In Literature Circles, Harvey Daniels combines two potent ideas—the importance of small literature discussion groups and the power of collaborative learning. In these workshops, you’ll learn about critical elements for structuring successful literature discussion groups. Much of this new understanding will come from participating in literature circles. Daniels also helps teachers improvise and move beyond role sheets as students develop more confidence and skill in discussions.

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Understanding Literature Circles

Materials Needed

You will need:
✓ Copy of Literature Circles by Harvey Daniels for yourself and each workshop participant
✓ One copy of each of the following for all participants:
  Key Features of Literature Circles (Figure 1)
  Role sheets (Figures 2–5)
  “An Incorrect Correction” by Cynthia McCallister (Figure 6)
  “One, Two, Buy Velcro Shoes” by Barry Lane (Figure 8)
  “The Wrath of Guess Jeans” by Jessica Zarins (Figure 9)

Participants will need:
✓ Literature Circles

Getting Started

Introduce the book Literature Circles by Harvey Daniels to the group. Talk about the schedule for the workshops, and list some goals (either the participants’ or broader school improvement plans).

Reading the Excerpt

Have participants turn to Chapter 2, “A Closer Look: Literature Circles Defined” in Literature Circles. Ask them to read the excerpt, underlining ideas that are familiar to them and circling those that are new. After everyone has finished reading, ask volunteers to read aloud one comment or sentence they highlighted. Don’t discuss these points individually at first—just move from person to person, filling the air with quotes from Literature Circles.

Working in Groups

Have participants discuss insights about literature response groups they have gleaned from this reading. Those who are already using literature circles in their classrooms will be able to make connections between this chapter and their experience.

Ask participants to list some of the basic principles for literature circles and talk about what might enhance or hinder their application in a busy classroom. Show the Key Features list from Literature Circles (Figure 1) and distribute the list to all participants. Talk about the purpose of each of the principles, referring to those participants have already suggested. Throughout these workshops, you’ll want to reinforce the basic principles behind literature circles.
Putting the Ideas into Practice  

The best way to understand literature circles is for the group to experience them. Working in groups of 4, ask participants to pick one of each of these four roles:

- Connector
- Questioner
- Literary Luminary/Passage Master
- Illustrator

(If the group can’t divide evenly into 4, have a group with 5 members with 2 taking the role of Connector.)

Give a one-sentence description of each of the three literature excerpts that were distributed:

- "An Incorrect Correction" is a narrative by a fifth-grade teacher about a parent-teacher conference.
- "One, Two, Buy Velcro Shoes" is a narrative by an aide working with an autistic high school boy.
- "The Wrath of Guess Jeans" is a narrative by a middle school girl about trying to fit in with a popular clique.

Tell group members to use one selection for this workshop. Explain that they will have the chance in the next workshop to try another, if more than one sounds appealing. (Don’t worry if more than one group chooses the same selection. As long as you have plenty of copies, this works well. Having more than one group read the same selection and then discover later how different the group discussions were is good fodder for the whole-group debriefing later.)

Distribute the readings selected (Figures 6, 8–9) and the role sheets (Figures 2–5) to the groups, and make sure the groups have decided on a different role for each member before they begin to read.

Have the groups read their selections silently, and have them complete their role sheets. The role sheets contain descriptions of the individual roles.

The individual groups then discuss their selections. Circulate, but don’t enter into any group. Instead, keep notes with insights/questions about what you are observing.

Then, have the whole group discuss the experience. Begin with your notes; briefly present some of your observations and questions prompted by your observations. You might use the following questions as prompts for group discussion:

- What surprised you about the experience?
- Did anyone dominate? If yes, explain. If no, how did you ensure equal participation?
- Were you comfortable with your role? Explain.
- Do you like or dislike the passage you read? How did that affect your participation in the circle?

Before the next workshop, participants will need to test out these four roles in literature circles in their own classrooms. They might choose to
have the whole class read the same small excerpt from an age-appropriate children’s literature selection or have multiple selections available to students.

This should be a brief activity in the classroom, to expose students to the literature circle procedures and to help participants think about the place of the circles in their instruction. Tell participants not to take part in student discussion groups but to assume a role similar to yours in this workshop—to circulate among their students, outside of the groups, to observe, and to take notes, which they will bring with them to the next session.

