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# Towards a Transactional Classroom: Can the at-risk reader belong?

By

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**Abstract**

This study sought to explore whether or not at-risk or less proficient readers were capable of building an envisionment while aesthetically responding to reading. Another focus included an investigation of the teacher's role and the "context" (environment) that needs to exist in order for transaction to occur. Three focal at-risk readers in a grade six classroom served as the voices that informed the study. In collaboration with their teacher and peers and with instructional support these readers made a tentative step into envisionment building. The study underscores the need for teachers to move beyond the more traditional approach when working with at-risk readers and to extend an invitation to reach for a horizon of possibilities.

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# CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

## NATURE OF THE INQUIRY

> Man's ontological vocation is to be a subject who acts upon and transforms his world and in doing so moves toward ever new possibilities of a fuller, richer life individually and collectively. ( Freire, 1970)

The world is not a static place, a fixed reality, which man must accept and adapt to, but rather a *problem* to be worked upon. Critical thinking is the primary element allowing the possibility of change. No matter what our class, race, gender or social standing, without the capacity to think critically about ourselves and our lives none of us would be able to move forward, to change and grow. Public education has failed somewhat in achieving this goal of critical thinking. Its paternalistic flavour tends to cover its real purpose of turning the masses into passive beings. It creates passive learners, for in order to fit into many classrooms, students must sign on the dotted line! Many classrooms subscribe to what Freire terms the banking system of education. This conjures up the image of the depositor (teacher) being the only possessor of knowledge and at her discretion depositing it into the receiver (student) who is allowed only the action of receiving, filing and storing these deposits. The student is perceived as the receptacle waiting patiently to be filled at the font of knowledge (teacher).

Freire suggests that an alternative system for education is a problem posing system in which the shift moves to teacher/student, students/ teachers, and student/student. Dialogue is vital to this life force that drives a problem posing system of education. Freire (1970) believed that when we read the *word*, we read the *world*. Conceived broadly, "the art of reading is not merely an act that facilitates the

accumulation of knowledge" (Sumara, 1995, 24). Reading becomes an act of interpreting the complex world of intertextual relations. Reading announces a "specific location in which the reader is able to discern the usually invisible relations" (Sumara, 1995, 25) among herself or himself and the world. From our earliest years, literature is an essential medium for "learning from and communicating with ourselves and others" (Langer, 1990, 99) a way " to reflect on our lives, our options and the human condition" (Langer, 1990, 99). As such it ought to contribute to every student's development of meaning, sense of self-esteem and literary development.

Involving poor readers with quality literature should be viewed as an integral part of their reading instruction. Considerable evidence indicates that in addition to their lower skills, students who have reading difficulties have had less exposure to *real* reading than their peers, especially exposure to high quality literature. Instead, we find students who are less proficient readers waiting for an invitation to join the *literacy club* (Smith, 1971). Poor readers seem to perceive reading as mainly a decoding process rather than meaning construction or comprehension. (Gambell and Heatherington, 1981). These students are characterized by a *passive approach* to meaning making (Johnston and Winograd, 1985). Yet, students learn to read by reading (Smith, 1976) and the motivation to read is essential in getting students to read. Chall (1983) and Stanovich (1986) contrast the reading experiences of good and poor readers, characterizing the contrast as a situation in which the rich get richer and the poor get poorer.

Johnston and Winograd (1983) believe that it is important to treat passive failure as a state rather than a trait. To treat passive failure as a trait means that programs must be modified to fit these traits which ostensibly ensures students never get past passive

failure. Johnston and Winograd (1987) believe that adopting a trait stance perpetuates the persistence of passive failure. Instead, it seems more reasonable, according to Johnston and Winograd (1987) to treat passive failure as a state thus deeming it to be a temporary learning problem. From the perspective of reader response theory, this positivistic attitude regarding traits distorts reader/text relationships by perceiving the text as "the purveyor of meaning rather than as a signifier of meaning to be constructed by the reader" (Purcell- Gates, 1991, 237). Rosenblatt (1991) defines reader response theory as having two stances: aesthetic and efferent when transacting with text. The purpose of an efferent stance is to carry away information and reproduce it to fulfill a specific response, such as character analysis. The purpose of aesthetic response is immediate, "to live through reading" evoking "what the words are stirring up—associations, ideas, attitudes, sensations or feelings" (445).

Literature education can play a role in addressing the problems at-risk readers face. Every student has a wide array of literary experiences before ever passing through a schoolhouse door, is familiar with subject matter, human experience and knows ways to organize and tell about it. People of all ages come by such experiences through tales that they have heard at home, in their communities, and in their places of worship, as well as personal stories they have told (e.g. Scollen and Scollen, 1991; Witherell, Noddings, 1991; Wolf and Heath, 1993). All of these are lived experiences.

In most classrooms, it appears that schools currently go to considerable lengths to focus students' attention on product rather than process. Winograd and Greelee (1985) believe that aesthetic reading is rarely found in classrooms. Even students who come to school with the notion that reading will be exciting as an aesthetic social experience

quickly find out that reading in school is often reading content and post-reading questions.

Instead of focusing exclusively on word identification and decoding skills it would seem valuable to engage at-risk or less proficient readers in the habit of aesthetic evocation in learning to read. It may well be that we can help students improve their reading only when students see that reading opens up worlds they could not otherwise enter. Thus, extending the invitation for at-risk readers to become part of reader response teaching may help close the gap between proficient and non proficient readers.

Langer (1995) in discussing critical thought suggests that the field of education has taken a "unidimensional view of critical thought" (209) defining its properties as those of logical/scientific thought. This seems to have negated another essential aspect of human reasoning and problem solving, what Langer refers to as "literary understanding" (209). Reading literature from an aesthetic stance or exploring a "horizon of possibilities" involves a great deal of critical thought. Langer suggests that in exploring a "horizon of possibilities" (1995, 214) readers are not just looking for information but orient themselves to exploring possibilities about characters, plot, situations and how they interrelate. The reader also thinks beyond the particular situation to reflect on his or her own life.

It still seems to be that the predominant focus of critical thought is scientific in nature. Langer stresses how literary understanding has been overlooked. She insists that literary understanding is another "highly productive avenue of making sense" (209). Purvis (1990) suggests that the literature curriculum has the power to seek to change people, it does not want them to become one of the herd of total individuals. Yet, both

instincts, critical and scientific, must be respected. Over the years, distinctions have been made between literary and scientific ways of thinking, suggesting that together they represent the multiple ways of making sense that people draw upon when constructing learning. Suzanne Langer (1942), for instance, distinguishes between presentational and discursive ways of constructing reality. Rosenblatt (1938), focusing on the reader's role, distinguishes between aesthetic and efferent reading and Britton (1970), in his work on language abilities; distinguishes between spectator and participant roles. Each set of distinctions focuses on at least two sets of meanings. One is more inward focusing on personal meanings and understanding of human situations. The other is information gathering, outside of the individual's life world, focusing outward, focusing on that and situations as they relate to each other.

In the context of a social milieu (the classroom) literature can perhaps serve as a catalyst around which students can engage in Freire's (1970) problem posing system of education. This in turn must give credence to each student's lived experience that is brought into the classroom.

## THE HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

When I was seven to sixteen years of age I would read in bed with a flashlight under the covers, hiding my self-imposed insomnia from my parents. Reading was my passport to joy, sorrow and laughter to name a few responses. In reading George Eliot's Mill on the Floss I did not just gather facts about Maggie Tulliver's life as a young woman in Victorian times, I lived in those times and I saw through the eyes and personality of Maggie. As well as chuckling at some of her rebellious antics, I

commiserated with her moral dilemmas. I acquired an awareness of the moral dimensions appropriate for viewing the world. Reading literature was not just an escape; it was a place wherein I began to know myself, and to understand the world around me, albeit somewhat naively.

In contrast, the study of literature in the classroom came under the auspices of New Criticism Theory. The fundamental tenet of New Criticism was that meaning resided in the text. The text was conceived as a "verbal icon" (Willmot and Beardsley, 1954) a "well wrought urn" (Brooks, 1947) and meaning was located in the text. In this way, correctness in interpretation could be ensured. Interpreting the text was the teacher's domain, the student as reader was invisible. It was much later in life when I encountered Louise Rosenblatt (1978) that I was given a language to articulate what I had experienced as a reader away from the school context.

With the publication of Literature as Exploration in 1938, Rosenblatt issued the first challenge to the New Criticism theory of reading. However, it was not until the 1970's that the significance of Rosenblatt's work was beginning to be recognized. During this period theorists such as Holland (1968), Bleich (1975), Fish (1980), and Iser (1978) were developing their own theories of reader response. These reader response critics all have in common the tenet that readers play an important role in the construction of meaning. They differ however in the relative emphasis they place on these elements: the reader, the text and the relationships between the text and the relationships between the text and the world.

Rosenblatt (1978) has argued that meaning emerges from the transaction between reader and text, as the reader " lives through the experienced meaning that for her is the

poem" (44). For the reader response critic, there is no distinction between the response and the meaning. The effect of the *poem* on the reader constitutes its meaning. Rosenblatt also contends that as the reader engages in the reading process, he or she becomes aware of the process itself as well as the interpretations the process produces. Using James Britton's (1970) terminology she argues that the reader is in a sense both "spectator and participant" (1985, 102). Even as the reader is engaged in text constructing meaning, he or she is also aware of the process that is being used. Harker (1990) contends that the "lived experience" of the reader " in the first instance produces meaning" but it also "produces an awareness of how the meaning is constructed" (71).

Iser (1978) makes the point, when he states that while interpretation occurs between " the poles of the reader" (ix) " we comprehend a fictional experience through the experience it makes us undergo." (189) Iser asserts that the text and the reader interact to create what we know as the literary world itself. The text has two poles, the "artistic" and the "aesthetic"; the "artistic" is the author's text" in which the content subject matter is produced, and the "aesthetic" is the "reader's reception" and the "active construction" of it. In looking at the polarity, " the work itself cannot be identical with the text or with the "concretization", but must be situated somewhere between the two. Thus it becomes virtual in character, as it cannot be relegated to the "reality" of the text or the "subjectivity" of the reader, and it is from this "virtuality" that it derives its dynamism (21).

Rosenblatt (1978) expresses that the reader does not find meaning located in the text or in her or himself, but rather, derives meaning from the "transaction" between self and text during the act of reading. Iser (1978) further developed this idea by showing the

ways in which texts organize readers' experiences so that active construction by the reader is necessary for the meaning to be worked.

Holland (1968) and Bleich (1975) locate the source of the meaning in the individual reader insisting that the literary work exists in the mind of the individual reader. By itself, it is just ink on the paper—it is not until it is read and reformulated in the mind of the reader that it becomes an act of literature.

Fish (1980) contends "interpretation is not the act of construing but the act of constructing . . . interpreters do not decode poems, they make them" (327). Fish would argue that the work's meaning lies in the process, not in a final neat complete statement that immobilizes it. This process needs an interpretive community to give it authority. The meaning of the transactions is due neither to the reader nor the text but " the interpretive communities that are responsible for the shape of the reader's activities and for the texts these activities produce" (322).

While there are a number of reader response theories, all have in common that readers play an important role in the construction of meaning.

## THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Reader response theory is not easily defined. Scholars and researchers affiliated with this school of thought do not always agree in their ideas and areas of interest—regarding text-reader relationships. Chase and Hynd (1987) in their article on reader response contend that most scholars and researchers do agree on the following assumptions: 1) Meaning is not "contained" in the text, but is derived from interaction (or transaction; as per Rosenblatt) between the context and the structure of the author's

message and the experience and prior knowledge of the reader, 2) Readers comprehend differently because every reader is culturally and individually unique, and 3) Examining readers' responses to text is more valid than establishing one "correct" interpretation of text meaning.

Based on reader response theory, the teaching of literature is essentially a pattern of thinking and talking that begins with the reader's primary response to the poem, play, novel, scientific text or social studies text—a response may be emotional, intellectual or even visceral and move on from there to other matters. When a reader approaches a text, she does not do so as a blank slate. Instead she brings to a reading of literature past experiences, feelings and preoccupations, and knowledge about previously read literature. Rosenblatt suggests that "books do not simply happen to people" (66). People also happen to books. A story or poem is " merely ink spots on paper until a reader transforms them into a set of meaningful symbols" (66).

Reader response theory, which takes into account the students' "personal" responses to a text, allows literature to be relevant to students' lives and makes it possible for multiple interpretations to be accepted, not just one correct interpretation (Iser, 1978; Rosenblatt, 1938). This view allows for creativity and reflective thinking in the classroom. Reader response theorists reject the notion that literary texts have some objective meaning or truth that is determined by the expert (teacher) to be the correct interpretation. Instead, the responses of the students are " guided, enriched, and extended by teachers working collaboratively with students in what remains their essentially private process of reading literature" (Harker, 1990, 71). Rosenblatt (1978) and others'

intention is to take that primary personal response and on the basis of this initial response help the students to build a sounder, fuller understanding of the text (51).

**RELATED RESEARCH**

We have available to us major pieces of literary theory and analysis and commentary on reader response. Their work provides the foundation for much of the research and practice in student's literature. Relevant works will be discussed next.

Langer (1992), operating from a constructivist viewpoint, sees reading as an experience of envisionment building. Envisionment building is an "act of becoming—where questions, insights and understandings develop as the reading progresses,"(65) while understandings that were once held are "subject to modification, reinterpretation and even dismissed" (Langer, 1989, 05).

Literature is not simply information to be used, facts to be carried out in support of some argument or knowledge to be applied to some problem; rather it is the "catalyst for an experience." It focuses on "the present, on what happens during those moments of reading and reflection" (Probst, 1983, 43). Probst (1983) states that responses to reading should begin with the most amorphous, non directive questions possible. This does not mean that it becomes a meandering, lazy groping to unfounded opinions. Probst (1983) states rather, that subsequent questions can "explore the students' reactions, seek out differences and similarities among them, clarify them, search for their points of origin in the text and in readers' experience" (44).

Studies that investigated reader response in the classroom were rare until recently. The majority of research articles on reader response are published from the fields of

student's literature, reading, language arts and English education. While much of the research is conducted by university faculty and graduate students, a growing number of studies are being done by teacher researchers. Some studies considered the influence that reader's stance or approach to the text has on a literary work (Many, J. and Cox, C. 1992; Galda 1992; Many, J. 1990). These studies found that fuller acknowledgment and understanding of the active role of the reader in constructing meaning from a text is a key element when considering the reader response approach in the classroom.

