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Peer Dialogue Journals as Response to Literature in Grade Two

by

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The undersigned certify that they have read, and recommend to the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research for acceptance, a thesis entitled PEER DIALOGUE JOURNALS AS RESPONSE TO LITERATURE IN GRADE TWO submitted by TERRI WALKER in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of MASTER OF EDUCATION.

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DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to the grade two students and teacher of Sunnybook School; for their trust and willingness to show that it can be done.

ABSTRACT

There are many differing theoretical perspectives on response to literature; some emphasize the reader, some the text, and still others the connection between the two.

This study examined children's written responses to literature. More specifically, it was an attempt to yield a better understanding of how grade two students 'learn to mean' through responding to literature in peer dialogue journals. Louise Rosenblatt's (1985) theory of literary response provided the framework for the study in that the students drew on their life experiences to reflect on and respond to literature. These experiences were drawn upon to aid in the synthesis of new ideas, feelings and images gleaned from the texts of the pictures books read and each partner's written responses to them.

Key questions asked were: What happens when children respond to literature in peer dialogue response journals? How do children respond to literature? What patterns of response, if any, develop? Do dialogue patterns between different partnerships occur? How do children handle peer dialogue journals at this age?

The study took place over a three month period with twenty-five grade two students in an urban school. Classroom visits were made twice a week, for one and a half hours in the morning. The teacher/researcher read picture books to the class and engaged the students in discussion.

The students then responded to the literature in a peer dialogue journal. At this point they exchanged journals with a predetermined partner and responded to their partner's writing.

The literature chosen for the project consisted of picture story books which were readable in one sitting. The books were chosen from various genres.

Data were gathered through student peer dialogue journals, a teacher dialogue journal, teacher interview and student interviews.

Data analysis revealed that peer dialogue journals can be used effectively with young children and many valuable insights arose for the teacher as students wrote in a manner that encouraged response and reflection. Examination of the data also revealed that grade two children are capable of both reflecting and responding in a variety of ways.

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Chapter One

> "...to have one's imagination carried soaring on the wings of another's imagination, to be made more aware of the possibilities of one's mind, to be thrilled, amazed, awed, elevated-in worlds unknown until discovered through the medium of language, and to find in those worlds one's own petty horizon growing wider and wider" (Hunter, 1978, p. 435)

Introduction

My journey into literature response started more than seven years ago when I began teaching in a grade two classroom. Having spent many years teaching special education I was not well versed in the curriculum for grade two students. In preparing myself for the upcoming year, I took home the curriculum guides and textbooks that were sitting in my new classroom. The Language Arts basal series really baffled me. The lessons seemed excessively structured and the majority of the stories in each reader did not appeal to me. Never-the-less, this was what the school board had chosen for us to use, and that is precisely what I did. After the first few months of teaching, it became quite clear to me that the students

were not only disinterested in the basal stories, but they did not have good recall of the skills I had taught. As this was my first year of teaching in a 'regular' classroom, however, I followed the basal reading series very closely.

The greatest excitement we shared that year occurred whenever I read a picture book to the children. This sharing time prompted many questions and discussions and we would all leave these daily sessions with reluctance.

The following summer I did much thinking about my Language Arts program. I decided to continue to use the prescribed basals but decided also to use storybooks alongside them to provide the students with better quality in their reading. Not only did this approach have more appeal to the students, but I found more enjoyment in teaching.

By the third summer, I was clearly convinced that the basal approach to teaching reading was not providing my students with a range of genres, and that the enjoyment of reading simply was not there. I decided that for the following year, on a trial basis, I would quietly shelve the basal reading series and begin an independent reading program in my classroom.

The difference in my students' enjoyment in reading and in my attitude to teaching Language Arts was remarkable. Many students read up to one hundred picture books over the year. We all participated in lively

discussions, quiet conferences, and celebrations of the books we read. The students talked constantly about the books they were reading and their attitudes towards reading were consistently positive. I became firm in my belief that teaching literature, not teaching reading, was the basis of my philosophy for Language Arts.

Firm in this resolve, I continued with this approach over the next three years. Literature became the mainstay in my classroom, integrated in all other subject areas as well. However, one concern remained; how were the children to take responsibility for their reading? What were the ways I could help the students to reflect on their reading, to dig deeper, to search for meaning as they read?

I experimented with many different methods. Celebrating each and every book was very time consuming, taking valuable time away from "reading". Hence, I began examining ways to use literature logs, notebooks, teacher-made sheets, and binders to help children reflect on their learning. These formats, I eventually noticed, were too restrictive in the patterned responses I had encouraged.

It wasn't until I again began taking courses at University that I learned about literature response journals. My examination of this method as a response to literature peaked my curiosity as a possibility to try with my second graders. My learnings had also taken me to an understanding of Rosenblatt's response to literature and Vygotsky's zone of proximal development. These educators

made me wonder if grade two student responses would deepen or change somehow if they dialogued their responses about literature in a peer dialogue response journal. These questions brought me to the threshold of this study.

Purpose

The purpose of the study was to examine grade two students' responses to literature in peer dialogue journals.

Guiding Questions

The following questions guided my research:

1. What happens when children respond to literature in peer dialogue journals?
2. How do children respond to literature?
3. What patterns of response, if any, develop?
4. Do dialogue patterns between different partner groups occur?
5. How do children handle peer dialogue journals at this age? What issues arise?

Methodology

This research was carried out in a grade two classroom over a three month period, with visits twice a week to the classroom. I adopted the role of teacher/researcher, reading picture books to the class and leading a discussion

afterwards. Following the discussion, the children responded to the literature in peer dialogue journals, after which they exchanged journals with a predetermined partner and responded to their partner's writing.

Chapter Two

Literature Review

Reader Response Theory

"Reader response theory is part of a gradual realization in the sciences, social sciences, and humanities that the observer effects the consequence of observations and that the focus of inquiry should be on the observer and the relation between observers and observations" (Cooper, 1985, p. xii). There are differing theoretical perspectives placed on response to literature; some emphasize the reader, others the text, and still others the connection between the two. These various perspectives are delineated further, depending upon the background of the theorists. Discussed below are some of the theorists who studied the response connections between the reader and the text.

"Central to the reading of every literary work is the interaction between its structure and its recipients" (Iser, 1978, p. 20). Iser, a European phenomenologist, is a supporter of reception theory that posits the reader as a performer who produces meaning throughout the reading act. As readers read they fill in gaps that exist in the text, such as unsaid things, unexplained actions or unarticulated true feelings. Readers gather and revise their viewpoints

along the way, joining together the pieces of the work until the entire text becomes comprehensible.

Iser believes that any study of a literary work should not only include the work itself but also a study of the response to the work. He proposes a continuum of response for any literary work, whose poles he refers to as artistic (the author's text) and aesthetic (the meaning derived by the reader) and he places the work somewhere between these two poles.

"As the reader passes through the various perspectives offered by the text and relates the different views and patterns to one another he sets the work in motion, and so sets himself in motion, too" (p. 21). Iser proposes that the message received from the literary work is actually composed by the reader. This response is guided by the text yet evolves from the reader's interaction with the text.

Holland (1968) views literature as "an experience, and further, as experience not discontinuous with other experiences" (p. xiii). He, along with David Bleich, falls into the subjective criticism school that blends its theories with psychoanalytic psychology. Holland suggests that readers' needs and personalities determine their responses to literature. Through this response, individuals are better able to see themselves in relationship to others.

Bleich (1975) was also influenced by the idea that literary study should "include the subjective bases and

purposes for reading and coming to literary judgements" (p. 3). He sees the purpose for this study as leading the individual to become motivated to read, which in turn, leads one to a new understanding of the self. Bleich developed a strategy for response to literature: asking students to identify the most important word in the text read. Discussion ensues around the various word choices, leading students to become aware of the various perspectives brought to the text. Through this process it is demonstrated "how important personal experience is in shaping the reading of a text" (Probst, 1989, p. 11).

Response to literature is thought to have its underpinnings in the work of Louise Rosenblatt. Rosenblatt's transactional theory of response to literature was developed in 1938 but was not explained in detail until 1978. It is this theory of literary response that has become the basis for my study.

Rosenblatt postulates that "reading is a transaction, a two-way process, involving a reader and a text at a particular time under particular circumstances" (Rosenblatt, 1982, p. 268). The reader brings to the text his or her experiences and uses these experiences to help build a framework of expectations for the text. If a discrepancy is found, the reader must revise this framework to allow for new possibilities.

Rosenblatt feels that readers take one of two stances as they approach a text. The stance would depend upon the

reader's purpose for reading. If the purpose was to seek or identify factual information, writing style or specific details, the reader would approach the text from an efferent stance. "It is more likely to evolve as a kind of study of the text with an emphasis on breaking it up into isolated segments and concentrating on certain information to be retained according to one or another analytic systems or way of viewing the text" (Cox & Many, 1992, p. 39).

The word efferent comes from the Latin word meaning "to carry away". Rosenblatt defines efferent reading as being non-literary, where the "predominant interest is in acquiring information that we wish to retain after the reading has ended" (Rosenblatt, 1991, p. 444).

At the other end of the continuum lies the aesthetic stance, coming from the Greek work meaning "to sense" or "to perceive". The aesthetic stance is when "the reader seeks a story, a poem, a play, [and] his attention will shift inward, will center on what is being created *during* the actual reading" (Rosenblatt, 1982, p. 269). "It evolves though attention to the special personal nature of experienced meaning and focuses on the selective process of creating a unique individual literary work of art through the transaction between the reader and the text" (Cox & Many, 1992, p. 41).

Rosenblatt (1982) suggests that any text can be read from either stance or from both stances. She cautions that teachers must know the reader, the other part of the

transaction, to help predict which text will produce the better evocation, that is, which text will help the reader achieve lived through meaning (p. 269). A response is developed from what we are gleaning from the text, and a reaction to that response accompanies it. To help us respond, we draw from our life experiences, and our reflections surround our responses and the reaction we have felt.

The study on which I embarked sought to examine children's aesthetic responses to literature. The focus of attention was on the lived-through-experience as the reading was occurring. Rosenblatt explains that the child "is attending both to what the verbal signs designate and to the qualitative overtones of the ideas, images, situations and characters that he is evoking under guidance of the text. The literary work of art comes into being through the reader's attention to what the text activates within him" (Rosenblatt, 1985, p. 38).

For a reading to be aesthetic, the child must "select out and synthesize the ideas, feelings, and images that have been aroused within by that particular set of verbal signs" (p. 38). Experiences are drawn upon to aid in the synthesis of this new material. Rosenblatt feels that the aim of teaching literature is to develop the capacity for this process to occur.