**What Participants Need to Bring to the Next Workshop**

*Literature Circles*

Completed students’ literature circle role sheets and their observation notes
Different Ways to Prepare Students

Materials Needed

You will need:

✓ Copy of Literature Circles by Harvey Daniels
✓ One copy of each of the following for all participants:
  “An Incorrect Correction” by Cynthia McCallister (Figure 6)
  “Aspects of Autumn” by Roberta Chester (Figure 7)
  “One, Two, Buy Velcro Shoes” by Barry Lane (Figure 8)
  “The Wrath of Guess Jeans” by Jessica Zarins (Figure 9)
✓ Post-its (4 or 5 for each participant)

Participants will need:

✓ Literature Circles
✓ Completed student role sheets and their observation notes

Discussion of Data 25 minutes

Working in groups of 4 or 5, ask participants to share their experience of attempting literature circles with students. Tell them to consider how students filled out their role sheets. Discussions should revolve around two questions:

1. What went well?
2. What would they do differently next time?

A recorder for each group should take notes, paying special attention to these questions. Then, get the whole group together and have each recorder summarize his or her notes for the whole group. Discuss together the patterns of success and problems across grades and classrooms. Record the successes and problems on a master list on a flip chart or overhead transparency.

Reading the Excerpt 30 minutes

Read Chapter 5, “Getting Started: Preparing and Orienting Students” from Literature Circles. Ask participants to read silently, marking in the margin any solutions they find to problems in their own classroom.

After the reading, discuss with the whole group what solutions to problems on the master list were found in the reading. Brainstorm additional strategies for modifying literature circles in the coming weeks.

Goal

In this workshop participants talk about successes and failures with literature circles in their classrooms. They also explore the possibilities for developing literature circles without role sheets.

Optional Break
Putting the Ideas into Practice

Remind the group that the best way to understand literature circles is to experience them. During this session, participants in the literature circles will not use role sheets. Have the participants divide into groups of 4 or 5. Pass out four or five Post-its to each participant. Ask them to write on the Post-its as they read. They can choose to connect the reading to their own life, ask questions, pick a favorite part, make mental pictures, or wonder about words.

Give a one-sentence description of each of the literature excerpts (the first three are the same as those in Workshop 1):

- **An Incorrect Correction** is a narrative by a fifth-grade teacher about a parent-teacher conference.
- **Aspects of Autumn** is a poem about a child entering kindergarten.
- **One, Two, Buy Velcro Shoes** is a narrative by an aide working with an autistic high school boy.
- **The Wrath of Guess Jeans** is a narrative by a middle-school girl about trying to fit in with a popular clique.

Tell group members to decide on one selection for the group.

Have everyone read the selections silently and fill out their Post-its. Then once again, have the small groups discuss their reading. During this discussion, circulate and make notes with insights and questions about what you are observing.

The whole group then gets together to discuss the experience. Begin with the notes from your observations. These questions might be helpful as prompts:

- What surprised you about the experience?
- Did anyone dominate? If yes, explain. If no, how did you ensure equal participation?
- Were you comfortable using the Post-its in the discussion? Explain.
- Do you like or dislike the passage you read? How did that affect your participation in the circle?

Tell everyone they will need to try literature circles again in their classrooms before the next workshop session, making at least one modification to the format they used previously. They might add additional roles, they might change the structure or size of the groups, they might have students try to respond using Post-its, they might try new genres. Remind teachers not to participate in the student groups, but to take on a role similar to yours in this workshop—to circulate among their students, outside of the groups, to observe, and to take notes, which they will bring with them to the next session.

**What Participants Need to Bring to the Next Workshop**

*Literature Circles*

Observational notes from literature circles
Troubleshooting and Problem Solving

Materials Needed

You will need:

✓ Copy of Literature Circles by Harvey Daniels
✓ Looking into Literature Circles videotape and a VCR
✓ Literature Social Skills and Thinking Skills for each participant (Figure 10)

Participants will need:

✓ Literature Circles
✓ Observational notes from literature circles

Discussion of Data 40 minutes

Ask participants to break up into the same small groups they were in at the start of the last workshop. They will be talking about their latest experiences with literature circles.