The role of the text in reader response has been the focus of numerous studies at all grade levels (Leal, D., 1992 & Kiefer, B., 1988). These studies showed readers clarified their ideas as they read and related them to the whole. They continually tried to go beyond the information given, by asking questions, making hypotheses, and seeking evidence. They sometimes used their understandings to reflect on their own lives.

In another subcategory of reader response research, the studies are concerned primarily with the reader and how factors within the reader affect the reader's response to literature. The articles in this subcategory focused on the process readers use to make meaning as they respond to literature. At the foundations of these studies are the processes involved in the transactions between individuals and their world ( Eeds, M., And Wells, D., 1982; Langer, J., 1990; Hancock, M.R., 1992; Hancock, M., 1993; Short K.G., 1992). These studies generally found that preferences and expectations influence aesthetic response to literature. Students making choices and establishing purposes for reading also seemed to influence students' responses to literature. In contrast there have been very few studies conducted with reader response and at-risk readers.

McCuthchen, Laird and Graves (1993) in their study on study groups with at-risk readers emphasized that motivation is typically a problem for this population of readers. The study suggests that because at-risk readers limited reading abilities deny them age appropriate reading materials, their interest in reading declines and thus lack of motivation increases. The researchers found that students' reading ability improved very little but that their motivation to want to read increased. The main instructional goal of these study groups was to provide opportunities to read and discuss quality literature to students at-risk for reading failure. The researchers contend that motivation is central to effective remediation.

Eeds and Wells (1989) in their study found that students who had difficulty in reading needed support in their struggles to understand. In the context of literature groups, the group dialogue could serve to model the internal dialogue good readers have with books. Within these discussion groups Langer (1985) contends that we can also possibly find ways to "help students engage in the creative and critical thinking that literature can provoke" (Langer, 1985, 22).

Straw (1990) suggests that a transactional approach to teaching literature can occur in a collaborative classroom. Collaborative, as defined by the World Book Dictionary, means " to work together, especially in a literary, artistic or scientific production of a product" (405). Much of the work in collaborative learning has been done with students reading and responding to literature. For example, Dias (1985) found that high school students who studied in collaboration with peers performed significantly better on measures of interpretation than students exposed to a more traditional approach. This would seem to indicate that all students in a reader response classroom could have a

role to play in a transactional approach to the study of literature. Golden's (1986) study suggests the importance of talk as a means of constructing meaning. Further to this the study shows that we can gain more knowledge about the "process of text construction and the nature of the literary text" (254) by observing small group discussions. According to Straw and Bogdan (1993) engaging in discussions about text can help students become part of "the active conversation that is reading, the conversation between the reader and the text, between text and community and among readers" (4). Vygotsky (1972) maintains that when speech is kept private (that is within the thoughts of the individual) it seems primarily to regulate the individual's behavior and cognition; however when speech becomes public during group discussions, it provides opportunities to develop and extend the knowledge of all the participants in the discussion.

## STATEMENT OF PROBLEM AND PURPOSE OF STUDY

Literary awareness, Rosenblatt (1978) asserts, begins with the "lived through" personal experience. With that unique and individual transaction at the center, "the literature program should be directed toward enabling the student to perform more and more fully and more and more adequately in response to text" (253). Research in reader response gained momentum in the 1970's; however there is very little research to date on reader response and at-risk readers. Theories suggest that a reader response approach to literature can play an important role in addressing the problems at-risk readers face.

The purpose of my study is to describe how response based reading instruction can contribute a literary experience as a natural and necessary part of the well developed intellect of at-risk learners.

## RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The study was designed to attempt to answer these questions in the context of a sixth grade class reading workshop with the focus being on the at-risk or less proficient readers in the group:

1) How effective are teachers in providing access to quality literature and opportunities for response to students with limited reading ability?
2) What effect does response- based instruction have on the development of students' thinking when transacting with literature?
3) How does the "lived through" experience change the students in the classroom setting generally ( i.e. attitudes, self- esteem, etc.)?

As the study progressed, the above questions were refined to enable a more insightful examination of reader response and the at-risk reader.

## OVERVIEW

Chapter 2 details the methods and procedures by which the study was carried out. The analysis and interpretation of the data are presented in Chapters 3, 4 and 5 in terms of the research questions. Chapter 6 presents the findings, a discussion, implications for classroom instruction, and proposes questions for new inquiry.

## CHAPTER TWO: DESIGNING AND FRAMING THE STUDY

To open the "literacy club" (Smith 1988) to reluctant, disabled or at-risk readers "teachers must take particular pains to make its activities distinctive from routine classroom activities, from the deadening aura of "school work" (Smith, 125). Sympathetic collaboration from teachers and other students must exist "not in *teaching* reading and writing, but in *doing* interesting things in reading and writing" (125).

According to Kleinman (1991), in moving beyond reductionist explanations to contextual ones, we begin not only "to desire more adequate explanations but to achieve insights more useful to practitioners" (242). This would seem to indicate that the most effective way researchers can learn what readers are doing is to observe them do what comes naturally. "Since action can best be understood when it is observed in the setting in which it occurs" (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992, 27), qualitative research seemed to lend itself to exploring what it is like when at-risk readers are invited to engage in the lived through experience of reader response instruction. In addition, the use of a naturalistic research mode was compatible with gathering data on an event that was naturally occurring (Guba, 1981).

Further to naturalistic study, Lincoln and Guba (1985) contend that prolonged engagement is one way to ensure reliability because it provides the researcher sufficient time to become acquainted with the context of the study and to build a trusting relationship with the participants in the study. Such persistent observation provided depth to the findings of the study. I established dependability and confirmability through an audit trail, an auditor (fellow colleague) was asked to attest to the dependability of the

inquiry by determining from the audit trail the acceptability of the process of the investigation. My journal and the teacher's reflective journal, in which introspections were recorded on a daily basis, documented shifts and changes in the researcher's orientations and interpretations. Triangulation was achieved through the use of multiple sources of data which helped to confirm the emerging findings.

Guba and Lincoln (1985) suggest taking data and interpretations back to the people from whom they were derived and asking them if they were plausible. Throughout the study, informal discussions were held with the teacher outside the classroom in order to clarify emerging impressions and interpretations. After each reading of the students' response journals and listening to the taped conversations, I checked with the students about their understandings of aesthetic response to literature. This led to some further elaboration in the realm of reader response.

## DATA SOURCES AND COLLECTION

In keeping with the tenets of naturalistic inquiry the researcher was the primary instrument of data collection. In conducting the study, I worked to achieve triangulation of data (Denzin, 1978). Data sources included observations, audio taped literature conversations, other conversations with students and teacher, field notes taken throughout the entirety of the study, students' written responses to literature (i.e., response journals) researcher's and teacher's reflective journals and artifacts of the students' work collected during the study.

Eisner (1991) contends that the richest veins of information are struck through direct observation of school and classroom life. Observation entails systematic recording

of events (field notes), and collecting evidence of behaviors as well as artifacts in the social setting (classroom) chosen for the study. Lincoln and Guba (1985) contend that having a permanent record of the data helps to ensure the credibility of the research findings. The response journals allowed me to gain insight into the students' meaning making; the journals also provided a way for me to get to know the students. The conversations were taped and transcribed to guarantee their accuracy. The taped conversations allowed me to further visit the students' lifeworld. Through the researcher's and teacher's journal I began to make sense of the data. As well, the teacher's journal made it possible for me to see through another lens.

On the first day the teacher and I met with the students to present and discuss the nature of the study. We outlined to the students how we would be running their reading classes for the next few months and how they would be involved in reading a series of novels. Students were given a choice as to their participation, with 100% acceptance. Each student then obtained permission to participate in the study through a parent letter as well as written permission from the students themselves. I spent the first week of the study primarily as a spectator, observing the learning environment, classroom routines and interactions between teacher and students during the day. The reading sessions were of 3-4 hours duration per week. After each session I listened to and transcribed the audio taped conversations. I collected the response journals once a week. In the duration of the study I collected three sets of artifacts of students' work. The teacher and I continually examined and reacted to the data collected.

## SITE AND PARTICIPANTS

In deciding upon the classroom site for this study, I looked for a teacher whose pedagogy would allow for much student led conversation about the novels, student decision making and collaborative work and who herself would have a strong identity as a reader and writer. Susan was such a teacher. As well, she and I had previously collaborated on including identified disabled readers in the reading and writing workshops. She was very enthusiastic about my study and invited me warmly into the classroom.

The school was an elementary/junior high situated in an older, more established neighbourhood in Calgary, Alberta. Since space was available due to decreasing enrollment from the area, the school acquired its population from several newer suburbs. Approximately 75% of the students were bussed into the school. The classroom was self-contained with the students sitting in desks arranged in groups of fours. These groups did not remain static, rather they shifted at intervals during the year. A spirit of interactive learning was present as students were invited and encouraged to participate in class discussions and decision making. The bulletin boards displayed various forms of the students' work, reminders for homework and other ongoing activities in the classroom. The students were primarily responsible for maintaining the above. There was a fairly wide collection of novels, magazines and other reading materials displayed throughout the room. The students visited the school library once a week and chose reading material.

They also used a journal to write periodically to the teacher about what they were reading.

The study began in January and ran for twelve weeks in total. Class routines were observed to be fully established, both during class and at the beginning and end of the day. Students knew the type of behavior that was expected of them and for the most part fulfilled these expectations well. It was observed that when there was any infraction committed the students were called upon to evaluate what had occurred and to recognize their thinking.

The participants in the study were 23 grade six students, 11 girls and 12 boys, with, as in any classroom, a wide spectrum of readers. In the context of this classroom community I chose three focal students, 1 girl and 2 boys who were at-risk readers to be the key voices that would inform my study. These students spent a portion of their language arts instruction time in a resource room. However, I chose to observe these students in a regular classroom setting rather than isolating them and observing them as a self-contained small group. I had a desire to see what could happen with students like this if a teacher moved beyond the skills and drills approach. Initial observations showed that these students would seem to be capable of engaging in richer literary experiences.

What follows is a sketch of each focal child that includes the teacher's designation of each student's ability and place in the classroom.

**JAMES**

James was reading independently at a grade 3 level as assessed by the teacher, employing the DRP (Diagnostic Reading Program, 1989). The teacher described James

as a "lost soul" trying to carve out a niche for himself in the classroom. He did not voluntarily participate in class discussions and even when prompted still had great difficulty coming up with an answer. He seemed uncomfortable with himself and tended to goof around a lot. He had one friend in the class, a boy who often felt sorry for him. James engaged primarily in avoiding classroom and homework assignments. He intimated that he liked reading, but was experiencing difficulty.

**SARAH**

"I love to read stories about animals," Sarah responded enthusiastically to "what are your favorite books to read?" Sarah was reading independently at a grade 4 level, as assessed by the teacher employing the DRP (Diagnostic Reading Program, 1989). She was not extremely popular among her peers, although she had one close friend in the classroom. She would have liked to be a better student but had difficulty in achieving that goal. She needed to be constantly reminded to complete her homework and other assigned tasks. One of Sarah's great joys in life was to visit her grandfather at his farm.

**CHAD**

Chad was reading independently at a grade 4 level as assessed by the teacher employing the DRP (Diagnostic Reading Program, 1989). Susan referred to Chad as her "peacemaker"—he tended to be instrumental in settling disputes both in the classroom and outside on the playground. He was a very well-mannered, kind hearted boy who struck one as being obsessed with doing well. Chad described himself as a good athlete, "I really like playing sports and physical stuff." He was highly esteemed by his peers and moved around from group to group fairly easily. It seemed that his opinion of himself

clashed with how others viewed him. He constantly needed assurance that his responses were good, that his assigned tasks were done well. Chad was a responsible friend and student.

**PROCEDURE/INSTRUCTION**

*Respond to each novel in any way you choose* was intentionally vague, in order to evoke a liberal range of responses and minimize the influence of any perceived investigator expectations. My intent was to begin with that primary written response (Rosenblatt 1978), move into the conversation groups, share the response within the group using the shared responses as a springboard for discussion.

The responses shared in this study were derived from a series of books of realistic fiction in a response journal format and through conversations (Hancock, 1991). These were My Side of the Mountain (George, 1975) where a city boy leaves his New York City home to go and live in the wilderness of the Catskill Mountains; Call It Courage (Sperry, 1940) is the story of a young boy who conquers his fear of the sea that took his mother's life; Where the Red Fern Grows, (Rawls, 1961), is a heartwarming adventure about a young boy and his two dogs; Sweetgrass (Hudson, 1984), is a novel that charts the lives of native women caught up in the sweep of Western Canada history in the early 19th century prairie; Looking at the Moon (Pearson, 1991), is the story of thirteen year old Norah living as an English 'war guest' in Toronto; Shadow of a Bull (Wojciechowska, 1964), the young Manola faces his fear of bullfighting and knows he must do what is right; Kidnapped in the Yukon (Woodward, 1968), spins a tale of thirteen year old Johnny who is kidnapped along with his father's boat, and is forced to accompany "mad"

Bill down the Yukon River to Dawson; Forbidden City (Bell, 1990) is the story of seventeen year old Alex Jackson who travels to Beijing (China's capital) with his father and gets caught up in the student uprising in Tian An Men Square; I Am David (Holm, 1963) is the powerful story of twelve year old David who had escaped a Nazi concentration camp and tramps across Europe to unimagined happiness; Sounder (Armstrong, 1969) traces the keen sorrow and abiding faith of a poor African-American boy in the nineteenth century south; and Julie of the Wolves (Craighead George, 1972) is a moving story about a girl's courage and the will to survive in potentially alien worlds.

To begin the study we listed the novels on the chalkboard, gave a brief description of each novel and then invited the students to form groups around the novels of their choice. There was some hustle and bustle as the students quickly formed their groups. It was decided by the teacher and the students that they would complete most of the reading in the classroom. The students decided as a group how much they would read during their session and how they would read– orally, silently or a combination of both. Susan revisited with the students their knowledge of group dynamics. I outlined the format the reading would take, fielded questions the students had, distributed the journals to each student, and gave tape recorders to each group and we began. At first, I had planned to group the focal students together with the researcher as part of that particular group. On further reflection, this seemed to defeat the purpose of a naturalistic approach when the intent was to observe these students in a natural social setting (the classroom) interacting with their peers. In conference with the teacher, I quickly adjusted my thinking and the focal students became part of the natural classroom setting, intermingled with other

regular classroom students and/or other at-risk students who were not the *focus* of the study.

