



Literature response groups in an interactive fourth grade classroom : a phenomenological study
by Valerie Katherine Cox

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Education
Montana State University

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Abstract:

This phenomenological study documents how a heterogeneous class of fourth grade readers collaboratively created meaning for literature during interactive, student-centered book discussion sessions.

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The researcher describes the changing role of the reading teacher, student ownership of the reading process, and naturalistic methods of observing children's reading processes.

LITERATURE RESPONSE GROUPS IN AN
INTERACTIVE FOURTH GRADE CLASSROOM:
A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY

by

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of the requirements for the degree

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This thesis has been read by each member of the graduate committee and has been found to be satisfactory regarding content, English usage, format, citations, bibliographic style, and consistency, and is ready for submission to the College of Graduate Studies.

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ABSTRACT

This phenomenological study documents how a heterogeneous class of fourth grade readers collaboratively created meaning for literature during interactive, student-centered book discussion sessions.

The researcher, acting in the role of a participant observer, recorded transcription of these literature response group discussions. During this year-long study conducted in 1990-91, the children's discussions gradually revealed their collective processes of negotiating meaning for literature. Their processes emerged as six dominant categories: (1) character persistence, (2) student-generated organic research, (3) textual presence of the novel within the course of discussion sessions, (4) corrective intervention of peers for substantive informational or clarification purposes, (5) negotiation of vivid images both externally imposed and internally generated, and (6) the making of connections between the world of the novel and that of the child reader.

The researcher describes the changing role of the reading teacher, student ownership of the reading process, and naturalistic methods of observing children's reading processes.

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

The Essential Enigma

The question that guided this research and the method of answering that question emerged gradually. In my elementary school teaching assignment, I was immersed in a search to find innovative ways to teach reading. On the home front, my 10-year-old son read avidly. My own love for the world of words dated back to my own efforts as a fourth grade child to write adventure stories. I wondered why I still held such vivid memories of long-past high school discussions about particular books. I admired the verbal ebb and flow of teacher Nancie Atwell's reading classes (Atwell, 1984, 1989) as she described her process of uncovering the ways middle-grade students read. Memories, personal interest, and needful professional curiosity converged to propel me to study my fourth grade students' reading experiences.

Wondering about my fourth grade students' reading processes prompted a palette of puzzlements that colored the formative phase of my search. I wondered how the children made sense of unfamiliar words, or vocabulary, as reading teachers called them. How did children become aware of story

elements such as plot, characterization, and point-of-view? Did young readers consider characters' motives? Would fourth grade readers wade into the murky waters of symbolic meanings? How could these children process scenes from literature for which they had no parallel life experience upon which to hook those scenes? Would they pool personal experience to help each other explicate the books that they read? How would my students interpret figurative language? These puzzlements laid upon my palette of possibilities until one research question emerged as a background upon which they could begin to reveal themselves.

I considered those puzzlements alongside what I knew about the readers that I taught. From 14 years of experience in teaching children in grades three through six, I knew that middle-grade students walked to recess in groups, decided what to play in herds, and talked freely and vociferously in clusters that magnetized spontaneously in the hallway. The children were living through what Victor Lowenfeld called the "Gang Age" (Lowenfeld & Brittain, 1987) and were intensely social beings. I had capitalized on the students' sociability in the past by assigning them to work in pairs or four-somes called cooperative learning groups (Johnson & Johnson, 1984). I had given these groups a broad gamut of reading-related tasks over the years in my classroom, from locating all the examples of figurative language or a character's traits in a story to collaborative editing of their own stories. I had watched; I had listened; I had evaluated their work and had come to value

highly the power of peer interaction in the classroom. Finally, I considered what interested my current reading class as individual students approached me from time to time bearing novels they had read, and asking if I'd read them, too. In such a way, these students invited me inside my class in the role of a fellow reader. The invitation having been extended, my search was more naturally begun. I would study how my own fourth grade students collaboratively made sense of literature. My students would become my research informants and, in the context of literature class, I would shed my teacherly distance and authority to transform myself into a participant in, as well as an observer of, the children's reading process. In wondering what the stories we read might mean to the children, I realized that I had settled upon a research question as I set out to discover how my classroom community of readers made meaning for what they read.

Choosing a Research Path

My research process was guided by the question, "How do fourth grade children collaboratively create meaning for literature?" Because I wanted my own presence in the classroom to minimally affect the children's process of meaning-making, and because I wanted to discover what could exist out there in the pool of children's thoughts about what they read, I decided to choose a research model that would be intrusive, yet non-directive. I chose a model that would allow me to "get inside" the children's meaning-making

processes (Spradley, 1980) with minimal imposition of my own presuppositions about what those processes might be. I became a participant-observer of the reading events in my classroom (Spradley, 1980): After reading Peter Woods' Inside Schools: Ethnography in Educational Research (Woods, 1986), I emulated his educational ethnographer's nonjudgmental style of casual discourse with students. Nancie Atwell's accounts of her classroom research (Atwell, 1984, 1989) validated my choice to become a fellow reader just as she had done. From all three of these researchers, I learned that I must listen carefully rather than lecture, and record faithfully rather than paraphrase the words of my students lest the messages those words contained be lost over time or through interpretive recounting of them. So it was that I chose the ethnographic research model to observe reading events in my classroom in order to look for the patterns of students' reading behaviors that might lead to discoveries about how they made meaning for what they read.

A Teacher's Intuition

As I began the research, a number of hunches about how my students read hovered above the ongoing work. I believed that, though as an adult I usually directed classroom reading activities, alongside those prescribed activities there existed a student underground of children's issues about the readings. Also, I sensed that if the children held the floor during book-related interactions, issues about the readings would surface about which I, as an

adult reader, would not consider asking. Our perspectives as readers were vastly different, I knew.

During the first few months of classroom observation, I suffered frequent lapses of distrust of the children's ownership of their reading processes and reverted from observer to director. Sometimes an impulsive need to grade a tangible product of their reading process propelled me to ask the children to do such things as list words that described the setting. In spite of these lapses, a strong intuition persisted in telling me that within the students' verbal interactions about the literature were hidden the keys to unlock their collaborative meaning-making processes. Over time, I listened longer and at more frequent intervals. My trust in the students grew. I transferred increased ownership of the reading to the children and learned to evaluate their efforts in a more holistic manner. The students rewarded my growing trust as they engaged in more self-determined interactions and allowed me to hear the occasional cacophony, the subtle harmonies, and the vivacious crescendos from the symphony of their combined responses.

CHAPTER 2

METHODOLOGY

The Teacher/Researcher

For years, the act of teaching reading had been guided comfortably for me by the sequence and routine of a prescribed curriculum until one day when I looked up from my desk out onto a field of young faces that I realized, as if seeing them for the first time, belonged to strangers. Who were the learners behind the faces and what was happening inside their heads during the 180 reading lessons I doled out yearly? I wondered how these children were processing what they read. What thoughts and images did their reading evoke? Was their reading in any way relevant to their fourth grade lives in and out of school? For me, wondering replaced smug contentment in thinking that I knew what happened when children read. I admitted to myself that I did not know their processes and resolved to allow my students to inform me of them.

I had taught reading to students in grades three through six and thought I had a well-developed sense of where fourth grade readers had been and where they were headed. However, my perspective widened as I shifted

focus from curriculum to children during the infancy of this research while I studied and gradually adopted the ways of the ethnographic observer (Spradley, 1980; Woods, 1986).

Gleaning information from students required that I become a participant/observer. It necessitated getting inside my classroom as a fellow learner instead of presiding over it. To accomplish this role shift, I examined first my outward appearance, compared it to the students' manner of dress, and decided that a wide chasm stood between us if clothing were an indicator. Casual pants, sweaters, and tennis shoes replaced my high heels and dresses. The podium disappeared. My desk no longer hovered dominantly as a command post looming just to the rear of the students, but retreated to an unobtrusive spot in the back room. From then on, I occupied a student chair when in the main reading classroom, or sat on cushions, or sat on the floor as the students did.

Perhaps outward symbols belie inward change. During literature response classes, I worked to stay in the character of a fellow learner and an observer. Uppermost in my mind was an effort to maintain a tone shift of both spoken and unspoken intent as I extinguished dogmatic pronouncements in exchange for great amounts of listening, note-taking, organic activity observations and occasional fine-tuning of them, and responding as a fellow reader and discussion group participant when appropriate. Because teaching events such as curriculum-required standardized reading tests would have

caused both myself and the students to change roles, I expelled such activities from the literature response class period in an effort to keep it as intrusion-free as possible. Hopefully I had freed myself inwardly as well as outwardly to wonder and to watch and to listen as the children unfolded their collective processes of negotiating meaning for what they read.

The Children

At first there were 29 children of varying abilities in my literature class. Shari, a Special Education student, was the weakest reader in the sense that she struggled to read easy third grade material, but was one of the strongest in her ability to dramatize and improvise stories with confidence. Cam, Cory, and Lana read with difficulty when they read at all, and went for a half-hour each day to the Chapter I room where they worked on remedial reading skills as well as supplemental reading of easy trade books. Yet Cam, Cory, and Lana were persistently independent thinkers. While Lana bided her time before voicing her thoughts, the two boys impulsively let theirs be known. Eleven of the children, Tom, Melanie, Rob, Sandra, Erin, Lance, Bud, Paul, Julie, Aminda, and Tish, attended weekly enrichment classes provided by the Gifted and Talented Education Program (GATE). These 11 read for pleasure frequently, some nearly constantly, and all proficiently except for Rob, who read reluctantly and almost exclusively for practical information such as deciphering complicated model airplane instructions. Molly, Lynn, Kate,

Kirsten, and Lindy read avidly, had strong verbal skills, and rode the eligibility border of the GATE program. Only three of the students filled the average reader niche, Jaren, Tim, and Scott. Of these three, Jaren and Tim were active sportsmen whose interests strongly guided their reading. In fact, during the course of the year, an article authored by Jaren's father bespoke their coon hunting prowess.

A process of natural attrition removed from my classroom a number of students whose performance promised potentially valuable information about their reading. So it was that Brian, Liz, Angie, JoEllen, David, and Blake belonged to my literature class for less than the full school year. Their curtailed attendance varied from a few days' membership to a few months. Thus these children are quoted less frequently or not at all in the data included in this thesis. Transfers out of my class eventually dwindled its total membership to 23 students.

The children's ages ranged from eight to ten years old when the school year began. Officially, each fourth grader should have attained age nine by September 10 of the school year. None of the children had been retained in a previous grade, but two of the boys, Lance and Bud, had summer birthdays and for that reason had been kept at home for an extra year before being enrolled in kindergarten. That is why they entered the fourth grade as 10-year-olds. These two boys were scholastically, athletically, and socially adept and were regarded by their peers as leaders and by the younger children as something akin to heroes.

Former teachers and other students alike perpetuated a rumor that our particular class was the best in the school in terms of good behavior. Though teachers wrote up disciplinary reprimand slips for individual students who broke school rules, members of this literature class rarely received them. In fact, as a group, they succeeded repeatedly in organizing their efforts to benefit from a token reward system that earned them school-wide awards. As a group, the children were motivated to work together to achieve tangible goals. For my research purpose, studying how children collaboratively generate meaning for literature, a better group of students could not have been delivered to my classroom on the opening day of the school year.

The Setting

My classroom, room 36 of Emerson Elementary School, was the setting for this research. Rooms 36, 37, and 39 housed the three fourth grade classes in one of five grade K-4 elementary schools in the small Montana city of Bozeman. Bozeman, a college town, numbered just over 25,000 people if you included the Montana State University population. Though ranch land and Forest Service holdings surround the town, few Emerson School parents derived their living directly from either source, but instead were self-employed, were connected with local small businesses, worked at the university, or were college students themselves.

The children loved Emerson School with a purpose and a passion. During the year preceding fourth grade, my students had experienced a blow. A decision had been made to sell or raze the 1939 vintage school to replace it with two new buildings. New schools were needed to house a burgeoning school-age population. However, my students staunchly strove to save the building via their letters to the editor of the Bozeman Daily Chronicle; combined with the efforts of their parents, they succeeded, finally, in having the edifice put on the state and national registers of historic buildings. In fact, Tom's father was chairman of the committee that successfully worked to preserve the school.

The school's interior was varied, expansive, and comfortable. Alcoves, roomy stairwell landings, a spacious foyer and art gallery, an ample stage, and smallish auxiliary classrooms provided a variety of nooks and crannies where small groups of children could work on book-related projects or simply read. Wide hallways offered extra work space adjacent to the classrooms.

My classroom actually contained two rooms. In the front room the students' desks were arrayed in clusters to seat groups of four to six children. There they read and worked, at times individually and at other times in groups. On the periphery of the room stood walls covered by book posters, poems, art prints, maps, and multitudinous samples of the children's written and graphic works. Old sofa cushions waited in stacks at opposite corners

of the room to be used by languishing readers or by book discussion groups. The back room was dominated by worktables and bulletin boards that displayed learning centers which connected reading to science and social studies units of study. On some days, the back room became a backstage area for literature-based plays. Arranged along the walls of both rooms were shelves that held a variety of reading and reference material. My desk sat in the back room because I seldom used it once the children arrived for school in the morning. It could be said of the literature class's environment that it was physically flexible and alive with print.

My literature classroom was not confined to the four walls that defined room 36. Immediately to the left, in the hallway outside the front room door, was a locker alcove where small groups of children worked. Directly from the front room doorway emanated a hallway where two sofas accommodated quiet readers, active project planning, reading to an adult volunteer, or putting on plays. On days when the hallway doubled as a theater, the children swung one sofa across the hallway to divide it into a backstage and a performing area. The hallway to the right of our front room proceeded past the other two fourth grade classrooms, turned left, and led to the entrance of the school library. There the children read in the reading loft, on cushions tucked between shelves of books, at and under listening carrels, sprawled on the carpet, or even in a chair. Below our front room was a small classroom of kindergarten children whom our class had adopted in the sense that once

a week my students read the kindergartners' library book choices to them. The stairwell kitty-cornered from our front room door led to the stage which we sometimes used for meetings, play practice, and project displays.

Time Frame

Research took place during a one-hour class period per school day for eight months. Daily literature class occurred from 10:30 to 11:30 a.m. During that hour, two separate book-related activities done by two different student groups for two different novels took place. On Monday, Wednesday, and Friday, silent reading sessions of one-half hour's duration apiece were scheduled for earlier in the morning. Though the children wrote in their journals on a daily basis, the journal activity each Thursday was to write to me about the books they were reading. Every Thursday afternoon I responded to the students via their journals. At times, while the students and I walked between classes to the library or toward the lunchroom, I informally interviewed students for several minutes about their reading.

This schedule persisted throughout most of the school year. Literature class commenced in October and continued until the close of the school year in June. Silent reading sessions did increase from once weekly in October to thrice weekly by January after procuring more time allocations from our librarian. Seasonal schedule adjustments to accommodate Christmas and Spring Program rehearsals as well as field trips interrupted the literature

program only rarely. Because many of the Emerson School teachers preferred to schedule rehearsals and programs during the afternoons, morning literature class interruptions occurred minimally.

The Research Process

The question, "How do children create meaning for literature in an interactive classroom?" generated the focus and shaped the process for this research. Because I wanted the children's meaning-making processes to reveal themselves to me, I set out to observe and record their reading related interactions from close proximity as a fellow reader as well as a teacher/researcher.

My recording and observing skills initially were rudimentary at best. In the beginning, my desire to record reading events verbatim outweighed basic tenets of human sense. At first, I ignored the children's preoccupation with the tape recorder itself and vowed to override the poor quality of sound produced by high ceilings in a room lined with plastered walls and filled with busy students' background conversations. To my dismay, several weeks of experimenting with audio taping produced little of use and did not extinguish the echoes, giggles, and nervous pauses that rendered the tapes barely intelligible and quite unnatural. So I abandoned taping and began a more natural method of recording classroom events. I converted to the pen-and-paper method. To record reading events verbatim, I needed to improvise a

streamlined note-taking system. I used initials to identify individual speakers. Lacking shorthand expertise, I omitted vowels to expedite recording the text of the children's talk. In order to indicate voice emphasis, I underlined the words that the speakers stressed.

My students noticed that my recording ability improved. They bragged to classroom visitors and to other students that I was a fast writer and added with pride that I wrote down everything they said. As I wrote, my speed did increase but, perhaps more importantly, so did my attentiveness to the children's words and to their thought processes.

Recording the results of hallway interviews and other literature-related events such as plays required a different data gathering strategy. As I moved among pairs or groups of students who were working at activities, I listened, I watched, and I asked questions. Quickly I would retire to the side of the hallway or to a vacant corner of the room where I wrote what had been said as well as I could recall it. Then I moved on to interview the next group. Such interviews were varied and ephemeral. Sometimes they involved only the two students walking alongside me as we made our way down the hall. Under those circumstances, I recorded what had been said upon returning to the solitude of my empty classroom, usually five to ten minutes after I had delivered my students to their destination.

The third method of data gathering utilized a special kind of written discourse, the dialogue journal. We engaged in three types of dialogue

journaling. A dialogue with self about the words of an author, we referred to as a Double-Entry Journal (DEJ). In the left-hand column, each child recorded passages and paragraphs of interest from the author's text. In the right-hand column, each child commented on his or her chosen excerpts. The DEJ functioned for the students as a metacognitive analysis of their reading and as a source of potential contributions to their book discussion groups. When carrying on an occasional journal dialogue about reading with a peer, the journaling was referred to as a Dear Fellow Reader entry. In such entries, the students wrote about an aspect of their reading to another student. The peer wrote a reply. The two students then shared their responses. Once weekly, I was the student journalists' respondent. This type of teacher-to-student journaling was referred to as "getting mail."

In the beginning of the data gathering process, I was not terribly efficient. I laboriously copied journal gleanings by hand into my data notebook. Finding this method too slow and fearing that selective gleaning might omit pertinent responses, I instead took to photocopying journal responses. By late winter, I had found that the most efficient and the least expensive way of inclusively gathering journal data was to do just that, to literally gather up the entries in their original form and place them in chronological order in my notebook.

A year-long research project required regular refocusing of my attention on the original question. To promote my own refocusing, I kept a card with

my research question written on it attached to the front of my data collection notebook. In my zeal to collect a great quantity of data, I only gradually realized what sort of evidence had a one-to-one correspondence with my research question. As with many kinds of learning, this realization emerged slowly.

Over time, the data that mounted thickly in my notebook became a source of categories which described what I was discovering about the children's interactions with each other and with the literature. Each day, I read the data for the dual purpose of evaluating the level of each child's involvement with reading and to look for emergent patterns of response within their talking and writing. During the evenings at home, I reread the data with highlighter in hand to give emphasis to those passages that seemed to be part of a recurring set of ways that the students created meaning for what they read. In the left-hand margin I wrote notes to myself indicating possible categories that could describe like groups of highlighted student responses. Sometimes many categories suggested themselves in a random and confusing array of possibilities. At other times, one dominant category would jump from the page and overshadow others. Strongly emergent categories could surface with suddenness, while others arose slowly along the horizon of the research. Along the way, the gathering information revealed ephemeral categories that changed identity, nuance, and level of dominance caused by the shifting weight of mounting layers of data.

The Research Process Matures

As categories continued to emerge, I examined them for relevance to my original research question, "How do children create meaning for literature in an interactive classroom?" Categories that emerged but digressed too far from interaction with literature and addressed other issues were set aside for the purpose of this research.

When the school year ended, the children left for summer vacation, and data collection ceased, I read and reread the entire spectrum of the data in order to gain a holistic sense of its content. From this reflective stance, I realized that data which captured young readers interacting with each other about literature produced categories pertinent to the research question. I also realized that my notes which recorded verbatim interactions between students provided actual evidence of what happens when children create meaning together for literature. So it was that I sorted that data for relevance.

It was also necessary that I cast out discussion group notes taken by my student teacher, for his notes only paraphrased what the students had said. Likewise, I removed hallway interviews and my own dialogue journals with the students from the body of pertinent data. Unfortunately, dialogue journals between students were so scarce as to be negligible as evidence. Because students had communicated only superficially and reluctantly in peer dialogue

journals, their use on a regular basis had been abandoned. Thus I became determined to go back to the actual phenomena, the transcribed words of the students themselves as they interacted during literature response groups. The children's unaltered words became the concrete descriptions that grounded my research. Their words became the examples of the phenomena of their learning. To succeed in learning from them, I had only to read carefully and listen closely to those words.

Once I had identified and isolated the pertinent data, I examined my own attitude in regard to it and resolved to suppress presuppositions about what I thought might, ought to, or could happen in literature response groups in order to approach with a mind receptive to discovering what the children's words would reveal rather than seeking to verify my own theories. It took time, several months, to gain an insightful distance from the data and from the children with whom I'd worked so closely. With the passing of summer vacation and the appearance of a new classroom full of readers, it seemed that the bond was finally broken and the distance was gained.

Time and reflection allowed me to transpose categories that emerged from the data from randomly significant units of meaning to specifically evident examples of broader phenomena of the students' realities of meaning-making. Categories that previously had appeared to be random and unrelated began to cluster themselves around several larger statements about how the students had learned. I also observed in rereading the data

that several students were especially prone to generating and translating meanings within the context of a literature response group. I sifted out those students' names, put an asterisk by them in the data, and resolved to give that aspect of the phenomena further thought.

A Teacher's Intuition

I was motivated to initiate and to conduct research into children's literature response groups by two beliefs: that all of my students, even my least proficient reader, could become better readers through active involvement with literature, and that children could become better readers by reading more frequently. I felt strongly supportive of the empowerment that peer collaboration could bring to reading groups. I hoped that the enjoyable social aspect of shared reading could motivate even reluctant readers to read. Also, I sought, through observation of the students' interactive reading processes, to realize more naturalistic ways to teach reading that would broaden and enrich my repertoire of strategies. Lastly, I hoped that this research might have value for others who teach reading to children.



CHAPTER 3

LITERATURE RESPONSE IN A FOURTH GRADE CLASSROOM

The Pedagogical Context

Since teaching reading in my classroom requires some degree of basal reader instruction existing alongside literature study, a review of pertinent issues related to both approaches is included in this chapter to provide a theoretical backdrop of issues related to skills-based as well as reader-response instruction.

A common approach to reading instruction employs a basal reader. Basals present reading-related skills in a sequential manner through the medium of story and workbook. Using the basal reader approach, the teaching of literature is incidental to the teaching of reading skills. The focus for stories is teaching controlled language (Gambell, 1986a). The sequential piecemeal methods of the industrial revolution are evidenced in the assembly line approach in American reading textbooks (Bettelheim, 1983; Della Piana, 1973). Schools "contrive barriers between related aspects of language" by presenting isolated reading subskills (Holdaway, 1979, p. 12). Many professional educators are confounded by required, sequential reading skills

programs and "teacher-proof" curricula (Wells, 1989). Unfortunately, when curriculum focuses on the mechanical aspects of reading, children are imparted with a narrow view of what reading is; they see it as decoding (Hunsberger, 1985). Students have little or nothing to think about when taught reading as a "contentless set of processes" (Koeller, 1988, p. 12) which they must then apply in a contextless manner. Children can master the skills and strategies of reading but still fail to become literate (Bettelheim, 1983).

Yet "a generation of reading specialists and teachers who have been educated as technicians" (Goodman, 1989, p. 69) administer and conduct reading skills programs. These skills programs focus on vocabulary, decoding, and comprehension skills. In basic skills programs, "students are often not challenged to go beyond summarizing or categorizing parts of the story in answering a question correctly" (Vardell, 1983, p. 50). Vocabulary words and their definitions are taught prior to reading a story via lists, charts, flashcards, and dictionary work. To teach a child a word requires a context for each word, an experiential context (Donaldson, 1978). By emphasizing isolated vocabulary, we have neglected semantics (Holdaway, 1979). Sylvia Ashton-Warner, proponent and creator of organic vocabularies for children, espoused that "reading should be motivated by the deepest springs of meaning in the human heart" (cited in Holdaway, 1979, p. 31). "The dictionary meaning of a word is no more than a stone in the edifice of sense" (Vygotsky, 1962, p. 146). "Studying the word separately puts the [meaning] process on

the purely verbal plane, which is uncharacteristic of child thinking" (Vygotsky, 1962, p. 52). "One cannot reconcile direct instruction with natural learning" (Goodman, 1989, p. 69). If natural learning occurs and if phonic skills are taught at the appropriate time for the individual reader, decoding can be mastered in six months time and then ought to be set aside (Bettelheim, 1983).

