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WRITING IN RESPONSE TO READING: CORRESPONDENCES ABOUT BOOKS

Mary Dekker

For every classroom teacher there are pieces of a school year that remain long after the children leave for summer vacation. For instance, I recall one day at recess when, as I was twirling the jump rope, I looked across at the girl working the other end of the rope. In one hand she had the rope and was making it go around; in the other hand she had a copy of *Superfudge*. I was amazed not only that she could read and twirl at the same time, but also that she wanted to.

I also remember another day when two girls received some minor injuries on the playground and had to spend time in the office for first aid. As the principal walked them back to the classroom, she told them how lucky they were, since they were just in time for lunch. One looked at the other and said, "Oh, shoot, we missed silent reading time."

These stories illustrate how my students felt about books and reading. Almost every day in my classroom students came to me on their own to talk about books: parts they really liked, parts they wanted to read to me, authors they wanted to talk about, or connections they made between books.

Many factors contribute to a classroom environment where children love to read and respond to books. In my room I incorporated three elements suggested by Atwell: time, ownership, and response. That is, the students were provided class time to choose, read, and respond to the teacher and to each other about books. What follows is an account of classroom-based research that involved second and third grade students, time for self-selected reading, and reading logs—dialogue journals where the students and teacher wrote to each other about books. I will not only characterize student responses to each other, but also show how the students' written responses played an important part in making our classroom a community of readers.

My interest in written response to reading can be traced directly to a conference where I heard Nancie Atwell speak. I could not have been more impressed with the letters her junior high students wrote to her and to one another. The responses not only demonstrated engagement with texts but also showed students making meaningful responses to what they read. An intuition that younger students would be able to write about texts in reading logs provided the impetus for my research.

My students were provided a daily silent reading time of twenty to twenty-five minutes during which they read self-selected texts. Students chose books from our classroom library as well as from other libraries or read ones they brought from home. The students read texts varying in kind and sophistication. Examples of narrative texts included "I Can Read" stories, picture books, short chapter books like Giff's Polk Street School series, and longer novels like those of Cleary and Dahl. The expository texts they read were primarily informational books about scientific topics (animals, space, volcanoes, etc.) and historical topics (U.S. presidents, primitive man, etc.). To provide a sense of ownership, the texts were self-selected. The students were also required to write two letters each week: one to the teacher and one to a friend. This, too, created ownership of their reading. I responded to the letters on a weekly basis also. All the letters were kept in spiral notebooks that served as the reading logs. This, then, was how I structured the classroom environment to provide for time, ownership, and response.

In the reading log letters, the students were encouraged to tell what they liked about a particular book and why. This was a simplified version of the way Atwell started with her students. In student letters to the teacher some of the response types included retelling, stating and/or substantiating opinions, connecting a story to personal experience, talking about a character, and raising questions about a text. As the students responded to each other's texts, they began to form themselves into a community of readers.

As part of my study, I was interested in the character of students' letters to each other as well as in their perception of these letters. During individual student interviews I asked the students if writing to friends was different from writing to the teacher. Half of the students indicated that it was different, since when they wrote to a friend, they tried to find a book the friend had not read before or one that the friend would be interested in. For many of them, that is, these letters to their peers had a clearer and stronger purpose than those written to the teacher.

I wondered how students were able to tell if a friend had already read a book. They suggested several ways. One was to observe what the friend read. Another was to look through the friend's reading log. One child said he went to his fellow student ahead of time to find out if the person had already read the book he was planning to report on. Based on these strategies, it was my perception that the students took this activity seriously. One day a boy validated my feelings when he said that writing to friends was an important part of the reading log activity— that it was his job once a week to find a good book for someone else to read. He added that "a lot of thought went into it."

I was also curious about how students knew what kinds of books their friends liked to read. Looking through a friend's reading log was mentioned as one way to find out the type of books the friend was interested in reading. From the letter exchanges between the student and the teacher, as well as from what other students wrote, the children often got a sense of the types of books their peers liked. Many of them just knew their friends' interests through informal talks, reading discussions, or writing conferences— other features of the integrated language arts classroom I was trying to create. During one interview with me, for example, a boy recited a list of his friends and the topics he was likely to write to them about. To one friend he wrote about sharks or monsters, while to another friend he wrote about monsters or Bigfoot. The reading log letters below demonstrate how students tried to match books to the friend's interest.

One boy who read and wrote stories about animals received the following letter:

You like nature a lot so here is a book with lots of nature called *The Little Fawn*. It is about a little fawn and what he does in a day.

Another boy who wrote a report about pandas received this letter:

I read a book about pandas. I like it because I like animals. I know you like pandas. So you might want to read it.

In each of the above letters the boys pinpoint the friend's interest when they suggest a good book. In the next two letters the writers are more

tentative about the books they suggest, but they do point out why the friend might like the book.

I read *A Special Trick*. You might like it because monsters are in it.

I read the book, *Touchdown For Tommy*. You would like it . I know you would. If you like football you would like it.

Sometimes the friend's interest was acknowledged, as illustrated by the above letters, while in other letters the interest was inferred. Two boys often read stories from basal readers they brought from home. One wrote to the other:

You know when you wrote to me about *Over the City Bridge* it reminded me about my mom's book called *Run About Come to Me*.

Students related to each other as members of a reading community each time they suggested good books to friends. Their actions created the community. When they read books, or when they looked for books, they were not only thinking of their own enjoyment but also what their friends might like. Reading and sharing reading experiences were social activities.

In other efforts to share books, some students wrote letters in which they related a favorite part as a method for illustrating a good book to a friend. Letters about expository texts often included interesting information:

I just read *Dangerous Fish*. I like the part where it said the great white shark can grow up to be thirty-six feet long!

I just read *The Biggest, Smallest, Fastest, Tallest* and I like the part when it says: what is the highest mountain in the world? Mount Everest. I think you will [like it] too.

In letters about narrative texts, specific incidents were shared, as in the letters below.

I just read *The Crooked Colt*. I liked it when he kept on winning his childhood races.

I just read a book called *Casper the Friendly Ghost in Ghostland*. I like when Casper's friend scared the people away. You might like it.

I'm reading *Sideways Stories from Wayside School*. I like chapter 19. The name of it is "Miss Zarves." I will tell you the whole story, OK? There is no Miss Zarves. There is no nineteenth story. Sorry.

In the letters just cited, the writers described a part in the book they liked as a way to help the friend know a little bit about the book. Another way students helped their fellow readers was to include information in the letter about where the friend could get a copy of the book. Some location references are shown below.

I read a book called *Camp Ghost Away*. It is good. I like it. It is David's book so maybe you can see if you can read it.

I am reading *Charlie and the Great Glass Elevator*. It is a library book. I hope you get it. Ms. D. has it too.

I am reading *The Loch Ness Monster*. It is a good book. When I am done you can check it out from the library.

I read a book called *Just Between Us*. I got it at the Perry Library. The author is Susan Beth Pfeffer. It's a good book.

Information about friends, the classroom library, the school library, and the library in a neighboring town is included in an effort to help the friend obtain a copy of the book. Providing such assistance is another way the students built a reading community in their classroom.

Yet another illustration of how the read-respond-share pattern helped create a communal environment can be seen in letters where students mentioned that they were willing to lend copies of their own books:

Come to me and I'll give you a book called *Run About*.

I'm reading the Babysitter's [Club]. I like it. You might like it. I can lend it to you.

I read a book called *The Beast in Ms. Rooney's Room*. It is good. If you want it after me you can have it.

A refinement of such procedures for loaning books to friends was to provide yes and no choices at the end of the letter. Thus, friends would indicate whether or not they wanted the book by checking their choices, as is shown in the next examples.

I read *Here Come the Littles*. I like when one fell into a cup. Do you want it? (yes or no)

I read *Worlds of the Past*. Do you want it? (yes or no)

As illustrated below, the response options were also used when students wanted the opinions of others about a particular topic.

I'm going to get a book about aliens. Do you believe in aliens? (yes or no)

I read [about] Bigfoot. I like it because it is neat. Do you believe in Bigfoot? (yes or no)

I read *U.F.O.'s*. I like it because it has mysteries. Do you like them? (yes or no)

I could see that by creating this new format for reading log response, the students had made sharing responses a part of the reading process; as a result, a reading community was built. However, I was confused about how the response format worked. The letter and response options were in the friend's log, not the writer's, so I did not understand how the writer knew how the friend responded. The students explained that it worked like this: After you wrote the letter you waited and you watched for the person to read his/her log and check the appropriate box. Then you went to the place where the logs were kept and examined the response. The procedure for writing

and responding in the boxes was really quite simple. Yet here was a student-initiated procedure, a new form of response, a new way to share reading experiences! Simple though the "yes or no" options might seem, I was pleased with my students' ingenious use of the response format. The students were thinking about what they were reading, wanted to know what their friends thought about particular topics, and came up with a way to find out.

My students found many ways to share reading experiences with one another. It was my job to try to figure out what the students' oral comments, their log letters, and my observations meant. In an article about classroom-based research, Burton states that "teacher-research is 'researching' experience. It is the telling of pedagogical stories" (767). Summerfield suggests that we tell stories "to make sense of the world" (288). In a way that is what I have been doing in this article, telling a story, providing a descriptive account to make sense of what happened in my classroom. As a teacher-researcher I structured the classroom environment in a way I thought would enhance the students' ability to read and respond to books. That is, I tried what Atwell suggested: I provided the students with time, ownership, and response. Then I waited and watched to see what would happen. When I started the project, I did not know what I would find. What I learned emerged from the students' oral and written responses to books, their behavior toward books and reading, and my reflections on all of the above.

What I have described suggests that these second and third grade students not only loved to read but gradually and through their own actions perceived themselves as members of a reading community. They made their own decisions; they were responsible for what they read, what they wrote, and to whom they wrote. It is no small consequence that they perceived each other as readers and writers who were able to share information about books. I believe now it was a way of empowering them as learners.

At the end of the year I asked my students to tell me in a letter what they thought about reading logs. The following two responses tell it all, and conclude this story told by a teacher-researcher:

I thought that reading logs were fun. I like them because if you don't have a book to read a friend might suggest a good one.

I like the idea of reading logs! I would like to do them for the rest of my life. They helped me learn what you and people like to read.

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