**RESEARCHER'S ROLE**

My level of involvement as a participant observer was active (Spradley, 1980). I began the study as a participant in one group in order to experience what it was like to be initially immersed in the group activity, choosing, reading, responding to and conversing around the text. However, I soon realized that being totally immersed in a group would limit my observations of the other groups. Thus, I modified my course of action to read each novel and move around from group to group to observe the focal students. In this process, I made notes, and participated in talk about the novels the students were reading. At first, I feared that it would be too intrusive—just dropping in on the conversations, but the students ignored me for the most part, yet at times inviting me into their conversation. As an insider I experienced some of the same emotions during the course of the study as I would had I been the regular teacher in the classroom. At the same time, I experienced being an outsider, viewing the study and myself as objects. Spradley (1980) suggests that being participant/observer alternates between the insider and the outsider experience and having *both* simultaneously. On four different occasions, I took the role of teacher in presenting to the students lessons geared to the activities we assigned. I participated in large group discussions and collaborated with the teacher in preparing the activities as part of the response to the novels being read.

## DATA ANALYSIS

The data analysis scheme emerged from the research questions and the trends found in the data. Prior to the study, I specified several broad aspects of teacher and student roles in a reading response classroom. Based on the literature, the categories included: 1) how the teacher's role shifts in a transactive classroom (Probst, 1984; Harker, 1990), 2) how collaborative learning promotes reader response (Dias, 1985; Straw, 1995), 3) how well at-risk readers can step in to reader response (Langer, 1985; Garrison & Hynds, 1991), and 4) the affective changes that can occur in a reader response setting (Stanovich, 1986; Johnston, 1985).

From these rather broad categories I formulated more specific descriptive questions: 1) What is the teacher's role in a transactive classroom? 2) How can a collaborative learning community nourish reader response? and 3) How do at-risk readers attempt to make meaning while engaged in literary activities? All written protocols, as well as all conversation, were separated into idea units (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), each unit of information was coded on a separate index card. These units emerged from repeated passes through taped conversations, transcripts, observation field notes and personal response journals as well as conversations and reflections with the teacher. I coded each unit idea into one of eight emerging themes:

1) reading stances
2) decision making
3) attitude towards reading

4) students' perceptions of themselves as readers

5) roles students played in conversation groups

6) hesitancy in accepting the invitation to engage in the reading activity

7) avoidance

8) active/passive participation

Table 1 shows a summary of coding categories (unit ideas) ascertained from the data.

Table 1

Summary of Coding Strategies Ascertained From the Data

| **Category (Unit)** | **Sub-category** | **Definitions/Examples** |
|---|---|---|
| 1. reading stance | aesthetic/efferent | summary of plot<br>" I feel sorry for." |
| 2. decision making | choosing novel<br>choosing group | could not decide<br>joined by default |
| 3. attitude towards reading | ambivalent<br>enthusiastic | wanted to read but had difficulty<br>approached the reading task willingly |
| 4. perception of themselves as readers | good-poor | "not that good"<br>"there's like half the words I don't know"<br>"I think I'm a good reader" |
| 5. roles played in conversation groups | leader<br>follower<br>disrupter | leads conversation group<br>acts silly in group |
| 6. hesitancy | stayed on the sidelines<br>needed encouragement to accept the invitation | "No one wants me in their group"<br>"I can't decide which book to read" |
| 7. avoidance | slow in getting started | went to get a drink several times |
| 8.active/passive | actively engaged in class discussion<br>sat there gazing down at desk | asked questions<br>responded without being prompted |

Through triangulation facilitated by multiple data sources, it became clear that different types of data yielded somewhat different answers to the categorical themes. For example, although there was evidence of strong similarities in the students' perceptions of themselves as readers, transcripts, journals and classroom observation were far more informative in making inferences about the students' perceptions.

Approximately every two weeks, I wrote an analytical memo in which I began to interpret the patterns I was seeing and began to theorize what they might mean in terms of my interpretive framework. I collected the reader response journals once a week and listened to the tapes after each session. Susan and I continually examined and reacted to the data collected both in conversations and the reflective journals. The data from each of the sources supported the hypotheses, adding to the credibility of the study.

**SUMMARY**

This study was designed to observe students engaged in reading and responding to literature. The use of a naturalistic research method was compatible with gathering data on an event that was naturally occurring (Guba, 1981). In a reader response classroom the literary activities grow out of the students' initial responses. The next chapter will examine the teacher's efforts to develop a reader response classroom.

# CHAPTER THREE: TOWARDS A TRANSACTIVE CLASSROOM

## TEACHER'S VOICE AT THE BEGINNING

> Through dialogue, the teacher-of-the-students and the students-of-the-teacher cease to exist and a new term emerges: teacher-student with students-teachers (Freire, 1970, 61).

As the data were analyzed stories emerged about these sixth grade students and their teacher. The stories were descriptions framed within the research questions and theoretical framework.

Initially Susan's beliefs about what it meant to read and discuss literature were aligned with the notion of interactive expectations in the classroom. Straw (1990) distinguishes between interactive approaches and transactional approaches to teaching literature. The role of the teacher in an interactive approach is that of an architect as opposed to teacher as fellow builder in a transactional approach. When asked at the beginning of the study what she expected her students to gain from reading and discussing literature, Susan's response showed her desire to change her approach:

> I want students who already enjoy reading (novels, short stories, poetry) to have their reading experiences at school to be as meaningful and fulfilling to them as what they read outside. For at-risk readers and non readers (students who spend very little or no time reading outside of school) to make personal connections with their chosen novels so that their reading can be meaningful to them, and so hopefully reading begins to be a pleasurable activity. I want to bridge the gap between what students read in school and what they read outside of school (Susan, 1997, January 29).

In this instance Susan was expressing the desire to move beyond the interactive approach thus responding to the call of theorists (Rosenblatt, 1978; Iser, 1978) to move

beyond providing her students with an artificial relationship with literature and to strive towards developing lifelong personal relationships between books and people. She was desirous of bringing the transactional approach to her students but was hesitant as to how to proceed. Rosenblatt (1956) states that reading literature must be a *living through* not simply knowledge *about the text;* for example, not simply gaining information about the boy and his dogs but a *living through* of Where the Red Fern Grows, when students are reading this book.

Many teachers respond warmly yet apprehensively to the idea of reader response instruction. "Teaching does not take place in a vacuum: Teacher repertoires… have been shaped by the crucible of experience and the culture of teaching" (Cuban, 1984, 40). There are traditions (the way we were taught), institutional constraints (everything from books we order to achievement tests), and personal pressures (how things we do would look to our colleagues) holding teachers back from moving into a different approach. Susan experienced tension trying to balance the above constraints with her desire to move into an alternate way of teaching literature.

> My main concern yesterday (the day before the study began) was to work out the tasks students needed to include with each personal response (summary of plot, predictions, an illustration, etc.) (Reflective Journal, 1997, January 27).

Susan needed to hang onto traditions while testing the waters (use of personal response but in the context of teacher imposed constraints). She was willing to make available a choice of books for the students but was not prepared to completely let go of her teacher role in guiding the students, wishing to retain some degree of control over the students' readings by structuring their personal responses. There still persists a general emphasis in reading instruction on developing procedures and materials so that reading

and comprehension are 'guided' rather than allowed to occur via direct and immediate encounters with 'natural' text (Dias, 1985). This structuring, from my perspective as the researcher, would not allow for the students to set up that 'live circuit,' to have that *lived though* experience with literature. This structuring would be in direct contrast to what my intent was in this study—to provide an opportunity for open ended students' responses so that they and their readings of the text become the central issue in the discussion. To create a reader response classroom/community, it is necessary to move teachers out of the central, directive role they often occupy in a literature classroom. Langer (1995) argues that "a shift in control from teacher to student" is a necessary first step for the social interactions to "shift from recitation and guesswork (what it is the teacher wants) to substantive thought and discussion" (82) that can extend a student's range of understanding. For teachers this means that they get to see the classroom as a dynamic entity, shifting and changing with the individuals that constitute it. Susan was concerned about how to control the reading situation and how to ensure that the students were on task. She was hesitant about stepping out of her teacher as teacher role. Yet, she was open to making that shift towards a transactive classroom because she was constantly struggling to make her hopes a reality for her students as readers. Her reflective journal contained many examples of the tension she experienced. However, as we conversed some of the felt tension began to fall away:

> When I met with Laura, she reminded me of the importance of beginning with initial personal responses and how things would emerge from that point. I would interfere with the student-'lived through' experience if I started by setting up the parameters (Susan, Reflective Journal, 1997, January 27).

Robert Probst (1988) suggests that in an effort to demonstrate to students that the discussion is not a way of *finding meaning* but of *making meaning*, teachers might sometimes try " the valuable if nerve wracking experiment" (33) of teaching a poem or novel without reading it in advance. During the first round of novels, Susan chose to participate in the group that was reading Julie of the Wolves. While participating in this reading group Susan was able to recognize more fully the literary awareness her students brought to the reading act. She was delighted with the insights that were offered!

> I'm glad to be reading Julie of the Wolves, I'm discovering why kids liked this book last year, and why this group seems to like it so much (Susan, Reflective Journal, 1997, February 5).

She suggested that she probably would never read it on her own because she is not drawn to animal stories. By participating in this type of group activity, Susan became acutely aware that questions with predetermined answers need not be asked by the teacher. Instead, the teacher is a participant in a book group, a fellow reader who shares joys, difficulties, insights and speculations and asks only questions she genuinely wonders about. As well, teachers can grow in their ability to recognize moments when they can help enrich their students' literary insights.

## CHANGING VOICE

As Susan began to let go of her teacher monitoring role she allowed herself to become teacher as student for that particular time: "Sitting as a member of one group, I saw my students from quite a different perspective (Susan, Reflective Journal, 1997, February 5).

Just as teachers who write are best able to act as guides for less experienced writers (Graves, 1983; Murray, 1985; Calkins, 1991; Atwell, 1985), teachers who see themselves as readers—who are aware of the requirements and strategies of the reader's role—are best able to guide young readers (Smith, 1982; Bleich, 1985; Hansen, 1987). For this reason it is important for teachers to participate with their students in the reading of the texts and the discussion around the reading. Susan stated:

> It was a strange feeling to be in the middle of the LA class, knowing all the students were working at the tasks assigned to them, and I was among them integrated in the same work. For the first time I could see us moving towards a true reading workshop (Susan, Reflective Journal, 1997, January 27)

Prior to participation in this research, she had operated in her monitoring teacher mode, setting up the novels, the groups, planning activities around the novels, marking the response journals, keeping things running smoothly in the classroom, but always on the perimeter of the students' reading experience. She did not allow herself to experience the immediacy of the reading. She did converse with the students but the conversations were built around the elements of the story such as, story, plot, characters, and setting. Letting go of that tension was a major breakthrough for Susan. Later in the study she reflected,

> My conversations with Laura certainly clarified and enhanced my original notions of personal response in reading. For example, restricting student assignments initially to personal response was one important breakthrough for me (Field Notes, 1997, February 3).

**CULTURE OF CLASSROOM**

In a reader response classroom the power granted to the teacher by New Criticism has been lost. Instead, reader response criticism grants teachers a collaborative role with students in the construction of literary text (Harker, 1990). First and foremost, it is necessary for students to experience the *living through,* not simply gaining knowledge

*about experience* (Rosenblatt, 1956). The responsibility of teachers is to help students have such experiences; then they can fulfill their function (to evaluate, direct, recognize and articulate the purpose of what we are attempting to do). In order to bring this about there must be a classroom environment where the relationship between teacher and student and among students will permit a personal response to what is read. As I entered Susan's classroom I was struck by the wealth of mutual respect and caring present there. The students were constantly invited to share their opinions, and discussion was a natural part of the classroom activities. Group work was in evidence from the very beginning. It was a venue waiting for transactional learning to happen. Susan's main concern was letting go of that initial teacher structure in her reading workshop.

Meaning in literature is ultimately a reader's opinion. Interactive and transactional theorists suggest that opinion is arrived through negotiation. Straw (1990) suggests that what differentiates interactive and transactive methods from each other is the amount of student and teacher input into the goals, roles, methods, procedures and content used within the general group process. Rosenblatt (1978) distinguishes between the two as well stating that *interaction* between different factors implies separate, self contained and already defined entities acting on each other but that transaction, on the other hand, designates " an on going process in which the elements or factors are, one might say, aspects of a total situation each conditioned by and conditioning the other" (17). However, both approaches differ significantly from the assumptions underlying transmission or banking models of education, (i.e. New Criticism). The essential difference in Straw's (1990) estimation is the role of the teacher as architect in one (interactive) and the role of the teacher as participant in the other (transactive). Susan's

interactive classroom was working well and it was an easy step to move towards a transactive collaborative learning community in the area of reading.

Bakhtin (1984) contends that learning has its roots in social interaction and dialogue. Students need to engage continually in the exchange of ideas; they need to be involved in dialogues of different kinds. Much of the work in collaborative learning has been done with students responding to literature. Collaborative learning methods most nearly approximate the act of reading, " Reading is constructive, socially mediated and independently motivated" (Straw, 1990, 142) and so are collaborative learning methods. In collaborative learning the teacher releases much of the control in terms of goals (what is to be learned), the roles of students within groups (the leader, if there are leaders chosen by the groups), and methods of learning and procedures within the groups.

Susan and the students had already established a strong interactive classroom climate—what was needed was for Susan to become a participant in reading activities.

The groups were built around interest in reading certain novels. However, I wondered whether students made their choices based on interest in a novel or because of people in the group (Field Notes, 1997, January 29). At the outset of the study I had contemplated having the at-risk readers form a group mainly for the purpose of closer observation. However, research suggests that diverse groups appear to be more effective both for more able and less able students where there is a diversity of individuals. In the classroom, teachers need to support students' ways to discuss, focusing on social behavior in order to help students learn to become participants in thought provoking literary discussion. One way to do this is to help students become aware of what is appropriate group behavior. The students in Susan's classroom were indeed aware of

group behavior and were concerned about the quality of each group members' participation. "How do we make sure everyone does the reading?" and "some people always fool around in groups" (Field Notes,1997, January 27) were comments they made. Thus, prior to the activity, the students in collaboration with the teacher set out some ground rules to ensure successful group discussions. These rules were posted in a conspicuous place where all students could refer if needed.

