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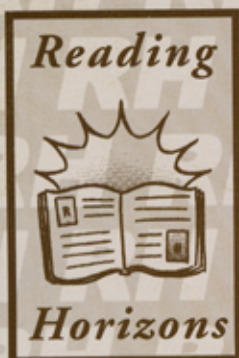
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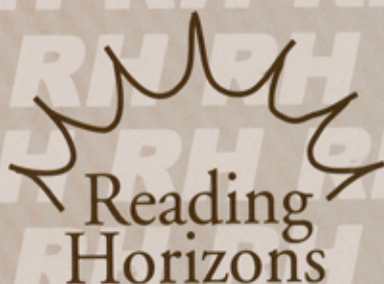


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Dorothy J. McGinnis Reading Center and Clinic
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Western Michigan University



Reading Horizons

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Reading Horizons

History and Mission of Reading Horizons: *Reading Horizons* began in 1960 as a local newsletter and has developed into an international journal serving major colleges, universities, and individual subscribers across the United States and Canada as well as a host of other countries. The journal serves as a forum for ideas from many schools of thought dedicated to building upon the knowledge base of literacy through research, theoretical essays, opinion pieces, policy studies, and syntheses of best practices. *Reading Horizons* seeks to bring together school professionals, literacy researchers, teacher educators, parents and community leaders as they work collaboratively to widen the horizons of literacy and the language arts.

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There is no more crucial or basic skill in all of education than reading

READING HORIZONS
Volume 43, Number 2

ARTICLES

- “Real Ways of Talking” and School Talking: 85
One Appalachian Student’s Perception of Teacher
Discourse During Writing Conferences
Sherry W. Powers
- When Do They Choose the Reading Center? 103
Promoting Literacy in a Kindergarten Classroom
Susan K. Green
Clair Britt
Patsy Parker
- Dear Author, Your Book Is Important To Me 115
Wilma D. Kuhlman
Carol L. Moutray
- A Survey of Contexts for Successful Literacy Tutoring 127
Dorothy Leal
Cathy Mowrer
Jodi Cunningham



***“Real Ways of Talking” and School Talking:
One Appalachian Student’s Perception of
Teacher Discourse During Writing Conferences***

Sherry W. Powers
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A barrier to school literacy is created when teachers fail to build upon the familiar language of students. These research findings indicate that when students perceive that nonstandard ways of talking are not as highly valued by the school as Standard English is valued, they deliberately fail to produce written products that match their teacher’s expectations.

You know what I don't like about school? I don't like it that they don't like who I am! I can talk all that proper talk and I can write a story like she [teacher] tells us to do. But my granny don't use that [school talk] and that ain't me neither. Zane Bailey, 4th grade

Home and School Language Links

As articulated by Zane Bailey, language is inextricably bound to one's identity. Language is not only a tool for communication, but is also the carrier of cultural values and attitudes, as well as oral and written literacy traditions (Garcia, 2002; Tatum, 1997). Members of different races, social classes and cultures may distinguish themselves from one another by the type of language they use. Much discussion about regional dialect differences in American English is qualified in terms of social status considerations. For example, when speaking of Appalachian English features, such as *hit* for *it* or *a-hunting and a-fishing*, one must carefully consider that these features are used at different rates or may not even be used by different social groups in Appalachia. Rural Appalachian language features are often associated with the *a*-prefix as in *She was a-cooking dinner*, or the *h* in *hits raining outside* (Wolfram & Schilling-Estes, 1998).

The various social meanings associated with ethnic and regional varieties of American English often force speakers to choose between fitting in and speaking correctly. Appalachian English is associated with a rural and stigmatized vernacular, and at the same time with an individual's native roots. These individuals are faced with the dilemma of choosing between group solidarity and being stigmatized by the mainstream culture. For example, native speakers of an Appalachian vernacular dialect who have moved away may feel constrained to shift to some degree back to the native dialect when visiting their home. Failure to use the vernacular of family may be interpreted as a symbolic rejection of the family and the inability to fit in (Fasold, 1996; Wolfram & Schilling-Estes, 1998). Many of these students deliberately choose to maintain the language, traditions, social behaviors, and culture of their home (Tatum, 1997; Wolfram & Schilling-Estes, 1998).

Spoken language is the format in which much teaching occurs, and students demonstrate to teachers much of what they have learned. Previous research has focused on language differences among children and teachers from various ethnic and socioeconomic classes across the United States (Cazden, 1988; Delpit & Dowdy, 2002; Delpit, 1995; Heath, 1983; Hymes, 1996). Much research has noted that a primary barrier to school literacy learning is created when teachers fail to build upon the familiar interactional styles and everyday uses of the languages of students (Au, 1993; Delpit, 1995; Heath, 1983). This highlights the profound and inescapable cultural fabric of the schooling process in American educational systems concerning the potential discontinuity between the culture of the school and the home (Boykin, 1994; Gay, 2000; Wolfram & Schilling-Estes, 1998). Formal education requires one to think, learn, talk, read and write in prescribed ways. Literacy education is designed to influence and mold an individual's cultural identity (Boykin, 1994; Flippo, Hetzel, Gribouski, & Armstrong, 1997; Gay, 2000).

Individuals who are highly affiliated with a strong cultural identity find that the cultures of schools are not always completely synchronized with their personal oral and written literacy experiences. Many of these students from diverse backgrounds are doomed to failure due to the fact that educators focus on what ethnically, racially, culturally, and linguistically different students can not do and do not have (Au, 1993; Delpit & Dowdy, 2002; Delpit, 1995; Heath, 1983; Gay, 2000). Unfortunately for these diverse student populations, academic achievement is more often associated with being middle-class and White. For many African American students, doing well in school becomes identified as trying to be White (Tatum, 1997). Fordham (1993, 1996) and Goto (1997) explain that a number of students with high academic potential intentionally sabotage or camouflage their intellectual abilities to avoid alienation from the friends or family members who have not been as successful in school.

In addition, these students run the risk of being marginalized as they attempt to incorporate selected aspects of their home culture with those of the dominant culture. To friends and family they appear to have rejected the ways of family, yet they are unable to find full acceptance in

the dominant culture. Some of these students may assimilate into the dominant culture as much as possible and distance themselves from their cultural group. Other students may withdraw by emphasizing their own culture and avoiding contact with or the use of dominant group practices (Tatum, 1997).

Rural and urban Appalachians have been called the "invisible minority" in much the same way that Asian Americans are seen as the "model minority" (Purcell-Gates, 1995). This term reflects both the general lack of knowledge about them as well as their culture beyond the geographic area in which they reside. The fact that Appalachians are overwhelmingly White and not recognized as a culturally diverse population in a political climate that equates diversity with "people of color" contributes to their invisible status. As a group, rural and urban Appalachian folk suffer from the ills of poverty, poor health, and low educational attainment. They are frequently discriminated against because of cultural differences between the mountain subculture and the mainstream culture. Mannerisms, customs, and in particular, speech patterns and language use mark these differences. One characteristic of unassimilated Appalachians is their retention of characteristic language patterns and word usage. Children from low-income rural or urban Appalachian areas achieve at significantly lower levels than their non-Appalachian peers in the classroom. Frequently, the school literacy practices, as well as the sound and structure of oral language used in the classroom, are unfamiliar to these Appalachian learners (Heath, 1983; Purcell-Gates, 1995).

Inside or outside of school, learning occurs in a cultural context. Embedded in this context are subtle and invisible expectations regarding the manner in which individuals are expected to use language and how he or she is to go about learning. To succeed in school, learners must be academically knowledgeable in the culturally appropriate ways of participating in instructional conversations and displaying academic knowledge. Schools must respond to the unique needs of culturally diverse students more effectively than they have done in the past. Creative and authentic solutions to the difficulties experienced by students of diversity are complex and urgently needed in American

classrooms (Au, 1993; Delpit, 1995, 1988; Garcia, 2002; Gay, 2000; Heath, 1983; Nieto, 1999; Philips, 1983; Purcell-Gates, 1995; Weis, 2003).

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this qualitative study was to examine the nature of the teacher-student conferencing discourse while focusing primarily on the student's perception of the teacher's discourse during writing conferences. The fourth-grade student was native to this Appalachian community and identified as a struggling reader and writer. School administrators, colleagues, parents, and professors at a regional university considered the teacher a high implementer of effective reading and writing instruction and conferencing practices.