It has been my experience that literature is generally taught efferently, that is, looking at the practical

functions of language. As a beginning teacher I was expected to teach reading from an efferent stance--even the system of reporting to parents reflected this viewpoint. The basal reading series that I used supported efferent reading in that it cued children to understand that they are expected to supply information at the end of the text; there are certain things they should know.

This is not to deny that there is value in efferent reading. There are times when efferent reading is essential--reading a recipe, an instruction manual, and so on. What I suggest, based on my experiences, is that the sole emphasis on efferent reading has neglected the equal importance of the aesthetic. "A better understanding of how children 'learn to mean' in specific contexts should yield signals for those involved in all aspects of reading, especially research on response to literature and the teaching of literature" (Rosenblatt, 1985, p. 41).

Vygotsky (1978) discusses the relationship between language and thought and sees response to literature as being a social process. Harding (1977) would agree with Vygotsky when he writes that perhaps this process is "similar to that of a discussion where we sympathetically entertain the frame of reference of our fellow participant, following through its implications into realms of novelty hitherto unsuspected, and then recoil momentarily as we set this new frame and its implications against the context of our own beliefs and assumptions" (p. 389).

Vygotsky proposes that "an essential feature of learning is that it creates the zone of proximal development; that is, learning awakens a variety of internal developmental processes that are able to operate only when the child is interacting with people in his environment and in cooperation with his peers" (p. 90). This zone of proximal development "is the distance between the actual development level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers" (p. 86). Simply put, the zone of proximal development is the difference between what the child can do by himself or herself and what he or she can do with assistance.

This study explored two key questions that incorporated Vygotsky's theories: What happens when students respond to literature and share their responses with a partner? Is learning extended through reading a partner's response to literature? Vygotsky's theory of a zone of proximal development will be explored further when examining children's responses to literature.

The teacher holds a crucial role in stimulating response to literature in her students. Her aim "should be to refine and develop responses the children are already making" (Britton, 1982, p. 33). She needs to encourage enjoyment in books and to extend responses to nurture growth of imagination. Many teachers have examined various

aspects of response to literature from their students. The following section will highlight some of these studies.

Research in Response to Literature

There is a wealth of studies completed on response to literature, and the number is rapidly growing. Most of these studies fall into two overlapping areas. The first area includes studies that either analyzed student responses into categories or models (Squire, 1964; Monson, 1986; Protherough, 1983) or have predetermined categories in which to place the responses (Purves & Rippere, 1968; Newell, Suszynski, & Weingart, 1989; Odell & Cooper, 1976; Marshall, 1987; Cooper & Michalak, 1981). A second area includes studies that examine how students process their thoughts before they respond (Langer, 1990; Vipond & Hunt, 1984; Odell & Cooper, 1976; Marshall, 1987).

All of the above studies deal with junior high, senior high or college level students. There are few studies that have examined young children's responses. Twenty-eight students were in Kelly's (1990) grade three class. Journals were introduced to examine the kinds of responses these students gave after the teacher read aloud a novel selected for this purpose. Each student was required to respond to three response questions based on Bleich's (1978) research: "(a) What did you notice in the story? (b) How did the story make you feel? (c) What does this story remind you of in your own life?" (p. 466). Analyses of the writings

indicated that students connected incidents in stories with their own lives, focused on particular story events, or wrote summary-like descriptions. A noticeable difference, according to Kelly was the growing ability of the students to put their feelings into words.

Keegan and Shrake (1991) analyzed literature study groups. Thirty-two students in the fourth grade responded verbally in their groups to an open ended question about a particular novel. They then reacted to this discussion and the novel in literature logs. Analyses of tape recordings of this process showed that these fourth graders compared and contrasted literature with their own worlds, brought background experiences to discussions, compared authors' styles and raised questions about their learning (p. 545).

Many and Wiseman (1992) analyzed the effects of three different teaching approaches on third grade responses to three picture books. One hundred and twenty students were randomly assigned to three treatment approaches: literary analysis (identifying and reviewing literary elements), literary experience (students lived-through experience and reaction to storyline), and no-discussion. Findings indicated that students who were taught from the literary analysis approach tended to respond efferently, those in the literary experience group responded aesthetically, and the no-discussion group tended to simply retell the story.

Some researchers here again have analyzed journal responses of elementary students into categories or

domains. Wollman-Bonilla (1989) taught grade four and she featured three students in support of her investigation of reading journals. A 'letter to the teacher format' was used semi-weekly in the reading journals, with the teacher responding in kind. She analyzed responses into five major categories: opinions about episodes and characters, direct expression of personal engagement, discussions of authors' techniques, reflections on reading, and questions about language, plot or vocabulary.

Bintz and Dillard (1990) used dialogue journals to examine the written responses of 25 first grade students. Dialogue journals were defined as "interactive written conversations about self-generated topics of interest" (p. 133). The students interacted with their teacher once every two weeks exploring self-selected pieces of literature. Reader response was explored in terms of: (1) Shuy's (1988) model of language functions and (2) emerging patterns and hypotheses. The researchers concluded that "an interest in dialogue journals is really an interest in learning. And, it is this shared interest in learning, coupled with the willingness and ability of learners to read, write, share, and reflect with other learners, that ultimately defines what it means for teachers and students to become real book buddies in the classroom" (p. 146-147).

The written responses of second and third grade students were examined by Dekker (1991). Over a two year period, the children responded in reading logs regarding

what they liked about texts and why they liked them. Responses were in letter formats addressed to the teacher and to a fellow student. Initially, three response categories were established: retelling, simple evaluation and elaborated evaluation. In January of the second year, Dekker chose to open up the log responses. Analysis then showed four additional types of responses: personal experience, discussion of characters, illustrations added to the log letters, and questions about the stories read. Dekker noted that her students varied the response type used in the log letters and suggested that if teachers are to value the texts the students produce, they must allow for freedom of response.

Hancock (1992) analyzed a sixth grader's responses to literature into five domains -- character interaction, character empathy, prediction and validation, personal experiences, and philosophical reflections (p. 38).

Two separate studies were conducted by Danielson (1992a, 1992b). The first study examined twenty two grade five students' literature responses in literature logs. These students wrote one question and one comment after reading each chapter of the novel The Not Just-Anybody Family (1986). The questions and comments were used as a beginning point in later discussion groups. Analysis of the questions and comments revealed the following categories: predictions, text-related statements, character

involvement, personal experiences, language and vocabulary, concept of author, and personal feelings (p. 375).

In the second study (1992b), Danielson examined the writing of her four year old nephew in response to literature. At each meeting, which was twice a week over a ten month period, she read a picture book to the young boy and asked him to write anything he wished about each book. Data were analyzed into three categories: uses for writing, concepts and principles of early writing, and demonstrations of engagement with children's books (p. 274).

Cox and Many have conducted several studies, both together and with other researchers, on aesthetic versus efferent responses to literature. One study (Cox & Many, 1992a) examined an eleven year old's responses to literature and discovered three main characteristics that occurred in her aesthetic responses. This student imaged a story in her mind, extended the story or hypothesized while reading, and related associations and feelings evoked.

A second study (1992b) examined the free responses of thirty-eight grade five children to four novels and five films. Data were collected bi-weekly and students were asked to "write anything [they] want about the book(film) [they] just read(saw)" (p. 43). A classification system was developed to place responses on an efferent to aesthetic continuum for both level of personal understanding reached and stance taken. Results indicated that: (a) children

allowed to respond freely do so aesthetically the majority of the time, and (b) higher levels of understanding are associated with aesthetic responses.

Many and Anderson (1992) compared the effects of grade and stance (efferent or aesthetic) on the intertextual and autobiographical responses of children in grades 4, 6, and 8 for three short stories. These children were asked to respond to one prompt, "Write anything you want about the story you just read" (p. 62) followed by two probing questions, "Think of any other story, movie, or tv show that reminds you of this story. Write the name of that story, film or tv show and tell how it is like the story you just read" and "Think of anything that has happened to you or to someone you know that reminds you of this story. Tell about what happened and how it is like the story you just read" (p. 62). Results indicated that there was no relationship between stance and the types of connections the students made and that students made more connections to television shows than stories or films. The grade of the students "seems to be related to the students' description of the meaningfulness of the connection to the literary work (p. 66) in that the fourth and sixth graders made connections that did not tie into the stories, yet the eighth graders made abstract connections beyond the story events.

All of the above studies examined responses to literature using a variety of formats and response styles.

Many were highly structured into categorization schemes or with the methods the students used to respond. Others developed response categories before the actual analyses of responses began.

There appears to be no research on peer dialogue journals as response to literature with elementary-aged children. I explored this new avenue.

Chapter Three

Methodology

Purpose

The purpose of this study was to examine children's responses to literature using peer dialogue response journals. A peer dialogue was a conversation between two children about their life experiences in response to literature. The peer dialogue journal was where this conversation took place.

Some key questions I planned to ask were: What happens when children respond to literature in peer dialogue response journals? How do children respond to literature? What patterns of response, if any, develop? Do dialogue patterns between different partner groups occur? How do children handle peer dialogue journals at this age? What issues arise?

Research Design

The study took place over a three month period, late January to mid-April, with twenty-five grade two students in an urban school. The school district was small in size with only four grade two classrooms. The classroom was selected for this study as the children had some previous experience with literature and with writing in journals.

Two of these students did not participate in the data collection. One child attended a special education classroom each morning, and the second child was mildly autistic and was unable to respond to the literature in a peer dialogue journal.

I visited the classroom twice a week, for one and a half hours in the morning. As teacher/researcher, I read picture books to the class. After discussion, the students responded to the literature in a peer dialogue journal. At this point they exchanged journals with a predetermined partner and responded to their partner's writing.

The students were grouped by the classroom teacher into dialogue pairs, thus there were eleven pre-selected pairs. The partnerships were chosen partly through ability but also the teacher strove to group children together who would articulate well; that is, the students were assigned carefully to ensure that each pair would encourage literacy growth in each other. The pairs remained together throughout the duration of the study unless a difficulty existed in which case a pair would be reassigned. It was hoped that one of the benefits that might result was the formation of new friendships.

As one of the students in this classroom was unable to participate in the study, there remained an uneven number of students to pair into partnerships. The classroom teacher and I decided that one child would remain partnerless, to be paired with either one of us if the

entire class was present, or with a child whose partner was away ill. This child was selected by the classroom teacher.

The classroom teacher and I modelled possible responses in the first two weeks of the study. However, the ultimate goal was to allow for open-ended responses. The modeling consisted of two stages. Initially, we modelled possible responses on the blackboard to avoid students attempting to retell the story. Second, we modelled how to respond in writing to a dialogue partner.

