TEXT TALK: TOWARDS AN INTERACTIVE CLASSROOM MODEL FOR ENCOURAGING, SUPPORTING AND PROMOTING LITERACY

by

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Abstract

This thesis is the story of my journey as a teacher-researcher in a grade five classroom. In it, I discuss some assumptions I held about written and oral responses to literature and describe the "critical incidents" that caused my assumptions to be challenged and my plans to be revised. This research describes my professional growth as I worked towards developing an interactive classroom model for encouraging, supporting and promoting literacy.

Response theorist Louise Rosenblatt regards reading as a transactional process, a kind of conversation between reader and writer, who together shape the ideas captured by the words on the page. As a teacher of reading, I became concerned about ways of improving the individual child's capacity to evoke meaning from the text. As one who believes in the power of personal response, the question arose: How could I foster the kind of fruitful transactions that Rosenblatt encourages?

When I began my investigation, I assumed that reading journals were the best accountable way of revealing children's responses to literature. I had assumed that the students would come to write about their reactions, opinions, and connections to the books they were reading. However, this did not seem to happen in any significant
way. The notion that dialogue would deepen their reflections was not validated for me. I introduced three different responses activities that further challenged the action research. My observations and reflections led me to abandon journals and to revise my investigation.

In the second phase of my Action Research I revised my plans, modified methodology and collected data to help me examine response through small group discussions. I introduced four talk sessions about four poems which helped me to better understand the significance of talk as a medium for response.

Through the action research process and writing about research, I have come to the present point in my journey with text talk. This thesis has prompted me to change my practice as a reading teacher to create opportunities for interactions - interactions between the reader and the text, between reader and reader and between the reader and the teacher.
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For David Booth, mentor and friend, I extend deep gratitude for encouraging, supporting and promoting my learning.
Foreword

Fraser, Antonia (Ed.), (1992). The Pleasure of Reading.

Figure 1: Zafer Baren
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Preface

This Book is Mine

The book is mine,
I checked it out.
I read it
and found all about
another me
who lived before,
who opened up a magic door,
who sailed an ocean,
flew a plane,
a me
I never could explain
until I found myself
within
a story
where
I've always
been.

Myra Cohn Livingston
Chapter I

Questioning My Classroom Practice

The Context for My Investigation

Teaching, like learning, is an ongoing process of inquiry, in which the knowledge that is constructed about learners and learning, as they are encountered in particular situations, continuously transforms the teacher's way of understanding and acting in the classroom.

Wells, 1999, p. 164

Throughout my career as a teacher I have been working with children, promoting and observing their responses to literature. When I began teaching, the approach to reading that I followed was fairly traditional in its teacher-directed organization. I relied upon testing students' comprehension of stories, poems, or novels, by asking questions that they would then answer in their notebooks. Sometimes these questions were drawn from a teacher's guide, or from commercial novel study packages. If I were fortunate, the questions would appear in the student text at the end of the reading selection, and I would have the students answer a certain number of them for homework. At other times, I remember designing questions and writing these on the blackboard, or distributing copies to the students. Once the questions were taken up, a different portion of the novel or a new reading selection would be assigned, and the process would be repeated. As a novice teacher, I felt secure in this question and answer format for teaching reading. It wasn't long, however, before I abandoned the list of questions to be answered, supposedly to assist and assess comprehension. I began to understand that the most significant questions needed to come from the children themselves. As well, I realized that if questions were to be asked concerning a text, they were likely to grow from the context of text discussions.
Over the years of teaching many grades, taking courses, reading professional books, lecturing at university, working as a language arts consultant, writing as a member of an author team for a published reading series, and conducting workshops on various aspects of literacy learning, I came to change my practice of the teaching of literacy.

As I grew and changed as a reading teacher, several assumptions provided a framework for the literacy conditions that I introduced into my classroom. I came to realize that literacy learning is developmental, and since children proceed at individual rates, I became aware of the need for setting varied but high expectations for each child's success. I moved from structuring whole class activities only, and began to include individualized and small group reading response activities. I came to recognize the need for encouraging the children in my classroom to respond in a variety of modes to what they had read, helping them to think about the text in personal and meaningful ways. I also began to understand that these interpretations, whether art, drama, verbal or written, when shared, could increase everyone's understanding of how text can be appreciated and valued in different ways. In a community of readers, it was important for members to talk about personal interpretations that may alter the thoughts of others. Above all, I realized that for a variety of reasons - social experience, cultural connections, personal interpretations of words, relationships with others and appreciation of the author's message - each child's response is unique. As a teacher of reading I recognized that it was essential to provide support for each child's interests, needs and abilities with language.

For the past twenty years, I had been teaching my class in the best way I knew how, operating a good deal of the time from an intuitive sense of what was needed. However, I felt a constant challenge to implement the best literacy program possible, one
that would promote interaction, one that would enhance significant language and arts learning, sustain the interest of the child, increase comprehension and generate a variety of expressions. Recognizing that the child's individuality of interpretation is supported by the guidance, the encouragement and the knowledge of the enabling adult, the challenge remained to set conditions for literacy that would reflect such beliefs. Encouraging each child's personal response remained a priority.

Over the years, I have been reading much research carried out by teachers in their own classrooms. Books such as Reclaiming the Classroom, edited by Goswami and Stillman (1987), The Languages of Learning by Karen Gallas (1994) and Workshop of the Possible by Ruth Shagoury Hubbard and Brenda Miller Power (1996) reminded me that the questions we ask and the answers we find in our classrooms help us become better teachers, to make important contributions to the realm of teaching and learning.

This present research inquiry developed from my growing discomfort with the reading program in my grade 5 classroom. When a course I was taking with Gordon Wells presented the opportunity to examine some aspect of my teaching with a focus for change, I welcomed the challenge to gain a better understanding - and improve - my teaching of reading. By joining the community of teacher-researchers, I welcomed the opportunity for renewal and development. As a teacher-researcher taking action, I was prompted to seriously consider what I might do differently to improve the educational practices in my particular environment. As Gordon Wells (1994) asserts, "It is only by subjecting one's present behaviour to critical scrutiny, that one can see clearly how it might be improved in the future" (p. 24).
The goal I set for myself was to begin creating opportunities for collaboration within the classroom community to encourage, support and promote literacy.

The Need for Classroom-Based Research

In an age when our nation is rallying for excellence in teaching, there is no more promising trend than the teacher-as-researcher movement. The demystifying of research, professionalism of teaching and empowering of teachers, are all part of the plan.

Strickland, 1988, p. 763

A critical area for education is the quality of the teaching force. Who then, are teachers of quality?

For Lawrence Stenhouse (1975), they are "extended professionals" who examine their own practice critically and systematically. For Judith Newman (1990) they are "interpretive teachers" who uncover their assumptions with the probability that they will reveal a contradiction within. Glenda Bissex (1988) describes them as "teacher-researchers" - observers, questioners, learners and more complete teachers. Quality teachers, in sum, are those teachers who engage in research to become professionals.

In becoming a teacher-researcher, I took deliberate action to look closely at the "stuff" of my lessons, at my students and at myself, thus joining a community of teachers who, according to Dorothy Strickland (1988), use research to do a better job. I was prepared to ask questions about students' learning, observe the action in my own classroom, attempt to make sense of my observations and work towards change in the light of my discoveries.
One day as I was driving home from school, I began to think about the conference that I had conducted with one of my students about a poem that she had written. When I reconsidered the conversation, I felt dissatisfied with the way I had interfered with Georgette's writing process. The next time, I would let her suggest the ways she might revise the form of her poem, instead of doing it for her. As I continued to mentally revisit the day, I thought about the drama lesson I had conducted with the students after we had finished the novel Hatchet by Gary Paulsen (1987): Should I have put them in pairs instead of working in a forum theatre mode? Was the technique of creating the main character's dreams the best way of getting the students to consider the change that he went through and his feelings about the survival experience? I also remembered how I had assisted Ricky with his research project on the topic of airplanes. I asked myself whether I had given him useful help, whether the activity was meaningful for him and even whether I should have assigned the project in the first place. As I continued driving, I thought about a conversation I had had with a parent about a student's behaviour; I thought about my failure to get to the heart of the legend that I read aloud that day; and I also thought about one of my students asking me, "Why do you like poetry so much?"

These conversations that I have with myself are not unlike those of any thoughtful teacher. Being thoughtful, according to Nancie Atwell (1989), is manifested in the careful way that teacher researchers continually examine and analyze their teaching. However, the most thoughtful practitioner, Atwell argues, is the teacher who acts as a researcher and a scholar - reading, debating, and writing about their discoveries.

What ultimately separates those teachers who 'look back on the day' from those who are researchers, lies in the notion of change. If educational change is to happen it will require that teachers
"understand themselves and be understood by others" (Fullan, 1982, p. 117). Thinking about a writing conference, a drama lesson or a legend that I had taught is one thing; taking action to improve my practice as a result of this thinking is what raises my role from that of teacher to that of teacher-researcher to begin to seriously consider what I might do differently.

As a teacher-researcher I was not trying to prove something to someone else, but trying to discover answers to many questions and challenges that emerged from my day-to-day practice. In particular, I embarked on this inquiry with the goal of revising my work with students when they were given opportunities to engage with texts and to reveal their responses to the reading.

Reflecting deeply on our own experiences and those of our students, we discover that explicating and exploring dilemmas is of itself a way of knowing, a powerful though often neglected means of moving beyond, creating, transcending.

Jacobs; Roderick, 1988, p. 650

**Three Features of Action Research**

One of the features that distinguishes "action research" from other forms of professional development for teachers is the ownership of the investigation. Teacher-researchers choose the issues or concerns that they want to address - something that they believe is worth knowing about - and take action because it is likely to make an improvement. Most effective teachers are reflective but in "action research" the reflection is deliberate. To learn deliberately, Garth Boomer (1988) asserts, is to research.
Boomer identifies personally owned research as an antidote to what he calls "big R" Research, i.e. institutionally legitimate inquiry into problems which exist elsewhere than within the research. In contrast to "big R" Research, where the researcher is detached from the problem, personally owned research is always oriented towards a solution to the present problem, although its effect may be to create new knowledge, new problems and new questions along the way. In Boomer's definition "'action' research is a deliberate, group or personally owned and conducted, solution-oriented investigation" (p. 8). The "big R" Research which occurs elsewhere provides vital information in the classroom when a problem is defined and owned. Boomer also reminds us that the human brain is a classic instrument of research. It is almost impossible to stop the brain from learning. Research, therefore is "simply a matter of doing deliberately and formally what comes naturally" (p. 11).

In education, the classroom teacher has an important role as investigator, rather than the one who is being investigated (Stenhouse, 1975). All well-founded school curriculum research and development can be based on the study of the classroom. It is not enough that the teachers' work should be studied: teachers need to study it themselves. Stenhouse's challenge for effective curriculum development of the highest quality depends on the capacity of the teachers to take a research stance in their own teaching, a disposition for examining one's own practice critically and systematically as a professional.

Teachers may make changes because of an outsider, because the children demand a change; or as a whim. Teacher-researchers however, identify an area of concern - something that they believe is worth knowing about - and take action because it is likely to make an improvement. While the word 'research' has the appropriate literal meaning - to look again - its connotations may be less
useful in describing the goals of teachers, like myself, undertaking action research in order to improve educational practice in their own settings. "We are not researchers in other people's classrooms looking for proof or generalizing truths, but are reflective practitioners in our own classrooms, searching for insights that will help us understand and improve our practice" (Bissex, 1988, p. 775).

Connelly and Clandinin (1988) emphasize that all teaching and learning questions - all curriculum matters - must be looked at from the point of view of the involved persons. They believe that "it is the teacher's 'personal knowledge' that determines all matters of significance relative to the planned conduct of the classroom" (Connelly and Clandinin, 1988, p. 4). On the point of knowledge, James Britton (1983), quotes Michael Polanyi (1969): "Research is an intensely dynamic enquiring, while knowledge is a more quiet research" (p. 15). For Britton, every lesson should be for the teacher an inquiry, some further discovery, "a quiet form of research".

A second feature unique to "action research" is the dialectic between practice and theory in the actual conduct of the investigation. Action research brings theory and practice together in the classroom, where answers to questions will be sought out. Teacher-researchers are more apt to know what others think about an issue and relate that knowledge to their own reflective practice. They become theorists, critical readers and rich resources. Teacher-researchers give attention to why they think the way they do.

Ann Berthoff (1988) argues that we need to constantly ask why we are doing what we are doing, so that our teaching practices are informed by theory. As teacher-researchers, we do not necessarily need new information, but we need to think about the information
that we have, to consider and interpret that which we consider. "Research like Recognition is a Reflexive act. It means looking and looking again" (Berthoff, 1988, p. 30).

James Britton (1983) suggests that effective teaching depends upon the concern of every teacher for the rationale by which he or she works. The decisions that teachers make, the interactions that arise, come from an inner conviction, as they consistently apply an ever-developing rationale. Time to reflect, draw inferences and plan further inquiry is essential in order for development to emerge from the research.

Teaching is something we do; research findings are something we come to know; development is the process by which we bring this kind of knowing into relation with this kind of doing.

Britton, 1983, p. 17

Third, the researcher's ultimate goal is to change one's teaching, "so that one's students, in turn, are enabled to become intentional learners" (Wells, 1994, pp. 30-31). Researchers draw their students into the inquiry they embark upon so that the students themselves can become inquirers into their own learning. As researchers, we model curiosity, problem-solving and reflective thinking for our students.

Eleanor Duckworth (1987) conducted a program that involved a group of graduate students who were required to record in a log, their observations and reflections of their investigation on the behaviour of the moon. The second-order task, moon-watching, enabled Duckworth's students to make sense of their own learning, since they were asked to explain what they learned and how they learned it.
A somewhat comparable study was conducted by Gordon Wells in a course he ran for teachers in British Columbia. In the final chapter of *Changing Schools from Within*, Wells (1994) describes a community of reflective inquirers who pursued their own individual interests while providing support for and learning from the interests, experiences and expertise of others. Using the topic of "time", Wells guided the participants to understand the need for a transactional and conversational approach to learning and teaching.

Both Duckworth and Wells have demonstrated that we can only study the learning and teaching if those involved are learning and teaching. In these studies, the teachers were prompted to transfer this inquiry process into classroom research investigations of their own students' learning.

Nancie Atwell (1991) is convinced that the one role her students will remember her for is that of a researcher - an adult who learned in public. Atwell explains that as teacher-researchers we serve as models of thoughtfulness for our students, showing them how adults can function as lifelong learners, and demonstrating also that learning is a social activity. They become more patient with, more responsive and more useful to their students; they invite students to become partners in inquiry as they collaborate with students and wonder about learning. The role of the teacher is not only to help learners reveal what they know but to provide an opportunity for demonstrating their own concerns about learning. When teachers invite students to become partners in inquiry, to collaborate with them in wondering about what and how they are learning, schools become, as Atwell says, more thoughtful places.

Connected to this learning-teaching relationship is the way that teacher-researchers share their learning with others in the field.
As part of the transformation from teacher to professional, it is significant that teachers document their learning as other teachers have done in, for example: Finding our own way: Teachers exploring their assumptions (Newman, 1990); Talking About Books: Creating literate communities (Short & Pierce, 1990); The Book Club Connection (McMahon and Raphael, 1996), and Changing Schools from Within (Wells, 1994).

Through courses, workshops and publications, a teacher-professional can offer information so that colleagues inside and outside the school can rethink their own teaching. Donald Schon (1991) tells us that researchers must become educators – practitioners who reflect in and on their own inquiry to design educational experiences for others. The range of teacher-researchers is demonstrated in three publications: In Classroom Talk (Booth, Thornley-Hall, 1991), seventeen teacher-researchers from the Peel Board of Education reflect on various aspects of making listening and speaking an effective part of their learning. Listening In by Thomas Newkirk (1992) is an investigation of a first/second grade classroom, documenting children's discussions of the books they read. More recently, Susan I. McMahon and Taffy E. Raphael (1997) in Book Club: Multiple voices building literate communities have presented the reports of over a dozen teacher-researchers who have implemented a variety of literature group approaches.

When teachers share their learning so that others can learn, they are joining hands with those who have become thoughtful practitioners and extended professionals. Moreover, they are inviting others to join them in this community.

The voice of the teacher, when situated in an attitude of wonder and inquiry, when framed with the idea of making sense of the classroom, automatically creates a new culture in the educational community: one in which "not knowing" is equally as valuable as knowing, one in
which the questions to be asked are not always clear, a culture where teachers learn to rely on one another for new ways to make sense of the sense children are making.

Gallas, 1994, p. 161

As a teacher-researcher, I went beyond "having conversations with myself" about my work in the classroom. Not only did I collaborate with others to make meaning for myself, but I began to question, observe, and reflect upon my teaching. I began a systematic analysis of gathered evidence in order to teach with a difference.

A Model for Action Research in the Classroom

Just as there are many ways for students to learn, there are many ways for teachers to inquire. We learn by reading, by observing in our own classrooms and in the classrooms of others, by reflecting on our observations alone and with others and by sharing their knowledge and experience. Because teachers have been asking questions about the practice of teaching and the process of the learning, they can best learn through a systematic investigation of problems concerning these concerns.

In her article, "The Teacher as Researcher: Toward the Extended Professional", Dorothy Strickland (1988, p. 760) refers to course materials presented by Judith Green (1987) at Ohio State University. For my purposes, I decided to follow Judith Green's plan to provide an overview of the use of reading response journals in my classroom. Green's plan consists of seven phases to help teachers conduct research in their classrooms:

Phase 1. Identify an issue, interest or concern;
Phase 2. Seek knowledge;
Phase 3. Plan an action;
Phase 4. Implement an action;
Phase 5. Observe the action;
Phase 6. Reflect on the observations;
Phase 7. Revise the plan.

What isn't mentioned in Green's plan is the role of "surprise" incidents that Judith Newman (1987) argues are critical in uncovering our assumptions.

It seems to me the switch into "researcher" occurs at those moments when the unexpected occurs, when things haven't gone as we thought they should, or when our predictions are disconfirmed and we're forced to see a familiar situation with new eyes. It's generally when I'm unsettled about something that's happened, and reflect on it I become aware of another critical incident. The trick is to become adept at noticing those moments and doing something about them.

Newman, 1987, p. 736

For Judith Newman (1987) changing what we do in the classroom in any meaningful way involves changing attitudes and beliefs, but before we can alter those, we have to know what they are. The route she suggests for uncovering our instructional assumptions is to delve beneath the surface of what we are currently doing. One powerful way of prompting us toward not only new understanding, but also toward change, is inspecting "critical incidents", occasions when something unexpected leads us to look more closely at our assumptions. Reflecting on what we are doing and why is to arrive at a deeper understanding of the complex of motives, beliefs and attitudes that influence our practices on particular occasions.

Engaging in reflective practice, I have discovered, is like using a highlighter marker to bring words and ideas and experiences into sharper focus for scrutiny. To understand the points that I had come to on my journey concerning reading, it was to bring a
sharper focus to the readings, conversations, and writing which acted as the critical incidents that led to change in my language program.

This thesis is the story of my journey as a teacher-researcher in a grade five classroom. In it, I will discuss some assumptions I held about written and oral responses and describe the "critical incidents" that caused my assumptions to be challenged and my plans to be revised. This research will describe my professional growth as I worked towards developing an interactive classroom model for encouraging, supporting and promoting literacy.

**Identifying Issues of Concern**

*If books could have more, give more, be more, show more, they would still need readers, who bring to them sound and smell and all the rest that can't be in books.*

*The book needs you.*


In the opening to his novel, *The Winter Room*, noted author, Gary Paulsen, corroborates what many contemporary literary critics are asserting, shifting attention from the text as an autonomous object that in itself contains meaning to what happens in the minds of readers as they actively engage in reading texts. Thus reading might become personally significant when we are encouraged to experience the work by allowing it to stimulate images, feelings, associations and thoughts. At the heart of response theory is the notion that reading is guided by the text and influenced by the personal experience and cultural history of the
reader, the present representation of the world and the reader
conventions that have been internalized.

Response theorist Louise Rosenblatt (1938/1976) regards reading as
a transactional process, a kind of conversation between reader and
writer, who together shape the ideas captured by the words on the
page.

The starting point for growth must be each individual's
effort to marshal his resources and organize a response
relevant to the stimulus of the printed page. The
teacher's task is to foster interactions - more
precisely, transactions - between individual readers and
individual literary works.

Rosenblatt, 1976, pp. 26-27

As a teacher of reading, I became concerned about ways to improve
the individual child's capacity to evoke meaning from the text. My
view of teaching and learning with literature is founded on the
beliefs that:

1. children learn to read by reading
2. interpretation is the result of a transactional process in which
   readers bring meaning to as well as take meaning from a text
3. no two readers ever read the same text in the same way; nor do
   they arrive at the same meaning
4. there is no single meaning for any text
5. story is a living context for making meaning
6. students create shared systems of meaning through talk

As one who believes in the power of personal response, the
question arose: How could I foster the kind of fruitful
interactions that Rosenblatt encourages?
Chapter II

Towards an Understanding of Interactive Literacy

Response: Interaction Between the Reader and the Text

A Transactional View of Reading

The reading of a literary text is in effect a dialogue between a reader and a writer, the written text being the vehicle permitting this exchange to occur. This dialogue, according to Bakhtin (1929), has the potential for limitless meanings. For Wolfgang Iser (1978), the writer's text is riddled with 'blanks' left to evoke the reader's creative participation. Geoff Fox (1979) describes these gaps as a kind of reflective middle ground, a place where reader and text meet.

To emphasize the role that the reader assumes in the reading process, Trevor Cairney (1990), uses the terms "construct" and "create". Writers create texts and represent them through a set of signs which readers then use to create their own texts, Cairney argues. The writer simply provides the raw material from which the reader fashions his own meaning.

The reader constructs his/her own text using the signs laid down by the author, and in turn relates these to the sum total of his/her knowledge and experience. The act of reading should lead to a text which belongs to the reader, because it is part of him/her. Readers make texts their own through the meanings they create.

Cairney, 1990, p. 21

Trevor Cairney believes that we need to recognize reading as a constructive process rather than view it as a process of meaning transfer. Lee Galda (1983) in describing the transactional theory explains that a literary work of art requires an active reader who
constantly builds and synthesizes meaning, paying attention to the words being processed while aware of the image and emotions experienced. The text does not embody meaning but rather guides the active creation of meaning. Thus, within this theory, it becomes impossible to discuss literature without reference to the reader. For Margaret Meek (1991), reading is the process of turning written language into meaning. Being literate, according to Meek, "comes from knowing what reading is good for, from engaging in it so that we enlarge our understanding not only of books and texts, what they are about and how they are written, but also of ourselves" (p. 42).

Ralph Peterson and Maryann Eeds (1990) recognize that for all reading, the interpretive act is transactional. "Readers simultaneously bring meaning to and take meaning from the text as they read" (p. 12). The authors differentiate between the words "interpretation" and "comprehension", arguing that comprehension has come to emphasize the text. When correct answers are required for questions asked in the teacher manuals or tests, an individual's lived and literary history is not accounted for. Only if readers are able to structure meaning themselves through their own interpretations, in the light of their experiences and intentions, is meaning genuine.

Those who recognize literary reading as a transaction between reader and text, see the writer as the one who contributes the words, sentences and paragraphs to represent his or her views while the reader brings to the text personal experiences, attitudes, thoughts and feelings. The conversation is not easy; the writer's work is done, and the reader now bears the burden. For Alberto Manguel (1996), every piece of writing involves a death (the writer) and a life (the reader):

The primordial relationship between writer and reader presents a wonderful paradox: in creating the role of
the reader, the writer also decrees the writer's death, since in order for a text to be finished the writer must withdraw, cease to exist. While the writer remains present, the text remains incomplete. Only when the writer relinquishes the text, does the text come into existence. At that point, the existence of the text is a silent existence, silent until the moment in which a reader reads it. Only when the able eye makes contact with the marking on the tablet, does the text come to active life. All writing depends on the generosity of the reader.

Manguel, 1996, p. 179

To make sense of writing, the reader must find connections with it. A reader does not become the writer, seeing and thinking as the writer does. Instead, the reader gathers and refines personal impressions and interprets, shaping the meaning and the significance of the work (Probst, 1988).

The reader takes considerable responsibility for making meaning - inferring, generalizing, distinguishing fact from opinion, making judgements. The reader brings to the text all of his/her life experiences using the features of written text - words, paragraphs, conversations, ideas and imagery. According to Jack Thomson (1987) reading, "although guided by the text, is also influenced by the reader's personal and cultural history, current representation of the world and internalized knowledge of reading conventions he/she has internalized" (p. 112). Because readers come from backgrounds that differ in attitudes, values and circumstances, the variations in response that they have to a text are individual and legitimate. "Two people may read the same book, but the stories they read will never be identical" (Booth, 1994, p. 137).

For Wolfgang Iser (1978), the author and the reader share the game of the imagination. The reader's enjoyment begins when he himself becomes productive, i.e. when the text allows him to bring his own
faculties into play. As we hear or read the words, we transform the symbols into starting pictures that let us see into the story. Iser writes: "the meaning of the literary work remains related to what the printed text says, but it requires the creative imagination of the reader to put it all together" (1978, p. 142). In his book, The Act of Reading, Iser points out that good writers leave gaps for readers to fill in and when a reader's mind works to fill in these blanks, an 'act of constitution' takes place. The author gives us words and blanks - and as we read the lines and between the lines, the text is brought to life.

Reading, a highly complex process, involves more than the passive recognition of words. Reading also encompasses understanding the concepts behinds those words and, to fully comprehend, readers have to fit new information from a text into their own world view. A child in our class who comes from a foreign country may have no comparable experience for subway, the child from an urban centre may lack background to understand silo. In every case, as Alberto Manguel writes, it is the reader who reads the sense:

It is the reader who grants or recognizes in an object, place or event a certain possible readability; it is the reader who must attribute meaning to a system of signs, and then decipher it. We all read ourselves and the world around us in order to glimpse what and where we are. We read to understand, or begin to understand. We cannot do but read. Reading, almost as much as breathing, is our essential function.

Manguel, 1996, p. 7

Before they start a story, good readers think about the text, prepare themselves for reading by drawing on prior knowledge and analyze the type of text to be read so that they can choose the appropriate reading approach. As they read, they build a coherent personal interpretation of both the selection and its real-world connections. They look for important ideas, paraphrase, predict,
anticipate and read ahead for additional context. They look back and reread to clarify a confusing part, or to relate new knowledge to existing knowledge. They test hypotheses and understandings, and create mental images to visualize description. They look for interconnecting details and monitor their own reading to ensure comprehension. If the material is too difficult, effective readers know when to stop reading. After reading, they reflect on what they read, relate what they can to their own experience, and respond to the text in a variety of modes to enrich and extend the meaning-making process.

Reader response, a valid form of literary criticism, is also a classroom practice in which the goal is to facilitate students' perceptions and responses to a text rather than dictate a specific view.

In the following excerpt of a transcript, (see: Appendix A), a group of students in my class responded to Gary Paulsen's Prologue to The Winter Room. As they shared their thoughts with me, these eleven year olds seemed to be validating the essential beliefs of Transactional theory, even though - to be certain - they had never encountered the words of the theorists.

Participants: Liza (L); Miranda (M); Sunny (S); Christi (C); Heidi (H); James; Teacher (T)

1 T: What do you think Gary Paulsen means when he writes "The book needs you"?
2 L: I think the author means that without you the book is nothing except for all kinds of words.
3 M: A book doesn't make sense if nobody's reading it.
4 S: It's sort of like the book and the person need each other.
5 T: How does the person need the book?
Without a book they wouldn't learn anything. And the book without a person is just words on paper.

All that's in a book is words. You have to picture what you think would be in your head, matching the words, the noise that it would make in your head and the pictures that you thought should be in your head.

No - I think that a book does have sounds and smells... but only you need a reader...

No - you imagine them.

What does a reader do for a book?

Because when the author writes a book, he gets all his enthusiasm and puts it on paper.

He puts his imagination on paper.

So you can read his mind.

... read his thoughts... A book is nothing without a reader...

... until you understand it and like it.

... A book is just black and white lines on paper.

A person is nothing without a book either...

**Louise Rosenblatt**

Louise Rosenblatt (1938/1976) was one of the earliest literary scholars to discuss the ideas of the reader, not as a hindrance, but as crucial to the construction of literary experience. Debunking the old school of the so-called New Criticism, Rosenblatt insisted that there is no one correct interpretation of a literary work, but multiple interpretations, each of them profoundly dependent on the prior experience brought to the text by each reader. Rosenblatt uses the terms 'co-creator' or 're-creator' to describe readers, implying that the writer is involved in the individual reader's construction of a text.
Robert Probst (1988), interpreting Rosenblatt's ideas, reminds us that the pathway to analysis, to more sophisticated interpretations of literature, must go through personal response, not around it. Probst, like Rosenblatt, claims that there may be better and worse readings of texts but there are no "wrong" ones. Any work of literature is always a confrontation, a collaboration between a reader's prior experience, and the words of an author.

Rosenblatt views the reading process as an event involving three characters on a stage - author, text and reader - and claims that all three characters determine the reading experience. She proposes that a text is never merely the graphic symbols on the page, and that the literary work of art, or 'poem,' as she later designates it (1978), exists only in the interaction of reader and text. Rosenblatt's definition of the literary experience includes a "synthesis of what the reader already knows and feels and desires with what the literary text offers" (p. 272). Where criticism once spotlighted the author and text, the reader now moves into the centre as the leading actor in the text performance.

**The Reader, The Text, The Poem**

Louise Rosenblatt (1978) outlines some important distinctions concerning the act of reading. First, she makes a distinction between the reader, (who brings his/her accumulated literary life experiences, abilities, and tastes to bear upon the act of reading) and the text, (which is simply the words on the page), and the poem, (which is created only when reader and text interact). Rosenblatt summarizes the transactional stance in the following way:

> The poem must be thought of as an event in time. It is not an object or an ideal entity. It happens during a
coming-together, a compenetration, of a reader and a text. The reader brings to the text his past experience and present personality. Under the magnetism of the ordered symbols of the text, he marshals his resources and crystallizes out from the stuff of memory, thought and feeling, a new order, a new experience, which he sees as the poem.


Second, Rosenblatt differentiates between two kinds of reading: efferent and aesthetic reading. Efferent reading focuses attention on what information is to be carried away from a text. The aesthetic reader focuses on what happens during the reading event, i.e. what is being 'lived through' during the reading. When a poem is analyzed for its imagery or identification of form, reading is considered to be efferent. In aesthetic reading we are asked to wonder, "How do you feel and think?" "What do you think made you think/feel this way?" "What in the text do you respond to?"

Third, Rosenblatt, differentiates between a reader's evocation of the work and his interpretation of that evocation. Rosenblatt uses the term evocation to refer to the lived-through process of building up the work under the guidance of the text. Interpretation involves primarily an effort to describe, in some way, the nature of the lived through evocation of the work.

Perhaps another way of looking at this distinction is to compare what can be called the 'process' of responding, and the 'outcome' of that response. The process of responding concerns what is actually happening when we are reading. These natural, primary responses can never be fully known by another person, including the teacher. The considered, or what Patrick Dias (1988) calls the 'secondary responses' are stated after the process is over. These responses are usually revealed in speech, writing or drawing.
The Response Journal as a Medium for Interaction

It became clear to me when I began teaching my grade five class in September that I was going to investigate the use of reading response journals in my language arts program. Journals could be used as a method for developing a literature curriculum based on reader-response theory, since they seem to offer students an "active and concrete means of participating in the text" (Tashlik, 1987, p. 177).

A reading response journal (also called a literature log or a dialogue journal) is a convenient and flexible method in which students can reflect upon their personal responses to their independent reading or to books read aloud by the teacher. Usually kept as a separate notebook or folder, the journal is a medium for students to record their thoughts and feelings about what they are reading. It becomes a record of their personal reactions as authentic readers.

In the preface to The Journal Book, Toby Fulwiler (1987) asserts that "good" journals offer the students opportunities to use a variety of cognitive modes: observations, questions, speculation, self-awareness, digression, synthesis, revision, information. In my classroom, response journals provide a world of literary support: they help to connect reading and writing and promote critical thinking and affective response. I invite students to track their reactions during reading and not just at its completion, and encourage them to make connections to, and ask questions about, a text they have read.

Journal entries may be responses to the open-ended prompts I provide, or spontaneous comments about the impressions the reading has created. Entries may appear in point form, as questions, as lists, as illustrations, or more commonly as comments to the
teacher, often written in a letter format. Students are encouraged to write in their response journals regularly, and in the first stages of use, often rely on a special time set aside for writing journal entries. However, once they come to appreciate the journal's purposes, some students begin to make entries without instruction.

The reading response journal is a flexible tool for having students consider literature they have read since they can respond to a book in any way they choose, including speculations about how the story will develop, judgements or comparisons with their own experiences, reflections on incidents or themes in the book, comments on how the author is telling the story and notes about their own experiences as prompted by the book.

Over time, as the students become more familiar with the context of writing in response journals, their entries can begin to demonstrate the ability to make inferences, examine words and language patterns or comment on the author's style. Students can also choose to record what they like or dislike about a book, predict what they think might happen next in the story, question the story line, or register their approval or disapproval of the way a character thinks or acts. The author's description of a character, an object, or a scene, sometimes evokes a strong mental image, or may arouse strong feelings or memories. At times the text may remind students of other stories, films, or real-life experiences. When they choose to record these intertextual connections in their journals, they are reflecting not only on their own reading but on how the text applies to their own lives.

Writing in a journal can serve to persuade students that the search for meaning starts with their own feelings and experiences (Les Parsons, 1990). The context of the journal also helps to develop an awareness of how meaning is constructed during reading,
because it directs readers' attention to their thought processes, and reveals these processes on paper. Students become consciously aware of the fact that, when they read, they enter into a conversation with the text, or rather a conversation with themselves about the text - or perhaps both!

Michael Benton and Geoff Fox (1985) inform us that "Every reading of every reader is unique" (p. 16). Reading response journals respect the uniqueness of every reader's reading. The journal allows each student to grow at his/her own pace and, teachers who choose to use this resource recognize that, in a classroom community, students are at different levels in their development as readers.

Journals allow the teacher entry to the thoughts that the students have chosen to write about, and present opportunities for extending, enriching, clarifying and deepening those responses. D.W. Harding (1977) has pointed out research that confirms that most children during late childhood and early adolescence will read more books than at any other time during their school careers. Carefully organized programs to support individual reading seem a necessity. Journal writing is a vehicle for guiding the students into their own path of literacy growth.

Journals can help build a feeling of security between teacher and student, since they allow a student to see that what he/she has to say is worth expressing. Journals can give the student the opportunity and the courage to approach literature personally, to let it mean something directly.

At best the responses afford a privileged glance into the mind allowing the teacher to understand the aspects of the student's thought and personality that might not
surface another way. Revealing or not, the response should indicate clearly to the students that their feelings and thoughts are important to the classroom.

Probst, 1988, p. 53

Teacher-researchers who have incorporated response journals into their literature curriculum validate journals as a powerful medium for learning. Pierpont (1990) concluded that the more opportunities that the students have to read and to write about books, "the deeper their responses to literature will be and the likelier the chance that we will become partners in learning" (p. 105). Wollman-Bonilla (1989) writes that students' journal entries helped her know what the students understood, how they were learning and how they approached reading. According to Phyllis Tashlik (1987) "students' writing and testimonies show that literary journals tap the energy and excitement of the imagination and add a whole new dimension to what teachers think of reading and literary discourse" (p. 187).

Perhaps Nancie Atwell (1987) says it best when she writes:

Dialogue journals play an important role encouraging students to pull up their chairs - to become readers, enter into the world of written texts, and make it their own. They allow me to respond pointedly and personally, to what my students are doing. Dialogue journals allow me to teach every reader.

Atwell, 1987, p. 196

**A Personal Investigation of Response Journals**

With one year's prior experience of using journals in a junior classroom, I began with these assumptions about the use of journals: a journal can help students to discover and inspect their own thinking and reading processes; a journal can assist the
teacher in discovering and examining the students' individual strengths and weaknesses. Journals, I assumed, could be a significant medium for helping children to reflect on their developing life stories.

I had used journals in previous reading programs but I was dissatisfied with the way they functioned. The students did not seem to go beyond retellings of their reading and I knew that I could improve the depth and range of their responses by changing my practice. I recognized that if I were going to use them again, I would have to introduce procedures that would help me overcome the features that caused my dissatisfaction.

My reflections on past use of journals led to plans to set conditions for improvement. First, I felt uneasy with the stance I had taken in helping students understand that their thoughts and feelings were important. I knew that I had to improve my role as reading teacher to guide the students into more in-depth reading. I believed that I could have done a better job of conducting written conversations, or what Nancie Atwell (1987) called "dialogues" with the students.

Second, I knew that I had to spend more time to respond to the students' journals. In the past, I did not take enough initiative to receive and to answer the students' writing. I assumed, wrongly, that it would be sufficient to just have the students write in the journals and provide the time for this. I did not, however, interact enough with my students. I would only check the students' journals occasionally (and sporadically) and I felt that I wasn't fulfilling my responsibilities of teaching reading. Specifically, if I improved my role as a trusted audience, a skillful questioner and model reader, then perhaps the students would be more apt to take risks, venture ideas and make personal meanings. Finally, I needed to change some of the conditions for
using journals - a better system for having the students write in their journals consistently, and a conscientious system for responding to their writing. I needed to discuss, and be specific about, my expectations. I also needed to provide the students with models of what I considered to be worthwhile responses. These models could come from the members of the classroom, from samples I discovered in my readings, and from responses I had written. By paying attention to these conditions I assumed I could affect change in the quality of the students' responses.

My own research seemed to be the cause of this dissatisfaction. Reading about other practitioners who used journals made me better realize the potential of journals and challenged me to attempt to achieve this potential with my students. Also, the stuff of research forced me to reflect upon, to question and to challenge my practice. This too caused me to use journals in a more in-depth way than I had in the past.

By introducing reader response journals to my junior-level students, my intention was to discover what the students had to say, to explore what influenced their responses, to learn about ten and eleven year old students as readers and to help them learn about themselves as readers and writers. A more careful inspection of their entries would help me discover the impact of the conditions I had introduced.

As a teacher-researcher, who believed that the reader counts as much as the book or poem itself (Rosenblatt, 1976), I wanted to learn about my students as meaning makers from reading their journal entries. With a keen interest, with a need to change the way I had used journals in the past, with a good grasp of response theory, with careful planning and many questions, I felt prepared and eager to discover the relationship between the teacher, the text and the learner.
The Interaction between the Teacher and the Reader

Teachers can play a variety of roles in facilitating learning. In the classroom, learning can occur when a positive partnership exists between teacher and children. Of this partnership, David Booth (1994) writes:

An enabling and supportive teacher pays attention to individuals, offers help until they can proceed alone, encourages them to compete with themselves rather than with others, makes certain all are involved, explains and discusses classroom and school rules, listens with interest to their experiences, acknowledges their feelings, and creates an atmosphere in which it is safe for them to take risks... The goal is to build a curriculum that addresses both what each child wants and each child needs.

Booth, 1994, p. 24

Learning, however, does not always depend on teaching and can't be guaranteed, however positive the partnership with the teacher. Learning can also arise when a learner engages in meaningful transactions with new information or experiences and answers the questions that this information or experience poses.

In a reading program, teachers need to design classroom activities that provide students with opportunities for using various processes as they engage with print. Recognizing that readers bring their individual and personal concerns to interact with the text on all levels, the teacher's role is "to empower children to wander inside and around the selection, to wonder about it, to make meaningful connections, to deepen their picture of it" (Booth, 1994, p. 140). With the teacher as coach and guide, children can safely explore the text and relate the ideas they find in it to their own lives. Such transactions help our students to become effective readers. What this means in practice is...
engaging with learners in activities to which they are committed, observing what they can already do unaided; then providing assistance and guidance that helps them identify the nature of their problems and to find solutions that enable them to bring the activity to a completion.

Wells, 1999, p. 159

In a response-centred classroom the roles of the teacher and of the student take the form of a collaborative interaction where the teacher encourages students to work through their understandings on their own, but also assists them when necessary. In order to provide a community of learners with multiple opportunities to interact in a variety of ways leading to literate thinking, a teacher may assume various roles during interactions with students. Raphael and Hiebert (1996) distinguish four roles: (a) explicit instructor, (b) instructional scaffolder, (c) facilitator, and (d) participant.

When students write letters to the teacher, the teacher has the responsibility for being a trusted audience member who can stimulate and stretch their. Letters to the students should affirm, challenge or extend the readers' responses. The letters that Nancie Atwell (1998) receives from her students help her learn the value of inviting students to read as real readers do: to choose, skim, skip, abandon and reread. Atwell calls such correspondences 'first-draft chats'. These letters, teach her about her students' needs, concerns and tastes. Atwell says she needs to respond to what readers are trying to do "without coming across like a teacher's guide or a test: how I can affirm, challenge, gossip, joke, argue, suggest, recommend, instruct, tell stories and provide the information a reader needs" (p. 263).

In the early grades, children often work closely with the teacher as they learn strategies for predicting, comprehending, for using
graphophonemic knowledge and for making connections. By the junior grades, it is often assumed that children know how to read, and no longer need the same kind of direct instruction as younger children. While it may be the case that most children in higher elementary grades have gained a fair degree of control over their reading strategies, there is still a need for teachers to work alongside the student to attend to the text.

As a teacher-researcher, the knowledge I gained from others who have helped young learners interact with texts, led me to make plans to change my practice. I was ready to help students extend their interpretive abilities, their awareness of the nature of literature and how it works. I recognized that a reader's initial reaction to a text is the essential beginning of instruction. Since children often react in terms of their own experiences, I needed to begin instruction with the students' initial reactions and then take them further. By asking questions, supplying information, pointing out connections, telling anecdotes, sharing personal responses, I intended to guide the readers into an 'in-depth' (Huck, 1982) reading in order to interact with and respond to text. As an 'expert' reader, I could plan, structure and participate in specific experiences to help individuals grow as readers. As a teacher-researcher, I was ready to take action to achieve my goal.
Chapter III
Designing the Action Research Project

Planning the Project

The setting for the project was a self-contained classroom in an Ontario school, with a mixed group of twenty-eight grade five students encompassing a wide range of abilities. There was an equal mix of boys and girls in the classroom. One half of the students were Caucasian and one half represented a number of cultures: Chinese, Japanese, Pakistani, Sikh, Urdu and Jamaican. Only one student was withdrawn daily for ESL instruction. The school was a lower to middle-class suburban neighbourhood. Half of the class walked to homes nearby and one half were bussed in from homes and apartment buildings.

The core of my daily reading program was twofold: 1) a read-aloud time when the students gathered on the rug to listen to the reading of a picture book, a short story, or an excerpt from a novel (Each day without fail, we would also read at least one poem together); 2) an independent reading time, when the students were allowed to choose to read a book from home, from the public or school library and, in particular, from a large classroom collection of novels, picture books and poetry anthologies.

On the first morning of school in September, I gave each of my students a yellow notebook and told them to label it their Response Journal. I explained to them that this journal would be used to record any of their thoughts and reactions to the books they would be meeting over the year. (Response journals can be extended to include reactions to classroom discussions, current events, television programs, films, video and theatre
presentations but, for my purposes, I was particularly concerned about response to reading.)

I invited the students to record in their journals thoughts and reflections about the books they would be reading. Keeping in mind what Aidan Chambers (1985, pp. 168-173) calls the "Tell me" Framework, I encouraged the students to use their journals to "tell me" what they liked, what they didn't like, what they wondered about, what they were puzzled by, and what they were reminded of, as they encountered literature from day to day. In addition, I explained to the students that they might want to record any words, sentences or passages that appealed to them, they might raise questions and hunches about what they read and they might want to discuss any connections between the texts and their own lives. Using Nancie Atwell's (1987) model of using Dialogue Journals, I suggested that the students set up their reading journals as a series of letters sent to me, so that they would feel that they had an actual audience for their written thoughts about books.

From the beginning of the term, times were assigned when students would write in their journals. This was usually done immediately after a silent reading period of approximately twenty minutes and the routine was scheduled two, or sometimes three, times in a five-day cycle. I had hoped that, as the weeks went by, the students would take the initiative to write in their journals on their own but, for the most part, the students seemed to require a set time for the activity and, as I came to discover, they usually required a set of prompts or focus questions to assist them in their writing.

At times, I would confer with students as they wrote in their journals. Some students approached me with their journals asking me to read certain entries. Each student's journal was collected
at regular intervals so that I could offer comments and questions and write a letter back as a response to the student's entry.

Professional reading and one year's experience with reading response journals in the classroom helped to refine my research goals. I drew up a list of 100 questions, (see: Appendix B), that concerned me about the function of journals. By grouping the questions together, I arrived at the following three sets of issues to investigate:

I. **Content:**
What would the students choose to write about? Would they write about their own experiences? Would they comment on the behaviour of the characters? Would they comment on what they liked or disliked about a book? Would they write about what was happening in their minds as they read?

II. **Process:**
How often would the students use the journals? Would they write in their journals unprompted? Would they write in point form? How long would their entries be? Would they write in their journals both at school and at home?

III. **Dialogue:**
Would they respond to the letters I wrote to them? Would they see me as a trusted audience? Would they see the journals as "penalty-free"? Would they ask me questions or seek clarification or information about a book? Would they see the intervention as useful?

By observing and reflecting on the pedagogy of using journals, I hoped to discover answers to some of these questions and then, through analysis, draw conclusions about students' interactions
with text so that I could determine which strategies and which contexts proved to be most significant in promoting response.

Observations

Responding to Books Read Independently

As I continued to read the students' journals regularly from September to December, I began to collect information and tried to make sense of it. The following are some observations that I noted about the use of reading response journals in the first term of my grade five program.

When it came time to write in their journals, many students often asked "What should we write today?" It seemed that the students regarded me as the authority figure who wanted them to write. They weren't quite ready to accept me as a trusted adult who wanted to read their entries, reply to them but not evaluate. Like Belanoff (1987), my basic purpose was to help the students "realize that whenever they read, they interpret; that, in fact, reading is interpretation" (p. 107). When I explained to the students that they could write whatever they wanted about the book, the way they felt about the book, or what they were reminded of as they read, most of them didn't seem to be reflective readers who could or would talk about what went on inside their heads as they read. To help them focus their responses, I began to assign open-ended prompts for my students to think and write about. A list of cues was copied for each student and this list (Table 1) was glued to the front of the journal. For those who said that they couldn't think what to write about, I would remind them of the list and invite them to contemplate focusing on one or more of these questions to serve as prompts for response.
4. What did you like about the book?
5. What did you dislike about the book?
6. What puzzles or questions do you have about the book?
7. As you read the book, did you "see" the story in your mind?
8. What problem(s) emerged in the book?
9. What words, phrases or sentences had an impact on you?
10. What interests you about the character(s) in the book?
11. What advice might you give to a book's character?
12. What advice might you give the author?
13. Have you or someone you know experienced an event similar to one that took place in the book?
14. What did the book make you think about?
15. What would you tell your friends about this book?

At the beginning of the term, despite the cues that I suggested, the students seldom ventured far from summarizing the plot:

I have read another chapter of The Borrowers and Mandy's mother almost dies while having the baby. So now Mandy has to quit school and take care of her mother and baby brother. Mandy has to clean, cook and make dinner. In the book Mandy said it's hard work but she can handle it.

(Miranda)

In this book its about a boy who comes from Washington D.C. to a new school and he meets a boy called Bradley and everybody does not like Bradley at all.

(Cindy)

When asked to talk about their reactions to a book, the students might say "this is a really good book" or "I like it because it's
funny." I attempted to stretch their thinking by asking them, in a reading conference, what it was about the book that appealed to them, or how they thought the author made the book funny, suspenseful, sad, or whatever, but many, like Ryan, wrote "I don't' know why I liked it. I just did."

During September and October, for the most part, the students continued to retell the bits of the story that they had just finished reading. As a result of my invitation to the students to be more specific and explain what they liked or disliked about the text, a few began to offer their opinions and share their feelings:

I chose The Boy Who Wanted a Family because it makes you think why can't god give everybody a place to live. That is why I chose this because: I want to see how it felt to want a family. I like books that tells about some things that's really going on in the world today. If I was the kind I would think I'm a unwanted foster kid feeling unloved.

(Shannon)

I am enjoying the part when they were journeying to Bridgeport. This taught me how somebody would feel it their mother just walked away without a goodbye. Because I would be so so so so so so so sad.

(Christi)

I am enjoying Park's Quest. I think Park's mom should tell Park about his father. I think he should try and find some relative other than his mom. He should look for his fathers father or I mean his grandpa. His mom should be more open with him because Park should know what his dad was like before he became a name on the wall.

(Janine)
Although encouraged to discuss how they saw themselves as readers, very few students were able to comment on their reading behaviours as Shawn and Liza have done:

I am not that big of a reader but on the other hand I like books. When I was in Grades 1 - 3 I used to hate books. Then I discovered the joy of books. I think of some people who can't read so I want to read when I grow up.

(Shawn)

I love reading and I always will. When I was in grade 1 and 2 I didn't know how to read but in grade 3, 4 and 5 I learned how to read. Thank you, Mr. Swartz. Last year I read 30 or 40 books. This year I want to read 140 books. Mr. Swartz you were the one who helped me read and so did Johanna and Laurie. Think if it wasn't for you and my mom and dad I would not be in grade 5.

(Liza)

When I responded with comments, opinions and questions, the students (unlike those described in Nancie Atwell's research) were generally reluctant to "dialogue" back. Many times my responses would be much longer than theirs. The students didn't seem to answer my questions. Seldom did they respond to my comments. Nevertheless, at times, I observed that they were aware of me as audience.

Mr. Swartz do you think the world was more safe when you were little or when we were little?

(Heidi)

Last time you asked me if I want to go to the future. Yes, I would really want to go for two weeks. P.S. Thank you for introducing me to the book The White Mountains and finding the sequel The City of Gold and Lead for me.

(Sunny)
Yes, I do like sports Mr. Swartz. I think Matt Christopher books are popular. I don't think girls would read them I also like to read books by different authors.

(Harveen)

Mr. Swartz, sometimes I have a picture in my mind from the story you are reading. I have read the fantasy books *Phantom of Fear, Portal of Evil* and *Vault of the Vampire*. I would like you to recommend some more books.

(Robbie)

Mr. Swartz, what is your favourite books these days?

(Lisa)

Often I encouraged the students to consider what they were reminded of as they read the books. These entries were the ones I particularly looked forward to reading in order to discover the intertextual connections:

Here is something I thought about when I read *Dominic* today. It reminded me of Abel's Island because Dominic had to survive to meet his fortune.

(Alan)

*Where the Red Fern Grows* made me think about....

1) how a dog is man's best friend
2) how love can be precious
3) how there is always hope for love between friends
4) how hope can provide love
5) how hope can turn into true love

(Sunil)

I like *Tucker's Countryside* because it's about friends and it reminded me of Johanna and Laurie from last year because they were there when I needed someone just like Tucker and Harry and Chester.

(Liza)
When I read *Abel's Island* it reminded me of a dream I had when I was trapped on a island and there was no but some how I think I found a way but then I woke up, or it reminded me of Tom Sawyer when him and his friend took a raft and went to a island.

(Greg)

Sometimes I would encounter journal entries that weren't about books. Students might share a reaction or a feeling about something that was going on in the class that they wanted me to be aware of:

Do you know what's going on? Christi and Charleen are fighting non-stop. First they like each other and then they don't - it's driving me crazy. Next time we change seats can I sit next to Liza?

(Heidi)

Why do you always pick on me Mr. Swartz? When I'm on the carpet and someone else is doing something to me you always pick out my name. And when we're doing math and you don't come to my end and tell me if that's right or wrong and you say it to other people. And I hate that!

(Georgette)

Occasionally, I came upon some surprises in the journal entries that stimulated me to think about my practice:

Mr. Swartz, I just got a great idea from a book I read. In this book the girls form a book club. Do you think we could form a book club in our class?

(Janine)

I am not in the reading spirit today. Do I have to read just because it's silent reading time?

(Ricky)
But it was Robbie's honest entry that most challenged me to reconsider my rationale for using journals:

I do not understand why we do journals. It does not help me. I am doing better this year with the reading program. I like having adventure. I like reading short parts at a time. I have completed six novels. I enjoy listening to you read.

(Robbie)

I was operating on the assumption that the students would come to understand how journal could function to help them become reflective readers. Perhaps it was an inappropriate assumption because it seemed that the students weren't doing the journals for themselves but for me, the teacher. Robbie's entry - a surprise - challenged me to consider the part that the children were playing in the research. Perhaps Robbie was speaking for a number of others in the class when he stated that he didn't understand why we had journals. His comment prompted me to consider not only how to invite the children to share in the learning with me but to help them discover the potential of learning for themselves.

Responding to Books Read Aloud

I read aloud to my students daily. I have set a priority in my program to read aloud picture books, poems, and novels to the class because I believe that people who are read to are more apt to enjoy reading and perhaps becoming life-long readers. Les Parsons (1990) offers the following rationale for having students listen to stories:

When we listen to someone read aloud, our minds can be activated on a variety of levels. As we listen, we often jump quickly from idea to idea, image to image and memory to memory. Sometimes, whatever we're thinking has been clearly stimulated by the reading. At other times,
the link between what we're thinking and what we're listening to isn't immediately apparent.

Parsons, 1990, p. 16

In my investigation with response journals I was open to finding alternate routes to having the students contemplate what they thought about when they read. I decided to focus on having the children respond to books that they listened to together.

As I read aloud the novel *Tuck Everlasting* by Natalie Babbitt (1975), I decided that I would ask for a written response from time to time, when I had a specific reason for doing so. Sometimes a small group discussion stimulated an invitation to the students to track their thinking by writing in their journals. At other times, as I read the book aloud, questions would come to my mind about the situations, behaviours, dilemmas or themes presented by the author and I made a conscious decision to have the students contemplate these elements of the text by assigning specific cues to write about. As we continued to experience the story of the Tuck family who had discovered spring water that made them live forever, I offered the students focus questions from time to time to guide their responses. Usually a class discussion preceded writing time. For example, one day I finished a mini-lesson on suspense and sent the students to their desks with this prompt: *What questions are you wondering about that you hope will be answered as we continue to read the story?*

- Is Mae Tuck always going to carry the music box
- Why would it be a disaster if people discovered the spring?
- Why won't the Tucks tell anyone about the water?
- Will Winnie run away and where will she go?
- What would Man in the yellow suit kidnap Winnie?

(Laurie)
A few days later, I had the students predict how they thought the plot might develop:

I think that Winnie Foster is going to drink the water. But she is not going to tell her mother, her grandmother or anyone else anyone in town. I also think someone else is going to find the spring and that would be a disaster.

(Jamie)

I think that Winnie is going to run away from Mae Tuck and drink the water and give some to her family so that they can live forever. And she will go to the village and give some to the people and when the babies are born she will give some to them and when they get babies she will give some to their babies and that will keep going on and on and on and on. That's what will happen.

(Sunil)

As we were completing the novel, I decided to have the students tap into the images, feelings or memories that were aroused as they listened to the story. I asked the students to complete the following sentence in their journals: Here's what I thought while Mr. Swartz read today...

I thought of me drinking the spring water and what it would be like. I also thought what it would be like if we had the spring water here in Canada. I thought of me if I was in Winnie's place.

(James)

I thought that Mr. Swartz is a good reader. I think that this novel is a bit boring. The only thing I like is if Winnie Foster is going to run away. I thought that when the man said he was 17 when he looked like he was 70. I think that when I picture it in my head, it seems a bit spooky.

(Christi)
A final journal entry had the students reflect on the novel as a whole to have them consider their understanding and enjoyment of the story. The students were prompted to consider whether they were surprised or disappointed by the ending and to consider how the author Natalie Babbitt kept them interested in the novel.

Tuck Everlasting was an excellent book!!!!. I really liked how Natalie Babbitt writes the words. I like the part where Mae Tuck shot the man in the yellow suit in the skull because it was an exciting part. The part that I thought was said was when we found out Winnie died. I hope Mr. Swartz read another Natalie Babbitt book to us. I was thinking of if I live forever how would it be.

(Laurie)

I am not interested in Tuck Everlasting. I don't know why. It is not the type of book I like. I think that this book is meant for older grades because I don't understand it.

(Natalie)

I thought that the story was going to end different. And I think when I am wrong it is better. My ending was about that the Tucks were going to try and kill Winnie but she drank the spring so they couldn't kill her.

(Trevor)

During this phase of my inquiry, I was deliberately asking the students to respond to certain aspects of the work: the motivation of the characters, the conflict between the two characters, the dilemmas posed by the situation, as well as exploring inferential and critical comprehension skills. The questions were offered to help the readers focus on their experience of the text, hopefully leading the students to understand and appreciate that experience by considering the way the author wrote the story.

Whenever a text is experienced as a community, each listener creates his own story in his own head. When time is taken to
discuss the book with the whole group, an opportunity is given for individuals to reveal personal meaning and perhaps develop some shared meanings. Working forward from the ideas students bring to discuss, the teacher can guide students to think about a text in a way that takes into account conventional as well as personal interpretations. As students listen to a novel together they can grow in their understanding of the text when individual responses are discussed or when individual responses are written and then shared. However, in the large group setting, many students might not feel as willing to put their thoughts forward as they would in a small group situations, and I was determined to further investigate this context in the future.

**Responding in Role: Fictional Journal Entries**

As my inquiry into journals developed, I wasn't comfortable with the way in which I was helping the students move inside the text. My observations led me to believe that students needed stimulation, guidance and support to better meet the potential inherent in journals.

To deepen their responses, I came to realize that students often needed sample questions or instructions to cue their efforts (e.g. "As you read the novel, did you "see" the story in your mind?" "Have you or someone you know experienced a similar event to one that took place in the novel?" "What advice might you give the author?"). In particular, I felt that my suggestion that they respond in role as a character they encountered in a book would offer a significant context for transactions not only between reader and author but between reader and character.

In her article "I Hear Voices: The Text, The Journal and Me", Phyllis Tashlik (1987) describes an investigation with fictional
journals with her secondary school English students. During the study of Arthur Miller's play The Crucible, the students were instructed to invent a character who would have lived through the events of Salem's 1592 witch hunt and write a series of journal entries from the character's point of view. An evaluation of the experience revealed that twice as many students enjoyed the fictional journals as enjoyed the reader-response journals. Tashlik said that what the students enjoyed most about the exercise was "that they were actively creating something they could identify as a new text; they transformed into written language the mental activity of creating a text that occurs whenever we are reading" (p. 176).

Jack Thomson (1987) argues that "the literary experiences which will be most valuable to our students (as they are to us) will be those in which they are both spectators and participants. They will be spectators of authors' representations of the possibilities of life, and they will be participants in the act of reading" (p. 4). In-role journal writing could empower the students to write about the text as if they had somehow participated in the action. In this way journals could better serve as a medium for this spectator/participant role.

Lesson #1: A Novel Read Aloud

The students' first experiences with writing in the role of a fictional character grew in response to a novel that was read aloud to the whole class. After reading aloud a chapter in the middle of the novel Abel's Island by William Steig (1976), I asked the students to imagine that they were the character Abel who had been stranded on the island and who was struggling to survive from day to day. I asked the students to consider what Abel might write to his wife Amanda to explain what was happening to him and how he
felt about the experience. The following three letters demonstrate how the students were beginning to empathize with the character's dilemma by writing in role as Abel:

Dear Amanda,

Hi Sweetheart. This is Abel. I'm on the island across the water. I miss you sooo much. I love you. If we were on this island together it would be a lot better. Ever since I came over here I've gotten to know myself a lot better. Being alone does that to you. I know that deep down I'm able to do anything I try hard at. I think my name finally suits me because I'm "able" to do more things.

Love, Abel

(Joanna)

Dear Amanda,

I hope I get across this island or I hope you find me. If you don't, look up in the sky on a clear night and you'll see a bright star. I'll be looking at the same star. When you look at the star, remember me because I am always remembering you and hurt so much without you by my side.

Love, Abel

(Carson)

Dear Amanda,

I'm stuck on this island near the east side. I could be home sitting down, eating some cheese and crackers, drinking some cocoa and even watching my favourite TV show. If I wasn't here I would be sitting on the couch with you on my lap filling me with warm kisses. If you would have tied your scarf on tight I wouldn't be here. If anything happens, I will write you.

Yours truly

Abel, the one and only

(Natalie)
These sample entries reveal that students were able to write in the first person, imagine themselves as another (i.e. Abel) and enter into the problems and conflicts invented by the author, William Steig. With these initial attempts to write in role, students still recalled plot details (I'm stuck on this island on the east side), but they were apt to be more inventive (I could be home sitting down, eating some cheese and crackers, drinking some cocoa milk and watching my favourite TV show), make inferences (I think my name finally suits me because I am "able" to do more things), empathize (I hurt so much without you by my side), and be reflective (I've gotten to know myself a bit better. Being alone does that to you.)

With each student role playing that he/she was on the island setting, the students could better understand the isolation and desperation of the character in the story. Each entry in the class demonstrated the varied responses that were initiated after listening to the same story. Each entry was a document of personal meaning that was brought to and taken from the story, and the journals were better serving my original intention as a medium for transaction.

**Lesson #2: Individualized Reading**

For a second experience with journal entries in role, I invited the students to imagine that a character in the books they were reading independently, kept a diary. The students were asked to write a diary entry in role describing some of the problems and feelings that this character experienced. The following are some samples:

(In response to the novel *George's Marvelous Medicine* by Roald Dahl)
Dear Diary,

Today my grandma was pestering me, so I decided to make a medicine to stop her from bossing me around. I have a big pot of some stuff. I hope my medicine will work. I hate my grandma. She said I haft make tea for her - or else!

From George
(Ryan)

(In response to the novel Tight End by Matt Christopher)

Dear Diary,

The past few weeks since my dad has come home from prison have been awful. Someone has been making phone calls to me and drew a bad picture of me playing football. I am trying to play good football but my mind is always on something else. I hope my father finds a job.

Jim
(Ameet)

These in-role entries give further evidence that the students were able to enter into the world of story, imagine themselves as other people, begin to enter into their problems, come to think their thoughts and behave as if they were another person. The fictional character created by an author is made all the more real for the students as they take on a new perspective.

Any earlier concerns I had about the students not commenting on the attitudes and behaviours of the characters were reduced. By writing as the character, students seemed better able to imagine how the character thought and felt. Writing in role helped the students adopt a new set of attitudes and feelings. Once a student lays pen to paper in the role of another, they are creating a fiction for themselves, but always they are keeping their own
attitudes and feelings in mind. In this way, writing in role in their journals was giving form to their feeling as they responded to literature. By moving into role, I felt the students were gaining confidence as readers and learning that their ideas mattered and were important.

Katherine Paterson (1989) informs us that "a book is a cooperative venture. The writer can write the story down, but the book will never be complete until a reader of whatever age takes that book and brings to it his own story" (p. 37). Like Louise Rosenblatt's transactional theory, the author Paterson makes a plea for respecting the reader in the text.

Writing a journal entry from a character's perspective enables each reader to have a conversation with the text, thus giving him/her as much responsibility as the author in the making of meaning. One of Phyllis Tashlik's (1987) students might be speaking for many students who write in the world of pretend when he stated that fiction writing made him "feel like I've taken a part in writing the play (The Crucible) which helps me understand it because I feel I collaborated with the author" (p. 176).

The inquiry into in-role journals helped give evidence that once the setting of a story and the problems of a character are grasped, the students can adopt the imagined perspective, writing 'as if' another. When students write from the point of view of a person created by an author, they are provided with a context for transaction not only between reader and text but a transaction between self and other. From a drama perspective students explore a different set of attitudes or a new light is cast. From a reading perspective, students are given an authentic context for empathizing with a character, hence moving into a deeper level of comprehension that promotes empathy, inference and analysis. If a book is "a cooperative venture" (Paterson, 1989), then writing
fictional entries provides a context and the reader becomes a writer within the construct. Writing in role as a character, therefore, serves as an important medium for respecting the uniqueness of every reader's reading.

**Reflecting upon the Project in Action**

Examining the 28 journals from my classroom helped me to better understand the way in which the journals functioned. It seemed that students seldom wrote spontaneously in their journals without having structured class time to do so. I noticed that most students needed a prompt, or suggested questions, or a mini-conference before they would write an entry. I also observed that, as the students continued to write in their journals during the term, entries seemed to increase in length, and that in the later part of the term, they were beginning to write more and more about episodes from their own lives that were stimulated by the text.

These observations suggest that students need a substantial amount of experience of talking and writing about literature in order to gain confidence in themselves and to learn that their ideas matter (Pierpont, 1990). I felt strongly that each entry revealed something about the student as writer and reader but I was frustrated by what I will call the "ordinary" responses that the students were giving unless I gave them directions for their entries. I wanted to be sure students realize that I am not just asking them to retell the story, but like Joanne Hindley (1996), I wanted them "to think 'off of it'" to contemplate the images, memories, and puzzles that were conjured up by a line or a word, even though they may not be sure why something seemed to pop into their heads. The students seemed to need encouragement to allow themselves to be surprised and to realize there is no right answer.
For the most part, the students were at the first stage of response, which Jack Thomson (1987) calls 'unreflective interest in action'. I decided to seek a different direction by putting some pressure on the students to think and formulate their reactions to what they have read and move them to deeper levels of response, which, according to Thomson's framework, (see: Appendix C), involves empathizing, analogizing, reflecting on the significance of events and behaviour, reviewing the whole work as the author's creation, and understanding self and one's own reading processes (Thomson, 1987, p. 360). In order for the journals to work more successfully, I realized that support and pressure were required to further enrich intrapersonal interpretations.

Since writing these types of responses was a new way for most of my grade five students to interact with literature, they needed help getting started with this new type of exploratory writing. Although the theory and goals of using journals was shared with the students, and although they were invited to freely choose what to write, many were rather tentative about having me as a trusted reader: they tended to see the function of reading as matching a prescribed set of answers someone else knows to a prescribed set of questions someone else devises. The students had little experience of articulating their thoughts about books and about the process of reading. These observations helped me to become aware of the discrepancy between what I thought was occurring and my students' perceptions of what was happening.

Throughout my inquiry, I was keeping my own journal in order to reflect upon my teaching practices during the year. The following excerpts reveal some of the concerns that arose about reading response journals, and helped move me into another phase of my
investigation. For each entry a focus question emerged, each question pushing me further into contemplating my practice.

**Reflection No. 1:** What is the role of talk?

September 20

During this week's seminar discussion at OISE/UT, Tamara questioned me about the difference between oral and written responses. Since the role of "Talk for Learning" was the issue tonight, I began to wonder about response through "Booktalk" (Chambers, 1985). Should I be conducting a comparative study exploring response dialogue a) on paper vs. b) out loud?

**Reflection No. 2:** Who are the journals for and who do the students think they are for?

September 25

Lois and I were sitting in the staff room talking about our day. Lois told me that one of her students felt that writing in his response journal interfered with his reading. He wanted to just enjoy his books and not take the time to write about them. Lois asked me for my opinion and I replied by asking her if she thought this student (and others) knew what the function of the response journal was. Did he understand why she was asking him to respond in his journal? What did he think he might learn by writing in his journal? What did she think he might learn by writing in his journal?

**Reflection No. 3:** What is my role in responding?

September 28

I received a stack of journals to 'mark'. I don't know what I thought I was going to do with them but I stayed at school tonight and spent time with these journals and this time matters. I have begun interacting with the children. A flaw in our use of journals in the previous year was that I didn't dialogue enough with the children. I looked at the pile on my desk and wondered: How long will I keep this up? Will all my responses be lengthy? How will I know whether my questions and comments are significant?
Reflection No. 4: Why aren't we dialoguing?

October 15

"Dialoguing" has been very limited, and I want to discover how we can have more conversations about books. I discovered that very few bothered to answer (my letters). They just continue to retell the story. I discussed my concerns with the kids and told them my expectations. Does it then become my agenda? What I've been considering, therefore, is: Do the kids understand what the journals are about? Do they know what a response journal is? Do they know what a response journal can be?

Reflection No. 5: Why do I want them to write in their journals?

October 26

The kids in the past two weeks have not used their journals much. The reason, of course, is that I didn't give them time in class to do them. It seems that they'll do them only when time is set aside. Few take the initiative to write in them on their own. So I'm wondering ... How can I get them to take the initiative? Why do I want them to write? Which brings up an interesting point - when I read I don't want to take the time to write about it. I just want to read. I think I need a good reason for wanting kids to write in their journals.

Reflection No. 6: What is the purpose of this research?

November 9

What learning do I want (expect) to happen? How am I going to achieve this goal?

Reflection No. 7: Why not talk instead of write?

November 10

I am more interested in booktalk than journal talk. I assume that the teacher can stretch the child by talking about the book and raising questions. The journals in my class don't seem to do this. For one thing, it's a matter of time. By the time they've read, written and I've answered, they are onto other parts of the book - other books. Talk is more immediate!
Reflection No. 8:  Do the students think the journals are useful?

November 20

Today Ricky said to me "Mr. Swartz, I've just read the saddest part in the book. I've got to have my journal". The journals are important!!

Reflection No. 9:  Why aren't we dialoguing?

November 27

7. Why aren't we dialoguing?
8. What is dialogue?
9. Why do I want them to dialogue?
10. How do I help them dialogue?
11. Do they understand what the function of a dialogue journal is?

Reflection No. 10:  They aren't 'dialogue' journals... are they?

December 2

I was looking at the entries that the teachers/researchers gave in their articles as examples of 'good' book talk in journals. What I discovered - and it was so obvious, I'm angry that I didn't recognize it earlier - is that in each of the examples in all of the articles (including Atwell's), there is only one piece of feedback given to a student's entry. The examples stop there. There are no further answers given by the students to the teacher's responses - THERE IS NO DIALOGUING!!!

You tell me something/I'll respond/and then what?... This is not dialogue, certainly not the kind of dialogue we can have in talk situations.

I'm wondering... what if I receive the journals more frequently, more immediately so that our exchange of responses is fresh. In a way I'm not blaming them for not dialoguing - especially if I'm taking too long to answer.
Reflection No. 11: Am I a trusted audience? listener? questioner? model?

December 8

Today the staff had a teleconference with Donald Graves. Graves said that the most significant step in helping the students become reflective readers/writers is when we show them our own reflective processes. This 'modelling' (of response) has more impact, he claims, than our teaching (of response).

Reflection No. 12: What should I be looking for in the journals?

December 10

I met with Gordon Wells today. He suggested that I might consider the most frequent categories that appear in their journals; which are unique to certain students; what are the surprises. He also asked me: "What do I think about the fact that book talk is different than written 'talk'?'"

Reflection No. 13: How can I teach them to be reflective?

January 7

New questions (after reading Calkins' Living Between the Lines): How do reading journals help students reflect upon their lives? How can I prompt them to reveal the things that the text reminds them of?

Reflection No. 14: What if nobody responds to their journals?

January 11

Some kids were actually disappointed that I didn't answer back in their journals quickly. How often am I expected to respond? Is my response necessary? (YES!) I have to consider the best system to handle the marking.

Funny, I still say I'm going to 'mark' their journals. Why do I say 'mark', when no marks are given? Do they see it as marking?
Reflection No. 15:  *Should I keep using journals?*

January 15

Beginning the new term is a convenient opportunity for developing and deepening (changing?) our work with journals. The kids have to be part of this research with me...understand why I might make changes, and what we might learn together.

As the above reflections indicate, many challenges confronted me as I continued to raise questions and contemplate alternative plans for my program. My own journal enabled me to consider and reconsider how I might best implement journals and why I was using them as a vehicle for response to literature. These entries, (and others), helped me to assess what was taking place in my classroom. Moreover, they also revealed the doubts and questions I had and led me to a more careful inspection of critical incidents in our journal journey.
Chapter IV.  
Challenging the Project in Action

Critical Incidents

Critical incidents are those occurrences that let us see with new eyes some aspect of what we do. They make us aware of the beliefs and assumptions that underlie our instructional practices.

Newman, 1990, p. 17

Since the beginning of the school year, I had begun collecting and sharing stories which contributed to my understanding of reading and response. Sometimes the incidents have confirmed what I believed, but more often I have been challenged to reappraise my assumptions. What these critical incidents have revealed is a gap between what I believed about response and what my actions were conveying.

There have been several surprises that come to mind, all of them providing opportunities for learning: a comment made in a staff room, a statement found in a journal, a question by a student, a parent, the principal, or something that I read. Experiences with specific poems and stories either validated my assumptions, allowed me to disagree, or bothered me with some practice and I had to reconsider my beliefs about reading and response.

In particular, three events with response ultimately led to further change in my practice. A storytelling experience with the memoir picture book July by James Stevenson (1989) prompted me to think about planning for opportunities so that the children, as Lucy Calkins (1991) has written, "bring the work of their lives to school with heart and soul" (p. 304). Written responses to the poem "When it is Snowing" by Siv Cedering caused me to think about planning for better talk experiences. A talk experience with Brian
Patten's poem "There Was Once A Whole World in the Scarecrow", (see: Appendix D), helped me to consider planning for better collaborative discussions. These three critical incidents that I will describe provoked a closer inspection of my beliefs and goals and subsequently formed the impetus for change. Writing about them forced me to engage in analysis in order to come to a closer understanding of the role of response in my program.

**Directed Response Activity: From Talk to Writing**

James Stevenson's (1989) *July* is a prime example of memoir writing. It therefore seemed a perfect vehicle for stimulating personal narrative in the classroom. In his picture book, the author-illustrator recalls moments and memories of his youth, "when each month was like a glacier slowly melting". The author recounts stories of summer months visiting Grandma and Grandpa, spending time with friends, and playing on the beach:

> Grandma loved to laugh. She was kind too. At night she locked all the doors, except one. "In case anybody needs to get in," she said.

> I never did get to the top of the Moffat's windmill. Either I got caught near the bottom, or I got halfway up, got scared, and came down.

The following stories are samples from a grade two class that I worked with three periods per week. These reminiscences were written after the children listened to *July* and after they discussed some memories stimulated by the book.

> When I was seven my dad and me went to the skydome, to see the Blue Jays vs the Brewers. We had a big mac at
the skydome. I was happy because Blue Jays won. We ate popcorn. But...the best thing I liked was my dad going with me.

(Jeffrey)

I remember once when we went to wonderland I think my mom went on this thing. It was a big toob with water in it I liked it but my mom didn't She was skared. When she went on it she closed her eyes and at the ending she was still screaming. We were wondering what she was doing. Finally she opened her eyes and it stoped and then we all laughed.

(Samuel)

In 1990 I got a new cam corder. It was a srprise for me and my GRANDMA! We tapte things. My sister's birthday party and me oping Christmas presents! Now I can go see my grandma when ever I want too on video.

(Erica)

When I was five, I went camping. I remember I put mushmellows in a pan. When it is all melted, I put it in a cup and drank it. I drink mushmellows and there is a kind of taste that I hate. So I change my mind. I camp with a rich kid called Eva Ho. She is the coolest kid in the whole class in Hong Kong.

(Karen)

When I was 6 I went swimming. I remember when I drowned.

(Jonilee)

In these written pieces, the students are recalling incidents from their young lives. For Jeffrey, a visit to the ball game was an enjoyable summer experience, but he goes further to tell about his relationship with his father. Just as Stevenson described his fear of climbing the Moffat Tower, Samuel recalls a time when his mother was frightened by a ride at Canada's Wonderland. Erica talks about her grandmother, writing the word 'GRANDMA' in large letters, because James Stevenson filled a page with the single
word 'JULY' in large, colourful letters. For Erica, her 'grandma' is just as important as Stevenson's 'JULY', so important that she loves preserving her times with grandma on videotape. In July, Stevenson compares those who like toasting marshmallows lightly to those who like them burnt black. Karen thinks back to a time she put melted marshmallows in a cup and drank them. But other narratives lurk in Karen's piece when she talks about a friendship with a rich girl when she lived in Hong Kong. Stevenson thought it was more fun swimming underwater than on top; Jonilee remembers a time when she 'drowned'. Her single statement recalls the episode but what Jonilee needs is an interested listener to question her and uncover the details of the event.

With July, the children listened to a story, told stories, and wrote stories. Not only is the integration of reading, writing, clarified by this event, but narrative was being nurtured in the classroom.

When storying becomes overt and is given expression in words, the resulting stories are one of the most effective ways of making one's own interpretation of events and ideas available to others. Through the exchange of stories, therefore, teachers and students can share their understandings of a topic and bring their mental models of the world into closer alignment.

Wells, 1986, p. 194

The success of the lesson with the primary class prompted me to implement similar strategies with my grade five students. One of my objectives was to promote the same type of narrative experience that I had developed with the grade two class, but a second, more significant objective was to use the experience to discover - and have the students discover - what happens in their minds as they engage with a text.
Before I read the picture book, I shared with the students some of the assumptions that I held about response. I explained that, because we are human beings, we cannot "not" respond to a story. "It is a fact of our psychological make-up," writes Aidan Chambers (1991), "that we cannot read anything without experiencing some kind of response (p. 23)". As we read or listen to a story, we are often reminded of incidents from our own lives, or from other real or imagined stories with which we are familiar. I had a hunch, I told them, that something was going on inside their heads when they listened to the stories, and I was interested in finding out what that "something" was. The way for me to discover their "inside thoughts and pictures" was to have them talk about them, write about them, or illustrate them. I invited the students into my research and asked them to share some of their thoughts during and after listening to July.

I asked the students to tell me what came to mind when they heard the word "July". The students brainstormed various ideas - "swimming", "summer", "my birthday", "America's birthday", "barbecues", "sweat", "lemonade", "cottages", "the beach", "free time", etc. I drew their attention to the fact that one word can inspire a range of stories, and told them that, together, we could discover a variety of stories we might think of as we listened to James Stevenson's stories.

After I read the story, the students shared some of their own experiences that were inspired by the picture book. In order to preserve these narrative experiences, the discussion was videotaped.

Miranda: I go to my Grandmother's trailer every summer.

Matthew: That reminds me of my aunt and two cousins going down to the beach to have marshmallows and hot chocolate and s'mores.
James: When we were at my Cub camp, I roasted a marshmallow and dropped it. I picked it up and later my dad ate it.

Ricky: I've got two stories. One is the boat. When me and my cousin went in a boat, a big boat, it had a thousand horse power or something and the other one was once I went down to the boardwalk and I was listening to the radio and they were playing the song "Down on the Boardwalk"

The discussion carried on for twenty minutes or so. Stories begat stories begat stories.

Cindy: You know the beach in Florida. We went there and I saw a killer whale.

Christi: When we went to New Zealand, a few hours after we came on the beach we saw a whale.

Janine: When we went to Barbados on vacation, we went fishing sort of and my cousin saw some fishees in the water and she got so excited she fell in the water and was splashing around...

Teacher: James, when she said that, I thought of your poem about your dead goldfish, because Janine said 'fishees' too.

Liza: That reminds me of seeing porpoises with my dad.

Georgette: When we went to the beach my uncle...well he was going to teach my aunt how to swim and my aunt said 'o.k'...I don't know which beach but it was far far away. He let her go and then she went sailing far far away and she started going like that and she was drowning and my uncle...he started running and my aunt was like yelling "Help! Help!" and me uncle, like he falls and he starts getting up to get her. Finally they grab her by the leg. That was the only part they could get hold of her. So they bring her to shore and she says "That was fun. Let's do it again!"
Teacher: When I think of your story, I remember the time I was in Alaska and I saw a man drown.

Students were then divided into small group clusters, where talk was more apt to happen. I explained that they might begin with an episode from July or they might think of something to tell as they listened to the stories from members of the group.

Christi told about the time she put ice cream in the goldfish bowl because she thought the fish were hungry. Greg recounted a skinny-dipping experience. Ricky remembered a cousin who had run away from home. Miranda then told about the time she got lost in a house because she locked herself in a closet and Sunil told about the time he got lost in a mall. He then went on to reveal a story about his two sisters, who had both died when he was younger.

To bring closure to the discussion, I asked the students why they thought they had told the stories and asked them to consider what they might learn from the experience. In the following conversation, Georgette, James, Greg, Liza, Christi and Janine articulate the essence of sharing memories:

Teacher: We've been sharing lots of stories for the last few minutes.... How come we're sharing these stories? Why are we doing that?

Georgette: It's our memories and thoughts that we thought about the book that we just read.

Teacher: Why are we talking about these stories? Where do they come from?

James: They're there to make people laugh.

Teacher: Sometimes laugh...Greg?

Greg: It was part of our life once.
Teacher: Why do these stories about fish, about drownings, about aunts and uncles come out in our discussion?

Christi: Because this is the time we're going to take them out of our mind...

Liza: ...sharing our life

Janine: Once somebody starts a story about fishing, we think of another one.

Teacher: Exactly! I hear the word 'drowning' and I think of a drowning story...and somebody thinks of another one.

After recess, the students were asked to choose one of the episodes that they had shared in the discussion, or another one that came to mind, and write a short personal narrative, as the author James Stevenson had done. Writing personal narratives calls for more than a report of the chronological details of an event; the significance of those events must be explored. Having the students write their stories would provide a means of recording what they had discovered through reading, talking and listening. I felt that the act of writing would help the students to consciously struggle with their thoughts and words and help them to reflect back on what they had said and what they had meant.

In this anecdote, Ricky talks about a time he went to the movies with his cousin but his yearning for a relationship also comes out in his memoir:

My cousin Keith and I went to see Rocky V. My cousin is 15 and when we got there I wasn't aloud to go see it. We went to see Quigley Down Under. Now I hardly see my cousin. Now my cousin has a job. He works at Macdonalds. I wish he had a day off on Saturdays. I really would want to see him alot now. He might have a day off and take me somewhere.
James Stevenson's *July* sparks Matthew to write about his love of California and the importance of family:

This story reminds me of going to California in June-July. California gives me chills. I once threw up because I was so excited. It gives me the best memories. I stopped at L.A.X. I turned on the radio and The Beach Boys were on. The palm trees were waving in the fresh Hollywood. My grandparents' house is the best. Meeting my family is the best feeling.

(Matthew)

Kuni, an E.S.L. student, talks about a lonely time for him. Maybe it was the friendship in Stevenson's story that stimulated this memory. It is interesting to note the way in which Kuni has written his reminiscence, choosing a form that is almost poetic and very much like the style found in the picture book. The anecdote was also the longest piece Kuni had written to date, and I believe that that was because he told the story first, before writing it:

```
I went to Briarwood
before I came to Queenston Drive
I did not have friends
at Briarwood
I felt badly.
I was a good soccer player
and that's how I got some friends.
```

(Kuni)

The lesson with the book *July* was a successful learning opportunity for both the students and myself. It seemed that the experience helped them reread their lives and bring forth a context for written and told stories. For me, the experience confirmed the hypothesis that, if a trusting atmosphere is
provided, students may reveal stories drawn from their own experiences. Storying in this way can be an important step to more differentiated modes of knowing.

In my work as a teacher, I value the role of story. However, it wasn't until I watched the students, listened to them, tape-recorded and videotaped them, and reflected on the stories that they told, that I came to recognize the beginnings of what David Booth (1990) calls a 'story tribe' emerging in the classroom. I wasn't surprised by the scores of stories that emerged from July. But I did wonder about how I might more effectively build a community of story and meaning makers. Writing in journals may not be the best medium for achieving this goal.

Then, in December, I read Lucy McCormick Calkins' (1991) text Living Between the Lines and was very much intrigued by Calkins' recent thinking about teaching reading and writing. For me, the heart of her research is found in the following quotation.

Teachers and children need to bring the great cargoes of our lives to school, because it is by reading and writing and storytelling and musing and painting and sharing that we human beings find meaning. When children bring the work of their lives to school, they will invest themselves heart and soul.

Calkins, 1991, p. 305

Because I respect the work of Calkins' and her Writing Project in New York, her book made me think more critically about reading and writing in my own program. I mention this reference because with their oral and written responses to July, I was able to witness the students unpacking the "cargoes" that Calkins writes about. Moreover, Calkins' writing seemed to reinforce some of the ideas that I was wrestling with: specifically, how could I provide more frequent opportunities for the students to discover and uncover their memories as a way of reading and writing the stories of
their lives? How could I change my classroom into a community through shared stories? How could I change journals into what Calkins calls "notebooks for living?"

Calkins (1991) writes:

Ramell and his classmates at P.S. 7 do not keep their reading logs separate from their notebooks. Instead, in their notebooks they move from recording cherished phrases from a book to commenting on their sister, from questioning why an author wrote a story to recalling a hurt dog they saw in the alley... This juxtaposition is a powerful brew - and a logical one. Writer Vicki Vinton, who supports this way of physically merging reading and writing, says "After all, the me who notices something at the Metropolitan Museum isn't any different from the me who notices something in a book or from the me who writes a story or teaches a class."

Calkins, 1991, p. 49

The underlining in the above quotation is my own. I have highlighted this passage in two colours in the text, I have xeroxed and glued it in my journal, and I have frequently quoted it to teachers in workshops that I have conducted. It is these words that challenged me to find a way of extending the journals beyond only responding to text, to a medium that could be used to have the children revisit, retell, relate, reflect, and respond to the "stuff of their lives" (Calkins, 1991).

Since I was contemplating some kind of change in my response program, the storytelling experience with July and my reading of the book Living Between the Lines were critical enough to have me further revise my teaching.
Directed Response Activity: From Writing to Talk

If children are to learn from a story, they must be able to express their individual personal concerns, ideas, and feelings about it, interacting with it on all levels. The teacher's role is to promote thoughtful story response, empower children to wander inside and outside and wonder about the story, making all kinds of meaning connection, deepening their private and public picture of the words. The classroom can be a place where children can safely explore those connections, with the teacher as a champion and lifeguard.

Barton; Booth, 1989, p. 20

One afternoon, I introduced Siv Cedering's poem, "When it is Snowing" to the students. This short poem seems to convey a definition of poetry that I once heard spoken by educator Georgia Heard at a conference: "A maximum thought with a minimum amount of words." I chose this poem because of the visual image it conveys, because I felt it was a good example of free verse, because we had already encountered a number of poems about birds, because the poem was accompanied by the poet's explanation of how she came to write it, and because I was confident that it would evoke a range of responses.

When it is snowing
the blue jay
is the only piece of
sky
in my
backyard.

Siv Cedering

After reading the poem aloud to the students, I had them copy it into their response journals. Next, I asked the students to
respond to the text by explaining whether they thought this was a poem or not. To help elaborate their responses, I suggested that they might discuss what the words made them think of, reminded them of, or how it made them feel. After the students made their entries, I asked them to discuss their responses with the others at their tables.

As I wandered about the room, it was interesting to hear Miranda argue that it was a poem, while the rest of her group said that it wasn't; to hear James puzzle over why the poet just talked about the blue jay as piece of sky when there are other birds that are pieces of the sky; and Liza who wondered about what else was happening as the blue jay landed in the backyard.

After this discussion, the students were then asked to revisit their journals, perhaps adding a new thought or question or clarifying their initial response. Finally, we had a whole class discussion, lured by the original question of whether this was or wasn't a poem.

Upon reflection, I have come to recognize our work with the sixteen words of this poem as a significant response activity in our classroom. Not only did the 'analysis' of the poem help the students to realize that there is no one way to respond to a poem, but the analysis of their responses allowed me to assess their responses through a developmental framework.

Using Jack Thomson’s "Development Model of Process Stages" (1981), I attempted to assess the students' process stages by fitting their written responses to the poem "When It Is snowing" into Thomson’s framework. The following chart (Table 2) outlines my analysis:
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>PROCESS STAGES</th>
<th>RESPONSE JOURNAL ENTRIES</th>
<th>STUDENT</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Kinds of Satisfaction</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. Unreflective Interest in Action</td>
<td>It is a poem because the blue jay is blue and so is the sky.</td>
<td>Alan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>I think that this poem's about nature. So does Janine.</td>
<td>Lisa</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>It is short.</td>
<td>Billy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Empathizing</td>
<td>This poem makes me feel like the blue jay on the fence looking at the snow on the ground.</td>
<td>Miranda</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Analogizing</td>
<td>It is a poem because how it is shaped when we done the other poem “The Minute Book.”</td>
<td>Jagpal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>We are a little piece of the earth and he is a little piece of the sky.</td>
<td>James</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>This poem reminds me of my cottage. There are blue jays and robins and the chipmunk family that lives under the deck. It made me think of how my grandpa got a blue jay to come and eat peanuts out of my hand.</td>
<td>Heidi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I Reflecting on significance of events</td>
<td>To me I would think it’s a miracle to see nature passing by. Why did the blue jay choose to go to that back yard?</td>
<td>Georgette</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### Table 2 (cont’d)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>PROCESS STAGES</th>
<th>RESPONSE JOURNAL ENTRIES</th>
<th>STUDENT</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Kinds of Satisfaction</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reflecting on significance of events (interrogating text)</td>
<td>What is taking place in the back yard?</td>
<td>Liza</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Some parts I don’t understand because other birds can also be a piece of sky.</td>
<td>James</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reflecting on significance of events (theme)</td>
<td>It makes me feel glad about birds. Because birds are the most colourful animals in the world. If we don’t have birds, they wouldn’t sing for anyone.</td>
<td>Ricky</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Reviewing whole works as author’s creation</td>
<td>I was thinking how she could have changed a paragraph into a poem.</td>
<td>Sunil</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>In my mind I picture a blue jay flying across a backyard of white snow with two gates and I picture a little house and someone looking out of the house watching a blue jay with his hand over his cheeks. And I picture a stream behind the gate. We all had different pictures in our heads.</td>
<td>Christi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Consciously considered relationship with text</td>
<td>I like this poem it's nice because it is so peaceful. I closed my eyes. I saw white snow.</td>
<td>Shannon</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Later in the day, I discussed the session with a colleague and this conversation forced me to articulate what I had done, how I had done it, and more important, why I had done it. That night, I also spent some time reflecting on the experience by writing about it in my journal. By contemplating the learning, I was trying to make sense of the response experience, seeking answers to my questions about the function of response journals, and raising new questions.

In my journal, I wrote:

Really, I think I should have given them more time to discuss in groups. They should talk about the poem before responding in writing. I should have planned the session more carefully thinking specifically about the moments of learning, and focusing on one event.

For me, this event, was the first real evidence of my reflecting critically on an issue that concerned me as a teacher of reading. It is in the following entry that I feel I have crossed the line from teacher to teacher-researcher:

'Should have's' don't matter - Don't think about you 'should have done' or 'could have done' or 'would have done' but what you will do differently as a result of observing and reflecting. Rather than whine, consider what you are learning, Larry.

Taking the time to analyze the responses through Thomson's framework confirmed a basic assumption that I held about the uniqueness of every reader. However, what remains "critical" rather than surprising is the questions I raised about the experience.

I was aware that this was very much a structured activity. I asked the question, and the students responded. If one of my goals were
to move students beyond the mere re-telling that they were apt to do in their journals, then this was enhanced with this short poem, as the students sharpened their own ways of responding to a text. On the one hand, the activity led the students to respond on their own terms and they were coming to know that I would accept each and every response. On the other hand, I was somewhat uncomfortable about the 'assignment' factor, because I felt that the students were answering my questions. These responses were the most stimulating I had come across in their journals to date, but I didn't want the journals to be a place for only answering the teacher's questions after reading a text, since I try to avoid having the students answering a list of comprehension questions after reading or listening to a story. It was unsettling when I realized that the most significant response activity happened with a strategy that I was trying to move away from. How could I change the way I used the response journals so that the students responded more spontaneously and as richly as they did with their writing about "When it is Snowing"?

In my lesson I allowed the students the opportunity to talk, but only after they had written first. Why didn't I let them talk at the beginning of the experience? Where was the element of collaborative meaning making? When I wandered around the room eavesdropping on conversations, I felt that deeper learning happened as the students described, questioned and argued over their own interpretations and the interpretations of others. How was I preparing them to see that others respond differently when I was asking them to write in a journal which is a private medium? What opportunities could I provide that would have the students make their thoughts more public with one another, and not just the teacher? Should they be writing letters to each other instead of the teacher? If I want them to talk their way through a text, why would I want them to write about it as well?
At the end of this poetry lesson, one student, Miranda, asked if we could experience a similar activity again. Maybe it was the poem that she had enjoyed, maybe it was the realization that her response was being welcomed along with the others in the class. I felt that Miranda was coming to recognize the potential that she had as a meaning-maker, and I hoped that she, along with her peers, would come to apply this to future readings - hopefully on their own.

This activity, I feel, was significant because it prompted me to change the way I was going to have the students use the journals in the future. Deliberating about how I was going to move toward change inspired further research. I knew that I would have other opportunities for challenging my assumptions, continuing to be a learner along with the students. "Teacher researchers are learners. They don't make a separation between those who 'know' and those who 'do'; they begin to trust their ability to find out" (Newman, 1987, p. 728).

The journal that I was writing allowed me to intentionally contemplate my work and for this phase of my research, I believe these reflections served to further improve my practice and increase my understanding of its theoretical underpinnin

I really am considering whether journals are serving my purposes. I think that the writing the students give me will give me better (more manageable) data but I think that talk will give the students more opportunities to share their thinking with others. I am the only audience for their journals, I think small group discussions will serve me better to build collaboration. I think that I should tape record some conversations and by transcribing their conversations I will have a different kind of data. I am curious: What kinds of things will they discuss? Will they build off each other's contributions?

With these concerns in mind, I planned a small group discussion that I hoped would help me find some answers to my questions.
Undirected Response Activity: Small Group Discussion

In a unit of study on environmental concerns, the students were presented with the poem "There Was Once a Whole World in the Scarecrow" by Brian Patten, (see: Appendix D), a poem that details how a farmer dismantled an old scarecrow. As he took away each part, he destroyed a creature's home until the field was empty and all the creatures, their world and the scarecrow, were gone. The students broke into groups of four or five to respond orally to the poem and then shared their ideas about this poem with the rest of the class before the end of the period. The following is from a transcript of one group's discussion.

Participants: Liza (L); Sunny (S); James (J); Heidi (H); Matthew (M).

1 T: Matthew, you say it's about the world. How do you think it's about the world?
2 M: Um... About it... like being gone, everything's going and like the world - everything's going.
3 H: Yeah - by pollution.
4 J: It's like um... the animals... like... like some parts are being demolished and put into apartments and houses and all that, so it's like the scarecrow being taken apart.
5 H: Maybe it's sort of like... the world... that's sort of like...
6 J: ... like the world's being taken apart!
7 H: And all the animals... and everything is gone.
8 S: And the scarecrow is their world.
9 H: And the animals...
10 S: That means like the humans have destroyed the earth.
Matthew begins the conversation by making an analogy between the scarecrow and the whole world. Sunny recognizes the farmer as representing all humans who might be destroying the Earth. Very quickly the group begins to relate the poem to their own experiences. At this point the discussion seems to help the students to look at the whole poem before breaking it down into little bits.

11 M: (reading) "The farmer dismantled the..."
12 S: ..."the old scarecrow."
13 M: ..."the old scarecrow."
14 S: He has taken it apart.
15 M: The straw is the only thing that is being blown away.
16 L: Yeah.
17 H: Yeah.
18 S: ... and the mouse once...
19 M: The scarecrow means life!
20 L: Yeah.
21 H: Yeah... the scarecrow means life and... the wind's taking the... well, we're sort of like the wind taking their homes and life.
22 S: Yeah... the straw's the life of the scarecrow.
23 H: 'Cause like in hunting season when they... when they shoot the animals, it's like they're taking their lives away.
24 L: So we're taking the scarecrow away.
25 M: We're taking advantage of it.
26 L: Yeah.
27 M: We're using it.
28 S: We're using it unwisely.
29 M: ...Use it wisely... (dramatically)
30 S: ... young man...
31 H: Use it while you can!
32 L: So, do you think that straw can be used for anything?
M: Straw heart?... (reading)... "a mouse once lived in the straw heart."

S: Why are you asking questions?

H: I don't know. She feels like it.

M: Just explain what you feel - no, you don't ask questions! (dramatically) How do you feel? (laughs)

H: (reading) "A mouse once lived in its straw heart." I never knew scarecrows had hearts. They don't have brains. They don't have hearts.

L: The world has a heart!

M: The wizard of...

L: The world has a heart!

S: Everything has a heart, Matt.

H: I don't understand it. It goes (reading) "now...now the field is empty." It's sort of like... the world is empty.

J: Yeah... but that will come really soon.

L: But that straw can make more hearts.

Liza, Sunny, James, Heidi and Matthew are engaging in a process of reaching a shared understanding. As they discuss the poem they are:

- describing: ("The straw is the only thing that is being blow away" [15])
- reasoning: ("So we're taking the scarecrow away [24]; "we're taking advantage of it" [25]).
- speculating: ("But the straw can make more hearts" [44]).
- questioning: ("So do you think the straw will be used for anything?" [32]).
- informing: ("Everything has a heart, Matt" [41]).
explaining: ("It goes "now... now the field is empty. It's sort of like... now the world is empty." [42]).

making analogies: ("the scarecrow means life and... the wind's taking the... well, we're sort of like the wind taking their homes and life" [21]).

When Matthew tells Liza "to explain what you feel!" (65), he is asking her to make her meaning clear to the group and thus invites her to share her feelings and reveal her thoughts. It seems that Matthew has understood the nature of the task that the group is involved with and is acting as a catalyst for promoting collaboration. "In sum, the need for mutual understanding in collaborative talk requires each participant to make his or her meaning clear to the other, and hence also to him or herself, with the result that thinking is made explicit and, thus, available for inspection" (Chang-Wells and Wells, 1992, p. 61).

Louise Rosenblatt (1976) states that a poem remains "merely inkspots on paper until a reader transforms them into a meaningful set of symbols" (1976, p. 2). For the poem to make sense it is important that a both a rational and feeling-based connection between the real world and the world created in the poem be made.

45 H: Come on you guys, you've got to get back to the topic of this poem...What did you say, Liza?

46 L: Well, um... the galaxy has a heart - it's the sun!

47 H: Yeah... I guess you're right sort of... in a way.

48 L: Because all the planets circulate the sun...

49 H: Like all our blood circulates around the heart...

50 L: ... and it goes 'poom'... and it goes out again... and 'poom'

51 H: ... and out again!
52 M: O.K.... Where are all the animals that are gone... that are going... that are going to be gone.
53 H: They're probably going to be gone.
54 M: I always... always had ... I have a feeling everyday that I'm about to die...
55 H: I don't! I have...
56 M: I'm walking down the street... I feel like I'm going to die.

Through talk, the group has moved inside the poem, discussing the dismantled scarecrow, the mouse in a straw heart, and the world that has disappeared. They have also gone beyond the words of the poem as they discussed the planets circulating the sun, the blood circulating the heart, and the extinction of animals. The atmosphere was supportive enough for Matthew, who had earlier felt a need to overdramatize, to reveal some real fears about dying.

In an article entitled "On a related matter: Why successful small group talk depends on not keeping to the point", Terry Phillips (1988) explains that when children are 'doing discussion' they are learning ways of knowing: "each discussion enables them to consider related matters, puts them nearer to a belief in knowledge as negotiable, ownable and exciting" (p. 81). While the students discussed the poem and matters related to the poem, Heidi remarked "Come on you guys, you've got to get back to the topic of this poem" (45). Though Heidi intended to focus the group's attention on the poem, it is also the "getting off the topic" that contributes to the learning that Phillips talks about. Given enough time, digression is likely to happen, should happen and must happen. As I listened to the tape I wasn't bothered that the students slid off the task of interpreting the poem. These wanderings are necessary surprises and need to be acknowledged and inspected.
As the students discussed "There Was Once a Whole World in the Scarecrow", they seemed to be looking carefully at what the poet was trying to say, how he was trying to say it, and they were making connections to their own lives and to their concerns with the environment. More significantly, the discussion demonstrated to the students that the poem might have several meanings depending on personal perspective, and that significant dialogue is one of the chief means we have of constructing meaning.

It is by accident, really, that I gave much attention to this sample conversation. I tape recorded this dialogue with the intention of assessing the students' responses, but it wasn't until a few weeks after the session that I slipped the tape into my car stereo. Only then did I play and replay the tape and listen carefully to the conversation. Further scrutiny was initiated when I decided to transcribe the tape and focus my attention on the words of the students, and the thoughts that were revealed. Many of their statements caught me by surprise, and through analysis, I was able to come closer to an understanding of poetry, response and discussion in the classroom.

This incident was critical because it lured me further into thinking about the role of talk in my classroom: Was I providing an atmosphere where everyone's views were listened to and respected? Was talk being overshadowed by reading and writing activities?

During the course of a week in a classroom, there are hundreds of conversations that take place. I cannot tape record all of the discussions that take place from day to day. However, what I could do, I realized, was to take a more fruitful role as a listener (at least more frequently than I thought I was doing) in order to tune in to the talk of individuals and the talk going on in my classroom.
Isolating and analyzing certain conversations such as this provide data that contribute to a change in my response journey. The students' collaborative analysis of this poem gave me some evidence of exploratory talk which "serves the purposes of understanding, giving the pupils an opportunity to reorder their pictures of the world in relation to new ideas and experiences" (Barnes, 1969, p. 73).

This activity intrigued me, and I became interested in the role of talk response more than the role of written response. Because I was drawing attention to written expression in response journals, I was sacrificing opportunities for the students to talk and learn together meaningfully.

Successful classroom talk requires an entirely different (and ultimately more important) kind of discipline and involves a new and more meaningful 'contract' between the teacher and the learners. The learners must understand the invitation to participate is in fact an opportunity to take responsibility for their own learning. The teacher in turn has the responsibility of doing his or her best to ensure that the learning takes place successfully... successful learning-talk requires a relaxed, two-way environment, but it also needs careful preparation, a disciplined and purposeful atmosphere and a teacher who knows good learning when he or she sees it.

Jones, 1988, p. 164

Reflecting on this incident bothered me enough to reconsider why I wanted to use journals at all, if I really believed that talk was a significant medium for response. It bothered and excited me enough to abandon the journals, to take further action with talk, and to make other changes to my program - providing frequent opportunities for the students to talk collaboratively with the teacher and with each other.
**Questioning the Potential of Interaction Through Journals**

Through my classroom experiences, I have come to understand that journals can function as a medium of interaction between students and text, and between teacher and student. Teachers who value reading response journals for teaching literature recognize that journals can serve the function of slowing the reader down and helping them to reflect on the meanings they are making.

As for my original assumptions, I still believe that journals help some students to think about their reading processes. I also feel that journals provide a useful means for the teacher to assess a student's comprehension and thinking abilities. However, some of my other assumptions had been challenged by my practice, observations and reflections.

When I began my investigation, I assumed that journals were the most accountable way of revealing children's responses to literature. I had some hunches about the possibilities of using writing as a way to reflect on reading. Writing, I assumed, would give students time to consider their thinking and the thoughts captured in their notebook pages might serve to spark new insights. When I designed this research, I suspected that students' written responses to books would go deeper than their talk. But when a colleague, Brian Crawford (1997), observed "they are second best to talk", I questioned why I was using a practice that was only second best.

I had also assumed that the students would come to write about their personal experiences and discuss the ways a particular text reminded them of their own life stories. However, this did not seem to happen significantly in their journals, although it seemed to arise in talk situations. Ultimately, I had imagined that the
students and I would have conversations about books inside the framework of journals, but the students didn't seem to respond to my letters by writing back to me. 'Dialoguing' was not happening. I was hoping that a written exchange between two readers - student and teacher - would move the young readers deeper inside the text, with the dialogue exchange helping them consider and develop their thoughts about the writers and their stories. In a revised edition of In The Middle, Nancie Atwell (1998) confirms such beliefs about the context of dialogue journals:

I believed... a teacher initiating and inviting first-draft chat would provide a way for me to respond to every reader and create an occasion for them to write and reflect about books: a genuine, genuinely interested audience that was going to write back.

Atwell, 1998, p. 41

Nancie Atwell writes that over the years she has exchanged thousands of pages of letters with her students and these correspondences go far beyond plot synopses and traditional teacher-manual issues. Atwell's consistency, organization and her expertise as an enabling teacher serves as a model for reading teachers.

However, asking students to keep reading response journals can result in little more than a burdensome writing assignment when the teacher doesn't respond or when the teacher makes responses that do not advance their interpretive powers. Ralph Peterson and Maryann Eeds (1990) write that "efforts that are not based on the desire to truly communicate about the story for the purpose of constructing meaning will not serve to illuminate the text or strengthen children's interpretive abilities" (p. 67).

Responding effectively and diligently to what students have written offered a challenge to me. Because I struggled to find a
way to best interact with students - and have students interact with one another - I decided to re-design my study and investigate what happens when students meet in small groups to discuss a text. With small group conversations, I felt that I could better demonstrate my interest in what the students were thinking, and like Atwell and her dialogue journals, help move them deeper inside written text and into their own lives.

The function of literature, according to Aidan Chambers (1985) is to offer us images to think with. The reading teacher's function is to help students realize that the importance of literature lies in what it can mean and can do for them. To better achieve this goal I felt it was necessary to revise the project.

Revising the Project in Action

As a teacher-researcher, I began to feel a sense of discomfort with using response journals in my program, leading me to further inquiry and learning about the medium of journals, the function of response, and the significance of teacher interventions with the students. It also led to set new goals, collecting and analyzing new data, and working towards further change. I felt that there were possibilities for better learning opportunities, - at least what I thought would be better learning opportunities - and revised my practice with two main concerns in mind.

First, response journals didn't seem to offer the same opportunity for fruitful interaction that conferences and discussions did and I decided to pay more attention to 'booktalk'. Since I had come to recognize more fully the importance of talk in the classroom, I wanted to introduce activities that would provide the students with situations, one to one, in small groups and with the whole
class, for revealing their thoughts about books through talk, rather than by writing about them.

Second, I became more aware of the other kinds of writing that the students were doing in the classroom, and after reading *Living Between the Lines* I became concerned about the need for students to better share "the great cargoes of their lives." In the second term, therefore, I decided to abandon the response journal in favour of what Calkins calls notebooks. In these, the students were invited to respond not only to literature, but to everyday events in their own lives.

As a teacher-researcher, I wanted to encourage personal response and to help students to write and read and talk in meaningful ways. Whether notebooks and booktalk would be more favourable than journals for achieving my goals, however, was a question that could only be determined through further observations, reflections and actions, i.e. through further action research.

The 3 events described in this chapter, and the groping towards understanding of the emergent learning, pushed me forward as a teacher/researcher. In the end, then, I decided to review the practice of response journals because I had read a new book about teaching, because I had invited my students to share some reminiscences, because I had used a journal to reflect on the incidents in my classroom, because I talked with colleagues in the staff room, in the school hallways, over the phone, and in a university seminar room. It is the sum total of these experiences - these "critical incidents" - that helped challenge my assumptions, re-shape my teaching, my learning, and my research.

Transforming teaching into a learning enterprise is a journey without end. Becoming a learning teacher means recognizing that our understanding of what we'd like to have happen in our classroom and our ability to make sense of what students are trying to do will be in need
of constant revision. No sooner will some aspect of instructional program be sorted out, than something will happen to raise further questions.  


During a graduate research course I was taking, an invitation came from Gordon Wells to contribute to a publication where a group of teachers would document their Action Research projects. In addition to receiving moral support, meeting with colleagues to make sense of the research experience by talking it over with those who understood it at first hand added an important dimension to the research. Writing about the research made it possible to revisit and review my thoughts over time. In Wells (1994) book Changing Schools from Within: Creating Communities of Inquiry, I joined a league of professionals who took the opportunity to write about their journeys with the goal of changing some aspect of their practice. Through my writing, I had come to a critical point in my journey with response journals, collaborative talk, and my own assumptions and uncoverings. In the conclusion to the article entitled "Reading Response Journals: One Teacher's Research", I wrote: "I have had some questions answered but I have uncovered many more. I have made some changes; I will certainly be making others" (Swartz, 1994, p. 125).

Out of the pilot project with reading response journals, I recognized a need to further my inquiry with personal response and a need to work towards significant modes of interaction not only between the teacher, the text and the learner, but amongst peers.

Change was the outcome of raising questions, keeping a journal, reading articles, re-acquainting myself with current response theory and practices, discussing my concerns with colleagues and mentors and most importantly, meeting a few surprises over the course of the project.
With new questions and a desire to further revise my practice, I moved into a new phase of inquiry in my quest to develop a reading program that would help students make meaning with texts both personally and socially, i.e. through talk. As I started a new phase of the study I hoped to find answers to a new key question: How does collaborative talk empower the learner and develop the potential for encouraging thought?
Chapter V  
Re-Designing the Action Research Project  

Small Group Discussion as a Context for Interaction  

Talk as a Medium for Learning  

I remember that when I went to school, my classrooms on the whole, were silent places. Student talk was usually limited to answering the teacher's questions, asking questions to seek permission or information, presenting show and tell sessions or giving formal prepared speeches. Generally, children hadn't been given time to think out loud, hypothesize and talk themselves into understanding (Barnes, 1976).  

In recent years, many classrooms buzz with the sounds of children's voices as they grope towards meaning with what Douglas Barnes (1976) calls "exploratory talk". Also, the term "oracy" was invented by the late Andrew Wilkinson (1990), to stress the importance of language skills in listening and speaking, thus giving a status equal to written language. As research helped us to focus on the understanding of language acquisition, the relationship between language and thought, and the various functions of language use, "oracy" became a significant aspect of the learning curriculum.  

In the book Classroom Voices, David Booth (1994), explains that children need talk in order to symbolize, structure, regulate and give meaning to experience. According to Booth, children need the collaboration of partners in conversation "to provide feedback that will lead them to understand what they are thinking, what they are saying, and the appropriateness of the language they are using to say it" (p. 248). Such talk does not feed through the
teacher because the children, not the teacher, are the focus of conversation.

Talk is a condition of learning across the curriculum. It can lead children to understand new concepts, enable them to communicate clearly as active learners with others, and permit them to consider a diversity of viewpoints and develop a critical tolerance of others. Douglas Barnes (1975) told us that children do most of their learning as talkers, questioners, arguers, gossips and chatterboxes. Talking can help children make sense "out loud" as they come to grips with new ideas. As children engage in thought through talk, they are building a bridge between what they know and what they are coming to know. If we can put our knowledge into words, then we begin to be able to reflect on that knowledge. James Britton (1970) says, "In considering language as a mode of representing experience, our main stress has been upon its use in turning confusion into order, in enabling us to construct for ourselves an increasingly, faithful, objective and coherent picture of the world" (p. 105). For Lewis Knowles, (1983) people talk to each other a good deal of the time and develop complex relationships without writing a word down. It is largely through our ability to speak that we exist as individuals.

Through finding their own voice in speech (and in writing), students can discover how to take control over their own lives and how to inter-relate with the lives of others.

In order to help children reach their full language potential teachers need to alter their classrooms to provide opportunities for interactive talk. Children need to express their thoughts and feelings within a social dynamic where the context rather than the teacher does the controlling. Purpose and context are essential for learning through talk, and it is essential therefore that teachers create situations that encourage talk within the limits
of the classroom, encouraging a maximum of individual expression as children communicate with others.

**Group Talk**

David and Roger Johnson (1987) remind us that our life is filled with groups from the moment of our birth to the moment of our death. As humans we have an inherent social nature. We learn, work, worship and play in groups.

Many children first encounter group conversation in small, informal family interactions that may arise during mealtime, at parties or other occasions when relatives or family and friends gather together. It is within our family and peer groups that we are socialized into ways of behaving and thinking. As individuals grow and experience wider social contexts, greater discussion skills are demanded.

In the classroom, the context of small group discussion provides a meaningful social dynamic for co-operative learning where interaction, negotiation and communication can develop effectively. The focus must be on the learning that grows from the talking and the thinking that emerges as students make decisions, solve problems, question, argue, create and plan together.

Group talk is concerned with getting things done, exploring, questioning and arriving at conclusions no one child could have reached alone. In this forum, students can clarify and modify their ideas. As participants build on the talk of others to carry discussion forward, the skills promoted through interaction have the potential for social and language growth. Being successful in group discussion requires using both knowledge of the topic - though knowledge of a topic is not all that necessary to discuss
it effectively - and of social situations to determine what to say, how to say it, when to say it, to whom to address it and when not to say anything.

To be successful in group discussion, an individual must know how to operate in ways that are appropriate for the particular social context, which includes the setting, the physical arrangement of group members, the focus topic, the assigned task, the allotted time, the members' roles, etc. The context also includes many less clearly defined factors: the individual perspectives and expectations of each member, interpersonal relationships among participants and the mutual expectations of all members of the group. The context may change from moment to moment, as different members speak, or as the understanding of the task changes. As the context changes, role relationships can change, as do behaviours. When group talk functions effectively, the students can experiment with the roles of leader and participant at different times. Gay Su Pinnell (1988) emphasizes that being aware of the context, defining it, matching one's behaviour to it and signalling contextual definitions to others are important group discussion skills.

Meaningful conversations will occur among students and teachers if contexts are created where students feel that their ideas are respected and valued by teachers and peers. A teacher who puts groups of students to work on some problem sends the important message that developing their own thoughts, and not just someone else's, is significant. Also, teachers who invite students to contribute to discussion rather than simply telling or giving them answers, demonstrate that "knowledge is jointly constructed in the collaborative meaning-making that occurs as people attempt to solve particular problems" (Wells, 1991, p. 14).
The Potential of Small Group Discussions About Texts

It is not uncommon for us to want to find someone to talk to in order to share our impressions of a movie, play or television show we've just seen or a book we've just read. Such conversations enable us to sort out what we think and to distance ourselves a little from the immediacy of our involvement in the experience. As Aidan Chambers (1985) has revealed, such talk involves the sharing of enthusiasms, the sharing of puzzles and the sharing of connections. When all the group members have seen the film or read the book, this sharing allows us to rub our ideas and opinions against those of other members of the group, and can often lead us together to insights we might never have discovered alone.

When students discuss texts in small groups they can help each other and can simultaneously check their own understanding. Dialogue, according to Ralph Peterson and Maryann Eeds (1990), is a natural way for people to learn and to construct meaning:

Participants in dialogue experience in a dramatic way what it means to construct meaning. For the most part, our individually constructed meaning happens unnoticed. But in a group we can take note of the shifts in thinking that occur as the interpretation of the text evolves. Group members also learn about the feelings and experiences of others as they interact. Members seek to know ideas on other people's terms as they collaborate in meaning construction.

Peterson; Eeds, 1990. p. 21

Students can discuss texts that they have all read before the meeting or discuss texts that they have read independently. To facilitate discussion, students can read the text aloud and offer oral interpretations and personal responses in the form of spontaneous questions and commentary. Members are encouraged to draw upon words or passages from the text and make remarks about
what the text makes them think or feel or remember, or puzzles that they don't understand.

In literature groups, the goal is to discuss the meaning of a text in terms of possibilities, not in terms of exact answers for specific questions. Talking in groups provides "a curricular structure to support children in exploring their rough draft understandings of literature with other readers" (Short, 1995, p. x). By having students with diverse interests, backgrounds and experiences collaborating, teachers build communities where learners work together towards personal and shared textual meaning making.

In practice, group discussions about texts allow members to relate impressions, ideas and problems they have encountered in considering the text. When a topic surfaces that commands the group's interest and has a potential for altering perception, the talk, according to Ralph Peterson and Maryann Eeds, shifts from sharing to dialogue. Through dialogue, the group (with or without the teacher), works to disclose meaning, thereby potentially expanding the impact of the work for all participants.

Because a text's meaning is embedded in character dilemmas, mood, sequencing of time, creation of place, character development, story structure, point of view, use of language and symbols, these elements of literature will usually surface naturally through dialogue.

In small groups, discussion is spontaneous - group members can put forward their comments, concerns and criticisms and at the same time receive (and perhaps respond to) the comments, concerns and criticisms of others. An essential point, suggested by James Moffett (1990), is that partners do collectively what individuals might do alone sometimes. Students are able to build upon and
extend the thoughts of others so that meaning constructed socially is greater than the meaning each student brings to the group. Margaret Meek (1991) recognizes that reading is a fully social activity by stating "in engaging with others' reading, I discover more of what is in the text; I add their meanings to mine (p. 41).

One of the strongest arguments for the sort of collaborative sense-making is articulated by Gordon Wells (1992) in his article "Talk for Learning and Teaching":

Only under these conditions are the students able to offer their interpretations for consideration by others without the fear of ridicule, and in the process of discussion, to calibrate with those of other members of the group, including the teacher. It is only under these conditions too, that the teacher is able to shape his own contributions to the discussion so that he can provide effective assistance to the students in their task of constructing a more complete and coherent understanding.

Wells, 1992, pp. 42-43

Essential to the construction of meaning is the spirit of collaboration. Whether the teacher works together with the students or whether the student works with other students to construct meaning, share interpretations and initiate responses, the process involves a certain amount of groping towards meaning, questioning and putting forth of utterances in the hope that others can contribute to complete the ideas. This way of working encompasses both inquiry and critique.

As members talk and listen in small groups, they weave a web of meaning which accumulates as the discussion continues. While group members may not have the same individual purposes or perspectives, they try, through sharing, to make their own meanings understood and to make sense of the meanings expressed by others. The group,
as a whole, begins to create a new set of meanings larger than and different from the collection of individual meanings.

**A Sociocultural Perspective of Literacy Learning**

Exploratory talk is an acceptable and necessary way for speakers to bring their tacit knowing, or "personal knowledge" (Polanyi, 1958) to a talking-place where, through interaction, they can construct new meanings. Personal knowing and social learning are therefore essential to our understanding of talk within a classroom community. Dorothy Watson (1993) moves Polanyi's concept of "personal knowledge" to a more active meaning-making view, using the term "personal knowing". This personal knowing that any learner brings to a talking-place is constructed not in isolation but with others.

Such interactions encouraged within school settings reflect a sociocultural perspective of literacy learning, one that suggests that "human learning presupposes a specific social nature and a process by which children grow into the intellectual life of those around them" (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 88).

The Russian psychologist Lev Vygotsky (1978) contributed to our understanding of the phenomenon of social learning. By observing a child, we can identify when the child is able to solve problems on his own without outside help. Vygotsky theorized that prior to this point, there is a broad indicator of learning, called the potential development level. A Vygotskian perspective on learning does not assume children learn naturally on their own. Instead, it assumes the contribution of someone more knowledgeable who guides learning. The appropriate point for teaching is related to what Vygotsky called the "zone of proximal development." In Vygotsky's words, the ZPD is "the distance between the child's actual
developmental level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers" (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 86). Vygotsky suggested that individuals are guided by their own mental process as they participate in social acts, but these processes are influenced by social experiences. Vygotsky argued that mental functions begin on a social or interpersonal plane first, then move to an inner, intrapersonal plane. He called this process "internalization". McMahon and Raphael (1997) used Vygotsky's notions about internalization to design their Book Club Program. "If individuals are regulated by their own mental processes as they participate in social contexts, then classrooms can be powerful settings in which learners develop their thinking about the texts they read." Such contexts must provide the students with "forums in which to actively participate, reflect, critique and reformulate their thinking" (McMahon and Raphael, 1997, p. 10). These arenas can be provided whenever students meet in groups to talk about texts.

Frank Smith (1986) provides an appealing metaphor for Vygotsky's "more capable peers" when he talks about "joining the club" (p. 37). Smith believes that we learn from the company we keep, and that children grow to be like the company they keep. In other words, learning is social and developmental.

Vygotsky's "zone" and Smith's "club" must be places in which a community of learners, both capable and less capable, can use talk in order to advance all the member's learning and knowing. If the personalization of knowing and the socialization of learning are to become a way of life, it falls on teachers "to create with their students a community in which meaning making is their intention and it cannot be done without talk" (Watson, 1993, p. 8).
As I began a new phase of research, I was striving to build a more collaborative community of practice, which is described by Gordon Wells (1999) in the following way:

Through assisted participation in appropriate activities students undertake a "semiotic apprenticeship" as they individually reconstruct the resources of the culture as tools for creative and responsible social living in this and the wider community... it is activity which is central, for to rephrase Dewey's insight, what we learn is what we do.

Wells, 1999, p.139

Planning the Project

For this study, I began by providing a group of children with the time and space to respond to, and reflect upon, the imaginative experience generated by a poet's words. I devised a plan to have seven young readers talk about their responses to a group of poems, and I, as the teacher-researcher, would attempt to learn from their conversations and their discoveries.

The students, three males and four females, ages eleven and twelve, from a mixed ability grade six class, volunteered for this study. Sunny, James, Heidi and Lisa were fluent readers who willingly spent time reading books outside of the school setting. Georgette and Liza enjoyed reading but wouldn't consider it a hobby. Jason, a high achiever, would only read books when assigned.

These children were former students of mine from the previous year in the fifth grade. During that year, they participated in a book club that was held once a week during lunch hour. The students visited me one day and asked if they could organize another book club. Because the students had a keen interest to meet and discuss
books, I felt that the opportunity was significant in allowing me to focus on my investigations with a small group of children. On a practical level, I knew it would be easier to manage the small group discussions and make tape recordings without the buzz of classroom activity. When I proposed that we operate a poetry club instead, they volunteered to participate in this study by meeting once a week to gather around a table and discuss a selection of poems, some of them chosen by me, others by them.

The dynamics of the group reflected some of the classroom procedures that the students were already accustomed to. Members of the group would share their reading of a particular poem and listen to their peers' reactions, reflections, comments and questions. I explained to the students that I was interested in discovering what children thought about as they read poems, and that I wanted to find out how they felt about discussing poems in a small group.

Weekly group talk sessions were arranged. The students knew that their conversations would be tape recorded and then transcribed. Learning what happened when students worked collaboratively to talk about a text would, I hoped, enable me to adapt my teaching strategies accordingly.

Though there were seven members of what came to be known as 'The Poetry Club', there were never more than five students involved in a discussion at one time. With more participants I felt that there would be some who had fewer turns to speak than others. Although there was potential for having the students respond in writing either before or after a discussion, I did not incorporate such strategies into this study. I was moving away from written responses, such as those prompted in their reading journals, with the goal of providing alternative mediums for sharing thought and for building richer contexts.
I had some decisions to make about the context of choosing the poems and the actual reading of the text. I wondered if the students should have the opportunity to read the poems prior to discussion meetings, or meet the poems at the same time as their group members did. For the first meeting I invited the students to choose a favourite poem from a poetry anthology that they would like to share with others. One of the poems brought by one of the students, stimulated a prolonged discussion. For the other meetings, I decided to have the students receive the poems simultaneously and read them silently before beginning their discussion. In this way, the context for the reading would be equal for all and their responses would be fresh, immediate and more spontaneous than if they had some pre-meeting experiences with the text.

Two other significant choices needed to be decided upon for the design of the study:

1) Should the students have a specific agenda to discuss as they attempted to make meaning;

2) Should they be left on their own, or have the participation of the teacher in the conversation?

Group structures are infinitely variable but the following considerations (adapted from a framework suggested by Michael Hayhoe and Stephen Parker [1988], p. 38) helped me to organize the way that I proceeded with the meetings (Table 3).
The open discussion is an activity which allows students to make their own meanings from poetry and calls for a degree of commitment and responsibility from the students if it is to work effectively. Since there is no specific agenda, students should be comfortable at participating in a discussion both inside and outside the poem (i.e. talk about the text and engage in talk prompted by the conversation itself). A directed discussion asks the students to analyze the literal meaning of a poem, look for metaphor, consider the use of language, etc. In this type of pre-specified agenda, the students are given prompts to frame their talk with the intent that specific questions will be answered.

The issue of whether or not the teacher becomes a member of the group adds a new variable to arranging contexts for discussion. A central finding of Barrie Wade (cited by Keith Hurst [1988, p. 158] in Group Discussions of Poetry) was that when a teacher leads a small group of students in the discussion of a poem, the teacher concentrates on explicating the text, whereas, if the teacher is removed, explication practically disappears but is replaced by a wider range of tentative explorations.

In their book Poems Please!, David Booth and Bill Moore (1987), advise teachers that they must not make the children afraid of

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saying the wrong thing but rather they should enable them to voice their own ideas and provoke them into "the surprise of coming to know, rather than checking them for comprehension of content or poetic techniques" (p. 89). I wanted to better understand how discussion can put learning in the hands of the students, freed from the fear of saying the wrong thing and enable them to voice their own ideas.

For purposes of this study, I planned to introduce four different contexts for small group discussion. By tape recording and later transcribing the students' utterances, my intention was to make comparisons: between discussions with an open agenda and those with a directed agenda; and between student discussion with their peers only and those in the presence of the teacher.

**Promoting Response Through Small Group Discussion**

**Directed Discussion with the Teacher**

To prepare for the initial meeting of the poetry club, the seven students had each been provided with a different poetry anthology and I instructed them to choose about five or six poems that interested them and that they might like to share with others (see: Appendix E). For the first discussion, the students were told to talk about their choices in any way that they wanted to. The participants each took a turn reading aloud their poems and shared their general impressions or opinions. The only agenda that was offered at this time was for the students to explain why they had chosen the poems. Heidi said that she had chosen "We Could Be Friends" by Myra Cohn Livingston because it reminded her of her friendships. Sunny chose Tennyson's "Morte d'Arthur" because he said he liked stories about King Arthur. Jason enjoyed the rhyme of Dennis Lee's "The Dinosaur Dinner" and explained that he had
chosen that poem because it was "goofy just like him". Georgette thought that "Snowman" ("The snowman in the snow -? How do you/ know/ that he hasn't made you instead?") was kind of odd and confusing. James was also confused by his poem, "The Way Through the Woods" by Rudyard Kipling, because the poet wrote at the beginning that "they shut the road through the woods" and later wrote that they entered the woods. James also presented "The Scarecrow" by Walter de la Mare because it reminded him of the poem "There Was Once A Whole World in the Scarecrow" that he had read before. Lisa thought "January" by John Updike was "stupid" because "If the poet wanted to talk about nature, why does he all of a sudden mention a radiator." Liza chose "The Minute Book" by Julie O'Callaghan because it was a short poem that made her think about how precious time is.

The students were polite enough to listen to each other's choices and reactions, but for the most part, they didn't conduct any dialogue about the poems. Once a selection was shared, the reader usually provided a brief comment, and then another person would read his or her choice aloud. There was very little argument, questioning or attempt to negotiate meaning.

After about twenty minutes into the activity, however, Sunny read aloud Robert Frost's classic piece "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening", and the members of the group, without direction from the teacher, began to linger over this poem.

**Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening**

Whose woods these are I think I know.  
His house is in the village though;  
He will not see me stopping here  
To watch his woods fill up with snow.
My little horse must think it queer
To stop without a farmhouse near
Between the woods and frozen lake
The darkest evening of the year.

He gives his harness bells a shake
To ask if there is some mistake.
The only other sound's the sweep
Of easy wind and downy flake.

The woods are lovely, dark and deep
But I have promises to keep,
And miles to go before I sleep,
And miles to go before I sleep.

Robert Frost

At the beginning of the discussion, most of the students offered a hypothesis of what was happening to Frost's traveller in the woods: "Maybe he's like a carrier or something" (Jason); "Maybe he's on a top secret mission" (James); "Maybe he's a doctor" (Heidi); "Maybe 'in sleeping', it means he's dying. He's dying right now and doesn't want to" (Sunny)."

In the following transcript, the students continued discussing "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening" and began to challenge the opinions of others as they revealed their own ideas about the words, images and stories that the text offered. After initial speculations, I stepped into the conversation as another member of the group, and although I was somewhat anxious about how the students might react to my presence, I remained in the circle. (Upon reflection, I questioned my intervention.)
Maybe he had a bet with someone.

What would the bet be about?

He would stop in the woods.

He would walk around the world...

He's not walking... you see...

He had to go all through the woods for many miles until he sleeps and if he won he'd get the money and if he didn't he'd have to pay money.

Or maybe it's like... maybe someone's gone with him and maybe he got killed and they're remembering what he said.

... and James, you said 'top secret'... what does that mean?

I don't know... like he's maybe a spy...

You were trying to say something? (to Sunny)

I don't think he's top secret... cause... well, shouldn't it mention something of a hint that he's on a secret mission?

I think he was going to see his friends... because he says his house is in the village and probably the village is pretty far from here.

Could I read my poem?

You wanted to say something Heidi?

O.K. ... like I think it is someone because it says here "he will not see me stopping here", so I think there's someone that saw him...

... and the village is miles away...

Yeah... and he's got promises to keep...

he could be going on a trip...

...or maybe he started to follow him for some reason... that's why he says "he will not see me stopping here."

... or maybe... maybe somebody in his family is dying...
21 B: ... and he has to go to the village... for his medicine.
22 H: I think then that he... like owns that place because it says...(reading) 'he will not stop to see me here/ to watch his... his 'woods fill up with snow'.
23 B: So it must be God.
24 H: Yeah.
25 S: No... look!...(reading)...Whose woods these are I think I know. His house is in the village though'... so the person who owns these woods lives in the village.
26 H: Maybe it's private property. That's his property.
27 G: Or...somebody is following him!
28 J: Maybe it's in the will that he's going to own the forest when that person dies.
29 G: Yeah!
30 S: Or maybe he's going to a funeral.
31 B: Maybe death is watching him... he says that if he stops, he'll die.
32 J: Remember that story last year...
33 B: Oh yeah! ... that was awesome!
34 J: What was it?
35 T: Come Again in the Spring.
36 B: Yeah!... that was cool!
37 H: I like this poem... I think that person lives there or he like he owns that land because it says 'But I have a promise to keep', so I think that the person who is talking is following him and he has miles to go before he sleeps... like he has to walk back maybe.
38 T: Could you please read the last verse?
39 H: The whole paragraph?
40 T: The verse...(pointing)the verse...
41 H: (reading) 'The woods are lovely, dark and deep/ But I have a promise to keep,/And miles to go before I sleep,/And miles to go before I sleep.
42 J: But I don't understand one line in the story - "The darkest evening of the year" - Why would he go then?
43 H: Maybe it's like you can't see him.
44 B: No... maybe it's because that's when he has to go... if he doesn't go by then... something bad might happen.
45 J: He's a spy.
46 S: That reminds me of a book I read... it's called The Darkest Day.
47 J: Who's it by?
48 S: I forget...
49 J: Is it a fantasy?
50 S: Yeah.
51 T: Do you think there's any other meaning to 'the darkest night'.
52 B: Maybe it's death.
53 H: Or maybe it's like... when there's like the moon... do you know the eclipse... like when the moon disappears?
54 L: I think that he's lost.

What, on the evidence of this transcript, did the group achieve, and what were the educational advantages of this small group discussion?

First, one might conclude that since the group was not instructed to talk about the poem in any particular way, the fear of "saying the wrong thing" was diminished. Patrick Dias's research (1987) indicates that small group discussions are a means of developing autonomous readers of poetry:

The students active involvement in the text, their facility in articulating response, their concerted effort after meaning and the conviction that meaning will be arrived at, all make undirected small-group discussion a promising means of developing the autonomous readers of poetry who can speak with some
confidence in their ability to make sense of poetry when asked to 'think aloud'.

Dias, 1987, p. 11

Secondly, as the children listened to others, they were made aware of the several possibilities of meaning and became exposed to ambiguity rather than simple closure. James, Sunny, Heidi, Jason, Lisa, Liza and Georgette were engaging in a process of shared understanding. The tentativeness of their conversation helped them to find their way to whatever discoveries they made and allowed them to modify and alter their points of view.

A discussion such as this is important because it is a major means "by which learners explore the relationship between what they already know and new observations or interpretations which they meet" (Barnes, 1976, p. 81).

As the students discussed the poem they were:

- **speculating** (Maybe he had a bet with someone [1])
- **reasoning** (I think he was going to see his friends, because he says his house in the village and the village is pretty far from there [12]).
- **explaining** (...it says here "he will not see me stopping here"... so I think that there's someone that saw him. [15]).
- **making connections** (Remember that story last year...[32]).
For most of their discussion, the students concerned themselves with the business of trying to decide upon a story of the traveller. Rarely were attempts made to unravel the complexities suggested by metaphor, although Jason suggested that "maybe death is watching him... he says that if he stops, he'll die" (31) and later Jason explains that "maybe 'the darkest night' means death." (52). Jason has come closest to what I believe to be the main theme of Robert Frost's poem. Although the group doesn't build on Jason's thought, it is significant to note that without Jason's contribution, the analogy of a traveller's journey in the woods and the approaching of death, would not even have been offered for contemplation.

Lewis Knowles (1983) suggests that the seeming 'aimlessness' of such a discussion is potentially advantageous since the conversation is more 'natural' or 'real' compared to what might happen when a specific problem is proposed for consideration. Had I instructed the students to answer specific questions, they might have found the agenda too restricting. The discussion of "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening" illustrates that "there is value in encouraging pupils, through talk, to consider their own ideas away from what can often be the inhibiting influence of teacher opinion and pronouncements" (Knowles, 1983, p. 50). What then should a teacher's role be in awakening the ability of the students in coming to meaning?

My involvement in the short conversation about Frost's poem was mainly to ensure that the students kept to the task of discussing this poem. Without my presence, the students would have merely continued to read their poems aloud, without pausing to interpret
the poems. In fact, early in the conversation, Lisa asked if she could read her poem (13), but I prompted further commitment to the conversation at hand by inviting Heidi to share an opinion (14). I also contributed by providing information (naming the title of the short story they had heard before [35]). I also gave instructions to revisit the poem (asking Heidi to read the last verse [38]). Here again I am providing information. When Heidi says the word "paragraph" I repeat the word "verse". My intention too, was to demonstrate the significance of highlighting specific statements to prove a point but more important to serve the group specific lines to interpret, a strategy that was already demonstrated by the students, particularly Heidi, when she chose to read aloud lines from the poem to support her thoughts, (e.g. "Whose woods these are I think I know/ His house is in the village though"... so the person who owns these woods lives in the village [37]).

When James presented his confusion about the line 'the darkest evening of the year', I asked "Do you think there's any other meaning to 'the darkest night'?" (51) therefore offering the students the potential of discovering the symbolism within Frost's words. However, rather than explaining the 'hidden meaning' I am offering the opportunity for individuals to share their speculations. Because the question comes from the teacher rather than another group member, I am likely signalling to the students that there might be "more-to-this-than-meets-the-eye".

Such a conversation as the one found in this transcript might be criticized because it lacks the direction and bite that might have occurred had I assigned a specific task for the group to discuss. For instance, I might have instructed the group to collaborate to create a single narrative about the traveller in the woods. Here, the students' ideas are just tossed out with little attempt being made to build on one another's ideas. Given more time, the students might have been more successful in their analysis. More
significantly, I have taken a more committed role to shape the talk and enlarge upon a number of contributions offered by the students. The dilemma it seems is a common one in much literature teaching: I am anxious that the students should respond in their own way to the demands of the text before them, but at the same time I feel an obligation to encourage and support the students in developing an open style of responding and discussing:

Teachers should avoid on the one hand a teacher domination that discourages pupils from active learning, and on the other the abandonment of pupils to their own devices. Thrown in at the deep end, some pupils might learn something, but teachers would be abdicating their duty if they did not take some responsibility for what their pupils learn.

Barnes, 1976, p. 78

Am I abdicating my duty by not assisting the students with their interpretation of a poem? The discussion of Frost's poem raises many of the central problems of teaching for those who believe in contingent responsiveness. Some might worry about the students' interpretations that may seem "incorrect". It is important that the students' opinions be taken seriously, but one might argue that they also need to learn that there are constraints in the text on what interpretations are warranted. In this session I did not press for deeper meaning or understanding of the poem. This didn't seem the appropriate context for giving specific literary interpretations. Perhaps too much analysis could eventually put a strangle-hold on students' appreciation of poetry at the same time as intimidate them from revealing their thoughts in future discussions.

It would appear that the first meeting of The Poetry Club was useful because it helped the children to realize that I was going to listen to their interpretations and treat their ideas with respect. For the next meeting, I decided to leave the group to
their own devices in order to help both the students and me to further explore the potential of discussions with an open agenda.

**Open Discussion Without the Teacher**

**Famous**

The river is famous to the fish.

The loud voice is famous to silence, which knew it would inherit the earth before anyone said so.

The cat sleeping on the fence is famous to the bird watching him from the birdhouse.

The tear is famous, briefly, to the cheek.

The idea you carry close to your bosom is famous to your bosom.

The boot is famous to the earth, more famous than the dress shoe, which is famous only to floors.

The bent photograph is famous to the one who carries it and not at all famous to the one who is pictured.

I want to be famous to shuffling men who smile while crossing streets, sticky children in grocery lines, famous as the one who smiled back.
I want to be famous in the way a pulley is famous, or a buttonhole, not because it did anything spectacular, but because it never forgot what it could do.

Naomi Shihab Nye

The poem, "Famous" was chosen by Heidi as one of her favorites. When she first presented it to the group, she said that she liked it because of the way the poet made her think that everything in the world has some importance. Heidi said that there were some parts that she didn't quite understand, and so I introduced the poem to the group for closer inspection. The students were advised that they could discuss the poem in any way that they wished, for as long as they wished. One of the group members, Lisa, sat apart from the group and did not participate in this discussion. I explained to the students that by the end of the talk they should be prepared to report to Lisa what they thought the poet was trying to say.

The transcript below is a record of the beginning of the discussion which presents the students' immediate responses to the poem:

Participants: Georgette(G): Heidi (H); James (J); Liza (L); Sunny (S)

1 H: I think it's talking about everything is famous to something.
2 G: I think it's talking about everything... something is always famous to somebody else.
3 S: It doesn't have to be someone else...
4 H: Something...
Anything can be famous somehow...
The boot is famous to the earth because the boot always walks under it... so the earth knows the boot.

(reading) 'The river is famous to the fish.'

'I want to be famous to shuffling men.'

'The loud voices is famous to silence.'

'The cat sleeping on the fence is famous to the bird.'

Why are we reading this poem out loud?

Because we just think of... what the words relate to...

We're making examples.

They're not examples. They're already on the page.

I know. We're just trying to figure out what they mean.

Which ones do you want to know what it means?

I want to know exactly what... all these mean and what they relate to... (reading) 'The river is famous to the fish.'

The fish need the water from the river, so it's famous.

I think that this poem is about nature... or the things around you... because everything is famous.

It doesn't necessarily... It's not always about stars (i.e. celebrities) that are famous.

Like your sock is famous to your boot, or your eyes are famous to your glasses, your hair is famous to your head...

But the last line... (reading) 'I want to be famous in the way a pulley is famous...'

Didn't you read it?... (reading) famous 'not because it did anything.' It didn't do anything spectacular, it never forgot what it could do.
24 J: This man doesn't want to forget what he could do...
or it could be a woman.
25 G: The earth without all this stuff would be nothing.
26 L: Really?
27 S: Not really!
28 G: Yes! The river is famous to the fish...
29 H: Without the river, without the loud voices, without
the cat, without the tears, without anything... the
earth would be nothing.

From their first attempts, it would seem that the students have a grasp of the main idea of the poem. As this transcript indicates, the students then go beyond 'the main idea' begin to scrutinize the ideas that the poet has created.

Very early in the conversation, when Sunny challenges Georgette's thought by saying that "it doesn't have to be someone" (3) that is famous, and Heidi answers that it could be "something" (4), they are demonstrating how conversation works. He is picking up cues from what is offered and subsequently presents a statement to which others may respond. When he offers an explanation as to why the boot is famous to the earth (6), he is also extending an implied invitation to look at the other 'famous' ideas that the poet has introduced. The group responds by reading various lines, but does not offer any comments. Sunny confronts the girls by asking them why they are reading the poem aloud (11). It seems that Sunny wants to get on with the business of explaining what the lines mean as he has already done with the boot. Reading the lines aloud just slows down the process of analysis for Sunny, but for the girls it is their way of bringing the lines out into the open for discussion ("We're making examples" [13]).

In line 14, Sunny reveals an interesting thought: "They're not examples... they're already on the page". Louise Rosenblatt (1978)
states that "not the words, as uttered sounds or inked marks on a page, constitute the poem, but the structured responses to them." (p. 14). Sunny seems to understand this when he asks the group "which ones do you want to know what it means?" (16) It seems that Sunny is eager to transform ink marks into meanings.

In the beginning of their conversation, the group also considers the meaning of the word 'famous'. Heidi does this by providing analogous examples of things that are famous (e.g. "your sock is famous to your boot" [21]). Liza contemplates the idea of fame ("it's not always the stars that are famous" [20]). For Georgette, "the earth without all this stuff would be nothing" (25). James, with his first utterance in this discussion (22), shares his curiosity about the last line in the poem, which the group doesn't return to until some time later in the conversation.

The next twenty five minutes of conversation reveal that the students chose to talk about a number of different topics which might have been evoked from the text, or from revealed thoughts of the various members of the group.

For several minutes, the group argued about the use of the word 'briefly' in the line "The tear is famous briefly to the cheek". Georgette explained that she was bothered by the word 'briefly' because that wasn't how she cried. The group eventually challenged Georgette to come up with a better word which she was unable to do. The group talked about crying and the way tears flowed until Heidi suggested that "probably the poet didn't think too hard about which word to use but just inserted 'briefly' "as an afterthought once the poem was finished". No sooner was the discussion about the word 'briefly' finished when the group got into an argument about stereotyping.
30 S: Nothing about tears, or hair or anything. We're off the topic of hair.
31 J: Do you like hair, by the way?
32 S: Maybe she should have said that hair is famous to the scalp - then she wouldn't have to write... he wouldn't have to write about this idea about tears.
33 H: She... it doesn't always have to have everything as a 'he'.
34 L: Stereotyping!

Heidi accused Sunny of stereotyping because, she felt, "boys always think that a male wrote a poem". James asked whether it made a difference whether a boy or girl wrote "Famous", and the group agreed that it didn't really matter. What did matter, according to Heidi, was that a poet shouldn't always be thought of as a he. Georgette suggested that the group was getting off the subject, and Sunny responded by saying "We are talking about the subject - we're talking about the poet."

In the next episode, Heidi leads the group directly back to the text and they go on to discuss a particular verse:

35 H: Back to the poem... back to the poem...
36 S: I don't understand "the bent photograph is famous to the one who carries it."
37 J: Maybe the photo is old.
38 S: But what about the line (reading)... "and not all famous to the one who is pictured."
39 G: I don't know... I can't figure it out... it's just old.

The students continue to speculate about the significance of the photograph ("maybe the photo is old, like when you carry it in your wallet and it starts to get bent" (James); "maybe he secretly took a picture of someone and they didn't know about it... that's
why it's famous" (Sunny); "maybe all this stuff is his experiences... maybe he went to a river, saw some fish and his children shouted" (Liza). Georgette confesses that she can't figure out the significance of the photo (39) and waits to hear what others have to say before making her mind up about it. Eventually, Sunny advises the group to read the verse carefully and emphasizes that it's the picture that is famous, not the photographer, or the person carrying it. The group doesn't bring this issue to closure and if one of them had a clear understanding of the meaning behind the poet mentioning the photograph, the thought remained hidden.

As the conversation develops, the group discusses whether the title the poet has selected is appropriate. James suggested that maybe Naomi Shihab's title could have been "Known To" instead of "Famous. It is suggested that everyone think of another title for this poem and when it is Georgette's turn she is stumped. Sunny responds by saying "See you have to think about it first. I just blurt things out. Then it comes from the heart." The conversation then takes an interesting digression as the question is raised about uniqueness.

40 G: The question is 'why does everybody have different thoughts?'
41 L: They share different experiences.
42 J: ... different minds...
43 G: ... same thoughts...
44 L: ... different minds... different thoughts...
45 G: I think people think differently...
46 S: Why? That's what we're talking about.
47 H: No one has the same brain. No one's perfect.
48 G: I might not like Liza's shirt, but Liza does.
49 S: Why are you talking about Liza's shirt?
50 G: Like... it's different tastes.
The subject of each person having different thoughts leads the students to compare their reactions to the poem "Famous".

51 G: Do we all think the same about this poem?
52 H: I don't think so... because we all have different minds.
53 L: We can't all think the same because we have different minds.
54 J: We haven't agreed on one thing about this poem.
55 G: Yes we have!... that not all titles say the same thing...
56 L: You mean, not all titles tell about the poem or story...
57 G: And we also agreed about different words to describe one thing.
58 H: So we all agree that this is an O.K. poem?
59 L: O.K.
60 G: I wouldn't say that it's 'number one'!

It would seem that the students haven't come to a consensus about the meaning of the poem ("We haven't agreed on one thing about this poem" [54]), or their opinion about the poem ("So we all agree that this is an O.K. poem?" [58]). For the students there are many discrepancies about the meaning of the poems because as Heidi articulates "we all have different minds." (52) Ironically, the one thing that the students seem to agree on is that they aren't agreeing because they are all different.

In the final part of the transcript, the students attempt to summarize what the poem has meant to them:

61 S: But we still haven't talked about the last line.
62 H: If you read the first line and then the last line - "The river is famous to the fish/ because it never forgot what it could do" - if you go through everything from top to bottom, it makes sense.

63 L: (following Heidi's instructions, she reads) "A tear is famous briefly to the cheek/ because it never forgot what it could do."

64 H: So use the bottom line and put it with each paragraph and then the poem make sense.

65 L: (reading)...The loud voice is famous/ Because it never forgot what it could do; The boot is famous... Because it never forgot what it could do...

66 S: So, in other words this is her philosophy about all these things.

67 G: It's actually about....

68 L: Life!

69 G: Life... and what we should do with it.

70 L: And not just the stars get famous. You're famous too.

71 S: They're not talking about really famous famous. Rock stars are famous for one thing and we're famous in our own way.

72 J: He's talking about famous his way, not famous because they have 1.2 million dollars.

73 L: Like the stars get the awards and we citizens don't get anything.

74 G: To other people they think that if you have 6 million records you're famous, but to other people, it's what's inside that counts.

Heidi's clever strategy of combining the last line with the others in the poem (e.g. "The loud voice is clever because it never forgot what it could do" [65]), seemed useful in helping the students make better sense of the poem. The students finish off their discussion by recognizing that all the things mentioned in
the poem have a particular significance and that's what makes these things famous.

In their summary, the students once again attempted to clarify the word 'famous', realizing that it doesn't necessarily have anything to do with fame. ("Rock stars are famous for one thing and we're famous in our own way" [71]).

Had I participated in the conversation, I might have asked the students to consider how they saw themselves as famous "the way the pulley is famous", but I think the question is implied in the poem and I'm confident that their journey into Nye's text would provoke the students to think about their own identities of being famous, even though the idea may not get shared with others. Their final discussion assures me that they have indeed thought of their personal famousness.

When Lisa visited the group towards the end of their discussion, she asked them why they thought the poet wrote "Famous":

76 L: Have you guys ever thought about that the poet wrote this poem to bring your attention to what you didn't think was famous.

77 G: No, I thought the poet wrote this because she wanted to tell everybody that they're special... and everything in the world around us is special.

78 S: That's what Lisa's trying to say... she's trying to ask if the author wrote this poem to give us new meaning of famous and I think she wrote this to say that we're special too.

79 L: Everyone is special in a different way.

From this moment of conversation, it would appear that the students have hardly moved further in their thinking from the time
when they first shared their responses to "Famous" thirty-five minutes earlier. Heidi started the conversation by saying "that everything is famous to something" (1) and Liza echoes this though at the end by saying "Everyone is special in a different way." Just how far did the students come in their understanding of the poem?

If nothing else, the students themselves made decisions about the things that they talked about. Listening to a tape of this conversation indicates the priority of concerns that was determined by the students, whether it was about a word (the discussion of 'briefly'); a phrase (the discussion of the old photograph); an issue (the concept of stereotyping); or the meaning behind the poem as a whole (e.g. "'famous' doesn't necessarily mean that you have to be a star").

A map of this discussion would show that the students have looked both inside the poem, at specific thoughts that the poet has presented about things that are famous, and have gone outside the words of the poem, as they discussed such things as crying, gender bias, choosing titles, or uniqueness. Because an open agenda allowed them freedom, the students took responsibility for exploring the poem on their own terms, thus weaning themselves from dependence on the teacher.

The psychological impact of the open agenda is very important. Such an agenda belongs to the pupils allowing them to become committed to it, and through it to poetry.

Hayhoe; Parker, 1988, p. 43

Compared to their discussion with "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening", the students have begun to pay more attention to the contributions of their group members, which makes the search for meaning more collaborative. As the students discussed "Famous",

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they examined what the poet was trying to say, making connections to their own experiences. Often the students would find themselves disagreeing with one another, thus demonstrating for them that a poem might have different meanings depending on one's perspective.

For much of the discussion of "Famous" I wasn't even in the room. Later, while listening to the conversation on the tape I came to the end of the tape and was presented with the following private greeting:

Liza: ...and that ends our tape...
Heidi: ...our meeting...
Georgette: ...our discussion...
Sunny: ...our club...
Liza: ...our fight!

For each of the students the activity meant something different, working together to make meaning on a personal level. The satisfaction that the students might have gained from solving the puzzle of this poem might stimulate them to discover more pleasure in playing with other poem puzzles they might encounter, such as "Lines" by Judith Nicholls, which was chosen for the next meeting of The Poetry Club.

**Open Discussion with the Teacher**

For this event I decided to participate in the discussion of the poem, "Lines" by Judith Nicholls. I like the poem not only for its sense of word play but for its portrayal of a schoolchild whose mind wanders as lessons are being taught. Would the students feel the same way about the poem as I did? Would they be able to know the person in the poem and understand what Nicholls was saying about daydreams and daydreamers?
Lines

I must never daydream in schooltime.
I just love a daydream in Mayshine.
I must ever greydream in timeschool.
Why must others paydream in schoolway?
Just over highschool dismay lay.
Thrust over skydreams in cryschool.
Cry odust over drydreams in screamtime.
Dreamschool thirst first in dismayday.
Why lie for greyday in crimedream?
My time for dreamday is soontime.
In soontime must I daydream ever.
Never must I say dream in strifetime.
Cry dust over daydreams of lifetimes.
I must never daydream in schooltime.
In time I must daydream never.

Judith Nicholls

For a discussion of the poem, I offered the following three questions for the students to discuss: What do we know about the daydreamer? What did they think Judith Nicholls was saying about school? How do they think the poet wrote this poem? For the first part of the conversation, I participated as a listener, and didn't contribute very much to their analysis. The students had some questions to deal with, and I was still conscious of not directing the course of the interpretation of the poem.

One might then ask, why I would be there at all if I wasn't going to contribute to the discussion. Discussions tend to go in many directions and I wanted to gently edge the students back to the text if they strayed too far. Moreover, as teacher-researcher, I
was interested in witnessing the nature of the conversation in the presence of the teacher, as opposed to being left to their own devices, as they had been with the poem "Famous".

Each of the participants began by confessing that they were confused by the poem because the "words didn't make sense" (James) and "the title 'Lines' didn't correspond to the dreams talked about in the poem" (Liza). As the conversation evolved, the students would frequently return to the poem, reading aloud certain lines or words such as "paydream", "timeschool" and "cryschool". Generally, the students didn't try to determine meaning for these words except for "greydream" which was interpreted as a "Bad dream that she must have had when it began to storm" (Heidi). Jason thought that maybe the printer scrambled up all the lines and decided that there must be some kind of code in the poem. In their further attempt to make sense of "Lines", it was decided to read the poem aloud in various ways. Sunny suggested that they should only read the nonsense words alphabetically, and Heidi thought the middle word on each line held some clues to a puzzle. At one point the whole group read the poem backwards from the bottom line to the top.

After about fifteen minutes of conversation, the students tried to speculate on the story behind the poem. Heidi suggested that probably there was a girl who was daydreaming in school and her teacher told her to write lines but she couldn't stop daydreaming. With this piece of narrative, the poem began to make some sense to them. Liza said that this poem was her daydream and her mind was just wandering. Jason said that she must have written her lines in a mixed order just to confuse the teacher. James suggested that even when she got back to reality and wrote the lines her teacher told her to, (i.e. "I must never daydream in schooltime"), she wasn't going to stop daydreaming because the last line said "In time I must daydream never."
The students then began to talk about daydreams and at one point Sunny noticed that Liza was daydreaming. Some of the conversation then revolved around whether it's useful to daydream:

II  "When you daydream, your mind leaves your body." (James)
III  "In daydreaming, time slows down." (Heidi)
IV  "If you read a book, one thing leads to another and then your mind keeps on going, until someone comes along and snaps you out of it." (Sunny)
V  "Sometimes when it's a rainy day, you walk along and see something familiar and then you start daydreaming." (Heidi)
VI  "When I read a book aloud, I'm sure that the story leads many you to daydream when you hear a word or an incident that reminds you of something." (Mr. Swartz)

In the following transcript, the students began to narrow their conversation to the topic of the poet and her intentions.

Participants:  James (J); Jason B. (B); Liza (L); Heidi (H); Sunny (S); Teacher (T).

1 T:  So, I'd like you to just talk a little bit more about the poet. We only have a few minutes left? Why do you think she wrote this poem?
2 J:  I think the poet likes daydreaming.
3 H:  ... and I think she wants to get other people involved... because when you read this poem... after a while you just sit there and you think...
4 S:  ... you think about what the poem's like...
5 H:  ... and you start to daydream after you read that poem.
6 T:  Is that good or bad?
7 H:  I think that's pretty good.
8 L: Because you sort of remember... well, I do like Mayshine... or I do like crying...
9 S: It looks like you're staring into the person, but you're staring past the person.
10 T: How do you think she wrote this poem?
11 S: Daydreaming!... while daydreaming
12 B: She was probably sitting...
13 L: ... or thinking of ... or thinking when she was in school and remembering that her teacher kept on saying "Don't daydream!"
14 J: Maybe she was in a classroom and she saw someone daydreaming and then she wrote it.
15 T: Or... she was this person daydreaming who became a poet... and might not have become one if she didn't daydream

Prompted by my questions "Why do you think she wrote this poem?" (1) and "How do you think she wrote this poem?" (10), the students are offered the opportunity of discussing the process that Judith Nicholls might have gone through to write "Lines". Heidi commented that the poet wanted to involve the reader because "you start to daydream after you read the poem." (6) Liza suggested a narrative situation that has a teacher saying "Don't daydream!" to one of her students. By offering an interpretation that "perhaps she was this person daydreaming who became a poet." (15), I was behaving more like a speculating member of the group than a teacher who is merely asking comprehension questions.

I did, however, change the direction of the conversation by asking the students to consider whether they understood "Lines" any better after having a group discussion than they first did when they read it privately. Sunny said that at first he thought the poem was "weird" because he didn't understand what the 'lines' were that the poet was talking about. Because someone suggested
that the lines were assigned by a teacher to a girl who must not have been paying attention in class, it seemed to make more sense to him. Heidi said, that by talking to others she came to understand that "it was really clear that this poet was trying to get across that it is o.k. to daydream".

Jason agrees with Heidi by saying that he was confused why the poet would have written this poem, but he now thinks that "she must have wanted to get everyone into daydreaming because it's a good thing."

A particular comment by Liza implied that the students were coming to see the benefits of making private responses public: "if someone was to go to this poem in a book, they'd probably just look at it, say 'this doesn't make sense', turn the page and leave it... but we talked about it and everybody understands it." Liza's words suggest that she was beginning to understand how we can make meaning through collaboration. Since this issue was precisely at the heart of my research, I decided to ask the students how talk helped them make sense of a poem. In the following conversation, the students talk about their talk experiences.

24 J: The first time... if you don't read it properly... it's like all the poet did was bunch up all these words together and made a poem out of it.
25 H: Like when you first read it, you think, you read it and say "Oh gee!... this is a stupid poem".
26 L: You need a title or...
27 S: Just like you... (turning to me)
28 H: I don't ever want to see it every again
29 S: Just like you said "life between... no... words between the lines"... or something like that... and the lines between the words and between the lines, the words...
The first time I read this, I thought there were lines or words or bits and pieces of information...

So, how do you understand it better now?

Well, like after you talk about it... you just think more... like everyone's saying what it reminds them of... and like then you read it backwards and then forwards again and you find that forwards is really quite... it explains itself, 'cause you read it backwards and then forwards but forwards explains itself.

Well then, what I'd like to ask, since you talked about talking... How does talking help you understand this poem?

Well, different people have different ideas and you can combine those ideas and that makes a poem a bit clearer.

You let out your problems about the story and then other people try to mix in with you.

You start imagining it in your mind while other people are talking and then you start to understand it.

It's like a jigsaw puzzle. Like everyone has different pieces and if you use your own pieces, you can't make a picture, but if you use everyone's pieces you can make a picture.

Well, it's kind of like if you hear what other people think about it, you could stop and think... well, my answer was kind of like that but I think this person is right in this way... and I think... I'm right in this way...

How did that happen with the discussion about "Lines"?
40 H: Well, when we talked about it, like everyone... different ways of reading it and then everyone was saying what word reminded them of 'this' and how 'this' word is combined with 'this'... and then you stop to think about it and you get a better answer.

41 S: That reminds me of equivalent fractions, because Heidi just said that everyone has the same thought but they like... just like say it in a different way... like different numbers but the same...

42 J: ... the same value...

43 S: Yeah!

From this rich piece of conversation, two main questions arise; What did the students learn about discussion? What did the teacher learn about discussion?

From their comments, it seems that the students in The Poetry Club have understood that each of us brings and takes different meanings from a text. Moreover, they have come to understand that by sharing ideas about a poem with one another, they clarify their private understandings. It is evident that these children were becoming more adept at building on one another's understandings, and refining their own responses as they listened to the insights of others: "Well different people have different ideas and you can combine those ideas and that makes the poem a little bit clearer." (34) It seems that few reached a point where they could construct a viable understanding on their own without the scaffolding that the group had built: "You start imagining it in your mind while other people are talking and then you start to understand it." (36). All the children said they were confused when they first encountered the poem. All the children said that they understood the poem better by talking about it.
Georgia Heard (1989) in her book *For the Good of the Sun and the Earth* claims that "there's nothing more exciting than the moment when the sense of a poem becomes clear; suddenly, meaning is unlocked. It's like fitting the last piece of a jigsaw puzzle in place". (p. 4) Sunny, who certainly hasn't read Georgia Heard's text, also offers the analogy of a jigsaw puzzle as it applies to the collaborative meaning making experience: "It's like a jigsaw puzzle. Like everyone has different pieces and if you use your own pieces, you can't make a picture but if you use everyone's pieces you can make a picture." (37) For these six students, the poem "Lines" was a puzzle that needed to be solved. Each utterance was like a puzzle piece being offered for inspection and manipulation. As the group locked the pieces together bit by bit, they came closer to unlock the meaning of the poem for themselves.

Conversing while reading not only gives a text a social setting, but helps individuals pay attention to their inner responses when they are reading silently alone. The method "externalizes and dramatizes the usually unnoticed stream of responses that goes on in us as we read. Pooling understanding spreads it, and hearing other responses to a text stimulates one to think more about it" (Moffett, 1990, p. 306) Heidi's comment validates Moffett's thoughts when she says "well, it's kind of like if you hear what other people think about it, you stop and think... well my answer was kind of like that but I think this person is right in this way... and I think I'm right in this way." (38)

Sunny offers a second analogy by saying that the talk experience reminds him of equivalent fractions ("Everyone has the same thought but they just say it in a different way... like different numbers but the same... value" [41]). I perhaps could have intervened and said to Sunny that I'm not sure that everyone has the 'same' thought, but everyone, I would argue, has a thought. By listening to each other, arguing, negotiating, challenging and
speculating, each member of the group can come up with an answer to the poem's meaning. For this group, making sense of poetry was essentially a collaborative activity as the students "talked their way towards each other's understandings and outwards along the path of their own experience." (McClure, 1990, p. 63).

As I listened to the tape recording of this conversation, I realized that I didn't offer much in the way of interpretation, but asked questions to help shape their conversation (e.g. What do you know about the girl in this poem? Was the girl confused or was she trying to confuse the reader? What's a daydreamer? How did the poet come up with these words?) Rather than indicate to the group that there was a correct answer, these open questions were raised to allow the students to formulate their own views, inviting them to explore their in-the-head thoughts aroused by this text.

Since I initially provided the group with a specific agenda to frame their discussion, several of my questions lured them into answering what they thought the message of the poem was and also had them consider the poet's intentions and the process she might have gone through in creating "Lines". In the last part of the conversation, my questions were brought forward to help the students to reflect on the process they had just gone though in analyzing the poem ("How does talking help you understand the poem?" [33]).

In the end, whether these students grasped a "correct" meaning of Judith Nicholls's poem is incidental. What is significant is that the students came to understand the potential for small group discussion, as the metadiscussion in the above transcript indicates. In this case, it was my participation that helped the students consider the potential of dialogue. Without my presence, the students might have continued to wander as they attempted to interpret the poem.
Upon reflection, I recognize that I am being too careful about revealing my own interpretations, for fear that the students might see my interpretation as the 'correct' one. I see a responsibility to intervene but I am still conscious of helping the students to explore their own connections to the poems and to each other. In this session, when I entered and steered the conversation in a certain direction by asking questions, I wanted them to reflect on their own thoughts or thoughts that were being offered by other members of the group. I was allowing the students to create meaning for themselves rather than impose meaning on them. As Amy McClure (1990) writes, the teacher should be there to support the students' ideas by "suggesting possibilities rather than stating probabilities" (p. 31).

At the end of their discussion about the poem "Lines", the students considered the appropriateness of the title:

63 J: I think this poem should be called "Daydreaming" or "Daydreams".
64 H: I think it should be called "Confusion"... or something like that.
65 L: "Lines" suits the name because it gives the reader something to figure out while they're reading it.
66 J: It should be called... it should be called... "Figure it out!"

Gregory Denman (1988) compares the experience of discovering meaning in poetry to that of finding a hidden face in a drawing of the forest:

An aesthetic response often needs to be nurtured by a group response. We need one another. We need to test our reactions or throw our hunches and guesses out to others for their reactions. We need to merge others' insights
By revealing their own thoughts about a poem such as "Lines" and listening to the revealed thoughts of others, these students are better able to find the hidden face in the forest and as Jason suggests (66)... "Figure it out!"

**Directed Discussion Without the Teacher**

For the final session of The Poetry Club, I presented the students with Jean Little's "After English Class" from her collection *Hey World, Here I Am!*

**After English Class**

I used to like "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening"
I liked the coming darkness,
The jingle of harness bells, breaking - and adding to - the stillness,
The gentle drift of snow...

But today the teacher told us what everything stood for:
The woods, the horse, the miles to go, the sleep -
They all have "hidden meanings."

It's grown so complicated that,
Next time I drive by,
I don't think I'll bother to stop.

Jean Little
For me, "After English Class" suggests that when a teacher is there to explain everything, then the students are apt to stop thinking for themselves, perhaps curtailing any further personal understanding of poetry. Throughout this research, the dilemma remained about teacher intervention, and how the teacher could model, collaborate, provoke or leave the students to their own devices.

When pupils work alone their discussion may be inconclusive or inexplicit or superficial. Every teacher wishes to rush in and ask the well-placed question and this is sometimes helpful. But just as often it has the reverse effect. Taking the initiative out of the pupils' hands may reduce their learning from an active organizing of knowledge to a mere mimicry of the teacher.

Barnes, 1976, p. 77

I decided to pose the dilemma of whether the teacher should be a giver or receiver of the children's ideas to the members of The Poetry Club by having them discuss Jean Little's poem.

Unlike the exploratory experience of "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening", the students were provided with an agenda to shape their conversation. Students were invited to discuss the poem in any way they wanted but were asked to consider the following points to frame their understanding of "After English Class" and by implication their understanding of personal response:

1. What do you think the poem says about teaching poetry?
2. What do you think the poem says about learning poetry in school?
3. What do you like or dislike about the poem?
4. Why do you think Jean Little wrote this poem?

These guideline questions were offered at this time with the intention that the students would have some organization to their
discussion since groups sometimes "need to feel secure and task-oriented in order to make full use of the talk-time they are offered" (Benton, 1988, p. 31). Students were advised that they didn't have to answer the questions in any particular order. There was no time limit put on the students, although the taped session ended up being forty minutes long.

After the conversation, I listened to the tape recording and I didn't have to listen further than the first dozen utterances to discover whether the students understood both the poem and the notion of everyone having unique opinions.

James: I think she wrote down 'hidden meanings' because the first time you look at a poem... some of them you don't really understand... so you have to keep on reading and think to yourself and then after a while it will come to you.

Lisa: I think that when she said that it gets so complicated because a teacher told them there were hidden meanings. I think that the teacher is wrong because everybody has their own meanings.

Heidi: This poem reminds me of a poem that Mr. Swartz would write.

Sunny: I think the teacher shouldn't have told them that there was a hidden meaning but they should have found out the meaning themselves.

James: But maybe they were having trouble with it.

Sunny: Well she should have just given them a hint instead of telling them, because now they're confused and don't want to read the poem anymore.

As the conversation around this poem developed, the students talked about the title, about horse-back riding, about walking in the woods, about teachers and also recalled Robert Frost's poem
that they had discussed on their initial meeting of The Poetry Club. Did they answer the questions posed to them? Had they learned anything about reading poetry? teaching poetry? As the following statements indicate (extracted from a longer transcript), I would say that the students had come a long way since their initial conversation about the poem "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening".

Georgette: It's like taste. You might say that this apple tastes good and then the next person who tastes it and says "ugh! this is kind of gross... like everybody has different thoughts and different tastes.

Lisa: Well, I think if I was her and stopped by the woods every day after English class, and the teacher suddenly tells me the meaning to it, I don't think I'd bother. I'd just go with my own thoughts.

James: The person would think it's one thing and the teacher would talk about another thing and they don't connect together. It doesn't mean it's true just because the teacher says so.

Heidi: Most people I know like things simple. At the beginning of the poem, the woods are simple... but then the teacher comes in and starts talking and makes everything really complicated so that the "next time I drive by I won't bother to stop" - or read a poem - because it's so complicated.

But perhaps Sunny summarizes the learning best in the following bit of conversation:

Sunny: If I were the kid in this poem I wouldn't listen to the teacher.
Georgette: You could listen to her thought but don't take it seriously.

Sunny: The teacher's job is to help you but not give you the whole answer.

James: The teacher points a line out to you.

Sunny: The teacher points you the path, but doesn't take you down it. It's like learning.... if the teacher just gives you the answer you won't learn anything, but if she tells you what to do, or gives you hints, then you might learn it.

It would be hard to say whether the questions offered at the start of this session helped the children to focus their thoughts. I would argue that the group would have discussed most of the points that I considered significant, even without the agenda but, as Patrick Dias's (1987) research shows, they would have done so in a framework of their own choosing as they did with their discussion of "Stopping by Woods On a Snowy Evening" and "Famous".

Ironically, the teacher that Jean Little portrays in her poem would certainly not approve of the students being left on their own to discuss the 'meaning' of "After English Class". After all, aren't there meanings that need to be explained? If not the teacher, who is to explain these meanings? I agree with Charles Duke (1990) who wrote: "If we hope to have success with poetry in the classroom, we must first establish a climate that allows students to move away from the teacher as curator and interpreter and develop some confidence in making sense of poetry on their own" (p. 445). It seems that the students of The Poetry Club are sympathetic to this philosophy, not because I explained it to them, but because of the very contexts they were involved in throughout this investigation.
Reflecting on the Project in Action

Charles Duke (1990) presents an effective analogy for the way that poetry is usually taught, suggesting that the students are like travellers in a strange land, where the strange land is the text.

Many of today's poetry classes, for example, are like trips through a foreign country; the teacher/interpreter leads the way, pointing out the significant sights and perhaps adding some footnotes here and there of interest, even quaint facts and anecdotes. Students may be attentive visitors, but once the trip is over they promptly forget where they have been and why they were there.

Duke, 1990, p. 443

The reading of poetry can never be more than a mere technical exercise for our students, unless teachers acknowledge the differences among readers and build upon the power of personal response. Throughout my investigation with The Poetry Club, I have argued that small group discussion provides a meaningful context for different interpretations to be accepted so that rather than having students travel to the foreign, (or what may seem foreign), land of poetry, they may come to live in that place for a while, growing in their understanding of the poet and the poem and their own world all at once.

Whether the students were left on their own to discuss a poem, were given an agenda to frame their discussion, or collaborated with the teacher as a guide, the participants in this research were given opportunities for making meaning their own as they explored a poem's various shades of meaning. The investigation, therefore, seemed to offer these students opportunities to not only to learn about poetry, but to grasp the potential that discussion has in helping them respond to poetry.
Every new poem has something to teach its readers about poetry, and "the more we learn, the more proficient at learning we become" (Denman, 1988, p. 78). Similarly, every small group discussion has something to teach the participants about discussion. According to Terry Phillips (1988), "small group talk in school is about more than the official task. Each discussion is an event in which the speakers explore the possibilities of small group talk itself" (p. 74).

If the goal of having children respond to poems and other texts is to have them gain confidence in their own responses and to have them tolerate ambiguity, then small group discussions provide a meaningful context for personal growth as students observe and evaluate the responses of others. Though such processes might occur in whole class discussions, the students are more likely to feel secure about sharing their feelings, personal experiences and criticisms in small group situations. In his investigation of group responses to poetry, Keith Hurst (1988) concludes that discussions encourage students "to find their way of explaining and describing their responses, or of demonstrating that they have power" (p. 201).

Teachers who invite students to contribute to discussion rather than simply providing them with answers, demonstrate that "knowledge is jointly constructed in the collaborative meaning-making that occurs as people attempt to solve particular problems" (Wells, 1991, p. 14). David Booth and Bill Moore (1989) talk about the importance of allowing children to discuss poetry as a natural response to the aesthetic and artistic experience:

Through discussion about a poem or a group of poems, children can come to understand universal meaning; they can hear each other and modify, clarify and extend ideas and feelings, they can re-read a poem for emphasis to prove a point; they can talk about the ideas of the
poem, its feeling and form; they can recall experiences as suggested by the poem; they can describe incidents or people that the poem conjures.

Booth; Moore, 1991, p. 97

In the context of small group discussions, the students are given the opportunity to think of many possibilities and play with various shades of meanings. Meaning is viewed as a process, as opposed to an end product. Emphasis is on the enjoyment of the poem as a whole and on developing an appreciation of how parts such as rhythm, imagery and language contribute to the whole. Gregory Denman (1988) writes that "interpretations and meanings are things that emerge from bits and pieces; they are not creatures born whole and correct. What we learn along the way in coming to meaning is certainly more valuable than our final view" (p. 85).

Group discussion allows individuals to work through and beyond personal associations to become tolerant of ambiguity and to pay attention to the contributions made by group members. Talking with others about a text confirms to the students that the process of collaborative discussion can be fruitful and that the search for meaning is only as productive as it is collaborative.

If a poem is "an event in time" (Rosenblatt, 1978), then it would seem that readers require time to come to terms with the event. As a written text, the poem is timeless - frozen continuous marks on the page. Every time a reader engages with the text and creates an interpretation, this is both an event that continues over a period of time (minutes, days) and an event in time in the sense that a second or subsequent reading of the poem is a different event from the previous reading, since the reader is now a different person who can bring different meanings to the text. A small group discussion seems, therefore, to provide an effective context for
eliciting the event in time. Because the evocation continues to develop through discussion, such collaborative talk provides useful insight into how readers, working together, come to find meaning, i.e. to 'interpret' a poem. "Responses need time and space in which to grow," writes Michael Benton (1988), and a "methodology for teaching has to be built on these principals" (p. 202).

As for the teacher's role in helping students take responsibility for their learning, Gordon Wells (1991) claims that the issue is not whether, but how the teacher should intervene. As Gordon Wells puts it, in a passage worth quoting at length, merely setting up these situations is rarely sufficient:

In our concern to have students take greater responsibility for their own learning, therefore, it is important that we do not mistakenly hold back from providing assistance when needed. On the other hand, we need to ensure that, when we offer assistance, we do so in a manner that is contingently responsive to the learners' goals and to the meanings they are constructing, and supportive of their creative attempts to make new connections and find novel solutions to problems. Whatever the choice made on any particular occasion, however, what is crucial is that it is perceived by both students and teacher as just one contribution to a continuing dialogue, for which they all have joint responsibility.

Wells, 1991, pp. 17 - 18

Some important questions remain: Can a teacher be on equal terms with the members of the group trying to make sense of a text? How can teachers best offer assistance in the collaborative meaning making process? How can teachers best organize the classroom program to have the students understand the process of interaction with the text, whether working independently with peers or with the teacher.
During this study, I recognized that, by helping students to discover meanings for themselves, I was being rather cautious about imposing any meaning on them. When I participated in the group, I did it mostly by asking questions that would guide the students to think not only about the poet's intentions, but to help them better reflect on their mental processes. One of the utterances offered by Sunny while discussing "After English Class" (see page 139), serves as a fitting conclusion to this phase of my research. In explaining what he thinks the job of the teacher should be, Sunny comments:

The teacher points you the path, but doesn't take you down it. It's like learning... if the teacher just gives you the answer, you won't learn anything but if she tells you what to do, or just gives you hints, then you might learn it.

I was conscious of my role in helping the students come to understand - and enjoy - poetry. Upon reflection, I realize that by offering these students opportunities to discuss poetry in order to find meanings, I was "pointing the path" with the hopes that when they meet poems in the future, they may do so with greater confidence, and when they participate in small group discussions in the future, they may do so with tolerance and commitment to make meaning collaboratively.

To further demonstrate the importance of social meaning making, it is worth mentioning a story shared by Nancie Atwell (1991) in an article entitled "When Readers Respond".

As part of course that she taught on responding to reading Atwell describes an experience of forty high school and university English teachers mapping their way through the reading of a poem that none had encountered before. Atwell explained that there were no two remotely similar accounts of the process of reading the poem. In this instance, expert readers who had spent time
discussing literature, had responses that were distinctly personal
and idiosyncratic. Then, through listening to each other's
responses, returning to the text and coming back to talk about it,
the group had agreed about the 'meaning of the text. Atwell
concludes that "readers in a community do share - or come to share
- general agreement as to the meaning of the text" (p. 66).

The challenge is set: How in our classrooms can we provide the
same type of community for sharing that these literate adults
encountered in exploring a poem? What are the best program
strategies to provide our students with the opportunity to
interact both with the text and with each other in the meaning
making process, where shared understanding can grow from the
learning of individuals?
Chapter VI
Towards an Interactive Literacy Program

The Value of Teaching Literature

Johan Aitken (1975) writes:

Just because you breathe you cannot necessarily explain in detail just why you need oxygen; teachers who have felt that literature is just as basic a need as oxygen cannot be blamed if they are bewildered and inarticulate and invariably, resort to metaphor when asked "Why?"

Aitken, 1975, p.7

"Why bother so much about children's reading?" Aidan Chambers (1975) asks in a Horn Magazine article. In coming to grips with answers to his question, Chambers sorts out why literature is important and claims that: "literature provides us with a unique relationship with language and form, creates the texture of experience through words, brings us to awareness, engages us in imaginal re-enactment and opens up different worlds to us while at the same time showing the relationship of those worlds to our own." These functions have vital value for children since by nature they are emergent, forming attitudes, building concepts, patterns and images and formulating judgements for understanding and connecting with the human condition. According to Chambers, "Literary experience feeds the imagination, helping it to come to grips with the astonishing amount of data and experience which assail children in their lives" (p. 183).

For Charlotte Huck (1990), literature not only has the power to change a reader, but it contains the power to help children become readers. David Krech, (quoted in Jerome Bruner [1986]), says that
literature gives us images to perfsink (perceive, feel, think) with. Vivienne Nichols and Victoria Roberts (1993) believe in the power of literature "not simply to entertain but to tell truths about ourselves and to nourish our spirit and imagination" (p.7). Richard Hoggart (1970) wrote that he valued literature "because of the way - the peculiar way - in which it explores, re-creates and seeks for the meanings in human experience" (p.11). For Hoggart, literature can "make us sense more adequately the fullness, the weight, the inter-relations and the demands of human experience - and the possibilities of order" (p.17).

The literature in my classroom includes picture books, novels, poetry, scripts, folklore, and non-fiction materials. Johan Aitken claims that, "One could almost declare children's literature to be anything children read... because a literary education must include the total verbal experiences of the child" (1975, p. ii). Jonathan Culler (1997) says that what leads readers to treat something as literature is that they find it in a context that identifies it as literature - in a library or a bookstore, a book of poems, a section of a magazine. Aidan Chambers (1975) uses the word to mean...

...any kind of composition in prose or verse which has for its purpose not the communication of fact but the telling of a story (either wholly invented or given new life through invention) or the giving of pleasure through some use of the inventive imagination in the employment.

Chambers, 1975, pp. 175 - 176

The literature in my classroom encompasses the range of literary genres that explain or describe, teach or entertain or do all four at once. Why some texts earn the merit of being called literature, and others do not, is of course arguable. For my purposes, I value stories which the offer the imaginative recreation of experience - both that of others and one's own (Wells, 1999) and I consider a
written text to be literature when students are engaged and a response is evoked.

I value teaching through literature because I want to help children develop into independent, purposeful readers who will think carefully about what they have read. All children need effective comprehension strategies as they grow into independent readers and writers. We need to promote thoughtful interaction with what is being read "so that readers will be able to select relevant, significant information from the text, make sense of it, and integrate that with what they already know into a personal construct of knowledge" (Booth, p. 11).

I teach literature to help the children in my classroom become more human. Much of what we teach in school is based on learning facts, and acquiring information. Teaching literature helps inform our feelings. The children can learn about the lives of others and learn about themselves through the skins of others, either the same as - or different from - themselves. They can:

- Laugh with the kids of Wayside School who watch their teacher turn into an apple (Sachar, 1978), or with King Whatchamacallit who mixes up his sentences ("Can ears believe my I?") (Feiffer, 1995).

- Cry with when Little Willy carries his dead dog across the finish line (Gardiner, 1980) or Henry and Zelda when they bury their science teacher in a trench in Central Park (Zindel, 1989)

- Feel the despair of a mouse named Abel stranded on an island (Steig, 1976) or with Maniac Magee who struggles to survive on the city streets (Spinelli, 1990).
I bother to teach literature to bring the whole world into my classroom and to take my classroom to the whole world. Literature gives the children vicarious experiences and helps them live more lives than the ones they have. The children may read *Hatchet* by Gary Paulsen (1987) and understand what it is like to survive alone in the woods of Northern Ontario. Or they can travel on an Arctic expedition in the frozen north with twelve-year old Helen in *Trapped in Ice* by Eric Walters (1997).

I teach literature to help make the students more knowledgeable. Literature can bring the past into sharper focus as with *Sarah Plain and Tall* by Patricia MacLachlan (1985), and can shed light into the future, as with *The Giver* by Lois Lowry (1995). It can provide facts at the same time as help the children feel what life was like in Medieval Times as they read the diary of a 14 year old nobleman's daughter (Cushman, 1994) or feel the horror of a church lynching in Alabama (Curtis, 1995).

The craft of the written word found in stories and poems can offer a rich foundation for children's language development. Strong readers may not become strong wordsmiths just because they engage with books, but a banquet of stories and poems help the children grow in their grasp of vocabulary and syntactic structures. Shelley Harwayne (1992) contends that to help children grow as writers we need to expose children to a variety of genres, styles and literature themes. The wider the vocabulary and language structures children are familiar with, the more likely they are to make choices which best convey their meaning in any context. When children read books independently, listen to stories read aloud, and discuss what they have read, their attention can be drawn to the form as well as the content of literature.
I teach literature to help the children develop their imagination. Literature helps the children to explore the world of "What if...?" - What if The Iron Man came to the top of the cliff (Hughes, 1968); what if stories were forbidden in the world (Hughes, 1998), what if we could drink the water and live forever (Babbitt, 1975).

I teach literature for the ways it nurtures narrative in the classroom. "There are always stories crying to be let out and meanings to be let in," Harold Rosen (1985, p. 12) informs us. Narrative in children's literature invites the children in recreating the author's story for themselves. Jerome Bruner (1986) argues that narratives invite the readers' performance or creation of a virtual text, and through that performance, ultimately the readers make the texts their own. Bruner writes, "the actual text needs the subjectivity that makes it possible for a reader to create a world of his own... I believe that the writer's greatest gift to a reader is to help him become a writer" (p. 37).

I believe in the transforming power of literature to take the children out of themselves and return them to themselves - changed. Certain books alter us in some way by disturbing us or by affirming the values and emotions we have but could not express in words. Out of the Dust (Hesse), The Music of Dolphins (Hesse), and Bridge to Terabithia (Paterson) are special novels that have educated and moved me personally.

Children need literature to come to understand its value without questioning what this value is. Many children won't get to this understanding on their own. For Aidan Chambers (1975)...

...they need help and encouragement, opportunity and guidance; they need to be led to books which will expand their sense of what it means to read fully by methods which do not suffocate their desire to read; and they need to discover that what may be a difficult task is
both worth their effort and enjoyable - enjoyable now while their are developing their skills as well as later."

Chambers, 1975, p. 184

The Value of Response

Response to literature allows children to develop insights into other worlds and to notice and accumulate new words and language patterns. Through response children can learn to discuss ideas from a text with confidence, to analyze and form generalizations, and to apply new learning to their lives. Response helps children to become members of a literacy community.

A major goal of teaching through literature is to pass on a passion for books, a passion that comes from more than introducing books into the classroom, hearing stories and poems read aloud and providing activities that engage students with print. The joy and passion for books, I believe, comes from allowing students to make the books their own and this happens through significant response activities that allow children some "form of commentary, as 'comprehension' or interpretation" (Meek, 1990, p. 1).

Response is a door that opens children's minds and feelings into a more insightful interpretation of literature. When children carefully consider their responses as invitations for further negotiation of a work's meaning, they assume control of their own reading and may move beyond children who can read, into those who choose to read. "Response to reading is always more reading, retelling, versions, renewals as well as the text-to-life, life-to-text engagement of readers" (Meek, 1990, p. 12). Admittedly, some children unmotivated to read, refuse to read or give up on reading. Others never really begin to read in ways that make response possible. As a reading teacher I can serve as a guide for
demonstrating the possibilities of response and the passion for books in my reading curriculum.

One of my professors, Richard Courtney, taught me that a curriculum is only of the moment. Curriculum, according to Courtney (1988) is, "an active dynamic that is created by people in their dialogic inter-relations" (p. 90). My reading curriculum is not an object and cannot be treated as one. The reading, writing and talk events described in this research outline the conditions when I helped children to engage with texts. The plurality of approaches that I introduced to promote response - journals, independent reading, reading aloud, in-role writing, oral narratives, whole class discussions, small group discussions - was inspired by the process of inquiry and reflection undertaken by action research. For Courtney, "curriculum" is a verb and what we do when we engage in curricula dynamics is "to currick".

My research helped me to become more aware of the action I took that helped me fulfill my quest to bring book and child together. The following anecdote, however, can serve as caution concerning the models of response that good-intentioned teachers choose to implement:

The students were gathered on the rug to listen to me read a story. As part of an author study I chose the book Silly Sally by Audrey Wood (1992) to share with the class. To begin, I asked the students what they noticed about the title (e.g. same number of letters, the second vowels are different, the double consonants, they both begin and end with the same letters). I explained how the title was alliterative and invited the children to choose an alliterative adjective to describe themselves (e.g. Mighty Matthew, Super Sunil, Amazing Alan). We clapped out the syllables of the title and then tried to clap the syllables of our own names. I then asked the children if anyone had double consonants in their first and last
names and then invited them to look around the room for any words with double consonants. I told the students a story about my last name which my parents had changed from Gwartz to Swartz before I was born. I asked the students if they had any stories about their names, and Bobbie shouted out, "Just read the book!"

Convinced that using children's responses to literature is a more authentic form of instruction, literature teachers may be too concerned with the question, "What shall I do with this book?", when they should just let the book be. Teachers do need to be thoughtful guides as children journey through literature, but along with introducing reading, writing, drama and art activities that have the children interpret literature, the teacher should leave the children to dream, to imagine, to question, and to enjoy the texts they encounter. "Certainly, children's exploration of literature ought to remain child-centred, enjoyable, and full of wonder. Too much instruction and too long an immersion in any literary work can dull the brightest story or poem" (McGee; Tompkins, 1995, p.413).

In sum, I believe that a balance is needed. To guide the students' reading processes, to talk to them about literature, and invite them to respond can be very useful, but it is not an end in itself. The end is the work, the book in their hands. Silence sometimes matters.

**Considering a Balanced Reading Program**

Daniel Pennac (1994) introduces his book Better Than Life by stating, "You can't make people read. Any more than you can make them love, or dream. Mind you, you can always try" (p. 11).
In my research journey, and in my career of teaching literacy, I have raised questions, implemented a number of response strategies, challenged my assumptions, digressed from my plans and taken action, all with the intent of implementing a literature-based program that would help children develop both competencies of reading and a desire to engage in reading as a worthwhile lifelong pursuit.

Through action research, I continually attempted to shape and reshape the existing curriculum in ways which were most appropriate for the children. I acquired many skills of observation, assessment and program modification striving for optimum results in literacy instruction. Like the student teacher researchers that Clare Kosnik (1998) describes in her article "Overcoming the Theory-Practice Gap", I recognize that there was no "magic" curriculum to help me achieve my goals.

One of my goals is to give students opportunities to read more books with satisfaction. A second goal, as James Britton (1966) points out, is to have students read books with more satisfaction. Students need a time to "just read" - an unconsidered unexamined response of text (in a formal sense) - and a time when they deliberate over the meaning of a text, consciously shaping cooperatively the meaning they make. In other words, I need to foster "wide reading side by side with close reading" (p. 8). I know that providing them with books and the time to read books is important. I know, too, that as a teacher of reading, it is my responsibility to help them understand what happens when mind meets book.

In my teaching of response I was hoping that the children in my classroom community would come to understand the "stuff of being a good reader" as they engage with books today and in their lives tomorrow. About good readers, Nancie Atwell (1998) writes:
When we invite readers' minds to meet writers' books in our classrooms, we invite the messiness of human response - personal prejudices, tastes, habits, experiences. But we also invite personal meaning and the distinct possibility that our kids will grow up to become a different kind of good reader - an adult who sees reading as logical, personal, and habitual, someone who just plain loves to read.

Atwell, 1998, p. 30

I know that despite my teachings, many - a majority - in the group of twenty-eight students I teach, won't choose reading as a life force as they grow older. Paul Kropp (1993) cites figures from the U.S. National Assessment of Educational Progress report claiming that the percentage of fourth graders who read daily for pleasure was 45.7 and by grade twelve the percentage of twelfth graders who read for pleasure was 24.4. Daniel Pennac is concerned that too much analysis and commentary frightens students away from books - "Books are there to be read, should readers be so inclined" (1994, p. 161) - and has drawn up a list of The Reader's Bill of Rights, (see: Appendix F), to create a life-long devotion to reading.

To prepare students for making reading part of their lives, our classrooms need to emulate the culture of habitual readers. These processes, according to Aidan Chambers (1985), form a sequence of activities - 1) selection 2) reading 3) response - that are common processes for any habitual reader (see: Appendix G).

Reading begins with the act of selection. In today's society there is an enormous range of material from which young readers (all readers) can select, and this choice will inevitably be influenced by a book's promotion and availability. In Novel Sense, David Booth and Larry Swartz (1996) outline a number of factors that influence readers aged 9 to 12 when choosing books: genre, length, cost, condition of the book and availability (see: Appendix H).
After selecting a book, what obviously comes next is the act of reading. Chambers reminds us that this requires time and an environment that enhances the concentration that sustained reading demands. Finally, reading always provokes some kind of response from the reader, whether it be recognition, frustration, confusion, anger or distaste. When circumstances are appropriate, a reader may want to talk about the book with someone else, preferably another reader. If the book was enjoyed, the reader will hope to repeat the experience. If a book has been a disappointment, the reader will probably hope to expect something more from another choice. And so the cycle begins again.

Aidan Chambers (1991) later refined his reading circle by introducing the concept of the "enabling adult" - any person who helps the children in his or her care to enjoy books and become committed readers. This is how Chambers summarizes this function:

What is it that enabling adults, teachers especially, do? They provide, stimulate, demonstrate and respond. They provide books and time to read them and an attractive environment where people want to read. They stimulate a desire to become a thoughtful reader. They demonstrate by reading aloud and by their own behaviour what a 'good' reader does. And they respond, and help others respond to the individuality of everyone in the reading community they belong to.

Chambers, 1991, p. 92

As I began my investigation into the significance, procedures and growth of a response-based program I had several assumptions about a literacy program and about the role the teacher could play in enriching a student's growth as a reader. In a literature-based classroom I knew it was important to surround the students with literature and create an environment "dripping with literacy" (Goodman, 1986). I developed a classroom library and I strongly committed my personal budget to selecting books that would support the curriculum, address the range of readers, frame thematic units
and offer the students a variety of genres that would give them satisfaction. To this end I have acquired over 2000 titles of fiction, non-fiction and poetry resources that surround the classroom. Over the years I have collected and displayed greeting cards, postcards, and magazine photos that convey images of readers; arranged posters on bulletin boards and on the ceiling that send messages to the students about the importance of reading - the cartoon character of Garfield standing atop a pile of books with the slogan 'Books Build Better Brains', and displayed student-made posters featuring slogans about reading. Each day I read aloud a picture book to the students and have a student read aloud a poem that he or she has transcribed on chart paper. I record the titles of books we read on a calendar displayed on the bulletin board and each Friday morning we choose our favourite book of the week and at month's end choose our favourite book of the month. I take time to read novels aloud completing about ten to twelve titles each year. Students are given time to read material from anthologies, poetry collections, texts, novel sets. We belong to a book club where each month students are invited to purchase books to add to their personal collection. I have taken the students on trips to the local library to ensure that each student has a card for the community library. I have established a Buddy program where students read to and with students in younger grades. I have practiced shared reading where students read poems chorally in large and small groups. During class discussions we have talked about a range of literary topics including the authors' style - how they began their books, how they structured chapters, the choice of titles, the use of dialogue, the reasons for similes and metaphors, the breaking of conventions, speculating on why they chose certain words to convey an image. We've discussed how poems are different from prose, how to determine a poem's rhyme scheme, the shape of poems, the use of white spaces, what makes a poem appealing and the confusion of some poetry images. We talked about our processes as readers - how
we choose books, how we abandon books, how long we can focus on
our reading, where and when we choose to read, what experiences we
are reminded of by the reading, what puzzles we have. We have
talked about a book's format - the end pages, dedications, the
connection between illustration and text, the range of type size,
fonts, the information provided on a book cover, copyright dates,
author information. And we discussed what the book made us think
about - stories from our own lives, stories that have happened to
others we know, stories that were written by other authors, news
events, movies and television shows, and how the books connected
to the lives we know and imagine.

Like teaching, research is a "complicated and messy process"
(Hubbard and Power, 1993, xvii) that cannot be divided into neat
linear steps. The research that I undertook allowed me to observe
my literacy program, modify practice in light of my observations,
readings, reflections and discussions, and assess the results.
This in turn lead to a further cycle of program modification and
assessment. For Gordon Wells (1998), Action Research moves in a
"never-ending spiral" and though I was caught in the spiral, I
felt that with each strategy that I introduced to promote an
interactive model of literacy, my teaching evolved always with the
intention of improving practice. The paradox, it seems, is that in
looking back on my practice, I push myself forward in the change
process.

Always there was room for change. Reflection allows us to build on
our learnings for "it is by considering where we have come from
that we can discover where and who we are; we can also see where
we want to head next and determine what we shall need to do to get
there" (Wells, 1998, p. 5).

When I began this study, attention to response journals helped me
to enrich personal response but the strategy did not, however,
build a sense of interaction, a place where the students and teacher could best collaborate to share knowledge and make meaning. In other words it was a community of readers that I needed to encourage and maintain.

**Building a Community of Readers**

Jay Lemke (1985) argues that schools are not "knowledge delivery systems" but human social institutions in which people influence one another's lives. Careful attention needs to be given by teachers to the ways in which they and their students create shared systems of meaning. This, I have learned, happens through talk. In classrooms "talk should arise from, and further stimulate, the individual monologues of response" (Britton, 1968, p. 8).

Building a community of learners creates an environment conducive to making meaning. When a community of readers shares interpretations, individual members create different interpretations that intensify the meaning-making possibilities for the whole group. Making connections to the text and to the experiences of others "forges 'literacy links' that strengthen comprehension for the whole community (O'Keefe, 1995, p. 124).

The most influential person on reading in North America today is talk show host Oprah Winfrey who, in 1996, introduced a monthly book club on her television show. Every month Oprah selects a book that will be discussed and that book becomes an instant bestseller as hundreds of thousands readers buy her latest choice from local book stores (e.g. *The Reader* by Bernard Schlink, or *A Lesson Before Dying* by Ernest J. Gaines). It appears that the reason people are so involved in Oprah's club is that it makes people realize that talking about a book with others who have also read
it - or hearing others talk about it - lets people share an emotional experience they've all been involved in. In a magazine article, psychologist Marla Woods, (1997) claims that the book club "satisfies the yearning we all have to connect with others." Each month Winfrey receives thousands of letters where readers share their thoughts about the month's selection and viewership increases when they tune in for Oprah's book club meetings with the author as guest. The success of Oprah's book club has led to the creation of over a quarter million book clubs - mostly women's (Time, 04/23/97) - across the country.

In the classroom, we can replicate the situation most closely by providing opportunities for students to talk about books with their peers and teacher, and to follow up the reading of a book they've enjoyed by choosing another. As Vivenne Nicolle and Victoria Roberts (1993) point out, many children won't choose to talk spontaneously about what they've read without some encouragement and modeling. It is, therefore, up to the teacher to provide occasions for this talk: during a read-aloud session when all the students are gathered on the rug, in a literature circle or small group discussion or by taking an amount of time in any given day - timetabled or not timetabled - to have the students turn to someone and talk about what they thought about a book, story, poem or article. What is discussed on such occasions depends on what previous experiences the students have had and what modeling teachers or other enabling adults have provided.

When students meet in literature study groups they are given the opportunity to express their experiences in a relaxed, non-threatening atmosphere. When students feel comfortable to share their opinions and talk about their experiences, a sense of trust and confidence evolves, thus enabling the learners in the community to share without reservation.
One aim for the students is to have them eventually be able to articulate their own responses without the guidance of the teacher or without any intervention. The challenge is for the students to talk in depth saying more than "I like this book because it's exciting." Through talking with others about what they've enjoyed, or not enjoyed, justifying their opinions, children are likely to develop their own literary tastes and grow in their appreciation of books. Real dialogues about literature emerge "when group members feel comfortable enough with their peers to share parts of their life experiences. They talk about real issues sparked by the literature. Debating both sides of an issue leads to well-rounded discussions and new insights" (Strube, 1996, p. 10).

Throughout my inquiry I have borrowed from a number of models to help shape my thinking. Reading about other teachers' classrooms, experts who have achieved success at interactive literacy, talking to others about their own literacy programs, and writing about my practice, have all contributed to a woven fabric of understanding of Interactive Literacy programs. I value useful models of interaction - Harve Daniels (1994) Literature Circles: Voice and Choice in the Student Centred Classroom; Susan Schwartz and Maxine Bone (1995) Retelling, relating, reflecting: Beyond the 3 R's; Aidan Chambers (1991), Tell Me: Children Reading and Talk - which have given me threads to weave into my own personal understanding of helping children become better readers. Whether I assigned roles to the students to make Literature Circles more productive (Daniels), implemented a framework to categorize and assess student responses (Schwartz and Bone) or used a range of questions to stimulate response (Chambers), my practice was always evolving to promote the deepest response possible.

The Significant Responses to a Story
It was quiet reading time in the classroom and I was conferencing with a student about the novel she was reading. As I tried to conduct the interview, two boys were not reading silently but were arguing using gestures that involved feeling each other's pulse and touching their necks. I was curious about the talk and asked Josh what was going on. He said that he and Mark were talking about how you could kill someone by biting through their veins. They were squeezing their veins pretending to get bitten by a vampire and arguing whether it could kill someone by stopping their blood stream from flowing. I asked how they came to be talking about the circulatory system and Josh explained that he had been reading a new picture book version of Dracula and in the story Dracula had just bitten someone in the neck.

In my classroom, when I program for silent reading time, I seldom get silence. Often there is a buzz of conversations. Many of these talks are prompted by wonderings, as students engaged with the books. I value these kinds of talks. I value it when conversations like Josh and Mark's happen spontaneously, without the structure of a literature circle, without a teacher's question and without the assigned task of writing down your thoughts in a journal.

I was recently reading aloud poems from a new anthology Insectlopedia by Douglas Florian. One poem entitled "The Army Ants", (left right. left right/ We're army ants/ we swarm, we fight...) seemed to capture the attention of the students. When I finished reading the poem, Laura put up her hand and told the story of her next door neighbour who had a ferret named Spank who saw some red ants crawling in the yard and decided to attack them. The next day, she explained, the ferret's tongue was sticky and all red and lumpy. When Laura finished telling her story, Ian put up his hand and told us about an episode during a family vacation involving his brother and a red ant. Apparently he got the ants to crawl on his hand and took them over to the swimming pool to
drown. Ian decided to help the ants and he scooped them in a bucket and let them go free. Next, Michael told a story about the time he was in Cuba. He was sitting by the pool when ants started climbing up his pants. He told us that he was itchy from ant bites for the whole week.

Later, some students chose to record these memories in their notebooks:

   In India we have lots of ants. One day I was playing in the sand box. I saw a line of ants in a big hole. It was their home. I was very amazed when I saw their homes

   (Richi)

   My next door neighbour has lots of ants. She also has a little sister and her sister calls ants my little dears.

   (Laura)

   Once at my old house my friend Brandon and I snuck into the creek all the time. One time when we went to the creek to catch frogs when all these red ants crawled up my face and stung me. From that day on we never ever went back to the creek anymore to catch frogs.

   (Josh)

Several years ago, I attended a workshop at a conference and heard Margaret Meek discuss the role of talk in literacy development. At one point, Meek told the audience: "The best response to a story is to tell another story". Her statement gave me a whack on the side of my head and Iscribbled it on my conference folder. The words have been haunting me ever since as I strive to engage children with literature in meaningful ways.

When a child reads or listens to a story and is reminded of a story from his her past, I believe the book has done its job. In a response to "The Army Ants", Laura is stimulated to tell a story
that she is reminded of when she listened to the poem and her story led others to share their stories. One student recalling personal experiences from his or her past can prompt other stories in the minds of the classmates and teacher. This sharing of stories and ideas is the social stuff of conversation. This transaction between reader and text is the stuff of personal response.

Similar to the reminiscences and anecdotes that were inspired by listening to the poem "The Army Ants" and the book *July* (see: Chapter IV, pp. 60-70), students can hitchhike on one another's ideas to tell stories from their lives. These stories not only reveal the students' life experiences and their ideas, but build a dimension of who they are. Susan Engel (1995), author of *The Stories Children Tell*, writes: "Each time a child describes an experience he or someone else has had, he constructs part of his past, adding to his sense of who he is and conveying that sense to others" (p. 1). Stories can be used to give children reference points for their experiences. For Robert Fulford (1999) "there is no such thing as just a story. A story is always charged with meaning, otherwise it is not a story, merely a sequence of events" (p. 6).

Because we are human, we have a multitude of narratives swimming around inside of us. According to Harold Rosen (1988), narrative is an important mode of thought which helps us to order our experiences and construct reality. For Rosen "narrative is nothing if not a supreme means of rendering otherwise chaotic, shapeless events into a coherent whole, saturated with meaning" (p. 164). It is the responsibility of the teacher, therefore to give time and attention for children to use narrative in their thinking, speaking and writing in order to develop the full range of their cognitive ability. Unless children are given opportunities to tell their stories, they may never come to understand or give meaning
to them. Story enables children to give shape to their life experiences through recounting them, or to compare them with similar experiences from literary sources (Kerry Mallan, 1991).

Teachers and children have their own treasure-chests of stories waiting to be unlocked and shared. The stories of others, whether written or oral, whether authored in books or come from those in the classroom community, provide the keys to those treasure chests. James Britton (1970) says that if a story is close to a child's experience, it will "strengthen and confirm" that child's view of the world. This is true not only of literary stories but also of children's own stories. When given voice, these stories will provide opportunities for children to reflect on events and make sense of experience.

Oral narrative is a powerful way of validating one's own life to oneself and to others. What may first be fleeting memories gain significance when they are told out loud. "When stories are told by children, our role (apart from listening to them) is to imbue them with meaning. They are not simply anecdotes, but appraisals of their experiences. Their confidence grows, and out of it gradually blossoms a cognition that what they say appears to have significance to others" (Barton and Booth, 1990, p. 51).

When we tell stories, we bring others into our own worlds. Our classrooms need to provide stages for children to tell their stories to others. Vivan Gussin Paley (1999) in her book The Kindness of Children wonders if the classroom is the only place left where we are guaranteed a full turn on the stage. If no one listens to our stories, we may forever feel disconnected. Paley writes: "when a member of the San People of southern Africa is away from the tribe for even a day, he is said to have died... 'Since I cannot hear the stories told when I am gone,' a man explained, 'then I have died on that day'" (p. 59).
My experience with children responding to books by telling life stories has led me to believe strongly that time must be allowed for children to recall stories, to tell their stories to others, and to find connections - to the text, to the past and to each other. As the students and I gather together as a "Story Tribe" (Barton and Booth, 1990), we validate each other's experiences as well as explore shared meanings. In this way I am able to give children a sense of significance and recognition which will hopefully impact their learning and living beyond the classroom rug.

In the following outline, I have attempted to provide a guideline for promoting oral narrative in the classroom in order to achieve the best of responses to story:

1. Choose good books
2. Take the time to listen
3. Allow digression
4. Tell your own stories
5. Organize small groups
6. Initiate responses before during or after reading a story
7. Honour a variety of connections
8. Ask questions
9. Invite children to record their stories in writing
10. Do nothing
Ten Ways to Promote Oral Narrative

1. Choose good books

Since I have over 2000 books in my classroom, how do I select which stories to share with the children when they gather on the rug to listen to me read? The daily read-aloud choices are framed by favourite authors (Anthony Browne, Dav Pilkey, John Burningham, Lois Ehlert), a theme we are exploring (ancient civilizations, bullies) or topics (dolphins, holiday celebrations). The challenge for teachers is to find stories which might make a connection to the children's lives even though we can never predict what these connections will be. In a community of young readers, every book can promote a range of responses. The interests, backgrounds and life experiences of children are wide and what they take from the story will be just as varied. A good book leaves readers with something to think about, or puzzle about. What a good book does is help connect the lives of children with the literary world at the same time as offer them journeys into worlds they might have never experienced. Books allow me to bring the world into the classroom and take the classroom out into the world. A cue I use for buying books and sharing them aloud: if a story helps me think of stories from my own life, then I am encouraged to share it with children with the hope that it will resonate for them too. Several books are in themselves stories of reminiscence which I find help me with the job of having the children share their own stories: The Relatives Came by Cynthia Rylant, Night Noises by Mem Fox, When I Was Nine by James Stevenson, The Dust Bowl by David Booth, The Auction by Jan Andrews and Owl Moon by Jane Yolen.

2. Take the time to listen

Just as a ritual time needs to be set aside for reading stories to the class, a deliberate time needs to be established for story
discussion. From time to time a structured event needs to be introduced to have the children share their stories that they have been reminded of as they listened to the story. However, I find that, more often than not, children are sparked to tell stories spontaneously without a prompt from the teacher. These stories cannot be ignored, as these opportunities are what truly make our curriculum authentic. We must, according to Lissa Paul (1988), "listen attentively to the kinds of clues that the children give about what interests them. We just trust the children to take from the story what is important to them" (p. 16). As teachers we have a responsibility to respond positively to all children's stories because they can offer important clues of who the children are.

3. Allow digression

The stories that children tell may not necessarily be connected to the topic at hand. Digressions will emerge, especially if a longer period of time is given for conversation. Whatever story the child chooses to tell, it is important to him or her. How he or she came to choose that story to tell is not as significant - at first - as the telling. Sometimes it's curious how children came to think of a story. We could ask: "What made you think of that story?". Usually a word or a snippet of narrative that they have listened to made stories from their lives bob to the surface. Recently when I went to visit a kindergarten class, I told them that I had new book about a cat. One child put up his hand and told me that his uncle took him to the zoo and he told about the polar bears that he saw. Another child then told us about her visit to the zoo. The topics that the children choose may not be the ones that we expect and these digressions need to be honoured and respected.

4. Tell your own stories
If the best response to a story is to tell a story, then the best of the best responses in the classrooms is for us to tell stories from our own lives that have come to mind as we read a book. By sharing our own stories, we are not only modelling what we hope the children will do, but we are demonstrating how one makes personal connections and gains personal meaning from reading. Sometimes it is important to make this connection very explicit. When a sentence or passage I read stirs up a memory, I draw the children's attention to it and tell the children... "this reminds me of the time that I..." When I was reading The Relatives Came by Cynthia Rylant aloud to the children, I told them about a family reunion when I was five year's old and my cousins from Florida came to visit. When I told the story about falling out the window while playing, the children had many stories to tell about accidents in their lives.

5. Organize small groups

To be human is to respond. When I read stories aloud, I believe that some response is evoked in the young children in front of me and stories are sparked as they listen to the text. It is true, though, that a majority of children who are sitting on the rug in front of me do not choose to tell us what stories came to their minds. Speaking in front of others can be a high threat for many. To promote conversation and interaction, I often have the children turn to someone around them and relate their thoughts about a book, particularly what the book reminded them of. If a child says he didn't think of anything, he or she might be prompted to tell a story after a friend has told his or hers. It is important to introduce a variety of groupings (pairs and small groups, gender balance, teacher-organized or freely-chosen by the children). A colleague of mine, Brian Crawford, introduces story talk very successfully with his kindergarten class. When Brian finishes reading a story he tells the children to find a partner. Each
child in turn is given time to tell what he or she thought about the book and what they thought about as they listened to the book.

6. Initiate Response before during or after reading a story

Sometimes when I introduce a story, I ask the children to talk about what the title of the book reminds them of. For instance, *Canoe Days* by Gary Paulsen was recently chosen as the daily read-aloud and many children had stories to share about being on a canoe, camping trips or boat trips. As I continue to read a story I usually find that one or two children put up their hands to tell us what they thought of. Sometimes during the reading of a story, I take the opportunity to pause and ask the children if they ever had an experience like the one described in the book. Other times when I finish a story, I organize small groups where students are given the opportunity to talk about their responses with their peers. After the small group discussion, we make these conversations public in a whole class context.

7. Honour a variety of connections

Sometimes the stories that children tell are not directly related to personal experiences but rather connections are made to other stories they have heard or read, movies or television shows they have seen, or the experiences of other people they know. When I introduced *The Rabbit* by John Burningham to a group of grade one children, I asked if anyone had any experiences with rabbits. I recognize that a large number of children may never have seen or touched a rabbit. Limiting the talk to things that happened to them personally may not include the majority of the children. To stretch the realm of their connections, children need to be encouraged to think of others they know (fictional or not), who might have had similar experiences to the one's being discussed. Broadening connections can release more stories to be told.
8. Ask questions

To help children dig deeper into their memory caves, it is useful to interview the children to help them elaborate on the details of their anecdote. It is not only the teacher who should be asking the questions, but opportunities should be offered to the classmates to ask questions of the storyteller. When significant questions are asked, the storyteller can better shape the story as he or she conveys specific details connected to the story. Besides making the story more impressionable, questions might lead the child into further inspecting memory and uncovering its significance.

9. Invite Children to Record their Stories in Writing

Sometimes children need encouragement to move the oral narratives into written narratives. The purpose of the invitation is not just to get them to become better writers. The experiences that they write about have a formative effect on the child's developing narrative voice and through this his developing sense of self. Lucy McCormick Calkins (1991) tells us that "when we write memoir, we must discover not only the moments of our lives but the meanings in those moments" (p. 177). Children have enough memories and enough stories to tell, but the challenge, according to Calkins, is to find out how particular moments fit into the plot lines of our lives. When we record anecdotes or memories we are writing about a time in the past that make up our personal histories. To write these stories down speaks to who we are today. What the children notice today, feel today, or reminisce about today, is woven into the tapestry of their histories. Time needs be given to have the students record these stories, preferably in a notebook where they can accumulate.
10. Do nothing

When children listen to a book, stories may wander through their heads, but these stories might not be released and made public. It is not always necessary to have the children tell what a book reminded them of. Just let the story be. Sometimes, the stories that have been awakened need to remain private in the minds of children. Though in our classrooms we want the children to release these stories to enrich the community of storytellers and conversationalists, we need to be respectful of the silence of children. There are many reasons for this silence. By demonstrating that we can respond to a story by telling another story, students will come to share their ideas and their stories by choice rather than on demand. Moreover when they come to read books on their own, they will come to understand how books can connect to the stories of their lives.

A Letter from Liza Taylor

Much time has passed since I embarked upon this inquiry. The students who were the subjects of my study are much older and I often wonder what the impact of my work on their development has been.

Recently, a letter was sent to me from Liza, who was a student in my grade five class and a member of The Poetry Club. Accompanying Liza's letter was a story she had written for her high school English class (see: Appendix I). Here is the beginning:

Her journey was a simple one. All Norah's life all she wanted to do was find out how words were able to change people's lives. You might think that finding about how
words affect people's emotions would be a simple quest but for her it wasn't. All she wanted was the ability to affect people's emotions with her words.

Liza's story takes place in a dwarf society a long long time ago in a world not unlike Earth. Norah was in love with the gift of music her parents had introduced her to, and although they had lots of books, Norah's problem was that she couldn't read. Years passed and Norah had no idea what the symbols on the pages meant and so she continued a charade of pretend reading ... until her fourth year of gatherings when she met a brand new instructor named Sir Dwarf Swartz.

Sir Dwarf Swartz and Norah met after class outside in an enchanted forest to read, and in the guise of a wizard, Swartz would pick novels to read and teach Norah "to read and to express her emotions through poetry, art and music". Over time, Norah would join in her family conversations about reading and her new found understanding of the power of words impressed Norah's family. One day, Norah expects to meet her wizard and continue with their lessons as usual, but instead of her teacher she finds a book filled with poems she had written and stories she had read. Norah picks up the book and reads the title: Norah's Story.

At that moment Norah realized that she had discovered how to read not just with words but with paintings and music and poems and that she was beginning to understand how words affected people's emotions and that she had discovered how to read.

From out of the blue appeared Swartz. "Finally," he said, "you have realized that words and emotions are expressed in many forms. And most of all you now understand words and are able to enjoy reading" he said. "So my journey with you is done but my dear, yours is just beginning..."
I taught reading to the children in my classroom with the best intentions of helping them become people who love books, people who know that their opinions matter. During my journey in this research I have taken many side trips from my original plans all the time offering them the "messiness of human response" (Atwell, 1998). In Liza's story she tells that Sir Dwarf Swartz helped her realize that "words and emotions are expressed in many forms", which after all parallels my work of helping my students become literate human beings.

I recognize that I am just one person in the children's lives for ten months. I recognize, too, that the learning that takes place in the context of the classroom can never fully be realized until years ahead. My research was about doing my job as a reading teacher and my journey with the young readers in the community ends as theirs continue.
References


Children's Literature Cited


Appendix A

Transcript: A response to the Prologue to the novel The Winter Room by Gary Paulsen.

To learn what the students felt about themselves as readers, I provided them with the passage that for me, best respects the notion of personal response. In the following transcript a group of students to discuss "Tuning" which is the Prologue to Gary Paulsen's novel, The Winter Room, and share some of their thoughts about reading. These students are making meaning from the printed word, as they explore the ideas of the author and interweave them with their own.

If books could have more, give more, be more, show more, they would still need readers who bring them sound and smell and light and all the rest that can't be found in books.

The book needs you.

Gary Paulsen, from The Winter Room 1989, p. 3

Participants: Liza (L); Miranda (M); Sunny (S); Christi(C); Heidi(H); Georgette (G); James (J); Teacher (T).

1 T: What do you think Gary Paulsen means when he writes "The book needs you"?
2 L: I think the author means that without you the book is nothing except for all kinds of words.
3 M: A book doesn't make any sense if nobody's reading it.
4 S: It's sort of like the book and the person need each other.
5 T: How does the person need the book?
6 S: Without a book they wouldn't learn anything. And the book
without a person is just words on paper.

7 C: All that's in a book is words. You have to picture what you think would be in your head, matching the words, the noise that it would make would be in your head and the pictures that you thought should be in your head.

8 S: No - I think that a book does have sounds and smells... but only you need a reader...

9 C: No - you imagine them.

10 T: What does a reader do for a book?

11 H: Because when the author writes a book, he gets all his enthusiasm and puts it on paper.

12 S: He puts his imagination on paper.

13 J: So you can read his mind

14 S: ...read his thoughts... A book is nothing without a reader...

15 H: ... until you understand it and like it.

16 L: A book is just black and white lines on paper.

17 S: A person is nothing without a book either

18 T: Why do you say that?

19 S: Because we wouldn't know anything. Because you pass on things you know to your sons or something by writing it down. You can't tell them when you're dead.

20 H: I think books can't have light!

21 S: They do have light!

22 H: They have light when people read it.

23 S: They have light when the sun shines in.

24 L: Or when your eyes shine on it.

25 S: But it won't shine by itself - unless it's a really good book.

26 T: How does a teacher help a book come alive?

27 L: The reader helps the book come alive because you give it sort of like a light.

28 C: Everyone has a question in their mind...

29 L: ... and the book gives them more thoughts...
30 S: The reader is part of the mind of the book.... the thoughts and mind of the book...
31 J: When he reads it, a person makes pictures in his mind.
32 T: Is it the person's imagination that does that or is it the author's writing?
33 J: It's the person's imagination...
34 S: It's the author.
35 J: I'd say it's both.
36 S: It's both. The author uses his imagination and gives you sort of like a plot and you can think about the theme or what happens.
37 J: So he puts his thoughts on paper to put thoughts in your mind.
38 G: I think books do have light. Sometimes a person is mad or miserable or something. A book sometimes lights them up and brings them into another world instead of this one.
39 S: But he has to read it.
40 G: Yeah... they read it.
41 S: A book has everything it says in here - it can smell, it can see, it can have light - just as long as the reader is there.
42 C: A book can have plot, it can have words, it can have pictures but it can't have light.
43 S: It can have life.
44 C: It can have life in your head because you're thinking about it.
45 L: You can be the characters. If the book's so good, you want to be the character, the book has life in your head.
46 S: Mr. Swartz wrote something in my notebook about a poet who said "I like to wander in other men's minds," or something like that. When you read you go into the author's mind. The author writes it down and you read it so you go into his mind...
47 H: When you read you take the character's personality...
Sometimes you have to read the whole book to understand it.

48 T: Do you always have to read the whole book?

49 H: Well, it depends what kind of book it is. Sometimes I skip parts.

50 T: Why would you skip a part?

51 H: It's boring... they lose you...you don't think you need that part because it's not interesting.

52 S: Or you don't think it's necessary. In The White Mountains, he said that they were cutting the small part from his armpit and the author describes an ant crawling on the ground - you don't think that's important - but I think the author writes that because the character wants to get his mind off the pain and so he sees the ant.

53 G: Reading books could have sound... what does that mean?

54 S: If a book has a reader... it can have all those things that Gary Paulsen talks about because you can make it happen.

55 L: Books teach you stuff - more than probably your teacher does.

56 T: Sometimes...

57 S: The teacher only teaches you about math and stuff like that but books teach you more.

58 L: ... how life can improve...

59 S: ... how other people are feeling...

60 T: ... Books do more than teach you things, don't they?

61 C: It helps your thoughts and you travel wide. It makes you think of things you never knew before... bad people and good people... in Where the Red Fern Grows... that made me think...

62 H: He talks about the boy's feeling and how the animals felt toward each other.

63 G: I read Sister and that book gave me life. It made me think that you should always be nice to friends, even though you're not relatives.

64 H: I read books that I could relate to the people and their
problems.
65 T: What about the words the author uses?
66 C: One word in a sentence makes you think about what was just said. In *Where the Red Fern Grows*, as so as I read that they both died and the fern came... I though about it a long time. I felt really said because the dogs died and I liked the dogs in the story.
67 L: In *The Ugly Little Boy* everybody goes "ahh" and thinks that the boy is so ugly... but the word can mean other things.
68 H: Christi read me this newspaper article about how these animals kept dying in plane cargoes.
69 C: ... because there's too much pressure.
70 H: When they wrote that in the paper it kind of gave you the feeling of how the animals felt.
71 C: ... the feelings of how you should feel about them... if you should feel happy or sad or mad...
72 H: There are all kinds of animals that are dead and when they wrote that article, the made it sound...
73 L: ... terrible.
74 H: It really is terrible. You could have the feelings of the animals. I could just picture them... you could smell...
75 L: Like they say at a new baby's in the house and you smell the powder and it's really nice.
76 H: ... and when you smell stuff like pie baking, you think of cinnamon. When they write in books, "The apple pie was in the oven"... you think of the smell.
77 T: O.K. So is it your mind or what the author writes?
78 C: It's our mind.
79 S: Actually it's the author that makes us think about it.
80 L: Because the author thought about it and he gave the thought to us...
81 T: What makes a book really good?
82 S: The way the author writes it.
83 G: Sometimes they have an introduction and that gets you
interested. Just like "Tuning" is the introduction to Gary Paulsen's story.

84 L: A lot has to do with the writing of the author and the way he makes your mind work and you imagine and stuff.

85 S: No, the reader makes the book come alive. If the reader doesn't have the imagination, when he reads the book he won't feel how good the book is. You need imagination.

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Appendix B

**Questions I Have About Using Reading Journals**

- Do students summarize plot?
- Do they discuss what they like about a book?
- Do they explain why they "like" the book?
- Do they discuss what they "dislike" about the book?
- Do they ask questions about what they've read?
- Do they discuss things they don't understand? (i.e. confusions/puzzlements)?
- What memories were recalled as the student read the book?
- Do they explain how the book reminds them of their own experiences?
- Do they explain how the book reminds them of the experiences of others?
- Do they make connections to other books they've read?
- Do they make connections to movies/television shows they've seen?
- Do they refer to experiences in the classroom?
- Do they make predictions about what might happen next in the story?
- Do they record 'surprises'?
- Do they talk about the way the author has written sentences? Paragraphs?
- Do they state things they learned (i.e. factual information) from their reading?
- Do they reveal some things they've learned through their reading about the world around?
- Do they record the words of authors in their journals?
- Do they comment on the behaviour of the characters?
- Do they compare the characters from one novel to another?
- Do they discuss how the characters remind them of people they know?
- Do they identify/sympathize with particular characters and discuss what makes them feel this way?
- Do they comment on any changes the character might have gone through?
- Do they discuss the setting of the story?
- Do they comment on the conflict of the story and how it becomes resolved?
- Are the students conscious of why the writer might have written what he/she did?
- Do they offer opinions/give advice to authors?
- Do they recommend books to others and explain why they recommend the book?
- Do their entries show an understanding of the genre?
- Do they comment on the point of view/voice the author has chosen?
- Do they comment on such literary topics as length of chapter, jacket copy, type size, choice of font, leads, titles, dedication, copyright dates?
- Do they digress from responding to the text?
- What pictures come to their minds as they read?
- Do they use the journal to record ideas that were aroused through small or large group discussion?
- Do they use the journal to record their perspectives that were aroused through small or large group discussion?
- Do they record daydreams that have been prompted by reading?
- Do they express wishes that their own life (or someone that they know) was more like a character in their book?
• How did their feelings change as they read the book - excitement, sadness, wonder, irritation, dislike, recognition, compassion?

• How has the book clarified or changed or confused their beliefs?

• What feelings are aroused by the reading?

• Do the students discuss why they've chosen a book?

• Do they record how much they've read?

• Do they discuss why they might have chosen to stop reading a book?

• Do they write in their journals without any prompts?

• Was the journal entry written in class? at home?

• Do they record in their journals regularly?

• Do they date their entries?

• At what time of day do they favour writing in their journals?

• Do they sustain their entries (i.e. continue a thought from one day to the next)

• Was the journal entry written before? during? after? reading?

• Do they cross out/erase words?

• Do they frequently use the pronoun 'I'?

• How much time might they spend on a journal entry?

• Does the length of journal entries vary?

• Do they write in pen? pencil? marker?

• Do they use a journal given by the teacher or do they use their own notebook?

• Do they ask if they could have time to write in their journals?

• What changes can be noted in a student's use of journals? What influenced these changes?
- Do they experiment with form (voice, format, underlining, parenthesis)?
- Do the journal entries become longer/shorter over a period of time?
- Do they write in point form? paragraphs?
- Do they use illustrations to convey a thought?
- Do they draw diagrams, charts or maps to reveal comprehension?
- Do they recommend books to others and explain why they recommend the book?
- Do their entries show an understanding of the genre?
- Do they comment on the point of view/ voice the author has chosen?
- Do they comment on such literary topics as length of chapter, jacket copy, type size, choice of font, leads, titles, dedication, copyright dates?
- Do they need talk to precede writing in their journal?
- Are they enthused about sharing their journals?
- What are some significant ways to have the students share entries?
- Do they see reading response journals as being different from other kinds of journals?
- Do they expect spelling and sentence errors to be corrected?
- Do they go back to earlier entries to 'revise' their thoughts?
- How does response to independent reading differ from response to books read aloud?
- Do they respond to the teacher's questions and comments that have been written inside their journal?
- Do they solicit a response from the teacher? (i.e. seek clarification, ask for opinions, seek recommendations)?
• How do they respond when prompts/cues are assigned?
• Do they use the journal to dialogue with others besides the teacher (i.e. peers, parents)?
• Who is the audience they address?
• Do they dialogue with the teacher/peers?
• What are the significant responses a teacher can provide to promote growth in response?
• Do they want to keep certain entries in their journals private?
• Do they discuss/argue meaning with the teacher/peers?
• Do they use journal entries to promote discussion (in small and/or large groups)?
• Do they see themselves as having a conversation with the author?
• How often should the teacher respond to student responses?
• Do they understand how journals can be a medium for assessment?
• How often do they need to write in their journals for the teacher to have a significant assessment of their reading?
• Do they see the reading journal as a 'test' of their reading?
• Do they see the reading journal as a 'test' of their writing?
• Do they see the journals as 'penalty-free'?
• Do the students feel that they can be honest in their journals?
• Are they able to assess their own reading behaviours?
• Do they discuss what they 'do' as they read?
• Do they discuss what happened in their minds as they read?
• Do they comment on how quickly or slowly they read?
• Do they think that writing in a journal interrupts their enjoyment of reading?

• Do they understand the significance of responding in journals?

• Do they enjoy writing in their journals?

• Are the journals important to them?

• Do they see the journal as a medium for interacting with text?

• Do they think journal writing helps them grow as readers?

• Do they see themselves as meaning makers?
Appendix D

There Was Once a Whole World in the Scarecrow

The farmer has dismantled the old scarecrow.
He has pulled out the straw and scattered it.
The wind has blown it away.
(A mouse once lived in its straw heart.)
He has taken off the old coat.
(In the torn pocket a grasshopper lived.)
He has thrown away the old shoes.
(In the left shoe a spider sheltered.)
He has taken away the hat.
(A little sparrow once nested there.)
And now the field is empty.
The little mouse has gone.
The grasshopper has gone.
The spider has gone.
The bird has gone,
The scarecrow,
Their world,
Has gone.
It has
all
g
on
e.

Brian Patten
Appendix E
The Poetry Club: Favourite Poem Choices from Anthologies

Sunny's Choices

Birches - Robert Frost
Morte d'Arthur - Alfred Lord Tennyson
Song of the witches - William Shakespeare (from Macbeth)
Stopping by woods on a snowy evening - Robert Frost
When we were young - John Hegley

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James's Choices

Amulet - Ted Hughes
The Frog Prince - Stevie Smith
The Scarecrow - Walter de la Mare
Stopping by woods on a snowy evening - Robert Frost
The way through the woods - Rudyard Kipling

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Jason's Choices

The dinosaur dinner - Dennis Lee
Drums of my father - Shirley Daniels
A mosquito in the cabin - Myra Stilborn
Poems can give you - Sandra Bogart
Trip to the seashore - Lois Simmie

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Heidi's Choices

Famous - Naomi Shihab Nye
The poem that got away - Felice Holman
Suppose - Siv Cedering
Valentine for Ernest Mann - Naomi Shihab Nye
We could be friends - Myra Cohn Livingston

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**Lisa's Choices**

Daffodils - William Wordsworth
In time of silver rain - Langston Hughes
January - John Updike
A new year - Mary Carolyn Davies
Snow toward evening - Melville Cane

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**Lisa's Choices**

Lines - Judith Nicholls
The minute book - Julie O'Callaghan
Phone - Diane Dawber
We have our moments - Arnold Adoff
The window and I - Julie O'Callaghan

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**Georgette's Choices**

Black kid in a new place
Coming home on my own
One
Pods Pod and Grin
Susan
Appendix F

The Reader’s Bill of Rights

1) The right to not read
2) The right to skip pages
3) The right to not finish
4) The right to reread
5) The right to read anything
6) The right to escapism
7) The right to read anywhere
8) The right to browse
9) The right to read out loud
10) The right to not defend your tastes

Daniel Pennac

### Appendix H

**Factors Influencing Novel Choice by Students, Aged 9 to 12**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Factor</th>
<th>Question</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Level of difficulty</td>
<td>Is the novel too easy? Too challenging?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Length</td>
<td>Is the novel too long? Too short?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Format</td>
<td>Is the shape of the book appealing? The size of print?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Author</td>
<td>Is the author familiar? Is she or he popular?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Series</td>
<td>Is reading about familiar characters in familiar situations an appealing idea?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interests</td>
<td>Are the story and setting familiar? What new knowledge will be gained by reading this book?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Availability</td>
<td>Is the book a personal book, or does it belong to a library? A friend?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Situation</td>
<td>Will the book be read independently? As part of a small group?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Issues</td>
<td>What can be learned about political conflicts? Social conflicts? Personal conflicts?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cultures</td>
<td>What can be learned about personal identity?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Setting</td>
<td>Is the setting modern? Historical? Set in the future? Set in another country? Set in a place of interest?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Genre</td>
<td>Is it a favoured genre?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Popularity</td>
<td>Is the book popular with other students?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender Appeal</td>
<td>Is the novel free of stereotypes?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cover</td>
<td>Is the title appealing? The illustrations? The colours? The description? The review comments?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Promotion</td>
<td>How is the book promoted - by posters? By brochures? By a book club? By other means?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cost</td>
<td>Is the book affordable?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Appendix G

Appendix I