

CONNECTING TO LITERATURE: READER'S RESPONSE JOURNALS
INFLUENCE PERSONAL CONNECTIONS TO LITERATURE

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Advisor

[REDACTED]

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DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated...to my husband and my family for their continual love and support.

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Abstract

Responding to literature is an essential component of the reader's workshop. Reader's Response Journals are a tool used in many language arts literacy classrooms as an instrument for critically responding and connecting to literature. The purpose of this study was to examine the influences of reader's response journals on personal connections. The connections made were further analyzed to determine if they were meaningful and if they could be supported by the text.

During this eight-week qualitative study, data was collected in a relatively affluent, suburban neighborhood in a K-5 elementary school. The school is located in northern New Jersey. The participant group was comprised of eight students, 4 boys and 4 girls. The students' reading levels varied from average to above average. Data collected included journal entries assessed with a rubric, transcripts of audiotaped journal conferences and teacher researcher field notes.

The study yielded several findings. The conclusions drawn were that the reader's response journal does in fact provide a safe zone for connection making, students sometimes "stretch-it" to make a connection, which results in less meaningful connections, genre does affect students' abilities to make connections, post-it notes may influence the quality and quantity of personal connections, the utilization of higher-level comprehension skills positively impact personal connections and when students can personally relate to the text, they can make meaningful connections regardless of their individual reading levels and abilities.

Recommendations would be to increase the number of study participants, as well as the length of the study. Further research would need to be done in a more culturally, socioeconomic, ethnically, demographically, socially, and academically diverse environment. Teachers, parents, and administrators should encourage students to respond and personally connect to literature. This transaction between reader and text is an experience that all students can benefit from, regardless of level or ability.

Chapter I

The Problem

New to the field of education, I began my teaching career six years ago in a K-5 elementary school in a relatively affluent and high-achieving district. The schools throughout the district had adopted and embraced a balanced literacy approach to language arts instruction prior to my arrival and implemented reader's workshop in all elementary classrooms. In the eighty-four minute block allotted for language arts (reading and word study), students engage in and experience the following activities; a class read aloud including time for class discussion, a word study mini-lesson with time for independent practice, a reading mini-lesson and a period of time in which to read independently, and respond in reader's response journals. The scheduled independent reading time allows for students to pursue their own reading interests while the teacher has the opportunity to confer with individual students or to meet with small reading groups. Without a definitive curriculum or a purchased reading program, teachers were provided with a binder of reading/word study resources and were given a couple of resource books to use as references. *Strategies That Work* (Harvey & Goudvis 2000) became the bible to which many teachers turned to when creating mini-lessons to teach reading strategies. While the teachers had a lot of freedom in terms of lessons taught and materials used, a program implemented in this way is frightening for a new teacher. The collaboration of teachers across grade level and throughout schools in the district indicated that many teachers, especially the newer ones, were feeling pressured and stressed about what to teach and when. With such an independent approach to reading,

how would teachers account for students' comprehension? Reader's Response journals became the answer.

The Reader's Response Journal is an assessment tool used throughout most, if not all of the elementary classrooms in the district. These journals provide a window into students' thoughts, ideas and most importantly, their literary understandings. The goal of the reader's response journal is to provide a safe location in which students can personally connect to the literature that they read, while hopefully deepening understanding and meaning.

Statement of the Problem

Reader's workshop is a necessary component of a balanced literacy program. It allows for students to read books that are not only of interest to them, but it allows students to read books at their independent reading levels. Students are often more engaged because they are reading what they want to read and they are given a good chunk of time each day to indulge in their independent reading interests. The idea that students are reading different books at different paces means that assessments and accountability measures must be unique and varied. However, the validity and reliability of these informal assessments, most notably the reader's response journal, are questionable.

The implementation of the reader's response journal was intended as a tool to allow teachers to understand what their students are reading, whether or not they understand and ultimately whether or not they are able to make personal connections to the literature that they are reading. The proposed goal of the reader's response journal is to increase the depth of personal connections made and to consequently increase the level

of comprehension. The reader's response journal also serves as a springboard for small group and whole class discussion that allow for students to freely share their ideas. These discussions serve to enable students to understand that there is more than one way to interpret a text and these varied interpretations may encourage students to modify their own interpretations (Rosenblatt, 74-75, 1938).

The reader's response journal allows for an opportunity to connect reading and writing and it provides an open circuit for reflection. However, the problem is that students often struggle with what to write in journals and tend to write limited entries. The entries written are not graded per say, but they are evaluated by the teacher and allow for a written discussion forum between teacher and student. Students are continually encouraged to dig deeper and to think critically about the texts that they are reading. They are consistently encouraged to make personal connections to what they read. However, the connections made are often simplistic and tend to lack meaning. It is the deeper, more meaningful connections that are sought after.

After implementing these journals for the last six years, it is evident that there is great variation in what constitutes a journal entry from student to student. Even with teacher modeling and journal entry suggestions and guidelines, many students still seem to struggle with what to write or what exactly should be included. Journal entries vary from a couple of sentences to a page or a page and a half. The freedom that these journals present is almost scary to some students. They are so used to a given topic or set of directions, that when left to respond freely they tense up. Ultimately, you find that some will expand their entries with unnecessary repetitive information, while some remain reluctant to expand, unsure of themselves and fearful of what is expected or what

others will think of their ideas. Of course you encounter a select few who truly “get” the idea of reader response, but these children seem to be few and far between. The benefits of these journals are in question and further studies of their advantages or disadvantages are necessary. The question guiding this research is: How do reader’s response journals impact personal connections to literature? A sub-question related to this research is: How does the implementation of reader’s response journals influence meaning making?

Definition of Terms

- Aesthetic Response – a more personal reading of the text, an understanding that a given text has more than one meaning (Rosenblatt, 1938)
- Background Knowledge – prior knowledge that a reader brings to the text; this information may have a direct impact on the textual interpretations made
- Connections – personal interpretations of text read and the ability to relate the text to ones own life
- Efferent Response – a literal reading of the text based on facts (Rosenblatt, 1938)
- Reader’s Response Journals – a journal that allows students to write freely about their thoughts, questions, connections and feeling about literature (Also referred to as dialogue journals, reading logs, learning logs and reflections journals)
- Text-to-Self Connections – the relation of textual information to one’s own life
- Transactional Approach – text and the reader are both active participants in the making of meaning (Dewey, 1949)

Theoretical Rationale

Louise Rosenblatt (1938) is one of the biggest theorists associated with the Reader Response Theory, however in the 1980s she disassociated herself from this theory

and went with a more transactional approach to literacy that fostered a reader-plus-text perspective (Connell, 2008). Her theories and ideas advocate the importance of the text and the reader. “A novel or a play remains merely ink spots on paper until a reader transforms them into meaningful symbols” (Rosenblatt, pg. 24, 1995). It is the transaction between the text and the reader that allows for meaning to be made.

Previously, it was assumed that there was one, single interpretation of a given text and that the teacher would convey that meaning. However, Rosenblatt fostered the belief that the individual constructed meaning and that more than one interpretation of a text was not only acceptable but also necessary. This simple idea allows students to learn from one another and build upon what they already know.

The interpretations made by students are influenced by many outside factors, such as past linguistic and life experience, personality traits, memories, present needs and preoccupations, the mood of the moment and perhaps a particular physical condition (Rosenblatt, 1938). Other factors that play a part include social and cultural beliefs. The idea of varying interpretations brings into question the accountability for each and every interpretation. Therefore, Rosenblatt discussed the importance of determining the validity of an interpretation. “Challenged to establish the validity of his interpretation and judgment of the work, he will be stimulated both to examine the text more closely and to scrutinize the adequacy of his past experience and basic assumptions” (Rosenblatt, pg. 117, 1995). Students must understand that each and every interpretation of text cannot be deemed acceptable and the interpretations made must be evaluated for their validity. Do they make sense? Can the meaning made be adequately supported by the text?

Rosenblatt also advocated for social interactions and the sharing of varying viewpoints between student groups. “A free exchange of ideas will lead each student to scrutinize his own sense of the literary work in light of others’ opinions ” (Rosenblatt, pg. 104, 1995). The hope is that through analysis of their own interpretations and interactions with the varying viewpoints of others, students will modify and perhaps deepen their ideas, beliefs and interpretations. This reflective process is very important and is directly related to developing critical readers.