The questions to be considered are:

How might I use literature circles in my classroom in the coming months?
How could I use literature circles in curricular areas such as science, math, and social studies?

A recorder for the group (different from the last session’s recorder) should note individual and group responses to these questions.

Reassemble as a single large group and have each recorder summarize his or her notes for the whole group. Discuss together the various ways participants plan to use literature circles in their classrooms in the future. Record these options on a master list on a flip chart or overhead transparency.

Reading the Excerpt 30 minutes

Have participants turn to Chapter 14, “Troubleshooting and Problem Solving” in Literature Circles. Ask participants to read this excerpt silently (allow 20 minutes).

Then, for a short period of time (10 minutes), have the group discuss the issues Daniels raises in this excerpt.

Putting the Ideas into Practice 40 minutes

In this portion of the workshop, you will view the videotape Looking into Literature Circles. (Make sure you preview the tape before the workshop so
you know what to expect.) The tape is only 15 minutes long, which allows for plenty of time for discussion after the viewing.

Prepare the participants for the viewing by distributing copies of the worksheet “Literature Social Skills and Thinking Skills” (Figure 10). As they watch the three literature circles in action on the tape, ask them to keep a running list of social and thinking skills being developed by the students of different ages.

After you finish viewing the tape, have participants meet in small groups for about 15 minutes to share their lists in each category. End by discussing the skills as a whole group for another 10 minutes. You may also want to compile these skills in a master list for the whole group on chart paper or an overhead transparency.

This concludes the RST workshops for Literature Circles.

**Extensions**

For further learning, try literature circles around popular adult fiction, review the videotape *Looking into Literature Circles* using workshop activities outlined in the Viewing Guide at [www.stenhouse.com/pdfs/0336guid.pdf](http://www.stenhouse.com/pdfs/0336guid.pdf), visit [www.literaturecircles.com](http://www.literaturecircles.com), or coordinate colleague visits to classrooms during literature circles.
Figure 1

Key Features of Literature Circles

1. Students *choose* their own reading materials.

2. *Small temporary groups* are formed, based on book choice.

3. Different groups read *different books*.

4. Groups meet on a *regular, predictable schedule* to discuss their reading.

5. Students use written or drawn *notes* to guide both their reading and discussion.

6. Discussion *topics come from the students*.

7. Group meetings aim to be *open, natural conversations about books*, so personal connections, digressions, and open-ended questions are welcome.

8. The teacher serves as a *facilitator*, not a group member or instructor.

9. Evaluation is by *teacher observation* and *student self-evaluation*.

11. A spirit of *playfulness and fun* pervades the room.

12. When books are finished, *readers share with their classmates*, and then *new groups form* around new reading choices.
Connector

Name
Group
Book
Assignment p _____–p _____

Connector: Your job is to find connections between the book and you, and between the book and the wider world. This means connecting the reading to your own past experiences, to happenings at school or in the community, to stories in the news, to similar events at other times and places, to other people or problems that you are reminded of. You may also see connections between this book and other writings on the same topic, or by the same author.

Some connections I made between this reading and my own experiences, the wider world, and other texts or authors:
### Figure 3

**Questioner**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Group</th>
<th>Book</th>
<th>Assignment p _____–p _____</th>
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**Questioner:** Your job is to write down a few questions that you have about this part of the book. What were you wondering about while you were reading? Did you have questions about what was happening? What a word meant? What a character did? What was going to happen next? Why the author used a certain style? Or what the whole thing meant? Just try to notice what you are wondering while you read, and jot down some of those questions either along the way or after you’re finished.