"It is standard American classroom procedure" to ask stereotypical questions about main idea, main character, to read a story once only, and to allow little time for student response (Miles, 1985, p. 347). Thirty years ago, J.N. Britton advocated extended time to "respond fully" to reading, but his advice "had little impact on current instructional practice" (Miles, 1985, p. 347). Teacher initiated questions and tasks should be open-ended, relate to genuine student interests, and evoke elaborative language (Shanklin & Rhodes, 1989a). Successful literature-related questions should focus on images evoked rather than on facts gleaned (Hickman, 1984). Questions asked in successful discussion sessions arise from natural puzzlements of the readers rather than the imposed intentionality of the teacher (Holbrook, 1987). However, students have become attuned to giving short answers to directed teacher prompts in a teaching scenario that inhibits or discourages "literature conversations" (Koeller, 1988) among children. In considering the motivations of teachers for asking children questions, it is important to consider that "it is not the answer, but the by-product of the search for that answer that is vital" (Dearing-Perrine, 1936, p. 63).

There are contrasting approaches that the teacher can take when teaching literature. They are the text-centered approach or the reader-centered approach. Louise Rosenblatt labeled these two approaches in a somewhat different manner. She termed them the efferent and the aesthetic approaches. Efferent reading derives informational content from the text. Aesthetic reading focuses on the reader's relationship to the work (Holbrook, 1987). The efferent reading style more closely matches the basal reader approach to text. The aesthetic style guides literature-response classes. The reader-response approach emphasizes the "integrated experience [transaction] that a reader has with a text" (Pugh, 1988, p. 1). Literature-response proponents hold that the readers synthesize what the text offers and their own reservoirs of experience (Galda, 1983).

"Reading is an exploratory process" (Le, 1984, p. 353). The successful reading of literature requires multiple processing of a work with adequate time provided for assimilation. Elements of success are "multiple reading, reflection time, multi-sensory activities, and diverse questioning" (Miles, 1985, p. 348). Meaning develops as it is revealed in a public context that Wittgenstein refers to as a "semantic condition" rather than in the idiosyncratic, isolated interpretation given to a work by the operation of a private language in the mind of a solitary reader (cited in Codd, 1982). The image of the reader as a solitary receptor of words gives way to a picture of the reader as an active participant engaged in the process of building a

"cognitive context" (Codd, 1982) around a work of literature among a community of readers. To improve the quality of peer discussion sessions, students write their initial reactions to a work prior to group response activities (Probst, cited in Holbrook, 1987). "Thought logs" (Rico, 1989) might be an apt name for such metacognitive jottings. These thought logs can take the form of a double-entry journal in which students record text excerpts in the left column and reactions to text on the right (Nugent & Nugent, 1984). Such double-entry journals activate prior knowledge and present feelings; sharing of them allows students to learn collaboratively; writing and reading are thus connected (Nugent & Nugent, 1984).

Literature response classes are not all discussion and metacognition. Oral and silent reading sessions are a part of the instructional repertoire as well. "Oral reading has an authentic purpose in literature study groups as students return to the text to support inferences they have made" (Wells, 1989, p. 43). Middle-grade teacher and researcher Nancie Atwell (1989) recommended setting aside three hours per week for independent reading of student-selected books during which individual conferences with the teacher take place.

Evaluation of student progress in literature response is a multi-faceted process. It should include anecdotal records of observed reading, performance in discussions, a checklist of literary abilities, and dated samples of the child's work with accompanying comments that track the child's growth

(Gambell, 1986a). Teachers can evaluate student discussions by taping them, playing them back, and focusing on adherence or non-adherence to topic and text (Koeller, 1988). The teacher also can check for understanding of the literature by observing children as they share their own "visual interpretations" (Rico, 1989) of text. When and if written tests are used, test tasks must make sense to the child in order for the child to be successful (Donaldson, 1978). If facing upcoming standardized reading tests, the teacher should bear in mind that such tests "are not designed to tap all the goals of high quality literacy programs" (Shanklin & Rhodes, 1989a, p. 61). Lastly, the need to get on with the process of evaluation should not override patience with the individual's rate of development, for human beings sometimes need the time to "move by inches toward a concept" (Truitt, 1984, p. 97).

The Teacher

The teacher in a literature response classroom has a complex complement of roles to play. Teachers in shared book programs change their roles from instructors to models of literacy and sharers of the pleasures of reading (Holdaway, 1979). From her research with elementary students and with her own child, Atwell (1989) concluded that young readers can benefit from a "literary apprenticeship" with an adult model reader. Attitudes toward reading may be "affected to some unknown degree by the process of imitation of significant adults" (Gardner, 1973, cited in Engel, 1976, p. 896).

The teacher is not simply a model reader after whom the children can pattern themselves. The teacher is also an observer of students and a searcher who has embarked upon a "pathway to understanding" (Spradley, 1980) of the students' developing process of reading. As an observer, the teacher makes an effort to look at the world from the student's position. The literature teacher "must constantly remain open to the possibilities of the text" (Gambell, 1986b, p. 151) and to multiple interpretations of it. If the teacher chooses not to entertain both the adult's and the children's interpretations, the more difficult teaching becomes because of the great disparity between points of view (Donaldson, 1978). In a sense, teachers allow themselves to some degree to be taught by their students.

However, the teacher is more than a model reader and a fellow reader. The teacher is also a guide through the process of understanding literature. Though they are emulative models of literate persons in a noncorrective environment, the teachers also induce appropriate activities, give hints as to how to solve reading related problems, and provide simple answers to direct questions (Holdaway, 1979). The successful literature-response teacher also asks "sensible questions" (Koeller, 1988) at appropriate times and designs response activities that enable the children to express their understanding of a work. They move away from the interrogation-of-students mode to asking genuine questions which encourage both student response and productive perplexity (Staton, 1984).

Sometimes the teacher functions much like an artist who, in order to propel productive creativity, must "harness attention into thought" (Truitt, 1984, p. 219). To do this without being overbearing is essential in order for the teacher to empower students without overpowering them (Au & Kawakami, 1985). Such a teacher gently leads children from where they are to a level that children can reach with assistance, the "zone of proximal development" (Vygotsky, 1962, p. 103). As a guide and a mentor, the teacher challenges pupils "to synthesize knowledge, to infer, compare, contrast, and evaluate by searching for patterns across authors, chapters or books" (Koeller, 1988, p. 6). In cumulative discussions of a work in which the students' search for meaning is the focus and use of critical thinking is encouraged, "relatively few teacher-initiated questions are needed to stimulate or guide their thinking" (Moss, 1978, p. 834). Questions asked are few and well selected. Teachers "sparingly interject" (Koeller, 1988) probing questions that extend and elaborate pupil responses. Skillfully formed and placed questions help students "throw a syntactic rope across the abyss of meaning" (Holdaway, 1979, p. 51). Teachers who initiate activities that cause students to engage in "retrieving text" (Holdaway, 1979) by rereading text help also.

The teacher is also a monitor of group work, for "literacy is a social practice" (Wells, 1989, p. 23). At the very least, the teacher is a quality control monitor of group interaction to help keep it both focused on the subject at hand and positive in the nature of the responses (Johnson &

Johnson, 1984). Literature response teachers also need to provide an "interactional scaffolding" (Staton, 1984) or framework upon which communication can take place safely. To do so, the teacher sets up goals for the group's academic work, establishes guidelines for appropriate social behaviors, and assigns work-related roles for group members to fulfill in contribution to larger, collaborative projects (Johnson & Johnson, 1984). If teachers participate in the groups as well, they give "legitimizing attention" (Hickman, 1984) to the formats used for response and, in so doing, have a strong effect on the frequency of those response forms. As teachers monitor group processing, they can also evaluate individual progress via short "roaming conferences" (Woolsey & Burton, 1986) with students.

When studying story in the context of literature response groups for the artistry as well as the content of the text, "success is dependent on the teacher to a greater extent than with any of the other approaches" (Odland, 1979, p. 365). Yet the teacher can be a roadblock rather than a guide on the journey to literacy when "high ability students receive preferential treatment and are granted more autonomy than low-achievement students" (Brophy & Good, 1970, cited in Allington, 1980, p. 872). Poor readers spend less time reading than good readers because classroom interaction patterns favor the higher achievers (McDermott, 1977, cited in Allington, 1980). Oral reading is used pervasively with "poorer readers" and words are taught out of the context of semantic sense (Allington, 1980). A survey of research on reading

practices found that poorer readers are interrupted more frequently for teacher-correction, but that successful reading instructors keep interruptions to a minimum (Brophy & Everton, 1976, cited in Allington, 1980). Teachers seldom give poorer readers opportunities for or instruction in silent reading (Quirk, 1975, cited in Allington, 1980). Less successful readers are asked also to focus on content recall while successful readers focus on literary analysis and personal response (Hill, 1985).

Literature-response teachers fulfill a demanding set of roles. "The teacher's role in group investigation is one of counselor, consultant, and friendly critic" (Weil & Joyce, 1978, p. 237). As a model of a literate person, the teacher is a guide and mentor who encourages children to respond intelligently to text because "response modes are learned" (Petrosky, 1980, p. 151). The decision to allow students to embark upon a journey toward islands of emergent meaning is an important one because this emphasis upon readers forming meaning unburdens the teacher as it shifts responsibility for learning to active learners. Such "experimentation with new ways of framing the learning environment" (Strickland et al., 1989, p. 192) empowers teachers with classroom decision making functions that allow them to resist "professional arrest" (Strickland et al., 1989) and methodological stagnation. The control of literary meaning decentralizes from the expert reader, the teacher, and disperses among the students who are given more time and freedom to explore text. The teacher's role is demanding, but not without reward. As

Ann Truitt said of her relationship to her own children's searching, "My reward is that I have found myself set free to move farther than I had hitherto dared, my own freedom widened to the degree I had been able to confirm theirs" (Truitt, 1984, p. 182).

The Reader

A piece of literature by itself is incomplete. Its very existence "presupposes a reader" (Hunsberger, 1985, p. 103). The text itself does not preordain a consistent response from all readers, for "each reading event is unique" (Shanklin & Rhodes, 1989b, p. 496). In any type of approach to literature appreciation, the worlds of the text and the individual reader are joined (Pugh, 1988). The reader must enter the world of the artist through the medium of words "in order to create his own [the reader's] world" (Hollman, 1989, p. 24). The reader is creative, not passive (O'Neill, 1984). As Paulo Freire argued, engaged readers read the word and their world at the same time (cited in Sanders, 1987). Reading, then, is a "receptive thinking skill" that is generative in nature and ought not be treated as a directable "performance skill" (Holdaway, 1979). Creative, artistic thought is individualistic (Vygotsky, 1962).

This view of the reader as a respondent who creates meaning from text has not always prevailed. For the last 40 years, New Criticism dominated the teaching of literature with its emphasis on the text itself rather than on the

author's intentions or the reader's internalization of it (Holbrook, 1987). Louise Rosenblatt, who countered New Criticism with her transactional theory of reader and text, observed that the New Criticism ensconced a class of highly trained expert readers as the only readers able to correctly access meaning from text (Holbrook, 1987). Leading reader response theorists, Rosenblatt, Stanley Fish, and Wolfgang Iser, advocated shifting meaning from the text to the readers themselves (Holbrook, 1987). However, readers do not equally receive this shift.

A variety of factors influence the reader's response. Personal style, preferences, experiences, cognitive development, and concept of story affect the level of student responses (Galda, 1983). Some children may produce responses that are primarily "picture stimulated" (Holdaway, 1979). Some children may experience "communication apprehension" (Wood, 1984), particularly elementary children schooled in the value of quiet classrooms. Amount and kind of prior involvement with literature influences response, for "young children learn literature from hearing it, playing with it, from speaking it and from inventing it" (Gambell, 1986a, p. 130). At the very least, the reader must have a sense developed through exposure that spoken and written language formats differ (Cox, 1981). Level of involvement has a bearing on the intensity of the reader's response as well. Sanders (1987) found that prior to age 11, students who become most personally involved with the literature, or who approach it with what W.H. Auden referred to as

"passionate attention," are the students who are most likely to give insightful responses and be ready to discuss literary conventions.

Several common patterns exist that describe the child's "evolving process" (Shanklin & Rhodes, 1989b) of story comprehension. These comments need to be prefaced by a reminder that the child in the ideal situation functions as an amateur critic, and that the root of "amateur" in Latin is "to love" (Sanders, 1987). Unfortunately, the reader is not always motivated by love of literature. The "educational apartheid of so much of school . . . seems intent upon dividing mind and heart" (Benton, 1984, p. 172). The child is often a captive reader pressured into an encounter with the text both by required reading and teacher questioning (Hunsberger, 1985). Yet, if story involvement occurs and reader responses do emerge, perhaps the most common response strategy at all age levels is story retelling (Hickman, 1983). Children tend to focus on events and situations as they emerge in the story (Sanders, 1987). Sometimes events in a story are so vivid in the mind of the reader that they cannot simply be retold; they must be acted out in a mini-drama (Sanders, 1987). Through such literature-processing strategies, children seem to make sense of situations first and then of the language attached to them later (Donaldson, 1978). Children tend to "fix upon memorable incident [sic] rather than respond to the story as a whole" (Hickman, 1984, p. 280). The deed overshadows the word.

As students gain more experience with literature, the characteristics of their responses change. They gain a growing "author's sense of intentionality" (Vardell, 1983, p. 48). Students begin to do what they must do — to read like writers (Atwell, 1984). They may demonstrate an intense level of involvement with the literature by suggesting revisions of the text or by researching topics related to the story (Atwell, 1984). Readers often become "analogists" (Koeller, 1988) who, subsequent to reading, compose related stories.

More experienced readers also engage in "introspective recall" (Benton, 1984). For them, literature awakens dormant memories of meaningful past experience and reorganizes it via a connection to a related but new experience provided by the plot of the text (Weil & Joyce, 1978). As part of this process of verifying connections, students often reread the text to search for clarifying or verifying details (Strickland et al., 1989). Although some believe that children below grade five cannot make connections between the worlds that literature presents and their own lives (Miles, 1985), this view is not commonly held. Most researchers contend that the integration of literature and experience, both direct experience and remembered, is vital for impelling literature to come alive for young readers (Cox, 1981).

The Classroom

An elementary reading classroom might commonly evoke an image of a place where quiet, individual seatwork is taking place. In the same room,

reading might occur in several ways, such as teacher-monitored round-robin reading or as story time when the teacher reads aloud to the entire class. The image might also include peaceful vignettes of students reading silently in their classroom or in the library. "Reading is often pictured as a solitary activity" (Johnston, 1989, p. 160) that takes place in a silent setting.

Yet, language is "the social means of thought" (Vygotsky, 1962, p. 51). The act of reading occurs for both the public audience and the private mind of the reader. Thus, the teacher should emphasize the social aspect of reading (Anderson, cited in Pugh, 1988). The teacher should encourage an "interpretive community" of readers to evolve in the classroom (Fish, cited in Johnston, 1989). More generically, educators should remember that children are part of the social family of this planet, and as social beings, "cannot act without reference to his or her companions on earth" (Weil & Joyce, 1978, p. 231).

A classroom in which the teacher subscribes to the literature response theory is one which buzzes with purposeful interaction propelled by reception of print. Indeed, the environment itself could be described as being "alive with print" (Holdaway, 1979) displayed in a multiplicity of professional and student-generated forms. Concurrently, a "psychic environment" (Hollman, 1989) prevails that allows children the permission and the time to consider and to consider again that which they have read.

The interaction patterns in a literature response classroom are varied. They are "places of continuing and varied face-to-face exchanges, teacher to student, student to student, student to group" (Gambell, 1986b, p. 146). The variety of interaction patterns catalyzes a variety of responses due in part to the notion that "the context in which the response is generated influences the ways in which readers respond" (Galda, 1983, p. 2). This interaction can be preceded by reflection, by a dialogue with self in the form of a journal entry (Dixon, cited in Pugh, 1988), or by "conversational partnerships" characterized by pairs of students thinking aloud about a story (Staton, 1984). Such a "corporate experience of culturally significant language" can be a "powerful mode of learning" (Holdaway, 1979, p. 64). Ideally, students work corporately in groups of at least 10 but less than 15. Such group size parameters provide enough "diversity of reactions" (Weil & Joyce, 1978), yet allow individual inputs. Explorations of and juxtaposition of personal relations appear to form "the matrix within which learning takes place" (Donaldson, 1978, p. 90).

A literature-response driven classroom uses a dyadic interaction model in which the teacher may initiate but does not dominate student responses. Also, the patterns of response are multi-directional rather than only teacher to student and back to teacher. The students "have more opportunities to talk in an interactional pattern that is likely to criss-cross among the group members" (Strickland et al., 1989, p. 199) rather than converge upon the teacher. Appropriate classroom interaction patterns include:

. . . primary spontaneous response; sharing or exploring the primary spontaneous response either in talk, writing, enactment or transformation (an interpretation via another medium); closer engagement with the world of the literary work through reflective writing and discussion; . . . entertainment of alternative responses . . . which may lead to a refinement or modification of their own responses; and production of . . . original literary works. (O'Neill, 1984, p. 34)

It is an environment that in the pursuit of developing literacy is "alive with activity which is felt to be deeply purposeful in all the ways of human meaning" (Holdaway, 1979, p. 14). Even controversy is tolerated; indeed, it is encouraged. Peer controversy in discussions promotes greater understanding of another's perspective and of one's own views than does teacher-dominated interaction (Johnson & Johnson, 1984). Human beings are stimulated to reconcile differences in their perceptions when they are projected against differing views presented by their peers (Weil & Joyce, 1978).

An ethnographic study of third grade readers in a whole language classroom revealed that "by interacting with others through language, theories . . . are modified and elaborated" (Wells, 1989, p. 16). Furthermore, Piaget (cited in Donaldson, 1978) hypothesized that the ability to make inferences depends in part on flexibility of point-of-view and the ability to test several of them. Through controversy and through entertaining several points-of-view, "we heighten our awareness of what is actual by considering what is possible" (Donaldson, 1978, p. 97).

When a study of literature is a social act, children uncover "wider realms of experience and gain insight outside of themselves" (Koeller, 1988, p. 13). If time is allocated for group processing of literature, children can avail themselves of the opportunity to practice becoming fluent in talking about books (Hickman, 1983). Students can engage in a process of "mutual composition" (Johnston, 1989) as they create meaning for texts collaboratively. Wittrock's studies of "generative reading comprehension" reveal that children read with greater understanding when they actively discuss their readings as well as relate them to their personal knowledge to "generate a relationship with the text" (Wittrock, cited in Koeller, 1988, p. 10). In a collaborative learning setting, the children's usually well-developed conversational prowess contributes to rather than detracts from the reading process.

The Literature

A classroom environment that exists to nurture literacy requires literature (Atwell, 1989). In her research on literacy, Wells (1989) found a condition called "aliteracy," a tendency by children who can read to choose not to read in favor of an environment that presents visuals rather than printed matter. In the process of developing young readers, the influence of the home is a powerful determiner of producing literate or non-literate behavior (Bettelheim, 1983). But "literature must delight the reader in order to gain his or her passionate attention" (Koeller, 1988, p. 6). Illustrations, too, are an important

factor instilling delight as well as meaning because for young readers, illustrations are the "mediating symbols" (Holdaway, 1979) that provide contexts for words. Certain genres facilitate reading as well. The narrative mode holds the strongest power of all genres to motivate both child and adult readers to read (Gambell, 1986a). However, narrative works should make up only a portion of a classroom literature program because "different genres may provoke different patterns of response" (Benton, 1984, p. 272) to better tap into the breadth of the child's reception and response strategies and to develop them.

A number of strategies exist for choosing literature for children. In a collaborative project conducted by the University of Colorado and the Denver Public Schools aimed at helping to solve literacy problems of urban, multi-ethnic children, teachers were asked to reflect upon and share their own methods of choosing pleasurable books to read as a strategy for guiding children in choosing (Shanklin & Rhodes, 1989b). Teachers may choose to present works of literature clustered together in thematic units, or present works ordinarily in a "spiralled sequence" (Stott, 1982, cited in Pugh, 1988) of increasing story complexity, or present for comparison the same story by different authors or different works by the same author. However, adults must consider both the child's interest and ability when recommending books, and should resist the well-meant urge to press a book on a child regardless of its outstanding merits. "Adults who press books on children may very

often have little idea whether the particular title in mind is below, at, or well above any individual child's present capabilities. When a mistake is made, it can sometimes be an important one" (Tucker, 1983, p. 1). An adult might observe which authors children are reading and recommend other books by the same author. Even with a same-author strategy, care ought to be exercised because "comparisons of books by the same author sometimes reveal surprise and frustration" (Strickland et al., 1989, p. 197).

Choosing literature for children can be a difficult task for an adult. "It has been a common finding that very low correlations exist" (Pascoe & Gilchrist, 1987, p. 56) between adult and child views about selection of literature. Unfortunately, teachers who actually work with the young readers are often overlooked by researchers, and questionnaires soliciting information about children's reading interests are more often sent to librarians, curriculum planners and school principals than to teachers (Pascoe & Gilchrist, 1987).

Some educators find benefits from allowing the children to choose the literature that they will read. Jeanne Veatch was a pioneer of the "individualized reading" program in which students self-select trade books to read (Holdaway, 1979). "We enjoy best and engage most readily in activities which we experience as freely chosen" (Donaldson, 1978, p. 124). A 1981 research project done with New York State middle school students found that the most frequently offered student suggestion for improving literature instruction was to let them choose their own books (Judy, 1981, cited in Gambell, 1986b).

Little investigation is evidenced in the area of what children enjoy in the literature they read except for compiling booklists (Pascoe & Gilchrist, 1987). In 1941, Robert Thorndike found that "consistent patterns of reading interest" (cited in Pascoe & Gilchrist, 1987, p. 56) existed among child readers. Of 40 book categories offered, children most frequently chose excitement, suspense, and a quality ending (Pascoe & Gilchrist, 1987). Thorndike's early research was not pursued by his contemporaries. More recent research found that children respond strongly to peer influence in choosing books (Hickman, 1983). When asked in both a free response and a structured survey, year five to year seven readers in Australian schools reported that they prefer stimulation in their reading via "exciting" books followed by animal stories and adventure, while their teachers cited ability to empathize with the main character as their most important factor in book choosing. Young readers tend to prefer "mystery-adventure" stories as well as stories in which young people are the heroes (Gambell, 1986a). Book length is also a factor in student choice. Students who choose to read long books feel they have more status as readers than those who read short ones (Wells, 1989).

"In most schools, basal readers make up the reading program and literature is relegated to enriching it" (Hill, 1985, p. 382). These early grade texts suffer from "print starvation" (Holdaway, 1979). Basal readers use unnatural, repetitive speech which is insulting to the child (Bettelheim, 1983). "Discursive, denotative language is the mainstay of basal prose" (Petrosky, 1980,

p. 153) that exists beside a context of everyday language in which metaphors are the means by which abstract ideas are hooked to the concrete world. "Print is the wand that summons human experience" (Sebesta, 1981, cited in Koeller, 1988, p. 14), yet American primers present only 175 to 200 words while the primers of other nations typically present 1,000 words by the end of the first year (Bettelheim, 1983). Perhaps the idea that "the essence of language lies in the magical relationship between words and their referents" (Benton, 1984, p. 265) is not being applied.

Those who oppose censorship as well as those who address the needs of individuals and groups of readers "argue for teacher and student self-selection of literature" (Gambell, 1986a, p. 130). However, self-selection must somehow strike a balance of genres and themes. One of the most significant benefits of wide reading is reflected in the variety of topics and techniques the students themselves produce in their own writings (Atwell, 1989). The reader who can move beyond the controlled vocabularies and literal comprehension level of efferent reading and can rise to the aesthetic reading level, and who can then become a creator of literature demonstrates that "reading is not walking on words, it's grasping the soul of them" (Freire, 1985, cited in Sanders, 1987, p. 619).