I gathered the data through a variety of qualitative measures, including observation, interviewing, and gathering of student artifacts (e.g., writing samples). I spent approximately two hundred and eighty hours over a period of sixty days from August through January observing in the classroom. Classroom observations occurred four to five consecutive days each week. The observations focused on teacher and student discourse during writing conferences. I conducted interviews to gather information in the participants' own words. Pseudonyms are used for all subjects involved in the study, the school, and the location of the school.

Study Participants

Ms. Neel, the teacher participating in the study, was beginning her twelfth year of teaching in an elementary school. She had taught in elementary schools in Texas, Pennsylvania, and for the last four years in Appalachia, Kentucky. This year marked the beginning of her seventh year teaching fourth-grade since beginning her career. Colleagues, school administrators, parents, and university professors highly respect Ms. Neel as an exemplary educator. Without exception, everyone considered her the best writing teacher in this rural Appalachian school district.

This body of research investigates the nature and impact of the teacher discourse with one particular target student named Zane Bailey.

Zane and his family are indigenous to the rural mountain community of Appalachia. Based on my personal interviews with Zane coupled with sixty days of classroom observations, he obviously disliked school, writing tasks, and most teachers. Furthermore, as a rule, he was not actively engaged in classroom instruction or typical school reading and writing learning experiences. He considered school a "...boring place and it don't do nothin' for you when you go home."

Although Zane appeared to struggle with reading and writing tasks, during casual conversations with classmates and the teacher he often shared detailed stories in his rich Appalachian dialect, using colloquial phrases when describing his life experiences with family and friends. Over the six month observation period, various teachers, school staff, and administrators commented that Zane was slow and a "typical unmotivated learner." However, Ms. Neel valued Zane's thinking and believed him a very capable learner. She frequently expressed her desire to further identify and build upon his areas of interest in writing tasks and actively engage him in discussions during writing conferences.

Findings

Zane Bailey: "I don't really like school but I like Ms. Neel."

Nine-year-old Zane Bailey speaks with a loud and pronounced Appalachian dialect. Zane, a European-American child, lives with his grandmother who is also a native of Appalachia. When speaking of his family Zane explains:

My mom lived here and I was born here. All my aunts, uncles, cousins and everybody in my family lives here. I got a lot of family here in this place cause we're all from here. But I have no clue about where my dad was from or anything like that about him.

Zane very openly shares that he does not like school. According to him, "school is boring and they make you do all this stuff that you don't never do no wheres else." As far as schools go he believes that Appalachia Elementary School is a "pretty good school."

His reasons for describing Appalachia as a good school are that the faculty and administrators keep students safe; they provide food for students and give them time to play during physical education and recess.

Learning how to write stories and letters seems like a waste of time to Zane. He does not enjoy participating in individual or group writing tasks. He believes:

People shouldn't have invented all that writing stuff. You should just be able to grab a piece of paper, write down what you want somebody to know, put it in an envelope, put a stamp on it and put it in the mailbox and forget it. I don't think you need to go through all those steps of writing that stuff. Just rewrite it if it's not neat enough or something.

Zane believes that Ms. Neel is a good teacher "as far as good teachers go." He describes her as being patient, nice, fun and as having a funny laugh. He quickly points out that Ms. Neel cares about students in her classroom and in the school. The reason he thinks she is a good teacher is because:

...whenever I don't understand something she tells me what it means. Like if I don't understand what a word means then she'll tell me another definition that helps me. She's real good at talking to you about your work, like your writing or stories, and she helps you work out your ideas but she don't tell you how you have to do it. If you're gonna have to do writing anyway then she is a good teacher to have cause at least you get to use your own ideas. She don't ever tell you your ideas are bad or make you feel dumb. I guess she's a good teacher to have even if you don't have to do writing. So I guess I'd say that if you're gonna have to go to school anyway then Ms. Neel is a good teacher to have.

According to Zane his learning experiences at school are for the most part unimportant and not useful in his life outside of school. He says:

See I don't think I'll ever use all this stuff they teach us at this school. I can do work like my granny and she don't use all this writing stuff we do in here to do her job.

Zane does not like school and he fails to see the relevance of school learning to his everyday life. In spite of his negative feelings about school, he expresses positive feelings and respect for Ms. Neel. According to Zane, "Ms. Neel is a good teacher because she cares about you."

Ms. Neel's discourse practices with Zane

Ms. Neel uses a variety of questions and comments that intentionally invite Zane to share his ideas and experiences as they relate to his writing. The teacher's discourse is designed to assist Zane in developing a writing topic with supporting details and to assist him in separating multiple steps of the writing process into "manageable pieces." Ms. Neel speaks to Zane in a manner that is private and affirming of Zane's efforts and ideas. Teacher questions and comments throughout the conference reflect Ms. Neel's attempts to assist Zane in choosing a writing topic, developing a story line, and providing additional details in the story.

[Ms. Neel (T) is asking Zane (Z) questions to help him develop arguments for a letter persuading his grandmother to join the Parent Teacher Organization (PTO)].

- T: All right, now in your second paragraph what are you trying to do?
Z: Uh, persuade her to join the PTO.
T: You've already given her your reasons [in the first paragraph]. What are you trying to do with those reasons now?
Z: State 'em.
T: Restate them and explain. Okay?
Z: Yeah.
T: So, can you give her a topic sentence?
Z: Yeah, you might say you don't have time.

T: All right. Now you've also listed that she could join because she doesn't have to dress formally to go to the meetings and it only costs two dollars to join. You have to explain those reasons too.

Z: Okay.

T: So, how are you going to do that?

Z: Tell her what I mean. Say it!

T: Tell her that! Exactly! Grandma, let me tell you what I mean! That is a topic sentence. Then you need to explain what you mean. What do you mean that you don't have time to go to the PTO meetings? Remember Zane, those PTO meetings are once a month usually at seven o'clock. She's home by seven o'clock isn't she?

Z: Sometimes she is home by six. She usually goes right in and fixes supper and does the dishes. She don't like no help with dishes or cooking cause I ask her.

Ms. Neel uses intentionally inviting discourse by asking Zane questions that provide opportunities for him to share about his family and experiences at home. Ms. Neel seeks to build upon Zane's areas of interest when helping him select writing topics.

Teacher attitudes toward Zane

According to Ms. Neel, "Zane could be one of my best writers, but he is not willing to put out the effort." However, Ms. Neel predicts, "if I could find a topic that he is really on fire about, I think he would enjoy writing. So far I haven't been able to help him discover that burning topic or questions that will motivate him to write. He is a good kid, although I admit that it is very challenging and sometimes even frustrating working with him." It deeply concerns Ms. Neel that she has been unable to help Zane make more progress as a writer. She feels a sense of responsibility for children in her classroom like Zane. On another occasion Ms. Neel stated, "I really believe that Zane enjoys learning. I keep trying to find new ways that pique his interest in learning. I'm still learning how to reach him. I know he is a very capable student."

Ms. Neel expressed appreciation for the dialect and language used by Zane in his oral and written narratives. In one instance, in a letter to his grandmother, Zane wrote "...I will clean up the bottom so you can come to the PTO meeting at school." When Ms. Neel asked him the meaning of "clean up the bottom," Zane explained that this was the flat ground behind his house. Ms. Neel smiled with understanding and stated that she would call this the backyard if she were writing her grandparents. Zane nodded his head and continued writing. Ms. Neel explained, "I think it is important for my students to have the freedom to use colloquial words or phrases in their writing. I suppose that many of the expressions I use are colloquial and odd to some people. I just encourage them [the students] to think about their audience, and whether or not the language or phrases are appropriate for the intended audience. The challenge I face is teaching kids like Zane to use standard English and words in their writing for more formal pieces of writing they are expected to complete in fourth-grade. In Zane's case, I feel awful when I have to lower his score on a piece of writing because he didn't use the expected language." Ms. Neel values the differences in language use and dialect she noted between herself and Zane, although she struggled to reconcile the conflict this created when evaluating Zane's formal pieces of writing.

An example of the results of IRE (Initiating, Responding, Evaluating) teacher discourse with Zane

Zane perceives the IRE discourse as disinviting. IRE involves the teacher initiating, the student responding, and the teacher evaluating during a writing conference (Cazden, 1988). Zane views this as the teacher trying to transmit her own meaning system into his writing. As a result he responds with "yes, no, maybe, okay or yeah" whether or not he is focusing on the task or understands the suggestions offered by the teacher.

[Ms. Neel (T) is talking with Zane (Z) about his feature article on lizards].