An important undercurrent in this study was the necessity to build a community of trust among the students, to remove inhibitions and encourage a willingness to reveal life experiences. Vandergrift (1990) cautions that a community like this is:

> one in which all participants are valued, listened to, and respected. Only in a group in which it is safe to take risks, knowing that those risks will be met with respect rather than ridicule, can one make the conceptual leaps that lead to more insightful, sometimes even startling, meanings (p. 128).

The classroom teacher wrote field notes in a dialogue journal kept between the teacher and myself, during the sharing of literature and the writing of responses. Audio recordings of the story reading, discussion and journal writing were initially made. However, it became quite evident that the audio taping was inhibiting a natural flow

of discussion among the students. It was decided to discontinue this method of data collection.

At the completion of the study all of the children were interviewed to gain an understanding of their thoughts and feelings toward peer dialogue response journals.

Peer Dialogue Response Journals

There was one peer dialogue response journal for every child in the classroom. The journal writing took place immediately after the reading and discussion of each picture book. The children were encouraged to write as much as possible for each response. Thus, some children wrote their responses on one page in their journals, others took several pages to respond to each story.

The journals were handed in to me after each session. They were read mainly to help me understand each child better as a writer and as a person. Occasionally, either the classroom teacher or I would respond to the students in their journals to offer support, to write a brief non-evaluative comment, or perhaps to add our own questions or thoughts. The dialogue response journals were examined for emerging themes or patterns that developed from both the initial responses and the dialogue conversations.

Selection of Literature

The literature chosen consisted of picture story books between the grade one and three reading levels. Picture

story books were selected as they often contain colorful illustrations that promote understanding of the accompanying texts. I chose the literature in conjunction with the classroom teacher. Each book was readable in one sitting, and the books were from various genres. After the reading, the books remained in the classroom for the duration of the study for the children to enjoy in their free time.

The Classroom Teacher's Role

The classroom teacher was viewed as a co-expert in the study. She chose the journal partnerships as she was familiar with every child and could best pair the students together. Initially, the teacher and I modelled written journal responses to literature and how to dialogue back and forth. I saw this as a crucial aspect of the study--to help students become comfortable with the methodology.

While the study was in progress, the teacher took fieldnotes. I would be reading the stories and leading the discussions, so I might not have easily noticed things that were happening among the children. The teacher was to act as an observer, writing field notes while the stories were being read and discussed. She was to record anything she noticed, with a focus on how the children were dealing with the task and how they were responding.

I also obtained the teacher's perspective on the study, by informally interviewing her once and

participating together in our own dialogue journal about the research project. The teacher was encouraged to read my field notes, data analysis and research results to ensure validity of the interpretations.

Role of the Researcher

For the purposes of this study I was to become a teacher researcher, defined by Cochran-Smith and Lytle (1990) as "systematic intentional inquiry" (p. 2). As teacher researcher, I would be directly involved with the students, seeking to become a complete participant (Spradley, 1980).

Teacher researchers are seen by Glesne (1991) as practitioners who "engage in inquiry for the purpose of assisting in practical problem solving, enhancing their own competencies, or increasing understanding of a social situation and, thereby, their efficacy" (p. 8). This type of research was chosen as the questions I sought to answer stemmed directly from my teaching practice. As a participant, I would attempt to take on two roles; to be physically present and interactive, yet also be a non-judgmental recorder of the happenings around me.

"This emphasis arises from a conviction that a teacher's own attempts to solve [her] instructional problems through research will have greater influence on [her] teaching than reading the results of research done by someone else" (Wann, 1952, p. 489). Through conscious

observation and fieldnotes, searching for patterns and themes that emerged from all the data collected, I sought to come to new understandings about my everyday teaching practice.

Ethical Considerations

There was no risk to the study participants. Students and parents of the students were asked to sign a consent form. This letter advised of the nature of the study and guaranteed anonymity and the right to withdraw at any time. A copy of the letter is to be found in the Appendix. The participants were advised of the study by the classroom teacher and myself. An explanation of the study was given after which the participants were asked to take the consent form home to be signed by both their parents and themselves. Approval for this study was obtained from the Department of Elementary Education Ethics Review Committee.

Peer Dialogue Journals in Action

After reading the first picture book, Franklin in the Dark, spontaneous discussion took place as the students volunteered their stories. I told a personal memory that the book had reminded me of, and asked the students what the story reminded them of. A few children shared their recollections and then all were given their peer dialogue journals and asked to return to their desks. The children were asked to write any thoughts that had occurred to them

while listening to the picture books. Once again the students were asked to write what the book reminded them of. While the children wrote in their journals, I modelled my previous verbal response on the blackboard and had the classroom teacher write a response to my writing, also on the board.

Once the students had completed writing their comments in the journals we then, as a class, read the comment and response that were modelled on the blackboard. I emphasized that the classroom teacher had responded to my writing, my thoughts. The students then located their partners, through matching numbers on their name tags, exchanged journals and returned to their desks to respond. Once everyone had completed writing the students retrieved their original journals.

After the second day reading, students were advised that more writing was necessary to ensure that their partners would understand the written thoughts.

I am looking for you to tell [your partner] something about your own life that came to your mind when I read this story or when you heard somebody else talking about the story as I was reading it. I'm looking for something that came to your mind when you were listening to the story. Something about your life. Something special about you (Big Al transcript, pg. 4, February 9, 1993).

The students were encouraged to use inventive spelling in their response journals or to ask a neighbor for

spelling help. If it became clear that difficulty with spelling was impeding the child's writing, help was offered on the specific words. Most students wrote willingly; only a few refused to write until spelling help was given.

Initially, partners were encouraged to exchange journals once they had completed their writing, but this caused much movement and commotion around the classroom. It became clear that the exchanges would have to be done 'en masse' so those students who finished early were encouraged to read quietly or complete unfinished class assignments. It was hoped that by doing the exchange 'en masse', the ones who finished quickly might be encouraged to write more in their peer dialogue journals.

If it became clear that a dialogue pair was having difficulty in writing to each other, the classroom teacher or I would either write encouraging or questioning comments directly in the journals, or talk directly with the pair, re-explaining what could be written in the journals.

Chapter Four

The Picture Books

Over the course of the study eighteen picture books were shared with the students. These books were chosen for various reasons. Some of them were my personal favorites that had been shared with other grade two students in previous years. Others were award winners. Two picture books were selected to match classroom themes; one of these books was suggested by the teacher, the other chosen by me. The remainder of the picture books were suggested by a librarian friend who is an avid reader of children's picture books and who remains up-to-date on current published picture books for young children.

Consideration was given to selecting what Roland Barthes (in Thomson, 1987) refers to as "writerly texts". Writerly texts are those which invite multiple readings "more readily than others, deliberately opening themselves to the production of many voices and interpretations. These texts are rich in possibility, for by resisting traditional readings they press the reader [or listener] into the role of creator of meaning" (Obbink, 1992).

Most of the books chosen were familiar to me; many were new to the classroom teacher. The teacher, Pam, was pleased with the choices made and spent time after each

session familiarizing herself with any unfamiliar books before reading the children's responses in the peer dialogue journals.

The books chosen varied in topic, setting and characters. For example, one book was a folk tale (Clever Tom and the Leprechaun), and two were fairy tales (The Balloon Tree, Princess Furball). Some of the books were chosen for their humour (Two Bad Ants, Finster Frets), others for their underlying messages (Chrysanthemum, Amazing Grace).

In the last four sessions, the students were given their choice as to which book I would read. I had previously selected four picture books that I presented to the group with a brief explanation of each. The children were asked to vote for their choice and the book that received the most votes was the one read to the class. Voting allowed the children some ownership or control over the choices made and they enjoyed voting for the one they wanted to hear.

After an interview with the classroom teacher late in the study, it was decided that a non-fiction picture book would be selected and read in the same manner and the children would be asked to respond in their journals as usual. This particular class uses a number of non-fiction books for projects and themes in the various subject areas. However, we wanted to see if the children would respond in their peer dialogue journals in a different manner. The

children were given their choice of four non-fiction books, and they selected How is a Crayon Made? (1988).

Much time and care was devoted to choosing the first picture book to be read to the children. It was important that this book be easy to relate to, so that the children would not experience difficulty when writing in their peer dialogue journals. Keeping these considerations in mind, we decided that Franklin in the Dark would be a good starting point. Franklin in the Dark deals with fears that young animals have, particularly the fear of the dark. The main character, Franklin, is a loveable tortoise, and the text is easy for the children to understand and relate to. It was due to the text, the embedded message and the illustrations that this book was chosen to begin the study.

The picture books were the beginning foci for each session in the study, and the children's responses were based on memories triggered by the plot of each book. A brief synopsis of each picture book is provided below, in order to help the reader make connections between the picture books and the responses in the peer dialogue journals that are quoted in this study.

1. Franklin in the Dark (1986) - by Paulette Bourgeois

Franklin is a young tortoise who has a fear of the dark. This is especially problematic for Franklin as he is unable to sleep inside his own shell. He sets out on a journey and discovers that all the animals he meets have

their own fears but have overcome them in some way. Franklin eventually solves his problem by sleeping in his shell with the aid of a night light.

2. I Want a Dog (1987) - by Dayal Kaur Khalsa

This picture book deals with a young girl's desire to own a dog. Unfortunately, her parents feel she is too young, so the girl begins a campaign to convince her parents that she is capable of caring for a dog by using her roller-skate as a replacement for a dog.

3. Song and Dance Man (1988) - by Karen Ackerman

Three young children visit their grandparents house. Grandpa used to perform on the vaudeville stage and when Grandma is cooking supper, he takes his grandchildren up to the attic and performs a song and dance routine from the old days.

4. The Mitten (1989) - by Jan Brett

This Russian folktale is about a young boy who is given a present of mittens made by his grandmother. She cautions him not to lose them as he leaves for a walk in the forest. One of the mittens is lost and many forest animals find refuge in it together. Eventually a tiny mouse sneezes, ejecting all the forest animals. The boy, unaware of all these events, retrieves his mitten, and when he

returns home, his grandmother is puzzled by the mitten's stretched shape.

5. Big Al (1988) - by Yoshi

Big Al is a large, ugly, lonely fish who tries to befriend other fish in the sea. He is rejected by the fish for many reasons but becomes their hero when he saves a school of fish who have become caught in a fisherman's net.

6. Roxaboxen (1992) - by Alice McLerran

Roxaboxen is a play area just outside of a desert town. Over the years many children have developed this area into their own little play town. The story focuses on one generation of youngsters who, at the end of the story, are grown-ups who reminisce about their childhood adventures in Roxaboxen.

7. Rosie and the Rustlers (1992) - by Roy Gerrard

This picture book is a western adventure that takes place in the early part of this century. Rosie is a ranch owner and she and her farm hands set out on a journey to capture the cattle rustlers who have stolen Rosie's cattle. The entire story is written in ballad form and demonstrates a friendship between the cowboys and the neighboring Indians.

8. Amazing Grace (1991) - by Mary Hoffman

Grace is a young black child who aspires to be the lead in her class play of Peter Pan. She begins to doubt her abilities when teased by her classmates until her grandmother takes her to see the ballet "Romeo and Juliet". The lead of that ballet is a black woman and Grace realizes that she can be or do anything that she sets her mind to.

9. Chrysanthemum (1991) - by Kevin Henkes

Chrysanthemum is a young mouse who longs for the day she can go to school. When she finally arrives, her classmates make fun of her name. This problem is finally solved when Chrysanthemum's teacher reveals that her own name is Delphinium. Delphinium is pregnant and declares that if her child is female she will name her after Chrysanthemum. She does.

10. The Mountains of Tibet (1987) - by Mordicai Gerstein

This picture book follows the life of a young boy growing up who always dreams of travelling to far away places. When he dies as an old man, he is given choices for a future life. As he makes his choices, the reader realizes that he is choosing a life exactly like the one he just lived, with one exception - this time he chooses to be a girl.

11. Clever Tom and the Leprechaun (1988) - by Linda Shute

This Irish Folktale is about a man who captures a leprechaun and forces him to show where he has buried his treasure. The leprechaun takes Tom to a field of boliuns, plants sometimes called ragweed, and marks the one under which the gold lies. Tom returns home to get his spade and when he returns to the boliun field *all* the boliuns are marked. Tom digs for many days and nights but to no avail. From that day forth, Tom always carries his shovel with him in case he finds that leprechaun once more.

12. Miss Rumphius (1982) - by Barbara Cooney

As a young girl, Miss Rumphius lived with her grandfather by the sea. When he died, Miss Rumphius set out to fulfill three dreams: to visit faraway places, to live by the sea when she was old, and to make the world more beautiful. The story follows Miss Rumphius on her journeys and the achievement of her final dream - planting lupines all over the countryside.

13. Two Bad Ants (1988) - by Chris Van Allsburg

This story follows the adventures of two ants who, on a trip into a house to collect sugar, decide to remain behind and explore the kitchen. They have many adventures, and when their fellow ants return the next day, the two bad ants are grateful to be able to return to their own home once more.

14. Finster Frets (1992) - by Kent Baker

Finster is an old man who, upon waking one morning, discovers that a bird's nest has grown in his hair. He and his wife make several amusing attempts to dislodge the nest, but with no luck. They finally dislodge the nest when Finster sneezes several times and frightens the birds away. The next morning, however, Finster discovers three eggs at the foot of his bed, not knowing that these eggs will hatch into baby dinosaurs.

15. Princess Furball (1989) - by Charlotte Huck

This fairy tale tells the story of a young girl who flees her father's castle to avoid marrying the ogre her father has chosen for her. She ends up as a Cook's helper in the kitchen of another castle and, through a little cunning and a great soup recipe, marries the King and lives happily ever after.

16. Jenny Greenteeth (1984) - by Mary Alice Downie

Jenny is an ugly water witch who is very sad because she has no friends. She begins to torment all the children who come to the beach to swim, causing the town Mayor to offer a reward for the capture of Jenny. To the amazement of everyone, one young boy solves the town's problem by showing Jenny Greenteeth how to use a toothbrush and

toothpaste. The story ends with Jenny offering free swimming lessons to all the children in the town.

17. How is a Crayon Made? (1988) - by Oz Charles

This non-fiction book takes the reader through the process of Crayola crayon making, from the melting of paraffin wax to the shipping warehouse where the boxed crayons are sent to stores to be sold.

18. The Balloon Tree (1984) - by Phoebe Gilman

Young Princess Leora is left in the evil hands of her uncle, the Archduke, when her father, the King, has to travel abroad. The King and Leora decide that if ever Leora is in trouble she is to send balloons up in the air to signal her father she needs help. The evil Archduke destroys all the balloons in the land and imprisons Leora in her room. Leora slips out through a passageway, finds one remaining balloon which, with a little magic, she plants. A balloon tree grows, releasing its balloons and signalling the King to return. The evil Archduke and his men are punished in the dungeon by having to blow up hundreds of balloons for a celebration party.

Discussion

A great deal of time and care was spent on choosing the picture books to be read to the class. Many books were read and discarded before the final selection was made. It

was difficult to select the books as I was unfamiliar with the class and did not know anything about the children. The books, therefore, were chosen based on what I thought the children would enjoy, books I had read previously to grade two students and knew were positively received, and books that had a message that I thought grade two students might relate to.

These children related to the chosen books differently than I had predicted. Interestingly, the books that I thought would be received with the most enthusiasm, were not. It became evident during the initial stages of the study that the children's reactions to the chosen books were unexpected.

Two picture books were received with reactions of disappointment by the students. I Want a Dog, the second book in the study, was poorly received because they found the plot to be unrealistic and inane. Jenny Greenteeth, a book chosen by a vote of the students, was poorly received because the illustrations were in black and white. The children felt misled as the front cover was in colour. Several children commented on this disappointment after the book was read. However, none of the students had difficulty in responding to either of these picture books in their peer dialogue journals.

Finster Frets was another book that deserves mention, as the children were very restless during the reading of it. The vocabulary of this book is quite demanding and the

plot would be difficult to follow if the vocabulary was not understood. However, the illustrations are quite lively and the story has a surprise ending so the children were able to respond without difficulty. Some of the restlessness may have been due to the fact that the school had held a pancake breakfast early the same morning and during that particular period the school had invited parents in to visit the classrooms for an Education Week Open House.

As a culminating activity on the final day of the study, the children were asked to participate in a graphing exercise. They were each given three slips of paper and asked to print their names on these slips. A bar graph that contained all the names of the picture books read was tacked to the blackboard. The children were asked to select their top three favorite stories read during the study. As each book's title was called out the children, who chose that book as one of their favorites, came up and pasted their slip on a corresponding box above the title of the book. To help the children remember the books, as each title was called out the book was held up so all could see the book's cover picture.

The results of this graph demonstrated three strong favorite picture books. Finster Frets was the most popular book read to the students, with twelve students voting for it. Second was Chrysanthemum, receiving ten votes. And third, with eight votes, was Two Bad Ants. The remainder of the books received four or less votes. How is a Crayon

Made? and The Mountains of Tibet each received one vote, and two books, The Mitten and Clever Tom and the Leprechaun received no votes.

This graph expressed student choices that were different from what I had predicted. Finster Frets, as mentioned previously, was thought to be poorly received as the children were very restless during its reading. The Mountains of Tibet provoked very deep connections and responses in the peer dialogue journals yet only received one vote. Clever Tom and the Leprechaun was read during the week of St. Patrick's Day which was a very exciting time for the students; yet it received no votes.

Perhaps this graph supports the notion that each person responds in an individual manner to literature; that we as readers connect in unpredictable ways to literature based on our life experiences. I suggest that this graph supports the practice of incorporating individual reading programs in teaching language arts. One story, as found in a basal reader with its accompanying exercises, may not promote life connections for all readers and thus may not become a meaningful learning experience.

Chapter Five

Presentation of the Data

The data for this study were collected in four main areas: the children's peer dialogue journals, student interviews, an interview with the classroom teacher, and a teacher dialogue journal kept between the classroom teacher and myself. The data will be presented in this order, each followed by a discussion of the issues and themes that arose from the data.

(A) Peer Dialogue Journals

All of the students enjoyed listening to the stories and readily discussed the text as I read. After each picture book was read, discussion was encouraged in order to help the children frame their reflections before writing. However, as the study progressed, the children became more reluctant to discuss, and more eager to return immediately to their desks to begin writing.

Most of the children in this study experienced initial difficulties responding in their peer dialogue journals. However, only one child paraphrased the modelled statement on the blackboard the first day. The rest of the children independently wrote their reflections in their journals. The children seemed to need reassurance, spelling help, and encouragement to put their thoughts into writing. The group

was reminded regularly to write in their journals about what the book reminded them of.

For the first few sessions, the students were requested to write as much as possible, as the more they had written, the easier it would be for their partner to respond. Many students depended upon the modelled reflections written on the board. This became evident in the patterned beginnings in many peer dialogue journals. Initially, many statements began with "This book reminds me of...", which was how the modelled reflection began. It was only later in the study, as the students became comfortable with responding, that this patterned beginning began to disappear from the journals. Also, the children who did not have difficulty responding to the picture books were the ones who tended to discontinue use of this patterned beginning.

Three children consistently had difficulty in responding both in their own journals and to their partner. Two of these three depended on help from the classroom teacher or myself. They needed to discuss possibilities for response before choosing what they would write. The third child experienced difficulty in responding due to difficulties in spelling and in keeping his attention focussed on his work. This child received constant spelling assistance and prompts. However, when the writing emerged it was of good quality and strongly reflected his personality.

One student did not have a consistent partner, as the class number was unequal. He was therefore partnered with children whose partners were absent, and in the event that all students were present, he was partnered with either the classroom teacher or myself. He did not appear to develop the same sense of commitment to the peer dialogue journal that the rest of the students did. A few times his response in his journal, when partnered with another child would be, "This book reminds me of nothing." However, when partnered with an adult, he would spend a great deal of time and effort in his response. I was concerned about this child and thought it might be better to permanently partner him with either the teacher or myself as he seemed much more eager to respond to us. However, part of the teacher's focus with this student was to encourage him to value other students instead of desiring adult company; thus, it was decided to leave him to be partnered as previously mentioned.

Examination of the children's peer dialogue journals revealed several patterns or themes. Some of these themes were common to most of the dialogue partnerships; secondary themes were common only to a few of the peer dialogue journals. Some children pursued the same theme throughout their journal responses and others used a variety of ways to respond, as they reflected on their partner's initial journal entry.

The following themes were prominent throughout most peer dialogue journals: (a) agreeing with the initial comment made; (b) questioning for more information; (c) reflecting on the initial comment; (d) making a different comment on the same topic; (e) providing information; (f) agreeing with the initial comment but adding more information; and (g) commenting on the initial statement. A brief explanation of each theme is provided below with examples to support the explanations. Examples were selected directly from the peer dialogue journals. Inventive spelling and punctuation are presented in their unedited form; however, standard English transcriptions are provided for selections that may be difficult to read.

(a) Agreeing with the initial comment made: Often the second partner would simply agree with what the first partner had written, without adding much other information. This type of response was labelled as such if the response repeated part of the initial comment and included the word 'too'.

Partner one: That book remind of dogs I like dogs
Partner two: I like dogs to

Partner one: Thes book remins me about beeing shy when I sing.
Partner two: Im shy when I sing to!

Partner one: The story reminds me of when I think about when I want to see the other wrolds.

Partner two: I wish that I could go to diffrent worlds too like you.

(b) Questioning for more information: Many times the second partners had their curiosity piqued by the comment made by the first partner. Their natural reaction would be to ask their partner for more information. Often questions were asked when the first partner's comments were quite brief, thus not providing enough information to help the second partner generate a response.

Partner one: This story reminds me of when I make krafts.

Partner two: Why does it remind you of when you make krafts?

Partner one: My famaley cot a hedghog and wen me and my sister go outside he curls up.

Partner two: Wae bas he curlsrl up to kep wrm? (Why does he curl up, to keep warm?)

Partner one: This story reminds me about my dog at home.

Partner two: Does he bite.

(c) Reflecting on the initial comment: Partner one's initial entry sometimes caused partner two to pause and reflect on the comment, prompting partner two to write down his/her thoughts about the initial comment. Often this reflection would begin with 'I wish' or 'I bet' or "I think".

Partner one: I wish I had a dog but we have cats insted.

Partner two: I wish I had fish but don't have no pets.

Partner one: That story reme me of when I have millens of ballons. but I shede them with my siter and my bruther. I had a great time plaing with them. (That story reminds me of when I have millions of balloons. But I shared them with my sister and my brother)

Partner two: I bet that was fun.

Partner one: This book remindes me when I see bird nests and some have eggs in them. One day a bird floow in my dad's truck and I got to tuch the bird.

Partner two: Bird's are wered when they wot to be! (Birds are weird when they want to be!)

(d) Making a different comment on the same topic: The second partners would often have a memory triggered about the same topic that the first partner had written about. They would respond with their own memories regarding this topic. This theme was the one that was most commonly found in the journal responses.

Partner one: The story remindid me of when I was at my Gamas and we say a brokin rodine egg. rodines egg are blue. We hid the egg under the deke evre time we go there we go under the deke and see the egg.

Partner two: We have eggs. When we go to go feed the cikins sumtimes thare are haf a dusint and sumtimes thare cen be 33. (When we go to feed the chickens sometimes there are half a dozen and sometimes there can be 33)

Partner one: The stoy it remind me about winde nihts. (The story reminds me about windy nights)

Partner two: Wind isent scary to me but it howls from outside.

Partner one: I remeber when my Dad tot me how cast a rod.

Partner two: I rememder wen I went feishing and I woues bambou. (I remember when I went fishing and I used bamboo)

(e) Providing information: Providing information is another theme that emerged from the peer dialogue journals. The second partner would read the initial comment and then inform his/her partner about something related to the comment. This theme is related to the one directly above, but these comments made were much shorter and more direct in nature, almost as if educating the first partner on the facts presented.

Partner one: This story reminds me of when I planted a seed. I planted the see right beside my house. It was a flower seed.

Partner two: I live in (name of town). We don't plant seeds.

Partner one: I have 24 crayons but my brother breaks them. We go back to the mall and my brother breaks them again. So I breaks his.

Partner two: I don't break my brothers because I don't have a little brother.

Partner one: The frish pisher remins me of when my Grandma die and my Uncle Dale die. (The first picture reminds me of when my Grandma died and my Uncle Dale died)

Partner two: Non of my uncles or Grandmas died.

Secondary themes that emerged include: (a) problem solving; (b) encouraging or reassuring; (c) restating the partner's initial comment; (d) answering questions asked in the initial entry; (e) empathizing with the initial partner's comments; (f) repeating the initial entry made from one's own journal; and (g) responding to the unstated. These themes occurred in at least three different peer dialogue journals.

(a) **Problem solving** arose when the first partner would write about a problem and the second partner would offer a suggestion for a solution. Often the suggestion came from the second partner's own experience with a similar situation.

Partner one: She is like me in the mornings cus my hair is messy always in the morning and I like this story becaue of my hair in the mornings.

Partner two: In the morning my hair is mosy but I allwes bersh my hair. (In the morning my

hair is messy but I always brush my hair)

Partner one: This book rmems me about the time I was wred about ever thing like the Dark, my closit, and a flash liet! (This book reminds me about the time I was worried about everything like the dark, my closet, and a flashlight!)

Partner two: When it is Dark and my closit door is open I am afade so I turn on my light and shut my closit door.

Partner one: I got a liter from a leqracor bat The rasckel did not gev me eney gowl. (I got a letter from a leprechaun but the rascal did not give me any jewels)

Partner two: You coud get some gowels latter. (You could get some jewels later)

(b) Some of the students wrote about fears, disappointments or dreams for the future. Their partners responded with **reassurance or encouragement.**

Partner one: The store remime me fo the drck and monstres. (The story reminds me of the dark and monters)

Partner two: dont be afraed of monstres.

Partner one: my famliy wants a dog but my dad dosenot only if we live on a farm.

Partner two: your dad is elergic to dogs and fur. I hope your dad finds some animals that you can keep.

Partner one: that story reamind me abaut my Basmat be cos I am afrad of the dark in the basmat.

Partner two: lets not be afrad fo the dark.

(c) Occasionally the second partner would simply **restate what the first partner had written**. Perhaps this happened when the second partner could not think of how to respond or might have been agreeing with the initial comment but didn't add further information.

Partner one: That store reme of when I feal lick rung away. (That story reminds me of when I feel like running away)

Partner two: Sometimes I feel like running alway from home.

Partner one: I have herd that story Befor and I injoyed It I would like to read It It over and over again.

Partner two: I would k to read I over and oev. (I would like to read it over [and over])

Partner one: This Reemiens me of my citing he is braev braever then me end my brother he is 11 yers old am 8 yers old. (This reminds me of my kitten. He is brave, braver than me and my brother. He is 11 years old. [I] am 8 years old)

Partner two: Your kittin is very drave.

(d) A conversational tone arose from some of the journals. The children often wrote as if they were talking directly to their partner. When this occurred, the first partner sometimes asked the second partner **a question** that came to mind while they were writing. The response from the second partner was, naturally, to answer the question. Sometimes additional information was written, sometimes not.

Partner one: This book reminds me of birds, and the Never ending story. Haver you heard The Never ending story? I haven't.

Partner two: I have heared of the never ending story. The story reminds me of a blue jay. What bird does it remind you of?

Partner one: I hav the song and dance man book. Do you yes no?

Partner two: I do not have it but I want it.

Partner one: That was a funny story baby dinsros wow! I woude what the dinsros will do? Some old people have corns. like the song and danse man. (That was a funny story. Baby dinosaurs, wow! I wonder what the dinosaurs will do?)

Partner two: Wow! Thats cool Probely the binosors are going to macke mityif and trampil on evrything. (Probably the dinosaurs are going to make mischief and trample on everything)

(e) The stories read to the class sometimes reminded them of fears or concerns that they had to deal with. Responses from the partners would be **empathetic to the initial comments made.**

Partner one: I had a dog but he diet from a dsyes me and my Mom wr crying. (I had a dog but

he died from a disease. Me and my Mom were crying)

Partner two: I so sared for you. (I'm so sad for you)

Partner one: This book reminds of my sister who is elergic to fur but she isn't elergic to pets outside.

Partner two: Im sorry that your sister is elergic. I have a pet to it a outside one it is a bunny.

Partner one: I usto have a dog named Rocky. But he ran away. Do you have a dog?

Partner two: Yes I do I bet you wher sad when he ran away.

(f) Sometimes it would appear that the second partner would not know how to respond to his/her partner's comments as the response was totally different from the topic partner one had written about. After careful examination, it was revealed that partner two was **rewriting the comment** they had made in their own peer dialogue journal before the exchange was made. The children may have re-written their own responses because they did not know how to respond to the initial comment, or because they were still focussed on their own initial comment. One child, in particular, made

this type of response consistently, as though disregarding what her partner had written each time.

Partner one: my fevrit prte was when the man was [illegible] a bath What was yours!

Partner two [illegible] ds me of rose's are red.

Partner one: [illegible] story reminds me of when I say peopl make balluwns I wact them doing it on tv I cant rmemd who to make a ballowns. (The story reminds me of when I saw people make balloons. I watched them doing it on TV. I can't remember how to make balloons)

Partner two: I when too the mall and I seen lots of crayons I whont too by sum But we did not have a nuf muny so I tolde my Dad if he had sum muny and he had a nuf muny for sum crayons so we bot two fo the crayons and my Dad Did not have a nuf too shop so we whent too the Bace then we whent too eat the afer that whent too Edmutin and then we whent too Whest Edmetin Mall. (I went to the mall and I saw lots of crayons. I wanted to buy some but we did not have enough money so I told my Dad if he had some money and

he had enough money for some crayons so we bought two of the crayons and my Dad did not have enough to shop so we went to the bank. Then we went to eat. Then after that [we] went to Edmonton and then we went to West Edmonton Mall)

Partner one: That story remiins me about me because sometimes I feel down on my sef.

Partner two: That story remiins me of when I when I whet fishing with my dad and Tommy we cot a ran bow fish. (That story reminds me of when I went fishing with my dad and Tommy. We caught a rainbow fish)

(g) A final secondary theme that arose was also puzzling to discern initially. After much reading and rereading it was later discovered that the second partner was **responding to an unstated message**, one that was embedded in the writing of the initial comment.

Partner one: Thes book remies me about my tree hauue theat is cut dawn! (This book reminds me about my tree house that is cut down!)

Partner two: I like the snow hill by the rode it's fun to play on!

Partner one: This book rerindes me ove my Grandma cos she wonts to have a dog and I want a dog and My cosin.

Partner two: I like dogs to.

Partner one: we had a bog it was fun it wus black and waet and we seld hen to a form and a boy was deriving a truck and he ran over ar bog. (We had a dog. It was fun. It was black and white and we sold him to a farm and a boy was driving a truck and he ran over our dog)

Partner two: when I got the ducks they were chicks. I bot two ducks. One of the eaten. we bot three more ducks. in novmber all my ducks got eaten.

Discussion

Examination of the data reveals several key issues. First and foremost, the data demonstrates that young children are capable of writing in peer dialogue journals. They are capable of responding to a picture book, reflecting on their lives and generating a written comment to that effect. Furthermore, young children are capable of responding to a partner's reflections.

Young children respond to picture books in a variety of ways. They agree, they question, they reflect, they

inform, they extend, and they comment. It appears that young children respond from the heart, based upon what they read and listen to. Very rarely did each child in this study respond in an identical fashion to all eighteen picture books. The response clearly depended upon the text in the story and the embedded meaning in the text. Partner two's response most often resulted from the comment which partner one had written.

Some very philosophical comments arose, revealing a deep level of thinking in these young children. Many insights were disclosed and reflected upon. Behind these comments lay a sense of trust in partner two and a willingness to be open and honest about one's life experiences.

One partnership, in particular, seemed to function at a higher level than the rest. These partners, one boy and one girl, created a deep dialogue over the course of the study. Their comments were unique and thought provoking. Many times the comments would be reflective in nature, as though one partner would stop and really think about what the other had written. The resulting reflections, although short, would demonstrate an effort to take partner one beyond the initial comment written. This was done by presenting information that responded to the *unstated* message in the initial comment. Over the course of the study these two children seemed to develop a sense of

respect for each other and were very supportive of each other in the comments they made to me during our interview.

One other partnership was just beginning to relate very well when the study ended. This pair, also a boy and a girl, were very reticent at the beginning of the study to reflect and write in their journals, even though they clearly enjoyed exchanging with each other. About half way through the study the young girl had written a comment that seemed to trigger the young boy into realizing that what he wrote mattered to his partner. From that point on, his comments were more thought provoking and his voice became stronger and more assured. Also, both children seemed more eager to write in their journals once this realization was made.

What remains a mystery is exactly what the partners learned from each other, and if this study has affected or changed the students in any way. The children were extremely disappointed when the study ended and several were concerned that they had to relinquish their journals. On the final day of the study one of the partners did not respond in the expected manner. Instead, he wrote: "Too bad this is the last time we will be writeing to each other". The students had not experienced peer dialogue journals before, but the enthusiasm and willingness to share their lives with their partners clearly made this study an unforgettable experience.

(B) Student Interviews

After completion of the study, each participant, except for one who was on holidays, was briefly interviewed individually. The children were asked the following questions:

1. Was writing in your dialogue journal easy or hard for you?

2. How did you decide what you were going to write in your dialogue journal each day?

3. Who was your partner?

4. What kinds of things did you learn about (name of partner) when you were writing back and forth?

5. Did you think that (name of partner) was a good partner for you? Why or why not?

6. Did you enjoy writing in your dialogue journal? What did you like/not like about it?

7. Do you use other journals in the classroom? If yes, how are they different from dialogue journals?

1. The students were divided as to whether writing in their peer dialogue journals was easy or difficult for them. Interestingly, none of the students discussed responding to their partner as the difficult part. Six students responded that it was difficult to think of how to respond to the book. One student stated that writing in her journal was a little hard "because you have to really think and, and, you don't know, um, what you know or what you're

going to write" (Silvana). Other reasons for difficulty were spelling words and unfamiliarity with the books that were read. The student who gave the latter reason felt that he had an easier time relating to a book if he had heard it before.

Ten of the students interviewed found writing in their journals easy. Most cited the reason that the books reminded them of memories or ideas. "Books give you lots of ideas to write" (Maureen). Other children stated that it was because they enjoyed writing.

Six students responded to this question with the answer 'both'. One student found responding difficult in the beginning but towards the end of the study was finding it easier. Other students stated that it depended upon the story that was read. "Sometimes hard, because the story didn't tell you too much" (Joey). "Sometimes the books were too complicated" (Jessie).

2. In response to the second interview question, asking students how they decided what to write in their journals each day, most of the students responded in a similar fashion. "I'd think of everything that I did and all of us done and every story that I hear [and] it reminds me of everything" (Tom). Other children stated that they thought back to the story that was read and that the words would remind them of something. "I'd start to think about the story and then think about what I did that relates to that" (Jessie). Yet others would think as the book was

being read. "While you read the story, I was thinking of something to write" (Shawn).

4. Most of the students had difficulty in articulating what they had learned from their partner, responding "I don't know". A few commented on the mechanics of the writing. "He's a good writer. He prints well" (Sam). Others commented on actual events they could recall. "I learned that she skips rocks at the lake and that she likes fairy tales and people sometimes call her names" (Silvana). Some children commented generally about their partner. "She doesn't really know what to write sometimes" (Sherry). "He liked all sorts of stuff" (Joey). "She has a lot of different interests" (Dariel).

5. All of the children believed that their assigned partner was a good one for them. They gave a variety of reasons why. "Because he always waits for me and I take long" (Tom). "She wrote a lot" (Ariel). "She asked questions I can answer and I enjoyed reading them" (Sophie). "He wrote long lines and he wrote nice things back to me" (Devon).

6. Similarly, all of the students themselves enjoyed writing in their peer dialogue journals. When asked what they liked about the dialogue journals, most commented positively on the stories that were read. "We get to hear lots of books" (Sam). Other children referred back to their joy in writing. "Sometimes I had lots to write about and got really excited about something" (Angie). Two students

viewed the journal writing as a positive learning experience. "Because it is a good skill for learning" (Jessie). "It helps me to write even more and helps me to think even more" (Dariel).

7. There were a variety of answers in response to the last question. A few children could not recall whether they used other journals; three children said they did not. The rest, however, discussed one other form of journalling used for classroom exercises, such as cloze sentences, sharing weekend adventures, person of the week, and math. When asked what the differences were, several thoughts came forth. "You have to sign your name and you have to get ideas from books" (John). "You're free to write whatever you want as long as it's kinda like the book" (Jeffrey).

Discussion

Writing in the peer dialogue journals was a unique experience for these children; an experience they found challenging but ultimately rewarding. There were many positive aspects the students were able to pinpoint, with comments ranging from enjoying the books read, to learning about their partner, to preparation for future learning.

Most of the children found writing in their journals difficult in the beginning, perhaps because of the different purpose for the writing. Several times the classroom teacher and I would have to remind the children they were to write about what the story reminded them of in

their own lives. It is of concern to me that the children found it difficult to write in this personal manner, in making connections between the school environment and the home environment.

All of the children were able to articulate how they developed a response to the literature, although they seemed to go about it in three different ways. They thought as the story was being read, they thought about the story after they had returned to their desks, or they thought about their own lives and events that had happened to them that could relate to the story.

All the children felt their partners were 'good' ones for them, citing that a good partner is one who writes a lot of information and is sensitive to the reflections made. Difficulties arose when the first partner did not write enough information to allow the second partner to respond. By the end of the study most children solved this problem by returning the journal to their partner, requesting more information be written before they responded.

It was difficult to ascertain just what these students learned about their partner over the course of the study. The question seemed to surprise most of the children into silence, as though they had not given this much thought. They may have been unsure about what the question asked, they may have had difficulty remembering the written dialogues, or they may have not known how to respond. A few

students answered about their partner's writing ability; others responded citing specific instances from the journals. There were very few generalized comments made, but all were framed in a positive manner.

It is interesting to note that none of the children interviewed commented on the experience of responding in their partner's journal, other than whether their partner wrote a lot or not. All of the children kept the focus on their own journals and their feelings towards them. It might have been interesting to have asked the students a specific question regarding this response aspect. However, these students found the peer dialogue journals to be a rich and rewarding experience. As one child stated, "You can write and you can think all you would like."

(C) Interview with the Classroom Teacher

The classroom teacher, Pam, was interviewed in a single session near the completion of the study. The interview was informal and fairly unstructured in nature. The session was tape recorded and transcribed shortly after. The teacher received a copy of the transcription. Her input was invited on the actual interview and she was encouraged to write further comments and clarification if she desired.

The interview focussed on four areas that I wanted to explore with Pam. Questions that came to mind as the interview progressed were freely asked. Much discussion in

the interview focussed on the actual partnerships among the children and general concern for individual students.

The first area dealt with the criteria Pam kept in mind as she chose the dialogue partnerships. A great deal of thought went into choosing these partnerships. The teacher assigned each partnership based on what she expected the students' verbal and written abilities to be, thus creating homogeneous groupings. She also assigned pairs of top general ability, but who she felt were of low writing ability, together, in hope that they would spark each other into producing higher quality writing. Pam found most of the children easy to assign together with the exception of two or three. The dialogue journal writing meant a long term relationship between the students and Pam feared that some children would be concerned with the partnership rather than with the journals. She also tended to avoid already existing friendships and assigned strong children, with ones whom she felt needed the benefit of that strength.

The students readily accepted each other into the partnerships on the first day of the study. The teacher felt that the students may have thought that there wasn't any other option available to them; they accepted their partners because they were assigned. She also mentioned that the development of classroom community had been worked on consistently over time, which may have aided this acceptance.

The second area explored in the interview was the teacher's thoughts on the study as a whole. Pam felt that the study was very successful and wished to continue with peer dialogue journals in the next school year. The class has a story-sharing time each morning and the teacher could see where the peer dialogue journals would fit in.

A critical observation from Pam was that she saw that the response to the literature

> wasn't belonging to the story any more. It was belonging to them. And I like the way it dug out of each of them their experiences or their thoughts or their hopes or some aspect of their inner being.

Pam feels that as adults we don't often pause to identify with a story, and more often we don't state our reflections. She thought it was good for the students to bring their thoughts into written form, and that these thoughts tended to be from the children's experiences rather than thoughts about the story in general.

The teacher stated that her students responded well once they knew what to do. She felt that initial confusion may have arisen through the children mistaking the journals with a book report approach, as they are used to the latter type of assignment. Modelling was provided initially, which the teacher felt was necessary, to provide children with an expectation or to confirm what was expected in the peer dialogue journals. Once the study was underway, however,

she felt the children became very comfortable with writing in their journals.

Pam commented that one benefit of the study was that she learned a lot more about her students through the response journals. When asked how, she responded "because they give inner thoughts of themselves or of their experiences. So it gives me another dimension to see them." A second aspect the teacher noticed was that the children's personalities surfaced through the writing.

One consideration that was explored initially in the study was the idea of changing the partnerships half way through, so each child would be assigned a new partner. When asked about this, Pam stated that she felt changing the partnerships would have been difficult for the students.

> "I think it would have been harder for them. I think they got very secure in the person they were writing to. And as long as it was going well, and it seemed to, I think it would have upset things to have switched partners".

A third area that arose in the discussion was the books chosen for the study. The teacher was surprised by a couple of the books chosen, particularly The Mountains of Tibet (1987). Pam felt this book was significant for a few students as the text "drew them out"; that the discussions all dealt with choice. She felt that another book, Finster

Frets (1992), was beyond the students' grasp as they were restless during the reading of the text.

The teacher was asked what she would perceive as a 'good' response, and this formed the fourth and last area of the interview. She struggled with this concept and stated that all the children have experiences they can share and through responding in dialogue journals, the children are provided with "a scope of something that is possible for them every time." Pam did not feel that anything else could have been done to encourage the students to dig deeper while responding.