CHAPTER 4

INDIVIDUAL PHENOMENAL DESCRIPTIONS

Literature Response Groups

My search for the answer to the question, "How do children create meaning for literature in an interactive classroom?" focused upon the words of the children as they emerged during the course of literature-related discussions. The following individual phenomenal descriptions of literature response group interactions reveal six sets of discussions. Transcriptions of discussions included in this chapter have been edited for length and for their relevance to descriptors referenced in Chapter 5, as they bear evidence to patterns recurring in the responses of these fourth grade readers.

These six discussion sets correspond to six novels that the children read and explored. My students signed up to read one of a pair of thematically linked novels. Usually I would read the first chapter of each novel aloud to the whole class, then post a sign-up sheet alongside the book. After three to five school days, the children had made their choices. The novels were distributed the day after sign-up had been completed. Because these paired novels were studied consecutively rather than simultaneously, the names of some children appear in the discussions of more than one novel.

The children read the books they chose in assigned segments of not more than 20 and not less than 8 pages per assignment. Then an activity that included and prompted discussion followed the reading before the children proceeded to the next segment of their books.

Excerpts from transcriptions of the students' book discussions follow. These discussions are accompanied by a running narrative of the story being read as well as anecdotal information about the ecology of the children's response group. Transcriptions appear in the order in which they occurred and in the students' own words.

Tales of a Fourth Grade Nothing

Our first theme, growing pains, focused on discussions about Judy Blume's (1972) Tales of a Fourth Grade Nothing, a humorous account of Peter Hatcher's difficulties in living the life of a normal fourth grade boy while constantly foiled by the naughty antics of his two-year-old terror of a brother, Fudge. Not even Peter's pet turtle evades Fudge's mischief. When the little turtle disappears, Peter slowly realizes with horror that his brother has swallowed it. A simple trip to the park with little brother in tow becomes a disaster for Peter when Fudge loses his two front teeth while trying to fly from the top of the monkey bars. In the end, Peter's parents smooth things over by getting a new pet for Peter that is much too large for Fudge to swallow — a dog.

To prepare for this first discussion, I'd asked the children to consider why they chose this book to read.

SCOTT: Well, a lot of people I hear say that it's supposed to be really good, and a lot of my friends are in it [this discussion group], so that's another reason why I picked the book.

SHARI: I thought that since I was in fourth grade I should try the book.

TIM: I picked Tales of a Fourth Grade Nothing because I have the book and it sounded like a good book.

STEVE: I like fiction books more than nonfiction. Fiction books are sometimes funny and I like funny books.

LIZ: I picked it because it was the shortest book and the pictures looked good.

BRIAN: [Holds up two books.] Look! I got my own book Tales of a Fourth Grade Nothing, and this one, too Green Slime. Now I can read my OWN! I went to the bookstore last night and my mom got it for me.

Not all discussions took the form of responses to prompts. This next discussion occurred spontaneously within a small, unappointed subgroup of our novel study group. The students had been asked to find a good place to read the next segment that had been assigned to them. Pairs and small groups of readers read quietly, except for these three boys who were sitting on the green sofa in the hallway. Their discussion follows.

TIM: [Holding open two spots in the book by using two fingers for bookmarks.] This part's really GOOD! [Reads aloud to Brian the part of the story where little brother Fudge eats a turtle.]

COX: That part is almost at the end of the book. Have you read to there, or to where your other finger is?

TIM: Only to here. [Points to the front third of the book.] But I like to check out the back part to see how good it is so I know if I want to read it.

COX: Is it worth reading?

TIM: Yeah. It's REALLY good.

BRIAN: Yeah. I could tell by the pictures it looked really good. Like this one. [Brian shows us the picture of Fudge on monkey bars, preparing to leap into the air.]

ROB: Yeah. That part's really good.

This next discussion, a reconsideration of why the children selected this book, took place five days later.

LYNN: There are only two kinds of books for me — exciting and scary.

JULIE: A book should be exciting. If it's not exciting, I get bored. When a book is about a cowboy sitting around telling tall tales, I do NOT find it particularly interesting. But if it's about five kids who ride a unicorn to another planet, I find it VERY interesting. If the characters don't move, I feel like I'm sitting around.

KATE: Sometimes books just go on and on and on and then I don't read them.

AMINDA: I like a book that sounds interesting to me. I don't judge a book by the cover. I just read part of it and if I like it I'll check it out.

KIRSA: I like taking adventures with the characters of the books I choose.

LANCE: I usually pick books that have something neat in them, like somebody getting kidnapped or a robbery took place. I like the ones that a kid gets kidnapped the best.

MEL: I like books that have adventure and JAZZ to them!

Ten days later, Lana, a Chapter I student who two months earlier had told me in graphic terms how much she disliked reading, volunteered to be the group discussion leader. Lana called on people to talk. As the children talked, they referred to comments from their Double-Entry Journals in which they had written about the assigned segment that they had read the day before. In this last segment of the book, two-year-old Fudge had swallowed his big brother's pet turtle. In a previous chapter of the book, Fudge had cut his own hair. Discussion began after Kirsa showed the group a picture she had drawn of the haircut her own little brother had given himself. Kirsa had been working on the drawing since she had read the hair-cutting episode in the book.

TIM: Let's see it! Let's see it!

BRIAN: [Chuckles.]

CAM: How can a two-year-old cut his hair without cutting his fingers?

KIRSA: He wasn't TWO!

BRIAN: How could Fudge eat a turtle?

CAM: I used to eat FLOWERS!

TOM: I used to eat GRASS!

CAM: I got a question. Scott, how could he swallow a WHOLE turtle?

SCOTT: What?

CAM: What did he do to swallow it?

SCOTT: I don't know. Maybe he took a drink of water and swallowed it.

STEVE: Like a VITAMIN!

SCOTT: Yeah. I don't know. That's what the book said.

LANCE: It could've been one of those little turtles.

CAM: But how could it?

BRIAN: It said he GULPED it down!

LANCE: This book's not TRUE!

ROB: [Reads to the group from the back cover of his novel.] Listen to this. "Fudge is never far from trouble."

BRIAN: How could Peter get attention?

LANCE: He could pretend he was hurt.

LANA: I agree with Lance. This book couldn't be true. What dad would dump cereal on a two-year-old's head?!

PAUL: Oh, SURE! I can just see my dad doing that. Just kidding.

This discussion ended when the morning recess bell rang. It was the last discussion that took place for Tales of a Fourth Grade Nothing.

Rascal

Our thematic unit on growing pains also focused on the book Rascal (North, 1963), in which author Sterling North recounts his year-long boyhood friendship with a wild raccoon that he catches, tames, and must finally return to the wilderness. Sterling lives in the woods of southern Wisconsin with his father. His mother is deceased, his older sisters, Theo and Jessica, are married and have moved away, his brother, Herschel, is away at the war in France, and his father travels a great deal on business. Sterling lives independently for long periods of time. This story tells of Rascal and Sterling's adventures as well as misadventures during their year together. At the end of the year, Sterling paddles into the wilderness in a canoe he builds himself and frees his mature raccoon so it can join and live with a female raccoon. Sterling, who turns 12 by the end of the story, returns home to get on with his own life.

To prepare for the first day of the discussion, I asked the students to consider why they chose to read Rascal.

COX: Why did you pick the novel that you picked?

KIRSA: This is my copy. [Holds up a copy of the book.] I read it when I was real little and I want to read it again to get more out of it.

TOM: People are too predictable. I'd rather read Rascal because it tells about raccoons, skunks, and lots of other animals and how they behave. I think that's more interesting.

The novel's chapters each deal with one month of Sterling's year with his pet, Rascal. Chapter one takes place during May, the month when young animals are often still in their nests, and a great month for young boys like Sterling and his friend, Oscar, to go exploring Wentworth's woods. Off they go one night armed with a paper sack of cookies and accompanied by Sterling's St. Bernard, Wowser. Wowser digs out a den of four baby raccoons. Oscar manages to catch one of the kits in his cap. He gives it to Sterling, for he knows it would not be a welcome pet on his chicken farm.

In this discussion of the events of the month of May, the children talked about Sterling's new pet and about raccoons in general. Jaren, a boy who owned coon hounds and went coon hunting with his dad, began the discussion.

JAREN: If you don't get one [a raccoon] when it's just born, they get mean and hate people.

KIRSA: Sterling's friend was chasing Rascal's mom and his friend caught the last baby coon with his hat.

CAM: No, that's not true. He didn't keep that one because they'd already got one out of the den.

TOM: It's on page 19. [Reads from his book.] "In another minute Wowser was making the dirt fly." Oh, no. It's on page 22. "Three of the little raccoons, hearing their mother's call, trundled with amazing swiftness into the hazel brush to follow her, and were gone. Oscar, however, was quick enough to cup one kit in his cap, our only reward for our labor — but reward enough, as time would prove."

CAM: So I was right. They found them in the den.

SCOTT: But they caught them in a hat.

The conversation lulled, then turned abruptly to Sterling's relationship with Rascal. Jaren again began the talking, this time with a question.

JAREN: Why does Sterling like Rascal?

SCOTT: I think you're supposed to love your pets, because I love MY pets.

LANCE: I kind of agree with Scott. You have to feed 'em [sic] and do stuff.

BLAKE: And you have to play with them.

KATE: He's never had a pet raccoon, and he wasn't raised by his mother, and Rascal wasn't, so he needs Sterling.

The children next read chapter two, an account of the events during the month of June. In this chapter, North describes how his raccoon has a penchant for gathering and hiding shiny objects. One of the shiny objects Rascal steals is a bass plug. Again, Jaren led off the discussion, this time with a theory as to why raccoons steal shiny things.

JAREN: I think it's because it hurts their eyes, so they go after it.

AMINDA: We think gold is a prize and go after it, so in their own animal ways, they go after it like we do with money.

KATE: What is a bass plug?

LANCE: Maybe a plug that has a whole bunch of outlets in it. A gas plug!

KATE: No, a BASS plug!

CAM: It's like a fishing lure.

The children's reading continued, and by August of 1918, Rascal is four months old. Both Sterling and his raccoon garden avidly through the summer. While Sterling hoes, Rascal follows. When the boy picks wax beans, the raccoon sleeps in the shade of the rhubarb leaves. Their lopsided gardening partnership continues unnoticed until Sterling makes a serious mistake. He introduces Rascal to the delight of garden-fresh sweet corn. Rascal eats part of the first ear, then keeps on nibbling at and discarding ear after ear of partially eaten sweet corn. Rascal's eating binge amuses Sterling but worries his father. Mr. North warns the boy that his pet's fondness for corn can only bring trouble.

The children met to discuss the chapter, answering questions that Paul, Aminda, Blake, and Cam spontaneously posed.

PAUL: Why didn't Rascal finish his first ear of sweet corn?

CAM: He wanted . . . I forgot now.

KIRSA: He wanted more and wanted it so bad that he forgot to eat the rest of it.

SCOTT: And he wanted to get another one.

TOM: He wanted to get to the rest first.

BLAKE: He was GREEDY.

AMINDA: Why was Sterling in for trouble?

SCOTT: I know exactly the page it was — 73!

KIRSA: He ate the corn and really liked it and couldn't get into their [North's] bunch of corn, so he ate the others' [the three neighbors' corn].

AMINDA: But why was Sterling in trouble?

KIRSA: Because HE'S the one that OWNS Rascal!

SCOTT: And his dad said he wasn't supposed to feed Rascal sweet corn.

PAUL: And everyone said, "Woodchucks, skunks, coons! What next?"

BLAKE: What was Sterling's worst mistake?

SCOTT: To feed Rascal sweet things. That was my question, too.

CORY: Why does Rascal get mad at Sterling when he yells at him?

CAM: Because he doesn't like the loud noise when he yells.

KATE: He doesn't like Sterling yelling because he's a wild animal and used to quiet.

LANCE: Well, when we get yelled at, we don't really like it. It's not a joy to us. We don't go, "Come on, yell more! We really LIKE this!"

CAM: Like when I jump on the couch.

CORY: We have assigned seats in our living room.

STEVE: Sterling had a right to get mad because Rascal did a whole bunch of stuff like eating corn. It was kind of a waste.

JAREN: Also, when you jump on the couch and they don't do much about it, you don't learn and you ruin it.

CORY: Or if the dog goes on the rug.

JAREN: And dogs sometimes don't learn unless you beat them. Sometimes he jumps on the waterbed and could poke a hole in it. He's a German Shepherd and they're tough, so you've gotta [sic] be tough on them.

AMINDA: You take away a raccoon's privileges or hit it where it doesn't really hurt so they learn.

SCOTT: I'd take away shiny things.

As Sterling's father had predicted, Rascal's penchant for garden sweet corn causes a problem. Fortunately for Sterling and his pet, besides being a businessman, Sterling's father serves as a part-time Justice of the Peace. Mr. North uses his judicial bearing to quiet his distraught neighbors who demand justice for Rascal's neighborhood sweet corn eating binges. Sterling's father makes him promise to cage and collar Rascal. Neither Sterling nor his pet are happy with the agreement. To postpone the raccoon's impending confinement, Mr. North takes his son and pet up to Lake Superior for a two-week fishing trip. While there, Sterling catches a black bass. He cleans, fillets, and fries it until it turns a golden brown. This change in color from a black bass to a golden brown one prompted a question from Tom.

TOM: Why did the black bass that he caught turn golden brown when he cooked it?

LANCE: Like marshmallows. They're white, but when you burn them they turn brown.

SCOTT: Toast turns black.

BLAKE: And wood turns to ash.

AMINDA: Maybe oils came out of his skin to make it lighter.

CAM: Like our hair. The oils inside the skin might be sensitive to heat.

LANCE: On page 80, about half-way down, it says, "It fried golden brown."

KATE: Maybe they just called it a black bass. Maybe it's not really that color.

CAM/ I'll look it up! [Together, they go and get an
TOM: encyclopedia.]

TOM: Here! [Shows a photograph from the encyclopedia.] Look! They're not black at ALL! It's just a term for sunfish.

The definitive encyclopedia picture ended the discussion of the black bass. Scott then jumped to an early summer episode in the book, and wondered about the color of the stars on the World War I service flag that hangs in the Methodist Church. When hometown favorite Rollie Adams' name joins the war casualty list, Mrs. Adams sews a gold star onto the service flag in place of the white one.

SCOTT: Why did they change the color of the stars on the flag from white to gold?

TOM: That one dude died.

KATE: Every time somebody died in the war, they sewed on a gold star.

CAM: When somebody died, you'd like something put on to honor them. You'd at least like somebody to be proud of you.

TOM: Because they fought so hard.

BLAKE: My dad was in Viet Nam. My uncles had some badges.

The children's discussion remained rerouted for a time to a consideration of war-related items. During the summer in Sterling's hometown, the local children collect peach pits to make charcoal for use in gas masks. Lance recalled reading about the children's collecting efforts, and took an interest in the peach pits as well as in the gas masks. He knew Mr. Day, an Emerson School teacher and a volunteer fireman, who had been present one day four years earlier and had demonstrated how his fireman's mask worked in Lance's kindergarten class.

LANCE: I brought a gas mask.

STEVE: Yeah, see, the boys were collecting peach pits to use in gas masks.

LANCE: [Puts on the gas mask.]

CORY: My brother's in the army and he's got to go in a gas room, take off his mask, say his name and serial number before he can get out. If he messes up, he has to do it again.

LANCE: Mr. Day one time couldn't get his off when he was demonstrating his mask.

STEVE: I've seen a gas chamber on TV on death row.

CORY: I'll bring a postcard of an army gas chamber.

JAREN: In the war there would be dangerous gases.

CAM: Or tear gas.

Between that day's discussion and the next, Lance made several phone calls to get more information about the use of peach pits in making World War I gas masks. He had asked me if he could use the school phone and I gave him permission to do so. Lance began the discussion by sharing the results gleaned from his phone calls.

LANCE: I called the Fire Department about the peach pits in the gas masks and they didn't know, so I called the National Guard, and they said it worked like a substance that absorbed the gas. But he wasn't really sure. He said it worked like charcoal.

CAM: My dad has a worker from another country who went to a beach where they have rocks that can burn. I think it's called coal. And my brother has like charcoal in his fish tank to filter water.

CORY: Charcoal like a barbecue.

CAM: Coals are different. You can burn them. These look more like stones.

SCOTT: It could work like an air freshener like Room-Aid.

At this point, Steve shifted the conversation back to a late-summer scene from the story that took place during the North's two-week fishing trip to Lake Superior. There the beaches are strewn with unbroken agates and an occasional broken one that reveals its shiny center. Steve wondered why Rascal didn't pick up the agates.

STEVE: Why didn't Rascal take the agates? They're really shiny.

LANCE: Maybe there's sharp coral around its edges. There COULD'VE been!

There was a long silence. Then Kirsra reached into her pocket, produced a tiny, white jewelry box, and began to speak. As she spoke, I remembered that we had recently finished a science unit on light in which the children had examined objects to check for their transparent or translucent properties.

KIRSA: I have something to show. [Takes some agates and white rabbit fur out of the box. She then passes the agates around the group.]

PAUL: I can bring an agate! I've got TONS of them!

CAM: I've got agates! [Holds up agates.] Mrs. Cox! This one's translucent!

STEVE: In the book it was talking about agates.

KIRSA: It says they're shiny and when you crack them open there's shiny stuff inside.

LANCE/

TOM: It's on page 85.

LANCE: I got it! It's on 85, about the middle.

TOM/ [They read together.]

JAREN: "The beaches of Lake Superior are strewn with agates. These ancient jewels are the result of age-long water seepage into small cavities of rock. The water carries silica in solution, stained by various minerals. The result is often a gem which in cross-section shows rings within rings of crocus yellow through all the shades of brown to deep, rich red. On the outside, agates are often pitted and with no visible evidence of their interior beauty — which rivals the most subtle stained glass."

STEVE: I was walking along with my friend who lived in the country and stepped on a big rock that cracked in half. It was a geode.

CORY: I know how to make crystals!

SCOTT: How?

CAM: I've got a recipe.

PAUL: I can bring in a rock polisher.

STEVE: So can I.

CAM: We can make candy crystals.

Paul never brought the rock polisher, but the next day Cam brought in a container of granulated sugar. I produced string and a beaker from the cupboard and the children gathered around as we made candy crystals. We set the jars on a shelf to check periodically for crystallization, then sat down to talk.

The discussion began back on the agate-strewn beach on Lake Superior and about the land that surrounded it.

AMINDA: It says, "The beaches were strain [sic] with agates."

PAUL: Strewn.

CAM/

STEVE: We've got that one, too.

PAUL: Full of agates.

TOM: Strone [sic] with agates, like covered.

JAREN: Yeah.

LANCE: There's cliffs, but I forgot where it said.

CORY: Over by Rock River.

LANCE: And there's trees.

STEVE: WE'VE got ALL of them!

LANCE: And there's ospreys.

AMINDA: We have THEM in Gallatin County.

CORY: Me and my uncle saw one come out of the water with a fish.

LANCE: Are they like a hawk?

STEVE: They're kind of, but they're real good in water. They've got really sharp eyes and they can dive.

AMINDA: Each year we go canoeing the Madison and see ospreys.

CORY: My dad has a picture of one on a video tape. He's working down there [Madison River] right now.

The children continued to consider the scenery that surrounded the agate-strewn beach of Lake Superior. Tom turned to his Double-Entry Journal and noticed the word "festooned" with his own question about its meaning next to it. This prompted him to interject a comment.

TOM: "Festooned with blueberries." I don't know what that means.

LANCE: Strewn? Frewned [sic]?

TOM: It's on page 90.

SCOTT: How do you spell it?

TOM: Oh, it's on 89.

JAREN: F-E-S-T-O-O-N-E-D.

KIRSA: Here it is.

KATE: It probably means there's a lot of them around on a bush.

SCOTT: [Reads from page 89.] "The very first day Rascal and I found an opening in the forest where a sunny hillside was festooned with blueberries nearly as large and dark as grapes, their leaves lacquered deep red." It probably means they're everywhere.

During this discussion, Jaren had been holding something in his hand. He brought out into the open several photographs of his dog, Charlotte, and the raccoon she had treed. The children looked at the pictures of the dog and raccoon. The session was over for the day by that time.

The next day, Tom again referred to his Double-Entry Journal. In it he had jotted down a phrase in which North described sunlight-shaped rosettes along the belly of a brook trout.

TOM: There were "rosettes of filtered sunlight."

CORY: Can I look it up?

PAUL: Can I help?

CORY/ [The two read together from the dictionary.]

PAUL: "Rosette — an ornament shaped like a rose."

LANCE: Maybe it means the color.

TOM: Maybe it's the shape of the sun coming up.

AMINDA: Maybe it's what it LOOKS like.

Cory returned the dictionary to the shelf while the rest of the children talked. He returned with an encyclopedia and began to speak to the group.

CORY: I have something on gas masks. Jaren helped me look it up. [It seems Jaren had slipped away, too.]

Jaren stepped forward to stand next to Cory. They held the book open vertically to show the group a picture of a gas mask. The two boys then read the entire article to the group. The children looked at the picture as they listened to the explanation being read to them. When Jaren and Cory were done reading we left for lunch.

During the next few days the children read the late summer episode from Rascal in which Sterling returns to his home and to the realization that he still needs to build a cage for his pet raccoon. Some of the children speculated as to what they would have built for Rascal if they had been Sterling.

CAM: I'd keep it in a big place like a cage with a tree in the middle.

JAREN: And twigs in it like my friend Warren's cage for Felix [a raccoon].

STEVE: You could make a cage with chicken wire and put it around a branch.

CAM: Like the glass cages with trees in them at Hogle Zoo in Salt Lake.

SCOTT: You could make a tree stand like a Christmas tree stand.

AMINDA: Sterling didn't like the idea of building a cage.

KATE: As I remember, he came home and started doing other things.

CORY: He wouldn't come home and just start it. He might have homework.

KIRSA: They postponed school because they didn't have enough men. They were at the war and the women had to do their [the men's] jobs.

CAM: Here it is — page 112. "The opening of school was postponed for a month in the autumn of 1918. With so many young men away at war, the women and older children tried to fill their places on the farms around Brailsford Junction."

Blake suddenly sat up straighter than he usually did. Blake, a new student to our school, usually sat silently, and had reportedly been a difficult student in his former school. When Blake read how excited Sterling was to return to school when it finally opened in October, he wondered why.

BLAKE: Why was it a pleasure for Sterling to return to school?

STEVE: He likes the new pencils, the smell of the textbooks right off the press, and he has two nice teachers.

AMINDA: He was going to junior high and he was kind of excited about it.

LANCE: Some people are kind of excited to go. Well, I don't know, you're meeting new people.

CAM: And like in fifth grade, you get to use huge beach balls [in our own fifth grade P.E. classes].

STEVE: What does this have to do with Rascal?

CAM: Well . . .

BLAKE: It would be fun for Rascal. It would be something for him to do while he was in school.

JAREN: Did Sterling bring Rascal to school?

LANCE: Yes.

SCOTT: I know WHY! His teacher said it was animal day at school. After class he went up to his teacher and asked if he could bring his raccoon.

CAM: Here's the PICTURE!

JAREN: No, that's after Rascal bit Slammy Stillman.

LANCE: Why did he bite Slammy?

STEVE: Because he snapped a rubber band at him.

TOM: Slammy Stillman didn't get punished at ALL! It was just if he got rabies.

STEVE: But the whole class SAW it!

CAM: All he did was snap a rubber band!

SCOTT: How'd you like it if I did it to your pet? Did Rascal do anything to Slammy?

CAM: It matters what kind of animal you snap. My cat eats gophers, so you COULD get rabies.

LANCE: But they put Rascal in a cage for 14 days.

SCOTT: They should've put Slammy in Rascal's cage.

LANCE: And he should've been punished for yelling in school. He went, "Mad coon! Mad coon!"

STEVE: Why did Slammy snap the rubber band at Rascal?

CAM: I think he'd snap it to get Sterling in trouble.

SCOTT: He was getting back for the pie eating contest. [Together, Sterling and Rascal had eaten their way to victory.]

TOM: He was just a bully, a plain bully.

LANCE: In some chapter it said, "Slammy Stillman never played fair." He's just a bully.

TOM: Yeah, just a bully.

Both Rascal and Sterling survive the Slammy Stillman episode, fall turns to winter in Brailsford Junction, and with winter comes trapping season. On Armistice Day, Sterling decides to make his own truce with the muskrats and cease trapping them. He busies himself instead with finishing his canoe-building project. (The unfinished canoe still occupies the middle of his living room.)

When the weather warms in March, Rascal awakes from winter's lethargy and becomes restless. On one particularly balmy night he escapes from his cage and raids the neighbor's henhouse. Sterling realizes that his pet's stay in civilization soon needs to end.

The children reflected on Sterling's friendship with Rascal, discussed what had been most important in the raccoon's year-long friendship with Sterling, then shifted to Rascal's ride into the wilderness and to freedom in the canoe that Sterling had built.

LANCE: I thought the canoe was kind of one of the main parts. He's building it for the whole story. Then at the end he takes Rascal on a ride and lets him go.

TOM: Also the collar, because he'll remember Rascal by it.

KIRSA: All through the story he was working on it. He bought Rascal a collar and put off getting canvas for his boat.

AMINDA: Kind of like what Lance said. He was building it through the whole book. Sterling and Rascal were the main characters, but the canoe was, too.

CAM: It says on page 183 . . . yeah, 183 . . . they were using some green stuff.

SCOTT: Green paint.

STEVE: Ghostly green.

Actually the paint described in the novel was a glossy green instead of ghostly green, but the children did not correct Steve. Instead, Kirsa directed our attention to her request that she and Aminda dramatize the canoe scene in which Sterling allows Rascal to go free. I told Kirsa that this would be fine, provided some cardboard so that the girls could make paddles for the canoe, and agreed that in about two days they could perform the scene.

Kirsa and Aminda enlisted Kate's help, for they needed three characters. Kirsa played Rascal, Aminda played the role of Sterling, and Kate was the female raccoon that emerged from the wilderness. Kirsa decided to use two chairs facing opposite each other to represent Sterling's canoe. Our greenish carpet served as the water. The three girls reenacted the scene. When it was over, the children discussed what they had seen and heard.

CORY: I think it's a happy ending because Sterling can get on with his life and so can Rascal.

SCOTT: But Rascal won't get all that stuff anymore like sugar cubes.

BLAKE: I think Rascal can get more food because he'll be outside all the time.

AMINDA: Like Cory said, Sterling does have to get on with his life. He's in junior high and 12 years old. And Rascal has the female to teach him how to get on with his life.

KIRSA: When he got the canvas he talked about getting ice skates, but it [the book] said after three years he was in a wheelchair.

The children continued to reflect upon scenes from the story. Cam recommended inclusion of a scene that was not in the book, but that he felt should have been part of the story.

CAM: I'd like to see a picture of when Sterling and Herschel . . . when he comes home from the war.

BLAKE: I'd like to see this in a movie because of all the stuff that happens like Rascal eating stuff and stuff that he does.

JAREN: Like the pie eating contest.

AMINDA: At the very beginning of the book when Dad is at the doorway and Oscar is hiding in the bush would be a good scene. I'd film it from behind Sterling when he's trying to talk to his dad.

LANCE: I'd show the part where Bert Bruce [a neighbor] lands a fish.

KATE: I have the movie.

ALL: You DO?!

The children begged to see Kate's movie version of Rascal. Kate brought the movie to school. We watched it. After the movie was over, the children were unusually silent. I refrained from breaking the silence, but waited until one of the children would do so. Finally, Scott spoke up. He

related an experience he'd had watching another movie after he'd read the book first.

SCOTT: Some movies are totally different, like Bunnicula.

STEVE: That's why movies aren't as good, because books have more detail.

PAUL: I'm reading The Hobbit right now. My imagination, like the battles, is a lot better than the movie was.

KIRSA: Like if the book shows you a picture, it's what the artist thinks, but if you imagine it you get to think what you want, not what the book wants.

Kate rewound and retrieved her videotape of the movie as the group dispersed. I thanked her for bringing it in to share with us. This session ended our discussions of Rascal.

Where the Red Fern Grows

The next pair of novels my class considered focused upon a different theme, young people meeting the challenge of adversity. Wilson Rawls' (1961) story, Where the Red Fern Grows, tells of a boy named Billy and his hard-earned hunting dogs, Old Dan and Little Ann. Billy traps raccoons to earn enough money to realize his dream of buying two Redbone coon hunting dogs. He and the two dogs become the best hunting team in the river bottoms of Cherokee country. Billy's love for his dogs and the dogs' devotion to each other grow to become wonderfully powerful. Sadly, Old Dan dies of a wound sustained while trying to protect Billy from a mountain lion attack,

and Little Ann slowly pines away for him until she takes her place in the shallow grave beside Old Dan. Only when Billy notices a red fern growing in between the two graves can he comfortably move away to the city and get on with his life, because he knows that the old Indian legend of a brother and sister united happily after death has come true for his two dogs.

My students began their first discussion of Where the Red Fern Grows by talking about how young Billy trapped animals to earn the money to buy his dogs. While first learning to use the traps, Billy somehow traps the family's cat. Billy's cat-trapping caused quite a stir among some of my students. Aminda caught the group's attention with the following statement.

AMINDA: I know if I caught my cat in a trap, my mom would get really mad at me.

CAM: My brother caught a mouse this morning. He had to keep it alive and take it to school for science class. You have to dissect stuff in fifth grade.

SANDRA: Is the animal alive when you dissect it?

LYNN: That would be GROSS!

JAREN: It's just like in the movie, Beetle Juice!

Billy continues to trap. He tries not to trap the cat, but raccoons instead. He slowly amasses money from selling furs and hides it in a baking powder can. Aminda read how Billy's cache of money grew slowly, but steadily, and commented on his perseverance.

AMINDA: Most kids now rely a lot on their parents. Like they say, "Can I have 10 bucks to go to the store?"

SANDRA: Not many kids would work for TWO YEARS.

Aminda and Sandra thought for awhile. The rest of the group waited. Then Sandra referred to a phrase that Wilson Rawls used in his novel to describe Billy's persistent desire to own hunting dogs.

SANDRA: The boy really had the "dog-wanting disease," and I felt sorry for him.

CAM: And if the dog had a disease like rabies, it would cost his family even MORE money.

BRIAN: But that's not the disease. It's like not eating because he wants a dog so much.

CAM: Yeah, but you might not eat for a long time and then you COULD get sick. I guess I thought they were talking about the dog having a disease.

LINDY: I wouldn't sleep.

BRIAN: And if you've ever stayed up until two or three, your stomach starts growling and you get cramps and you can get sick. And you daydream about them all the time and you just can't sleep.

TISH: He couldn't sleep at night because he was HEARING dogs, not daydreaming them.

ANGIE: People were hunting coons in the woods.

Tish reflected for a moment, then seemed to remember something. She began to speak rapidly to the group in general.

TISH: He got three steel traps to help him out with his dog-wanting disease, so he'd get to be out hunting anyway, even if he didn't have dogs.

SANDRA: He wanted to go hunting with dogs, but when his dad brought him the traps, at least he got to go kill coons, so he felt better because he couldn't eat and he couldn't sleep from the dog-wanting disease.

CAM: Yeah, he even got skinny!

For two whole years, Billy ferrets away his trapping money in the old baking powder can that he hides up in the barn. The can itself became the topic of our next discussion.

AMINDA: What did K.C. Baking Powder stand for?

BRIAN: It could be just a brand, like J.B.'s Big Boy.

LYNN: I thought it stood for Kentucky Country Baking Powder.

The baking powder can in question finally contains the \$50 Billy needs to buy his dogs, so he sets out for his grandfather's combination country store and post office to send out an order for them. When Billy arrives at the store, he dumps the contents of the can on the counter for his grandfather to see.

As Scott read this scene between Grandfather and Billy, he wrote down in his Double-Entry Journal that Rawls describes Billy's grandfather as being dumbfounded by the amount of money that the boy has saved. Scott brought his journal to our discussion group and read from it at the opening of our discussion session.

SCOTT: "Grandpa was dumbfounded." That sounds weird.

LYNN: I thought it meant he was surprised at Billy.

SANDRA: Yeah, like he was surprised.

BRIAN: I think he was found dumb.

SANDRA: Yeah, like he was dumb because he didn't know what was going on.

JILL: He couldn't speak because he was so surprised.

BRIAN: There's two meanings of dumb — like dumb as a dork and like stupid.

TISH: It means you don't know if you heard it right, and you're really surprised if you did.

As the story continues, Grandfather helps Billy send off an order for his dogs. Billy's dogs finally arrive, but not at Grandpa's store. Instead, they await Billy in a shipping crate at the train depot in the neighboring town of Tahlequah. Billy sets out barefooted on a 20-mile walk to pick them up.

Erin spoke up first after reading about Billy's first trip ever to town. She asked if she could read a scene from that trip to our discussion group.

ERIN: "The sun was just right, and the plate glass was a perfect mirror. I saw the full reflection of myself for the first time in my life." That's hard to believe he's never seen himself before.

SANDRA: It reminded me of looking in a metal cookie bowl.

CAM: It's like seeing yourself on the shiny pipes in the boy's bathroom.

SCOTT: I've got another thing. Like at carnivals they've got Mirrorland where you walk around and you can see your whole body and it looks really weird.

CAM: Yeah, the fun house!

LYNN: It said, "I'd never had a bottle of pop in my life and didn't know what to say. Seeing my hesitation he [the town marshal] said, 'This strawberry looks pretty good.' I said that would be fine." I've never had strawberry pop. I can't imagine what it would taste like.

Some of the children looked at Lynn and some looked at the floor or off in another direction. No one said a word. The conversation lulled. Then Lynn retrieved another puzzling phrase from her Double-Entry Journal. This phrase described how barefooted Billy felt when haughty townspeople taunted him for his tattered overalls and shaggy hair.

LYNN: What does "my blood boiled" mean?

CAM: You're nervous or scared.

BRIAN: Your heart's beating fast 'cause [sic] you're really mad.

JAREN: And also like when you're running off if something scares you.

LYNN: I kinda [sic] get it. He's probably mad because people are staring at him.

Several days later this group met again. During the interim, the children had read the segment of the book that described how Billy trained his dogs that summer. I decided that after we discussed this portion of the story, I would direct the students to write to each other about traps, raccoons, and training dogs. I had hoped that through writing, the children would call upon their reading and blend it with personal experience. However, this writing assignment was derailed, as can be seen in the following conversation.

MEL: The most important thing about the book is the relationship between Billy and his dogs.

AMINDA: I think Billy had a lot of determination to get the dogs, and I think he trained the dogs well.

SANDRA: Yeah. He had to spend a lot of time with the dogs to train them.

MOLLY: What are we doing today?

COX: Writing a dialogue to another reader about traps, raccoons, and training dogs. You can choose one or do all three.

MOLLY: I wish we still had workbooks. I'm bored. There's not enough to DO!

SCOTT: Are you going to let us do more PLAYS?

ROB: I want to know when we could build some traps.

JAREN: My stepdad . . . you know, Roger . . . has a friend who has two coonhounds and another guy has this raccoon and they could bring them to school and they could let the dogs go after the raccoon.

COX: Would the raccoon get hurt?

JAREN: No.

The raccoon never did get chased by dogs at Emerson School. I decided not to assign the writing. Instead, Rob and Brian gathered sticks and cardboard and built traps, Scott organized a play, and Jaren's stepfather, Roger, brought his pair of coonhounds to school. We met them outside on the playground where Roger held them and let the children pet them. Then he turned the dogs loose and we watched them respond to Roger's commands. When the dogs were done demonstrating, they wagged their tails and walked next to each other. Scott said that they were "just like Old Dan and Little Ann."

We said goodbye to the hounds and to Roger, then returned to the room where we discussed the dogs' qualities as well as an episode from the novel in which two local bullies, Rainie and Rubin Pritchard, goad Billy into betting that his dogs can successfully hunt the elusive ghost coon.

CAM: I thought they made a good hunting team because Old Dan was strong and Little Ann was smart.

SANDRA: I disagree, because on page 144, Little Ann fought against another dog. It said, "She would never loosen that deadly hold until the last breath of life was gone."

TISH: See, these boys Billy was hunting with were sposed [sic] to keep their Blue Tick hound tied up, but they didn't. It said, "The Blue Tick had finally got a fight out of Old Dan."

SANDRA: Yeah, but see, Little Ann got in the fight and saved Old Dan.

As the battle between the old Blue Tick hound and the two young dogs progresses, Rubin can see that Billy's dogs are besting his dog, so he grabs his axe and starts toward the dogfight to save Blue. Rubin trips on a tree root and accidentally impales himself on the axe.

Cam asked if he could read the dogfight scene aloud to the group. He read with difficulty, mispronounced some words ("breezy" instead of "drizzle," and "Berford" for "Buford"). The children supplied the correct pronunciations and followed along silently in their own books. Though Cam read slowly, the children sat still and listened. In fact, six of the children gradually sprawled on their bellies as they followed Cam's words on the pages of their own

books. When Cam had finished reading, he looked at the other children and commented.

CAM: I would have had butterflies in my stomach.

ERIN: I would've been scared, like I'd just killed somebody and the world was coming to an end. I wouldn't want to live anymore.

SCOTT: Blood really grosses me out! Once I'd seen that [the axe in Rubin's stomach], I'd have bad dreams the rest of my life.

The children all dropped the subject of Rubin's death. I took advantage of their lack of momentum to shift their attention to the next set of reading assignments. We did not meet again for several days, until the children had read the three chapters that followed. In those three chapters, author Rawls tells of a regional coon hunting contest, of how the menfolk in Billy's family prepare for it, and the way Old Dan and Little Ann win it.

When we met again, the events of those three chapters prompted the following flurry of comments.

LYNN: [Reads from her book from the scene at the end of the hunting contest.] "Then, trotting side by side, they disappeared into the darkness. We followed along, stopping now and then to listen." I like the way the author said, "disappeared into the darkness" instead of just "trotted into the forest."

AMINDA: It's different. I could just picture a little dog and a big dog going into the forest.

JILL: My favorite part was on page 216, where Billy was so surprised because he won the two cups and the money — a LOT of money!

AMINDA: I like it, too, because he was the only boy who entered the contest. The rest were GROWNUPS!

As the four girls had talked, I noticed that none of them had their Double-Entry Journals with them. Both Lynn and Jill had stuck little pieces of scrap paper into their books to mark passages that they wanted to retrieve from the novel during discussion group.

The children's next reading assignment began with Billy and his entourage's triumphant return home from the hunting tournament and went on to tell of the tragic lion attack that occurred several weeks later. In the novel, Billy allows his dogs to tree what he thinks is an ordinary bobcat, but instead it turns out to be a full-sized mountain lion. When the lion springs at Billy, both dogs attack it. Though Little Ann tries to save him, Old Dan is fatally wounded in the fight. Afterward, Little Ann's physical wounds heal, but she gives up the will to live once Old Dan has died.

When we met to discuss these events, Aminda began by taking a stance that someone or something ought to be blamed for the death of Billy's dogs.

AMINDA: Who was the culprit in Ann and Dan's deaths?

LYNN: Little Ann died of sadness.

LINDY: Old Dan died because a bobcat got him.

MEL: The culprit was the mountain lion. It made Old Dan lose a lot of blood.

JAREN: This guy named . . . I forgot . . . that I know had . . . uh, his dog tree a lion. The lion ripped the dog's face open. He's still alive. They took him to a vet. He was really torn up. The dog had gone after the lion when it went into a cave. It was shot, but not good enough.

AMINDA: Little Ann died of starvation. In the story it said they always waited 'til [sic] the other dog got their share before they ate, so she wouldn't eat.

SCOTT: Yeah. Old Dan was like her eating partner.

AMINDA: Old Dan and Little Ann were like one. They fought the lion together to protect Billy. Ann wouldn't let go until Billy pried her jaws off. She wouldn't release it until she was sure Billy was safe.

CAM: And when two elk are fighting, they're like one because they're both fighting for the females.

SANDRA: The females, even ducks, can't do ANYTHING about the males fighting over them.

JILL: They're trained to fight to see who gets to keep the girl and the dogs are fighting for Billy.

The next day, the children continued to discuss the battle with the lion, as well as the sudden death of Old Dan and the lingering death of Little Ann. Scott spoke first. He compared Old Dan's death to a possible death of a brother. (Scott had one sibling, a younger brother.)

SCOTT: If your brother died like Ann's died, you'd be really sad.

CORY: I lost an older brother. He got shot.

SCOTT: In The Accident [by Carol Carrick], when the dog died the boy blamed the truck driver, but it wasn't fair because it wasn't his fault. Old Dan died because he risked his life for Billy.

ANGIE: I do think Billy is kind of blaming himself. He shouldn't have had the dog stick up for him. Then he wouldn't feel bad. He should have let himself get hurt.

CAM: It was really the mom's fault because she wouldn't let him have a gun to shoot the mountain lion.

JAREN: And the only reason Little Ann survived is because she wasn't as brave, so she let Old Dan stick up for her AND for Billy.

ANGIE: It was the whole FAMILY'S fault because they let Billy hunt.

JAREN: Well, when Roger and I hunt, mountain lions are safe if they're treed, but they could come after you if they're not. They could tear up a dog or come after you. People who are hunting sometimes get carried away and don't realize where they are and which way the wind's blowing.

This discussion took place on a Friday. I asked the children to finish reading the book over the weekend. During the weekend, Sandra and Lynn watched the movie version of Where the Red Fern Grows. They returned to school and told their fellow readers about the movie.

SANDRA: I saw the movie, Where the Red Fern Grows, over the weekend, and it was TERRIBLE!

LYNN: Yeah. It skipped a lot of details.

SANDRA: It even skipped the part about sliding down the pipe at the school [in Tahlequah]. And it didn't even tell about the little old lady laughing at him like it did in the book.

COX: Why did that bother you?

SANDRA: Because you could just SEE the little old lady rocking back and forth on her rake and laughing!

LYNN: Yeah.

SANDRA: But it DID say "based on the novel" at the beginning.

LYNN: And the movie said Grandma told the girls the Indian story of the red fern, but that wasn't true. It was GRANDPA!

The children listened to Lynn and Sandra, but neither involved themselves in this discussion nor asked to see the movie version of this novel. Therefore, I decided not to show the movie in class.

The Wolves of Willoughby Chase

I chose Joan Aiken's (1962) Wolves of Willoughby Chase as the other half of the pair of books we discussed on the theme of young people meeting the challenge of adversity. Aiken's novel features Bonnie, the pampered but kind-hearted daughter of Lady Green and Lord Willoughby, and Sylvia, her less fortunate cousin. Sylvia moves from the modest apartment of her aging Aunt Jane to travel by train through wolf-infested wilderness to take up residence at Willoughby Chase. When a wolf in fact does attack Sylvia's train compartment, a fellow passenger, Mr. Grimshaw, kills it, and thereafter attaches himself to Sylvia as a solicitous traveling companion. Grimshaw feigns an injury and thus becomes an additional guest at Willoughby Chase. Lord Willoughby and Lady Green immediately set off to take a cruise on an ill-fated ship as Grimshaw and the newly-hired governess, Miss Slighcarp, plot to take over the estate. With the help of Simon the gooseboy, James the butler, and Pattern the nanny, the two girls escape Miss Slighcarp and her

accomplices' workhouse privations, fetch medical attention for the ailing Aunt Jane, secure the services of a lawyer to help them regain Bonnie's estate, and enlist the aid of the police in removing Miss Slighcarp and her accomplice, Miss Brisket, from the Willoughby Chase estate. Bonnie's parents arrive home safely just in time to share in their daughter's triumph.

I read chapter one to the children. They then read chapter two independently. When we met for our first discussion session, Tim wondered why Mr. Grimshaw wanted to be near Sylvia on the train.

TIM: Why did the man that was in the boxcar with Sylvia move up?

MOLLY: Because the window broke and they had to move up to another compartment.

SARAH: And it might get cold.

ERIN: Why didn't Sylvia stay with her Aunt Jane?

JILL: She was getting too old, and she and her brother [Lord Willoughby] talked to each other and decided she was too old and would live with Bonnie.

LANA: Well, if she did, if Aunt Jane did, like die, Sylvia would have to stay there alone and they'd have to send her to Bonnie's house. So if Aunt Jane does die, Sylvia will already be there.

LINDY: Why did her grandma make her a white suit to wear on the train?

ERIN: Her GRANDMA?!

MOLLY: She seems kind of old for an aunt. It's kind of mean to say, but she's old. That's why she's sick and stuff.

SARAH: Yeah. On page 17 it shows her white hair.

All of the children turned to page 17 in their books. They each looked at the picture of Aunt Jane sewing material that had recently been a curtain, used as a room divider.

LANA: She just took that cloth cuz [sic] that's all they had. It was the dividing thing and little girls back then wore white.

MEL: And Aunt Jane probably wouldn't use the divider anymore, so she just used it to make a dress.

Suddenly, the students' attention turned to a nervous Sylvia, huddled in a cold train compartment with Mr. Grimshaw.

SANDRA: Why did Mr. Grimshaw offer Sylvia candy?

MOLLY: You kind of have to read the back, the end, to know the answer.

SANDRA: Well, I read farther than chapter two, and I don't know if I should say this, but he's working with Miss Slighcarp. Him and Miss Slighcarp had everything all planned out.

LINDY: He might have done something to the chocolates.

SANDRA: If they had it planned, he probably wanted Sylvia to think he was nice and then pretend to be unconscious so she'd take him to Miss Slighcarp.

SARAH: I think Miss Slighcarp has something to do with the wolves.

LINDY: Yeah. She might have them trained to go after other people, but not her.

JILL: But she's only been there a few DAYS!

I assigned the next chapter to read. In it, Lady Green and Lord Willoughby depart and leave Miss Slighcarp in charge.

When we met again, Jill wanted to open the discussion with a question about the previous chapter, which we had discussed four days earlier.

JILL: How did Aunt Jane tell Mr. Willoughby that Sylvia would stay with him if she doesn't have a phone?

JULIE: She probably wrote a letter or sent a telegraph.

LANA: She probably wrote a letter.

JILL: Then how come she didn't write to the doctor later?

SANDRA: She was probably too sick.

ROB: Too old.

Mel then shifted the discussion to the chapter the children had just read. She took a slip of paper out from between two pages of her book and glanced at a page. Then she asked a question about the coins Lord Willoughby pressed into Bonnie's hands as a parting gift.

MEL: What is a sovereign?

SANDRA: What page is it on? How is it used?

MEL: Page 45. When Bonnie's mother and father are leaving, it says, "She pressed a golden sovereign into each of her hands."

LINDY: It could be a chocolate in a gold wrapping.

MOLLY: I've heard it somewhere else. I think he gave one to Simon, too.

TISH: At the end of the story he did for saving their [Bonnie's and Sylvia's] lives.

As the discussion continued, the children considered a later scene from the chapter. In this scene, Bonnie's parents have barely removed themselves from Willoughby Chase when Miss Slighcarp appears wearing one of Lady Green's best dresses.

Sandra seemed somewhat upset as she continued the discussion by asking a question.

SANDRA: Why did Miss Slighcarp wear Bonnie's mom's DRESS?

JILL: Because she was in charge of the house and she wanted to wear family stuff.

SANDRA: Like it says, she was wearing . . .

MOLLY: A plain grey twill.

SANDRA: There's a picture of her on page 10, and she looks pretty fancy to ME!

JILL: But she wanted to make people think she just arrived cuz [sic] she just got dropped off there and she wanted people to think she just got off the train.

SANDRA: But Sylvia wasn't fancy [getting off the train].

MOLLY: Well, Aunt Jane couldn't afford to dress her fancy, so she concentrated on making her act like a lady more to cover up that she couldn't LOOK like a lady. So she overdid acting.

SANDRA: And they'd look at her and say, "What nice manners!" instead of noticing her clothes.

ERIN: Well, Miss Slighcarp might have worn Lady Green's dresses so she'd seem more in charge of everything in the house — the servants, clothes, toys, and everything else!

SANDRA: Now I get it! And when she first got there, Miss Slighcarp wore plain clothes so she'd look like someone who'd be happy just to teach kids. That reminds me of the way these people dress, really plain, girls with big bonnets and boys with suspenders, and the girls have to be all proper!

MOLLY: Yeah. The HUTTERITES!

