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This grounded theory study explores how middle school literacy teachers used dialogue journals and the processes by which they responded to their students' written responses. Literary conversation between teacher and student was conceptualized as an ongoing scaffolding process within dialogue journals. Teachers used "response facilitators" including visual aids, modeling, questioning/requesting, and feedback independently and in combination with one another to scaffold literary conversation with students. Every response from a teacher had a place on a response continuum, fluctuating between instructional responses and conversational responses. There were times when the teachers' roles called for direct scaffolding, focusing on developing students' literacy understandings, and other times when the teachers joined the discussion as an equal, giving students more freedom to experience literature. Although the full potential of dialogue journals has yet to be realized, this study suggests dialogue journals provide an effective means of individualizing the literacy development of young adolescent learners.
A renewed emphasis on response-based approaches to literature instruction has occurred in the past few decades. Teachers in elementary through high school classrooms are implementing a variety of instructional strategies to encourage and validate students’ meaningful discussions of literature (Atwell, 1987; Bean & Rigoni, 2001; Hancock, 1993; Matthews & Chandler, 1998; Mizokawa & Hansen-Krening, 2000; Raphael & McMahon, 1994; Wollman-Bonilla & Werchadlo, 1995). During the same period, a considerable number of researchers have investigated responses to literature. One focus of research in this area is the role of the student in literary response. Factors such as student’s personal experiences and background knowledge (Farest & Miller, 1994; Sipe, 1998), student’s ability level and age (Applebee, 1987; Galda, 1990; Lehr, 1988; Martinez & Roser, 1994), student’s gender and sociocultural background (Finders, 1997; Johnson, Peer, & Baldwin, 1984; Squire, 1964), and student’s linguistic and cultural diversity (Staton, Shuy, Kreeft Paton, & Reed, 1988) contribute to how a student responds to literature. Still, another burgeoning strand of the research focuses on the role of the teacher in guiding students’ responses. As response-based approaches have increasingly become an integral part of literary study, researchers have examined the teacher’s role within a variety of instructional frameworks.

One of the most common contexts for literary study involves oral conversations. Whether labeled as literature circles (Daniels, 2002; Short, 1986), book clubs (Raphael & McMahon, 1994), or discussion groups (O’Flahavan, 1989), the teacher’s role in these conversational settings is multifaceted. Some researchers view the teacher as director of literature groups responsible for leading the discussion (Hanseen, 1990; Peterson & Eeds, 1990). Others believe the teacher should assist students’ discussion by assuming the role of an outside observer (Hancock, 1993; Tiballi & Drake, 1993). Still, other researchers see the role of the teacher as a participant of literature discussion groups (Routman, 1991; Simpson, 1994). Flood and Lapp (1994) raised the issue that the teacher’s role should vary based upon student needs and goals for the discussion. While researchers have targeted their investigations to the roles of teachers within the contexts of literature circles, book clubs, and discussion groups, reader response research has
not adequately addressed the teacher’s contributions to students’ response in dialogue journals.

Teachers and researchers investigating the use of dialogue journals have primarily analyzed the students’ written responses attempting to describe different categories, levels, and processes (Atwell, 1987; Calkins, 1986; Fuhler, 1994; Hancock, 1993; Hansen, 1987; Rief, 1992). Atwell (1987) discovered over 150 kinds of literary talk that emerged from her eighth-grade students’ dialogue journal letters. Based on the research by Staton (1980), who studied the written conversations between sixth-grade students and their teacher, Atwell chose dialogue journals to elicit her students’ active engagement with text. To understand how dialogue journals help promote reading development, Wells (1993) examined eight student journals from her eighth-grade reading class. Student responses emerged into five categories: (1) ongoing business, (2) metacognitive, (3) responses, (4) connections, and (5) evaluation of text and author. Identifying these categories helped Wells form hypotheses about how journal writing fostered her students’ reading development. Wollman-Bonilla and Werchadlo (1995) identified a categorization scheme from 620 first-grade dialogue journal responses. Although this study demonstrated that when given the opportunity, students in the primary grades can create differing responses to literature, several unanswered questions emerged as to how the teacher may have influenced the students’ responses.

While such research notes the varying topics and categories documented by students, it does not directly determine if the teachers have indeed fostered these students’ written conversations (Hall, Crawford, & Robinson, 1997). The purposes of the current study were, therefore, to investigate how middle school literacy teachers used dialogue journals and the processes they employed to respond to their students’ written responses. To accomplish this, the researcher employed a grounded theory study (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin 1998) to create a theoretical model to help explicate an area of inquiry about which little is known.
Theoretical Frame

In response-based approaches to teaching literature, the teacher's role is to encourage students to share their individual responses to what they have read through guidance and support focusing on the student's construction of meaning from text (Cox, 1997; Fountas & Pinnell, 2001). This view of literacy instruction is grounded in reader response theory (Bleich, 1978; Iser, 1978; Langer, 1989; Probst, 1988; Richards, 1929; Rosenblatt, 1938). Reader response theory takes into account the students' personal responses to a text, allows literature to be relevant to the students' lives, and makes it possible for multiple interpretations to be accepted rather than just one correct interpretation.

Emphasis on the role of the reader indicates that the interpretation of a single text may vary. Langer (1994) refers to this as the "horizon of possibilities." Throughout the literary experience, readers will explore their emotions, rethink their predictions, and consider new possibilities. "Coming from different backgrounds, with different attitudes, under varying circumstances, the students naturally have different readings" (Probst, 1984, p. 13). Consequently, teachers who want to establish a response-based literature program should encourage students to find personal meaning in literature (Many, 1994).

The significant role of the reader as the source of constructing meaning from text is supported by the theoretical work of Bleich (1978). In Subjective Criticism, he advocated that meaning is developed in the minds of readers. Words on a page may form an object, but it is the reader who constructs the meaning. Bleich argued that readers, as a result of their individual motivations and psychological structures, form subjective responses and interpretations to a text. Additional support for the reader's involvement in creating meaning from text is supported by Iser (1978) who applied the philosophy of phenomenology to the interpretation of literature. Iser proposed that during the dyadic relationship between text and reader, the reader must fill in the gaps in order to make meaning.

Langer (1989) added insight into the making of meaning process from her ethnographic research. Langer argued that readers are actively
engaged in creating meaning from text through a process of envisionment. Similar to the ideas proposed by other theorists about the reader’s stance (the way in which a reader relates to the text), Langer’s research suggested that the reader moved through four stances: 1) *Being out and stepping in* — during this stance, the reader uses background knowledge to attempt comprehension of the text; (2) *Being in and moving through an envisionment* — here the reader interacts with the text to build more complex understandings; (3) *Stepping back and rethinking what one knows* — during this stance, the reader reconsiders his knowledge, assumptions, and attitudes brought to the reading; (4) *Stepping out and objectifying the experience* — finally, the reader reflects on the reading of the text and the experience of reading it. The role of the reader, therefore, is seen as an integral part of the response process and the construction of meaning. Since construction of meaning is determined by the reader, the role of the teacher is significant in guiding students’ understanding of text. Hence, examining strategies teachers use in dialogue journal writing may provide insight into how to enhance students’ literary development. The more we know about what teachers do, the more we may know about the instructional implications of the dialogue journal approach.

**Method**

**Participants**

Bogdan and Biklen (1992) recommend participants be purposefully selected to facilitate theory development. A letter describing the research study was attached to a participant survey and distributed to approximately 70 middle school literacy teachers. From the surveys, 10 teachers responded with interest. However, based on established criteria, the final selection involved three middle school literacy teachers: Ms. C, who taught reading at the seventh-grade level, and Ms. L and Mr. D, who both taught reading at the sixth-grade level.

**Data collection**

Dialogue journals were the primary data source. The researcher analyzed over 600 dialogue journal letters written by the teachers.
Although the researcher using the grounded theory method “collects primarily interview data” (Creswell, 1998, p. 56), relatively recent studies have added merit to the researcher using documents as a primary data source in developing grounded theory (Pandit, 1996; Stamp, 1999). The data collection for this study also included a participant survey, interviews, classroom observations, and notebooks to record the researcher’s thoughts, questions, and ideas during data analysis.

