examines the processes that readers go through as they become involved in reading literature. Then we present an Implementation Model that describes how teachers can provide for varied patterns of classroom organization to foster student interaction with their reading. Accompanying this model are a number of guide sheets that may be duplicated for use in the classroom.

Reader Involvement Model

Our goal is to use multicultural literature to help students move beyond being readers of words to being readers of literature who recognize and appreciate its power to make a difference in their lives. Too often when students are assigned to read materials that they have no connection with, they simply go through the motions. The underlying premise of the Reader Involvement Model is that if students are to move beyond pronouncing words to constructing meaning, they must have literary experiences that evoke a commitment from them as readers. To connect with it, a book must make enough of an impression on the reader that he or she will have a reaction to it. We have all witnessed students who don't remember anything about the story that they have just completed reading. Additionally, students need opportunities to respond to their reading through discussions and especially through writing. Through these kinds of interactions, reading literature will make a difference in the lives of students.

The Reader Involvement Model (Brown and Stephens, 1995) (figure 2.1) is designed to provide teachers with a framework that describes the processes that readers go through as they become involved with reading literature. The first stage in this model is the initiating stage when readers make decisions about what, when, and how they will read. This stage is crucial as teachers guide students to choose appropriate selections and prepare themselves for their interactions with them. In each of the thematic chapters in this book, we provide teachers with specific suggestions for initiating activities. The second stage is that of connecting when readers make connections between their reading and themselves, those around them, or the world in general. Student Involvement Experiences keyed into specific focus books are presented in each thematic chapter to aid in facilitating this second stage. The third stage is that of internalizing when readers affirm the connections and internalize reactions, beliefs, and understandings about what they have read. Each thematic chapter contains Responding and Reflecting activities to facilitate internalizing.

These three stages reflect involvement between the readers and the text with sharing as the ongoing dimension of the Reader Involvement Model. Involvement is enhanced when readers have a context in which they reflect and react to the initiating, connecting, and internalizing by sharing with others. In the context of the classroom, involvement is enhanced when teachers are able to provide an environment in which readers are able to share their reading experiences through a variety of activities. The remainder of this chapter provides teachers with help in establishing just such an environment.