A weekend passed. The children read chapter six before this next discussion took place. On Monday, the discussion began with Sandra's question, one which referred back to chapter five and a scene in which Miss Slighcarp and her accomplice, Mr. Grimshaw, alter Lord Willoughby's will to their benefit and destroy his old one.

SANDRA: Why was Mr. Grimshaw burning papers?

TISH: When he was burning the papers in the library?

SANDRA: No, in his room. Here it is.

ERIN: What page?

SANDRA: Forty-three. [Sandra reads from her book as the other children quickly turn to page 43 and follow along.] "What was their surprise to discover that the patient was not in bed but up and standing by the fire, wrapped in a crimson plush dressing gown! Moreover, he seemed to have been burning papers, for the fireplace was full of black ash, and the room of blue smoke."

LINDY: Like someone said, he might be playing along with the games.

SANDRA: Like what games?

LINDY: He might have been playing along with Miss Slighcarp's trick, acting like he was brain-damaged.

SANDRA: But why was he burning papers?

LYNN: He might have been burning the will.

ROB: He could've been trying to start a fire to warm up.

MOLLY: But it made blue smoke!

SARAH: At the beginning of the story, Pattern was helping Miss Slighcarp get out something . . . and she said . . . [Sarah looks through her book.]

SANDRA: [Points to a spot in Sarah's book.] Here, read this part.

SARAH: "I shall leave you for a moment. Shall I come back in half an hour?' but [Bonnie] was arrested by the sight of Miss Slighcarp snatching a heavy marble hairbrush from its rest and striking a savage blow at the maid, who had taken out a little case apparently containing letters and papers."

SANDRA: Yeah, a case.

MOLLY: A dispatch box.

ROB: Would you see blue smoke?

SANDRA: Maybe it was the LETTER!

JILL: She wrote to somebody and she wrote back.

TISH: And she wanted Mr. Grimshaw to act unconscious and burn them for her.

SANDRA: Or it could've been a letter from the police.

MOLLY: Or forged papers from the last place where she worked.

SARAH: Or her IDENTITY! She could be really somebody else!

- ROB:** This is like a Nancy Drew mystery! I read this one called The Jet Marine. These girls are arguing like they do in the book when they're trying to figure things out.
- MEL:** You know, when Mr. Grimshaw was trying to burn the papers . . . he probably used to work for Miss Slighcarp and wants to burn those papers.
- SANDRA:** Oh! No wonder he was on the same train as Sylvia! And he had neat WRITING!
- SARAH:** And Miss Slighcarp knows Sir Willoughby is a reasonable man and will let Mr. Grimshaw stay there. [Sarah reads from her book.] "He can remain till he gets his wits back . . ."
- MOLLY:** Here. I found something. [She reads from her book.] "Miss Slighcarp summoned Bonnie and Sylvia to be inspected by their new instructress. As soon as they saw her they recognized the lady whom they had seen driving her carriage near the boundaries of Willoughby Chase." So the girls recognize the new instructress. She's the same one they'd seen when they were skating!
- TISH:** And Miss Brisket and Miss Slighcarp told Mr. Grimshaw to pretend he was unconscious on the train. Miss Slighcarp is the planner.
- LINDY:** But how could he act unconscious when the doctor was checking him?
- ROB:** They didn't have that many good instruments back then.

Silence engulfed the discussion group. By this time, the children had moved steadily closer to each other until their knees nearly met in the center of an irregular circle. Rob brought the group back around to the blue smoke with this final comment.

ROB: It reminds me of a Matlock show when he hired a guy to burn a disc that made blue smoke.

Our next discussion session was delayed for 10 days due to spring vacation. When the children returned, their talk focused again on Lord Willoughby's original will which Miss Slighcarp had burned.

LANA: Why was Miss Slighcarp changing that contract that said Bonnie got everything?

SARAH: The will?

LANA: Yeah.

SARAH: Because all Miss Slighcarp would get was 100 dollars.

SANDRA: No — pounds, not dollars!

SARAH: But they're the same.

SANDRA: There's two kinds of ways. At the grocery store they say three pounds of potatoes for two dollars or they could say it costs two pounds. It kind of equals out.

MOLLY: No, that's not the way it is!

ROB: I'll look it up. [Rob leaves to look it up.]

ERIN: She didn't want the kids to get anything.

Rob returned with a dictionary and read the definition of a pound to the group. Then he asked me if he could call a bank to find out how much a pound was worth. I gave Rob permission to use the school phone. He returned a few minutes later.

ROB: This is off the subject [he interrupts], but I found out what a pound is worth. First I called D.A. Davidson. They said to call First Citizen's Bank. They told me to call First Security. They told me to call First Bank of Bozeman. They said it was worth \$1.6371. [Rob passes around a scrap of paper that has the amount written on it.]

My students next turned their attention to the Willoughby Chase mansion and its many rooms as well as to the secret passageways where Bonnie and Sylvia clandestinely met their loyal servants during Miss Slighcarp's cruel reign at the estate.

LANA: About the blue powder room. Bonnie showed Miss Slighcarp lots of rooms, but she didn't show her the blue powder room.

TISH: I found the answer. Page 83 to 84. [Tish reads to the group.] "At five o'clock the two children stole cautiously to the little blue powder room, which, luckily, was in a remote wing of the great house, where Miss Slighcarp was not likely to make her way. . . . James [a loyal servant] came quickly and quietly into the room. 'What a lark!' he said. 'The old cat nearly caught me — met me in the long gallery — and asked what I was doing. I said, going to see all the windows were shut for the night . . .'"

MOLLY: So he WAS going to the blue powder room!

SARAH: Powder rooms are like a bathroom except they don't have a bathtub.

ROB: Tom has one.

SARAH: Kyla has one. It has lots of towels in it.

JILL: This lady in a movie said she needed to go to the powder room. The man didn't know what she meant, so she said "the can" and that she was powdering her nose.

MOLLY: Where does the secret passage lead to?

SANDRA: There's peekholes where you can see inside.

LYNN: Like the dairy room.

SANDRA: No, the DIARY room!

LYNN: Dairy!

SANDRA: I thought her dad kept his diary and money there. But it didn't make sense.

MOLLY: Well, sometimes I get mixed up on that word. A dairy is like the one my grandpa used to own. You make cheese and things out of milk. It has machines where you take the cream out if you don't want it.

ERIN: I found where they said it. [Reads from her book.] "They stepped out, and found themselves in the dairy, a brick-floored, slate-shelved room with several sinks, where some of the dishwashing was done."

SANDRA: We went on a field trip to a dairy, but I couldn't believe you could have one in your house.

MOLLY: But they were so far from Blastburn. It would be kind of complicated to get stuff . . . like by James going on a train to London to get it. So it's simpler because they've got so many servants to feed to have a dairy.

At this point, the conversation jumped back to another setting within the mansion, the blue powder room. Julie led off on this leg of the discussion.

JULIE: Why did Sylvia, Bonnie, Pattern, and James meet in the powder room instead of in the secret passageway?

MEL: Maybe people don't go there very often. I wish they had a map of the house, but it was probably away from the library and stuff. Like the little out-of-the-way dusty room where Pattern stayed cuz [sic] she knew Miss Slighcarp would never go there.

SARAH: Miss Slighcarp hadn't checked out the whole house yet and spent most of her time in the library checking out documents, so she might not have known about the blue powder room.

JILL: When Miss Slighcarp went down the halls, Pattern ducked into the powder room and then just stayed there because Miss Slighcarp kept going down the halls.

LYNN: And it would have to be a little room. Otherwise the sound would echo.

ROB: There's a mansion by my house on South Third and Bristol Lane. They had a party and I went inside. I didn't look at the bathrooms.

SARAH: I've been in a mansion in Livingston. Now it's a bed and breakfast.

Our group met again the next school day. As I neared the group, I could hear the students already talking about the numbers that Bonnie, Sylvia, and the workhouse girls had to wear on their drab uniforms at Miss Brisket's boarding school in the industrial town of Blastburn.

COX: Why DID Lucy have a number 6 on her?

LANA: Maybe that's her age.

MOLLY: No, because Bonnie and Sylvia are 98 and 99.

MEL: Maybe because they all wear the same clothes and all have their hair cut short and Miss Brisket can't tell them apart.

ERIN: I agree with Mel and maybe Miss Brisket doesn't WANT to say their names.

LINDY: And it's easier to say 98 or 99 than to remember a name.

ROB: Maybe it's the number of the job they're assigned.

SARAH: Miss Brisket said, "In this house we don't have names. We have numbers."

TISH: Their bunk numbers are the same as on their shirts. And names are too fancy. A name is for one specific person.

MOLLY: My name is too fancy for me.

SANDRA: Bonnie and Sylvia are pretty names. And Miss Brisket is really mean and the girls might have prettier names than her daughter or her. The girls might brag about their names.

LYNN: I agree with Sandra. Miss Brisket is so mean and she wants her DAUGHTER to be the most special.

SANDRA: She took their hair and clothes and names away so they wouldn't be more beautiful than her daughter or her. She thinks of them as slaves.

JULIE: They have numbers and are living robots.

Several of the children voiced their agreement with Julie. Then Sandra wondered why someone didn't do something about the deplorable workhouse conditions at Miss Brisket's supposed boarding school. She asked the group why Mr. Friendship, the itinerant school inspector, didn't uncover Miss Brisket's misuse of the children.

LANA: Miss Brisket wasn't an honest woman because she told the girls to go to the schoolroom only when the police came to check on her.

SANDRA: But when Mr. Friendship came, why didn't he notice how dirty the children were? And if Miss Brisket was so mean to innocent children, how could she read the Bible to them?

LANA: You'd think she'd read the DICTIONARY!

SANDRA: But she doesn't want them to learn and grow up to be president and come back and fire her.

The children talked about how Bonnie acted like the stronger of the two girls while at Miss Brisket's school, and of how Sylvia seemed to need looking after by Bonnie.

SANDRA: Bonnie had a lot of responsibility for Sylvia, like when you babysit and you worry about them falling down the stairs.

ROB: Like when I had to call the parents at the restaurant when my little cousin got cut.

LANA: This might be sort of off the subject, but this book sort of reminds me of My Side of the Mountain because Simon makes his own clothes like Sam.

In Aiken's story, her character, Simon, the self-sufficient gooseboy, rescues Bonnie and Sylvia from the harsh life of Miss Brisket's school and leads them, by wagon and on foot, cross-country on a journey to London. The threesome's first stop in London at Aunt Jane's modest, attic room prompted the following conversation. Mel wondered why the doctor prescribed a small dose of champagne for Sylvia's ailing aunt.

MEL: Why would they give an ill lady champagne?

LYNN: Wouldn't water be the same?

MOLLY: The doctor said, "We can't try anything harder than that!"

ROB: My parents let me taste champagne on New Year's Eve.

JILL: If you give it to a sick person, they might wake up out of surprise.

ROB: But a TEASPOONFUL isn't much!

LYNN: And how would she swallow it?

JILL: It says it went down real smoothly.

MEL: It slides down easier.

SARAH: It BUBBLES!

SANDRA: And 7-UP wasn't invented then, THAT'S why.

Sandra's definitive comment ended the students' considerations of champagne as a remedy. Rob turned the pages of his book to a picture of Mr. Grimshaw lying prone on Aunt Jane's steps surrounded by cackling geese, Bonnie, and Simon. The frail Sylvia stands upon the top step and holds a candle that illuminates the scene. Rob held the book open to this illustration as he began to speak.

ROB: On page 145, Mr. Grimshaw looks weird. He's bald and the geese are running all over. It's funny!

SANDRA: He reminds me of a butler.

LYNN: Or a president with big ears.

ROB: His hair is like Elvis's.

LYNN: Sideburns.

MOLLY: He reminds me of James A. Garfield.

SANDRA: Or Smithers.

MOLLY: I'll bring a picture. [Molly leaves and returns with our classroom poster of the U.S. Presidents. She points to Garfield.]

ROB: I think he looks like GRANT! Big face.

MOLLY: Here's Garfield. [Shows picture to Rob.]

Rob did not pursue the Grant look-alike idea any further. Our time available for discussion that day had ended. As we got ready to go to lunch, Molly stapled the poster of the presidents back onto the closet door.

We met again several days later, after the students had finished reading the book. They reflected on what had been important in the story.

TISH: Kind of the most important thing was Willoughby Chase. That's where practically the whole thing takes place.

TIM: Joan [Aiken] could've gone to a school like they did.

SANDRA: A boarding school. Where they stay overnight.

TISH: Like a boarding kennel for dogs.

ROB: It was a POUND! How Miss Slighcarp and Miss Brisket were hard on the kids and locked them up like dogs.

TISH: Miss Brisket and Miss Slighcarp were like dog-catchers.

ROB: At the end of Rascal and Wolves of Willoughby Chase, the characters got to go free!

ERIN: Why was it called Wolves of Willoughby Chase?

SARAH: Wolves are vicious. You usually think of them as vicious and mean, like locking up Bonnie and Sylvia and making them go three days without eating.

MEL: Miss Slighcarp is the meanest. She's the head of the pack.

SANDRA: And remember when Bonnie had the dream that Miss Slighcarp was after her and she was the head of the pack.

ROB: It was Sylvia.

SANDRA: Miss Slighcarp threatened the girls, also like wolves, or like the Big Bad Wolf.

The other children nodded their agreement with Sandra. Talking ceased; words no longer flowed. With talk at an end, so also ended our discussions of Wolves of Willoughby Chase.

Tuck Everlasting

In this last pair of novels, my students focused on the theme of decision-making. We read Tuck Everlasting in which author Natalie Babbitt (1975) recounts two stories. One story tells of Winnie Foster, a sheltered, only child who longs for adventure and finds an incredible one when she falls in love with Jesse Tuck, is kidnapped by his mother, Mae Tuck, and is asked to make a difficult choice between remaining a mortal or living forever. The other story is that of the Tuck family, stuck in an eternal present due to

drinking magical water from a hidden spring from beneath a tree in the Foster's woods.

My students read the prologue in which Natalie Babbitt describes the hot, August sun that hangs above the town of Treegap. Within her description, Babbitt compares the sun to the hub of a ferris wheel.

Rob and Cory together read a prepared statement to open our first discussion of Tuck Everlasting.

ROB/ [Reading together.]

CORY: The hub is like the sun. It's a sphere. It's a round shape. If you had a square hub, it wouldn't work.

AMINDA: The wood is the hub.

ERIN: Hubs hold wheels together.

JULIE: The hub is a fixed point and thus left alone.

AMINDA: The earth's fiery core is like a hub.

ERIN: The sun is the center of the universe and is a hub.

AMINDA: We looked for these in the book and then put them in different words.

I realized as I listened to the children speak that Julie and Aminda had paraphrased the author's words. Rob then continued on without Cory as he opened his copy of the book and read from it.

ROB: I read this and I don't understand it. "Sometimes people find this out too late."

AMINDA: Like Rob and Cory said, a wheel won't work without a hub.

Rob continued to ask his questions. For these he did not refer to his book, but spoke to the group directly. In his next question, Rob referred to the yellow-suited stranger who visits Winnie one evening as she peers out from the confines of her fenced yard. This same man, a stranger to the girl, subsequently witnesses her kidnapping.

ROB: What does the stranger have to do with everything?

CORY: He's the one who kidnapped Winnie.

AMINDA: It was a stranger who kidnapped Winnie, but it wasn't the man in the yellow suit.

ROB: At least I got the STRANGER part right!

CORY: Like Curious George and the Man in the Yellow Hat. He always went with the man in the yellow hat.

LINDY: I know who kidnapped Winnie — Mae, Jesse, and Miles Tuck.

AMINDA: Like Cory was saying, they just call him the man in the yellow hat or suit. He doesn't have a name.

CORY: They should call him Bill or something. It's BORING!

AMINDA: He might not have a name to disguise himself.

ROB: It means you don't have a family.

CORY: And moms name you.

At once the children's discussion refocused, this time on mother Mae Tuck. Erin wondered why Mae kidnapped Winnie.

ERIN: Why did Mae Tuck kidnap Winnie?

JULIE: She didn't want her to tell anyone about the spring.

ERIN: They could've just sat her down and told her. They didn't have to kidnap her to tell the story.

AMINDA: They didn't want anyone else to hear the story. Then they'd want to make money and sell it [the water].

ROB: Like on Karate Kid on Saturday. The shrine is in the water. If you drink it, you stay young.

ERIN: And if they drank too much, they stay too young.

The discussion next backtracked to a scene that took place the evening before the kidnapping. During the kidnapper's getaway with Winnie, the girl recalls repeated and fearsome warnings her parents and grandmother had given about the dangers of going out into the world alone.

AMINDA: What's the reason that kept Winnie from running away?

JULIE: She was afraid of all the things that could happen to her. And she'd hardly ever been out of the yard.

LINDY: And she might get kidnapped like she did.

ERIN: She might've loved her mother and grandmother and wouldn't want to be alone all the time.

AMINDA: Who would want to live in a clean house where the only excitement was talking to a toad?

ERIN: On page 22 it says, "'Where would I go anyway? There's nowhere else I want to be'. . . . But in another part of her head, the dark part . . . she knew there was another reason for staying."

I noticed that Erin skipped a few words here and there as she read from her book. Erin omitted that the dark part of Winnie's mind was "where her oldest fears were housed." She also omitted the last part of the paragraph she had cited, which in its entirety said, ". . . she was afraid to go away alone." The children listened to Erin. Some of them had followed along in their own books as she read from her own. When Erin had finished reading, Cory spoke first.

CORY: Was the toad outside the fence?

AMINDA: Sometimes it was and sometimes it wasn't.

CORY: It just sits and listens to her.

ROB: Like when she had the discussion about throwing rocks. If you're mad, you can just go out and yell at a toad.

AMINDA: I go out and catch frogs with my dad. They're scared of me.

Next, the discussion jumped ahead as the children considered a scene in which Winnie met handsome, young Jesse Tuck unexpectedly by a spring in Foster's woods.

JULIE: Why did Winnie tell Jesse, "It's my wood" instead of that it was her parents' wood?

ERIN: It's like telling a new kid she'll be going to MY school.

AMINDA: Maybe she was thinking there was a boy in her wood and she'd be selfish to him.

ERIN: You don't invite someone to come over to your family's house. You say MY house because it's partly yours.

When the discussion group met the next day, Rob reintroduced the kidnapping scene. He also alluded to a subsequent scene in which the Tucks explain how normally fatal accidents, such as gunshot wounds, fail to kill them because they drank from the waters of the eternal spring some 87 years ago.

ROB: I had the vision of being kidnapped. You don't know what they're going to do to you. Also, I thought Mr. Tuck shot himself in the heart. The story kind of jumps into things.

AMINDA: He didn't die because he drank the water.

ROB: I didn't get that.

CORY: It's hard to follow. You don't know what year it is.

AMINDA: When the chapters change, it's really confusing.

ROB: In Willoughby Chase, a chapter ends with a knock on the door. The next chapter starts with opening the door.

AMINDA: This book might jump to a week later.

JULIE: On page 37 it says it was a strange story. I think it was strange, too, like a fairy tale.

AMINDA: A lot of fairy tale is magical. But this story is strange and magical.

LINDY: Some things just don't fit together. Like . . .

ROB: How it's magical. The only thing magical is the spring.

SHARI: The music box. When they mentioned it, a picture popped in my mind and it was really pretty.

LINDY: Her grandma thought it was elves, and elves popped into my mind.

Shari and Lindy referred to a small music box which Mae Tuck kept in her generous pockets and played on occasion, once long ago when Winnie's grandma was a young girl.

On this same school day, my students considered the sad plight of Miles Tuck, whose family abandoned him because his frightened wife could no longer live with a man who never aged.

JULIE: I wouldn't have left someone just because they didn't change.

AMINDA: She might've thought he was cursed.

SHARI: She wanted to protect them [the children].

CORY: Or like the guy in the yellow suit . . . I still don't get who kidnapped Winnie!

AMINDA: Miles, Mae, and Jesse Tuck. I have a picture of him in a dirty, yellow suit.

Aminda did not have an actual drawing or illustration of the man. She referred instead to a picture she held in her mind. Lindy continued the discussion along the lines of the kidnapping.

LINDY: It's fun to be swung in the air. [She opens her book and reads to the group.] "First she was kneeling on the ground, insisting on a drink from the spring, and the next thing she knew, she was seized and swung through the air, open-mouthed. . ."

ROB: When I was three, my brother and sister swung me in the air and let me go on "three."

AMINDA: I hate being the runt of the family because the same thing happens to me. Winnie hadn't been with many other people besides her family.

LINDY: Her grandma is too old to swing her.

AMINDA: I would've felt scared because it was the first time she'd been away from home. She goes off to the woods for her first adventure and gets KID-NAPPED!

JULIE: And she'd never been on a horse before.

LINDY: I went on an adventure to Seattle and it was so big I could've gotten lost. I went up in the Space Needle. We went on a cruise, too.

AMINDA: Mae said, "We're teaching our little girl to ride."

Lindy next referred to Natalie Babbitt's description of the road on which the Tucks absconded with Winnie. Lindy did not actually read the passage aloud, but alluded to it in her conversation.

LINDY: Dazzling white reminds me of snow in Minnesota. My dad and his brother woke up in the tent on the snow and everything looked blurry.

As the horse Winnie rides trots along on the dazzling white road, she begins to cry. Mae comforts her. In thinking back on this scene, Lindy wondered why Mae didn't want Winnie to cry.

LINDY: Why did she say, "Please don't cry" . . . because she's going to cry ANYWAY.

AMINDA: She [Mae] felt helpless. [Aminda reads to the group from her book.] "Dear Lord, don't cry. Please don't cry child . . . We're not bad people, truly we're not. We HAD to bring you away — and we'll take you back just as soon as we can. Tomorrow. I promise." Mae wanted her to be happy. She thought, "Poor child! You'll be home tomorrow." They were taking her away for one day to tell her a story and save her life. Well, not exactly save her life.

JULIE: They wouldn't just let her go. They didn't know her and she might tell someone.

AMINDA: They didn't trust her.

Babbitt's story reveals that even the Tuck's cow drank the eternal spring waters. Miles Tuck recounts a family memory of hunters who once mistook their cow for a deer, shot the cow, but didn't harm it.

Lindy referred to Miles' surprised comment to himself as he reflected upon the time when the hunters thought their cow was a deer.

LINDY: "Can you fancy that?" I don't know what it means. I think it means imagine.

JULIE: It means imagine.

AMINDA: Sometimes it might mean that if you have a fancy on something you might want it.

As the children considered the potentially fatal accidents that left the Tucks unharmed, Lindy commented on the way Mae Tuck talked about it.

LINDY: "We was gonna live forever." They don't talk right.

AMINDA: Later on in the story, Jesse Tuck tells Winnie he didn't have much schooling.

CORY: I wouldn't want to live forever.

AMINDA: Your spirit lives.

CORY: You'd live underground with the beavers. They put you in a grave and you're underground with the beavers . . . I mean gophers.

AMINDA: But your spirit LEAVES.

CORY: You're like a ghost. My dog died. He's up there. I saw him flotin' [sic].

LINDY: My mom saw her dead grandpa walking down the hall.

ERIN: Mindy Ryan believes in ghosts.. Her dad saw a really old lady crossing the street and she disappeared.

ROB: I wouldn't want to live forever . . . well, KIND of. I'd want to see the new kind of cars.

CORY: The world goes on and on and never ends. You'd DIE if you get too old.

LINDY: When the sun blows up you'll die ANYWAY!

ROB: I wish those springs were REAL.

AMINDA: In the book, Winnie changes her mind back and forth about it. I think it'd be a hard decision to make.

Several days later, a group of children met spontaneously and began to discuss what constituted real magic for them. All of the children, except Julie, were from another novel discussion group that was reading Bill Brittain's (1983) The Wish Giver, a story of a carnival man named Thaddeus Blinn who granted wishes perversely to unsuspecting children.

MOLLY: Real magic isn't just tricks. It's things that really happen, like what happened in The Wish Giver and like miracles. Stuff like that.

LANCE: I like magicians and stuff. But it's not like real magic. If you walk through something, it's just an illusion. Real magic is something that's real. Like staying a tree forever like in Wish Giver is real magic. It's not fake or anything. Well, it's really fake, but in the book it isn't. You can do anything in a book.

TOM: I think it's kinda like most magic tricks are coincidence. Real magic has to be done by a real magician or a magical person like Thaddeus Blinn. You have to have power to do it. Not everybody can perform miracles.