Data analysis

Data were analyzed using open coding, axial coding, and selective coding procedures devised by Strauss and Corbin (1998). These set coding procedures allowed data to be analyzed and coded forming categories in which substantive theory emerged. The first stages of data analysis began when the researcher transcribed the audio tapes of the teachers’ initial interviews. As the tapes were transcribed, the researcher wrote memos consisting of impressions, observations, reflections, and interpretations related to potential categories of theory development. This permitted her to record the first phase of open coding categories.

Open coding: Interviews

The open coding process of the teachers’ transcribed interviews involved a combination of underlining, circling, and margin notations of initial concepts. Each concept, totaling 106, was then written on a separate index card, which allowed the researcher to collapse like concepts into categories. After open coding of the interviews, the researcher read the teachers’ responses in students’ dialogue journals looking for similarities, differences, or inconsistencies in the initial coding.

Analysis of students dialogue journals

Using the constant comparative method described by Glaser and Strauss (1967), the researcher used color-coding tabs throughout the journal letters to identify specific segments of the teachers’ responses. As the researcher read and reread the letters, it became evident that the teachers’ responses fell into four separate categories: visual aids,
modeling, questioning, and feedback. The data became suitably grouped under one of the four teacher response categories until theoretical saturation occurred in which the teachers' responses became repetitive and no additional data were being found to establish new categories or properties of the categories.

Axial coding and selective coding

During axial coding, the researcher uncovered relationships within and among categories. Axial coding helped the researcher understand the relationship between the four teacher response categories and their properties. During selective coding, the researcher integrated and refined the theory to identify a "central" or "core category" (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Using such techniques as writing a storyline, using diagrams, and sorting and reviewing memos, the researcher identified "individualized instructional guidance" as the core category that conceptualized the teacher's response process and explained the interconnections of the response categories.

Substantiating the emergence of theory

In order to determine the reliability of the research results and to confirm that the themes and substantive theory emerged from the data rather than being forced by the researcher, follow-up interviews were conducted with all three teachers. A technique called "stimulated recall" was used to gain access to the teachers' thoughts during their journal letter writing (Gass, 2000). During this process, the teachers read selected journal letters and their responses to the students; answered specific questions to facilitate their thoughts and reflection; and evaluated the resulting data analysis, thus confirming the validity of the response model and achievement of theoretical saturation.

Results and Discussion

A model of the teacher's response process

The model in Figure 1 is depicted on open pages of a dialogue journal. It is within this context that literary conversation between
teacher and student became conceptualized as an ongoing scaffolding process. With each student's dialogue journal, the teacher plays an important role in engaging the student in a reciprocal process of dialogue about literature and the act of reading. In considering the theoretical model, it is important to keep in mind that the teacher's response process is in a state of dynamic change as each new journal entry from a student is read.

Figure 1. A Model of the Teacher's Response Process.
Knowledge and Experience Base and Theoretical Base

The teacher's knowledge and experience base as well as theoretical base are two model components that influence the entire response process. This is depicted in the arrows flowing separately from each component at the top of the journal pages and then joining together to form a circular flow of arrows connecting various model components in Figure 1. The teacher's knowledge and experience base can be expanded over time as new knowledge and literacy experiences are acquired. The theoretical base held by the teacher, however, is likely to remain unchanged but does assist the teacher in responding to a student.

Knowledge and experience base

The teacher's knowledge and experience base is critical to the response process. The teachers recognized the range of academic ability and young adolescents' developmental changes in using dialogue journals at the middle school level. Such knowledge of young adolescents influences literacy education (Irvin & Strauss, 2000; Knowles & Brown, 2000; Rief, 1992; Robb, 2000; Simmons & Carroll, 2003). Moreover, the teacher's familiarity of the forms and conventions of writing and understanding of the processes and strategies that readers use to comprehend text was important in the teaching of literary response. A final aspect of the teachers' knowledge and experience base resides in their ability to recommend topics, authors, and genres to motivate adolescents to become lifelong voluntary readers (Morrow, 2003).