Besides group dynamics and procedures, another component of concern to the students was evaluation. Rosenshine and Stevens (1984) suggest that the most successful school reading programs are those that maintain high emphasis on achievement and are task oriented. The expectations in the classroom under study ran high and a number of the students aspired to achieving well.

Probst (1988) suggests that evaluation has become something that the teacher does *to* the students rather than with them, something that is imposed, rather than shared. However, if students are involved in evaluating ongoing work of the group they are more likely to commit themselves to the work. In a collaborative classroom, students need to become not just negotiators in the act of reading but also need to make decisions about how they would like to see the group function. Figure 1 illustrates the pattern of criteria for evaluation created by the students themselves.

| A. Type of Response | B. Group Behavior |
|---|---|
| 1) make personal response | 1) co-operation |
| 2) take a second look | 2) respect other's opinions |
| 3) provide reason for all statements | 3) be prepared when starting discussion |
| 4) be a reasonable length | 4) stay on task |
| 5) be legible | |
| 6) make sense | |
| 7) be comprehensible | |
| 8) provide date/title | |

Figure 1: Evaluation Criteria

For each they assigned numbers 1-3 with 3= Excellent, 2=Good, 1= Poor.

Straw (1990) contends that organization of groups should permit effective feedback from teacher and peers to students on their ideas and their work. At times it became necessary for Susan and other students to provide instructional guidance when feedback from members of the group was negative. For example, at one point in the study several group members complained to Susan that others in the group were not living up to their commitment to the group (homework was not being completed, they were coming to the group ill-prepared). Susan felt torn. She had relinquished that control to the students and was now wondering if she should step in:

> Last week I was concerned with the amount of work not being completed. I had left the responsibility of checking homework with each group and the evaluation forms the student must fill out (Susan, Reflective Journal, 1997, February 16) .

She decided to open up the topic for whole class discussion. As the students expressed their views it became obvious that the class was divided on the idea of Susan stepping in. A vote revealed that about half of the students wanted her to monitor and others wanted the procedure to remain the same. "There were few surprises as to which of the kids voted to continue with the original method" (Susan, 1997, March 16). The use of collaborative learning strategies should not suggest a decrease in the expectations of performance. Rather, it should result in an increase in expectations. Webber (1981) has suggested that one of the characteristics of exemplary reading programs is their high expectations for student performance. Susan and I shared with the students that as teachers *in loco parentis*, we could not leave the students who were struggling to fend for themselves, rather we ought to lend guidance when needed. Valuable teaching and learning practices, such as the expectation that assigned homework would be done was spelled out at the beginning of the reading sessions. The students agreed that this would be fair and that Susan would monitor those students who needed it until they could work effectively on their own. She stated, "It was tough not to be monitoring—I felt that some of the students thought they were getting away with something. That had me steamed" (Susan, 1997, February 16). Collaborative learning gets students involved in their own learning (rather than passively involved in listening to the teacher, and can perhaps significantly raise students' commitment to learning). There may be stumbling blocks along the way but the talk and feedback as part of an evaluation process that takes place in the classroom can assist students in articulating and refining procedures they use when reading and responding to literature.

In many ways, collaborative learning procedures may be a goal to strive for rather than a starting point in instruction. In this classroom, as in many others, the teacher was hesitant about giving over that control to students for evaluation. She also wanted to structure the students' responses. The challenge for teachers is to, "re-know for themselves the objects their students are trying to learn, to find meanings in them hidden to them before" (Freire, 1985, 21). If they do not, they may uncritically transmit *their* knowledge to students. In a collaborative learning community students and teachers build knowledge together. This is what we strive for in a true problem posing classroom. As well, if we are to begin our teaching with students' responses, we need literary works that provoke responses, stimulating students to think, feel and talk.

## ENGAGING STUDENTS IN AESTHETIC RESPONSE

The influence of the classroom environment on students' response to literature has been well documented by research ( Eeds & Wells, 1989; Golden; 1986; Purves, Harnish, Quirk & Bauer, 1981; Wilson, 1966). The importance of the teacher establishing this environment and what takes place within it is vital. The environment in the classroom under study was conducive to reading and talking about books.

In choosing the literature curriculum, there perhaps ought to be a balance between some of the issues the teacher wants to address and the interest of the students. In providing text for the students we also need to address students' pattern of reading interest. Carlsen (1980) has contributed much to our knowledge of the developmental patterns in adolescent literature, but that knowledge has not always been employed effectively in curriculum development. Carlsen (1980) has concluded that reading

interests of adolescents fall into three stages; 1) Early Adolescence ( 11-14), 2) Middle Adolescence (15-16), and 3) Late Adolescence (17-18). For my purposes I was interested in the eleven to fourteen stage. At this stage there is interest in animal stories, adventures, mysteries, the supernatural, sports, coming of age in different cultures, stories about the home and family life, slapstick, stories set in the past, and fantasy.

In a survey given to the students at the beginning of the study the above interests seemed to hold true. The students indicated that they liked stories that were exciting, adventurous and action-filled. For example, students wrote comments such as: " I like a story that moves quickly." Some of the other categories gleaned from the survey showed interest in stories that were: realistic, true sports, violence, mystery—" stories that could be about me" and stories " where I'm really in it." We tried to accommodate students in terms of what was available. Fortunately, most of the titles we had available fell into Carlsen's hierarchy and the categories the students had described.

In order to prepare the students for the aesthetic experiences they would be engaged in over the next twelve weeks, Susan and I outlined the procedure that we would like students to follow: 1) Choose a novel you are interested in reading and your group will be formed around this novel; 2) Decide as a group how to approach the reading task how much to read during each session, how to read, whether orally or silently; 3)After each reading session each student is to write a response in his/her journal; 4) Discuss the journal responses in your group; 5) Reflect on your initial response and ensuing conversation; 6) After the novel has been finished, complete individual assignments; and 7) At the conclusion of the three rounds of novels, complete and share a group project based on the novels.

The students were instructed to approach aesthetically their reading of the novels. We discussed the difference between aesthetic and efferent reading. Students were encouraged to read each section and record thoughts, insights, feelings, opinions and reactions in their literature response journals. Students presented a wide spectrum of readers as was evidenced through the wide array of responses written in their literature journals. In an attempt to make sense about where these responses fit I referred to Sebasta, Monson and Senn, (1995). See Appendix A. These authors suggest a four stage hierarchy to examine reader response: 0-efferent, 1- evocation, 2- alternatives, 3- reflective thinking, and 4-evaluation. In reading the students' journals the responses could be seen to reflect these stages ranging from efferent (0) " I think this chapter was cool, it was about a boy called Sam, he went away from home" (James, Response Journal, 1997), to evaluation (4) "If I were Norah I would give Andrew a chance, he could be just the friend she is searching for" (Brenda, Response Journal, 1997).

The authors suggest this hierarchy as a means to document individual and class development in aesthetic response. This knowledge in turn can assist the teacher in guiding the students to move beyond their initial responses. After the first round of novels was completed the students were given a choice of activities to work on. They completed and shared their final projects. Prior to the second round and after examining the students' response journals and listening to the taped conversations, I presented to the student a mini lesson which focused on Iser's (1978) *gaps* and *silences* in the text. I again stressed that the text should be read aesthetically. The majority of the students quickly became engaged in their chosen novels. However, as I circulated among the groups I noticed that the boys who were reading Sounder expressed difficulty in "getting into the

book." They could not get past the fact that the writer did not name the characters—indeed seeing it as an error on the author's part. To them the story resembled a parable and the characters (the boy, the man, the woman) were meant to be representative of universal characters. One of the comments made in several of the response journals was: "I learned one thing from this book, if it has a medal put it back" (Josh, Response Journal, Jan. 31, 1997). A novel, such as Sounder which was chosen to address the issues of slavery in 19th century southern United States, could fall into the category of being teacher's choice—the students for the most part seemed not to be able to engage in the "lived through" experience in this particular novel.

Norma Greco (1990) suggests that in motivating students to become, in Roland Barthes terms, *producers* rather than *consumers* of text (1974, 4), one of the most effective ways in which teachers can help students become *producers* is through meaningful assignments that challenge students to become instrumental in the construction of textual meaning. I referred to Norma Greco's (1990) assignments building on Iser's (1978) *silences* and *gaps*, and presented the students with the following assignment: "Choose a scene from your novel that particularly intrigues you. Rewrite that scene from the point of view of a character rather than the narrator" (Greco, 1990, 35). After some discussion the students set out to complete the assignment. This type of assignment requires close reading of the text to get details and then to view these details in a new or different manner. This activity helps the students to understand that reading is a composing activity because they are perceiving and interpreting realities (just as a narrator would)!

The first two rounds went well in terms of reading and discussion. For the third and last round Susan wanted to include a novel, Forbidden City, to complement the social studies unit on China. This novel had been recommended to her by a colleague and the library happened to have a class set. It had been purchased on the recommendation of teachers with the intent of using it for the grade six social studies unit on China. The novel came equipped with a teacher's guide. The students had a fair wealth of historical background knowledge about Tian An Men Square and the student uprising which was the main theme of Forbidden City because, prior to the study, they had completed the unit on China in Social Studies. Susan had intended to use this novel efferently for locating information students could add to their learnings in Social Studies. As stated earlier, Rosenblatt (1978) has chosen the term *efferent*; derived from the Latin *effere*, to carry away. As the reader responds to the printed words or symbols her attention is "directed outward," so to speak, towards " concepts to be retained, ideas to be tested, actions to be performed after the reading" ( 25). However, from the perspective of an aesthetic reader the reader's primary concern is what actually happens during the actual reading event. In aesthetic reading "the reader's attention is centered directly on what she is living through during the relationship with that particular text" (Rosenblatt, 1978, 25). I wanted the student to have that *lived through experience* with the Tian An Mien Square uprising—to feel some of the horrors that the Chinese students felt and perhaps to identify with Alex as he becomes part of this scene. After some discussion Susan and I agreed to proceed in the same manner as the first two rounds in this study. The first reading session went well—then it took a nose dive for several of the groups. I wrote "I am concerned at the restlessness I see among several groups" (Field Notes, 1997, March 16). As I observed

the students it became obvious that the intensity witnessed at the beginning was absent. Susan and I both became a little concerned. We decided that we would call the class together and set up a discussion in an attempt to determine why the breakdown occurred. During the ensuing discussion, several students commented that they did not like the style in which the book was written. Such comments were provided as "it is boring;" "there are too many details leading into the story;" "this book isn't very interesting;" and "it isn't very much like a story." One student summed up how most of the class was feeling by his comment "The author just should have made a history book instead." Students' primary personal responses are valuable in forming the basis for literary conversations. However, left unexamined they can also be limiting. It was evident that the majority of the students were not responding aesthetically to the reading of Forbidden City except for a few strong, mature readers who were able to reach for more. At first, we were somewhat concerned but in conversation with Susan and referring to what researchers such as, Probst (1988), Harker (1990), and Langer (1992) posit, we recognized that we needed to acknowledge that students are allowed to like or dislike the work. We recognized that such expressions are legitimate, and we invited further comment. As teachers, we needed to understand why there was this incredible resistance to this particular text, so our request for elaboration was not issued as a challenge but as an invitation to search collaboratively for what this meant. We wondered if it was a case of imposing Susan's agenda, taking away ownership and/or limiting students' choices. Susan commented that she felt humbled by the students' reactions—her intentions were legitimate but there was the assumption that what she assigned would automatically be accepted. It would seem that moving towards a collaborative classroom and then taking away choices (primarily

choice of what to read) was bound to lead to resistance on the part of some students. She was shocked by the resistance the students expressed. For me, as a researcher, I was able to observe the power that students can wield if invited to do so. It also reaffirmed for me the value of having a collaborative classroom. If we had gone ahead and read this book efferently, the same type of responses would not have been evoked. The students might groan about having to locate information but there would have been no or less involvement with the literature, and students would have been cheated out of the *lived through experience*. If discussion had not been part of the instructional process, the teacher would not have experienced her students' life world and would not have recognized who these students were.

"We didn't get to choose," was another popular comment. When there is some consultation between teachers and students "there is at least the likelihood of a negotiated range of texts" (Corcoran, 1990, 135). Some of the students commented that they did not like the way the author chose to tell the story. They discussed the difference between reading for pleasure and reading for school—it would seem that there was a definite line drawn between the two. They felt that Forbidden City fell into the for "school" category. Sheila commented, " this book depends on who you are." Josie claimed in response, "You can choose to be in the book or you can just read." Another comment made was, "Different people like different types of books."

In examining the students comments it seemed that they were grasping in an attempt to understand their own reading. They were cognizant of their perceptions of the difference between reading for pleasure and reading for school. In this instance they may have been lacking a language with which to articulate what they were feeling.

Traditionally teachers have invited an efferent reading of literary texts. Perhaps students "fell back" on this approach. Some of this was evident in the students journal entries in that their personal responses took the form of summarizing, and discussing details, and lack of descriptive language. How do we encourage students to evoke aesthetic response? It seemed that in the instance of Forbidden City we were not clear about our focus—we perhaps should not have linked it to Social Studies initially. This may have shifted some of the students' stance to reading efferently. When giving instructions we perhaps should have invited the students to live in the moment; devoting the students' attention to experiencing the story fully without concern for its connection with a particular reality (Tian An Men Square). After this reading had been completed, then we could have read the book efferently. Rosenblatt (1978) suggests this is so:

> It can be discussed and analyzed efferently. Or it can yield information. But, first, if it is indeed to be literature for the students, it must be experienced (Rosenblatt, 1987.)

Having the entire class read Forbidden City took away choices for students who were perhaps not open to reading it aesthetically. A critical incidence such as this offers a way of exploring our assumption that, as teachers, what we assigned the students would automatically accept. On reflection, this particular incident became a growing experience for both teachers and for the class. We realized that we must be careful to scrutinize all our procedures to be sure "we are not in actuality substituting other aims—things to do *about* literature—for the experience of literature (Rosenblatt, 1966, 1004). It seemed in the case of Forbidden City that the students who balked did not possess experiential awareness. We were not suitably informed in the understanding of these students' general background, level of maturity and we did ignore their major interests in choosing a novel

for them. We need to know our students extremely well to help them create that *live circuit* between them as readers and books.