CAM: I went to Little League last year and couldn't hit the ball that well, but this one kid could hit home runs. He was lucky. I couldn't hit a home run and he could. I thought . . . well, it was a MIRACLE!

JULIE: Real magic is sort of like what happened to the Tucks drinking water from the spring. They couldn't die. It looked like a bullet went through Tuck and it really did. I thought he'd get killed. The spring water made him able to live forever. It didn't just LOOK like it happened, it actually DID happen. That made it real magic.

SCOTT: In Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade, Indy's father got shot and they poured a cup of blood . . .

TIM: God's blood.

STEVE: It was the Holy Grail, and they poured it on his wound and it was healed. I'd say that's magic.

CORY: In Crocodile Dundee II, at the end, he fell and got shot. The lady went down there and he was suddenly up there with her. I'd thought he'd died and come back.

JAREN: No, he just switched coats with the bad guy.

When the Tuck Everlasting discussion group convened again, Aminda opened the talking with her opinion of the book and a reference to magic.

AMINDA: It's a special book because I've never read one except fairy tales that have magic in them.

ROB: I've never read a book before that had a spring in it that was magic. It jumped from drinking water in the spring to kidnapping. It was more confusing than fun to read. When Winnie got kidnapped, I felt like I was there. I was thinking I might get kidnapped some day and I'd have some experience from the book.

CORY: It was like being around people you don't know. Like at a carnival where you're getting on rides and there's people in front and in back of you that you don't know. I'm kind of scared.

LINDY: Riding in the boat with Mr. Tuck felt like I was there because of the way she described it. She described the sun as if it was an egg yolk. It was setting. It reminds me of times when I sleep on my deck and the sun is rising when I wake up.

JULIE: When Winnie got kidnapped, I was right there. She was wondering who the people were. One time when I was fishing, I was thinking of lots of things at once like cast, reel in, hold the pole up, and so on. Winnie was thinking, "Duck your head; I wonder who these people are; this horse is going too fast."

ERIN: When they kidnapped Winnie, that night I had a dream I was Winnie and I was on the back of that horse.

JULIE: I found the part where it says all the things Winnie was thinking. [Julie reads from her book.] "Disconnected thoughts presented themselves one by one, as if they had been waiting their turn in line. 'So this is what it's like to ride a horse — I was going to run away today anyway — what will they say when I'm not there for breakfast — I wish the toad could see me now — that woman is worried about me — Miles is taller than Jesse — I'd better duck if I don't want this next branch to knock me off.'"

At the end of the story, Mae is taken to jail for shooting the man in the yellow suit when he threatens to sell eternal waters from the spring to the public. Winnie breaks into jail with Miles' help and takes Mae's place on the jail cell cot. This switch gives the Tucks until morning to get away, and protects Mae from a hanging that wouldn't kill her, but would unfortunately reveal her immortality. Mae and her family escape. Winnie remains in Treegap, does not drink the water from the spring, and lives a normal life.

Though both the story and the discussions of it ended, Aminda decided to write a sequel to the story. In her sequel, Jesse and Winnie marry and have one daughter. When their child turns two years old, they return to Treegap. Once there, they show their child the spring and tell her its story. Aminda then commented on what was important in her story.

AMINDA: Well, it was important that they had a child and started a new life, and that their two-year-old understood the story about the spring.

Lindy also wrote a sequel. In it, the Tucks relocate to Hawaii where they work as movie stuntmen and become wealthy. Sarah wondered why Lindy chose to have the Tucks take a trip to Hawaii in her sequel. The discussion began with Sarah's question.

SARAH: Lindy, why did you pick that the Tucks went to Hawaii?

LINDY: Because they were rich then.

SANDRA: Why did Mae get put in jail?

LINDY: Because she shot the man in the yellow suit.

SANDRA: How did they become poor after Mae was in jail?

LINDY: Because people found out she was in jail. The people who asked them to be in movies took their money back that they gave them.

PAUL: How could they FIND a block of ice in Hawaii?

TOM: In the refrigerator.

LINDY: Like in a refrigerator, or in the water.

PAUL: The water is . . . well . . . above the temperature we have here.

LINDY: They just found it [the ice] in the water. It's mysterious. Maybe somebody threw it in. Mysterious ice is ice that's like made out of the spring [water], but it was reversed.

Several of the children questioned Lindy further about the water turning into ice in Hawaii, but she assured them that it was magic. The group listened to Lindy's explanation and did not question her further. This conversation concluded our discussions about Winnie, the Tucks, their spring, and the book as well as its sequels.

The Wish Giver

This final set of discussions also focused on the theme of decision-making. In Bill Brittain's (1983) The Wish Giver, Coven Tree town's annual church carnival offers something unusual the year that Thaddeus Blinn sets up his mildewed tent at its perimeter. That year, Blinn sells wish cards for a mere 50¢ apiece. Three local young people buy the cards: Polly, Adam, and Rowena, as well as the mature and sensible storekeeper, Stew Meat

(Stewart Meade). Blinn's wish cards, when used, grant a perversely literal translation of each person's wish, thus plummeting each into predicaments that worsen as time passes. Polly's wish for people to smile at her, translated Blinn-style, causes the girl to croak like a frog whenever she criticizes people. Her verbal victims then laugh at her in her froggy state. Rowena's silly infatuation with traveling salesman, Henry Piper, prompts her to wish that he would decide to put down roots and settle in Coven Tree. What in fact happens is that Henry firmly roots himself to the ground and transforms from salesman to tree. Adam's wish for his dry farm to have water all over it turns his land into a virtual lake. In the end, the three turn to Stew Meat for help. He uses his wish card to return everything to normal.

The prologue of the novel opens with a short, historical background of Coven Tree. Author Brittain explains that witches' covens used to meet near the twisted tree at the crossroads, and that equally evil creatures used to appear from the nearby swamp. The author notes the evil appearance and movements of these creatures of darkness.

Lynn opened our first discussion with a question about a word used by Brittain in commenting on these evil creatures.

LYNN: [Reads from her Double-Entry Journal.] "All these bespeak their evil nature." What does "bespeak" mean? It probably means the same as another word, but I don't know which one.

PAUL: I think it means "tell of."

TISH: I think it means show or look like it. There are sounds, probably creepy sounds, you can hear.

MOLLY: It probably means hold. What does "be" mean for a prefix?

SANDRA: In Captain and the Cavemaster, it says, "Behold the ultimate warp zone." Like "see." So bespeak means see how they say it is.

Next, Molly wondered about New England's witch trials, an historical happening that was unfamiliar to her. Molly read to the group from the prologue in which Brittain refers to these trials.

MOLLY: "Witches have abounded in this part of New England since colonial days, when Cotton Mather held his witch trials in Salem to be rid of them." What is a witch trial? I don't get what witch trials means and what Bill Brittain means by it.

PAUL: Well, in olden times they used to think there were witches. They'd have trials and ask them 20 questions and then dunk them for one or two minutes. If they survived, they burned them.

SANDRA: But that doesn't make sense. I could hold my breath for two minutes. You have to do that in synchro [synchronized swimming]. And did anybody survive the burnings? If they did, were they witches?

At this point, Lynn asked to leave the group to get an encyclopedia so that she could find out more about Cotton Mather.

LYNN: Would I look up Mather or Cotton?

COX: Try under Mather.

Lynn returned to the group and read the encyclopedia article on Cotton Mather to them. They listened, then wondered where Paul had found out his own information on witches.

LANA: Did Paul read this in a book?

PAUL: Yes, The Witch Hunt.

LYNN: I'll have to read it, too.

TISH: In Wizard of Oz, Dorothy threw water on the witch and she melted. Wouldn't the witches have melted when they were dunked?

LANCE: There were no witches.

The discussion lulled, then resumed with speculation about the word "covens" that Brittain uses in the prologue. Tish referred to the word and probed its meaning.

TISH: Groups of witches. Covens. Covens sounds like cauldron. I think it's a big, black witch's pot. I don't know what coven means.

MOLLY: It says, "Here in Coven Tree" [the prologue, which Molly points out to the group].

SANDRA: You know how tribes have different names? Some witches might have called their group the coven group because they met at the coven tree.

The children did not pursue the meaning of the word "coven" any further. Instead, they turned their attention toward Thaddeus Blinn's physical appearance. Author Brittain describes Thaddeus Blinn as wearing a white suit with a red vest. Blinn's face bears a bulbous nose and carries a toothy smile. Altogether, the narrator, Stew Meat, thinks Blinn "put me in mind of Santa Claus, shaved and dressed for warm weather" (Brittain, 1983, p. 7). However, Tish voiced to the group her disagreement with Stew Meat's impression of Blinn's looks.

TISH: I don't think they should've described Thaddeus Blinn as Santa Claus.

LANA: It was the wrong season. Even if he did give you what you wanted.

MOLLY: His shadow on the tent looked like it had horns. He was too mysterious for Santa.

LANCE: He reminded me of the fortune teller on Pee Wee Herman.

In his comment, Lance referred to a stereotypical character, complete with swami's turban and crystal ball, who appears on a weekly children's television show. The discussion continued along the lines of the mysterious and magical as Scott took his turn to talk.

SCOTT: He wasn't talking about rabbit-from-a-hat or coin-up-the-sleeve variety. I mean REAL magic.

MOLLY: Real magic are things you couldn't do. They're too incredible. Like saying "Alakazamazoo" and your hurt arm is better.

LYNN: Maybe they [magicians] don't do things that big.

Sandra left the group. She walked over to the reference book shelf, chose a dictionary, and read to herself. She returned the book to the shelf and rejoined the group.

SANDRA: A coven is a gathering or meeting of witches.

The group listened to Sandra, then she joined their discussion with a comment about the annual Coven Tree church carnival and social.

SANDRA: This is a social and there are outsiders there. They paid the church.

TISH: I don't get why you'd go into a yukky tent with a stranger and think he'd give you what you want.

LYNN: On page 14, Thaddeus Blinn says, "'Now you have what you came for,' he announced in a sing-song voice. 'It's time for me to be on my way. Outside, please. Everybody out.'" He leaves after he gets everybody to buy one card.

LANA: "He put me in mind of Santa Claus." He didn't remind ME of Santa.

SANDRA: He doesn't look like Santa at all. I think Santa dressed for summer would have red shorts and a little cap with a tassel.

The next day, the children talked about phrases and words they wondered about from the story. Kate began with a comment about Brittain's description of the swamps adjacent to Coven Tree.

KATE: I have heard of dismal swamps before. My dad has a computer game called Dismal Swamps. And water birch. We don't see many of them in Montana.

PAUL: I have one in my yard. It's fun to pick those things off the end and swing them around — those branches.

JAREN: Imps and fiends are weird words.

LANCE: They sound like made-up words.

TOM: Imps sound small, like wimps.

KATE: I've read this one book before. Well, I've heard of imps before. They're like elves.

CAM: They sound like pimps.

JAREN: Fiddlesticks reminds me of Mr. Wilson on Dennis the Menace. Or like when you're doing a gadget and can't get it together, so you say, "Fiddlesticks!"

MOLLY: I thought of a dog muzzle.

STEVE/ [In unison.]

CAM/TIM: Like Lady and the Tramp?

CAM: I saw it five times!

A week passed before the group met again. When they began the next discussion, Lance opened by returning to the scene in which the three children and Stew Meat pay Blinn 50¢ apiece to purchase a wish.

LANCE: If I was Thaddeus Blinn, I'd ask for more money, like \$15.

SCOTT: Those were the old days and they didn't have much money.

TOM: Maybe a dollar then.

MEL: Maybe he only asked for 50¢ so people would come in more often.

LANCE: He reminds me of a troll because he's fat and short. He's like a rich guy because he has a gold watch on a chain.

MOLLY: He reminds me of Bombur in The Hobbit. A troll.

PAUL: Dwarves, not trolls.

MOLLY: Well, dwarves. Bombur was fat.

SANDRA: It was sneaky to only give one wish.

LANA: In most stories, if you get wishes you get THREE. I'd sell three for more money.

MOLLY: This one story has a little boy who gives three wishes. If you don't say them right, like in a lot of movies, you get goofed up. This book kind of teaches the lesson that you shouldn't get too greedy with wishes.

MEL: He was SNEAKY because he only gave one wish. Because he knew they'd goof it up.

When they met the next day, the students continued to discuss wishes. Lana began by considering how Polly's wish for people to smile at her was different from other people's wishes.

LANA: Polly's wish was different from most wishes. Most people wish for money. She was pushy and bossy. It seemed like when her mother made her breakfast and burned toast she was snotty.

LANCE: I would've wishes for three more wishes.

MOLLY: I agree with Lance. You wouldn't want to wish for only one thing.

TIM: I'd wish for 3 or 10 or 20!

CAM: I'd wish I could wish for things as long as I lived and use it whenever I needed it.

TIM: I wish I was . . . um

CAM: Or wish you were dead and come back to life.

LANA: It wasn't very nice to complain because the toast was burned.

MOLLY: Mom would just say, "Then fix your own!"

LANCE: I'd get sent to my room.

CAM: I make my own breakfast.

LANCE: Thaddeus Blinn gave only one wish so they'd get in trouble and it'd go wrong. He was mean.

All of the children were silent for a few moments after Lance spoke. Then Tim broke the silence by suggesting that he knew what Thaddeus Blinn wanted from Coven Tree.

TIM: He wanted lots of souvenirs. Something that goes away. If you leave some place you buy something to remember it.

TISH: The wishes were souvenirs because they stayed with him.

KATE: They could be souvenirs like memories.

In the novel's first wishing episode, caustic-tongued Polly Kemp uses her card to wish that people would notice her and smile. People do notice her, and they laugh as well as smile, because whenever insults cascade from Polly's mouth, she begins to croak like a bullfrog.

Tim read this episode and wondered about the "Jug-A-Rum" sound that author Brittain ascribes to the unfortunate Polly Kemp.

TIM: What does "Jug-A-Rum" mean?

LANCE: It doesn't mean anything. It's supposed to be what a frog sounds like. But I don't think it does.

TISH: It's supposed to be "ribbit," if frogs say it. But bullfrogs are different. They wouldn't say "ribbit."

KIRSA: Maybe because that's what the author thought it sounded like.

TISH: Maybe he went down to a pond one day or to Spider Creek and heard a bullfrog and that's how he got the idea for the story.

KATE: I heard "Jug-A-Rum" in a book about frogs. It's the closest way to write what a frog really says. At the ocean, the frogs sounded like crickets to me. My dad and I suspected they were a type of little frog.

One of the insulting words that Polly Kemp most favored using was the word "dunderheads." Lance commented on Polly's use of that particular insult.

LANCE: Dunderheads is a weird word.

MOLLY: It sounds like thunderheads.

LANCE: Like dunce. It means they're dumb or something.

KIRSA: She doesn't want to use bad language, so I think she made up a word that isn't bad that means something, like dumb.

When the group gathered together the next day, the discussion began with the children's observations about the illustrations in the book, and about illustrations they'd enjoyed from books they had read in the past.

KATE: I enjoy mysterious beasts or animals like unicorns, Pegasus, star stuff like Draco.

MOLLY: Sometimes when you read about them . . . like before you go to bed . . . if you read them, then you think of it. There aren't any pictures of them in this book.

LANCE: There aren't many beasts or animals in this book. I wouldn't mind if there weren't any pictures. I liked the picture of the guy who turned into a tree.

MOLLY: The illustrator had to read the book over and over to draw the pictures. He could've drawn the guy in full form or else like a tree with a face on it. You have to use your own imagination. Pictures just help you along.

- LANA:** Like Molly, if you don't get it, the pictures help.
- LYNN:** I think the pictures ruin the book because you have it set in your mind how someone looks and then you turn to a picture and it ruins it.
- CAM:** In Rascal, a picture of the car cranking up and exploding would be good.
- SCOTT:** You can't fit everything into one picture.
- CAM:** Walt Disney kind of reads and skips around.
- SCOTT:** In a movie you can skip around because you can see a whole lot of things happening at once.
- CAM:** They should stick to the book.
- PAUL:** I agree with Cam. Like I saw Lion Witch and Wardrobe, and it was totally different. Books are a lot better because they tell the whole, entire story.

Kate thumbed through her copy of The Wish Giver. She stopped and looked at a page that had the phrase "JUG-A-RUM" printed in large, boldface type.

- KATE:** "Jug-A-Rum" is written so big. It stands out.
- SCOTT:** They don't want you to miss it.
- PAUL:** It's what the CHAPTER'S called!
- LANA:** If you missed it, it wouldn't make sense. Some words you CAN'T miss because they're important words.
- CAM:** It bugs me when I say the word wrong and people are watching me and I get two sentences away and they say, "Oh! You missed a word!" And I have to go back and read it over.

- LANCE:** When you grow up you might get a job and they might not hire you because you miss a word. Or everybody'd laugh at you.
- MOLLY:** If you miss a big word, an important word in the story, you kind of feel when people tell you, "OK! OK! That's THIS word." You feel like, "OK! Don't get so mad!"
- TIM:** In Wolves of Willoughby Chase, I missed who Simon was until the last chapter and I asked, "Who's Simon?" I asked somebody in my group. They told me. The whole group. Then I went back and skimmed for it.
- KIRSA:** Most of the time people ask things like, "Who's Donnybrook?" If they asked who Rascal was, it'd be embarrassing. That doesn't happen.
- JAREN:** It'd be embarrassing to say, "Who's Thaddeus Blinn?" It says it right on the front COVER! Or if you said, "Thaddeus was a nice girl." That'd be embarrassing. Thaddeus Blinn is sort of the main character. The story is called The Wish Giver, and the wish giver is Thaddeus Blinn!
- TISH:** And none of this would've happened if it weren't for Thaddeus Blinn!
- KATE:** You'll find more about these characters when you finish the book.
- SARAH:** I think Thaddeus Blinn is kind of a sly guy. If you'd see someone like him walking down the street . . .
- JAREN:** You'd be freaked out!
- SARAH:** Yeah! If you looked at him on page 11, you'd be freaked out.
- SCOTT:** And he had a toothy smile. Most people don't have teeth that are all separated.

It was interesting to me at the time to mentally note that Scott had just begun preliminary orthodontic work.

By about a week and a half later, the children had finished reading the remainder of The Wish Giver. When they met again, they discussed a collection of words and incidents from the story. This conversation eventually returned to the topic of wishes. It was Kate who began that day's discussion.

KATE: It's about imps. It's pretty old-fashioned.

TISH: Not many people now, like Agatha Benthorn, live in a big, fancy house, drink tea, and do needle-work.

SANDRA: I have cookies and milk.

TIM: I have sun tea.

LYNN: Or iced tea. All the ladies and girls act lady-like.

JAREN: Not like today.

SANDRA: Polly Kemp doesn't.

JAREN: Neither does Lenora.

LANA: It does seem old-fashioned, but half of it could happen. Henry Piper turns into a tree. So it seems half real and half make-believe. Lots of kids make wishes. Most of them don't come true.

LANCE: One of my wishes came true, but only for a week. My brother and I don't get along and I wished he'd go away. He went away for a week to Camp Krist-A-Kon.

SCOTT: Rowena wished Henry Piper would put down roots in Coven Tree and never leave again. He did more than just turn into a tree.

SANDRA: All of the wishes were like figures of speech.

TOM: The author said "put down roots" because it worked for him in the story. I'd just say I wished Henry would stay forever.

LANCE: Stew Meat says his wishes more clearly.

MOLLY: He doesn't use expressions.

Tim opened his copy of the novel to page 30 and read Polly's wish to the other children. They listened as he read.

TIM: "Carefully she placed her right thumb over the red circle. 'I want ever so badly to be liked,' she said softly. 'And not just by Leland and Lenora, either. I want people to greet me and not walk on the other side of the street whenever they set eyes on me. And especially I want Agatha Bent-horn to invite me to her house for tea. So that's what I'm wishing for, Mr. Wish Giver. I'm wishing that people will pay attention to me. And smile when they see me.'"

KIRSA: When she said she wanted people to smile, it could've been to make fun or tease.

SANDRA: And Thaddeus Blinn always gave you the opposite meaning.

STEVE: They were smiling at Polly because they were laughing at her.

TISH: Stew Meat had to get the wishes just right. He said he didn't want any of the misery that usually goes with the wishes.

KATE: He knew enough to say he didn't want any misery mixed with his wish.

SCOTT: The kids didn't really believe in the wishes and were just fooling around with them, but Stew Meat had experience and believed in the wish. He was more careful.

MOLLY: I thought Stew Meat was a girl at first. I don't know why. He was a grown-up, a normal guy. They all got accidentally mixed up in this.

SARAH: On page 136 and 134, it says, about Adam, "I wish we had water all over this farm. Enough for washing, drinking and crops with plenty to spare." He said, "all over the farm."

SCOTT: He should've said in the well.

LANA: I thought Stew Meat was a girl, too. I didn't read it right.

Paul wrote a sequel to The Wish Giver and brought it to the next session of our discussions. In his sequel, Stew Meat wishes that Thaddeus Blinn would be banished from the earth forever. Lance commented on Paul's sequel.

LANCE: I like how at the end he was vanished from the face of the earth.

PAUL: Sort of like one second he was standing there and the next minute he was gone. It was magic. He'd wished that the wish giver was banished from the face of the earth. Sent away.

TIM: Disappeared!

PAUL: Banished.

SCOTT: I'm gonna [sic] look it up.

TIM/

PAUL: Can I help?

MOLLY: I think it's sent away.

SANDRA: And vanished is like, "Pool" disappear.

SCOTT: [Reads from the dictionary.] "Vanish: disappear suddenly."

LANCE: No! It's BANISH!

SCOTT: [This time looks up "banish" in the dictionary.]
Oh!

CAM: I've heard a town called Bannock, a ghost town. It sounds like banished, and it's GONE. So banish is kind of like Bannock.

SCOTT: [Reads from the dictionary, this time reading the definition for the entry word "banish" instead of "vanish."] "Forced to go away, drive away. 'He was banished from the game, so he cried.'" Like my BROTHER!

Molly also wrote a sequel to the novel. Her sequel took place 25 years after Brittain's story ended. In her story, Thaddeus Blinn was a benevolent wish giver who retired to become a storekeeper, like Stew Meat. Lance thought that Molly's sequel was "nice," but further discussion of her story never ensued. No additional sequels materialized, and the discussions ended.

CHAPTER 5

FINDINGS

Predominant Patterns

I viewed and coded, reviewed and categorized the students' responses to literature in an effort to learn how children create meaning for literature in an interactive fourth grade classroom. Through a reflective process of reviewing the phenomenological descriptions, which were the discussion transcriptions, and the categories they suggested (Guba, 1978), a set of patterns gradually emerged. These patterns characterized the interactions of this particular group of fourth grade readers from my vantage point as a participant/observer. Six patterns emerged: character persistence, organic research, textual presence, corrective intervention, vivid images, and connections. I will begin with the simpler patterns and work toward the more complex.

Character Persistence

Several conversations and activities took place during discussion of three of the novels that seemed to indicate that certain characters existed for the children beyond the final scene of the plot. These characters persisted

beyond the boundaries of the book; thus the name "character persistence" described this particular pattern. During a discussion of Rascal, Scott wondered what the pet raccoon would eat after Sterling freed him into the wilderness. He decided that Rascal wouldn't get any more sugar cubes, but Blake thought the raccoon would have more food then because he would "be outside all the time" where he could get wild foods. Cam suggested that a scene be added to the book to continue the story, and that it should include Sterling being united with his older brother, Herschel, when the war was over. The children's comments and suggestions seemed to indicate that Sterling and Rascal's lives continued after the story ended. In this case, they actually did, because North's story was autobiographical. Kirsa discovered that in real life, Sterling was confined to a wheelchair within three years after the raccoon saga ended.