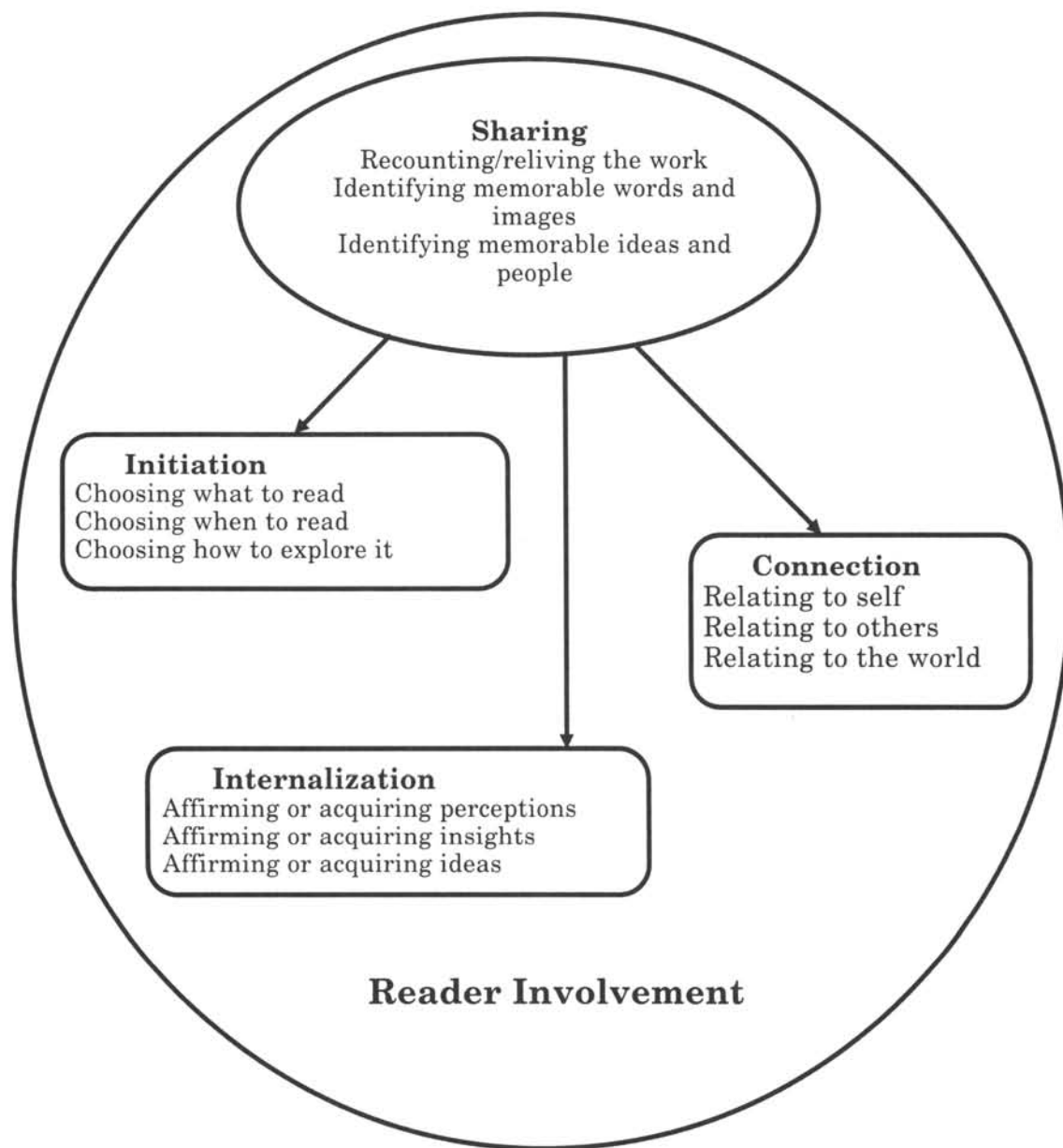


Fig. 2.1. Reader Involvement Model—(Brown and Stephens, 1995)

Implementation Model

For teachers who are seeking to incorporate multicultural literature into the curriculum, the initial question is “Where to begin?” There are a number of preliminary steps that teachers can take, but perhaps the most important one is simply to start reading multicultural literature for young people. There is no substitute for a teacher who is enthusiastic and knowledgeable about specific books and authors. Teachers can use any of the books recommended in this guide as a starting point. Additionally, the following suggestions will help teachers prepare for integrating multicultural literature into their programs:

1. Survey students to see the breadth of cultural heritage among them.
2. Review class materials to see how ethnicity is presented and addressed in literature anthologies, reading texts, social studies books, and other supplementary material.
3. Talk with the school librarian to learn what materials and services are available.
4. Visit the local public library (also visit any nearby college or university libraries).
5. Read books that are written on appropriate interest and reading levels for your students and begin matching them with your curriculum objectives.
6. Talk with colleagues to see how they are addressing multicultural literature in their classroom.
7. Collect professional books on the subject.
8. Contact genealogical libraries for information, guidelines for tracing one’s heritage, and sample family tree charts.
9. Prepare a display of multicultural books for your classroom.

Once teachers have established a foundation for their integration of multicultural literature in their classrooms, they are ready to begin implementing it into the curriculum. Figure 2.2 presents teacher roles in implementation.

The Implementation Model describes three major roles for teachers: planning and organizing, instructing and facilitating, and responding and reflecting. The model is based on the assumption that students will be involved in a series of discoveries of self, connections, and heritage. To facilitate this type of learning, the classroom emphasis is on a variety of student experiences with literature. The teacher prepares for these experiences through several organizational approaches designed to stimulate and maintain student interest and positive involvement: whole class, small group or pairs with learning partners, and individual. Next the teacher provides direction for student experiences by deciding learning objectives, selecting teaching strategies that arouse curiosity, create interest, and promote involvement for all students, and providing support for students as they interact with the literature. Finally, the teacher engages in responding and reflecting by providing feedback to students. The thematic chapters in this book contain suggestions and activities to assist teachers in using the Implementation Model. Additionally, the following forms are designed to be copied and used to facilitate classroom organization. Directions for their use are as follows:

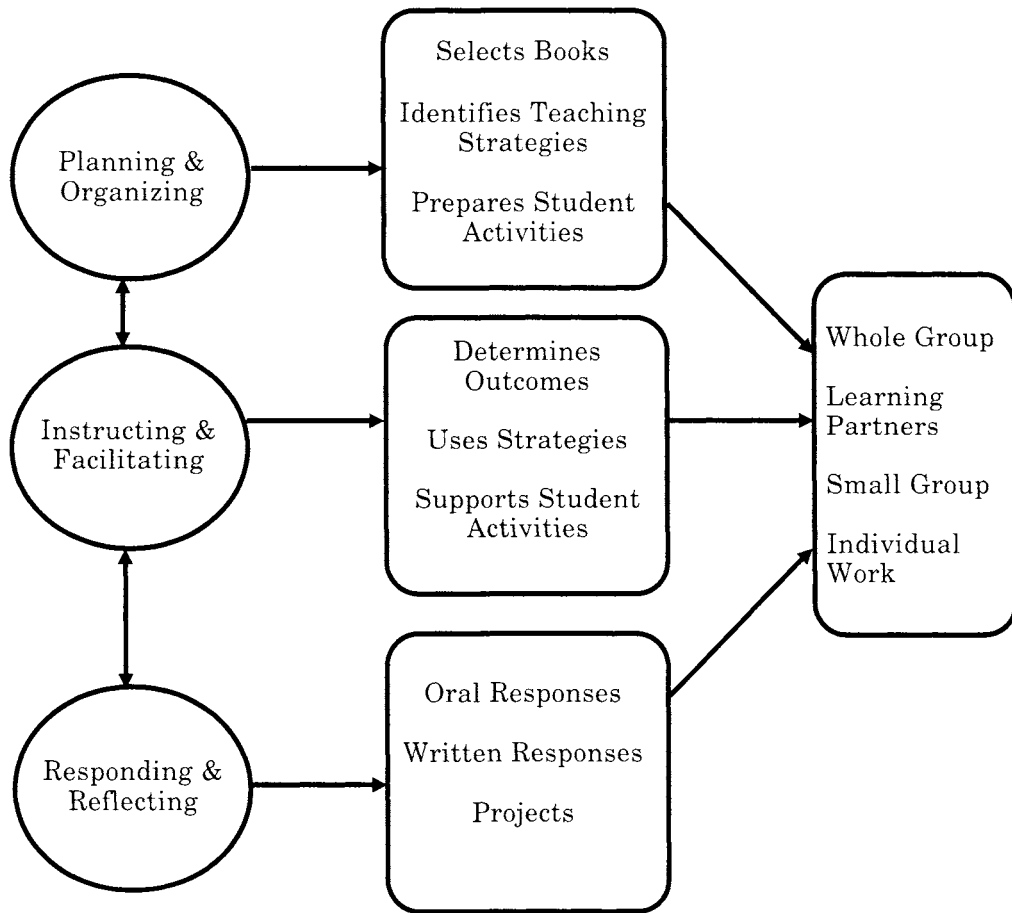


Figure 2.2. Implementation Model

Class Logs—a daily record of pertinent class information to aid students who are absent or who have difficulty understanding or remembering; responsibility for keeping class log rotates among students

Small Group Project Journal—record of group progress; responsibility of group recorder can rotate among group members

Small Group Project Evaluation Sheet—evaluation of group work using rating scale; each member completes sheet individually

Self-Evaluation for Individual Work—evaluation of contributions to group work using written responses; each member completes form

Individual Evaluations—evaluation of each group member using the rating scale; each member fills out the form for self and all other group members

Student Self-Assessment Form—information on individual reading interests; completed by each student

Student Reading Record Form—information related to a specific book; completed by each student

Class Logs

Course Title:

Date:

Announcements:

Class Notes:

Other information:

Signed:

Small Group Project Journal

Date: _____ Recorder: _____

Members Present: _____

Planning Summary:

Individual Assignments:

Timeline/ Deadlines: