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The University of San Francisco

THE IMPLEMENTATION OF CONNECTION PROMPTS IN BUILDING  
SUBSTANTIVE ENGAGEMENT IN THE 2<sup>nd</sup>-GRADE CLASSROOM  
THROUGH BOOK CLUB CONVERSATIONS

A Dissertation Presented  
to  
The Faculty of the School of Education  
Learning and Instruction Department

In Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements of the Degree  
Doctor of Education

by  
Amy Alamar  
San Francisco  
December, 2010

THE UNIVERSITY OF SAN FRANCISCO  
Dissertation Abstract

The Implementation of Connection Prompts in Building Substantive Engagement in the  
2<sup>nd</sup>-Grade Classroom Through Book Club Conversations

Conversation is a strategy that helps students build reading skills and improve reading comprehension. It is not widely used in the primary grades due to limited time and perceived effort by the teacher. This study describes the implementation of connection prompts with second-grade students in book clubs. These prompts were cues implemented by the teacher that helped students make predictions, question the text, and help initiate conversation. Research suggests that once conversation is initiated, students learn how to continue to initiate conversation. A qualitative research design was used to identify key themes that emerged in field notes from multiple visits to the classroom. The connection prompts resulted in an increase over time in the frequency of students making connections/predictions, questioning the text, questioning other students, using the connections to think about the text, and working together to build a deeper understanding of the text. Further, the connection prompts helped the teacher and students remain focused and on-task. The connection prompts are a simple tool for teachers. They promoted conversations in the classroom immediately and stimulated deeper conversations in a six-week period. This study suggests that second-grade students are fully capable of conducting conversations with critical thinking about literature and that teachers can scaffold these conversations with a relatively easy tool.

This dissertation, written under the direction of the candidate's dissertation committee and approved by the members of the committee, has been presented to and accepted by the Faculty of the School of Education in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Education. The content and research methodologies presented in this work represent the work of the candidate alone.

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favorite statistics TA. Thank you for showing me the respect and admiration you do on a daily basis and for helping me through this process by giving me support, encouragement, and time.

## **Dedication**

To my children, the children involved in this project, and children around the world, I wish you years of reading for education, for necessity, and mostly for pleasure. It is the gift of literacy that will enable you to know, but it is your experience and reflection that will make it worthwhile. I will leave you with a quote by one of my favorite philosophers, John Locke: “Reading furnishes the mind only with materials of knowledge; it is thinking that makes what we read ours.”



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## **CHAPTER I STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM**

Reading comprehension scores in California are below average nationally and internationally (National Assessment of Educational Progress, 2007). Research repeatedly suggests that questioning and making connections are effective strategies for improving reading comprehension (National Reading Panel, 2000b; Stahl, 2008). This study investigated the use of connection prompts, a tool which aims to help students make connections through questions. Connection prompts are verbal cues a teacher can use to help students connect to literature while exploring meaning. In theory, connection prompts help initiate and increase instructional conversation and quality of conversation (Blum, Koskinen, Bhartiya, & Hluboky, 2010). These conversations are predicted to contribute to student reading comprehension.

Conversation is not widely used in schools, though it is suggested by research to be effective in supporting reading comprehension (Alvermann, 1987; Nystrand & Gamoran, 1990; Almasi, 1995; Sipe, 2000; Stahl, 2008). Conversation is difficult to conduct in a classroom setting because it requires time, a shift in teacher and student roles, and teacher-training (Nystrand & Gamoran, 1990; Almasi, O'Flahaven, & Arya, 2001; Baumfield & Mroz, 2002; Maloch, 2002; Berry & Englert, 2005). While conversation is not often used, Almasi (1995) and Gambrell (1996) note that it can lead to critical thinking, which is a key component of reading comprehension.

Conversation creates a context in which students can explore areas of text with other students and make connections (Gambrell & Almasi, 1996). Connections students make can be text-to-life (i.e. "My neighbor is a fireman, and I know he drives a truck"), text-to-text (i.e. "I read a book about a fire in the character's apartment"), or text-to-self ("I remember when my smoke detector went off when my mother forgot to turn off the oven"). This study focused on the

use of connection prompts, which were predicted to encourage students to make connections and explore reading more deeply. It is theorized by the researcher that the conversation following the connection prompts provided students with opportunities to make connections and build meaning.

Baumfield and Mroz (2002) suggest that conversation is beneficial to student understanding and that questioning triggers and facilitates conversation. To use conversation as an instructional tool the teacher must demonstrate, model, and scaffold conversation in action. There is a need for research in the area of instructional conversation, specifically in how to initiate and support it. The connection prompts used in this study were designed to help a teacher initiate and support conversation about literature. Research suggests that prompts are useful in supporting conversation, as well as questioning and making connections (Nystrand & Gamoran, 1990; Martin, 1998; Blum et al., 2010). Connection prompts combine these effective conversation supports and were predicted by the researcher to help students make meaning through conversation that would foster improved reading comprehension.

Conversation can be used in large-group or small-group settings in the classroom. Book clubs are small groups of students (from three to six) that read a common book and discuss the text together. They are also referred to as literature discussion groups and literature circles. Book clubs are growing in popularity in educational settings and are suggested to be an appropriate and effective form of instruction for developing and practicing reading strategies (Martin, 1998; Evans, 2002; Maloch, 2002). The intimate nature of the groups allows students to try out new ideas and test their own understanding. Some research suggests students in the primary grades (first and second grades) are capable of participating in book clubs and conversation (McIntyre, Kyle, & Moore, 2006; Heller, 2006). Of the eight studies that investigate primary-aged students'

participation in conversation around literature only five include book club discussions (as opposed to large-group discussions). Further, there is a lack of research describing the process of teaching primary-aged students through conversation.

### **Purpose**

The purpose of this study was to investigate the use of connection prompts as a tool to help initiate and sustain conversation around literature and to examine the possible effect connection prompts have in helping students build meaning about literature through the conversation. Using a sociocultural theoretical framework, the notion of practical and conceptual tools for teaching are hypothesized to lead students to internalize a process. A practical tool, such as the prompts used in this study, function as pedagogical strategies or devices a teacher can implement in instruction. This study describes the implementation of connection prompts with second-grade students in book clubs. The connection prompts were used during and after the reading to help support student conversation and reinforce reading strategies to encourage engaged reading. These prompts are cues in the form of questions that helped the reader make predictions and question the text in order to initiate conversation. Research suggests that once conversation is initiated and supported, students learn how to continue to initiate and use conversation independently of direct instruction from the teacher (Vygotsky, 1978; Almasi et al., 2001).

Primary-aged learners may struggle with the procedural issues involved in book clubs such as off-task talking, assuming leadership positions) (Almasi et al., 2001; Christoph & Nystrand, 2001; Baumfield & Mroz, 2002; Maloch, 2004b; Berry & Englert, 2005; Clark & Graves, 2005; Anagnostopoulos, Smith, & Nystrand, 2008). The connection prompts in this study helped to structure the conversation in the book clubs. Additionally, the connection

prompts were an extension of strategies the teacher had already begun to use in the classroom, such as making predictions, connecting, and questioning in large-groups or pairs. In this study, the students were in book clubs of five students working with one teacher. When exposing students to conversational conventions, the conversations should be teacher-fronted (which may lead to more teacher talk than student talk) in the beginning to model and guide student conversations (McIntyre, 2007). The book clubs in this study provided a transition for the students because they are small and led by the teacher. It is theorized that once students are able to participate meaningfully in a social setting (in this case, book clubs), they will transfer their conversation skills to other academic settings (Vygotsky, 1978), however this is not the focus of this study.

### **Significance**

This study is significant for three reasons: (a) the proposed connection prompts aim to lead to meaningful conversations which contribute to reading comprehension; (b) the second-grade is a foundation year for learning literacy skills, and there is a lack of research in conversation for young learners; and (c) teachers struggle with facilitation of conversation, and the connection prompts are a tool teachers can use. Reading comprehension is necessary for success in academics and employment as an adult (Council on Advancing Adolescent Literacy, 2010). Reading comprehension is defined in this study as understanding the literal and intended meaning of a text and critically evaluating it (Harris & Hodges, 1995). The foundation years are critical when it comes to literacy skills because students are expected to function as capable readers across the curriculum by third grade. Unfortunately, despite the fact that our national and state standards reinforce reading comprehension skills, American and specifically California's students are not demonstrating success with reading comprehension.

Conversation is an instructional tool teachers can use to practice standard reading strategies such as critical thinking, comparing and contrasting, reflecting, predicting, and connecting. These strategies all contribute to improved reading comprehension. As readers approach a text, they bring a perspective built on prior experience, knowledge, and expectations. This perspective directly influences the way a reader reads a text, understands it, and applies the knowledge from it (Rosenblatt, 1978). When engaging in conversation about text, students can share their conceptions and clarify misunderstandings. Knowledge is built during the conversation, and perspectives are influenced. The student leaves the conversation with this changed perspective, which will make her or him a more informed and critical reader.

The first and second grades in American schools are the foundation years for literacy learning. It is crucial to prepare first and second-grade students with literacy skills they will use for the rest of their lives. While research documents the benefit of conversation in teaching these skills in the third-grade through university-level academics, very little research has been done in the area of conversation with primary-aged learners. This study contributes to the field of research focused on conversations about literature in the primary classroom. Specifically, it addresses the use of connection prompts as a specific way to promote and facilitate conversations that utilize effective reading strategies which contribute to reading comprehension.

### **Background and Need**

This section describes reading comprehension and strategies used to promote reading comprehension. Specifically, the section will address engagement and the use of conversation to enhance substantive engagement. Research presented suggests the use of questioning and prompting to increase authentic conversation and thus substantive engagement.

## **Reading Comprehension**

Reading comprehension is crucial to students of all levels and in every subject area because students need to acquire and apply information from texts. It is complex because it requires skills in basic literacy and critical thinking, and therefore it is difficult to define and assess. For young learners this involves understanding that reading is a meaning-making process as well as the ability to make personal, text, and world connections to the reading. For adolescent learners, reading comprehension is necessary across the curriculum (Council on Advancing Adolescent Literacy, 2010). They will use reading comprehension skills in their academic and everyday lives (National Reading Panel, 2000a). Further, as our students enter the work force, their literacy skills need to be in line with those of our international competitors. Despite the need for reading comprehension across the curriculum, reading comprehension is a challenge because it requires students to decode language, process meaning, and connect the text to other information. Harris and Hodges (1995) suggest that at its most basic level, comprehension involves understanding a literal meaning from a text although it can also involve critically evaluating it. Nationally, we define reading comprehension as the ability to comprehend and apply what is read (Ambruster, Lehr, & Osborn, 2003). The National Reading Panel (NRP) (2000) calls for students to be able to ask and generate questions, summarize, identify story structure, clarify, and predict. In its state-curriculum standards, California expects its students to demonstrate reading comprehension in the primary grades through retelling, generating and responding to questions, making predictions, and comparing texts (Academic Standards Commission, 1998).

Students in the United States, and in California in particular, are not living up to academic standards. According to the results from the Progress in International Reading Literacy



Study, fourth-grade students in the United States of America rank 22 out of 45 countries in reading comprehension (Baer, Baldi, Ayotte, & Green, 2007). Nationally, students in California rank 48<sup>th</sup> (National Assessment of Educational Progress, 2007). Only one third of the states showed a statistically significant increase in reading scores since 2004, and California is not one of those states. Furthermore, the standardized assessments used to measure reading measure comprehension only to the extent of basic understanding and analytical skills. First and second grades are the foundation years for students to become fluent readers who understand that reading relates to meaning, not only to decoding words. It is important to support reading comprehension early in education so students can apply reading strategies instinctively throughout their school years.

### **Reading Comprehension Strategies**

There is a large body of research in the area of reading comprehension for young learners. Questioning and collaborative learning are repeatedly suggested as effective tools to encourage reading comprehension. In a literature review of experimental and quasi-experimental research in the area of reading acquisition strategies and selected studies in English-language, peer-reviewed journals that looked at students in grades K through 12, the NRP (2000b) reports that comprehension is increased when readers can connect to the text personally (linking text to prior knowledge and incorporating new information into their schema). Further, there are specific strategies that novice learners can use to help with comprehension; some are learned through practice, but many need to be taught formally and practiced until the student can incorporate them instinctively as she or he reads or listens to books.

The seven strategies for reading comprehension identified and recommended by the NRP are: (a) comprehension monitoring, (b) cooperative learning, (c) use of graphic and semantic

organizers, (d) question answering, (e) question generation, (f) story structure, and (g) summarization. These strategies all include active student participation. In order to monitor comprehension, students must be aware of what they are, and what they are not, understanding. For cooperative learning they must be willing to listen and process what is said as well as to contribute ideas. Graphic and semantic organizers require students to demonstrate understanding of text structure and details. Question answering, question generation, story structure, and summarization involve understanding of plot and sequence, as well as speculation.

In another literature review of reading comprehension strategies for young learners, Stahl (2004) examined strategies backed by research and frequently used. These include: (a) guided retelling, (b) story maps, (c) teacher-generated questions, and (d) reciprocal teaching. Guided retelling is teacher-facilitated summarizing of the narrative. Story maps are visual representations of story structure. Teacher-generated questions are questions about the text the teacher poses for student response. Teacher-generated questions can be closed (with a prescribed or expected answer) or open (with no prescribed answer). They can require lower or higher-order thinking. Reciprocal teaching, based on Palincsar and Brown's (1984) model, helps to encourage self-monitoring by having students practice summarizing, questioning, clarifying, and predicting during the reading process.

Stahl (2004) notes that strategies backed by research but not widely used by teachers are: (a) targeted activation of prior knowledge, (b) text talk, (c) directed-reading-thinking-activity, (d) literature webbing, (e) visual imagery training, (f) video, and (g) transactional strategy instruction. Targeted activation of prior knowledge includes leading students to making connections to the text. Text talk encourages students to refer back to the text and asks that students support statements and responses with the text. Directed-reading-thinking-activity

makes use of students' background knowledge to help them to make predictions. The teacher guides students through the text, portion-by-portion, stopping, making predictions, reading, confirming or correcting predictions, and continues throughout the text. Literature webbing involves students ordering pictures of the story, predicting the order the actual story will take. Visual imagery training helps students to retain and use information from a text by having them form a mental image of the text. According to Stahl (2004), visual imagery training is better for novice readers but less helpful for more proficient readers. Combining video versions of stories with print versions has been shown to improve reading comprehension of readers with limited literacy experience and with children who have difficulty maintaining attention for long stories. Transactional strategy instruction includes linking text to prior knowledge and constructing meaning within a group. The meaning constructed by the group reflects the thinking of the group, not just one individual in the group. All of these strategies encourage the use of activating prior knowledge and making predictions.

### **Engagement**

Engagement refers to student involvement and degree of being on-task during instruction. Students are generally engaged in class, but the engagement can be either substantive or procedural (Nystrand & Gamoran, 1991). Nystrand and Gamoran (1990) describe the usual interaction between teacher and student as initiation-response-evaluation (IRE). In this interaction the teacher initiates a thought or asks a question, a student responds, and the teacher evaluates the response with a comment or physical acknowledgement. IRE is appropriate to check for literal understanding but does not support critical thinking. Defining engagement is difficult because engagement might be evident in a variety of ways. A student who is engaged substantively is absorbed in the assignment or expected task; a student who is engaged

procedurally is concerned with the assigned and expected tasks and is not as invested intellectually. Both students could be doing the work and might not be disruptive, but the student who is engaged substantively is likely to do better in terms of achievement (Nystrand & Gamoran, 1991; Almasi, 1995).

Nystrand (1991) analyzed student discourse and found students to be substantively engaged when exposed to more conversation-style instruction, while they were more procedurally engaged during recitation-style instruction. In Almasi's (1995) study, students were responding with greater complexity and depth when they were engaged substantively and with less complexity when they were engaged in the more typical teacher-centered discussion.

### **Conversation**

An effective instructional approach that supports reading comprehension is the use of conversation to clarify, connect to, and explore literature (Rosenblatt, 1978; Nystrand & Gamoran, 1990; Almasi, 1995; McCarrier, 1995; Mercer, 1995; Gambrell & Almasi, 1996; Sipe, 2000). While conversation as an instructional tool is a well-researched area, it is not used often with regard to reading in early grades (Almasi et al., 2001; Christoph & Nystrand, 2001; Berry & Englert, 2005). Teachers regard discussion as a valuable tool, but they admit to not using it. Commeyras and Degruiff (1998) reported that only 33% of teachers indicated they frequently use conversation around literature (in the format of book clubs) in their classrooms, while 95% indicated they believe it to be useful. Typically, classroom conversation is dominated by the teacher and teacher-directed activities (Mercer, 1995; Nystrand, Wu, Gamoran, Zeiser, & Long, 2003). In a study of classroom discourse, Nystrand (2003) noted that teacher-directed activities make up about 85% of class time. Student talk makes up about 8% of classroom talk (Baumfield

& Mroz, 2002), and teacher questions are primarily closed or procedural (Groenke & Paulus, 2007).

Conversation can be a tool teachers use to engage students substantively (Nystrand & Gamoran, 1991; Almasi, 1995). It is an instructional approach which embeds six of the seven strategies suggested by the NRP (2000b), and seven of Stahls' (2004) twelve noted successful strategies. The six strategies suggested by the NRP include: (a) comprehension monitoring, (b) cooperative learning, (c) question answering, (d) question generation, (e) story structure, and (f) summarization. The seven strategies recommended by Stahl are: (a) guided retelling, (b) teacher-generated questions, (c) reciprocal teaching, (d) targeted activation of prior knowledge, (e) text talk, (f) directed-reading-thinking-activity, and (g) transactional strategy instruction. In this study conversation refers to student responses to teacher comments and questions, uptake with other student comments and questions, and listening by all participants. It is measured by demonstration of ability to respond to one another, maintaining a thread of discussion beyond the characteristic classroom dialogue of teacher initiations, student response, and teacher evaluation. Students can demonstrate critical reading by making connections to the text, asking their own questions, and making predictions. Through conversation students are able to monitor their own understanding. As a student faces conflict with another student's interpretation, she or he will likely try to reconcile the conflict by either defending her or his original understanding or by trying to understand the new perspective. In doing so, she or he will realize that one works better than the other (or possibly a third option) and will construct new knowledge. Further, the student will now approach future reading with a more critical eye, knowing that there are possible alternative perspectives. Teachers are also able to assess student understanding through listening to student talk. Conversation as a form of cooperative learning using language is associated with

constructing knowledge when guided and facilitated by a teacher (Mercer, 1995). Conversations are often initiated and propelled by question answering and question generation. Through conversations, students often refer back to story structure and summarization strategies to clarify, connect, and expand their knowledge. Further, the NRP (2000) report cited conversation as having a positive effect on comprehension across grade levels. Each of these strategies can be used effectively with second-grade students, who are the focus of this study.

Conversation can be initiated and facilitated through the use of questioning. When conversation is used instructionally in the classroom, it is initiated and led by the teacher, supports student knowledge and beliefs, and perpetuates further conversation with student participation (McIntyre et al., 2006). At its best, it is facilitated by the teacher and structured with the use of specific prompts (Rosenblatt, 1978; Nystrand & Gamoran, 1991; McCarrier, 1995; Sipe, 2000; Baumfield & Mroz, 2002; Berry & Englert, 2005; Clark & Graves, 2005; McIntyre et al., 2006; Blum et al., 2010). Prompts, which are statements or questions posed by the teacher and used by the students to form responses to text read in the classroom, can be used to initiate conversation. By modeling prompts, teachers promote student questioning, which in turn decreases teacher-led conversations (Wells & Arauz, 2006). The guided instructional conversation, if well supported, develops into conversation.

### **Research in Conversation**

Most of the research on conversation around literature in the classroom investigates conversation at the third grade or higher (Sipe, 2000; Stahl, 2008). There are eight studies in the past 20 years in English-language peer-reviewed journals that investigate conversation of English-speaking, primary-age students with regard to literature. The studies are summarized in Table 1 and described in further detail below. Elementary school students are expected to

participate in conversations around literature, and the primary grades are an ideal place to mold the foundation. As students practice strategies for participating in conversations, they will be able to use the strategies independently (Stahl, 2004).

Table 1  
Summary of Research in Conversation About Literature with Primary-Aged Students

Author	Date	Population	Key Findings
McCarrier	1995	Kindergarten students	Comfort with a text developed through multiple readings of the text leads to more participation in conversation.
Martin	1998	Second-grade students	Conversations during literature circles increased students' ability to connect to, predict, and question literature.
Sipe	2000	First and second-grade students	Connecting is a category of student talk during large-group, small-group and one-on-one read-alouds.
Baumfield and Mroz	2002	Kindergarten-elementary-grade students	Teachers can use student-generated questions to assess understanding.
Berry and Englert	2005	Kindergarten-third-grade students	Students construct knowledge together in book clubs, using each other as resources.
McIntyre, Kyle, and Moore	2006	First and second-grade students	Teacher-fronted conversation helps to model and structure future classroom conversations.
Stahl	2008	Second-grade students	Activation of prior knowledge contributes to increased reading comprehension.
Blum, Koskinen, Bhartiya, and Hluboky	2010	First-grade students	Prompts that encouraged connecting to the literature stimulated meaningful conversation with students.

In a qualitative study of Kindergarten students McCarrier (1995) investigated the nature of student talk during several read-alouds (an event during which the teacher reads a story aloud to a group of students). McCarrier (1995) analyzed field notes, audio and video of the conversations, and the talk of students during multiple readings of a pattern book and during multiple readings of a folktale. Findings indicate that as students gained comfort with the texts, they participated more in the conversation. The conversation helped the students understand the texts better. They had an opportunity to express understanding and misunderstanding and to clarify. McCarrier (1995) does not analyze what specifically initiates the conversation, such as teacher prompting.

Martin (1998) presents a small action-research study of literature circles in her second-grade classroom. The purpose of her study was to investigate whether or not literature circles increased students' ability to apply three commonly used reading comprehension strategies: (a) predicting, (b) questioning, and (c) connecting to the text. Using a pre and post test for strategy use and a discussion rubric, Martin (1998) noticed an increase in scores for predicting for 75% of students and an increase in scores for questioning and connecting for 83% of students.

In a descriptive qualitative study Sipe (2000) investigated first and second-grade student conversation as a measure of understanding literature. Using audio tapes of conversations in three settings (large-group, small-group, and one-on-one read-alouds), Sipe categorized the type of talk that emerged during the read-alouds. One category, personal talk, included talk that demonstrated the student making a connection. The connections were either text-to-life, in which the student used a portion of the text to explain, elaborate, or understand something in his or her life. On the other hand, a life-to-text connection involved a student using her or his personal life to explain, elaborate, or understand part of the text. While Sipe does an impressive job of



describing the types of talk, he does not indicate or speculate on what stimulated the talk, nor what stimulated each type of talk.

Baumfield and Mroz (2002) cite the importance of increasing student-generated questions to improve student understanding. Student questions allow the teacher to gauge student understanding and help the student to clarify misconceptions and expand her or his knowledge. The researchers investigated the impact of a community of inquiry on the development of student questions with five-to-nine-year old students. In their study, the students found they needed to justify their answers and were exposed to alternative responses. Analyzing the student-generated questions as data, Baumfield and Mroz (2002) identified nine categories of student-generated questions. Most of the questions fell into 5 categories (factual plot-related, character motivation, wondering about possibilities, open-ended summary, and speculation on circumstances before or after the story). The researchers did not investigate the use of teacher guidance during this study or how teacher facilitation might have enhanced the higher-order thinking of the questions students generated.

Berry and Englert (2005) investigated the teacher's role in developing and conducting book clubs (referred to in this study as book discussions) with Kindergarten through third-grade students and the nature of the talk in those discussions. Using audio of the book discussions and teacher interviews, the researchers analyzed the type of talk that took place in the literature discussion circles. The conversations were initiated by visual prompts (written questions and statements on a poster) to remind students of reading strategies to help them stay on task. The key findings in their study were that student-selected topics increased conversation and that the teacher was integral in creating the conversation for young learners by scaffolding the actual format of talk. Students tended to stick with the suggested topics on the poster when it was

available. In the later discussion groups the posted prompts were removed, and the conversation increased (this was measured in length of turns per topic). Berry and Englert acknowledge the importance of the scaffolding in the beginning, especially for students with special needs. Berry and Englert further suggest that future research investigate teacher-student dialogues and the way a teacher can guide the conversation. They assert that these conversations are where students construct knowledge using each other as resources. The current study investigated a tool to help facilitate conversation.

McIntyre, Kyle, and Moore (2006) followed a teacher's implementation of conversation in a primary-grade class (first and second-grade). The data they collected include observations, videotaping of class time, interviews with students and teachers, student assessments, and interviews with family. Using grounded theory the researchers analyzed their data from a sociocultural perspective but also transitioned to interactionism as they observed that following conversations required a new way of analyzing the data. The researchers coded the content of the teacher talk, the procedures the teacher used to implement conversation, the responses from the students, and the prompts (which they refer to as cues) to encourage conversation. One of the major findings reported by McIntyre et al. (2006) is that teacher-fronting (heavy amounts of teacher talk) in the beginning of a conversation helps to structure the conversation for the students as they gradually take over more of the conversation. This further argues for teacher facilitation. Secondly, what helped to promote dialogue in the study in addition to verbal prompting was the use of praise, encouragement, non-evaluative comments, and non-verbal prompts (such as hand gestures, longer pauses, and pacing). These prompts are more evidence of facilitation.

Stahl (2008) investigated the effects of three reading interventions on reading comprehension and science-content learning. The three different reading interventions were: (a) picture walks, (b) know-want-to-know-learn, and (c) directed reading-thinking activity with second-grade students. All three reading interventions included the use of conversation, student participation, and student question-generation. All were recorded on audiotape. One of the key findings in Stahl's (2008) study is that activation of prior knowledge is a contributing factor to increased reading comprehension. Activating prior knowledge asks students to make connections. Additionally, while all three strategies help to increase vocabulary development, picture walks and directed reading-teaching activities are more effective than commonly used instructional tools in promoting fluent reading and basic comprehension (literal understanding). Directed reading-thinking activity was the most effective of the three interventions at eliciting higher order comprehension. Stahl suggests that directed reading-thinking activity is so effective because it not only incorporates much of what the other interventions use but also requires a strong teacher facilitation and conversation in which students can reconcile misunderstandings.

Blum, Koskinen, Bhartiya, and Hluboky (2010) noticed an increase in meaningful conversation with the introduction of four consistent prompts for literature discussions with first-grade students. The prompts used were in the form of statements and helped students connect to the text. Teachers in the study believed conversation to be a meaningful instructional tool and were interested in ways to promote it. The teachers felt that the prompts were an appropriate and helpful tool.

The research to date suggests primary-age children are able to participate in conversation that prompts (especially in the form of questions) help to stimulate conversation, and that conversation is an effective instructional tool as it allows students to confront misunderstandings,

draw on prior knowledge, and construct new knowledge (Rosenblatt, 1978; Nystrand & Gamoran, 1990; McCarrier, 1995; Martin, 1998; Baumfield & Mroz, 2002; Berry & Englert, 2005; McIntyre et al., 2006; Blum et al., 2010). There is some research on the types of talk of which primary-age students are capable. The research on conversation concerning literature among young learners highlights the use of tried and true methods (questions to prompt conversation) and suggests further study into specific ways to implement those questions. It does not examine connection prompts in the form of questions.

### **Questioning**

Questioning is shown to help stimulate and guide conversation (Nystrand & Gamoran, 1991; Almasi, 1995). The questions posed by a teacher can lead the conversation to substantive or procedural engagement. Features of questions that lead toward substantive engagement include: (a) no prescribed answer, (b) connections to the literature, and (c) predictions. Features of questions that lead toward procedural engagement include: (a) prescribed answers and (b) summarization.

Questioning using the aforementioned features is not widely used due to lack of time, energy, and skill (Tharp & Gallimore, 1988; Goldenberg, 1992; Almasi et al., 2001; Christoph & Nystrand, 2001; Berry & Englert, 2005). Questioning does take time but is also shown to be associated with achievement in reading comprehension (Nystrand, Gamoran, & Heck, 1993; Gambrell & Almasi, 1996; Clark & Graves, 2005). There are instructional tools teachers can use to help guide questioning, and one of those tools is connection prompts.

### **Connection Prompts**

Prompts are statements or questions that cue a reader to respond to literature. Prompts and responses can be verbal, graphic, or written. To date, the research that exists in the area of

conversation around literature and questioning suggests the use of teacher facilitation and modeling to initiate and increase conversation (McCarrier, 1995; Sipe, 2000; Baumfield & Mroz, 2002; Nystrand et al., 2003; Berry & Englert, 2005; Clark & Graves, 2005; McIntyre, 2007; Stahl, 2008). One way for teachers to initiate and facilitate conversation is to guide it with the use of questions. In this study the teacher used an intervention of connection prompts, which are open-ended questions that ask the student to make connections and predictions. Open-ended questions, connections, and predictions are three features of questioning that have been shown to lead to substantive engagement.

Broadly speaking, researchers and teachers may not all use the same terminology. That said, teachers use prompts, sometimes intentionally and sometimes haphazardly. Clark and Graves (2005) describe the idea of scaffolding student reading comprehension through conversation. They use data from their previous studies to offer examples of scaffolding but do not actually investigate the strategies suggested. To stimulate conversation Clark and Graves suggest the use of questions and incorporating responses in future instruction. Nystrand, Wu, Gamoran, Zeiser, and Long (2003) suggest the use of prompts (which they refer to as dialogic bids) to initiate and sustain conversation. These prompts are authentic questions, to which there are no prescribed answers.

A connection prompt is one that asks the student to associate the text with his or her personal life, general observations, or other texts. Connection prompts can be in the form of statements or questions. An example of a statement connection prompt is “This book reminds me of” (Blum et al., 2010). The same connection prompt as a question would read: “What does this book remind you of?” When a teacher uses a connection prompt, the students are encouraged to connect the text to their prior knowledge, personal life, or other texts. The use of questions as

prompts is shown to encourage and support conversations. Prompts can also be used to connect learning to prior knowledge. Connection prompts are in the form of questions in this study.

While the research looks at what kind of conversation young learners are capable of, only one article investigates connection prompts specifically. Blum et al., (2010) suggest specific connection prompts are useful in helping the students connect to the literature and construct meaning. The prompts used in the study were statement prompts, and this current study investigates the use of question connection prompts (questions that encourage the reader to connect to the literature aloud through an interaction with other readers) in initiating and sustaining conversation.

Research suggests that questions, specifically those that elicit connections, predictions, and have no prescribed answer, along with facilitation, lead to improved conversations. None of the nine studies reviewed looked specifically at connection prompts in the form of questions. What may be a promising way of promoting these conversations is by thoughtfully and systematically using a tried and true instructional tool (questions) in the form of connection prompts. The current study suggests that the use of connection prompts in the form of questions leads students to deeper and more meaningful conversations. From that it can be theorized that the conversations lead to substantive engagement.

### **Theoretical Rationale**

This study draws on three theories: (a) Rosenblatt's (1978) Transactional Theory of Reading, (b) Langer's (1990) Theory of Envisionments, and (c) Vygotsky's (1978) Sociocultural Learning Theory. The first two theories describe an individual reader's experience with a text, and both of them indicate that a social environment contributes positively toward the experience in that it leads to substantive engagement. Vygotsky stresses the role of social interactions in the

development of the individual and the internalization of skills and vocabulary learned in the social context. The students in this study engaged in a social context facilitated by a teacher. It is theorized that the students internalized the conversational skills as well as the reading strategies reinforced by the conversation through connection prompts. An integrative model of the three theories is depicted in Figure 1.