- T: What do you want to find out specifically?
Z: How they [lizards] live.
T: Exactly! You want to find out about how lizards live?
Z: Yeah
T: Good! Are you looking specifically at lizards in Kentucky?
Z: Yeah
T: Yes, since you are talking about Kentucky's Commonwealth. Okay, where do you think lizards live?
Z: Uh, well, uh, maybe.
[The conference continues...]

In this conference Ms. Neel probes Zane's thinking in an attempt to understand the question he is trying to answer in his feature article. However, during IRE teacher discourse Zane does not engage in the conversation anymore than necessary. He produces very little written work following the conference. Zane's behavior featured in this vignette is typical of numerous writing conferences where the teacher uses an IRE discourse.

Over the course of six months, Ms. Neel gradually shifted away from an IRE style discourse pattern during writing conferences to asking open-ended questions that generated discussion about the content of the piece of writing. She acknowledged in several interviews that Zane did not respond favorably to her "discussion and questioning style in writing conferences." As a result, Ms. Neel explained that she had decided to "...try new discussion and questioning techniques" when conferencing with Zane, since "what I have been doing so far doesn't seem to be working with him." While Zane did not produce the written narratives that Ms. Neel desired, he did engage in oral discourse during the conferences by telling detailed and lengthy stories about his family and life experiences. Many times, Ms. Neel listened patiently and encouraged Zane to consider how he might use relevant events or supporting details in his oral storytelling to develop a current piece of writing.

Differences in storytelling structures

Ms. Neel expected Zane to produce topic-centered narratives, a single topic narrative focusing on one event that is sequentially organized, even though he preferred reading, telling, and writing episodic narratives. Within the community of Appalachia, children and adults produce rich oral and written episodic narratives in their daily conversations and during writing events. These episodic narratives contain a series of implicitly associated anecdotes with shifting scenes, characters, time periods, and organizational structures (Cazden, 1988).

Zane consciously decided to use "real talk" rather than "school talk." He enjoyed sharing episodic-centered narratives during oral class discussions, teacher student conferences, and personal interviews. He expressed great pride in being a member of his family and in the language that directly connects him to his grandmother. According to Zane, "I don't talk as country as my granny, but I sure don't talk like school since that ain't real talking. I can do it [use school language] but that ain't who I am." Throughout the academic year Zane did not change or adjust his oral or written language practices to match the teacher's oral and written expectations of his work. As a result, in assigned writing tasks Zane continually produced brief and nondescript pieces of writing reflecting his deliberate rejection of this expected school standard. Zane held very strong opinions concerning the way teachers speak. Zane explains:

You see my grandma thinks that I talk country. Cause like I was with some people and we was out in the country and everything and we talked like country talk. She said I stayed there too long visiting. Well, my grandma she don't talk like country. She just talks like old people. That means she's always talking about back when she was a kid. But my grandma don't talk like Ms. Neel. ...She [Ms. Neel] talks real formal like the school and sometimes she uses those words that ain't easy to know. ...Most of the kids in this school don't talk the same [as the teachers] cause we don't talk school talk. I mean everybody has their own way of talking. ...What I don't like about school is that you have to do everything so proper. At home you don't have to talk proper. You just talk like yourself. It's mainly the teachers and the principal that expect me to talk different at school than I really talk. She [the

teacher] always wants us to speak proper and I mean all the time. But I will say this, when Ms. Neel corrects me for saying "ain't" she does it in a good way. You learn it, but you don't feel bad or dumb. I know not to use "ain't," but I don't really talk that way so I forget a lot at school and say it. School talk is proper talk and it ain't a real way of talking. ...I don't really talk as country as my granny, but I sure don't talk like school since that ain't real talking. I can do it [use school language/standard English] but that ain't who I am.

Zane indicated that he had made a decision not to change or adjust his oral or written language practices to match the teacher's oral and written language expectations for his work. As a result, in assigned writing tasks by the teacher, Zane continually produced brief and nondescript pieces of writing reflecting his deliberate rejection of this expected school standard. On the other hand, anyone who listens to his oral stories, conversations, or reads his unedited stories recognizes his ability to produce very descriptive and lengthy episodic narratives. Instead of providing writing tasks linked to Zane's native use of language when telling stories, Ms. Neel unintentionally silenced his voice by only soliciting a style of writing that disconnected him from real life. Allowing Zane to write about his experiences in the same manner that he talked would have validated his use of language as well as his style of writing. As a result, Zane made the conscious choice not to comply with the teacher's oral and written language expectations at school. He consistently made decisions not to actively engage in classroom instruction, teacher-student conferences, and writing tasks when expected to comply with school writing styles. When completing writing assignments he consistently produced brief and nondescript pieces of writing.

Issues of power in the classroom

There is a striking power struggle in the classroom between Zane and Ms. Neel. Zane wanted to maintain control over his use of oral and written language in the classroom. Ms. Neel wanted him to comply with the oral and written language expectations of the school. In some writing activities, she allowed Zane to use colloquial phrases and nonstandard

variations of language in his writing (e.g., "bottom" for flat land). In addition, she allowed him to share his oral and written episodic stories written in his private journal. However, Zane sensed that the teacher valued Standard English and topic-centered narratives over nonstandard variations of English and episodic-narratives. Therefore, Zane refused to comply with the oral and written literate expectations of the school. From Zane's perspective, compliance with the school's language expectations violated who he was and devalued the language and literacy traditions in his home. This power struggle is played out in Zane's off-task work habits that forced Ms. Neel to consistently monitor his progress toward completing a final written product. In addition, Zane's lack of compliance in producing detailed topic-centered written products that met the teacher's expectations indicated his decision not to use the language of the school. Regardless of the consequences, Zane insisted on using language that was "real" and natural to him. He maintained his identity by speaking and writing in his native dialect, he continued using colloquial phrases, and produced episodic story structures. Many children like Zane find they must choose between their own unique language patterns and that of the school in order to be successful in public school classrooms. The unique and rich language features of these students are often erased by well meaning educators, state assessment systems, and national policy makers.

Zane's belief that school talk was not a "real way of talking" expresses the perspective of many members of subordinate groups who are ethnically, culturally and/or linguistically diverse. He refused to assimilate into the dominant culture by using unfamiliar oral and written language structures characteristic of the culture of the school. Just as many African American students refuse to "act White" (Tatum, 1997); Zane is representative of Appalachian students who refuse to act like those who are part of the dominant mainstream culture. Zane deliberately sabotages and camouflages his intellectual abilities to avoid being alienated from his family. When required to choose between the oral and written language expectations of the school and the language practices of his home, he chooses the familiar language of his grandmother. As a result, when speaking and writing Zane emphasizes the language structures of his home, and avoids oral and written language practices characteristic of the dominant culture. Zane did not waver in his

determination to use language in ways that seemed appropriate to him, even if it meant being unsuccessful in school. On the other hand, Ms. Neel continued to offer support, scaffolding, and structure, designed to assist Zane in completing topic-centered written narratives. Needless to say, she remained frustrated with Zane, and he remained distant and irritated with Ms. Neel.

Conclusion

The belief that teachers, rather than students, need fixing (Gay, 1983) sounds harsh, but it challenges educators to re-examine previously held convictions concerning attitudes toward marginalized and diverse students. Gay (1983, 2000) explains that we are not dealing with culturally deprived children, but with culturally deprived schools. Therefore, the task is not to revise, amend, and repair deficient children, but to alter and transform the atmosphere, policies, practices, and operations that make up the culture of the school. "To continue to define the difficulty as inherent in the raw materials, the children, is plainly to blame the victim and to acquiesce in the continuation of educational inequity in America" (Gay, 1983, p.561). Many excellent teachers may find themselves unintentionally responding to students in ways that violate the child's home culture and language. As demonstrated, teacher discourse can impact student achievement and motivation. However, it is important to acknowledge that educational systems and curriculum experts advising teachers, who do not understand or address these issues, also contribute to the discontinuity existing between the home and the school. For example, when educational assessment practices and policies solicit only one style of writing from students, the voices of many young diverse students are silenced. Students like Zane Bailey resist the attempts of well meaning teachers who provide instruction that is aligned with assessment practices that do not value nor are reflective of the language practices of the student. The current trend to standardize the curriculum at the national level diminishes opportunities for students to receive instruction that values and builds upon student differences such as the non-mainstream oral and written literacy practices of diverse learners. In particular, the *No Child Left Behind* legislation, which ignores issues of dialect and diverse oral language patterns as well as the

challenges rural schools face, ultimately seems to erase children like Zane from public school discussions.

Schools should respect and celebrate local culture while also providing students with educational experiences that give them options when they graduate, one of which may be to return to their communities and teach the succeeding generations. Obviously, Appalachian students who do not learn how to use oral and written Standard English grow up with limited options inside and outside of their communities. Many of these individuals will be forced to work in menial, low-wage jobs because they cannot or choose not to use the language of the mainstream culture. Therefore, children like Zane must assimilate into the mainstream culture linguistically in order to be successful in school. Such requirements continue to disenfranchise these children while their language and identity alienates them from school settings. In the interest of students who are marginalized in classrooms, it is time to reevaluate school structures, policies, and assessment accountability measures that value only one way of speaking, writing, and demonstrating knowledge.

If educators are to reverse the achievement trends of students like Zane, we must understand our own cultural orientations while learning about the ethnic identity and cultural socialization that comprise students' individuality. Curriculum content, teaching strategies, and oral and written literacy practices must be filtered through students' cultural lenses of reference in order to make content personally meaningful. For example, some Appalachian students like Zane Bailey will experience a connection between their personal language use and school writing tasks when teachers provide meaningful writing opportunities and explicit instruction in constructing episodic-narratives. Students' interest and achievement will increase when their familiar language structures are validated and valued by the school. In this way, teachers, administrators, and evaluators deliberately create cultural continuity in educating culturally diverse students. As a result, fewer students may feel the need to camouflage or sabotage their academic achievement to avoid compromising their cultural, ethnic, or personal language integrity and identity.

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When Do They Choose the Reading Center? Promoting Literacy in a Kindergarten Classroom

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This action research project investigated activities designed to encourage children to visit the reading center in a kindergarten classroom. Three interventions were implemented on alternating days. Analyses suggested that these interventions led to increased voluntary use of the reading center. The days the intern read a story produced the most visits. This process of systematic data collection also increased monitoring of the children with the lowest literacy skills and provided opportunities to tailor literacy activities to their interests.

THE RECENT SHIFT away from viewing teachers solely as consumers of research to viewing them as producers and mediators of knowledge has fueled the popularity of action research as part of educational practice (Richardson, 1994). Reflecting this trend, a recent survey of institutions affiliated with the American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education found that almost half of the respondents require their teacher education candidates to participate in action research (Henderson, Hunt, & Wester, 1999).

Perhaps the most frequently stated goal for action research is to provide candidates with skills and the opportunity to improve professional practice (e.g., Auger & Wideman, 2000; Brown & Macatangay, 2002; Lytle & Cochran-Smith, 1994; Noffke, 1997). By answering a question or solving a problem that arises in specific classroom circumstances, teachers analyze and modify their practice to become more effective.

The three of us, a classroom teacher, university intern, and the university liaison to the school, decided to initiate an action research project in a kindergarten classroom. We undertook this project to see if action research could viably be completed during a one-semester internship at the school. Both the school administrators and the university liaison had recently learned about benefits of action research, and we hoped to reap such benefits at our school.

Cotton Belt Elementary School is a rural pre-K-5 professional development school associated with Winthrop University in South Carolina. The student body is 75 percent European American, 23 percent African American and 2 percent other ethnicities, with 47 percent eligible for free or reduced fee lunch. Our kindergarten class had 21 students, including 16 European Americans (8 boys and 8 girls) and 5 African Americans (3 girls and 2 boys). Twelve of these students qualified for free or reduced fee lunch. The classroom teacher was a European American female with Bachelor's and Master's degrees in elementary education and 30 hours above the Master's level in early childhood education. At the time of this study, she had been teaching 28 years, including six in kindergarten.

We decided to explore the question of how to entice children to visit the reading center more frequently. The reading center is always a part of the kindergarten classroom, but is often the least-used center. In our experience, many children prefer the more active play of the block center and housekeeping. Many children in our rural area are not exposed to literature, nor do they see their parents reading; consequently, they do not understand the importance or enjoyment of reading. As lifelong readers, the three of us consider getting children and books together as most important.

The reading center is one of six centers that children can choose each morning after large group time. It is in a relatively quiet area of the room near the computer center and the art center. It consists of a two-sided bookcase and two inflatable chairs, with wall art in the area that changes from time to time and may include environmental print, posters of poems, or the children's writings. There is a basket with pointers and eyeglass frames that children can incorporate into literacy activities.

We had noticed that some children willingly go to the reading center and happily spend their time reading, looking at pictures, and sharing books with friends. Other children never choose to pick up a book. We wanted to try different ways of encouraging children to spend time in the reading center. We agreed that participating in reading center activities could be thought of as a good, concrete indicator of children's motivation to read. Watching patterns of attendance at the reading center could yield important insights that we could use to encourage more reading.

Activities to Encourage Reading

Next, we decided to think about putting activities in place that might promote visits to the reading center. We wanted to test three approaches to get books into the hands of children. One of these activities would be presented each day, and every third day we would start again with the first activity.

On the first day, Ms. B, the teacher intern, would introduce a book during early morning group time, telling the children about the book and

that she would be in the reading center later to read it to them. During center time, the children could first listen to the story if they chose the reading center, and then move to another center or stay and look at other books. We called this "Read To" day.

On the second day, baskets of books would be placed on the tables when the children came into the classroom in the morning. At the beginning of the day, children could sit at the tables and talk quietly or look at books. Some of the books in the baskets were easy to read, some were small copies of the big books used in guided reading with the whole class, some were good picture books, and some were specially chosen based on students' interests at that table. We called this "On Tables" day.

The third day the book baskets would be in the centers during center time, available to the children if they wished to stop and read or to incorporate the books into their center activities. For example, the children might read a book to a doll in the housekeeping center. Children in the writing center might choose to copy words and sentences from the books in the basket. In both the writing center and the art center, the children might use tracing paper to trace words and illustrations from books. The basket in the building center included books about construction and vehicles. The only center in which we did not place a book basket during this intervention was the computer center. We called this intervention "In Centers" day. We implemented this three-day alternating pattern for 13 weeks.

Indicators of Participation at the Reading center

We decided that a handy way to keep track of children's use of books and attendance at the reading center would be a chart listing all students' names with dates and the alternating daily activities across the top. Ms. B would note with a check when each student used books to meet the objective of each of the three daily activities (e.g., listening to the story on "Read To" Day, reading at the tables on "On Tables" day, or incorporating books into center activities on "In Centers" day). She entered a star whenever students visited the reading center and read books *in addition* to the daily activities (or sometimes instead of them).

This system proved simple to keep daily track and did not require modification over the course of the project.

First Analysis of the Reading Center Attendance Data

The three of us decided to meet on the average of every two weeks to look at the data Ms. B collected and to see what patterns emerged. The first time we met, we noticed that, of the three activities, children met the reading objective for the day most frequently on "On Tables" days when books were on the tables in the early morning. We thought this was the case because they had only one other choice at this time—quiet talking in their seats.

In looking at which of the three activities generated more stars (visits to the reading center) after the first two weeks, "Read To" day stood out as the clear favorite (9 stars vs. 4 and 5). The children seemed to be spending more free time at the reading center on the days that Ms. B read to them.

We also checked which children had no stars. After two weeks of the project, three of the four students judged to be lowest in literacy skills had no stars. Our discovery led Ms. B to focus on the interests of these children, hand picking books for "Read To" days that suited their interests. For example, she learned that one student had a strong interest in NASCAR, so she found a book to read about auto racing. Several students showed interest in dogs, so she chose *The Most Obedient Dog in the World* (Jeram, 1993) for another session. She also found an interactive book about pizza (Pelam, 1996) for a child who loves pizza. Books with an unusual characteristic were a real draw. For example, children found the shiny scales of *Rainbow Fish* (Pfister, 1992) or the raised web of *The Very Busy Spider* (Carle, 1984) fascinating. Books with wonderful rhythm or literary devices like *17 Kings and 42 Elephants* (Mahy, 1987) or *Chicka Chicka Boom Boom* (Martin & Archambault, 1989) were also favorites and encouraged children to go to the reading center for a closer look and to read their favorite passages. We have developed a list of titles that we have found pique the interest of reluctant kindergarten students, which is displayed in Table 1.

Table 1. Books for Reluctant Kindergarten Readers

Art

Purple, Green, and Yellow by Robert N. Munsch

My Crayon Talk by G. Patricia Hubbard

Elmer by David McKee

Housekeeping

Dress-up by Anne Geddes

Math Center

Number Munch! by Chuck Reasoner

Bear In A Square by Stella Blackston

Ten, Nine, Eight by Molly Bang

Writing Center

The Jungle ABC by Michael Roberts

Clifford's ABC by Norman Bridwell

Reading Center/Reading with the Teacher

I Love to Eat Bugs! by John Strejan (pop-up)

Alpha Bugs by David A. Carter (Interactive/pop-up)

Monster's Lunch Box by Marc Brown (Interactive/pop-up)

Five Little Ducks Raffi Songs to Read

I Can Read by Rozanne Lanczak Williams

ABC and You by Eugene Fernandes

Where the Wild Things Are by Maurice Sendak

What Makes a Rainbow? by Betty Ann Schwartz

Joseph Had a Little Overcoat by Simms Taback

I Can Read With My Eyes Shut! by Dr. Seuss

The Wheels on the Bus by Maryann Kovalski

Rain by Manya Stojic

The Ants Go Marching (Traditional) Illustrated by Jeffrey Scherer

Sunflower House by Eve Bunting

The Grouchy Ladybug by Eric Carle

The Hungry Caterpillar by Eric Carle

Later Analyses

We continued to meet three more times during the semester to examine the children's patterns of reading activities. We found that voluntary use of the reading center increased over time, with 34 students visiting the reading center on the last nine days of the project compared to 14 during the first nine days (See Table 2). Children tended to visit most consistently on the "Read To" days, with a median of three children per day. On "On Tables" days and on the "In Centers" days, a median of one student per day visited the reading center.

Table 2. Patterns of Book Use and Reading Center Participation at the Beginning and End of the Project

	First 9 days		Last 9 days	
	√	*	√	*
Read To	15	5	20	12
On Tables	43	4	36	19
In Centers	18	5	7	3
Total	76	14	63	34

Note: √ = Met reading objective for that day

* = Looked at books in the Reading center

We also continued to focus on the three students with the lowest literacy skills (the fourth had moved away three weeks into this project). We quizzed them about their interests and helped them find books that related to these interests. One boy seemed enthralled with trains, so we kept an eye out for any interesting train books. We also encouraged these

children to reread books and not to give up after one try, even urging them to take their favorite books home. Our focus on them paid off because we found that by the end of the project these students visited the reading center voluntarily a total of 16 times. We even noted that their visits to the reading center occurred on "In Centers" and "On Tables" days, not just on "Read To" days. For comparison purposes, we found that three other randomly chosen boys (who had stronger literacy skills) visited the reading center a total of ten times during the project.

Other issues arose in later meetings. Our data helped us discover that changing books in the baskets and in the reading center helped keep students' interest. We started changing books in the baskets and in the reading center every two weeks. We wanted to make sure that, as visits increased, we would have fresh books available that children had not seen. When using the baskets less frequently, we only changed them every seven weeks.

Ms. P voiced concern about how to maintain the "Read To" days when Ms. B finished the internship. We brainstormed ideas about having parent volunteers or fourth and fifth graders take turns at reading a story in the reading center. This year we have a fifth grade child who visits twice a week to read to children in the reading center during center time. We also thought about ways the children could keep track of their own visits to the reading center with a specially designed sign-up sheet they could initial.

Conclusions and Implications

This project helped us take a fresh look at our efforts to encourage children to enjoy books and to see them as an important part of life. Our three different interventions seemed overall to make a difference. As the year progressed, children visited the reading center more often, as verified by the increasing numbers of stars on our charts. We also saw children staying longer at the reading center and asking for more books to be read to them.

Collecting data made us conscious everyday of our goal of encouraging literacy, and as such other ideas came to us about that goal.

We put books we read to the whole group in the reading center and told children they could look at them again. We found children going to the baskets to get books to use in the housekeeping center for their pretend play even on the days when we did not place books in centers. We found ourselves saying, "When you go to the reading center..." more often. Articulating our assumption that they would go helped them to understand that a visit to the reading center could be as much a part of the day as going to lunch. We made our higher expectations clear, and the children eagerly met them. We realized again the power of teacher expectations on children's behavior, a phenomenon that has been clearly and broadly established in educational research over the last 30 years (e.g., Brophy, 1983; Jussim, Smith, Madon, & Palumbo, 1998; Rosenthal, 1994).

We found that the more time children spent with books, the more they enjoyed and noticed similarities and differences between them. For example, after reading *Have You Seen My Duckling?* (Tafari, 1984), the children asked that more books where you have to look for something hiding in the picture be in the reading center. Ms. P then suggested children to look for the little deer hiding in every picture in *Anansi and the Moss Covered Rock* (Kimmel, 1988) when they went to the reading center. Sometimes she put two versions of the same book in the center and asked the children to compare the two and tell her what they discovered when the class next got back together again. The children also started comparing Caldecott award winners. They were amazed that *Make Way for Ducklings* (McCloskey, 1941) won because the pictures were not colorful. Upon further discussion about the details in the pictures, they agreed that the sepia tones actually enhanced the pictures.

For us, one implication of doing this project is the importance of collecting data and using it to make some decisions about what goes on in a classroom. We so often get caught up in the day-to-day management of the classroom that we do not have time for reflection, to think about how we can do things better. Collecting the data forced us to reflect. We found it made us think about ways to encourage children to enjoy reading and books. Both Ms. B and Ms. P intend to incorporate data collection and the reflection it engenders into other aspects of their classroom practices next year.

More important, perhaps, the project made us think about individual children and their needs and interests. We could see in black and white that some kids were "falling through the cracks," and we had to do something about it. One of the most important applications of this project for us will be our future effort to conduct action research with the more reluctant learners in the forefront of our minds and our data collection. Our state has placed a good deal of emphasis on teaching the standards, and doing this kind of action research helps us integrate teaching children with teaching standards.

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Dear Author, Your Book Is Important To Me

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Research with letters written to authors for a contest showed that students often responded to literature in different ways according to the subgenre. Contemporary realistic fiction elicited many personalized responses while historical fiction elicited more responses that informed students' lives. Students noted that high fantasy and science fiction affected their writing skills, while mystery and other series fiction supported reading growth. The research indicates that writing letters to authors is a viable response activity for students.

THE LITERATURE CHILDREN read is an invitation to articulate their knowledge of themselves, their emotions and the actions that shape their future (Probst, 1998). Although many studies report the importance of choice and interest for children's reading (Gambrell, 1996; Wright, 1998), few studies report children's responses indicating their interactions and insights with text choices. Teachers who use trade books in their reading programs seek evidence that students are growing as literate people through their reading, and they need ways to provide rewarding response options for their students. Probst (1998) stressed the value of writing letters to authors as a valid reader response, noting, "It (a letter) typically explores something of significance to the writer, perhaps to the reader too, and so it matters. It encourages the student to visualize a particular reader, sharpening his sense of voice..." (p. 137). Our research centered on letters written to authors by fourth through sixth graders involved in writing for a national contest. The authors to whom students wrote could be anyone – living or dead, so the sense of audience varied from writing to a living author in anticipation of a return letter. Responses proved to hold interesting and enlightening information about students' connections and relationships with particular texts (Rosenblatt, 1978).

As we reflected on the numerous responses of children in letters written to authors, we considered how those transactions might look in light of the circumstances and purposes within the parameters of the contest invitation. Although data provided many and varied examples of children sharing personal responses to books they had read, we did find some commonalities among those responses. We found particularly insightful responses in connection with the subgenres of realistic fictional works (historical and contemporary) and subgenres of fantasy (high fantasy and science fiction) (Goforth, 1998).

Transactional reader-response theories that highlight the role of readers and their stance toward texts guided our research. Grounded in work by Rosenblatt (1938, 1978) and others who have researched student literary responses (Beach & Hynds, 1991; Tompkins, 1980), the responses of children to books they have read and why they have read them can provide insight about the genre they choose to read. Recent research in the field of reader response has often used case studies or

data collected from one classroom (Becker, 1999; Moss, 1998; Newton, Stegemeier & Padak, 1999; Sipes, 1998). The insights from individual responses indicate each reader's unique perspectives. Although the richness of multiple responses from one reader was not available, through means of one type of written response from many different students we found it possible to fit general themes of responses from across many students' letters into genre and author categories.

The unifying concept of transactional reader-response as developed by Rosenblatt is that meaning and purpose for reading ultimately lie with each reader (Karolides, 1999; Rogers, 1999). Mizokawa & Hansen-Krening (2000) urge educators to consider the ABCs of attitudes of students toward reading. They refer to psychologists' use of affect, behavior, and cognition to understand people. Likewise, researchers can consider these ABCs of readers' responses to literature. Our look at responses started with a student's behavior of writing a letter to an author. Responses themselves included affect (why they liked the book) and cognition (what they gained or learned from the book).

The Letters and Authors

In a national contest, students were encouraged to write to an author (living or dead) and explain how the piece of literature impacted them. These directions provided context for students' written responses and guided them more toward aesthetic than efferent responses as described by Rosenblatt (1978). Contest directions encouraged readers to bring their own personal lives and environments into their letters. They wrote, however, for a contest with the possibility of winning (even if students were aware that their chances were slim). Children in fourth through sixth grade from all parts of the United States penned these letters. They typed some letters, but also handwrote some (making many difficult to read). The children wrote letters as long as two to three pages, though most wrote about one page in length. In our analysis, we included all letters in the database, regardless of length or other factors.

Although the contest was open to all public, private, and home-schooled children, a teacher usually submitted entries. Contest rules provided a general guideline for the focus of the letters; however, we

could not conclude teachers' exact presentation and requirements of the children writing the letters. Some letters appeared to follow a standard format while others appeared to be self-generated responses. Not knowing the instructional procedures for writing the letters may be considered a limitation of the study. We eliminated letters that came in groups from one teacher since it seemed likely that the teacher had assigned the writing experience after the class had read a certain novel. Our goal to consider students' personal responses seemed better served when group submissions included several authors and books. The diversity of responses from so many children across the nation is an advantage in the study. Other than first name, grade level, and geographic location, contest participants were unknown to researchers. The children wrote mostly to authors of fiction, with 64 percent realistic fiction categories and about 25 percent for fantasy categories. We questioned how students might respond similarly or differently to different types of fictional works.

After first dividing titles into categories of genre, subgenre, category (in contemporary realistic fiction), and author, then numbering each letter, we used spreadsheet software to randomly select 15 letters from those written to the authors who received the greatest number of letters in each category. The subgenre labeled contemporary realistic fiction received the most letters, and we analyzed letters addressed to authors Judy Blume, Beverly Cleary, Phyllis Reynolds Naylor, and Gary Paulsen. In the historical fiction subgenre, we analyzed letters to Lois Lowry, Scott O'Dell, Mildred Taylor, and Laura Ingalls Wilder. A realistic fiction category of mystery (Goforth, 1998) received a significant number of letters, so we also analyzed letters to Frank Dixon, Mary Downing Hahn, Carolyn Keene, and Joan Lowery Nixon. We saw Roald Dahl, C. S. Lewis, Brian Jacques, and J. K. Rowling as authors with the greatest number of letters for high fantasy, and K. A. Applegate, Michael Crichton, and R. L. Stine as the primary science fiction authors.

Children Share Responses to Books with Authors

We read and categorized those responses that related to the text and author. We first categorized responses into the types of literary responses developed by Sipes (1998) in his research with first and second graders.

Sipes found that students' responses were generally subsumed into categories of:

- *analytical*
- *intertextual*
- *personalizing*
- *transparent*
- *performative*

These categories are demonstrations of affect and cognition. Because we limited responses to letters and not personal knowledge of students, we did not consider the performative response as an option. As we further analyzed the data, other subcategories emerged, particularly in the personalizing category. Three readers coded the letters to control for reliability, and final decisions were made when at least two readers agreed on the category or subcategory. After reading many of the letters, we added the category *informing life* in order to accommodate children's many responses that fit there more clearly than in any other category. This category coincides with Manning's (1995) suggestion that children can find some purpose and direction in their own lives from the experiences of others who live in literature.

Through this qualitative research, we looked at patterns of response that occurred frequently within subgenres to indicate differences of affect and cognition of students about these books. Because of the contest guidelines, we expected that more responses would be in the *personalizing* category than any other, and approximately half of the units coded fit in that category. These letters contained personal reference to children's families, pets, school experiences, and more. From hundreds of examples, we have chosen just two to exemplify the personal connections indicated in many of these letters. In a letter to Gary Paulsen about the book *Tracker* (1984), a boy wrote, "We both shared many problems. He's losing a grandparent and I lost one it's hard. We both get sort of lonely. We both keep to ourselves and we don't talk a lot." After mentioning her pleasure at Leigh's chance to see his dog and his dad in Beverly Cleary's *Dear Mr. Henshaw* (1983), a female reader projected, "Leigh is probably blaming himself because I blame myself that my parents split up. I know how he feels only to see his

mom.” These examples of aesthetic personalized responses support the contention that writing to authors, even for a contest, provides response opportunities that invite text connections to self – an important reason to read (Harvey & Goudvis, 2000). The personalizing category contained many responses, and as patterns emerged, we defined subcategories. Those subcategories included:

- friends
- family
- life issues
- events in life

Of particular interest to literacy teachers were personalized responses about reading and writing as academic subjects in school. Reading was mentioned in contemporary realistic fiction’s subcategory of mysteries. A girl wrote to Carolyn Keene about her books in general, “When I was 8 I didn’t like reading at all, but when I got part of your series of Nancy Drew books I got addicted to them. Now whenever I have a free moment I sit down and read, trying to solve the mysteries for myself.” A letter to Frank Dixon noted, “Your books have improved my reading skills by reading them so much and enjoying them. I want to thank you because reading your books has helped me to improve my reading skills and comprehension.” One can speculate that mysteries in general, as a genre with such strong plots, draw readers forward to learn the answer to the mystery. Nodelman and Reimer (2003) note that series books serve a purpose for developing readers because of their predictability and comfort. Keene’s and Dixon’s books are both mysteries and marketed in series. These students’ letters support Nodelman’s and Reimer’s understanding of series books’ value.

While series mysteries invited reading, science fiction, and high fantasy seemed to invite writing. R. L. Stine has materials and invitations of various types to young writers, so it is no surprise that a girl commented in her letter, “Because of your books I would like to be a writer. Doesn’t that make you [feel] good?” Some students were very specific about an author’s inspiration. Writing to K. A. Applegate, a boy wrote, “Each of your stories has many details in it, and that is what changed my writing . . . your stories taught me how to elaborate and

make things interesting." J. K. Rowling also received praise for inspiring writing by making "me learn bigger words" and helping learn to "write a good book by reading one." Authors C. S. Lewis and Roald Dahl inspired students about learning to use similes, action verbs, and conversation words instead of "said." We found the insights of these young writers intriguing.

In our research high fantasy, science fiction and historical fiction were the subgenres that seemed to evoke *transparent* responses. Sipes (1998) defines transparent responses as those where the reader "entered the narrative world of the story" (p. 47). An example from a young male reader writing to Brian Jacques reads, "Most books I have read didn't pull me in as much as yours did. It felt like I was actually in the story fighting the enemy. The book feels like I am being sucked in, and when someone says something to me I snap out of it. After I finished *Redwall* (1986), it was like I had just awoken from a dream." Readers who enjoy fantasy can relate to the way this reader lived in another world for a time. This sense of place can evidently happen in class at school for some readers. In a letter to Mildred Taylor about *Roll of Thunder Hear My Cry* (1976), one female student wrote, "Reading your story was like going into a time machine and witnessing the truth. Sometimes, I wanted to jump in and tell the characters which way to turn or what to do. Then I would realize I was in class reading a story."

Children wrote responses that *informed life* more frequently with historical fiction than other subgenres. Sipes (1999) discusses how literature can be life informing, although childrens' responses can either "reinscribe or challenge their own ideology and worldview" (p.123). In a letter for Lois Lowry after reading *Number the Stars* (1989), one student wrote, "This book really made me think about racism and why it happens." In response to the same book another student wrote, "I learned that you should not judge people by their religion." When students wrote responses that informed them in their lives, they most frequently mentioned Lowry's *Number the Stars* and books by Mildred Taylor. In response to *The Well* (1995) a male student commented, "The book made me start to think about what I say to people. After I read the book, I made friends that are different then[sic] me. They are small, tall, black, skinny, and big." At times responses fell in both the category we named

life and the personalizing sub-category of relating to self as is evidenced in this response. Bishop (1997) suggests that literature can act as a “catalyst for engaging students in critical discussions and for eliciting multiple perspectives and multiple voices in pursuit of understanding” (p. viii).