Theoretical base

This model component comprised three belief areas. The first included the teacher's perception of "reading is thinking" as a strong driving force underlying the entire premise of dialogue journals. Teachers continually facilitated students' thinking about reading, beginning with students' personal connections and reactions to a piece of literature to ensuring that they considered different literary elements and techniques used by authors to convey meaning. A second commonality was that all three teachers believed that they played an important role in
motivating their students to become lifelong voluntary readers and valued student choice reading (Moore, Bean, Birdyshaw, & Rycik, 1999). Studies that addressed the question of what motivated students to read indicate that teachers can be a motivating influence in fostering students’ lifelong reading (Gambrell, 1996; Guthrie & Humenick, 2004; Ruddell, 1995). Finally, the teachers believed in building student-teacher relationships by engaging in one-on-one conversations with students. These teachers reported during their interviews the development of student teacher relationships in dialogue journals described by several researchers (Bean & Rigoni, 2001; Hall, Crawford & Robinson, 1997; Hanrahan, 1999).

Together, both components helped to formulate the teacher’s response, which begins with reading the student’s letter, as shown in Figure 1. The teacher drew upon his/her knowledge, experience, and theoretical beliefs in an attempt to reflect upon a student’s letter. This required the teacher to form an “instructional stance,” which influenced decisions relevant to how the teacher responded to a student.

**Instructional Stance**

Instructional stance accounted for decisions teachers made about how to respond to a student. As Mr. D explained:

> When you are writing a letter you have to sit and think, “Well now, what was that child saying, and what do I want to say in response to that.”

Teachers formed an instructional stance based upon the perceptions made of students’ understandings and needs in terms of: (1) literacy development, (2) reading motivation, and (3) relationship development as shown in Figure 1. Essentially, each student and each letter were unique and required “improvisational judgments about which of the teacher actions to employ” (Jewell & Pratt, 1999, p. 849).
Literacy development

Forming an instructional stance teachers to make decisions or judgments while reading students’ letter. For Ms. C, her instructional stance began by looking at different aspects of the student’s writing development. In addition to evaluating the quality of students’ writing, teachers looked at students’ letters to see if they understood how to use strategies during reading. For example, Ms. L stated:

I can see if they understand how to make connections or if they understand how to make predictions. So it is a quick way for me to check to see how many kids are getting it, or who’s not getting it. So it is an assessment tool.

Reading motivation

Based primarily on the teacher’s theoretical beliefs, teachers had expectations that students will become lifelong voluntary readers. Forming an instructional stance toward reading motivation required the teachers to model their literary experience. Ms. C indicated this when reflecting on a letter she wrote to a student:

I then went into something that I was reading, which I often do because I think that is a good way to get the kids to learn about new titles and tell them something about what I am reading.

Relationship development

Relationship development accounted for decisions teachers made about writing responses in order to connect with and better understand their students. Mr. D described how through the dialogue journals he was able to learn more about his students:

Every week I read their writing and after a few weeks you begin to realize the child and their thinking and how they were doing.
As the teacher gained more knowledge of the student's abilities and interests, the teacher's choice of response was likely to change. By using a variety of "response facilitators," another model component shown on the bottom right of Figure 1, the teachers guided student's literacy development.

**Response Facilitators**

Using the constant comparative method described by Glaser and Strauss (1967), the researcher created another model component, a broad category called response facilitators (Figure 2). This category included four subcategories: (1) visual aids, (2) modeling, (3) questioning and requesting, and (4) feedback. Although each response category was presented as a separate category, it is important to note that they functioned together in a simultaneous and integrated manner. This is illustrated by the arrows surrounding and connecting these categories (Figure 2).

**Visual aids**

Teachers introduced students to the dialogue journal process using visual aids during classroom instruction. This subcategory had several properties, including an introductory letter, overhead transparencies of example letters, as well as posters and chart paper. All visual aids were used to support students' initial attempts at response writing. Teachers provided continued support and guidance through journal correspondence between teacher and student. On occasion, the teachers wrote journal responses to scaffold the student's writing by referring to visual aids and by commenting on proper formatting of a letter; other times, the teachers addressed the quality of the student's letter writing in terms of correct spelling and grammar, development of paragraphs, and complexity of the student's thinking, as seen in the following response:

I'm confused as to why you aren't following the instructions and format we agreed upon. I have stapled another copy of the letter I gave you at the beginning of the year about the kind of thinking and writing I'm looking for. (Ms. L)
Don’t forget what we talked about Wednesday in class. Your letters should consist of 2-4 paragraphs. Your topics should change with each paragraph. (Ms. C)

The teachers responded using what Jewell and Pratt (1999) term as “procedural reinforcements.” Through dialogue journal responses, the teachers wrote comments to ensure that their students followed the expectations and procedures of journal writing.