**Questions about today’s reading:**
Figure 4

**Literary Luminary/Passage Master**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Group</th>
<th>Book</th>
<th>Assignment p ____–p ____</th>
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</table>

**Literary Luminary:** Your job is to locate a few special sections or quotations in the text for your group to talk over. The idea is to help people go back to some especially interesting, powerful, funny, puzzling, or important sections of the reading and think about them more carefully. As you decide which passages or paragraphs are worth going back to, make a note why you picked each one. Then jot down some plans for how they should be shared. You can read passages aloud yourself, ask someone else to read them, or have people read them silently and then discuss.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Page No. &amp; Paragraph</th>
<th>Reason for Picking</th>
<th>Plan for Reading</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

From *Literature Circles: Voice and Choice in Book Clubs and Reading Groups*, 2d edition, by Harvey Daniels. Copyright © 2002. Stenhouse Publishers. All rights reserved.
Illustrator: Good readers make pictures in their minds as they read. This is a chance to share some of your own images and visions. Draw some kind of picture related to the reading you have just done. It can be a sketch, cartoon, diagram, flowchart, or stick-figure scene. You can draw a picture of something that happened in your book, or something that the reading reminded you of, or a picture that conveys any idea or feeling you got from the reading. Any kind of drawing or graphic is okay—you can even label things with words if that helps. Make your drawing on the other side of this sheet or on a separate sheet.

Presentation plan: Whenever it fits in the conversations, show your drawing to your group. You don’t necessarily have to explain it. You can let people speculate what your picture means, so they can connect your drawing to their own ideas about the reading. After everyone has had a say, you can always have the last word: tell them what your picture means, where it came from, or what it represents to you.

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From Literature Circles: Voice and Choice in Book Clubs and Reading Groups, 2d edition, by Harvey Daniels. Copyright © 2002. Stenhouse Publishers. All rights reserved.
Andrew Wright was as quick as a whip. When I think of him now, six years later, I vividly recall his wide, lively brown eyes behind dark bone-rimmed glasses. His look usually conveyed an undercurrent of mischief combined with wisdom that, to me at the time, seemed unusual in a child of his age. I met Andrew on my first day as a classroom teacher. It took a few short days for me to recognize that he was not a typical fifth grader. Being a new teacher, I had neither the benefit of experience nor a teacher’s intuition to help me identify or name the subtle nuances of Andrew’s gifts. My abilities to observe and assess children were more or less primitive hunches at that point in my career. Through rudimentary judgments, I assigned children more or less into the simple categories of low, medium, and high. Andrew was the highest of highs.

In any of my subsequent years as a teacher I would have found Andrew’s wit and brilliance appealing and entertaining—an asset to my classroom community. But as it was, being a brand-new teacher who lacked confidence and skill, entrusted with the responsibility of providing an education to a child prodigy who seemed to match my intellect on many levels, Andrew kept me uncomfortably on my guard. In spite of my initial lack of confidence, as time passed that first year I grew accustomed to working side by side with a ten-year-old “genius” who frequently proved to be a quicker thinker than me.

After the initial marathon weeks of getting organized and accustomed to the demands of teaching, I became content with the set routines and habits I had carved into the form of a predictable, daily instructional itinerary, one element of which was a weekly spelling quiz. Every Monday I introduced a new list of words, assigned pages of homework from the textbook to be due throughout the week, and on Friday gave my students a spelling quiz. At the time, I felt comfortable with that routine. There were some drawbacks, the main one being the huge mound of papers that needed my constant attention each evening. At one stage during my first year as a teacher I was correcting on the average sixty pages of student assignments each night. Typically, I would sit down with my stack of papers and begin plodding through them, pen in hand. I would move into a trancelike state akin to that when I stand at the kitchen sink peeling potatoes and gazing out the window. The nightly task was tedious and uninteresting. But at the time, I was at a loss for an alternative. The routine of my teaching day was, on the surface, quiet and industrious by virtue of busying my students with a constant barrage of assignments.

By mid-October I was feeling comfortable with my teacherly persona and assured that I was managing the education of my students nicely. When parent conference night arrived I found myself a little nervous, but any hesitation was kept at bay by my emerging confidence. I arrived at school early in the evening, prepared for my first conference. By the rural Maine standards that prevailed among the staff of my school, I had dressed lavishly for the occasion in a plain navy wool skirt and a dressy blouse. I thought the outfit made me look teacherly and professional, if only slightly overdressed. Above all, I wanted to portray an image of competence and skill—I wanted to instill a sense of reassurance in the minds of my students’ parents that their children were in good hands.

The meeting with Andrew’s mother was my second of the evening. My first conference had gone smoothly, and Andrew was such a bright student, I expected my meeting with Andrew’s mom to go well. Mrs. Wright followed me into my big, empty classroom. I was struck by how strongly she resembled her son. She had the same all-knowing look that convinced me of the presence of deep, interior thoughts. She also had a very no-nonsense approach to casual conver-
sation, which, within minutes, made me feel uneasy and guarded. It wasn’t long before I began to feel self-conscious and insecure.

“It’s a pleasure having your son in my class,” I offered. “He is a quick thinker and offers a positive contribution to class discussions.” She nodded in agreement. It soon became obvious that my insights were not original; I’m certain she’d heard similar comments each year at her son’s conferences. “He has such a wonderful sense of humor,” I continued. “And he is very well liked by his classmates.” The conference limped along. I was anticipating our final good-bye when Mrs. Wright made it clear the conference was not finished.

“Oh? You have a concern?” I responded in a feigned tone of casual competence. Suddenly, Mrs. Wright reached into her purse and produced one of Andrew’s recent spelling tests I had graded. I glanced at the top where I had written “100%.” But below, three out of ten words were circled in pencil. I suddenly felt confused and off guard. “I don’t understand,” I muttered. In a firm and subtly accusing tone Mrs. Wright pointed out that Andrew had obviously misspelled three words on his spelling test. I had overlooked them, giving him a perfect score. Mrs. Wright went on to explain her concern: Andrew is a bright boy, but weak in some areas. Because of his brilliance he is often eased of the pressure to achieve, held to a different standard than the rest of his classmates. He needs instruction and guidance, just as any other child. She was justified in her criticism; and she waited for an explanation, pinning me down with her serious eyes.

I felt my stomach turn and my face flush. In my mind’s eye I could see myself, in my tidy classroom, overdressed in a navy wool skirt and a dressy blouse, feigning confidence and competence, and suddenly having my cover blown by one of my student’s parents. I felt stupid and pathetic! I wanted the ground to open up and swallow me. But I also realized I needed to be professional and at least make some attempt to save face in this unpleasant situation. How could I have overlooked three misspelled words, giving a perfect score to a child who deserved an average one? I apologized and offered my excuse…I had simply overlooked the errors. Mrs. Wright knew, and so did I, that my excuse wasn’t adequate.

The incident of the incorrect correction occurred because I relied on routines that allowed me to blindly assign and reassign students into categories. It came early in my teaching career and derived from the unreasonable routine of weekly spelling tests, which I abandoned soon after. But the development of innovative practices hasn’t delivered my teacher’s subconscious from the dangerous ghost of Andrew and unbridled assumptions. In fact, regardless of how progressive my teaching becomes, I find myself continually exorcising him from my instructional practices. While my approaches to and philosophy of teaching have changed over the years, the newer, modified routines I currently embrace also fall victim to mindlessness, complacency, and routinization.

I’m faced with a continual challenge to structure enough routine into the classroom experience to support higher levels of thinking and learning for my students and myself. But the danger arises when I blindly or thoughtlessly embrace routines, allowing them to resemble tracks that take my students and me over the same terrain, day in and day out, steering us clear of the unexpected surprises that take learning in new and necessary directions. When my teaching routines and habits allow me too easily to slip into a potato-peeling frame of mind...that’s when I know the ghost of Andrew lurks around the corner.

Figure 6  “An Incorrect Correction” (cont.)
On the first day
my grandfather took me to school.
His accent was thick and so he kept
his voice beneath his tongue, never
speaking once we left the house,
and now we stood, my hand pressed in his,
face to face with Mrs. McCarthy. Then it would have
embarrassed me to death, but now
I wish he had said, “This child
is more precious than gold, she is my heart,”
and suddenly we would have seen the pins
flying from her head and would have
heard them striking in the far corners
of that room like thunderbolts.

Instead, the silence was deep
enough to drown, as she put me down
on the chart and pointed to a table
where the children sat around a can
of broken crayons. All that long year
we would fight about each stick of bright wax
as if it were a wand our lives depended on
to get the world right, as if only blue
would keep the sky from falling.

Even now, the smell of crayons
sweetening the darkness of a tin can
lingers on and has the power to turn me
around and around as if it is really full
of tears and beards, and shoes and tears
and whispers, and pictures
of our old houses with the lights out
where our lost crayons may still be lying.

From Light Years by Roberta Chester. Copyright © 1983. Puckerbush Press. All rights reserved.
His arms would stiffen like two-by-fours at his side. His face would distort into a grotesque mask as if he were being poked with hot irons. His eyes would close tight in horror, “She’s comin’ back!” he’d shout, patting his chest like a penitent as his whole body recoiled in terror. “It’s all right, Greg,” another voice inside him would reply. “She’s gone, Greg.” Greg was about to tie his shoe, and each time I tried to teach him he turned into a B-movie monster.

I was Greg’s personal care attendant, which was another way of saying I was the guy who was supposed to follow Greg around and try to teach him something, which was another way of saying I was the interpreter of Greg’s cryptic messages, which was another way of saying I was the guy who cleaned up Greg’s messes.

Greg was a sixteen-year-old boy with autism being schooled at a private school for the retarded in the early 1980s, when such institutions were still politically correct in New Hampshire. They even still used the word retarded then, though two years later the move to developmentally disabled gained prominence. Labels are an institution’s way of saying, Don’t I know you from somewhere? and Greg was one to defy all labels; though autism, a term created by psychologist Leo Kanner in the 1950s to describe fourteen characteristics exhibited by schizophrenics, seemed to fit him fairly well.

He was about five feet tall with straight black hair that stuck up in several directions. He walked on his toes (one of Kanner’s signs) and clucked often. Children with autism also often exhibit self-abusive behaviors, which in Greg’s case involved walking along brick walls with the right side of his face pressed against the brick. He had stopped most of this activity by the time I met him, though the scabs and scars were still there. Some people with autism are savants like Dustin Hoffman’s character in the movie Rain Man, but Greg’s afflictions involved various types of other brain damage, which meant he had little of what we might call normal speech. He did a lot of parroting. (“Go in the house, Greg?” I’d say. Greg’s reply, “Go in the house.”) In his file the label severe and profound was used to describe Greg’s problem. This seemed to me the most apt and fitting description of Greg I had seen. One look in his eyes and you saw the severity of his pain, and the more I got to know Greg the more I became aware of just how profound a human being he was.

Greg will learn to tie his shoe with minimal assistance. This was the sentence that tormented my life. It was written in Greg’s IEP, which stands for Independent Educational Plan, but because of that line I started referring to it as Greg’s ITP or Independent Torture Plan. Goals like Greg will undo the twist tie on a loaf of bread or Greg will make himself chocolate milk and drink it were easy. Even goals like Greg will learn to shave his face without losing the eyebrows were not too difficult to master. But this tying-the-shoes thing got the worst of him every time we tried it.

First let me explain that the way they tied shoes at this school was different from the way you or I learned to tie shoes. I remember learning from Gary Fagan, an older boy in the neighborhood, when I was four. I remember how proud I was when I showed my mother. It was the “through the loop” stage that made the breakthrough for me. I can still remember how it felt when I pushed the loop through and almost magically the laces formed a bow. I remember quickly undoing it to see if it was luck or if I could repeat my success, and when I did it again and again I could feel a swelling sense of pride. Contrary to my own popular belief, I was educable, knowledge would stick to me, and I could demonstrate this for years by tying my shoe.
To teach Greg this daring feat, I was asked to break it down into several stages. These stages are, of course, etched in my memory like the Doublemint Gum jingles of my childhood:

Left hand: cross drop.
Right hand: cross drop.
Left hand
under the triangle.
Take both ends and
pull tight.
(repeat)
Take both ends and
pull
but leave a little hole.
Left through the hole
going away from you.
Right through the hole
going towards you.
Pinch both loops and
Pull tight.

Most days we couldn’t get past the first two stages without Greg’s having a major tantrum. One day he ripped a shower curtain right off the rod in a Brando-like moment of utter contempt and outrage. It was after that hair-raising experience that I decided tying the shoe might not be quite as important as understanding what was happening inside Greg when he tried.

I began studying more about autism and I learned some startling facts. Because children with autism are left-brain deficient, they have great difficulty conceptualizing time with words. Most of us know today is today and tomorrow is tomorrow. We think, It’s 8:00 A.M. now, I will finish breakfast and go to the store to buy milk at 8:30. Many people with autism can’t have that thought because it requires an abstract concept of time. In other words, the only way a kid like Greg can structure time is in the present with ingrained routines and rituals that give him the same sense of order that we construct in thought. I remember reading a story in which a mother of a seven-year-old boy with autism described a major tantrum her son had on the way to school. She thought the routine was no different from any other day until she remembered she had passed a car that day. When you depend on external routines for mental clarity, just about any inevitable variation becomes an Orwelian assault on your thoughts.

That’s when I started thinking seriously about the deeper implications of being Greg. If you had no way of creating time in your head, there was nothing to say that the past was past. The expression “Time is the great healer of all things” would not be true, because everything that had every happened to you would continually happen to you in each moment of your waking life. There would be no past to escape, no future to hide in. If all humanity were like Greg, we would live the eternal return. We wouldn’t have the luxury of saying, World War II happened before we were born; it would be happening right now, and we would be powerless to stop the painful thoughts unless we could be distracted by the present long enough to engage in some activity like stirring Hershey’s syrup into a glass of milk.

The pain trapped in Greg’s gentle face suddenly began to make sense.

I began to play closer attention to Greg’s words when he had his tantrums. “She’s comin’ back,” he’d say, his face contorted in excruciating pain. I asked Greg, “Who is she?” and Greg would reply,
“Who’s she?” his face still twisted with pain. The other most consistent voice was one that said, “It’s all right, Greg, calm down.” This was not a consoling voice but more a self-annihilating one. “Who’s saying that?” I asked. “Who’s saying that?” Greg parroted again. I realized this was getting us nowhere when Greg started saying my questions as part of his repertoire. I was just adding another disembodied voice to the confusion.

Then I began to investigate Greg’s past. The social worker had told me a little about Greg’s family. They were Portuguese, a big Catholic family. They loved each other but expressed it by shouting insults and hitting and calling up guilt. They had refused most respite care and Greg’s younger brothers took care of him to fill in for his older brother who had recently left home to join the service. They had little money but were not poor in spirit. Just in passing she told me that Greg’s maternal grandmother had taken him alone for summers when he was a young child. She had taught him to speak but died suddenly when he was five.

A month later I interviewed Greg’s mother about his grandmother. I had gotten to know her well through the summer program I designed for Greg at his house. In her words, “Greg wouldn’t speak for anyone but his Nana.” His Nana took him for the summers when he was three and taught him to play peekaboo. She nurtured him and loved him so hard, he would pine away when she brought him back home in August to his big confusing family. Nana’s sudden death of a stroke at fifty years old was a shock to everybody. On the way to the funeral Greg’s mother and dad had stopped at Nana’s house to get something. Greg was with them and bolted out of the car and into the house in front of them. He started looking for Nana in closets, in drawers, under beds. He kept shouting, “Peekaboo Nana, Nana Peekaboo.” Greg’s mother was greatly distressed and kept telling her husband, “That kid. That kid. Do something about that kid.” Her husband finally grabbed young Greg by the shoulders, sat him down on Nana’s bed, and in a stern voice said, “SHE’S GONE, GREG! ALL GONE! NO MORE! SHE’S NEVER COMING BACK!” Greg’s mother described her son’s reaction, “His head tipped over, his eyes closed, and he didn’t speak again for eight years.”

After hearing that story it was clear where Greg’s tantrums came from. With no concept of time how could five-year-old Greg process grief? You or I would be able to reflect on a painful memory as something buried years in the past. For Greg, ten years ago was today waiting to happen over and over. A trigger as simple as tying a shoe would propel that moment into the present. Since Greg was four or five when he lived with his Nana, I could only speculate that, like me, that was the year he was learning to tie his shoes.

The next time Greg went to tie his shoe I put my theory to work. “Over, Over,” I said, initiating the painful process. Greg’s arms turned to timber and his head recoiled in that twisted mask of sadness. “She’s comin back,” he muttered as his eyes squeezed shut. “Greg,” I said, “she loves you.” I will always remember the moment that followed. Greg’s entire body seemed to deflate as though an icy wind had stopped blowing and a warm sun was now shining over him. “She loves you,” I said again. And this time his eyes opened wider than I’d ever seen and he turned to me, and with the wonder of a small child said, “She loves you, Greg.”