The reader’s response journal is a tool that allows students to interact and engage with the text that they read. Students are provided with a free, safe environment to independently explore their thoughts, feelings and emotions, as well as to make connections to what they read. Rosenblatt (1995) speaks of both aesthetic and efferent readings. It is the aesthetic readings that are truly sought after and the reader’s response journal provides the venue in which to do so.

John Dewey (1938) served as an inspiration to Louise Rosenblatt and many of her ideas and theories are based upon Dewey’s beliefs and principles. John Dewey debated traditional versus progressive education and believed that progressive education was necessary to prepare students for their lives in the real world (Dewey, 1938). Dewey’s theories are based on experience and lay to rest education of the past where the teacher simply conveys knowledge to her students. Students are active participants in the educational process and each student has an individual, personal experience with the literature that they read. Each reader’s experience is different from the rest.

“In 1949, John Dewey had suggested that, instead of *interaction*, which implies separate entities acting on one another, the term *transaction* should be used to designate

relationships between reciprocally conditioned elements” (Rosenblatt, pg.291, 1995).

Therefore, students transact with the text that they read. The two are necessary in order for meaning to be made. As previously indicated, the meaning made varies from student to student, therefore, the reader’s response journal provides an environment for each and every student to engage in an individual literary experience.

“Can we find any reason that does not ultimately come down to the belief that democratic social arrangements promote a better quality of human experience, one which is more widely accessible and enjoyed, than do non-democratic and anti-democratic forms of social theory” (Dewey, pg. 34, 1938)? A classroom set-up that fosters social interaction and allows for students to play an active role in their learning is one that is likely going to promote successful learning endeavors. Students will not only have the opportunity to make personal connections to the literature that they read, but they will also be able to learn from their peers.

Brian Cambourne’s “Conditions of Learning” is based on a constructivist perspective. “He outlined a series of interactive processes teachers can use to facilitate students’ understanding of the learning process” (Rushton, S.P., Eitelgeorge, J., & Zickafoose, R., pg. 11-12, 2003). This model consisted of eight connected conditions; immersion, demonstration, engagement, expectations, responsibility, employment, approximation and response. And while all of these conditions are important, two are most relevant in terms of reader’s response journals and the aforementioned research; engagement and response.

“When students are able to engage in and take responsibility for their learning, a sense of empowerment often follows” (Rushton, S.P., Eitelgeorge, J., & Zickafoose, R.,

pg. 17, 2003). When learning experiences are meaningful and of interest to students the outcomes are often more positive. “As a child begins to see that there is a personal investment in the learning process, her attention to the subject at hand increases, and more importantly, she begins to engage in and become an active participant in the demonstration itself (Rushton, S.P., Eitelgeorge, J., & Zickafoose, R., pg. 17, 2003). The reader’s response journal allows for personal engagement and individualized learning experiences that are meaningful for each child.

Response journals allow students to share their personal thoughts and connections but also provide an opportunity to engage in dialogue and receive feedback from teachers and peers. “Cambourne suggests that it is critical for all learners to receive feedback from an outside, knowledgeable, significant other” (Rushton, S.P., Eitelgeorge, J., & Zickafoose, R., pg. 20, 2003). Obviously, feedback can come in the written form in response journals, but feedback can also be provided through small group or whole class discussion. “Cambourne (2001) describes the process of social interaction as, “Experts and novices interact; novices try their developing skills and knowledge out; experts give feedback and direction, which provides a kind of learning scaffold; and each novice’s performance gradually approaches the target level” (Hurst, B., Fisk, C., & Wilson, C. pg. 37, 2006). Response journals and the personal connections made within them provide a springboard for the social interactions and open dialogues between students. Through these open discussions, students deepen the meaning made and are able to modify and enhance their interpretations.

The aforementioned theorists support the research intended in this study and their theories and beliefs form the basis for implementation of response journals in the classroom.

Educational Significance

Reader's response journals are used in a countless number of classrooms throughout the world on a daily basis. The intention of their use is to increase personal connections made to literature and to deepen the meaning made. The question at hand is whether or not these journals really impact the connections made and ultimately the meaning constructed. Is comprehension deepened when reader's response journals are incorporated into the classroom? Are these journals beneficial to students? Are they valuable tools that should remain part of the reader's workshop?

This qualitative research study is important for many professionals in the field of education, including literacy/language arts teachers, reading coaches/specialists, administrators and curriculum directors. The results of this study will aid in the development of future curriculum and instruction, especially in the area of literacy and language arts.

Chapter II

Review of Related Literature

A vast amount of research has been done on reader's response journals and their intended uses. Some studies focus on the importance of making meaning and background knowledge, some focus on the dialogue aspect and the significance of communication between teacher and student or students and peers, and yet another group has focused on connections and personal associations with literature. The studies that follow directly support the research embarked upon for this study.

Aesthetic Responses/Personal Connections

The following individuals engaged in studies regarding the use of reader's response journals and how they influence personal and meaningful connections made to literature.

Behar (2003) implemented a multicultural literature study into her third grade, Baltimore classroom to provide students with the opportunity to personally connect to the books that they read. The cultural background knowledge that these students possessed would enable them to make connections while improving higher-level comprehension skills. The goal of the program was to encourage students to make aesthetic responses to literature. The classroom was designed as a reader's workshop. Students were given freedom to choose the books they would read from a teacher-created list, they answered questions before and after reading, discussed the books in small groups, wrote in journals and also discussed the books at home with their families. Data was collected through journal samplings, as well as teacher field notes obtained while observing small and whole group discussion. Aesthetic responses were evaluated using Altieri's Levels of

Aesthetic Response Scale (1996). Twenty-three third graders participated in the study, 12 were girls and 11 were boys. The class was predominantly white, middle class, including one Korean American student and one student who was born in Nigeria.

Results indicated that third graders were able to make aesthetic responses to multicultural literature with the implementation of effective instructional strategies and teacher modeling. Most students' responses fell between level 3 and 4 on Altieri's scale. 2/3 of the class wrote detailed responses to literature. Students indicated that they enjoyed the experience, especially reading books they could relate to. Students' individual reading levels did not appear to impact the level of aesthetic response; in fact, average readers seemed to reach a higher level of aesthetic response. The study did indicate that oral responses were indicative of higher aesthetic responses. Further research should examine the results in a more diverse group.

Bowman (2000) encouraged her students to read often, to think critically about the literature that they read and to share their ideas with their peers. In her classroom, active reading was promoted and she wanted to portray to her students that there was no, single correct interpretation of literature. Students must interact with the given text and create meaning based on their individual beliefs and background knowledge. Data was collected through reading response samples. Two hundred letters were randomly sent to former high school students asking them to participate in the study. Students were surveyed about their feelings concerning reading logs (reading journals).

Results indicated that journal writing was a beneficial tool for students. Journals positively correlated to meaning making, they influenced and increased comprehension and they resulted in more intuitive and thoughtful writing. The reading and writing

connection provides an opportunity for students to critically connect to what they read thus developing a more critical understanding of the literature that is read.

Hancock (1993) studied reader's response journals of students and the ways in which they personally connect to the literature that they read. The idea behind the journals can be linked to Rosenblatt's transactional theory (1978, 1982) and the intention of the journals is to allow for a personalized experience with the text. Data was collected through journal samplings. The study was conducted on preadolescent readers aged eleven and twelve in sixth grade. The students involved in the study read and responded to four realistic fiction texts: Hatchet (Paulsen, 1987), One-Eyed Cat (Fox, 1984), The Great Gilly Hopkins (Paterson, 1978) and The Night Swimmers (Byars, 1980).

Students' response entries were classified according to eight different response options; monitoring understanding, making inferences, making, validating or invalidating predictions, expressing wonder or confusion, character interaction, character assessment, story involvement and literary criticism. The findings indicate that the reader's response journal provide a safe environment for students to explore their own personal findings and interpretations. The communication between teacher and student is essential for further expansion of personal responses. However, overall, it can be determined that the response journal has positive effects on the exploration and extension of personal literature response.

Mayhill (2004) analyzed how, if and when teacher use background knowledge in whole class teaching. The study references the Schema Theory (Bartlett, 1932) and the importance of Schematic Knowledge, which indicates the importance of connecting new learning to past experiences. The study examined whether or not teachers utilize

schematic knowledge in their teaching practices. The study was funded by the Economic and Social Research Council. Data was collected through classroom observations, video recordings, student interviews and teacher conferences. Research was obtained from two cohorts, and was taken from Year 2 in the three first schools and Year 6 in three middle/primary schools

The video data was analyzed and it was clear that teacher's made little use of background knowledge. On three percent of the students' statements were indicative of prior knowledge. In fact, teacher seemed to have a misunderstanding of what prior knowledge really means and most teachers believed that it related only to information learned in school. It is clear that the utilization of existing schemata allows for new learning to occur. Understanding what students already know allows for more meaningful and productive learning environments.

Werderich (2002) studied the impact of reader's response journals for middle school students and how they provided not only an arena for differentiated instruction, but also a forum for personal connections. Teachers of middle school students must be aware of the individual differences their students possess and be receptive to them. Students' abilities, backgrounds, motivations, academic levels and home lives will directly impact the meaning a text has for them. Data was collected through dialogue journals for the 1998-99 school year. A random sampling method was used and fifteen journals were collected from the forty-six created by two advanced reading classes. The students engaged in the study were seventh graders. Field notes were also kept and referred to.

Results indicated that the dialogue journals did in fact support personal and meaningful engagements with literature. Students who read the same book connected to the literature in varying ways. These journals gave teachers a clear picture of the progress students were making with reading. Based on what was written in the journals, teachers could respond to the varying needs of each of their students.

Dialogue

Several studies noted the importance of dialogue and how journals provide a place for dialogue between teacher and student or dialogue between students and peers. The intention of dialogue is to encourage students to think critically about their interpretations and connections and promote a deeper understanding.

Farest and Miller (1994) incorporated dialogue journals into their classrooms to allow for free discussion of ideas, formulation of opinions and development of insights about authors and characters. The implemented journals allowed students to write freely and gave them the opportunity to ask questions, discuss individual ideas and share opinions. The authors collected their data through journal samplings from their students and analyzed their entries, noting the varying interpretation of texts, as well as the significance of background knowledge. Students were immersed in an environment with defined classroom routines, such as, read aloud sessions, small group discussions and journal writing opportunities. The aforementioned journals allowed for free expression of thoughts, ideas and concerns. Students were given the opportunity to “free write” and were never pressured with a prompt. Journals implemented in this manner provide each student with the opportunity to explore and interpret literature individually, in his/her own way, making their own unique meaning of the text. Journals also provided students

with the opportunity to dialogue back and forth with teachers allowing for students to revisit ideas, infer, predict, wonder, etc. In turn, teachers could validate comments made, ask for further clarification, and most importantly, probe children to dig deeper.

This study indicated the benefits of implementing journaling and specifically noted that journals could be used for multiple reasons, such as finding answers to personal questions, wondering about the story, making personal connection to the text, and providing opportunities to make judgments about the author, characters, plot, and/or theme. Most importantly, these dialogue journals provided students with a safe place to share their personal thoughts freely without the fear of being judged.

Serafini (2005) conducted a study to determine how students respond to and make meaning of postmodern, meta-fictional books with non-linear plots. The particular book used for this study contained four different perspectives. This was a qualitative study conducted with intermediate age children (ages 8-12) in a small, rural, western US town. Students participated in a multi-age classroom and reading was taught in a workshop format. Data was collected through transcripts of audio taped classroom discussion, literature response journals and classroom field notes. The focus was on responses to Voices in the Park by Anthony Browne.

Due to the dynamic nature of the text, results indicated that students reacted and/or responded in different ways to the text. Some were up for the challenge and were able to make meaning despite four separate story lines. Others gave up before they even started. However, the study did reveal that students felt comfortable sharing their ideas with their peers and the open-response format allowed students to learn from one another and to personally connect to the text.

Strausbaugh (1995) studied the impact of journal writing on teachers and students alike and was focused on determining whether or not this strategy was beneficial to both parties. Dialogue journals and literature response journals were utilized for this study. Data was collected through journal samples, as well as a fifteen question, Likert scale survey that was divided into the following four categories: duration, student interest, attitudes and advantages. The multiple-choice survey was provided to thirty teachers and twenty-five teachers responded to the survey. Teachers were prompted to answer to questions in the following manner: strongly agree, agree, disagree and strongly disagree.

Results of the study and survey indicated that journal writing is, in fact beneficial to both teacher instruction and students' learning. The implementation of journal writing gives students more of an opportunity to write and it provides teachers with a window into students' minds and thinking. Journal writing also provides an opportunity for individual reflection and self-discovery. The study also indicated that students felt more comfortable about sharing their thoughts when writing in their journals and that the writing that took place in these journals was more meaningful.

Werderich (2006) studied the use of dialogue journals in middle school classrooms. Journals were implemented to individualize literacy instruction and to encourage meaningful discussion about literature. A letter explaining the study and a survey was sent to seventy middle school literacy teachers. Ten teachers responded with interest and three were selected to participate in the study; two sixth grade teacher and one seventh grade teacher. Data was collected through dialogue journals samples (over 600 samples), participant surveys, interviews, classroom observations and field notes.

The data were analyzed using axial coding and selective coding, a measure developed by Strauss and Corbin in 1998.

Results indicate that dialogue journals provide an open arena for differentiated instruction designed to meet the needs of all students. Teachers must act as facilitators and guides for their students. The journal should provide a place for students to "...visualize, react, predict and connect with text..." (Werderich, 2006). This study indicated that students were able to employ those strategies; however further research should test the effects of journals on varying populations to see if results are consistent.

Making Meaning

Reader's response journals were also implemented in classrooms as a tool for making meaning and deepening comprehension. The following studies exemplify journals and their use for constructing meaning.

Hurst, B., Fisk, C., & Wilson, C. (2006) studied the value of the Read, Respond, Revisit and Discuss (3RD) strategy for reading instruction. The theory behind this strategy indicates that the connection between reading and writing is essential; it provides for a deeper level of student learning. Students must also be given the opportunity to socially interact with their peers enabling them to see text from varying points of view. In order to assess the value of the 3RD strategy, a twelve question survey was given to 123 graduate and undergraduate students. 84 students were undergraduate elementary and middle school education majors. 39 were graduate students taking two classes in a master's reading program. The students surveyed used the strategy at least once a week over the course of an eight-week period.

The results indicated that 92% of students felt that the strategy positively impacted their learning and it assisted students in remembering what they had read. 98% of students specified that they had obtained new insight from the discussions engaged in. The majority of students also said that they would use the 3RD strategy in their classrooms in the future.

Lifford, J. (2000) studied the benefits of more explicit strategy instruction and how this would enable students to become more independent readers. They wanted readers to understand that they play an active role in meaning making. The teachers implemented a specific program aimed at deepening comprehension. The program was based on the following premises and the goal of instruction was to create readers who use prior knowledge, monitor comprehension, determine importance, synthesize, make inferences and ask questions. Data was collected through reader's response journals and pictograms. Written pieces were a compilation of exploratory writing, focused responses and reflective pieces. The study occurred in the Dedham Public School District and was conducted in grades six through twelve English classes.

Results of the study indicate that provided ample time for student reflection is important and it positively impacts the level of comprehension and meaning attained. Students indicated that they were able to tackle more sophisticated texts because they could make connections. Students ultimately learned to think about what they were reading. Follow-up interviews portrayed that a great deal of student learning had occurred and the strategies implemented were indeed successful.

Martinez, M. & Roser, N. L. (2008) conducted a study to determine how the implementation of reader's response journals assist in comprehending a difficult text.

The authors collected data through written logs of response prompts, as well as free response entries and student visualizations. The study was conducted using three first graders as the subject studies; two boys and one girl. The yearlong study was conducted in a middle-class neighborhood elementary school in a southwestern city. Journals entries were analyzed and sorted into three piles; more mature, mature, and less mature. The entries analyzed were written in response to a chapter book; none of the participants had experienced a chapter book before.

The results indicate that the three first graders studied did in fact benefit from the implementation of response journals. The journals served to deepen comprehension. Students utilized two main strategies in journal samples: recreating and speculating. According to Martinez and Roser, “a student who poses wonderings and speculations about ways in which the story might develop is one who is actively engaged in the process of meaning construction.” (Martinez & Roser, pg. 209, 2008)

Schraw (2000) analyzed transmission beliefs and transaction and beliefs and how they affect meaning making of text in a large midwestern university. Transmission beliefs focus on the author’s intended meaning of the text, whereas transaction beliefs indicate that readers play an active role in making meaning and that meaning does not lie in the text or reader alone, but is made when the two interact. The author collected data through a 20-questions multiple-choice test and a written response-Type essay, in which students were encouraged to share what they thought of the text. All students read and responded to the same piece of text. Research was based on four principle research questions and was conducted using a group of 247 undergraduate students.