Although Sipes’ (1998) *analytical* category can easily connect to books with illustrations, most responses from fourth through sixth graders’ letters connected to novels and thus had few if any illustrations. Consequently, the analytical category refers to readers’ construction of meaning by analysis of the text. Traditional elements of setting, characters, plot, theme, and authorial techniques would fall into this category. In our research, most of the analytical responses fell into the contemporary realistic fiction category of mysteries - with the exception of the Harry Potter books by J. K. Rowling. In a comment any teacher would love, one girl wrote, “Unlike most books, Harry is not Mr. Nice Guy or the opposite. He is like the majority of people - and because of that the magic means all the more.” This contrast between flat and round characterization could come out of a textbook.

How Does This Inform Literacy Teachers?

Research on letters written to authors, even in the context of a contest, indicates that the exercise itself provides a chance for students to explain their connections and describe their relationship with a particular text (Rosenblatt, 1978). Teachers must find ways of encouraging students to read and respond on their own, rather than rely on some outside authority to decide what the text means and how students should respond (Probst, 1992). As these data indicate, students can find connections with their own worlds and many types of texts. Beach (1998) warns that teachers often fail to connect text worlds with real-world experiences, and these research results indicate that letters to authors are ways for students to share some of those connections.

Teachers can also consider the responses of children in the letters analyzed for this research and connect genre to strategy instruction. Although readers will always respond to texts in their own ways, this research is support for including various genres during instruction.

Teachers might look to science fiction and high fantasy for models for developing writers. As letter writers mentioned, they learned about similes, details, and elaboration. Although letter writers with analytic responses did not specifically comment about texts informing them as writers, their comments on character development, plot, and settings are cogent. Writers of science fiction and fantasy need to build worlds that are unfamiliar to their readers; consequently, the models they present may help writers see the craft very clearly in these subgenres.

Realistic historical fiction is written to give readers a glimpse into a past situation. By its very nature, the subgenre gives readers the chance to gain perspective from people very different from themselves. This reading experience differs from one where characters are like the reader. Advocates of multicultural education can take heart that readers can be informed about life and much more through these books. As Bishop (1997) notes, the connection is not necessarily automatic, but teachers who include well-written historical fiction - especially from authors of diverse backgrounds - may be adding to the perspective-taking skills of their students.

Non-fiction or information books made up a very small percentage of those that children chose to write about in these letters. Writers also rarely responded about *intertextual* connections. A question for further research would be to consider whether text to text connections (Harvey & Goudvis, 2000) are more common with non-fiction texts. Perhaps the contest parameters discouraged a more efferent response, but the lack of intertextual connections is worth considering.

Clearly, writers to this contest expressed affect about and for the books they had read. They indicated their wonder, enjoyment, appreciation, and connections to characters and stories. By perceiving different perspectives and recognizing how models of authors supported their own growing literacy practices, students shared cognition about more than aesthetic responses to story. They were noticing their own growth. Among the many options they provide students, teachers can be satisfied when students choose to write a letter to an author - even if it's for a contest.

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A Survey of Contexts for Successful Literacy Tutoring

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Effective tutoring is key to successful literacy learning for at-risk children. This report provides an overview of answers to the question: "What are the contexts for effective literacy tutoring?" The research shows that successful reading tutoring is commonly found in four contexts: home, school, professional/community, and university settings.

WITH THE CALL FOR literacy tutors increasing around the country, it is important to know the contexts for effective literacy tutoring. Children who have difficulty mastering the reading process are more at-risk for future academic failure (Rimm-Kaufman, Kagan, & Byers, 1999). The pressure is on to find ways to help these students "catch-up" to their peers in reading development (Klenk, 2000). It is our intent to provide the reader with a sampling of effective tutoring programs offered in four different contexts: home, school, professional/community, and university settings. Each of these contexts builds on the importance of one-on-one tutoring in order to remediate reading difficulties of students considered at-risk for school failure. Clay (1993a) stresses the importance of one-on-one tutoring because the instruction is individualized for each student's needs. One-on-one tutoring allows the teacher or tutor to immediately respond to children's reading difficulties.

Home

It is commonly acknowledged that parents are the child's first teacher and primary influence in academic achievement. It is important to recognize programs that involve parents and family members helping children with reading. Programs that weave school instruction with involvement by parents and family members are some of the most successful programs. Collaboration from multiple and diverse resources creates a strong partnership on behalf of children. One example of a successful home-focused program is found at the Kelly School in Portland, Oregon. This program, called "Parent Partners," uses an effective approach for involving parents in their children's literacy (Ian, 1996) by bringing parents and school personnel together once a month to discuss ways to support their children's learning at home and share reading activities, projects, and books they successfully use at home with their children. "Family Stories" is one element of this program where parents and children work together to explore family histories by talking and writing on this important topic once a week.

Another program, called "Storymates," invites nine, ten, and eleven-year-old students to pick books in school, practice reading them, then bring the stories home to share with a younger sibling, neighbor, or

cousin (Fox & Wright, 1997). The trade books used in this program provide predictable language patterns and recount simple, uncomplicated stories with illustrations that intentionally describe and extend the text. The success children have reading these books helps them perceive themselves as better readers, thus making them more willing to participate. At the conclusion of their study, Fox & Wright found that students had made gains in reading fluency and comprehension with the extra reading they did at home.

School

A classroom teacher, reading or intervention specialist, classroom aide, or adult volunteer usually delivers tutoring during the school day. The context for classroom tutoring, whether pullout or in-class settings, has been shown to be an influence on what can be accomplished (Bean, Cooley, Eichelberger, Lazar, & Zigmond, 1991).

Reading Recovery

One of the best-known early intervention programs used in schools today is *Reading Recovery*, a program designed by Marie Clay and introduced in the United States in the mid 1980's (Graves, Juel, & Graves, 1998; Gunning, 1998; Santa & Hoiem, 1999). *Reading Recovery*, as an early intervention program within schools, is successfully helping young first grade readers who are experiencing difficulty in reading. The major requirements in a reading recovery program include:

- first grade children
- one-on-one tutoring
- daily 30-minute instruction
- a specially trained teacher
- tutoring done in addition to the regular classroom instruction

Due to the success of *Reading Recovery*, many tutoring programs are based on this model and its components.

In a typical *Reading Recovery* lesson, there are seven activities that the *Reading Recovery* teacher will go over with the student each day. The activities are done in the following order:

- rereading two or more familiar books
- rereading the new book from yesterday and taking a running record
- letter identifying and/or word-making or word-breaking
- writing a story
- cutting up a story to be rearranged
- introducing a new book, and
- attempting to read the new book

This order is a natural progression, moving the child from successfully reading familiar books to tackling the challenges of the new book (Clay, 1993b).

Although *Reading Recovery* programs are more effective with first-grade reading achievement than traditional remediation (Mounts, 1998; Pinnell, et al. 1994; Pollock, 1998), they have also run into some criticisms (Graves et al., 1998; Juel, 1998; Santa & Høien, 1999). Juel points out that *Reading Recovery* programs are expensive and that it is possible to develop more effective and cheaper programs with the same money. Santa and Høien also indicate that *Reading Recovery* programs ask all children to do the same number of designed lessons and so it becomes “less effective for children with the most severe reading difficulties” (p. 54).

Countering the criticisms, the Reading Recovery Council has issued a booklet documenting its success. Looking at the 17-year results in the United States shows that “60 percent of all children served can read at class average after their lessons, and 81 percent of children who have the full series of lessons can read at class average. No other intervention in the United States has such an extensive database and such strong accountability” (Council, 2002, p. 1). Although there are criticisms of the *Reading Recovery* program, its many accomplishments in the area of student literacy should be applauded. James Cunningham questions why

there are so many attacks on this program that is "the only widely implemented program of any kind that documents impressive rates of learning in real reading for struggling students" (Cunningham, 1998, p. 446). Thus, most schools strive to create a *Reading Recovery* type-tutoring program.

Student Tutors

Some very successful tutoring programs encourage peer tutoring within the school. Several studies have shown the value of cross-age and peer-tutoring (Taylor, Hanson, Justice-Swanson, & Watts, 1997). Both reading ability as well as reading attitude benefit from this strategy. We examined results from cross-age tutoring by fourth graders of second grade students meeting three times a week for seven months. Activities focused on reading and rereading books with discussion and writing activities provided to improve comprehension. One group of these students also received tutoring twice a week to read and complete a comprehension activity with their fourth grade tutor. We found that the second graders that met twice a week with their peer tutors made the most significant gains in reading when compared to the group that attended only the intervention class and control group.