Character persistence appeared in a different form within the students' responses to Tuck Everlasting and The Wish Giver. Four children independently decided to write sequels to these two novels. Aminda wrote a sequel to Tuck Everlasting in which Jesse married Winnie Foster, and together they brought their young child to the eternal spring. Lindy wrote a sequel as well. Her story strayed farther geographically and financially from the ending of the book. In Lindy's sequel, the Tuck family became wealthy by working as fearless, indestructible movie stuntmen, and moved to Hawaii. Mae suffered punishment for the murder of the man in the yellow suit in Lindy's version,

whereas in Natalie Babbitt's story, Mae Tuck escaped with Winnie's help. Paul's sequel to The Wish Giver featured Stew Meat, who had become powerful enough to banish the evil Thaddeus Blinn from the earth forever. Molly's sequel proved to be chronologically further removed and more forgiving than Paul's. Her story continuance took place 25 years later. Thaddeus Blinn had become a benevolent wish giver who emulated Stew Meat by making a living as a storekeeper. I noticed that both novels for which sequels had been written treated enigmatic themes: the possibility of eternal life and the capricious and somewhat malicious application of supernatural power.

Though no sequels were written in response to Tales of a Fourth Grade Nothing, the students checked out all available copies of Judy Blume's sequel, Superfudge. The characters, Peter and Fudgie, grew older and continued their lives in this author's sequel. The books made the rounds of our classroom accompanied by high peer recommendations.

Some novels seemed not to lend themselves to evoking character persistence in the students' responses. After the finality of Old Dan and Little Ann's deaths in Where the Red Fern Grows, the students neither wrote sequels about the dogs' afterlives nor surmised what happened to Billy after he moved away.

In regard to character persistence, it must be said that this phenomenon did not emerge across all novels and for all readers. It seemed instead to

be suggested to some readers by memorable characters from certain novels.

Organic Research

A pattern called "organic research" manifested itself when the children sought additional information from sources outside the text and our group of readers. These organic (Ashton-Warner, cited in Holdaway, 1979) information quests arose from a need within the students rather than from an assignment imposed upon them. Organic research, then, was information-seeking in response to questions generated by interactions with the literature or with fellow readers. It happened spontaneously. For instance, during a discussion of Rascal, the children talked about the Norths' fishing trip to Lake Superior. Tom couldn't understand how the black bass Sterling caught and cooked turned brown when he fried it. Though other children offered color change theories for Tom, such as marshmallows and toast changing color when cooked, he and Cam decided to check on black bass in the encyclopedia. Tom read aloud that black bass was just another name for a sunfish. He showed the group a picture and, indeed, the black bass was not black at all.

Sometimes a question from one student prompted another to embark upon an organic research project. The phrase "rosettes of filtered sunlight," when used to describe the belly of a trout, confounded Tom. Cory promptly asked if he could look up the word "rosette" in the dictionary. Paul

volunteered to help, and together they found and read the definition and a sample sentence. Lance, Tom, and Aminda discussed possible reasons why rosettes could be an apt description, but Cory chose not to return to the discussion. Instead he continued to do research. This time he chose an encyclopedia as a source and gas masks as a topic, a subject from an earlier discussion of Rascal. Jaren crept away from the discussion to help Cory. They returned and the group listened as together they read the entire article on gas masks aloud. The two of them then showed a picture of a gas mask to the group.

Not all organic research required a dictionary or an encyclopedia. Sometimes the children consulted other sources of information. When Lance became intrigued by the peach pits that Sterling and his contemporaries gathered for use in World War I gas masks, he opted to use the telephone as a method of gathering information on his topic. His first call to the local fire department yielded no information. A second call to the local National Guard unit office proved more successful. The guardsman told Lance that peach pits functioned as filters, somewhat like charcoal.

Another instance of using the telephone as an organic researcher's tool occurred during a discussion of Wolves of Willoughby Chase. Sarah uttered that she thought pounds and dollars were the same. Sandra corrected Sarah and followed up with a shaky explanation of pounds. To Sandra, pounds had something to do with the weight of potatoes as well as their price. Molly

objected to Sandra's explanation. Rob decided to look up the meaning of pound in the dictionary. Reading the brief dictionary explanation of pound to the group did not satisfy Rob's need to know. He felt he still did not know what a pound was worth. Rob, too, opted to use the telephone to gain further information. It took a series of four phone calls, the first to a Montana investment firm and the next three to local banks, before he finally learned that the current value of a pound was \$1.6371. He wrote this figure on a scrap of paper and shared it with the discussion group.

Other words prompted research which took place as an organic process of the children's need to know in the context of book discussion situations. Sandra stole away from a discussion of the prologue to The Wish Giver after the word "coven" became the focus of the discussion in order to look the word up in the dictionary. Paul's use of the word "banish" in a sequel to the same novel prompted Scott to locate its definition and share his finding with the group.

On one occasion, the children sought historical background information through their organic research process. Within the prologue to The Wish Giver, the author made mention of Cotton Mather's witch trials. Molly referred to these trials and confided to the other children that these were unknown to her. Paul contributed what he knew from other reading about physical tests performed on suspected witches. Lynn then sought further information from an encyclopedia article on Cotton Mather. She also chose to read her findings to the group.

Organic research seemed to happen as a result of student-generated questions brought about by interaction with the literature. It was interesting to me that the children considered the telephone as well as books to be reference tools, and that they acted as if information retrieved ought to be shared with their peers. The peers consistently listened to the results of other children's research, thus giving their findings not only an audience, but lending it the validity that attention gives.

Textual Presence

I observed that the students frequently interjected the actual words of the literature into book discussions. I named this recurring phenomenon "textual presence." It manifested itself in two forms: a reading of the exact words from the text and textual paraphrasing.

Exact quotations happened in a variety of contexts. Sometimes the children read a favorite passage to a fellow reader. At other times, a student might read an excerpt to the group in order to ask or to answer a question. Children also read from their novels to clarify an idea or an event from the story.

During an early reading session, I overheard a small group of students sharing favorite passages from Tales of a Fourth Grade Nothing. I came upon Tim, Brian, and Rob in the hallway. As I approached the group, I overheard Tim read two "really good" passages from the book to Brian and Rob. A discussion of two events, Fudge's flight from the monkey bars and

ingesting of Peter's pet turtle, events which made the book "really good," ensued.

Students shared favorite passages during literature response group sessions as well. In the course of a discussion of Where the Red Fern Grows, Lynn said she liked the way Wilson Rawls described Old Dan and Little Ann trotting off into the darkness of the woods. She read the author's description aloud. Following Lynn's lead, Lindy chose to read a favorite scene from Tuck Everlasting. She prefaced her reading by commenting that she liked being swung in the air. Then she read the scene from the novel in which the Tuck brothers swung young Winnie Foster into the air and onto the back of a horse.

The children also quoted the literature as a medium for introducing a word, phrase, or an event they didn't understand. As an example, Erin wondered how barefooted Billy of Where the Red Fern Grows had never seen his full-length reflection before. Prior to asking her question, Erin read the scene from the novel in which Billy saw his full-sized reflection in the plate glass of a store window in Tahlequah. Another instance of a student prefacing a question with an excerpt from the literature surfaced when neither Rob nor Cory understood Natalie Babbitt's chapter one warning in Tuck Everlasting, a warning that bemoaned the fact that most people realize too late that the cycle of life must not be interrupted unnaturally. Rob read her warning aloud to the group. He then admitted that he didn't understand what

it meant. His admission cued a subsequent discussion about what the author might have meant. On another occasion, when Lynn didn't comprehend the word "bespeak" as used by Bill Brittain in The Wish Giver, she quoted the sentence that contained the word, then admitted she didn't know its meaning.

These young readers also read from the literary text in order to answer questions arising from discussion sessions. In Tuck Everlasting, Mae Tuck had tried to comfort Winnie, the little girl she'd kidnapped. Lindy read aloud Mae's plea to Winnie not to cry, then asked her fellow readers why the woman would plead with the girl when she knew she'd cry anyway. Aminda answered by reading a textual excerpt in which Mae revealed her compassionate feelings toward Winnie.

Aminda was not the only reader who quoted the text as a means of answering a fellow reader's question. For instance, during a discussion of Rascal, Steve wondered why the raccoon didn't pick up shiny agates from an agate-strewn Lake Superior beach. Lance told Steve that it was probably because agates had sharp edges like corral. Steve then reminded himself aloud that the author described agates. By that time, Lance and Tom had found that description in the book, and read it aloud. The passage explained that not all of the agates looked shiny. In fact, the outside looked dull and rock-like.

A similar use of the literary text emerged when one student, Sandra, clarified the identity of an object in question, a dispatch box, during a

discussion of Wolves of Willoughby Chase. Sarah wondered what object Pattern, the nanny, tried to get for Miss Slighcarp. Sandra pointed to the passage in Sarah's book in which the object was mentioned. Sarah then read the textual excerpt aloud that Sandra had identified for her. She thus heard for herself that the object was a small case that seemed to contain papers and letters.

Another illustration of student use of the literature as a source of answers for readers' questions took shape when Lana pondered why Bonnie would not have shown the blue powder room to Miss Slighcarp, the new instructress, during a tour of Willoughby Chase mansion. Tish told Lana that she had "found the answer" and referred her to pages 83 and 84 of the novel. As Tish read, the author's words revealed that the blue powder room was situated in a remote wing of the mansion, in an area that Miss Slighcarp would not frequent. Lana quietly accepted the "answer," but Molly explosively reacted by voicing her realization that the out-of-the-way powder room was indeed the secret meeting place for Bonnie and her loyal servant, James.

Sometimes the readers paraphrased the text rather than read from it. Paul used paraphrasing dramatically during a discussion of Rascal. Sterling North's pet raccoon enraged the neighbors with its nocturnal raids of their sweet corn patches. Paul imitated the neighbors' reactions and the author's words as well when he hollered, "Woodchucks, skunks, coons, what next?!" Lance also paraphrased author Sterling North's words during a subsequent

discussion of Rascal. In the story, the pet raccoon bit Slammy Stillman, and Stillman shouted in reply. Lance condensed Slammy's reaction by yelling simply, "Mad coon! Mad coon!"

Paraphrasing sometimes accompanied exact quotations of the literary text. Going back to an earlier literature response group discussion of Natalie Babbitt's warning that people realize too late that they must not tamper with the natural cycle of life, Rob had read her warning aloud to the other students. Rob's reading triggered a series of paraphrasings. The children paraphrased an array of images the author used to explain that life was a natural cycle. Aminda told that the wood was the hub. Julie added that "the hub is a fixed point and thus left alone." Aminda referred to the earth's fiery core as its own hub. Erin also paraphrased one of Babbitt's images when she told the other students that the sun "is the center of the universe and is a hub." Aminda then admitted that she and the others had looked for these phrases in the novel, then "put them in different words." Still another example of paraphrasing emanated from Julie when she imitated the actual words Winnie Foster thought while being trotted away by the Tucks on the back of a horse. Julie shared how she felt she "was right there" at the scene of Winnie's kidnapping. She then compared Winnie's racing thoughts to her own while she tried to remember all the things she had been told to remember when trying to cast a fishing lure. Her thoughts then returned to Winnie's thoughts as she paraphrased what went through the girl's mind. Julie cried,

"Duck your head; I wonder who these people are; this horse is going too fast."

Last of all, the children used words from the literature as a means of refocusing fellow students who had only a blurry understanding of a passage or event from the story. Tom demonstrated the use of the literary text as a tool for clarification during a discussion of Rascal. Cam held the false impression that Sterling and his friend did not keep the baby raccoon that they'd caught in a hat. Instead, Cam thought the boys kept one they had retrieved from the den. Tom opened his book and read the scene in question aloud. On another occasion, Sandra quoted the text to correct a misunderstanding. Tish assumed that Mr. Grimshaw burned Lord Willoughby's papers while in the library of the mansion. Sandra disagreed. She then read the scene, which revealed that Mr. Grimshaw was in fact in his room and had burned the papers there in his fireplace.

As I reviewed the data and replayed the children's discussions in my mind, I realized that the text had been present often. It had been a kind of invited guest at our literature response groups. These young readers reread text purposefully. When they read literature aloud, they did so voluntarily from self-selected passages. Their audience accepted their reading ability differences, because they focused on the content of what was read to them rather than on delivery alone. I had not expected to find the text as a presence. My pleasure at this presence overrode my surprise.

Corrective Intervention

If I imagined prior to collecting the data that I might discover corrective intervention to exist as a pattern of interaction among my fourth grade readers, I did not expect what I found. I expected to hear the kinds of reading interventions that years of presiding over reading groups brought to my ears: correction of mispronunciation and insertion of skipped words. Gratefully, I came to realize that this type of corrective intervention did not dominate the children's reading interactions.

I found that I was not the only one who dreaded the interruption of reading with interjected corrections. During one of our last discussions of the final novel we read together, Cam, a Chapter I student, expressed a sense of frustration over being interrupted in mid-reading for pronunciation corrections. He referred to past reading experiences that "bugged" him because he would say a word wrong while people "were watching." Cam added that these same people waited to correct him until he was "two sentences away," then asked him to back up and "read it over." Molly confessed to having a somewhat different but no less frustrating experience with pronunciation correction. She told the group that when someone corrected "a big word, an important word" by emphasizing that instead it should have been "THIS word," she felt like saying, "OK! Don't get so mad!"

The students corrected each other, though, and did so on numerous occasions and in a variety of ways. For example, during a discussion of

Sterling's feelings about returning to school in the fall, Cam commented that he was looking forward to fifth grade P.E. class because you get to play with huge beach balls. Steve halted Cam's digression by asking him what it had to do with the story, Rascal. The children then refocused on Sterling's feelings. Though the children utilized personal experience to explicate literature, I wondered what kinds of digressions would prove to be tolerable. Since the preceding exchange took place early in the school year, I had to wait to find out.

Sometimes a student related a personal experience perceived to be parallel to a situation in the novel, when in fact a critical element differed. As an example of this type of situational dissonance, a discussion of Billy's preoccupation with getting hunting dogs seemed to Brian to be parallel to a stint of sleeplessness and daydreaming that he had experienced. Brian told of being awake until one or two in the morning, experiencing stomach cramps, and daydreaming because he couldn't sleep. Tish pointed out to Brian that the character, Billy, hadn't been daydreaming about dogs and of hearing dogs, but that he had actually been awake and had heard other people's coon hounds hunting in the nearby bottoms.

Another type of corrective intervention involved clarifying the identity of a character. During a discussion of Wolves of Willoughby Chase, the children wondered why Sylvia didn't continue to live with her Aunt Jane. Jill and Sandra suggested that Aunt Jane had become too old to continue to

care for Sylvia. Lindy wondered why Aunt Jane made Sylvia a white dress to wear on the day they parted company, but instead of referring to the woman by her correct name, she called her "Grandma." Erin objected strongly to the misnomer by repeating the word "Grandma" with emphasis. Molly added that Aunt Jane seemed to her to be quite elderly for an aunt. A case of mistaken identity surfaced later on during discussion of this same novel. Sandra recalled that Bonnie dreamed of Miss Slighcarp pursuing her at the head of a pack of wolves. Rob corrected Sandra by telling her that it was Sylvia who had dreamt of Slighcarp, not Bonnie.

One interesting case of mistaken identity emerged during a discussion of The Wish Giver, but in fact focused on a character from another novel. Molly thought Thaddeus Blinn reminded her of Bombur from The Hobbit. She added that Bombur was a troll. Paul corrected Molly by telling her that the character was a dwarf, not a troll. Molly accepted the term "dwarf," and added that Bombur had indeed been described as "fat," a quality associated with dwarves in the book.

Mistaken identity errors embarrassed some students. Jaren expressed this reaction when he proposed a particularly mortifying scenario. He supposed that a student might ask who Thaddeus Blinn was or even refer to him as a girl, when in fact his masculine likeness graced the front cover of The Wish Giver, and he was "sort of the main character" of the book. It was not until one of the last discussions of that same book that both Lana and

Molly admitted that they at first thought Stew Meat, the shopkeeper, was a girl.

Mistaken identity errors sometimes persisted, as Molly's and Lana's did for a time. In one instance of error persistence, correction required more than one intervention in order to dispel the incorrect impression. During an initial discussion of Tuck Everlasting and our first session about Winnie's kidnapping, Rob asked what the yellow-suited stranger had to do with everything. Cory told him that this stranger had kidnapped Winnie. Cory was mistaken. Aminda diplomatically agreed that the kidnapper was indeed a stranger, but that "it wasn't the man in the yellow suit." Cory promptly returned to the image of the man in the yellow suit, and compared him to a character in another book, Curious George. Cory explained that Curious George "always went with the man in the yellow hat." The children's attention and conversation immediately refocused on the yellow-suited stranger at Cory's mention of a man in a yellow hat. It was not until days and discussions later that Cory admitted to the group that he still didn't "get who kidnapped Winnie." Aminda again intervened. This time she did not hint at the answer, but supplied the kidnappers' names: "Miles, Mae, and Jesse Tuck." Cory's misunderstanding did not surface again.

I was gratified to learn from the children that their corrective interventions were substantive rather than superficial. Their interventions dealt with the content words carried instead of merely the sounds of them. Perhaps

most satisfying to observe was the fluid nature of these corrections, which for some children differed from their experiences with interruptive teacher corrections in their past reading.

Vivid Images

The image of the man in the yellow suit was not the only one to surface persistently in the children's talk. Other vivid images emerged as well. These images seemed to appear in two basic forms: those that were internally generated and those that were externally imposed.

These two types of images sprang from different sources. Internally-generated images might come from internalization of an author's words, or they might come instead from experiences in the reader's own life. Externally-imposed images appeared as book illustrations, book covers, and movie renditions of novels.

I must confess that during the first months of the data-gathering process, two incidents sensitized me to the importance of images to young readers. On a visit to the school library for the purpose of checking out books, the librarian confided in me that some excellent stories were seldom checked out because she felt their old edition covers either bore outdated illustrations or no illustrations at all. That same fall, during our school's annual book sale, I overheard one of my students suggest to a friend that they each buy the same book. The first child thumbed through the recommended book, saw that there were no illustrations, then politely told his friend that he was sure it was

a good book, but that ones without pictures just weren't for him. I wondered if mental pictures held the same importance for my students as well.

A number of internally generated images surfaced within our literature response group's interactions that began to answer my question. One entertaining example emerged when Kirsa shared with the group a picture she had drawn of the haircut her little brother had given himself. She drew and shared the picture after reading an episode from Tales of a Fourth Grade Nothing in which young Fudge cut his own hair. She combined the author's image with her memory and produced a piece of art. Months later, during talk of Winnie Foster's kidnapping in Tuck Everlasting, Erin revealed that for her, the author's account of the scene generated an image that surfaced as a dream. In her dream, Erin became Winnie and rode away on the back of Mae Tuck's horse. I noticed that the kidnapping scene was discussed a number of times by the students. It was a scene that held their attention over time. They retained an image of the scene that surfaced days and weeks after reading it.

Objects from literature could trigger vivid images as well. Shari told that when the author mentioned Mae Tuck's music box, the object "popped" a "really pretty picture" into her mind. In another instance, author Natalie Babbitt described the dazzling white road along which the Tucks trotted Winnie away. Lindy then recalled an image of her father and brother in a tent on the dazzling white snow in Minnesota.

Externally-imposed images sometimes worked to benefit the students' reading. Brian, for example, agreed with Tim that Tales of a Fourth Grade Nothing was "really good." He explained that he "could tell by the pictures" that the story would be good, especially by anticipating the event connected with the illustration of Fudge preparing to fly from a set of monkey bars. For Brian, illustrations aided in book selection because they indicated that its contents would be good or bad.

Book illustrations could be used to reinforce an impression of a character. Sarah utilized an illustration to reinforce the idea that Aunt Jane of Wolves of Willoughby Chase was indeed elderly. Sarah led all the children to turn to the illustration in which it showed Aunt Jane's white hair. Another time, Rob shared an illustration of Mr. Grimshaw lying prone on Aunt Jane's steps. This sharing prompted a chain of comparisons in which the children constructed a kind of collective image of Grimshaw. He became a composite of a butler with Elvis Presley's sideburns. He had the face of James A. Garfield, or the Smith Brothers of cough drop fame, or Ulysses S. Grant. The children referred to a poster of the U.S. Presidents that Molly took off the closet door and to a box of cough drops as they formed Grimshaw's image.

One particularly dominant image, that of Thaddeus Blinn in The Wish Giver, persisted for the students, but the artist's illustration of him when compared to the author's description struck a dissonant note among them. Bill Brittain suggested that Blinn looked like Santa Claus dressed for summer.

Neither Lana nor Sandra agreed. Lana stated that his looks didn't remind her of a Santa. Sandra went a step further by proposing that Blinn should have been attired in "red shorts and a little cap with a tassel" to better conjure up an image of a summery Santa. Lance went so far as to comment that he "wouldn't mind if there weren't any pictures" in The Wish Giver.

Some students believed that illustrations could improve comprehension. Two readers, Lana and Molly, felt that the illustrations helped the reader along. Lana said that "pictures help," especially "if you don't get it." Not all of the children agreed, however. Lynn stated that "pictures ruin the book because you have it set in your mind how someone looks and then you turn to a picture and it ruins it." I recalled the discussion of Thaddeus Blinn, and remembered that after the discussion of Blinn's appearance, drawing Blinn, or perhaps I should say redrawing Blinn, became a popular classroom activity. Kirsia felt that illustrations imposed upon the reader. She said that "if the book shows you a picture, it's what the artist thinks, but if you imagine it you get to think what you want, not what the book wants."

Perhaps some illustrations seemed too non-specific and failed to help the reader connect with the story. Scott, for instance, cited an illustration of Sterling in the schoolroom as the scene in which the boy asked his teacher if he could bring Rascal to school. Cam found the picture and showed it to the other children. Jaren insisted that instead it portrayed Sterling talking to his teacher after Rascal bit the class bully, Slammy Stillman. The

disagreement remained unreconciled. I still wonder which scene the artist intended to depict.

In the text of The Wish Giver, the printed word functioned as a vivid visual image. Whenever poor Polly Kemp croaked like a frog, her "jug-a-rum" sound appeared on the page in large, boldface type. Kate noticed that the words stood out because they looked so big. Scott added that "they didn't want you to miss it." Paul noted that "JUG-A-RUM" was "what the chapter's called." Lana concluded that if you missed those words, the Polly Kemp croaking episode wouldn't make sense. She emphasized that some words were too important to miss.

Movie versions of books, rich in externally-imposed, vivid visual images, found disfavor among these literature response group members. Scott objected to movies like Bunnicula, a movie that was "totally different" from the book, in his opinion. Steve believed movies weren't as good as books "because books have more detail." Paul viewed the movie version of The Hobbit before he read the book. He decided his own imagination provided better images, especially in the case of battle scenes.

One weekend, Sandra and Lynn watched the movie version of Where the Red Fern Grows, a book they had just finished reading. Sandra thought "it was TERRIBLE!" Lynn agreed because, in her opinion, the movie "skipped a lot of details." Sandra particularly objected to the cutting of a scene from the book that she "could just SEE." In the movie version, no little old lady

raked as she watched Billy cascade clumsily out of the school's fire-escape slide. No little old lady rocked back and forth on her rake "laughing at him like it [she] did in the book."

For a number of students, externally-imposed movie images of books they had read either neglected or contradicted vivid images of scenes they established in their imaginations. So then, I was not surprised that the students did not clamor to see the movie version of Where the Red Fern Grows. I remembered one day, months earlier, when Kate brought the movie version of Rascal to class. We all watched the movie. Afterward, the children were unusually silent. From a more removed and reflective vantage point that time and accumulated data gave me, I later understood their silence better than I had on that day. The children seemed to prefer to leave the images they had built intact.

Certain scenes from the literature seemed to become so vivid in the imaginations of the readers as to evoke a desire in the students to bring them to life and to develop their vivid images. Such a scene was the farewell vignette from Rascal in which Sterling paddled his handmade canoe to the wilderness to release his pet racoon into the wild. Rascal went on that journey again in the person of Kirsas as she sat with Mel on two chairs that doubled as a canoe in their reenactment of the scene.

I underestimated the effect of vivid images on young readers. Before the children read Tuck Everlasting, I assumed that Winnie's discovery of Jesse

and his secret of the eternal waters of the spring, as well as her struggle to choose to drink the water or not, would be the focus of our book discussions. How wrong I was. Instead, the kidnapping scene dominated their discussions. When I reread the discussion transcriptions, I noticed that during the second week of our literature response meetings, Lynn, Julie, Aminda, Kirsas, and Mel voiced their preference for books that were exciting, full of adventure, or scary. Lance preferred stories of kids getting kidnapped. The dominance of the kidnapping scene made more sense months after it occurred. I learned over time and with an enlarged repertoire of listening that children tended to focus on a vivid image of a scary or exciting scene rather than on a philosophical issue.