Results indicated that transactional beliefs make noteworthy contributions to the meaning making process. Readers' responses were scored using a 9-level scale created by Schraw. Based on the finding of this study, it appears that transmission beliefs negatively impacted response. Transaction beliefs corresponded to meaning making in several areas, such as thematic responses, critical responses and holistic interpretations. Overall, transaction beliefs deemed a greater level of meaning making than did transmission beliefs. This research also suggests, but does not prove that transaction beliefs may align with other beliefs, such as self-efficacy and/or background knowledge.

The above studies portray the benefits of reader's response journals and their impact on making connections. It is through dialogue and journal writing that students are able to make meaning of the text and consequently make personal connections to the literature that they read. The connections made by students should exceed the efferent or literal stage; they should be deep and meaningful. This study intends to determine, if in fact reader's response journals influence connections to literature, and whether the connections made are meaningful or not.

Chapter III

Research Design

This qualitative research study was conducted in a relatively affluent district in a small northeastern suburb. The town is made up of approximately 3,300 families, which are predominantly Caucasian. Approximately 88% of the population is Caucasian, 2.7% Hispanic, 2.1% Korean, 1.8% African American, 1.2% Japanese, 1.2% Chinese, 1.0% Asian Indian, 0.9% two races or more, 0.6% Filipino and 0.6% from other races. The school district is broken into four (K-5) elementary schools with a combined middle school/high school.

The elementary school in which this study was conducted is a K-5 school consisting of a self-contained K-2 classroom, three resource rooms, 2 ½ Kindergarten classes, four first grade classes, and three second, third, fourth and fifth grade classes. The school also possesses a gifted and talented/enrichment teacher, a speech therapist, an occupational therapist, a reading specialist and a part-time guidance counselor. Students in all grade levels are exposed to two five-week sessions of enrichment each school year.

The class utilized for this qualitative study consisted of twenty students. During the language arts/literacy block, the classroom is comprised of eighteen students, as two students are classified and require language arts resource room replacement. The eighteen students receiving language arts/literacy (word study/reading) instruction in the mainstream setting are quite diverse. One student possesses an IEP and is classified ADHD and is medicated. Six students are eligible for speech services and work with the speech therapist once a week. Two students attend Rock and Read twice a week for reading reinforcement instruction and one student is pulled twice a week for math basic

skills instruction. A balanced literacy approach has been implemented for language arts/literacy instruction. Reading, writing and word study are taught in a workshop format. 126 minutes a day is devoted to language arts literacy instruction. The morning block is 84 minutes. During this time, student are exposed to a chapter book read-aloud, a word study mini-lessons and activity, a reading mini-lesson and independent practice time where they are either reading and implementing a new strategy learned or responding in their reader's response journals. A 42-minute period in the afternoon is dedicated to writer's workshop.

It is important to note that this particular district is a high-achieving district and the majority of students are performing above grade level. This is particularly true in terms of reading levels. Most students are reading above grade level. Parents of students who are reading on or below grade level are often concerned and looking for additional suggestions or support to bring their children up to "par". In this particular group, all students are reading on at least a beginning of third grade level according to the Fountas & Pinnell Benchmark reading assessment. According to this particular assessment, students reading on levels L-P are reading on a third grade level, students reading on levels O-P are reading on a fourth grade level and students reading on level S-W would be reading on a fifth grade level.

Research Participants

Eight third graders participated in the study and data was collected over an eight-week period. Eighteen students receive reading/word study instruction in the mainstream setting and the participants were chosen at random. The following biographies provide

snapshots of each of the participants to allow for a better understanding of the individuals involved.

Brooke is an eight-year-old Caucasian girl who lives at home with her parents and siblings. She works hard and has performed well in each academic year thus far. She is reading above grade level and was placed on a level T according to the Fountas & Pinnell Benchmark reading assessment. She is a developing writer and an active participant in classroom literature discussions. Brooke is a conscientious student who consistently strives to do her best.

Timmy is an eight-year-old Caucasian boy who lives at home with his parents and siblings. He is performing well in all subject areas, however, it appears he is often capable of more than he produces, as silliness or inappropriateness may interfere with his academics. Timmy is also reading above grade level. He was placed in between a level S and T on the Fountas & Pinnell Benchmark reading assessment and is a developing to strong writer.

Tara is a nine-year-old Caucasian girl who lives at home with her parents and four siblings, two of which are adopted. She is a shy student who has consistently performed well in all subject areas. She was recently tested for the Gifted & Talented Program, however she did not score high enough to qualify for the program. Tara is reading on a level T according to the Fountas & Pinnell Benchmark reading assessment and she is a developing to strong writer.

Christina is an eight-year old Caucasian girl who lives at home with her parents and sister. Her sister is classified and even though Christina is a high achiever, her mother is consistently worried about the possibility of a learning disability. She is

reading between a level Q and R according to the Fountas & Pinnell Benchmark reading assessment and is a descriptive writer who consistently writes responses to literature in her reader's response journal. She actively contributes meaningful information to classroom literature discussions and often demonstrates higher-level comprehension skills.

Bret is an eight-year-old Caucasian boy who live at home with his parents and siblings. He is a twin; his brother is in one of the other third grade classrooms. Bret is a little shy and gets a bit nervous when he makes a mistake. He is reading between a level O and P according to the Fountas & Pinnell Benchmark reading assessment. Bret is a developing writer, as he sometimes exhibits difficult organizing his thoughts. However, Bret has consistently performed satisfactorily in all subjects throughout his academic career.

Rob is a nine-year-old Caucasian boy who lives at home with his mother and sisters. His parents were recently divorced and Rob divides his time between his parents. He attends speech therapy once a week and it is anticipated that he will graduate soon. Rob is very bright and performs exceptionally well in all subject areas. He becomes very upset if he makes a mistake or is asked to redo something. Rob is reading on a level S according to the Fountas & Pinnell Benchmark reading assessment, however he often chooses books that are way below his level and needs to be encouraged to choose more appropriate independent reading books. Rob is a developing writer and is probably capable of more in-depth writing if he did not rush to get things done.

Nick is an eight-year-old Caucasian boy who lives at home with his parents and brothers. He works hard but is a struggling learner. He attends Basic Skills Instruction

two times per week for additional support in math. He is reading on a level L according to the Fountas & Pinnell Benchmark reading assessment, which is a beginning third grade level. While this is technically where he should be, he is reading at a significantly lower level than most of his classmates. Nick also experiences difficulty with writing and has trouble organizing his thoughts and remaining on topic. He requires a lot of additional support to experience success. His parents are very supportive and the lines of communication between home and school are consistently open.

Jodi is a nine-year old Caucasian girl who lives at home with her parents and sister. Jodi suffers from Type 1 Duane Syndrome, which is a rare, congenital eye movement disorder. She loses her balance often and falls a lot. She is very bright and the highest reader in the class, reading at a level W according to the Fountas & Pinnell reading assessment. She is a strong writer and exhibits a mature vocabulary for her age. She was tested for the Gifted & Talented program in 2007, but did not score high enough to be entered into the program. She is being recommended again this year. Her parents are very supportive and she puts forth effort in all that she does.

Data Sources

As previously indicated this study was qualitative in design and three different sources of data were collected to allow for triangulation of data. Research was conducted in an authentic classroom setting and no curriculum or instruction modifications were made. Students' identities were protected through the use of pseudonyms. The data was collected over an eight-week period beginning in January of 2010 and culminating in March of 2010. Data sources included students' written journal samples, audiotaped

conferences about the journal writing process and field notes indicating observations made in the classroom (see Table 1).

Table 1: Data Sources

Data Source	Purpose for Collecting Data was to Discover:	Data Collection Method	How Data Were Collected	Data Analysis Process
Student Journal Samples	Were personal connections were made to literature.	Entries were photocopied.	On a weekly basis and entries were photocopied	Personal connections identified were coded (high, middle, low) & analyzed for emergent themes.
Tape Recordings of Student-Teacher Conferences	Recorded to analyze literature discussions and possible personal connections discussions	Conferences were audio taped so that valuable dialogue or discussion would not be missed	Listened to at a later time and transcribed to allow for written documentation and/or evidence.	Conversations were analyzed to identify connections. If they were made, were they meaningful?
Field Notes	Observations of student behaviors, actions, comments, insights, etc. recorded daily	Notes were kept in a personal journal by the researcher.	Brief notes transcribed as events took place, further detail added at the end of each day if and when necessary.	Notes kept/analyzed to identify literacy behaviors (i.e. attitudes, time on task, interest, etc.) and to determine if connections were made and if so, how they influenced meaning made.

Students' journal samples were collected and photocopied to allow for the teacher to observe whether or not personal connections to literature were made. The written samples were evaluated using a rubric (see appendix A). Connections made were evaluated to determine if they were meaningful. Meaningful connections are those that allow for a deepening of textual understanding. After each journal reading, the teacher wrote a letter back to the student, indicating what was done well, providing suggestions

for improvement and perhaps making a connection to the students thoughts, feelings, etc. The rubric also provided insight into where students could further their thinking and deepen connections made.

The teacher conferred with an average of three students per day, allowing for the teacher to confer with the entire class over a week to a week and a half period. Each conference followed the same format and the questions asked were always the same (see appendix B). The audiotaped conferences allowed the teacher to interpret the underlying thinking that went into journal entries. Every conference began in the same manner; students shared a brief summary of what they were currently reading. Students were then asked connection-specific questions. Students were also challenged to evaluate the connections that were made. Were the connections meaningful, if so, how? Also, did students think that the connections made had enhanced comprehension? The conferences allowed for authentic discussion between student and teacher and also provided insight for future mini-lessons.

Field notes were kept in the form of anecdotal records on a daily basis. Brief notes were jotted down during the language arts/literacy block. The notes included observations of students' attitudes toward reading, time on task, whether it be independent reading or journal writing, and observations of literacy behaviors during mini-lessons, independent practice and share time, etc. Note taking during class time had to be brief, however, detail was added at the end of each day if and when necessary. The field notes also served as a springboard for mini-lessons and/or small-group instruction.

Data was analyzed on a weekly basis. Journals were collected on a rotating schedule, Tuesday through Friday, with students being held accountable for at least one

entry per week. The entries were assessed for content, format, personal connections and higher-level comprehension skills using a rubric (see appendix 1). For the purposes of this study, only the first three categories were analyzed, as they are the areas that were specific to the research question. The teacher also responded to the students in their journals, sharing thoughts, insights, suggestions, etc.

The audiotapes were listened to on a weekly basis as well, and the conferences were transcribed. Upon analysis of these conversations, students' connections were highlighted. Connections were analyzed and coded high, middle or low. Connections coded as high were those that were considered meaningful and appeared to directly impact comprehension. Evidence of student struggles were analyzed and used to develop mini-lessons.

Field notes were also used to interpret what was working and what was challenging for students. All pieces of data directly influenced instruction in the classroom and in one-on-one conferences.

Preliminary Data Analysis

Reader's response journals are utilized each and every year as a window into students reading and their thoughts about the material and characters they encounter. Students utilize them on a weekly basis or more often depending on individual motivation. However, the results are often varied and participation is not always evident. Students are required to write at least one entry in their journals per week. The entries submitted are often limited and the connections made are vague and literal for the most part. The intent is that as the year progresses so do the journals. Ultimately the journals should serve as a safe environment for students to write about their reading and to make

personal connections to the literature that they read. As students make these personal connections, it is hoped that they will in turn find a deeper meaning and understanding in the text.

The varied results that have been encountered year after year have called into question the benefits of these journals. Are they beneficial and do they encourage personal connections to literature? If personal connections are made, do they impact meaning made? Hence we find the motivation for the study at hand. The benefit of these journals is at stake and this study aims to determine whether the journal writing is in fact beneficial or not.

This qualitative study is valid because it employed the use of triangulation. Multiple sources of data were collected in hope that they would converge to support research findings. "...Qualitative researchers generally use this technique to ensure that an account is rich, robust, comprehensive and well-developed. A single method can never adequately shed light on a phenomenon. Using multiple methods can help facilitate deeper understanding" (Cohen & Crabtree, 2006, "Triangulation," para. 4 & 5). Therefore, the three data sources collected in this study were analyzed to verify findings.

The study is considered reliable because it encompassed the systematic collection of data. The study occurred in a natural and authentic classroom environment. Modifications were not made to the classroom setting or to instruction. Students were provided with a safe and comfortable environment and all names used are pseudonyms. The research question was open-ended and the study was objective and was not influenced by any preconceived notions, opinions, biases, etc.

Limitations

Further research would need to be done to identify the consequences, whether positive or negative, of implementing reader's responses journals, as this study includes a number of limitations. One of the participants, needed to be dropped. He was earlier identified as a struggling learner and his struggles continued to progress as the year progressed and the content became more difficult. While he still participated in the mainstream setting, he began working with a tutor and his journal entries were completed during those sessions, making them unrepresentative of his independent capabilities. Also, data was only collected over an eight-week period. It would have been beneficial to collect data over the course of an entire school year. This would allow for the observation of reading and journal writing behaviors from initial implementation. It would also be interesting to observe how students writing changed from September to June. Additionally, the study was intended to last for a **full** eight weeks, however some of the eight weeks became partial weeks as teacher. Finally, the results of this study could not be generalized to a specific population. The students that participated in this study live in a predominantly Caucasian, affluent neighborhood. The district is high achieving and most students are reading above grade level. Therefore, the students represented in this study are not indicative of a typical elementary school. It does not account for diverse populations or struggling readers who are significantly below level. Further research would need to be done in a more culturally, socioeconomic, ethnically, demographically, socially, and academically diverse environment.

Chapter IV

Findings

This eight-week study investigated the participants' personal connections to literature through systematic analysis of their response journals.

Findings were validated through triangulation of the three data sources: researcher field notes, audiotaped conferences and journal samples accompanied by graded rubrics. Students were required to submit a journal entry each week, which was graded utilizing a reading response journal rubric (see appendix A). Students also conferred with their teacher about the journal entries written and to discuss what they were reading. During the collection period, field notes were taken to record important ideas, events and student quotes to discover what influences reader's response journals have in making personal connections to literature.

Based on analysis of the data, the findings of this study suggest that the reader's response journal provides a safe zone for personal connections, genre affects students' abilities to make personal connections, post-it notes may influence the quantity and quality of connections made, there is, perhaps a connection between the utilization of higher-level comprehension skills and the making of personal connections, and finally when students are able to personally connect/relate to a book, regardless of levels and abilities, the connections are meaningful.

Journals Provide a Safe Zone for Personal Connections

Analysis of the data demonstrated that the participants were able to make personal connections to literature 82% of the time (See Table 2). It was also evident that students made connections more readily in journals, as opposed to conferences, where connections

were made only 51% of the time. The journal seemed to provide a “safe” zone for students to make connections without having to verbalize their thoughts and ideas. Some students even indicated in conferences that they felt more comfortable making connections in their journals as opposed to speaking about them in a conference, as demonstrated in the sample below.

Mrs. Hahn - Ok, when you make a connection that’s personal, then how do you feel? Like when you made the connection about not wanting to talk to your parents about the person you like, is it easier to write about that or talk about it?

Rob – Write about it.

Mrs. Hahn – Why?

Rob – Because if it’s something embarrassing it’s easier to write it than talk about it.

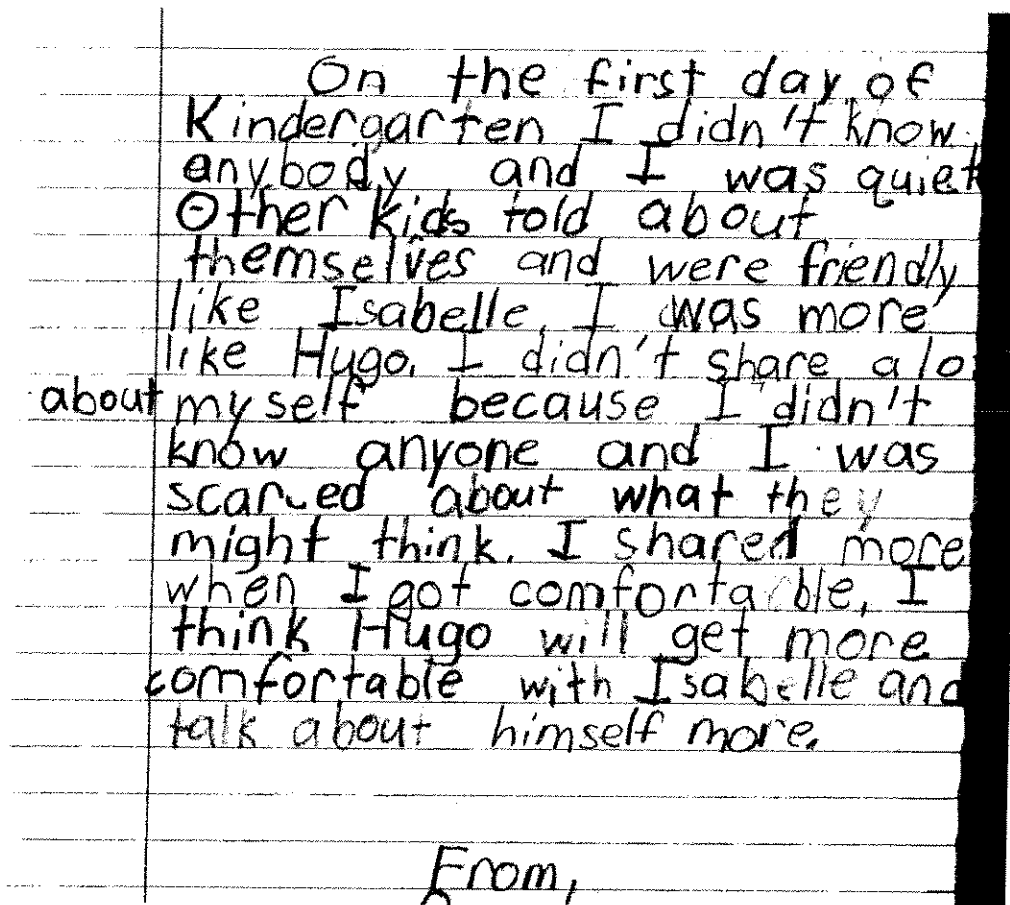
Table 2: Journal Response Analysis

Category	n = Frequency of Skill Observed	N = Total Samples Analyzed	Percentage
Connections Made	47	57	82%
Textual Support Provided	45	57	79%
Connections Were Meaningful	41	57	71%
Higher-Level Comprehension Strategies Utilized	45	55	82%

The content of each entry (2-paragraph model) was analyzed to see if the thoroughness of an entry was related to the inclusion of personal connections. It should be noted that students who wrote entries that included both a summary and a response, most often included personal connections to the literature that they were reading. As evidenced by the data in table 2, the connections made were meaningful most of the time. Students

were able to relate to the characters' experiences or their feelings. In Figure 1, Bret makes a connection with the main character in the story he is reading.

Figure 1



On the first day of Kindergarten I didn't know anybody and I was quiet. Other kids told about themselves and were friendly like Isabelle. I was more like Hugo. I didn't share a lot about myself because I didn't know anyone and I was scared about what they might think. I shared more when I got comfortable. I think Hugo will get more comfortable with Isabelle and talk about himself more.

From,

In the follow-up conference, Bret discussed the connection and indicated that the connection made helped him to understand the story better, as evidenced in the sample below.

Bret – I can relate to Hugo, in Kindergarten I didn't really know anybody, and Hugo he is really quiet and he is not sharing anything about himself and Brooke is sharing more about herself than he is. In Kindergarten, other kids knew each other and shared a lot about themselves, but I didn't want to share a lot about myself and I was more like Hugo than. But I got more comfortable, and I got to know people and shared about myself.

Mrs. Hahn – So, is that what’s happening with Hugo, the more he gets to know Brooke, the more he shares with her?

Bret – Yea

Mrs. Hahn - Ok, and I think that’s true for the real world too. When we first meet people, we’re shy, most of are anyway. I know I am, and then when we get to know them better, we share more and we act like more of ourselves around them. Do you think that connection helps you to understand the story any better?

Bret – Yea

Mrs. Hahn – Ok, how?

Bret – I can understand that Hugo is really lonely and he doesn’t really want to talk to anybody because his father died.

In Figure 2, Jodi makes a connection to the way that the characters, Pauline and Petrova are feeling.

Figure 2

I can relate to Pauline and Petrova when it was parent observation week at dance and my mom came to watch me. I tried my best. But my guess is my best isn't what I think it is! When my Mom told me how I did I got told to externally rotate my hips in second position, and work on my Pirouette. But she said I did wonderful! That made me feel good! When she went to see Michelle at the end she didn't get any corrections! My mom said things like Wonderful and you were great keep it up! I

During the follow-up conference, Jodi further discussed the connection and indicated that she felt her connection helped her to understand the characters better as demonstrated in the following sample.

Mrs. Hahn – Ok, in your journal entry, you talk about a couple of connections. Can you tell me a little bit about those?

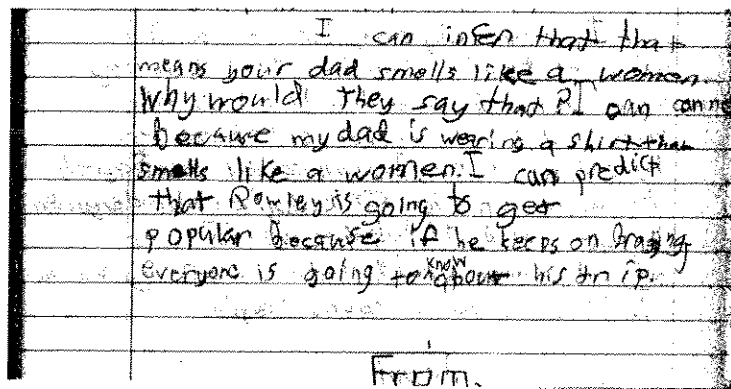
Jodi – Um, when they were jealous, it reminded me of when it was parent observation week at dance. And, um, my mom said I could work on some stuff, but she said I did good at the end, but I didn't really feel that good. And then when she went to see my sister, she said she did wonderful.

In journal samples one and two, both students make connections to the characters feelings. The connections made are meaningful and can be supported by the text. The students both indicate in their follow-up conferences that the connections help them to understand the way that the characters are feeling.

Less Meaningful Connections

Students made connections 82% of the time, however, the connections made were not always necessarily meaningful. It sometimes appeared as if students were “stretching it” to make a connection (See Figure 3).

Figure 3



In our follow-up conference, Timmy indicated that he was just trying to make a connection and expressed that it was not necessarily a meaningful connection, which is depicted in the following sample.

Mrs. Hahn – Ok, so when they speak their secret language, you can say that you can infer that it means, “Your dad smells like a woman.” Then, you say, I can connect because my dad is wearing a shirt that smells like a woman. So, what do you mean by that?

Timmy – So, my grandma used to clean the clothes and she wears this perfume that spreads onto the clothes, so he smells like a woman.

Mrs. Hahn – Oh, ok. Do you think that this is a meaningful connection or are you stretching it to make a connection?

Timmy – Pause...stretching it to make a connection

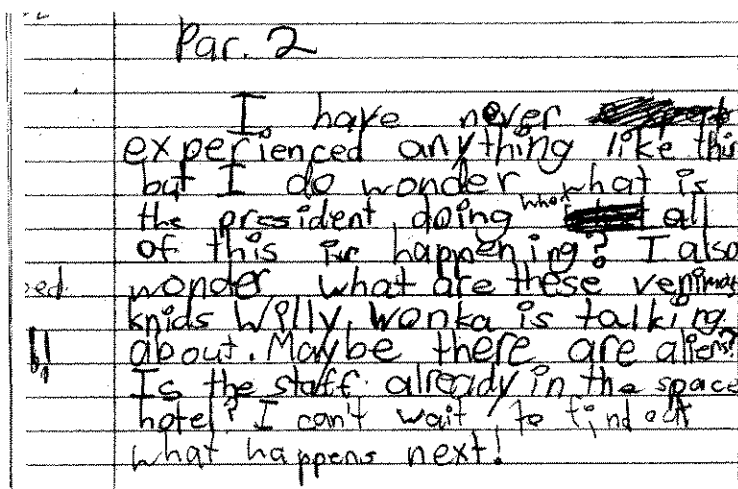
The connection that Timmy made was not necessarily a meaningful connection and it was evident that he was “stretching it” to make a connection. This was evidenced several times throughout the study.

Genre Affects Ability to Make Personal Connections

While the data showed that students were able to make connections most of the time, not one student was able to make a connection every time they wrote in their journal. While this is normal, and students should not be expected to make connections every time they read, it is interesting to look at the influencing factors. Most notably, it appeared that the genre of the book influenced the participant’s personal connections. Students more readily connected to realistic fiction. Students that were reading fantasy books found it more difficult to make connections. The exaggerated ideas and far-fetched circumstances made personal connections to the character’s experiences virtually impossible. Several students participating in the study were reading Roald Dahl at one point or another. These students were able to utilize other reading strategies, but could

not necessarily connect personally. Christina read James and the Giant Peach by Roald Dahl during part of the eight-week study. It was very difficult for Christina to personally connect to this book, as the story line was so far from her reality. (See Figure 4).

Figure 4



Efficacy of Post-It Notes

The periodic absence of personal connections was further pondered. While it appeared that genre might impact students' abilities to connect, there were situations and circumstances where students should have been readily able to connect, but did not. In a casual conversation with Tara at the end of one of our recorded conferences, the idea of forgotten connections or predictions arose, which can be observed in subsequent sample.

Tara – I was gonna make a prediction, but then I forgot about it.

Mrs. Hahn – I guess this part in your summary is kind of like a prediction... I can tell by looking at the front cover that there is going to be a new doll.

Tara – Oh yea, and I had a connection to that but I forgot what it was.

Mrs. Hahn – So, what are you supposed to do when you have a connection so that you don't forget it?

Tara – Write it down.

Mrs. Hahn – On a post-it right? That’s why I try to stress that you use post-its, because if you don’t write your thoughts down, you will forget them. If you use post-its, I think your connections may even become more meaningful. So, I think it would be a good idea to start using post-it notes again, ok?

Tara – Yes

This particular conversation initiated a revisit mini-lesson of using post-its, as evidenced in the field notes. Midway through the study, at the beginning of week 5, the idea of using post-it notes to record thoughts during reading was revisited. Would the use of post-it notes increase the quantity and quality of connections made? The data from the first four weeks of the study was analyzed and it was determined that students made personal connections to literature approximately 80% of the time. During the second half of the study, students made personal connections to literature 85% of the time.

While those students who had been shying away from making connections, did seem to increase the amount of connections made during the second half of the study, it is not certain that post-it notes were the influencing factor. Ideas such as book choice or perhaps the ability to more readily connect to the piece being read could have contributed to the increase in connections with certain students.

Connections Between Higher-Level Comprehension Skills and Personal Connections

As previously mentioned, journals were also analyzed to determine if students were utilizing higher-level comprehension skills and if the implementation of those skills was related to connection making. According to the data in table 2, students made connections and utilized higher-level comprehension strategies 82% of the time. When looking at individual entries, it seems as if those students that utilized higher-level

comprehension skills were those who most often made personal connections (See Figures 5 and 6).

Figure 5

~~I think that they're going~~
 to light the balloon again except this
 time they're going to light it with more
 fire. How did his dad get that idea?
 I can infer that Danny is a really
 happy person. I can connect with
 Danny because I love flying my
 kite with my dad and Danny likes flying
 his kite with his dad.
 From

Figure 6

I made a text to self
 connection when Emily found the
 diamond ring. It filled her with delight.
 It reminded me of when it was
 Christmas day and I saw a tiny

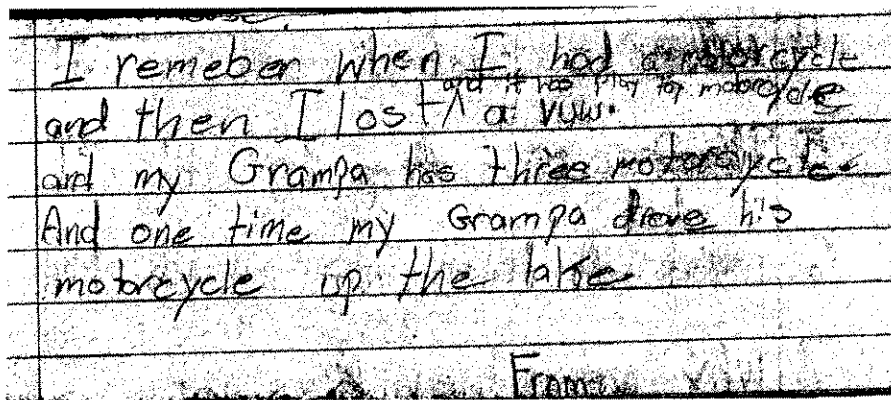
package under my Grandpa's
 tree. I opened it. It was a
 ring! The middle was my birthstone,
 opal surrounded by diamonds! I was
 filled with delight just like
 Emily! Which one will she be a
 mermaid or human? I wonder. I'm
 predicting mermaid because she
 spent 12 years of her life on
 land, maybe she wants to explore the
 ocean. I can't wait to find
 out what's happening next!
 Love,

It seems that the implementation of higher-level comprehension strategies may positively influence students' abilities to personally connect to what they are reading.

Reading Level does not Impact Students Ability to Personally Connect

It seemed that when students could personally connect or relate to the material that they were reading, they were able to make meaningful personal connections regardless of reading level or reading abilities. Nick, who has been identified as a struggling reader since the beginning of the school year and is reading on a level L according to the Fountas and Pinnell Benchmark Reading Assessment, demonstrates this finding. When reading a text that was, perhaps difficult to relate or maybe not a "just-right" book, Nick struggled to make a meaningful connection and was unable to support the connection made with information from the text. The connection made could perhaps be supported by the title of the book he was reading, The Mouse and the Motorcycle, but it was not necessarily a meaningful connection and it was not supported with evidence from the text. (See Figure 7).

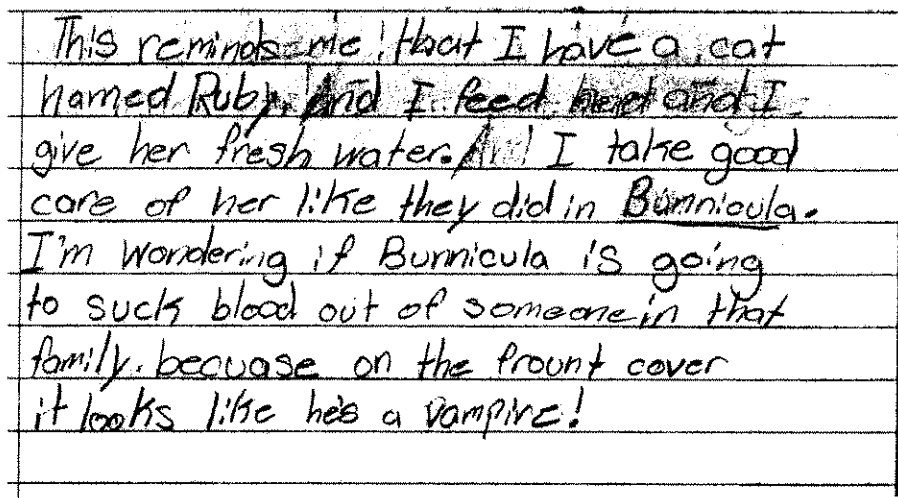
Figure 7



However, when reading a more appropriate book and one that he could more readily relate to, Nick is able to make meaningful connections and support those connections with information from the text. Even though he struggles with reading, and

is considered to be reading below grade level, these factors do not impact his ability to make meaningful personal connections to literature. When reading Bunnicula, Nick makes a meaningful connection and discusses its relation to the text he was reading (See Figure 8).

Figure 8



This reminds me that I have a cat named Ruby and I feed her and I give her fresh water. And I take good care of her like they did in Bunnicula. I'm wondering if Bunnicula is going to suck blood out of someone in that family because on the front cover it looks like he's a vampire!

Therefore it seems that making personal connections is a strategy that all readers can use and when a text is meaningful to students the personal connections that they make are often meaningful.

In analyzing the three sources of data, it was evident that students were making connections in their reading response journals most of the time. Sometimes they were meaningful and sometimes they were not, but if you compare connections made in journals to those made in conferences, students made connections in their journals 82% of the time, as opposed to 51% of the time on conferences. Therefore, it seems as if the journals may have provided a safe haven for connection making.

Chapter V

Conclusions, Discussions and Recommendations

The study yielded several findings. Findings indicated that reader's response journals provide a safe zone for making connections, students sometimes "stretch-it" to make connections, genre impacts personal connections, post-it notes may affect the quality and quantity of connections made, higher level comprehension skills impact connections and students can make personal connections regardless of their reading level or ability.

Journals Provide a Safe Zone

Primarily, the reader's response journal provides a safe zone for making connections. Students made more meaningful connections in journals as opposed to those made in conferences. This is consistent with Hancock (1993), whose study indicated that the reader's response journal provides a safe environment for students to explore their own personal findings and interpretations. In fact, the study indicated that it can be determined that the response journal has positive effects on the exploration and extension of personal literature response. Students seemed to "freeze up" in conferences. Some were shy and spoke in a small voice, while others would pause for long periods of time. Students even indicated in conferences that they felt more comfortable making personal connections in their journals as opposed to talking about them, especially if the connection was embarrassing. Thus it appears that the journal is the location where students can connect freely and readily.