In another study, Thrope & Wood (2000) found that seventh grade students' reading ability improved when they developed lessons to tutor third grade students. Compared to other seventh graders in a comparison school, the effects of cross-age tutoring made a significant difference. The unique aspect of cross-age tutoring is that the older tutors also make gains in reading achievement.

Reading Specialists

Another well-known program for first through eighth grade students who have difficulties in literacy is Title I. Johnson (1998) noted that "the purpose of Title I programs is to provide assistance to selected underachieving pupils in grades 1 through 8 so that they might more fully attain their potential by improving their language and reading skills" (p. 4). Gunning (1998) indicated that Title I programs are designed to eliminate the gap in literacy achievement between

economically disadvantaged pupils and other pupils. Rubin (1997) mentioned that Title I programs are now provided not only for children from low-income families, but also for children who have severe basic skills deficits, regardless of their family status. Based on information in *Reading Today* (IRA, 2001), Title I programs failed to achieve their original goal—to help poor children achieve at the same level as their better peers. These programs might have helped, but were too weak an intervention to bring students on a par with their classmates. Based on Johnson's report, many underachieving students cannot complete this reading program, and it is not considered effective or efficient.

Professional and Community Programs

There are many professional and community contexts for tutoring. Several popular programs are based on the Howard Street model. The Howard Street Tutoring Program, which began in a low income Chicago neighborhood in 1979, is a "grassroots, community-based initiative" that uses adult volunteers to provide one-on-one tutoring for children (Morris, 1999). Under the supervision of a reading specialist, volunteers meet twice a week for approximately 45 minutes to an hour. The Howard Street tutoring concept is currently being used in rural North Carolina schools as a follow-up tutoring program for second graders. Darrell Morris, who instituted a similar program in North Carolina, outlines a typical tutoring lesson to have the following components: "Contextual reading at the child's instructional level, word study, easy reading, and reading to the child" (Morris, 1999, p. 8). A positive component of this model of tutoring is the ongoing support and supervision that each tutor receives.

Another successful community organization, Start Making A Reader Today (SMART), is an Oregon-based volunteer tutoring program that has proven cost-effective as well as successful in improving reading skills among first and second grade participants (Baker, Gersten, & Keating, 2000). SMART is mostly funded by community businesses. Tutors receive training before meeting to read with one child 30-minutes, twice a week, for six months out of the school year. In a two-year study, Baker compared students in the SMART program with students who

received no additional instruction, outside of the classroom, in reading. He found that the students who participated in SMART made significant statistical gains in word reading, reading fluency, and word comprehension when compared with the control group.

Other volunteer programs use retired community members, (Rimm-Kaufman et al., 1999) and students at-risk for school failure receive intensive (three to four sessions per week) after-school tutoring from those retired members. Many schools across the nation are using the services of AmeriCorps workers as tutors (Moss, Hiller, Moore, & Gamse, 1999). Often used in conjunction with the America Reads Challenge, those serving in schools are trained as tutors and work with students of all ages throughout the school day and during after school programs. This cooperative program provides schools with tutoring assistance while also enabling the AmeriCorps members to receive educational grants to help defray the cost of higher education. Proponents of this program claim that both schools and the AmeriCorps members benefit from this partnership.

University

There are a variety of programs where universities send students into elementary schools to be tutors and mentors to young students. It is common for preservice teachers to go into schools and tutor students as a requirement for one of their methods courses. Although literature evaluating the success of this type of reading tutoring program seems to be scarce (Klenk, 2000), there are many reports of successful reading tutoring programs.

Trained University Students

Many universities send students into elementary schools to be tutors and mentors to young students. Many of these programs pair at-risk students who are struggling in reading with a college student one-on-one. Juel (1996) studied one such program to identify what makes literacy tutoring effective. This program was unique in that it paired thirty struggling first-graders with college students who were themselves poor readers. Juel asked whether these relatively untrained college students

could successfully help the struggling first graders. Each elementary student was tutored for 45 minutes twice a week. Tutors attended a seminar once a week where tutoring activities and literacy development were discussed and books written for the children by those tutors. Each tutoring session contained three to four of the following seven components:

- reading children's literature
- writing short stories or messages
- reading *My Book*, the short books tutors created in seminar
- writing in a journal
- alphabet recognition
- phonemic awareness activity
- letter-sound activities

Juel found 15 of the tutor-student teams to be especially successful at the end of the year-long intervention. These pairs had three characteristics in common. First, they displayed obvious affection toward one another, with tutors frequently reinforcing the child's progress, both verbally and non-verbally. Next, their sessions contained many scaffolded reading and writing experiences where the tutor enabled the child to complete the task by providing a piece of information and/or segmenting the task into smaller, clearer components. Finally, in the most successful pairs, tutors modeled specific reading and writing strategies so that the children understood the strategies more clearly.

Hedrick (1999) studied a university program called *Reading One-One*. In this program, pre-service teachers (working on a specialization in reading) tutored third, fourth, and fifth graders in reading four times per week for 30 minutes each session. The tutors designed individualized plans for each child, which consisted of a balanced approach between reading, writing, and working with words. Results of the study showed that 60 percent of these students made an accelerated gain of more than one year in reading at the completion of the one-year program. This type of program seems ideal, for it benefits everyone involved. The students are receiving tutoring at no charge by trained individuals, and the university students are acquiring experience.

America Reads

Perhaps one of the most well known tutoring programs that use university students as tutors is that which grew from the America Reads Challenge Act. Initiated by President Clinton in 1996, the America Reads tutoring program is "an effort to insure that all children will read independently and well by the end of third grade" (Ross, 2001, p. 500). Using work-study funds, this program provides much needed tutoring services to low income school districts while also allowing university students to acquire experience working with students. University faculty members and school site coordinators, preferably reading specialists, train the tutors. Tutoring sessions are scheduled for at least two, preferably three, days a week for 20 to 30 minutes a session.

Stetson Reads

Stetson Reads is another example of an after-school reading program. This program pairs second and third graders with undergraduate work-study students (Heins et al., 1999), trained by a *Reading Recovery* teacher and monitored by a graduate student. Students in the program receive tutoring twice a week for one hour. A typical lesson plan in the program consists of:

- reading familiar text aloud
- manipulating letter cards to make words
- writing one or two sentences in a journal
- reading a new book aloud

Heins found that 81 percent of students in the program made gains in their ability to read text at the end of one year. We suggest that elementary students would benefit from more instruction in reading comprehension and that overall results of the program may be heightened if undergraduates from the university's education department were used.

Figure 1. Overview of Tutoring Programs

	Context	Who are the tutors?	What do the tutors do?	Benefits
Parent Partners	Home	Parents and school personnel	Support literacy through reading activities, projects, books, and family history projects	Provides extra help at home and time with family
Story Mates	Home	Siblings, cousins, and neighbors	Help 9, 10 and 11 year-olds pick out books at school to practice and bring home to read to younger children	Motivates children because they help younger children read
Cross-Age Tutoring	School	Student tutors	Plan and carry out activities to help younger children in school	Gives both older and younger children practice in reading
Title I	School	Reading specialists	Give lessons everyday for improving reading and writing skills	Provides under-achieving pupils in grades 1-8 extra help during the school day
Reading Recovery	School	Reading Recovery trained teachers	Give struggling 1 st grade readers 30 minutes of focused instruction in reading and writing	Provides students with individual lessons to practice reading and writing every day
Howard Street, SMART, AmeriCorp	Professional/Community	Trained volunteer tutors	Work with students twice a week for 30-60 minutes on contextual reading at the student's level, word studies, easy reading, and reading to the child	Gives students individualized help in reading and writing
America Reads, Stetson Reads	University	Trained university students	Provide literacy instruction two to three times a week for 30-60 minutes of reading familiar and new texts, journaling and making words	Gives students extra help in literacy while university students gain experience
Reading One-One	University	Trained pre-service teachers specializing in reading	Work with students 4 times per week for 30 minutes, tutors design a balanced approach of reading, writing, and working with words	Students receive practice in literacy skills

Conclusions

Chances for success for both children and their reading tutors are great. Helping students catch-up in reading development in order to avert academic failure is a realistic goal. There are a myriad of tutoring programs being implemented today, and while the context in which they take place may differ, the goal of helping children learn to read better is the same for each program. Tutoring resources and people available include specialized teachers, parents, volunteers, national and state service members, community organizations, and university students. It is the combination of these resources along with quality tutoring programs that will help our schools to reach that important goal of helping each student become a successful reader.

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