> "We teach them to write and writing should be meaningful. And yes, they will write in their journals and they will write to me, but, this responding back and forth was immediate response. If I wrote back to them, in their journals, it would be just a quick response and it might be a day or two before they got it back. Whereas this happened right away, and they couldn't wait to hear what their partner was going to say to them."

Some of the interview focussed on the ages and grade level of the students involved in the study. There was some initial doubt and concern on the part of the teacher as to whether grade two students would be able to participate and benefit from the study. She had been advised by a colleague that peer dialogue journals as a response to literature had not been successful with grade four students. However, Pam

commented that it would be better to introduce peer dialogue journals at an earlier age because the children are more willing to open up. She also felt that at this age the response journals are not likely to be discussed outside of the immediate classroom setting, as might happen with older students.

Discussion

Some very important issues surfaced from this interview. The classroom teacher felt that all teachers should be aware that peer dialogue journals do, indeed, work with grade two students. In fact, Pam thought that this may be the ideal age to introduce peer dialogue journals, as the children did not appear to refer to the journal entries made by their partners outside the classroom environment, and at this age may be more accepting of the dialogue partnerships.

The teacher also felt that partnerships should be carefully chosen to ensure success. One way is to assess verbal and written skills, keeping in mind friendships and individual strengths and weaknesses. At the grade two level, Pam felt it might be disruptive to change partnerships, unless there is a problem, as the students develop a comfort level and a feeling of security with the long-term writing relationship. Modelling may help to deepen understanding of expectations for writing in the peer dialogue journals.

An advantage the teacher saw with the peer dialogue journal partnerships is the idea of immediate response. Normally, journal writing between this classroom teacher and the students would mean a time span between the writing and the response. With peer dialogue journals, the response was received immediately, which may be positively reinforcing, as the partners read what each other has had to say without delay.

(D) Teacher Dialogue Journal

Over the course of the study, the classroom teacher and I dialogued in our own peer journal. We wrote often in the initial stages of the study to help overcome or circumvent difficulties. We worked on developing a research relationship by voicing our feelings on issues that arose, and on our hopes for the study. Initially, we passed this journal back and forth separately from the children's peer dialogue journals. However, it became clear that our teacher dialogue journal should remain with the children's journals so comments could be written about issues or thoughts that arose from reading the children's writings.

Approximately 32 entries were made in this journal. An in-depth look at the writings reveal that we wrote about three main areas: the picture books read, the children's peer dialogue journals, and about the students themselves- both individually and in their partnerships. A secondary

area that we wrote about was regarding the methodology for the study.

We wrote about our concerns, we asked questions, we made suggestions, we evaluated the discussions and writing, and we made comments. A problem arose regarding the time that the teacher needed to read, reflect, and respond in our teacher dialogue journal, as she had many other classroom responsibilities. Thus, as a time-saver, Pam would often write her comments in the margins of the journal, writing about specific issues.

(i) Picture Books

The comments that were written about the picture books selected for the study focussed on observations prior to the reading, during the reading and following the reading.

Comments before the reading centered on the storyline and whether the children would be able to follow or understand the themes embedded in the text. "I'm going to try Miss Rumphius on Tuesday. I enjoy it and it has a nice message. Maybe the general storyline will help the children in their dialogue journals".

Other comments about the picture books were simply statements providing reasons for the choice made. "Finster Frets has lovely language in it. This type of story demands rereading to catch every bit of humour. The illustrations are priceless too".

Comments arose from observations that occurred as the books were being read. These comments stemmed from the

children's reactions. "The children seemed to enjoy the story. It's funny - the ones I thought would get the most out of it, were the ones I had to keep settling down".

The final area focussed on comments made after completion of the reading - the reactions of the students and the discussions that arose.

> "I could not believe how extended some of our discussions became. The kids had so much to say about the story. But the final discussion just blew me away. I could not believe that some of them thought it was the same castle and were horrified to think that the princess was going to marry her father! It was interesting that when each side gave their reason for their choice, the reasoning was well-founded for both possibilities, and that at the end, there were still children who thought Princess Furball was still at her own castle."

There was one particular incident that arose regarding the selection of Miss Rumphius (1982). The children had heard this story earlier in the year and were very resistant to the book being read again. Two children especially, complained bitterly that hearing a book for the third or fourth time was boring. This prompted a discussion that books we hear more than once may become more exciting and that sometimes we hear or learn things we missed during earlier readings. At the beginning of the reading of this book, the same two children made jokes and remarks about

the text being discussed. However, they eventually settled down and responded well, as usual, in their dialogue journals.

This issue was discussed in detail in the teacher dialogue journal, as was the question of whether responses are deeper when a book has been heard before. This issue also affected future choices for book selection, as I tried to choose books the children might not have heard before, thus preventing resistance during reading and discussion.

(ii) Peer dialogue journals

Comments written about the peer dialogue journals arose from observations regarding the actual writings and regarding the ease with which the children were able to respond in their journals. There was an overall evaluative nature as to whether the children were coping or were having difficulties. Concerns arose about the time some students spent on writing in their journals. On the other hand, there were concerns that the students needed to write more to clarify their thoughts for their partners. Much was written about the struggle to achieve a balance between these two concerns.

There were general observations on the progression the students were making in their own journal writing. "The students are beginning to make the journal more personal. They need to gain their self-confidence and to risk telling others about themselves, to expose the real person underneath." "There seems to have been a quantum leap in a

lot of the dialogue journals this time. The writing is longer and the response comments extend the reflections further."

Other observations were about the ease with which the students were responding to their partner's journal writing. "They tend to ask a quick question instead of reflecting on the journal thoughts, which is more what I'm after. I found if we talked it through first, they would readily share out loud, but then think they needed to write something totally different in response."

Naturally, many of the comments about the peer dialogue journals were directly related to the book read. One comment the classroom teacher wrote seemed to clarify this connection. "I think the key to success is an elusive one based on the individual. If the child is caught up in the story, he/she writes. But if they are only listening as a passive activity, they do not extend it to themselves. It was just a 'fun thing to do'."

(iii) Students

The majority of the comments written by the classroom teacher and myself were regarding concerns about the students. These concerns encompassed expressive writing abilities and observations on student involvement.

> "Tom relates very well to animals and wrote a great deal today. I was impressed. The only person I have heard negatives from is Randy. Written expression is

very slow and painful to him, and he is sure that he does not like it."

Several of the teacher's writings were confirmations and extensions on observations I had made about her students.

"I agree that Neil would probably respond better to one of us. But part of my focus with him is to get him to be as normal a student as anyone else. He needs to value other students too. Let's try a few things with him."

The teacher wrote that her "main concern through this project is to keep the students progressing" and she monitored the students closely looking for evidence of this progression. "I know that some are struggling but they are not buckling under. Rather than that, they are starting to meet the challenge."

(iv) Methodology

Initial journal discussion revolved around organizational supports such as name tags, response journals, and so on. Tape recording the students was also a main focus, as the students were reluctant to speak aloud when writing, knowing that their conversations would be recorded. Many suggestions were discussed in the journal before it was decided to discontinue tape recording.

The time factor available was another area explored in the journal. The time the children spent

writing was always a primary concern - how to encourage the children to spend more time writing, to read over their writing and to add missing details if necessary. Some comments were written about the time spent on discussion before the children wrote, and we questioned whether more discussion would prompt longer written ideas. Other comments were regarding the time the children should exchange their journals; whether this exchange would be done all at once, or when the partners were both ready.

Preparation for modelling was discussed in the journal - suggestions as to how it should be done and the way the modelling might be written up.

> "I think we should try modeling again on the blackboard. This time you write a comment and I'll respond. A suggestion - make your comment extremely personal so no one can copy it. (e.g. about your home, family, etc.) By modeling, maybe we can help those who struggle with a response."

A new idea arose from the discussion on methodology. It was suggested that the students be encouraged to try a second exchange with their partners if time allowed and the interest was present. This idea was explored and experimented with. At the time the study ended, the classroom teacher and I were discussing the possibility of allowing the children to explore other areas of response before writing in their peer dialogue journals, such as

drama or art. However, this idea was not possible in the course of this study, due to time constraints.

Discussion

It is unfortunate, yet understandable, that more time could not be spent on the teacher dialogue journal. This form of communication was a valuable research resource. Four areas were discussed in this journal - picture books, peer dialogue journals, the students themselves, and the methodology used in the study. Concerns were brought forth and discussed with possible solutions suggested and acted upon. Observations were made and confirmed. Changes and new ideas were created through this discussion. The entire study from start to finish was monitored and improved upon through this informal discussion. What began as two points of view transformed into a research relationship, a discussion that deepened and strengthened the study.

Chapter Six

Conclusions and Thoughts for Further Study

This study examined children's aesthetic responses to literature, to yield a better understanding of how grade two students 'learn to mean' through responding to literature in peer dialogue journals. Louise Rosenblatt's (1985) theory of literary response provided the framework the study in that the students drew on their life experiences to reflect on and respond to literature. These experiences were drawn upon to aid in the synthesis of new ideas, feelings and images gleaned from the texts of the pictures books and each partner's written responses.

Response to literature was also viewed as a social process, as proposed by Vygotsky (1978). By the creation of a social encounter through using peer dialogue journals, this study provided an opportunity for the awakening of the zone of proximal development in each child. One of the questions kept in mind during this study queried whether the students' learning would be extended thorough reading their partner's responses to literature. Although the answer to this question is difficult to ascertain, the students, by reading how another student responded and by reading another student's life experiences were provided an avenue for new learnings to take place.

Peer dialogue journals as a response to literature provide all students with a wide range of possibilities for

response; thus each child has a high probability to experience success. Literature contains the possibility of evoking significant themes or topics that a classroom teacher may not otherwise be aware of. It is through the possibility of responding in peer dialogue journals that the teacher can become aware of this significance.

Literature response is not always expected in written form with young children, but this study indicates it may be beneficial to encourage students to place their thoughts in writing. Teachers will be able to learn about their students in a manner different from regular classroom work, through the reflections and responses written in the journals. Students writing to each other, in an atmosphere of trust and within a sense of community, may reflect on parts of their lives they would not otherwise reflect on. Teachers new to a class of students will quickly learn some interesting information about their students through the reflections written in the peer dialogue journals.

Peer dialogue journals can be a rewarding educational experience, both for the teacher and the students in the classroom. Peer dialogue partnerships will be successful if care is taken in selecting the partners, in using literature that promotes significant responses and by introducing the peer dialogue journals in an environment that is caring and supportive.

At the beginning of this study, there were some concerns as to whether students of this age would be able

to reflect on their own lives as a response to literature. Further to this, would they then be able to respond to a partner's reflections? It is evident that peer dialogue journals **can** be used with young children and many valuable insights arise as students write in a manner that encourages response and reflection. Examination of the data clearly shows that these grade two students are capable of both reflecting on their lives and responding to a partner's reflections, and most do so in a variety of ways.

The students' responses varied according to the picture book read, and according to what the initial partner had written. Seven primary themes and seven secondary themes emerged from the data collected. These students questioned, reflected, informed, extended, commented, problem solved, encouraged, and empathized. These responses were generated from the embedded meanings in the texts of the picture books, and clearly were written carefully and thoughtfully.

Teachers need to be aware that these capabilities may exist in their own students. Peer dialogue journals as a response to literature are a unique experience that creates a deep dialogue between the partnerships. Grade two student partnerships have the possibility to reveal abstract thinking and philosophical reflecting, if the students trust each other and are willing to share their life experiences.

The students in this study initially found responding difficult. This method of response was new to them and the expectations were unusual in that there was no one 'correct' response. Even with the reminder to write what the story reminded them of, a few children still sought the response that I might have been looking for. With gentle questioning and discussion, these children began to realize that, indeed, there was no one correct response. Any response was acceptable as long as it reflected their own life experiences.

The students' efforts on the initial day of the study were haphazard as though they were writing any response possible. Once the journals were exchanged, however, the students realized the uniqueness of responding to a partner. It took the students a few sessions to realize that they needed to connect the embedded meaning in the text to events from their own lives. And as the study progressed, the students responded in a manner that demonstrated that they read and tried to understand and respond to what their partner was saying and feeling.

It is disconcerting to me that at this young age students felt the need to seek out the right response. I feel that we, as teachers, need to help children find connections in school to their lives beyond school, to make learning meaningful in a broader sense by providing relevant connections between these two environments. I

suggest that peer dialogue journals as a response to literature is one avenue that may do so.

Modelling was used initially to provide the students with an expectation for response. The children were also verbally encouraged to write what the picture book reminded them of. A disadvantage to the modelling is that many students then developed a patterned response that they used every session in their journals. This was not the intention in the study, and could be viewed as a restraint to the response. The children were encouraged to write from their life experiences in any manner that they chose yet using a patterned beginning may have limited the avenue that the responses took.

Writing in peer dialogue journals provided the children with the opportunity to take ownership of their writing through writing about their own lives. Along with this idea of ownership, however, comes risk-taking. These students had to make the choice of whether to reveal to their partners their fears, concerns, and questions about past events or experiences. The second partners realized the vulnerability of risk- taking as they themselves had taken their own risks when writing in their dialogue journals. With both partners realizing this and by building trust over time, fear of risk-taking did not appear to be an issue.

However, this might not have been the case had the partnerships changed during the study. Indeed, the one

student who did not have a consistent partner seemed very reluctant to share his thoughts and past experiences. Therefore, it is important that each student have the opportunity to dialogue with a consistent partner in order to encourage ownership and provide a safe environment for risk-taking.

I would suggest that introducing the students to peer dialogue journals also served to help strengthen the sense of community in the classroom. These students were placed in a positive situation that encouraged them to communicate back and forth with each other and this peer-dialogue relationship would only be successful if they made an effort to share their lives with each other. The partnerships were chosen carefully to ensure 'like' abilities and the classroom teacher did not assign children who were close friends together in the same partnership. Hence, the students were placed in a situation where they would learn about and communicate with someone they did not normally choose to associate with, thus further building the sense of classroom community. In this case, the peer dialogue journals created the possibility for the ideal learning situation - the development of a solid classroom community.

A concern that is often discussed among classroom teachers is how to provide students with a purpose and desire for reading and writing. The students in this study were observed to automatically go to each other whenever

they could not read what their partners had written. Discussion after reading the picture books decreased steadily as the children became more eager to begin writing to their partners. The official exchange that took place when everyone was ready was a very busy moment as the children showed a strong desire to read what their partner had written and respond back to them in the peer dialogue journals. Teachers often strive for ways to have their students write for an audience, to purposefully read and write, and to feel positive about their learning. Peer dialogue journals provide an avenue for all this, and more, to occur.

It is interesting that the students' individual interviews did not provide much focus on what it was like to respond in someone else's journal. Perhaps the uniqueness of this type of response along with the young age of the students led the children to concentrate fully on their own journals. Or perhaps they did not perceive their partner's journal to be separate from their own - rather, their partner's journal became an extension of their own journal since they were responding in both. Whatever the case, what is important is that the students were encouraged to respond. They were given an avenue in which to respond and become knowledgeable of the fact that their responses, in whatever form, were *important*. That responding to literature is important. That each one of us responds in a unique manner based on our life experiences

and that we can learn from each other by sharing our thoughts, desires, questions, memories and dreams.

Another area that merits thought is whether children make connections more easily if they have heard the picture book previously. Two children in this study protested vehemently to the reading of Miss Rumphius (1982) and even after discussion as to why rereading a book can be rewarding, these same students made remarks during the first few pages read. This reaction has prompted me to wonder whether children prefer new stories to old ones. It would seem that if students have heard the text before, they might be able to connect with their own lives more easily. However, these children made it clear that they preferred to hear a story that was novel to them. Further research may indicate whether responses are deeper and are more easily generated when the picture book read has been previously heard.

The graphing activity at the culmination of this study supports the notion that each person responds in an individual manner to literature; that we, as readers, connect in unpredictable ways to literature based on our life experiences. I have suggested that this graph and this study show support towards individualized reading programs; that one story, as found in a basal reader with its accompanying exercises, may not promote connections for all readers and thus may not be a meaningful learning experience. By reading a variety of stories to students,

teachers may allow for connections that may otherwise not become available to children.

The question of what is a 'good' response to literature is a difficult one to answer, and is one that the classroom teacher was beginning to explore when her students became involved in this study. She had initially thought that the children in this study were to respond *about* the story, as in situations they liked or as in responding to teacher developed questions about the picture books. When questioned about response later in the study, Pam saw response as being from purely personal experience, and that by responding in peer dialogue journals, her students were provided with an avenue that allowed for a variety of responses. She also stated that not every student was going to relate to every picture book but that all students have life experiences that they could share, thus experiencing success when responding.

This is an area that teachers need to explore and define for themselves. Why should we ask students to respond to literature and if we do, how should our students respond? What *is* response to literature and what constitutes a 'good' response? Perhaps it is as teacher/researchers that answers to these questions can best be sought.

It is through careful exploration of classrooms that teachers learn about their students and their teaching practices. Teachers reflecting on their practices can enter

into new areas, areas that may change the way they teach. And when such changes arise, teaching can become more exciting both for the students and the teachers. It is through teacher/researchers that the greatest influences on teaching practices may occur.

I see response to literature as a series of connections. These connections have one element in common - the child. Response to literature is going beyond the text, making connections with other books, connections with life experiences, and connections with elements in books, such as characters, plots, etc. These connections, however, must be real and individual to each child. They must be personal in order to become meaningful. When personalized responses are encouraged, true learning can take place.

It is also important to have children share their responses with each other, to hear and read other personal responses. Listening to or reading about how others have responded may help to clarify, change, modify, extend or deepen one's own response. Sharing responses in peer dialogue journals places children in a position that encourages them to learn how their partner responds to literature and thus makes possible the affirmation or modification of their own responses.

Peer dialogue journals are only one way to respond to literature. Response could also be explored through art or drama. Towards the end of this study, the children were asked, during one session, if they wanted to experiment by

responding in different ways. Most of the children wished to draw a picture as part of their response. These pictures, however, tended to stem directly from the plot of the picture book. So much time and effort was expended on the pictures, that little effort was put into the corresponding message. The second partners complained that they did not know how to respond to the pictures and so the next session when the open option was given once more, the majority of the partnerships readily returned to the written responses. The second partners had difficulty connecting with the first partner's response in the picture form, showing that this form of response may not have been suitable for use in peer dialogue journals.

When choosing picture books to read to children, teachers need to be aware of 'readerly' and 'writerly' texts. Many texts allow themselves to be open to multiple interpretations, inviting readers and listeners to create their own meanings. These texts would be ideal to read to children responding in peer dialogue journals.

It would be interesting to see if the children's responses to the picture books would have been different, somehow, if the entire class engaged in some form of drama between the time the books were read and the time the responses were recorded in the journals. Some of the picture books read would have lent themselves readily to group drama; others would have been suitable for dramatizations or choral speech. More time would be needed

to engage in drama before responding, but exploring picture book characters and situations through drama may help students identify and more fully understand situations from their own lives.

Finally, this study shows that teachers need to expand opportunities for children's responses to literature. As Cox and Many (1992) summarize:

> Readers and viewers are, without question, integral components in the process of reading and responding. The worlds which students construct as they read are critical to the construction of meaning and understanding, and consequently, the emphasis in curriculum and instruction should be on understanding, supporting, and celebrating the evocations of students. This implies a shift from traditional methods of text-centered approaches to response and meaning-centered approaches (p.67).

Literature-based programs need to be considered. Children need to be given control over the literature used and time allowed to ensure depth of response. For it is only when children are allowed to explore the possible worlds of themselves and others that meaningful learning will occur.

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Appendix

Letter of Consent

Dear Parents:

I am a Meadowview grade two teacher currently on leave as a graduate student at the University of Alberta. I am very interested in the area of Language Arts and wish to do some research about children responding to picture books. I have approached Mrs. Ibsen and obtained consent from herself, Mr. Harris, and the Meadowview School Board to conduct my research in Mrs. Ibsen's classroom.

The research will be a normal part of the classroom studies in Language Arts. All of the students will be involved in listening to a story which I will read to the children. The children will discuss the story and then write about it in a journal. The students will exchange their journals with a partner, who will then respond to the writing in this journal.

I have already talked to the children about this project when I visited the school but I will need your written permission to tape record these picture book sessions and collect your child's journal for further study.

I guarantee that your child's name and the school name will be kept anonymous during this research study and afterwards. If your child wishes to withdraw from the study, he/she may do so at any time. This withdrawal would

mean that I would not use your child's journal and discussion in my research. However, your child would still participate in the storybook sessions as they are a regular part of the classroom program for Language Arts.

If you have any questions please do not hesitate to contact me through the school. I would ask that you and your child sign the permission form on the attached page, and return it to the school by January 25, 1993. Thank you for your support.

Sincerely

Terri Walker
Graduate Student
Faculty of Education
University of Alberta

January 25, 1993

I agree to allow my child to participate in the research study.

_____

Parent Signature

I do wish my child to participate in the research study.

_____

Parent Signature

I would like to be included in the research study.

_____

Child Signature

I do not wish to be included in the research study.

_____

Child Signature