**SUMMARY**

In this chapter I tried to capture an image of the classroom culture, of students and teacher negotiating and collaborating to create a transactive classroom. In the beginning we are offered a glimpse of the teacher's struggle to throw off the mantle of her teacher's monitoring role in order to become a participant in the literary discussion groups. Then we see the scene unfolding with the students preparing for engaging in aesthetic response by setting up rules to facilitate discussion, choosing their novels, and forming their reading groups. How students engaged in aesthetic response is the topic of the next chapter.

# CHAPTER FOUR: VOICES OF THE STUDENTS

> Reading is not walking on the words; it's grasping the soul of them (Freire, 1985, 19).

In the original plan to explore reader response theory in the classroom, the students were going to be a source of data to provide an understanding of how the principles of reader response could be used instructionally with students who were at-risk for reading failure. I began with the intent of examining the effect that response based instruction might have on the development of students' thinking when transacting with literature. However, in observing the life world of Susan's classroom I began to understand that in order to take part in literary thinking, these students must first of all "step into" the literature and construct meaning while reading. I began to wonder if it was possible for these students to evoke that lived-through experience. Following observations of the students I revised questions two and three on the basis of Langer's (1990) envisionment building when transacting with literature. My query became, "What evidence is there of envisionment building when the reader response approach is used with less proficient or at-risk readers in the classroom?"

This chapter is dedicated to the voices of the three at-risk readers introduced in Chapter 2 (James, Sarah, and Chad). Each of the voices informs the research questions through their response journals. Each voice is also framed by the roles played in the conversation groups.

All three students were interested in reading, although they did not consider themselves to be "good readers." "I don't read good, there's like half the words I don't know" (James, Interview, 1997, January 28). James was frustrated with his lack of ability

to identify all the words. Chad equated a good reader as reading "a larger book, a book with more pages" (Chad, Interview, 1997, January 28). Sarah felt she should read faster in order to be a good reader.

Upon reflection, prior to the study these students did not appear to have experienced Rosenblatt's (1978) "lived-through" experience of transacting with text, or if they did they were not familiar with a language to articulate that particular concept. Each of the students seemed to be very much concerned with "walking on the words; [not] grasping the soul of them" (Freire, 1985, 19).

Patterns of response serve as a reference point for detecting individual ways of making sense of the text. I have chosen to use Langer's (1985, 1990) stances as a framework for discussing the students' written and oral responses. Langer describes building an envisionment of the text world through the lens of these four stances: 1) being out and stepping in where the reader makes initial contact with the characters, plot and setting and how they are interrelated; 2) being in and moving through, reader's become immersed in the text world, which would seem to parallel Rosenblatt's (1978) "lived-through" experience; 3) being in and stepping out, when readers use text knowledge to reflect on personal knowledge; and 4) stepping out and objectifying the experience, the reader distances herself from the text world, reflecting and reacting to both the content and the experience.

## RESPONSE JOURNALS

### *James*

In conversation with James' resource teacher I learned that he had developed a dislike for leaving the classroom to go to the resource room. He stated, "we never do anything fun there. I like the classroom better" (Field Notes, 1997, January 27). In the resource room the focus of reading was on learning strategies and the technical aspects of learning to read. James found creative ways to avoid remedial class, such as permission to skip class to make posters advertising a talent show. Susan was concerned about his behavior in the regular classroom as well. He did not complete his assignments on time, and he rarely finished his homework. It became readily apparent, while observing James, that he experienced difficulty focusing and staying on task. He seemed easily distracted by those around him and needed constant reminders to get down to work. He did not voluntarily participate in classroom discussions and when called on he seemed surprised that he was even included. James was, at best, a reluctant member of the learning community he was immersed in. He did not seem to know how to accept the invitation that was extended to him. James' expression of discontent with the resource room led me to consider him as a likely candidate for reader response instruction. Several researchers, in calling for reform in special education literary instruction have stressed the importance of providing a social context in which students participate in meaningful literary activities (Dudley-Marling, 1994; Englent, Raphael and Mariage, 1994). In consultation with Susan and the resource teacher, we decided that perhaps extending an invitation to James to

participate in the novel reading with his peers might ease his way into becoming a more fully contributing member of the learning community.

During the novel reading, James chose to read My Side of the Mountain and Kidnapped in the Yukon. As well he read the assigned novel Forbidden City. James' choice of My Side of the Mountain seemed to be dictated by interest in the novel since at that time he was not a member of any particular group in the classroom. This perhaps occurred because of being pulled out of class during reading time. He approached the group with some trepidation but was soon made comfortable by the other members. However, shortly after the group had decided they would approach the reading silently, he went to the washroom. This meant that he was behind the other students almost from the beginning. James had difficulty with reading silently, so the group decided to read orally in order to accommodate him. In the reading, James' focus seemed to be very much on word recognition—he constantly stumbled over the words.

James came ill-prepared to the second reading session--no novel, no response journal. The group made allowances for him and shared the reading orally once again so he would not feel left out. In this manner, the students wended their way through the novel.

James accepted the invitation without undue resistance to do written responses to the novel. However, it became readily apparent that his responses would be scanty. As evidenced in his journal, many of James' comments were directed at the story or the author's writing style, such as: "I think the chapter is boring, because it only talks about how Sam gets into the forest" and "I think the chapter is cool, it's about a boy called Sam

he went away from home" (Response Journal, 1997, January 28). His other responses were consistent with those exemplified.

His responses would seem to indicate that he was reading from an efferent stance even though encouraged to read aesthetically. Sometimes well-directed suggestions by the teacher may lead a student to explore a perspective of response that he/she may never express (Hancock, 1993). In noting James' limited perspective I wrote the following comment in his journal in an effort to encourage him to follow another avenue of response: "Instead of talking about how the author writes, maybe you can give some advice to Sam about what he could do in the situation" (Response Journal, 1997, January 29). Following my suggestion James indicated that this mode of response could become a viable option for his responses. Some examples that followed are: "If I am Sam I would go to the old man's house rather than live in a smelly forest" (Response Journal, 1997, January 30). "I think Sam is smart enough to know how to look for food, and how to build houses on the tree. If I am Sam I would go back to New York and buy some food for my fourty dollars" (Response Journal, 1997, January 30).

The later responses suggest a tentative step into the literary experience. In referring to Langer's stances James seems to be at the "being out and stepping in" portion. He makes initial contact with the character, Sam. This is also evident from his responses to Kidnapped in the Yukon and Forbidden City. For example: "I think Johnny is sucking up to Bill" and "I think Alex is a history nut, if I am Alex when I go to China, I will forget about school and history."

However, in his responses James does not ever go beyond the first stance. Purcell-Gates (1991) in her study, working closely with Langer's envisionment building, found

that fewer proficient readers (than at-risk readers) spent a disproportionate amount of time trying to "step into" building an envisionment.

***Sarah***

Sarah sat quietly in the classroom. She appeared to be listening to instructions, yet she never voluntarily participated in classroom discussions. During instruction time she did not indicate that she was experiencing difficulty in understanding, yet, when it was time to work independently on assigned tasks, she either passed in the assignment incomplete or not at all. Yet her enthusiasm for reading was genuine. She mentioned in a conversation we had about reading that, "I like to make myself the character that I am reading, sometimes I'm happy, sometimes I'm sad" (Field Notes, 1997, February 16). But as alluded to above, she showed little inclination to write about her reading experiences. She did not complete the assignments that were part of the novel except for the final project during which she partnered with her friend. I wrote as follows in my field notes: "Sarah strikes me as someone who is constantly trying to 'step in' (into the learning community, into the classroom instruction. . .) (Field Notes, 1997, February 5)

She had difficulty fitting into the classroom and this caused her considerable distress. She constantly tried to ingratiate herself with the more popular girls in the class as well as with Susan. The boys mocked her and the girls generally avoided her. I speculated in my journal: "Sarah tries so hard to be liked she seems to overwhelm the others with her neediness" (Field Notes 1997, February 5). She seemed to be *close* to only one girl in the classroom. Sarah always had a book visible on her desk and could be seen reading during free time. The students were encouraged to write to Susan about their

reading, but it was evident in the lack of letters on Sarah's part, she chose not to write about her reading. When asked why this was so, she merely shrugged and with further probing refused to elaborate.

In the first round of novels, Sarah chose to read Where the Red Fern Grows (Rawls, 1961). Sarah had indicated to me earlier on that stories about animals were her favorite kind of stories. She exhibited involvement with the characters and the plot from the first response in her journal, "If I were the man I would have jumped in and stopped the fight. I don't think I would be able to see the dog fight" (Response Journal, 1997, January 29).

Her reading of Where the Red Fern Grows continued to be highly evocative. She seemed to be able to identify with each of the characters on an emotional level.
"I probably would be worried if my son set out coon hunting and didn't come back that night, it's a mother's job to worry so they say" (Response Journal, 1997, January 30). "In the above section Sarah identifies with Billy and Mom and how worried she is about Billy not coming home from coon hunting" (Response Journal, 1997, January 30). "But I would also be determined to get that coon if I was Billy, too" (Response Journal, 1997, January 31). She seemed to be able to see both characters' perspective of the issue at hand.

In Sarah's responses to Where the Red Fern Grows she seemed to be approaching the text world from the stance of "being in and stepping out" (Langer). She appears to be using her background knowledge to make sense of what is happening with Billy. Perhaps, part of Sarah's ability to empathize with the main character, Billy (in his yearning to own a dog) is her own sensitivity to and love of animals.

Further to the above excerpts other responses seem to indicate that for Sarah, Where the Red Fern Grows evoked a lived-through experience. For example:
"I think that even though Billy felt so bad about Ruben's death it was brave sweet and kind that he still had enough guts to go and place flowers on his grave. I would hide away" (Response Journal, 1997, February 5). "I think that Billy was very, very excited. I think that when the boy saw the puppies he was just stunned that the day had finally come" (Response Journal, 1997, January 29). Literary awareness (Rosenblatt, 1978) asserts, begins with the lived through experience between a reader and a text. Primary personal responses are valuable and can be the basis for literary conversations. However, left unexamined, they also can be limiting. Lehman & Scharer (1996) and Golden, Eeds & Wells (1989) feel that opportunities for talking together about books can refine initial responses by allowing the individual reader to be exposed to other perspectives. Golden (1986) points out that individual perspectives may change when the text is discussed in a group of readers. Although Sarah's initial written responses seem to be highly evocative, there is a need to move beyond the initial response to perhaps elicit an analytical or critical stance towards literature (the fourth stance in Langer's framework).

Sarah's written response to Sweetgrass tended to be quite different from her response to Where the Red Fern Grows. Sarah did not display any evidence of the lived-through experience while reading Sweetgrass. The following excerpt from her journal would seem to indicate this, "I like this chapter. It was a bit more exciting but I didn't like the part when the attackers came" (Response Journal, 1997, February 22).

During the last round of novels, Sarah and her friend paired up to read Forbidden City. Her journal entries were sporadic and tended to be primarily of the efferent stance leaning towards summarizing.

A pattern of response different from Langer's (1985,1990) described earlier emerged from Purcell-Gates' (1991) study but was not reported by Langer. This stance reflected a "passive, reiterative orientation towards the text" and is exemplified by "repeating or restating of the text" (Purcell-Gates, 1991, 242). Sarah's responses to Sweetgrass followed along these lines and reflect the orientation described by Purcell-Gates. For example the response which follows exemplifies the passive orientation:

> Leoder said that beijing is under marshal law, the students wouldn't leave, ted and edy go to tian imen Square. Troops come and shoot tear gas, the PLQ starts shooting the students and innocent people. His dad would not leave so he got captured (Response Journal, 1997, March 11).

In reading Forbidden City Sarah did not "step into" an envisionment. As has been demonstrated above in Sarah's written responses to Sweetgrass and Forbidden City, they differed markedly from her responses to Where The Red Fern Grows. The difference could be either the text itself or the background of the reader. As mentioned in the beginning, Sarah identified with the character Billy and his dogs. It would appear that reading Where the Red Fern Grows provided personal significance for Sarah and permitted experiencing Langer's third stance.

### *Chad*

Chad was always seated in the front of the classroom. He sat quietly focused on the teacher during instruction time. He seemed to have a secure sense of his place in the classroom. He was well liked by his peers, was part of the more popular, brighter groups

of boys and he aspired to be like them academically. Chad intimated to me during a conversation that he enjoyed sports and always looked forward to physical education class. He was extremely concerned about doing well academically; in fact it seemed almost an obsession with him. He had no difficulty asking questions when he did not understand, but at times his questions did not make a connection with the instruction. He was a very diligent worker, never having to be reminded to stay on task. However, the quality of his assignments did not always measure up to the standards of the class.

During the first round of novels Chad chose to read Call It Courage. Chad made his choice after some consultation with his friends. This particular group decided at the onset how they would organize their segments of reading. They planned to read a chapter at a time, do a written response at the end of each chapter, then at the conclusion of the novel would hold a conversation around it. It would seem that this group had worked together on more than one occasion.

Chad's initial written response to Call It Courage (excerpted here) was a summary of the chapter.

> Chapter 1 was a good part. He started remembering about the part when his dad got throw in the lake and his mom to got throw in the lake but his dad had the power not to die. Then it went to the now and his step brother started making fun of him. . ." (Response Journal, 1997, January 31).

For the most part Chad's responses follow the same pattern throughout the majority of his journal entries. Chad's responses show scant evidence of transacting aesthetically with the text world—his reading focus tends to be primarily efferent.

To further demonstrate that Chad's written responses did not shift in stance throughout the study the following is an excerpt written in response to Sounder, read at

the end of the project. "This part of the story was telling about church, Sunday and sort of everything he hear, he remembers his father in jail" (Response Journal, 1997, February 11).

Chad gave very little indication of "being out and stepping into the envisionment" (Langer, 1990). Instead there was much evidence (shown in the above excerpts) that he remained "outside of building an envisionment."

## CONVERSATIONS (STANCES)

> The stances that describe how a reader approaches text also describe how readers move through discussions of text as they explore, explain, defend and refine their envisionments and ideas" (Langer, 1990, 814).

In each of the conversations I examined there would appear to be evidence of Langer's envisionment building stances for each of the at-risk readers.

### *James*

Turning to an example of conversation that took place around the beginning of My Side of the Mountain, it would seem that James has resorted to "stepping in" but not "moving through" to construct an envisionment. His oral responses tended to parallel his written responses. James seemed to be incapable of moving beyond the wondering stage which is displayed in the following excerpt:

James: I wonder why he left New York City?

Jackie: If I had eleven in the family I would leave as well.

Tom: Do you think this happens in the real world?

Bill: No, kids would be too scared to do that. I'd like to do it but I wouldn't have the courage.

James: What if he got sick, there's no one to take care of him.

Jackie: He wants to learn to survive on his own.

James: If I had eleven brothers and no sisters that would be cool.

The students in the conversation group seemingly are attempting to move through an envisionment towards a "horizon of possibilities" (Langer, 814), where as James seems to display a strong tendency to create meaning in "local level events rather than working from an understanding of the whole" (Purcell-Gates, 244). There is further evidence of this in the conversation around Trapped in the Yukon:

Simon: Johnny is sucking up to Bill.

James: Yeah.

Simon: I think that's because Bill could kill Johnny.

James: Yeah, Johnny is a smart kid.

James' role in the conversation groups as is demonstrated above, as well as in the following excerpts, seemed to be minimal. He did not contribute except superficially; for example, "I think the chapter was interesting and Sam is smart like well he can build a tree house I think he is smart" (Transcripts, 1997, January 30). In the conversation groups James seemed to fall into the category of less proficient reader. Langer (1990) suggests "Less proficient readers gather more superficial information than their better reading classmates (building less complex envisionments) (814).

James frequently left his novel at home, thus making it difficult to maintain a relationship with his peers and detracting from a sense of community in his reading

group. During an informal discussion, when asked how he felt about discussing the story with his group, James felt that it would help him read better because "I'm not that good reading by myself--there's like half the words I don't know. I would understand better when I'm in the group" (Field Notes, 1997, February 17). He was desirous of being part of the group but was unclear as to "how" and "what" he should share.

***Sarah***

Sarah's oral responses tended to be richer than her written responses. In the following conversation around Where The Red Fern Grows the participants formulated constructs of how Billy felt as they speculated about his reaction to finally seeing the puppies.

Lynn: I was really wondering why he wouldn't just run over and pick up the puppies. I know he's like excited and stuff but I would've run. . .

Abby: He wanted to see what the puppies would do to him. Would they go and bite him?

Sarah: I think he was just so stunned, he has to stand there in awe—it's like these are mine!

Sarah seems to be using Langer's stance "being in and moving through." She appears to be immersed in the text world, bringing together the preceding pieces of the novel to this point where she can articulate what Billy is feeling.

Jan: I think he also wanted to see what the puppies would do to him, if they accepted him or were upset at him.

Lynn: If I were him I would have run and picked up a puppy.

Jan: Yeah! He wanted them for such a long time.

Sarah: I think he was pretty stunned—it's like, oh geez there finally fine. (Transcripts, 1997, February 5).

As the above would seem to illustrate, Sarah seems to have evoked the lived through experience, has experienced being in and moving through the novel. However she does not seem to move beyond this stance. There was very little evidence of engagement (reflection) in her written responses even after the conversations had taken place. The following discussion is built around a segment of the novel Sweetgrass, in which the female characters Sweetgrass and Favorite Child discuss their friend's upcoming marriage. The students' conversation, in a sense, parallels the characters' discussion. They seem to be comparing their attitudes with those of the characters, considering how they might react under similar circumstances. They are reflecting upon their own lives and the human condition as it existed then.

Sarah: I wonder what will happen. Do you think that Eagle Sun, or whoever she's getting married to will refuse?

Margie: She probably can't ask him, her parents do.

Sarah: No, but yeah.

Margie: She can't refuse, it doesn't matter because they have lots of wives.

Wendy: We have to think of this, they probably don't have divorces.

Sarah: To them it's probably not even a word.

Margie: They probably have their own word.

In the above excerpt Sarah seems to demonstrate the stance "being in and stepping out." She is attempting to connect with the experience. In conjunction with the other group members she is attempting to build an envisionment. The students went on for some time in the same vein attempting to compare the lives the young girls in the story led to their own lives today. In another section there was some evidence of an attempt to critique the author's writing style, although the group did not comment on figurative language or literary elements as is displayed by the following. The segment shows being out and objectifying the experience, according to Langer's framework.

Margie: This book doesn't give very much description, not of the tipi, what they look like or what the place looks like, where they live, what they wear. . .

Sarah: If you've never read a book like that before you wouldn't have known.

Langer's stances do not represent a linear sequence and can recur at any point in the reading. In the above excerpt the students seem to be making an attempt at "stepping out and objectifying the experience" (Langer, 1990), albeit a very tentative step. This was evident throughout the study as the students moved back and forth examining characters feelings, making associations with their own lives and trying to understand the place men and women held in native culture. This all seems to point towards the students leaning toward a "horizon of possibilities" (Langer, 1990). As well in the following excerpt we can see an example of the recursive nature of Langer's stances.

Margie: I didn't like Sweetgrass she gets favoured by her Dad.

Sarah: She says not all the time

Abby: She's bragging about her marriage.

Sarah: All the native people wanted to do was to have children so they could keep having their own tribes.

Margie: Also, okay, just imagine that I was an Indian, that my Dad wanted me to get married, he'd picked the person that's really rich, has the most horses, he wouldn't care about love.

Abby: If I were an Indian I wouldn't want to get married.

Sarah: I'd run away.

Abby: Women didn't have rights.

Margie: Well it's true. Sweetgrass kind of knows that though she wants to marry for love.

Sarah: That was the Indian way.

It seems that Sarah, who was fairly quiet during these particular excerpts joins in as if she had always known and accepted what the text was offering. Iser (1978) describes the concept of "gaps and blanks" left in the text by the author which must be filled in by the readers. In this group collaboration, Sarah seemed to enter more fully into the text thus getting help in filling in those gaps.

***Chad***

In each of the conversations examined in Chad's group there seemed to be evidence of Langer's stances coming into play. In examining this group's conversation around Call It Courage, the students are intent on trying to understand what they seem to consider disappointments or flaws in the story.

Len: Like most legends and survival stories he gets stranded on an island and tries to get back. That's kind of boring.

Chad: It's sort of like Hatchett because he crashed on an island except this time he's on a boat and at the end. . .

Jake: He dies

In the above excerpt the students are stepping out and objectifying the experience. In this stance Langer (1990) states that "they objectify the text, judge it and relate it to other texts and experiences (813). In mentioning legends there is reference to genre and Chad makes reference to a similar text that he was familiar with, using that knowledge to construct meaning.

Len: I think that's kind of stupid—he tries all his best to stay alive. . .

Chad: Yeah, on the island

Jake: Then he gets home to prove himself and he dies.

Chad: I mean, he had enough food like what's with the guy?

Mike: Did he have a sickness I didn't know about or something?

It would appear that the group, including Chad have moved into generalizing—their conversation would seem to suggest their frustration at the futility of Mahfatu's quest "if he only makes it home to die" (Transcripts, Chad). This evaluation and generalization is based on "their notions of specific genre" (Langer 813). The group seemed to feel that this was a flaw; survival stories do not end in that way.

As the students begin their conversation around Sounder we are invited into that particular segment by:

Jake: This is the chapter when Sounder comes home and the family's so happy to see him.

Mike: I don't understand—he's probably suffering a lot—I would just put him out of his misery. I wouldn't keep him.

All: NO WAY!

Chad: You're supposed to put a dog out of its misery—my dog used to have cancer—OK

Len: Oh

Chad: I'm serious—cancer—and so we had to put it away.

Chad is "being in and moving through" using text knowledge and background knowledge to make sense of what is happening. In recounting his personal story Chad was trying to make sense as to why the family would let Sounder suffer. He also might be

said to "being in and stepping out," this stance Langer views as "reflecting on the human condition in general" (813). In view of Chad's written responses, his oral responses seem to give credence of his attempt to construct meaning with the assistance of his peers. Being part of a collaborative group seemed to benefit Chad—as he expresses in his journal: "Well I like reading in groups cause you get to share and hear what everybody else is saying! But, when it's normal reading, it's sort of boring (Response Journal, 1997, March 7).

**SUMMARY**

In this chapter I describe the written and oral responses of the three at-risk readers whose voices informed the study. Using Langer's (1990) four literary stances as a framework, their responses were analyzed. Four levels of responses emerged from the oral responses (group discussions). However, the written responses tended to fall mainly into a stance that reflected "a passive, reiterative orientation of the text" and is exemplified by "repeating or re-stating the text" (Purcell-Gates, 1991, 242).

Interestingly for one of the readers, written and oral responses to one particular novel were highly evocative. There would seem to be a number of factors involved in this student taking the various stances, that is, text choice, interest, background knowledge and discussion with peers. Some of these factors are internal to the students, others are external, emanating from the classroom context. In Chapter 5 I will discuss the context (classroom environment) that is needed in order to cultivate reader response.

# CHAPTER FIVE: EMPOWERING VOICES OF AT-RISK READERS THROUGH COMMUNITY

> As a classroom community, our capacity to generate excitement is deeply affected by our interest in hearing one another's voices, in recognizing one another's presence" (bell hooks, 8).

My original question: "How does the "lived-through experience change the students in the classroom generally (i.e. attitudes, self-esteem)?" seemed to be slipping out of my grasp as I became immersed in observing the students and in analyzing data. I began to think that what I should be looking for was not whether the lived-through experience changes the students in the classroom, but rather what needs to happen in the classroom in order to enable that lived-through experience. My analysis of data and discussion in Chapter 4 around the question, "What evidence is there of envisionment building when the reader response approach is used with less proficient or at-risk readers in the classroom?" led me to ponder on how the actual community affected whether the students reached for a "horizon of possibilities" (814) (envisionment building). I also began to reflect on impressions I had received in the classroom primarily through the eyes of James, Sarah and Chad. I had observed from the outset that these three "voices" were often silent. James seemed to be the receiver of frequent admonishing "be quiet;" "pay attention" (Field Notes, 1997, January 29). He did not seem to know what was expected of him in the large group. Sarah's voice was almost non-existent in the large group. Sarah did not ask questions; perhaps she felt that this would place her in the humiliating role of appearing ignorant before her peers. In reflecting on my own experience in traditional classrooms, it seemed that having questions signified that a student did not know the correct answer. To wonder about something did not usually

signal a time of exploration but rather the student looking to the teacher for the right answer. Chad, on the other hand, seemed to have no difficulty asking questions, though they were also directed toward Susan. Perhaps, because of his popularity with the "in group" and his prowess as an athlete, he felt more confident than the others in the large group. As the students' roles in the classroom began to unfold in my analysis it became imperative for me to attempt to make sense of the role "context" played in this phenomenon. Context as defined by the World Book Dictionary means the "immediate environment; attendant circumstances or conditions surrounding a situation" (448). Araki (1995) defines school culture or environment as a way of life, the traditions, values, norms and other shared meanings. Making sense of the life world of Susan's classroom (a culture within a culture) and how it affected James, Sarah, and Chad and their ability to respond aesthetically to literature led me to change my question to: How do "contexts" in the classroom affect the "lived through" experience?

In order to discuss my findings with respect to the above question I will need to briefly revisit the culture of Susan's classroom as discussed in Chapter 3. A number of studies (Langer, 1995; Close, 1992; and Spiegel, 1996) have shown that the students need to believe that the classroom is a place where they can freely share understandings about pieces of literature, where all questions are important and where all students of different ability levels have important contributions to make to the discussion. This would seem to indicate that establishing that environment needs to be one of the first concerns of a teacher as she begins the school year. The teacher must value everyone's presence through the lens of her own considered understanding. Referring to my prior discussion (Chapter 3) it became evident that Susan's classroom was fertile ground in which to plant

the seeds of an envisionment building, collaborative, and literary community. A community as defined by World Book Dictionary (1991) is a "group of people living together or sharing something in common such as interests or vocations" (420). Within a literary community there is an attempt to build a classroom culture, culture being seen as "behavior, or beliefs characteristic of a particular social, ethnic or age group" (505). In light of the above definitions we could ascertain that the culture of an envisionment building community should manifest certain behaviors, beliefs and characteristics. This then, leads me to wonder how we can ensure that each voice is heard in such a community. One of the beliefs inherent in these phenomena is that we as teachers need to recognize the value of each individual voice. Ensuring that at-risk readers are part of a literate community compels teachers to recognize the narrow boundaries that have shaped the manner in which these students have been treated. An envisionment building classroom could perhaps be a good place to begin. Writing workshops and group activities were already in evidence. Also Susan and the students attempted to solve classroom problems in a collaborative manner.

Langer suggests that leaning toward an envisionment building, collaborative classroom leaves room for the less proficient reader to be a functioning member of a group. Spiegel (1996) claims that central to the success of reader response is trust: "teacher trust of student, student trust of teacher, student trust of students and a student trust of self" (333). Very early, I wrote, "the classroom pulsates with the energy and eagerness to begin the adventures in reader response" (Field Notes, 1997, January 22). From the moment I walked into Susan's classroom I felt the rapport between Susan and her students . The manner in which they accepted me seemed to give testimony to the

trust that had been established between teacher and students and I wrote, "the classroom excludes a very relaxed environment, most students are very comfortable in expressing opinions" (Field Notes, 1997, January 23). The discussion of "contexts" will thus focus predominantly on trust in the classroom.

## TEACHER TRUST OF STUDENTS

Prior to the study Susan had anticipated setting up more structured discussion groups. Susan wrote, "my main concern yesterday, the day before the reading response group was to begin was to work out the tasks the students needed to include" (Susan's Journal 01/97). However, during our discussion she shifted quite easily to having the students respond to text on their own terms. Susan already trusted her students to share control of decision making in the classroom, thus it was a natural shift to trusting students to manage their own discussions of literature. As stated by Turner and Paris (1995, 667),

> When teachers and students share control, students learn to make crucial literary decisions themselves. . . Students want to see themselves as originators of plans and ideas, not as followers in a good scheme they may not understand. Tasks and classroom structures that are overly controlling unwittingly undermine intrinsic motivation by removing the element of participation, standard setting and decision making. Shared control provides students with both the tools and opportunities to take responsibility for their learning.

Teacher trust of students was also evident in allowing the students to choose their novels rather than assigning each with a particular novel. The importance of trust appeared to be borne out in my comment when for the last round we decided to assign <u>Forbidden City</u> . "If the moans and groans emanating from the students is any indication of foreshadowing, we ought not to do this" (Field Notes, 04/97). As discussed in Chapter 3 things fell apart for this particular session. On the other hand, Susan's trust in the students

allowed her to call in the groups and discuss why the conversation on the book was not working. In respecting the student's resistance to the reading of Forbidden City Susan continued to maintain the students' trust in her. "Teachers can earn students' trust by respecting their answers and by exploring rather than judging answers they don't understand" (Spiegel, 1996, 335).

## STUDENTS' TRUST OF STUDENTS

### *James*

Vygotsky's (1978) ideas about the social construction of knowledge inform us about the potential value of talk in literature programs for developing literary understanding and appreciation. Collaborative interaction helps learners to stretch beyond their limits and gain new insights. According to Ash (1990) it is through social interaction that literature comes alive. The literature discussion groups had the potential to provide James with experiences similar to his regular education peers rather than the comparative isolation of the resource room. But the potential can only be fulfilled if there is trust present in the group. As discussed in Chapter 3, James had not been part of a literary discussion group prior to this study. His language arts curriculum was taught in the resource room where he had not been presented with much discussion around literature. The focus of his instruction had tended to be on specific skills such as decoding and oral fluency. Being part of this group would be James' first opportunity to discuss a work of literature like a competent reader.

"James worked well in the group this morning, he is focused, interested in reading the story, he is attempting to carve out a space for his voice as a group member" (Field

Notes, 1997, January 28), I wrote. James seemed to be readily accepted into the group around My Side of the Mountain. This was displayed by the students' recognition of James' need of scaffolding to help him read the text. To accommodate him they decided to read orally. Community members care that each member succeeds and understand the need to work together towards a common goal.

James had experienced success in the first group, although he did not always come prepared. The students in the group made him feel that he was an integral part of the group. It might have also helped that I was part of this group for a good percentage of time. James approached the next round of reading positively in the group around Kidnapped in the Yukon. The group decided to read the novel silently as opposed to orally as the first group had done. After a time he seemed to have more difficulty with silent reading. James became easily distracted and strayed off task. At this time his journal entries showed a total lack of engagement, "I think the first chapter is kind of boring and the second chapter is getting into the action" (Response Journal, 1997, February 18). He wrote responses in the same vein for the first six chapters and then the responses ended.

Similarly, he did not contribute to the conversation:

Jeff: How did you think it was, Pat?

Pat: I thought the chapters were sort of like boring and no action

Jeff: What do you think James?

James: These chapters were just like boring.

His behavior and unpreparedness meant that he struggled to complete reading and writing activities. This led to his lack of focus in the group which in turn interfered with the other

students accomplishing their tasks. They perceived the task as important and felt the responsibility to get things done. James, by his behavior, began to pose as an obstacle to accomplishing such. Spiegel (1996) states "students must trust that they have the insight to let the teacher know when they hit a roadblock (333). In this instance, the students were sharing responsibility for the group as well as self evaluation. Also, these boys were highly motivated, task oriented students. They aspired to high achievement. Their frustration with James grew to the point where they approached Susan with help to solve their dilemmas. They requested that James be removed from the group. I had written in my journal prior to this : "James seems to be experiencing difficulty with the reading; Susan and I need to take control here" (Field Notes, 1997, February 6). We had failed to provide him with the tools needed to function in a group in this way. It would seem that James did not have a sufficient grasp as to how participation in a group might occur.

This might have been avoided if he had been more confident in himself as a reader and a group participant. His inconsistent and erratic behavior meant that he often struggled to complete reading and writing tasks and to keep up with the discussions that took place around the novel. In the first group James had been offered support and had participated in this group for about 70% of the time. Whereas in the second group, given that there was less time spent by an adult and that the boys who made up the group were an eager, energetic bunch, James was not offered the same support. The students set up the parameters and trusted that each participant would maintain their responsibility. I needed to more fully understand problems James might have in developing an envisionment in this context. Rather than remove James from the discussion group we might have helped him be a more responsible participant by offering more support (that is

instructional scaffolding [Applebee & Langer, 1983]) through additional instructions and reinforcement for his continued progress.

***Sarah***

For Sarah her peer group would seem to be a less threatening forum for participation than in the teacher-led group. In the discussion group around Where The Red Fern Grows, Sarah initially approached the group in a tentative manner; perhaps not certain of her role in the group. In observing the group during the first session I wrote "Sarah seems to be feeling her way, wondering if she wants to do this." (Field Notes, 1997, January 28). She took a longer time than the others to read the first section, then she went to the washroom which would seem to be an indication of uncertainty on her part. By the second session Sarah seemed more at ease in being part of the group. It would seem that having her friend, Abby, as part of the group, helped Sarah to open up. There needs to be student trust of students in reader response groups—trust that her ideas will be respected. Sarah's lived-through experience while reading Where the Red Fern Grows would seem to have given her the confidence to take part in the discussion. She came to each session, prepared, by having completed the reading and written response. This particular group seemed to treat each other with respect and civility. Sarah's ideas were acknowledged as a positive contribution to the discussion. Sarah could trust herself to have some good ideas because at this point she felt acceptance, she could sense that what she had to say was valuable. She did not need to have the "right" answer but what she genuinely felt made sense for her in her transaction with the text Where the Red Fern Grows.

***Chad***

Chad was very serious about getting things done on time. As stated earlier, he was not without voice in the larger group. As for moving into the discussion group—choosing the novel Call It Courage was a group decision. The group consisted of several other boys as well as Chad. Chad very quickly donned the role of facilitator. I had written, "These boys seem to have collaborated on group projects, prior to the study, they seemed very much at ease with one another" (Field Notes, 1997, January 28). Chad was very much concerned with keeping the rest of the group focused because it was important for him to complete the assigned task. For the most part this group did not become personally involved in any of the novels. Instead, they tended to judge the text and evaluate it in terms of the writer's style, lack of excitement, or lack of action. This is shown in the following excerpt of dialogue around Forbidden City.

Chad: I thought this was a good book, but some of the chapters were really short. They are short chapters but they carry detail.

Len: Chapter 11 was good because Hu died and they went to Tian An Men Square.

Jake: The chapters are really informative - they're detailed really well, they have lots of true information especially for a fiction story.

Chad: It's sort of like our social book because Alex is going around reporting just like in the social book.

Len: At last we are in Tian An Men Square.

Jake: We're waiting for that explosion.

Chad: Yeah, the last group of chapters is gonna rock! Tian An Mien Square is going to be blown up.

It was as if they were marking time, reading the book mainly to get to the end. It would appear that there was need for instructional scaffolding in order to guide Chad's group toward reading aesthetically.

## STUDENTS' TRUST OF SELF

### *James*

This leads me into the area of student trust of self. Response groups are unlikely to work if readers do not trust themselves to have good ideas or do not know how to belong in a group. Self-esteem plays a critical role in this instance. Since James had not been taking part in literature discussion prior to this group it seems possible that he did not trust himself to be a functioning member of this community. In the first group (My Side of the Mountain) he was made to feel an integral part of the group while in the second group (Kidnapped in the Yukon) this was not the case. Thus, it seemed that effectively his voice was silenced, he began to lose interest and hid behind inappropriate behavior.

### *Sarah*

In choosing during the second round of novels Sarah seemed to experience some difficulty—as compared to the other students who quickly formed their groups. Sarah seemed to hover on the fringes not knowing what to do. Each time Sarah attempted to

choose a novel she would first of all look at the students who had already signed up. Eventually, she chose to be in the group with her friend, Abby, who had chosen to read Sweetgrass. I wrote: "Sarah and Abby are having some heavy discussion about what to read. I wonder how much power Abby will have over Sarah's decision" (Field Notes, 1997, February 8). I could sense Sarah's ambivalence towards being part of this group but the need to be with her friend won out.

Sarah sat on the edge of the group (the community)—she seemed hesitant with her participation. Margie almost completed dominated the discussion as displayed in the following excerpt:

Margie: And, we're about one third of the book, and so far it's good.

Margie: O.K. What I think—you know like—like. I don't know, somebody is a warrior and that means they don't cry, they can't be shot.

Sarah: Yeah.

Margie: If somebody sees a warrior cry, they'll be like, omigod, what an outcast!

Sarah: I wonder. . .

Margie: That's what happens when you're a warrior

The discussions continued for several sessions in the above manner. As these sessions continued, Sarah seemed to detach herself from the conversation and did not engage in written response—as though she did not trust herself to have good ideas to share. Later for several sessions I became a participant in the group. Sarah's silence at this point seem to call for instructional support by the teacher. The group needed to be reminded of how to ensure a successful group discussion by 1) listening to others, 2) respecting each others' opinions, 3) sharing and reacting in productive ways, and most importantly 4)

making sure that each voice was heard. Students must be willing to contribute to discussion, not to dominate. It seemed that after the teacher facilitated the group discussion, Sarah was aided in finding her voice again and she contributed well to the discussion.

In the last round of novels where Forbidden City was assigned to the class, Sarah and Abby teamed up to discuss the novel. It seemed important for Sarah to be part of the discussion with someone whom she could trust to accept her ideas respectfully. Many of the students in the class at that time became part of a group that was made up of their friends. Since they did not have to choose the novel this seemed to be a natural way to group.

### *Chad*

Chad did not experience any difficulty in being part of the conversation groups at any time during the study. In each of the conversation groups Chad assumed leadership and remained in a participating role. He seemed to trust himself and his place within the group. However, he was much less apt to share his personal ideas. It would seem that although he seemed to know "how" to share in a group he did not really know "what" to share. It would seem that perhaps Chad did not trust himself to have good ideas to share in the group, thus he hid behind his role as leader.

Observing James, Sarah and Chad made me realize that the context needs to provide students with models of how to read aesthetically, how to build an envisionment and not to "walk on the words of the text." Goatley (1997) found in her studies that data revealed one of the primary areas the at-risk reader struggled with was "moving beyond

literal interpretation which includes discussing their feelings about text and evaluating the text" (126). In the group Chad was eager to contribute but seemed not to have the experience of responding aesthetically. He needed guidelines to evoke that lived through experience.

Langer (1998) discusses two kinds of instructional support that we as teachers can employ to foster literary thinking; one is support for "ways to discuss" and another "for ways to think" (20). For all readers and more especially for at-risk readers ways to discuss revolves around discussion routines (turn taking, agreeing and disagreeing) and the other helps them sharpen their thinking, ways to make themselves understood, focusing and extending their ideas. Borders and Naylor (1993) have found the fewer the prompts the more fruitful the discussions. However, many educators suggest that prompts and other teacher supplied questions may be necessary in the beginning. James needed support in ways to discuss as well as in ways to think. Chad seemed to have a good grasp of ways to discuss, but if he is to do more than literal interpretation he needs support in asking authentic questions. Sarah seemed to know what to share but she needed to feel accepted in the group in order to do so. It would appear that all three students needed guidance in forming questions that would increase their ability to reach for a horizon of possibilities.

Trust has a central role in any community. If teachers want to move towards a transactive classroom they need to trust that the students who come to their classrooms bring to the "text" and "context" knowledge and questions of their own. Students need to trust that their ideas will be accepted by their teachers and their peers, teachers must be trusted to share authority appropriately. Community members must be trusted to accept

responsibility. Students must trust themselves by recognizing their own capabilities to contribute both to their personal development and to the classroom community. This would seem to be the type of community where teachers and students can reach towards a "horizon of possibilities."

## SUMMARY

In this chapter, I have tried to capture some of the "context" (environment surrounding the reading community) of Susan's classroom. In an attempt to achieve this I sought to show how ultimately envisionment building depends a great deal on the climate of trust that the students and teacher have constructed collaboratively in the classroom. It would seem that the three voices of the students informing the study could stand clear of the background noise and become part of the larger chorus of the classroom. The teacher should not serve as the sole holder of knowledge but instead provide scaffolding for the students, helping them do what they could not yet do alone.

# CHAPTER SIX: SUMMARY, DISCUSSION, IMPLICATIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The particular is always more than a match for the universal; the universal always has to accommodate itself to the particular (Goethe)

## PURPOSE AND SIGNIFICANCE

This study grew out of a desire to discover whether the voices of at-risk or less proficient readers could be more than a tentative whisper in an envisionment building classroom. Eisner (1991) states "it is the generalizing capacity of the image that leads us to look for certain qualities of classroom life or features of teaching . . ." (198). I come away from this study with images of James, Sarah, and Chad burned into my consciousness.

This study, including at-risk readers as part of an envisionment building classroom, was built on the assumption that given the opportunity and support to experience literature, to bring their feelings, their questions, and their creativity to the act of reading, at-risk readers voices could become a visible thread in the rich tapestry Langer refers to as an envisionment building classroom. Traditionally, at-risk readers tended to be identified and separated into programs that focused on "walking on the words" (Freire, 1985). This meant that the students mainly worked on word recognition and fluency. The shift in reading programs in the classroom from skills-based to literature-based needs to extend the invitation to less proficient readers as well. All students come to school bringing a wide array of literary experiences with them. Building on these experiences should be continued when they enter school, not discounted as in certain cases. By examining how these readers can indeed transact with literature and

what conditions need to prevail in the classroom to affect the lived through experience, this study proposed to contribute to an understanding of how at-risk readers can perhaps embrace reader response as an instructional option.

**PROCEDURES**

A naturalistic approach and the techniques of ethnography were used to explore these areas of interest. During the study, the questions asked were how effective teachers are in providing an environment for at-risk readers to transact with literature, what evidence there is of envisionment building, and how context in the classroom affects envisionment building. A grade six classroom was identified where a teacher had been struggling with how and to what extent to include at-risk readers in her community of learners. There was a genuine desire to learn more about how to help the students find their voices. I was a participant observer in this classroom over a three month period. Data sources were my field notes, teacher's journal, audio tapes and transcripts of students conversations about the novels chosen to read for this study, as well as students written responses. Data analysis involved the synthesis and analysis of all data sources both throughout the study and more intensively after the data had been gathered.

As the discussion has demonstrated a number of findings have emerged. I will frame those findings around the three questions I posed which grew out of my original research questions.

## DISCUSSION

### *Teacher's Role*

It would seem that emphasis on the responses of the students diminishes the authority and stature of the teacher. O'Reilly (1989) suggests that as teachers we have "inherited our father's light saber, and we have to learn to wield it. The worst thing we can do is "'pretend' we don't have power" (146). As a teacher in an envisionment building, collaborative classroom O'Reilly would have given up the power of the traditional pedagogue. As teachers, we then have to assume a new responsibility. In a transactive classroom the students' thinking is at the center of concern which then moves part of the teacher's role to providing her students with new and more sophisticated ways to engage in the literary experience.