Modeling

Teacher modeling was important in scaffolding students’ written responses to their reading. The teachers modeled many aspects involved in literary response, including (1) properly formatting a letter, (2) demonstrating the reader’s thinking and use of strategies, and (3) interpreting literary elements and techniques. As Hickman (1984) noted, the teachers “acted as the classroom’s number-one model reader, showing in attitudes, habits, and actions what it is like to find enjoyment and meaning in books” (p. 282).

In many ways, examining of the teachers’ responses indicated an aesthetic stance toward reading (Rosenblatt, 1938/1995). From this stance, teachers made personal connections, empathized with characters, and visualized scenes and events to demonstrate being actively involved in reading. The following examples of teachers’ responses, which focused on encouraging students’ personal experiences with literature, are supported by literary theorists (Bleich, 1978; Iser, 1978; Langer, 1994; Probst, 1988; Rosenblatt, 1938/1995).

This sounds like another heartbreak for Brian. I’m with you on this one. If this had happened to me, I don’t know how I cold have found the strength to go on. I wonder how this book is going to end. (Mr. D)

Well your connection could like my connections when I first read these three stories. Yes, I too started to believe in the “enthrotti.” Also, I thought about Kything and how cool that would be. I also want to be in Meg’s
family. They have such a fun and interesting home life. (Ms. L)

Figure 2. Response Facilitators.
Teachers in this study were required to meet curriculum standards and improve students' performance on standardized achievement tests and they used the dialogue journal as an opportunity to provide literacy instruction to meet certain standards. For example, the teachers often provided their own interpretations of literary elements (e.g., theme, character, setting, plot, tone, conflict) to foster students' own understandings of text:

I think you really nailed down the theme of your book. It seems to be all about courage and finding the strength inside of you to survive even when things are terrible. It reminds me of the book we're going to be reading. This is a good example of how the same themes keep coming up throughout literature. (Mr. D)

While the teachers' responses demonstrated thoughtful engagement with literature (Langer, 1998), they also emphasized response to literary technique (e.g., figurative language, dialogue, description, word choice, style).

In the following response, Ms. L discusses different literary techniques used by authors:

Mysteries are fun books to read and they usually have foreshadowing in them. That's when the author puts things in that later you can look back on and say "Oh, yea . . . that's why that was there!" Anyway, look for clues like that and write me about it. (Ms. L)

Questioning and requesting

Another frequently identified tool used to scaffold students' literary conversation involved questioning and requesting. Teachers asked questions and made requests in their dialogue journal responses to: (1) invite students into discussion, (2) clarify students' understandings, and (3) redirect and extend students' thinking. This is consistent with Probst's (1984) assertion that "Students also need to learn to analyze, to interpret, and to seek evidence for their conclusions" (p. 57).
Asking students to reflect upon thinking as readers is a commonly reported strategy in response-based literacy instruction research. O’Flahavan (1994) found that teachers asked questions while assuming the roles of elicitor and framer in peer discussion groups. In both roles, teachers frequently asked questions to help students “elaborate or extend their ideas” and to help “students gain perspective of their thinking” (p. 355). Many of the teachers’ responses included questioning and requesting statements to clarify students’ understanding and redirect or extend students’ thinking.

You described well what you liked in your reading, but you didn’t explain why. Is it because you could visualize it? Also, your prediction is interesting, but what events in the story help you write that prediction? (Ms. L)

Try not to give so much summary next time. How about telling me what surprises you in your story and how the author’s writing style helps you understand the story. (Ms. L)

Could you tell me how the book is interesting and what makes it “cool?” Give some examples from the story to support that. (Ms. C)

Asking students to consider the teacher’s written questions and requests appeared to be an essential strategy to guide students’ thinking about literature. Langer (1994) declared that teachers use questioning and probing techniques to get students to critically think about literature. Lehr and Thompson (2000) recognized that asking divergent questions, rather than asking questions about literal facts of a piece of literature “allows children to consider their interpretations of the story” (p. 482). Others have reached a similar conclusion. Wells (1993), Wollman-Bonilla and Werchadlo (1995), Berger (1996), Jewell and Pratt (1999), and Short et al. (1999) all found that probing students’ thinking by asking questions aided in improving a reader’s capacity to evoke meaning from text.
The final response facilitator used to scaffold students’ literary conversation was feedback from the teacher. Feedback included (1) providing encouragement, (2) answering students’ questions, (3) offering recommendations of authors and titles of young adolescent literature, and (4) giving compliments. Teachers’ feedback was necessary to support the reciprocal conversation that is inherent in dialogue journals. The greater the foregrounding of a safe conversational context, the more likely it is that the students will feel comfortable to develop their ideas, thoughts, questions, and concerns as adolescent readers (Bean & Rigoni, 2001; Hall et al., 1997; Jewell & Pratt, 1999). The following responses illustrate how teachers encouraged students to contribute to the literary conversation:

I look forward to hearing from you again soon. (Ms. C)
Keep up the good reading and writing! (Ms. L)
Go for the goodness! (Mr. D)

To expand students’ reading experiences so that they come to enjoy reading, teachers often recommended topics, authors, and genres for students to explore. Jewell and Pratt (1999) determined that teachers often used “validating” and “affirming” responses during literature discussion groups with second- and third-grade students. Examples of their responses included: “(1) Give it a try, (2) You did a wonderful job of bringing in your true life experience, and (3) You did a nice job of connecting with each other” (p. 849). These responses are representative of the encouragement and compliments identified in the teachers’ dialogue journals analyzed in this study.

Response Continuum

The “response continuum” shown in Figure 3 reflects three forms of teachers’ responses. Instructional and conversational responses are two forms of teachers’ responses represented at opposite ends of the continuum. The third form, named “instructional/conversational” responses, is indicated at the center point of the continuum showing a blending of both types of responses. Essentially, the response continuum
indicated that the teachers’ responses (symbolized by the teacher’s letter in Figure 1) continually fluctuated between an “instructional” response and a “conversational” response. When asked to reflect on the emergence of the response continuum, Mr. D concluded:

I think with each student you are going to find a place on this continuum. I’ll have 25 different dots in terms of how I meet them.

Figure 3. Response Continuum.

Analysis of the teachers’ responses provided the researcher an awareness of the complex and changing role of the teacher in dialogue journals. There were times when the teacher’s role called for direct scaffolding, focusing on developing students’ literacy understanding (instructional response), and other times when the teacher joined the discussion as an equal (conversational response), giving students more freedom to experience literature (Probst, 1984). A constant emphasis on curriculum mandates for reading instruction coupled with reader response theory (Bleich, 1978; Iser, 1978; Probst, 1988; Richards, 1929; Rosenblatt, 1938/1995) seemed to foster “permanent tension in the relation between authority and liberty” (Shor & Freire, 1987, p. 102). While teachers want to foster students’ unique responses to literature, they are also required to follow state standards for literacy instruction, thus creating instructional/conversational responses. Throughout the dialogue journal process, the teachers’ responses fluctuated, thereby tailoring their responses to the needs of individual students. This is illustrated by the arrows surrounding and connecting the central theme named “individualized instructional guidance” (Figure 1).
Individualized Instructional Guidance

During selective coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1998), a central theme named "individualized instructional guidance" was identified explaining how the teacher facilitates literary conversation with a student. As the teacher's response process occurred, the response facilitators were used independently and in combination with one another to scaffold literary conversation with a student. The scaffolding process is reflected in the circular flow of arrows connecting various model components, as seen at the center of Figure 1.

Through dialogue journals, the teachers assisted students' literacy learning by providing and referring to visual aids; modeling and demonstrating reading skills; strategies, and experiences; asking questions to guide students understanding; and giving feedback to encourage students’ growth and motivation to read. This instructional guidance was ongoing throughout the dialogue journal process and was tailored to the needs of individual students. The emergence of individualized instructional guidance is consistent with Vygotsky’s (1986) work. According to Vygotsky, teachers can assist students’ learning using a variety of strategies. Wertsch (1980) further clarified how adults alter their dialogue to support the learning of a child. Depending on the child’s ability to complete a task, the adult’s responses vary from explicit directives to vague hints and suggestions. Wertsch refers to this as “semiotic flexibility.” The teachers in this study provided varying levels of support in the form of written dialogue to encourage students’ literacy learning.

Instructional Implications and Recommendations

The research reported in this study offers several implications and recommendations for middle school literacy teachers who are inclined to implement dialogue journals as part of their reading curriculum. Through use of dialogue journals, middle school literacy teachers can foster individual student’s literacy development and lifelong reading with both curriculum standards and reader response theory (Bleich, 1978; Iser, 1978; Probst, 1988; Richards, 1929; Rosenblatt, 1938/1995) in mind. To accomplish this requires a balance between providing instructional...
responses and conversational responses. Furthermore, a variety of response facilitators should be employed if middle school literacy teachers are to scaffold students' literacy learning and promote students' engagement with literature. Too many questions and too much emphasis on a “quality” response may create teacher-dominated conversations and hinder students’ attempts at responding freely to literature (Adler, Rougle, Kaiser, & Caughlan, 2003/2004). As O'Flahavan (1994) warned, “excessive teacher participation” (p. 356) may undermine the premise behind dialogue journals. Teachers must perceive their role as a facilitator (Close, 1992; Paille, 1991; Short et al., 1999) who continually determines what strategies best meet the needs of their students and the purposes of the dialogue journal.

The present findings show that as literacy professionals, middle school teachers must possess in-depth knowledge of reading and writing processes in order to mentally analyze the quality of response and understanding indicated in students’ dialogue journals. They further need to understand how to address these processes effectively in their dialogue journal responses and classroom instruction. This calls for improving teacher education programs in adolescent literacy (Bean & Harper, 2004). Appropriately prepared middle school literacy teachers should have proficiency in modeling for students how to write quality responses; how to visualize, react, predict, and connect with text; and also to relate those experiences to instruction in literary elements and techniques used by authors to convey meaning.

Middle school literacy teachers should get to know their middle school students through dialogue journal conversations. These insights will inform their instructional decision within dialogue journals and their classrooms. Using dialogue journals also allows middle school literacy teachers the opportunity to forge strong relationships with their students (Bean & Rigoni, 2001; Hall et al., 1997; Hanrahan, 1999). Most important, middle school literacy teachers should model the pure pleasures of reading to promote lifelong reading of their students (Morrow, 2003).
Limitations and Future Research

Many teachers may use journals with their students, but in different forms, using different methods, and in different contexts. Due to the uniqueness of the practice of dialogue journals in classrooms, one limitation of this study may be a lack of generalizability. The researcher is also aware that the complete picture of the teachers’ response process may not be fully realized (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Additional studies that employ various research paradigms within low-socioeconomic and culturally diverse educational contexts are needed to confirm or refute the theory of the teachers’ response process. With the current emphasis on implementing effective reading instruction that is based on scientific evidence (National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, 2000; Reyna, 2004) there is the need to conduct quantitative research. An experimental study such as Many and Wiseman’s (1992) examination of different approaches to students’ responses to literature might present insight into the effectiveness of dialogue journals. Given the demand to improve students’ performance on standardized tests, teachers will have to select instructional approaches that demonstrate positive educational outcomes. Wedwick and Weilbacher’s (2004) examination of eighth-grade students’ engagement in literature circles (Daniels, 2002; Short, 1986) showed observable connections between students’ discussions in literature circles and state standards for English language arts. Extensive secondary analysis (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) of the students’ journal responses may provide additional insight into the educational outcomes of the teachers’ responses in this study.

Final Thoughts

The field of literacy, especially when focused on best practices for adolescent literacy instruction, must consider the instructional decisions that teachers make and the roles that teachers play in fostering students’ literacy development. As this study suggests, teachers’ use of dialogue journals have the potential to design literacy instruction based on the needs of individual students. Individualized instructional guidance was the premise of dialogue journals. Teaching a “one-size-fits-all” curriculum was not the goal. Rather, each journal correspondence was
“another step in the students’ growth toward independent learning and better understanding of literature” (Close, 1992, p. 65).

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