No, Greg never learned to tie his shoe, and it was about a month later that I gave up and bought a pair of gray running shoes with Velcro fasteners with my own money. I confess I did not follow Greg’s IEP with the same zeal after that day. Greg taught me that the forest was not the sum of the trees but something larger and far more magnificent than I ever imagined possible. My IEP has not been the same since.
Walking down the halls of Sellwood Middle School was like encountering a ravenous beast, ready to gobbled you up. Between the snobby rich Eastmoreland girls and the overly preppy Eastmoreland jocks, I was immediately stamped with the words “fashion reject” from day one. My two-year-old white and purple Pro-Wings were falling apart and my grungy Levis weren’t cutting it anymore, either. Everyone was suddenly wearing Guess jeans. “Guess?” I thought, “Guess what?” I felt like the only person in the world who didn’t understand the concept of Guess jeans but I certainly understood the importance of them and how they were absolutely essential at Sellwood.

I had been talking about Guess jeans for weeks before my mom actually took me to Meier & Frank to take a look at them. When we got to the juniors section and found the Guess jeans my mom almost had a heart attack. “Sixty dollars!” she gasped, as she peered at the price tag. “I’m sorry, honey, but I really can’t afford these.”

As I watched her put the jeans back on the rack, I felt like I had had my heart ripped out of my chest and thrown into a pit of wild bears. After all the talk of how important these jeans were to me, they were too expensive? I wasn’t having it. The whining began.

“But Mooooooom! All the girls have them and they won’t let me hang with them if I don’t have them. I’ll be the only girl without . . .” I pleaded, pulling on her shirt sleeve. My whining immediately to cut short when she said in what sounded to me like a yell, “WELL, I GUESS WE COULD GO TO VALUE VILLAGE AND TRY TO FIND A PAIR THERE!”

Looking around desperately to see if anyone had heard, I hoped I wouldn’t see anyone I knew or might ever know. I moved quickly to look through clothes about two racks away so no one would think I was with my mom, the person who had literally yelled out the dread words, “Value Village.”

Value Village? How could my mom have said that in front of everyone at Meier & Frank? I was appalled. Obviously she understood nothing and did not care about me or how I felt. Value Village was the place the popular kids ridiculed and degraded. They yelled at kids in the halls with the insult, “You buy your clothes at Value Village!” They said it was a place for homeless people and welfare recipients. After we were back in the car, I decided that if Guess jeans might be there I would have to take my chances.

We drove off in our ’67 blue Chevy, otherwise known as the Blue Bomber—the same car I made my mom park behind a trailer two blocks away from my school so the popular kids wouldn’t see me—and in not time we were in the Value Village parking lot.

Entering Value Village, the stench of disinfectant lingered in the air, assaulting my nose with every breath. Struggling to hold my breath, I walked toward the jeans rack where I immediately spotted Carmen, one of the popular girls at Sellwood. She saw me, turned beet red, and ran down the aisle and out the door. I was so astounded that one of the popular girls was at Value Village, I almost forgot my purpose. But then, remembering why I was there, I promptly looked for and found a pair of Guess jeans, slightly frayed at the ends, purchased them, and went home.

The next day at school, wearing my most fashionable Guess jeans and dressing down at the girls’ locker room, I heard snickering behind me. I turned around and found all the popular girls in a clump, pointing, laughing, and whispering.

Rebecca, the leader of the pack, who could be clearly identified by her pearly pink lip gloss and her six-inch bangs, which always reeked of Aqua Net, suddenly piped up, “Nice jeans, Jessica. Was Value Village having a half-price sale?”

“Yeah, too bad you can’t afford the real thing!” mimicked Carmen, both hands placed defiantly on her hips.

I was completely mortified. After all my hard work to finally fit in, my prized possession Guess jeans weren’t even considered “the real thing” because they came from Value Village. It was then I realized that the popular girls were obviously never going to be my friends because they were rich, preppy snobs and I didn’t need them to criticize me anyway. From that day on, I never wanted to be popular again.
### Figure 10

**Literature Social Skills and Thinking Skills**

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