MONTANA STATE UNIVERSITY

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
© Copyright by Valerie Katherine Cox (1991)

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.

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
Bozeman, Montana

July 1991

APPROVAL

of a thesis submitted by

Valerie Katherine Cox

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.

7/15/91
_____
Date

Priscilla Fenton
_____
Chairperson, Graduate Committee

Approved for the Major Department

7/15/91
_____
Date

Donald Robson
_____
Head, Major Department

Approved for the College of Graduate Studies

August 6, 1991
_____
Date

Henry J Parsons
_____
Graduate Dean

STATEMENT OF PERMISSION TO USE

In presenting this thesis in partial fulfillment of the requirements for a master's degree at Montana State University, I agree that the Library shall make it available to borrowers under rules of the Library. Brief quotations from this thesis are allowable without special permission, provided that accurate acknowledgement of source is made.

Permission for extensive quotation from or reproduction of this thesis may be granted by my major professor or, in her absence, by the Dean of Libraries when, in the opinion of either, the proposed use of the material is for scholarly purposes. Any copying or use of the material in this thesis for financial gain shall not be allowed without my written permission.

Signature _Valerie Katherine Cox_

Date _7/15/91_

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

TABLE OF CONTENTS

TABLE OF CONTENTS--<u>Continued</u>

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 presupposi-

tions 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 para-

phrase 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 pronounce-ments 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 respond-

ed 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 confus- ing 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 piecework 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 "profes-sional 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 ordinally 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/ TOM: I'll look it up! [Together, they go and get an 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.