Connections

These fourth grade readers linked their comprehension of story to their own perceptions and memories, to each other's understandings, and to the physical world around them in a variety of ways. Four strategies emerged for making their connections. To these four strategies I assigned the following categories: concrete connections, experiential definitions, waves of understanding, and perceptual junctions.

Objects appeared in class that for the students concretely connected the real world around them to the world of their reading. When Sterling North recounted how he and other children collected peach pits to make charcoal for use in World War I gas masks, Lance brought a gas mask to school. He

put it on. Once on, Lance's gas mask brought forth from the students a flurry of recollections about gas masks they had seen, as well as knowledge of gas chambers and gases.

Objects were not always presented quite so dramatically. One day, Kirsa reached into her pocket and produced a jewelry box full of tiny, polished agates. This happened during a discussion of Rascal in which Sterling and his pet raccoon explored an agate-strewn Lake Superior beach. Talk about agates and a return to the text for more information about them occurred spontaneously as Kirsa's agates made their way from one child's hands to another's. Just after the children discussed how Billy trapped animals until he could purchase hunting dogs in Where the Red Fern Grows, Brian and Rob gathered sticks and cardboard from which they constructed their own traps.

Even animals appeared in class as concrete connectors to story. Once our discussion of Where the Red Fern Grows was well underway, Jaren's stepfather, Roger, brought their pair of coon hounds to school. Roger demonstrated how the dogs worked together in response to his commands. Afterward, Scott remarked that the dogs performed "just like Old Dan and Little Ann" in the book. I also remembered that the children begged to borrow the turtle from the classroom next door after we read how young Fudge swallowed one in Tales of a Fourth Grade Nothing. We borrowed the turtle. The children watched as it slowly maneuvered along the carpet between our desks.

Sometimes the children's need to connect with concrete objects broke the boundaries of good taste. From my memory surfaced a recollection of Molly, Sandra, and Lynn in the hallway dressed in old fashioned clothing. They were acting out a scene from Wolves of Willoughby Chase. In the scene, Bonnie, played by Molly, fed a raw egg to a starving Sylvia, played by Lynn. I chuckled to myself as I remembered convincing Molly that a plastic egg filled with water would suffice, and that the play would still be effective if Lynn didn't swallow a real egg.

When the children encountered unfamiliar words or phrases, they engaged in a process that I referred to as forming experiential definitions. This process differed from the methods I used habitually to teach new vocabulary words. The children's approach centered on experiences that simulated the meaning of the word rather than on formulating a formal definition.

Experiential definitions couched word explanations in people's actions rather than in disembodied definitions. For example, when Scott thought it sounded weird for Wilson Rawls to say that "Grandpa was dumbfounded," Lynn told him that it meant he was surprised at Billy. Brian and Sandra explained that he had been found dumb because "he didn't know what was going on." Jill added that "he couldn't speak because he was so surprised."

Another instance of forming an experiential definition involved the children in trying to explain a phrase. Lynn wondered what the author,

Wilson Rawls, meant when he wrote that Billy's "blood boiled" after haughty townspeople taunted him for his tattered appearance. Brian explained that his heart was beating fast because he was "really mad." Jaren described it as being like the feeling you have when you're "running off if something scares you."

Sometimes the children used the experiential definition process to explain the meaning of a noun. In Wolves of Willoughby Chase, Bonnie and Sylvia clandestinely met their loyal servants in a place called the blue powder room. The children were unfamiliar with such a room. Sarah explained that powder rooms were like bathrooms "except they don't have a tub." Rob had seen Tom's powder room at his house and Sarah had seen her friend Kyla's which had "lots of towels in it." Jill heard the term "powder room" once in a movie. The actress told a gentleman that she was going to "the can" to powder her nose when he acted as if he did not know the meaning of powder room either.

The children's experiential definitions seemed to issue forth from them in a verbal pattern that often began with the word "like." Such responses told that a word was like a certain experience. For example, when Lynn did not know what Bill Brittain meant when he used the word "bespeak" in the phrase, "all these bespeak their evil nature," Sandra explained that it meant "like, SEE," as in Captain and the Cavemaster, in which she had heard the phrase, "Behold the ultimate warp zone." For Sandra, hearing the word

"behold" in the context of another story was like hearing "bespeak" in The Wish Giver. In a similar fashion, Scott explained that to banish Thaddeus Blinn from the town of Coven Tree would be "like when his brother cried and had to quit a game."

On occasion, sound associations mixed with experiential definitions. After Paul read his sequel to The Wish Giver, in which Stew Meat wished Thaddeus Blinn could be banished from the earth forever, Lance thought it meant "like he vanished." Cam explained that "banish" reminded him of the Montana ghost town, Bannock, because it "sounds like vanish," and everyone had gone from it. I had visited Bannock myself. Everyone indeed had vanished, and perhaps some of its former inhabitants had even been banished. At any rate, it seemed that experiential definitions could encompass cues both from auditory memory as well as from the world of physical experience.

Often the children's responses to a story built upon each other's understandings of it. Additions to each other's understanding seemed to happen in waves of emerging comprehension. To these successive additions, I affixed the descriptor "waves of understanding."

The children added to each other's comprehension of the story by building upon each other's responses in discussion group situations. For example, while discussing Fudge's antics from a chapter of Tales of a Fourth Grade Nothing, Brian wondered how the youngster could eat a turtle. Cam

told Brian that he "used to eat flowers." Tom added that he "used to eat grass." Cam wondered whether Fudge could "swallow a WHOLE turtle." Scott suggested that he could have done it with the aid of a drink of water. Steve added that it would be like swallowing a vitamin. Lance thought perhaps it "could've been one of those little turtles" and reminded the group that he felt "this book's not TRUE," not realistic. At that point, the waves broke on the shore of Lance's definitive assessment and subsided.

At times the children's waves of understandings rolled smoothly in the same direction; almost as if together, their utterances formed one complete response. During a discussion of Rascal's sweet corn eating binge, Paul asked why the raccoon didn't finish his first ear of sweet corn. Cam uttered, "He wanted . . ." Kirsia finished Cam's response by saying, "He wanted more and wanted it so bad that he forgot to eat the rest of it." Scott added, "And he wanted to get another one." Tom followed with, "He wanted to get to the rest first." Blake finished their collective response by saying, "He was GREEDY." At this point, the waves broke their rhythm upon reaching a destination and subsided.

Waves of understanding lapped against each other when one child finished another child's thought. For example, Sandra began a description of Miss Slighcarp's clothing when she said, "She was wearing . . ." And Molly quickly added, "a plain grey twill." In the course of a discussion of Rascal, Kate once noted that people sewed gold stars on the service flag at

Sterling's church "every time somebody died in the war." Cam felt, "You'd at least like somebody to be proud of you," and Tom completed the thought with, "because they fought so hard." Such understandings supported each other as they moved in the same direction toward building a sort of collective comprehension of the story.

Not all waves of understanding presented themselves as a uni-directional sequence of additive comprehension. Sometimes waves bore upon their crest the contradictory word "but" instead of an agreeable "and." Some waves moved in another direction. A scene from Rascal caused such a discussion undertow. The story told how Slammy Stillman, the class bully, snapped a rubber band in Rascal's face during science class. Rascal bit Slammy. As the discussion began, Lance asked why the raccoon bit the boy. Steve answered that Slammy had "snapped a rubber band at him." Tom protested the fact that Slammy didn't get punished, but thought that the fear of getting rabies would be a possible punishment for the boy. Steve disagreed with Tom by saying, "But the whole class SAW it!" and lobbied for punishment. Cam defended the non-punishment because in his opinion, Slammy only snapped a rubber band, a minor offense. He went further and refuted the rabies theory. Cam believed an animal would need to eat gophers in order to contract rabies. Lance countered with, "But they put Rascal in a cage for 14 days." Scott felt, "They should've put Slammy in Rascal's cage." Lance added, "And he should've been punished for yelling

in school." The discussion continued. Cam, Scott, Lance, and Tom talked about Slammy's motives, and produced a series of them. In the end, the tide and the undercurrents of their waves of understanding receded and left a clearer comprehension of the scene.

Waves of understanding could carry repeatedly the word "or." In one such sequence, the children functioned like a team of detectives trying to determine the nature of a paper Mr. Grimshaw burned in a scene from Wolves of Willoughby Chase. Sandra supposed it was a letter. Jill suggested Miss Slighcarp had written to somebody and that someone wrote back. Sandra added, "or it could've been a letter from the police." Molly suggested, "or forged papers from the last place where she worked." Sarah exclaimed, "or her IDENTITY!" Rob listened to the others, then commented that the conversation sounded like a Nancy Drew mystery. Silently, I agreed with Rob.

Whenever an event from a novel intersected with what a child perceived to be a parallel personal experience, I assigned the category "perceptual junction." During a discussion of witch trials mentioned in The Wish Giver, Sandra, for example, strongly insisted that trial by two-minute dunking constituted a poor test for witches, a test that didn't "make sense." Sandra knew she could hold her breath for two minutes from her training on the local synchronized swimming team. In the context of a later discussion of the same novel, one focused on whether or not children's wishes could come

true, Lance insisted that they did, even if "only for a week." His certainty rested on the fact that he had wished that his brother would go away, and he did, to Camp Krist-A-Kon for a week.

Sometimes perceptual junctions began with the word "like." As the children discussed why Rascal "got mad at Sterling when he yelled at him," Cam provided an example of likening a personal experience to a situation from the novel. Cam told the group that Rascal's situation was "like when I jump on the couch." Jaren added from his own experience that if parents "don't do much about it, you don't learn and you ruin it."

As I reflected upon the variety of interactions that formed the patterns of the children's responses to literature, I marveled at them. I had gained a heightened awareness of the versatility of their meaning-making strategies as well as a respect for their collective resourcefulness. I must confess that I had underestimated these young readers, and was surprised at the depth and complexity of their involvement with the literature at so young an age.

Findings Interface with Literature Review

Length of Response

The children's literature response group discussions began stiffly with short discussion spurts and gradually lengthened as discussions became more diverse. Discussions evoked by the first novel, Tales of a Fourth Grade Nothing, seemed sparse and lacking in personal involvement. It was

interesting to note that approximately 90% of the children's talk appeared in the transcriptions of those first discussions. By the time the children experienced five months of responding to literature, I noticed discussions increased substantially in length. Transcriptions of the last two novels were far lengthier than the first, yet for the purposes of this research, I included only about 70% of the total body of their responses.

It seemed that the children's increased length of response came with time and experience. Perhaps their initial terseness was due to the short-answer format to which they were attuned in previous basal reader classes. Such a short-answer format required only that the children write a sentence or a sentence fragment in response to a reading-related question. This format discouraged "literature conversations" among the children (Koeller, 1988). At first, the children's stiff responses could also have resulted from some degree of generalized "communication apprehension" found among students (Wood, 1984). For whatever reason, increased discussion session opportunities afforded the children practice at interacting about literature. Such practice allowed the children to become more fluent in talking about books (Hickman, 1983). In those later, more fluent discussions, the children's interactional patterns unstiffened. They in fact criss-crossed among group members in a spontaneous sequence of talk (Strickland, 1989).

Over 30 years ago, J.N. Britton advocated extended time for children to "respond fully" to reading (cited in Miles, 1985). Yet, Britton's advice went

unheeded for years. Perhaps in our hurry to have children succeed in reading and to produce correct answers, we may have forgotten that "literacy is a social practice" (Wells, 1988, p. 23). By shifting the focus of responding to reading in such a way that the children come to value consideration of questions rather than an answer-product, they gradually attuned themselves to focus on the process of meaning-making. We must remember that in the child's process of meaning-making, "It is not the answer, but the by-product of the search for that answer that is vital" (Dearing-Perrine, 1936, p. 63).

Time was a critical commodity necessary for the students to have a successful literature response experience. Availability of expanded time for discussion and the opportunity to respond were necessary to elaboration and consideration of multiple meanings for literature. In order for this to happen, a "psychic environment" (Hollman, 1989) also prevailed that allowed the children permission as well as time to consider and consider again that which they had read.

The Role of the Text

In that first series of discussions about Tales of a Fourth Grade Nothing, the text was present, but only in its physical form. The children referred to ownership of the book and to possession of it, but they seldom ventured inside of it to retrieve text. Later on, the students gained experience in talking about the books they read; they often invited the words of the text into their discussions. They reread from it in order to negotiate their personal

connections to it. They sought to verify the presence of relevant situations and details from the story (Strickland, 1989).

Successful literature response required multiple reading of the text (Miles, 1985). In order for the children to mediate their personal and collective responses with experiences evoked by the literature, they needed to reread it. Rereading of the text happened repeatedly in the children's discussions, for in the reader response approach, the emphasis was on the "integrated experience (transaction) that a reader had with a text" (Pugh, 1988, p. 1). The children's oral reading sprang from needs determined by their meaning-making processes. Their reading was internally and naturally evoked. It was purposeful, for "oral reading has an authentic purpose in literature study groups as students return to the text to support inferences they have made" (Wells, 1988, p. 43).

Perhaps the increased volume and variety of the students' interactions about literature stemmed from a different print stimulus. For the first time, the children used novels in reading class. Students coming from basal reader programs, as these children did, may have suffered from texts afflicted with "print starvation" (Holdaway, 1979). The extensive narratives that the novels they studied offered to them presented the children with a richness of print to which they could respond. After all, "Print is the wand that summons human experience" (Sebesta, cited in Koeller, 1988, p. 14).

Intensity of Images

Book illustrations played a part in the children's discussions. Some students found illustrations to be such an integral part of their reading that they chose to read only illustrated books. For them, their responses to literature may have been primarily "picture stimulated" (Holdaway, 1979). Other children disagreed about the meaning of and appropriateness of certain illustrations. For those students, illustrations served instead as "mediating symbols" (Holdaway, 1979). Their questions focused on images evoked rather than on facts gleaned from the story. Such questions are characteristic of successful literature discussions (Hickman, 1984).

Certain events and situations in the stories they read left vivid images in the memories of the children. Upon these vivid events they refocused repeatedly. Sometimes the children refocused on the vivid images they had created via story retelling, perhaps the most common reader response strategy at all age levels (Hickman, 1983). At other times, events were so vivid that they could not simply be retold; they needed to be acted out (Sanders, 1987). It seemed that the children tended to "fix upon memorable incident [sic] rather than respond to the story as a whole" (Hickman, 1984). Exciting moments, such as Winnie Foster's kidnapping, stayed with the children, possibly because they had a tendency to prefer stimulation in their reading via "exciting" books (Pascoe & Gilchrist, 1987).

Thinking Like Writers

At times the students went beyond reading and discussing the literature by revising and adding to what they had read. Some of the children wrote sequels that were somewhat analogous to the novel. In some of those sequels, story elements were added, plot was altered, or characters persisted on into a student-created future. Other instances of editing involved the students suggesting revisions of scenes in the work they had read, perhaps scenes that could appear in a movie version of the novel.

It could be said that these children had begun to read like writers (Atwell, 1984). They engaged in a writer's process of editing the literature for their own story-sense purposes, and with an "author's sense of intentionality" (Vardell, 1983). It seemed that these active readers thought like writers.

Exploring the Literature

The children sometimes treated the literature as if it were a puzzle that contained certain pieces which demanded closer scrutiny. When those pieces were handled, they seemed to inspire the children to embark upon organic research projects from time to time. Successful quests and subsequent reporting about them arose from natural puzzlements of the readers (Holbrook, 1987). The term "organic research" grew from Sylvia Ashton-Warner's term "organic vocabulary," which referred to individual children's study of words that were personally meaningful to them. She felt that "reading should be motivated by the deepest springs of meaning in the

human heart" (Ashton-Warner, cited in Holdaway, 1979, p. 31). So also should reading-related organic research spring from children's needs to explore and understand what they have read, for "reading is an exploratory process" (Le, 1984, p. 353).

Vocabulary Study

Within the context of the children's literature response groups, vocabulary study incorporated allusions to life experience. The children explained unfamiliar words experientially. Disembodied dictionary definitions took a backseat as the children used mini-stories to explain how a word was "like" a happening. Putting the meaning of words on a purely verbal plane was "uncharacteristic of child thinking" (Vygotsky, 1962, p. 52). The students probed below the surface of the words and uncovered related personal experience. In doing so, they touched more than the dictionary meaning of the word. They touched for them what constituted the word's living essence. Successful reading of language required this, because "reading is not walking on words, it's grasping the soul of them" (Freire, cited in Sanders, 1987, p. 619).

In previous years, when I had dutifully doled out word definitions, drilled students on their application, then tested them on retention, I had satisfied my instructional requirements, but not the meaning-making needs of the students. To teach a child a word requires establishing a context for each word, an experiential context (Donaldson, 1978). Involving the children in the

language they met in the text required that their experience be engaged with the literary word, for engaged readers read the word and their world at the same time (Freire, cited in Sanders, 1987). In teaching isolated words, I had neglected considerations of semantic sense (Holdaway, 1979). By listening to the children, I discovered that for them, "The dictionary meaning of a word is no more than a stone in the edifice of sense" (Vygotsky, 1962, p. 146).

Language is a cultural phenomenon. A society creates a language, then mediates and molds its changing form through its interactive use over time. Words take on new connotations and new meanings through use. For these young readers, meaning was revealed in a public context that Wittgenstein referred to as a "semantic condition" in which discussion mediated isolated and possibly idiosyncratic interpretations in the private language of a solitary individual (Codd, 1982). Yet, "poorer readers" in my class had been taught words out of the context of semantic sense to an even greater degree than most of the other children. Cam complained of this focused attention on words treated as isolated units. It "bugged" him as it may have also bothered other "poorer readers," because studying words in isolation from semantic sense is common practice for struggling students (Allington, 1980). Distasteful memories of reading sessions focused on words rather than on a connected sense of the story experience caused some readers to form a narrow view of what constituted reading (Hunsberger, 1985).

Focusing on Understanding

The children gradually became a community of readers. They explored the meaning of what they read in a social context, for language was their primary "social means of thought" (Vygotsky, 1962, p. 51). Together, these young readers synthesized what the text offered with their own reservoirs of personal experience (Galda, 1983). The children moved from the individual to the "corporate experience" of reading (Holdaway, 1979). To begin with, they processed their personal experience with the story, for each of them a unique reading event (Shanklin & Rhodes, 1989b). As time went on, the children increasingly revealed their perceptions about the story, an eventual phenomenon that sometimes occurred in waves of understanding during which the students formed "conversational partnerships" characterized by students thinking aloud with each other about what they had read (Holdaway, 1979).

The children did not always agree with each other's understandings about a story. Sometimes they engaged in a kind of productive conflict in which they negotiated meaning in a kind of "mutual composition" process (Johnston, 1989). This type of controversy promoted greater understanding of others' perspectives than teacher-dominated interaction would have produced (Johnson & Johnson, 1984). By juxtaposing varying understandings, the children "heightened their awareness of what was actual by considering what was possible" (Donaldson, 1978, p. 97). In retrospect, the

children assisted each other to understand the text from a diversity of point-of-view and a depth of experience that a solitary reader might not have achieved. These children assisted each other in attaining a developmentally higher level of understanding. They helped each other to achieve their "zone of proximal development" (Vygotsky, 1962).

These fourth grade readers were active participants in a meaning-making process of reading. They formed understandings for what they read through a "generative" process of reading comprehension (Wittrock, cited in Koeller, 1988). Together, as they focused on understanding what they read, they engaged in a process of building their own "cognitive context" around works of literature among a community of interpreters (Codd, 1982).

Breaking Barriers

Perhaps one of the greatest barriers to my students' reading processes in previous years had been my limited trust in the strength of their responses to literature. While teaching about stories, I had forgotten one essential element. I had forgotten that a piece of literature by itself is incomplete, for it "presupposes a reader" (Hunsberger, 1985, p. 103).

Successful readers were those who read for more than detail, and read beyond what an expert reader (in this case, a teacher) expected of them. Instead, their reading was transactional (aesthetic) in nature, because it focused on the reader's relationship to the work (Rosenblatt, cited in Holbrook, 1987). Their focus tended to center on events and situations, as

is typical for young readers (Sanders, 1987). Often, during discussions of events and situations, the students incorporated happenings from their own lives as well as from their experiences with other chapters from the book, other books, and related movies in order to sort and synthesize relevant knowledge (Koeller, 1988). Via this synthesizing process, the children engaged in "introspective recall" as the literature awakened memories of meaningful past experience and reorganized it through a connection to the literary text (Weil & Joyce, 1978).

My previously limited expectations of the ways in which young readers could connect with text had perhaps limited them in much the same way that school often "contrives barriers between related aspects of language" (Holdaway, 1979). Schools, after all, were made up of people like myself. I had learned that children who connected with the literature gradually became more fluent in discussing its possibilities. I understood, finally, that prior to age 11, students who became most personally involved in literature, who approached it with W.H. Auden's "passionate attention," were the students who were most likely to give insightful responses (Sanders, 1987). I had come to understand that connections to direct experience and memory were vital for impelling literature to come alive for young readers (Cox, 1981). I looked back upon my own memories of animals and objects and personal stories that made their way into our classroom, and realized that it was indeed true that "the essence of language lies in the magical relationship between words and their referents" (Benton, 1984, p. 265).

Legitimizing Student Responses

The students noticed that I listened and wrote down each word they uttered in the context of book discussion sessions. They bragged to students in other reading classes about how fast I could write down their words. Even after these students moved on to the fifth grade in another building, some of them returned periodically to ask me how the book I was writing about them was coming along. They were fascinated to find out what I would say about them. By writing what they said and about what they discussed, I had given their words "legitimizing attention" (Hickman, 1984).

Increased attention paid to the students' dialogue empowered them as it unburdened me. I found that the children took increasing initiative in asking questions, and induced increasingly lengthy and elaborative considerations of what they read as time went on. They took greater responsibility for making decisions about their learning, and chose to perform plays, conduct organic research, and write sequels for what they read. In the process, more responsibility for their learning rested on the students themselves. As Anne Truitt said of her own children, "My own freedom widened to the degree I had been able to confirm theirs" (Truitt, 1984, p. 182). So it was with me.

Through a process of months of listening to the children respond to literature and to each other, I began to change the intent of my teaching. I no longer envisioned briskly-paced reading lessons that marched toward an instructional goal. From a changed perspective, I entertained a diversity of

responses in an atmosphere of acceptance of that diversity as my students lingered over meaning. What I began to envision was what Stanley Fish called an "interpretive community of readers" (cited in Johnston, 1989). In so doing, my teaching had grown as the students' fluency and freedom had increased. Their freedom allowed me to escape stagnation, and avert "professional arrest" (Strickland et al., 1989).

Implications for Researchers

After reporting the data and reflecting upon the patterns of the children's responses, I considered aspects of this research that offered potential for future studies. Within this study, the pieces of literature that the children discussed were narratives. They were stories. If a future researcher's students were to discuss poetry, written with its abbreviated sense of meaning, the ensuing child interactions might evoke other kinds of responses from fourth grade readers. Perhaps it could be the case that "different genres may provoke different patterns of response" (Benton, 1984, p. 272).

Subsequent studies could add to the body of knowledge about children's meaning-making interactions with literature by shifting the focus of the data gathering. Future research focused on other mediums of the children's expressions about literature, such as what could be revealed with double-entry journals, might reveal different patterns of response. Observation of the process of performing literature-related plays might prove fruitful.

Patterns that emerged from scene selection, prop construction, play rehearsals, dialogue choice, and staging could offer insights into how the children created meaning for literature. Study of the sequels and analogous stories the children wrote in response to reading could provide helpful insights into their thinking for use by reading teachers.

The issue that underlies this research is the appropriate role of the reading teacher. If students are to develop beyond functional literacy to truly become readers, then a question that needs to be studied as a corollary to this research is one that reveals what kinds of teacher/student interactions empower young readers who are struggling to negotiate personal meaning and the written word.

Finally, in light of the fact that it took the greater part of a school year for the students to establish a community of readers, a lengthier research period of several years could illuminate patterns of response that the duration of this research was not able to reveal. Ideally, the same students ought to be observed for a period of two to three years by the same teacher/researcher. As teachers are wont to proclaim, I needed more time.

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