Within a transactive classroom the attention to students' first reactions is not meant to substitute for thought but to precede and prepare for it (Probst, 1988, 53). Having a roomful of readers is a strong foundation on which to build a community of readers. There will be chaos, there will be uncertainties as a student takes that first step into transacting with literature. The teacher will experience the same kinds of confusion and uncertainty as she attempts to make that shift to "teacher as student" (Freire, 1970). The teacher needs to relinquish her role as the sole voice of authority in the classroom and to add her voice to the students' voices as they collaborate in striving towards a "horizon of possibilities" (Langer, 1990, 814) in an envisionment building classroom. Susan, in referring to her first experience in shedding her teacher monitoring role to become a participant in the discussion group was awed and humbled "by the discovery of

what kids liked so much about this book, by their insights and their questions" (Teacher's Journal, 1997, February 6).

The teacher needs to demonstrate to the students that she is not "the" authority on text. Rather, she needs to bring her experiences, creativity and imagination out in the open as she models for the students how she transacts with a particular text. The teacher's role then shifts at times during a particular classroom reading. She becomes reader, facilitator, collaborator as she and her students construct meaning from text and context.

***Envisionment Building***

The data provide evidence that the three students whose voices informed my study were desirous of building an envisionment around the literature they had read. That is, they appeared to understand that to be part of an envisionment building community they needed to take that initial tentative step into an envisionment. That is not to say that they demonstrated complex envisionments but they began to develop an awareness of how to proceed.

Several findings emerged from the data exploring envisionment building by the three at-risk readers whose voices informed the study. In a very real sense, the responses reflected more of an efferent stance. Purcell-Gates (1991) study using Langer's (1990) stances found that less proficient readers spent much of their time being out and stepping into an envisionment and trying to maintain that stance. Yet there was some evidence of the students responding aesthetically. The literary work must "hold out some link with the young readers own past and present preoccupations, emotions, anxieties, and ambitions" (Rosenblatt, 1956, 69). Some of the students were more knowledgeable about

certain texts than about others in the study in terms of background knowledge and experience with a particular type of material and thus more successful in aesthetic response. Choice became an issue as was displayed during the study when one of the literature selections was assigned to the class. This puts teachers in a position of becoming better informed about their students, their likes and their interests.

*Classroom Contexts*

Knowing how to read, taking risks, and taking a chance at being disputed, and exposing one's vulnerabilities by sharing personal experience may pose a threat to students who do not trust themselves to have a good idea or the "right" response. Interest in particular texts, and responding aesthetically rather than efferently could present risk taking for the students; thus stock responses are substituted for real ones. Just as the data suggested that students' views of envisionment building and views of themselves were shaped by the reading community, there was also evidence that the students' sense of community served as a tool in their participation in envisionment building. An envisionment building community is one where trust prevails. Through the trust of teacher and students, students like James, Chad and Sarah can begin to learn to trust themselves as learners. There needs to be room for these students to form and develop their own understandings where mutual support is offered by students as well as teachers as part of the social network.

If we are to begin with students' responses, we need literature that provokes responses, stimulating students to think, feel and talk. The selection of literature for the study seemed to appeal to the students for the most part and it did invoke plenty of

discussion. The initial responses are not to be used in themselves but students need to rethink their responses and go beyond. There was very little evidence of reflection on the part of the at-risk readers. It seems that there was need for more instructional support and some potentially teachable moments were lost. In an envisionment building classroom we respect our students as thinkers and we trust that they will request help if needed. This did not happen for the at-risk readers. Thus from this perspective, teaching involves becoming a careful listener (a kid watcher as Yetta Goodman [1985] calls it).

For the at-risk readers in this study, conversations about the novels they had read made a difference in their understanding of literature. Reading on their own did not have nearly as much value for these students. Through listening and participating with the other students in their groups, the at-risk readers attempted to reach for a horizon of possibilities. Within the literature discussion group set in a transactive classroom the at-risk readers began to recognize that it was not the right answer that was valued. Instead, in such a discussion group, there is room for multiple perspectives, thus providing an opportunity for the at-risk readers to offer an opinion and to ask questions.

## IMPLICATIONS FOR CLASSROOM PRACTICE

The findings in the study suggest that the first step towards an envisionment building classroom is in creating an environment where all students feel a sense of belonging. There needs to be recognition of the uniqueness of each voice and a willingness to create space where all voices are listened to, valued and respected. Students at risk for reading failure can carve out a niche in a transactive classroom with support from teachers and peers about how and what to share in a discussion group. Literary instruction stresses the importance of providing a social context in which

students participate in meaningful activities (Englert, Raphael and Mariage, 1994). Programs need to be developed wherein at-risk readers can participate in such an environment which a transactive or envisionment building classroom will provide.

Goatley (1997) suggests that students identified as learning disabled may often have considerable language skills despite lower achievement. Thus teachers should encourage responses to literature through use of discussion groups. It would seem valuable to the at-risk reader if remedial instruction moved beyond word recognition and fluency skills to the very nature of the reader/text in discussion. For the reader/text relationship to blossom, teachers need to explicitly teach students how to develop and maintain discussion which can contribute to the general cohesiveness and productivity of the wider classroom community.

Thoughtful responses cannot always be offered verbally or written; there needs to be space for responding through other mediums (dancing, painting, drawing, music). Too often we focus totally on the oral and written responses forgetting that individual students can respond in other very unique ways. These multiple ways of responding and expressing might be used very effectively in a reader response classroom.

Students need more time to read in school and need to be able to choose their own materials and talk with fellow readers (Fielding & Pearson, 1994, 64). For at-risk readers time would seem to be a crucial element, time to read, time to reflect and time to just be part of a classroom. It is also important that at-risk readers be guided and encouraged to choose materials they can easily read otherwise the students cannot make that "being out" and "stepping in" stance.

Students need to learn to become good questioners, questioning what it is they are

reading. Langer (1991) suggests that the understanding of literature involves the raising of questions. Teachers in collaboration with the students can develop ways to form questions.

Effective instruction will help students read and make them want to read. It may well be that only when we make it possible for at-risk readers to improve their reading is when they see that reading opens up worlds they otherwise could not enter.

## RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

This study suggests new areas of inquiry about at-risk readers and reader response instruction. These include:

- What impact does the teacher's attitude and approach to teaching at-risk readers in the classroom have on the students attitude towards learning to read?
- What techniques are most effective in moving at-risk readers beyond the first stage (being out and stepping in) in envisionment building?
- How and why is response to literature (envisionment building) enhanced through the use of drama, dance, and art when teaching at-risk learners?
- What other variables/factors in the context of the regular classroom community contribute to envisionment building for the at-risk learner?

## LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

One of the limitations of the study was the small sample size, dictated in this case by the students available in the particular classroom. The three months spent in the classroom facilitated my understanding of the conditions (context) needed in order to include at-risk readers as participants in reader response—though the length of the engagement remains a limitation. Restricting the focus of the study to one particular classroom restrains the transferability of the findings—one upper elementary classroom would be different from another. Another limitation was the age difference of the subjects between the participants in this study and Langer's participants on which the analysis of envisionment building was based. The average age of the subjects differ, with Langer's average being two and a half years older.

## SUMMARY COMMENT

The environment of a transactive classroom has the potential for inclusion of at-risk readers. Being part of this inquiry made me realize how important it is for teachers and students to collaboratively cultivate the climate that is needed to effect this phenomenon. Just as the readers transact with the text so they also as students need to transact with the context of the classroom.

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# APPENDIX A

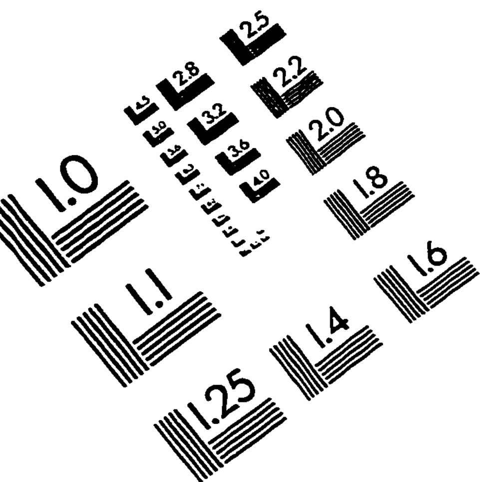
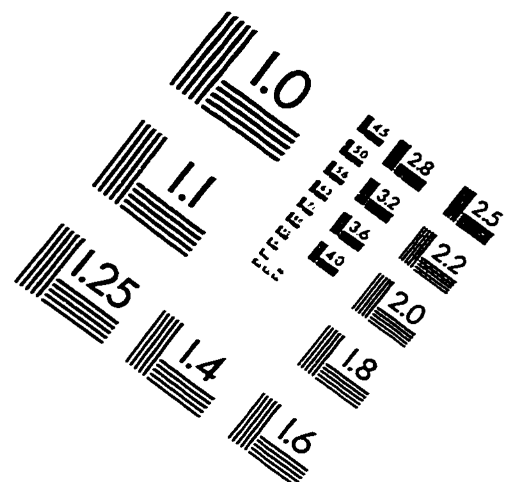
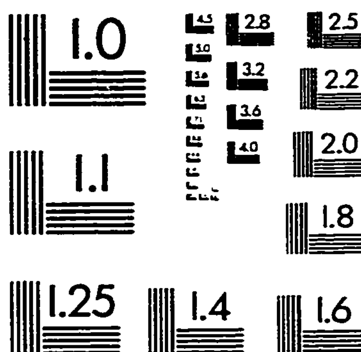
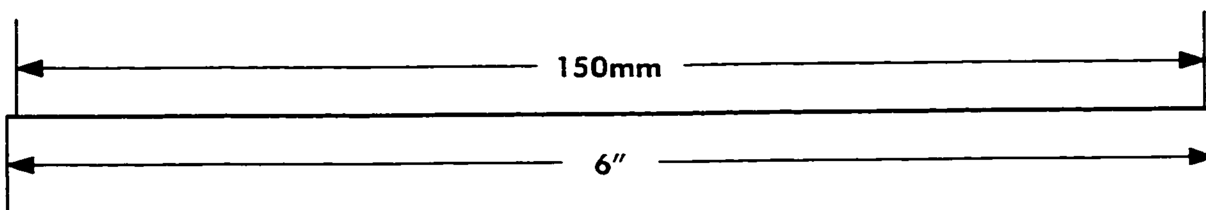
## A TAXONOMY OF AESTHETIC RESPONSE

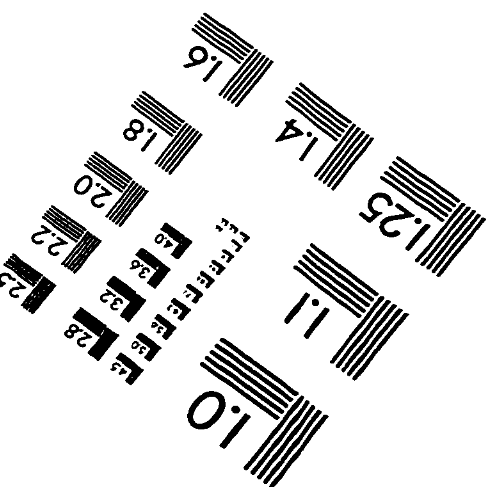
| | Minimal | Moderate | Complete |
|---|---|---|---|
| 0. Efferent response.<br><br>Example: "The main characters in the story are talking mule, the talking dog, the boy, and his father." | ______ | ______ | ______ |
| **Stage 1: Evocation** | | | |
| 1. *Relive the experience*: reexperience what happened as you read; includes acting out, telling, rereading a part that you, the reader, choose to reread.<br>Example: "When the mule spoke it was a surprise. I was thinking it was going to be a magical of in some way a special mule." | ______ | ______ | ______ |
| 2. *Imagine or picture* characters, setting, or events from the selection; elaborate on the basic idea.<br>Example: The son was so scared that he almost a heart attack. He screamed as loud as he could. Then he ran as far as he could." | ______ | ______ | ______ |
| **Stage 2: Alternatives (comparing, contrasting the original evocation)** | | | |
| 3. *Apply own experience*: reconsider response by relating self.<br>Example: "This is a picture of all the people telling Bill what to do and where to go because it reminds me of my brother and everyone telling him what to do and him telling them NO!" | ______ | ______ | ______ |
| 4. Apply other reading or media to the work: e.g. comparing folk tales.<br>Example: "This story reminds me of a story I was told when I was little about a King who had a chair that talked and nobody would believe him ...." | ______ | ______ | ______ |

| | Minimal | Moderate | Complete |
|---|---|---|---|
| 5. Apply other readers' views (as in book discussions) or reexamine your own views.<br>Example: "I really liked the story. It was unpredictable and humorous . . . . It was surprising when the dog started talking, too.... It would be great to be able to talk to animals and have them talk back." | ______ | ______ | ______ |
| 6. Reexamine text from other perspectives: including hypothesizing, considering another point of view, extrapolating.<br>Example: "I wonder why the mule hadn't talked before now? Why did he wait so long to say he was sick of being yelled at?" | ______ | ______ | ______ |
| Stage 3: Reflective thinking (thematic level, requiring generalization and application) | | | |
| 7. *Interpretation*: generalize about the meaning of the literary experience, with application to the reader's own life, hence extending #3 to application.<br>Example: "Finding out what animals thought would change the world. There may not be anymore eating beef or poultry. Yikes! I love a good leg of chicken." | ______ | ______ | ______ |
| Stage 4: Evaluation (classified only as aesthetic if the above categories have been met) | | | |
| 8. *Evaluating what you got from the transaction.*<br>Example: "If I were the boy I wouldn't trip out. I would go and talk to the animals. What harm can talking to a mule do? Most people chat with their pets anyways. It wouldn't make much difference if the pet talked back. It would actually be nice." | ______ | ______ | ______ |
| 9. Evaluating the "goodness" of the work itself: in regard to criteria set by the reader.<br>Example: "I think this story really does not have any other point beside the fact that things are not always what they seem. Writing about this donkey might be a lot easier if the story was longer and more thought provoking." | ______ | ______ | ______ |

Sebasta, S.L. Monson, D.L., & Senn, H.D., (1985) A hierarchy to assess reader response, *Journal of Reading*, 38(6).

# IMAGE EVALUATION TEST TARGET (QA-3)



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