The journal samples collected indicated that students made meaningful connections 71% of the time. The students feel comfortable connecting to the literature

that they are reading and the journal provides the secure location for doing so. Students feel that they can say what they feel and freely connect without the fear of being judged. The ability to write freely without criticism allows for the making of more quality personal connections. When the tape recorder was used, students seemed to tense up, they became shy and they did not respond as freely.

Students “Stretch-It” to Make Connections

The second finding that surfaced was also related to connection making. It was evident that at times, students were “stretching it” to make a connection. Each and every entry was assessed with the reader’s response journal rubric. Students knew that when their entries were assessed, they would be looked at to see if connections had been made. Were students feeling intimidated? Did they feel as if they **had** to make a connection each time they wrote in their journals at the risk of being penalized? Does this go against what Farest and Miller (1994) advocated? Did students feel as if they were being judged, when this is not really the intent of the journals? Perhaps so.

The utilization of the rubric is two-fold. It keeps students accountable, it primarily presents the expectations, and allows for students to see where they need to improve and where they are meeting or exceeding expectations. However, the knowledge of the components assessed might also add additional pressure. Students often felt like they had to make a connection, this was even indicated by certain students in follow-up conferences. These ideas resulted in less meaningful connections and sometimes even connections that were so far-fetched, they were unbelievable.

Genre Impacts Personal Connections

The genre of the text affects students' abilities to make personal connections. Students reading realistic fiction made personal connections more readily. However, students reading fantasy had a difficult time making personal connections. These were the students who were either "stretching it" to make a personal connection or did not personally connect at all. The exaggerated experiences and inconceivable ideas were so far from reality and students did not know how to deal with this.

Students who could personally relate to the characters' experiences or feelings in the text wrote the aesthetic responses. Students who really couldn't relate to the text wrote the more efferent responses. This is in tune with what Louise Rosenblatt (1938) proposed in her Reader Response Theory. There needs to be a "transaction" between the reader and the text. Students must interact with what they read and then make meaning. However, if students cannot relate or interact with the text, the connection making and meaning making process becomes very difficult.

Post-It Notes Affect Connections

Post-it notes may or may not increase the quality and quantity of personal connections. These notes can be used as a tool for students to record their thoughts as they are reading independently. The intent is that when students record their thoughts during independent reading, they will be less likely to forget a connection made or a question that arises. Students in this study were encouraged to use post-it notes since the beginning of the school year and a min-lesson halfway through the study reiterated the usefulness of this strategy. However, the quantity of personal connections made increased only slightly; moving from 80% to 85%.

The efficacy of post-it notes cannot be confirmed or validate from the results of this study. While the quantity of personal connections made did increase, it is not conclusive that the use of post-it notes was the influencing factor. Other ideas such as genre, interest, topic, and simply, the ability to more readily connect could also have impacted this increase.

Higher-Level Comprehension Skills Impact Connections

Another finding yielded by this study was that there seemed to be a connection between the utilization of higher-level comprehension skills and the making of personal connections. The students who implemented higher-level comprehension were the same students who made meaningful personal connections in their journal entries. Consequently, the students who made less meaningful connections were those who did not utilize higher-level comprehension skills. So, there seems to be a positive relationship between the two.

Bowman's 2000 study is indicative of this same finding. She found that the use of journals positively correlated to meaning making, they influenced and increased comprehension and they resulted in more intuitive and thoughtful writing. The connection between reading and writing provides students with an opportunity to critically connect to what they read and therefore to develop a critical understating of the literature. Therefore, the implementation of higher-level comprehension skills and personal connection making go hand in hand.

Students Connect Regardless of Reading Level or Ability

Regardless of reading level or abilities, students could connect to literature that they were able to personally relate to. In fact, the connections that they made were

meaningful. This is important because it indicates that this is useful strategy that all learners can use. It is a strategy that allows all learners to experience success, therefore validating its usefulness and importance. Reader's response journals are a tool that can benefit all learners.

This is in direct correlation to Behar's 2003 study. She also found that students' individual reading levels did not appear to impact the level of aesthetic response; in fact average readers seemed to reach a higher level of aesthetic response. Therefore, all learners were able to make meaningful connections and the journal provided the forum in which to do so.

Summary of Findings

The results of this qualitative indicate that reader's response journals are a beneficial tool that positively influence personal connections. The journal provides a "safe-zone" for making connections where children can share their thoughts, critical responses and personal connections without fear of being judged. While students sometimes "stretch-it" to make a connection, the journal was a venue where all students were able to make connections. The average readers were just as successful as the above average readers. This indicates that the reader's response journal is a valuable learning instrument that allows all students to experience success and to personally connect to the literature that they read.

Recommendations for Further Research

Several limitations surfaced during the study that should be considered for further research. First, the number of participants was relatively small. The groups was initially

comprised of eight students, however, one student need to be dropped. A larger group of study participants would have allowed for a more diverse representation.

Similarly, the students that participated in this study live in a predominantly Caucasian, affluent neighborhood. Reading levels ranged from a level L through W according to the Fountas and Pinnell Benchmark Reading assessment. These reading levels are indicative of average to above average reading levels. Not one students could be identified struggling significantly academically. Further research would need to be done in a more culturally, socioeconomic, ethnically, demographically, socially, and academically diverse environment.

Lastly, this study lasted for a duration of eight weeks, which is a small period of time in terms of a whole school year. Extending the study over the course of the entire school year might have been more telling. It would be interesting to look at journal samples from the beginning of the school year and to analyze how they evolve as the year progresses.

Recommendations for Teachers, Administrators and Parents

The reader's response journal is a beneficial tool for all readers. As evidenced in this qualitative study, the journal provides a safe zone for students to personally connect to the literature that they read. These connections seem to go hand in hand with the utilization of higher-level comprehension skills. Therefore, the journal provides a forum for making personal connections, while deepening comprehension. When students are reading something of interest or a text that they can relate to, they can make meaningful connections regardless of their individual abilities and capabilities. Therefore, the reader's response journal should be utilized both in the classroom and at home.

Administrators should embrace their educational value and encourage classroom teachers to utilize them in their classrooms. Teachers should share the positive results of writing in response to reading with parents. Parents can encourage their children to respond to literature at home. Parents, teacher and administrators can work together to encourage students to critically read and respond to the text that they read.

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Appendix

Appendix A: Reader's Response Journal Rubric

	4 = Exceeding Expectations	3 = Meeting Expectations	2 = Developing	1 = Experiencing Difficulty
Journal Entry Content	Entry includes a thorough summary and response.	Entry includes both a summary and a response.	Entry includes either a detailed summary or a detailed response.	Journal includes a limited summary or response.
Format of Entry	Student utilizes all aspects of friendly letter format. The book title is indicated in the first sentence of the entry.	Student's entry is written in friendly letter format, but one piece is left out (i.e. date is missing). The book title may or may not be included.	Student aims at using friendly letter format but has forgotten 2 or more pieces. The book title may or may not be included.	Students does not use friendly letter format. The book title may or may not be included.
Personal Connections to Literature	Student makes meaningful connections (allows for connections to characters' feelings, experiences, etc.) to literature and uses the text to support those connections. The connections made allow for a deepening of understanding.	Student makes meaningful connections to literature without providing textual support.	Student makes connections to literature that can be supported by the text. However, connections made are not necessarily meaningful.	Student does not appear to have made any connections to the literature.
Higher-Level Comprehension Skills	Students has utilized multiple higher-level comprehension strategies such as questioning, predicting, inferring, etc.	Students has utilized a couple of higher-level comprehension strategies such as questioning, predicting, inferring, etc.	Students has utilized one higher-level comprehension strategy such as questioning, predicting, inferring, etc.	Student shows no evidence of using higher-level comprehension strategies.

Appendix B: Reader's Response Journal Conference Questions

Reader Response Journal Conference

Name _____ Date _____

1. Tell me a little bit about the book you are reading.
2. Can you relate to any of the characters in the story? If so, how?
3. Have you experienced anything similar to the character(s) in the book?
4. Do you feel like the connections you have made are meaningful ones? If so, how or why are they meaningful?
5. Do you think that the connections you have made have helped you to understand the story any better? If so, how?