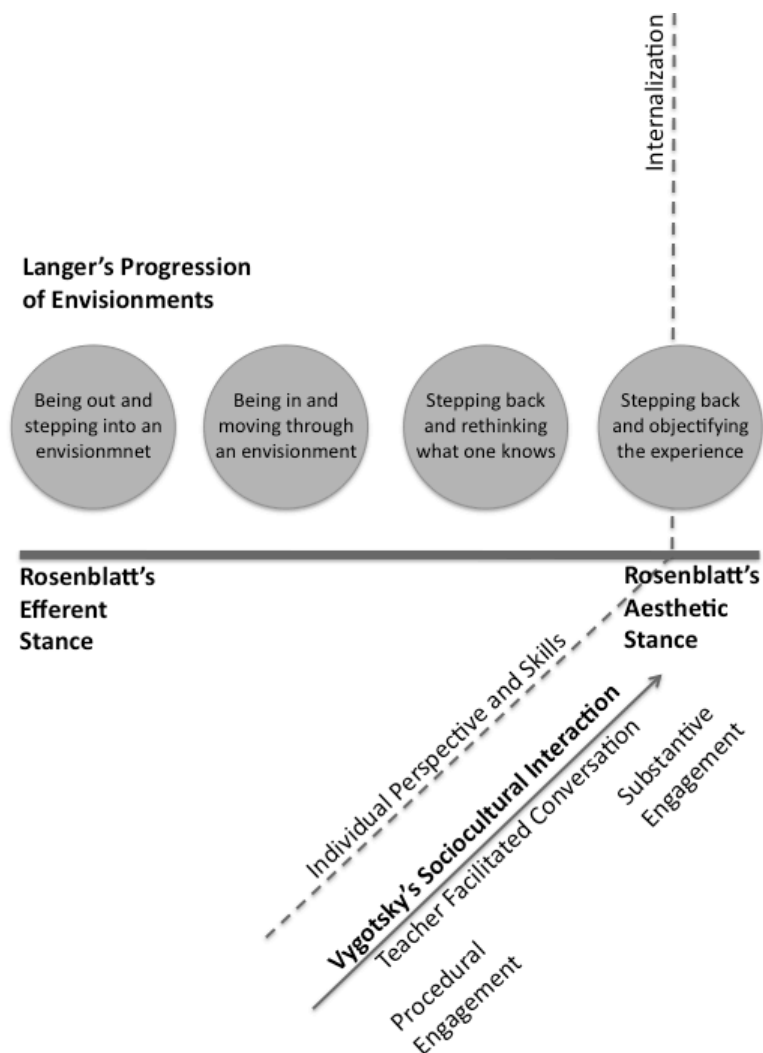


Figure 1. An integrative model of the theoretical framework.

All three theories described below in this section recognize the individual reader and her or his learning experience. Rosenblatt (1978) stresses the importance of how the reader approaches a text. She also explains the importance of recognizing that each reading experience is different and builds on the reader's experiential reservoir informing the future reading experiences. Similarly, Langer (1990) recognizes the reader's orientation. She continues to describe the process a reader goes through, and her second, third, and fourth envisionment occur fully with a reading for literary understanding orientation or, as Rosenblatt asserts, aesthetic reading. Vygotsky (1978) is central to the proposed study in that he defines the experience of learning through social interactions. The treatment in this study was administered in a social setting with the intent of teaching through social interaction. It was predicted that this would not only help students make meaning of the text, but bring the experience with them (as with Rosenthal and Langer's theories) and internalize the skills used to construct meaning. Figure 1 outlines the theoretical framework for this study by incorporating Rosenblatt's continuum, Langer's envisionments, and Vygotsky's theory of social learning. Rosenblatt's continuum, the horizontal line, goes from efferent (on the left) to aesthetic (on the right). Langer's envisionments (the circles) also progress from an efferent stance to an aesthetic stance with the implementation of a social (teacher-facilitated) environment. The dashed line represents the individual progressing through the envisionments while exposed to the social experience (indicated by the solid line with an arrow). Student discourse develops within the social experience. As the student moves vertically through a social experience, she or he is predicted to encounter Langer's four envisionments. This happens only as she or he also moves horizontally, towards what Rosenblatt refers to as an aesthetic reading.



## **Rosenblatt's Transactional Theory of Reading**

Rosenblatt's (1978) transactional theory of reading and writing addresses the transaction between reader and text, which happens when a reader decodes a text (or hears a text) and integrates the information from the text into her or his schema. Rosenblatt uses the term transaction to emphasize the importance of both the reader and the text in every reading event. The reader arrives at a text with an experiential reservoir: a combination of experiences and attitudes about exchanges with the world. The reader draws on this reservoir to understand the text and uses the text to make better sense of the reservoir. Rosenblatt argues the reader continually processes information and recognizes and/or adjusts his or her perspective as he or she proceeds through a text. Rosenblatt claims that even a re-reading of the same text will be a unique event. The meaning of a text, according to Rosenblatt (1978), is constructed when a reader reads and interprets the text. Full comprehension includes literal understanding and critical evaluation of the text. There are several factors that contribute to the interpretation, such as context of, and purpose for, reading. The reader's cultural, social, and personal life will affect the pacing, organization, and synthesizing of the text. In short, the reader is changed having gone through the experience of reading. According to Rosenblatt, understanding the text is the process of reading and evoking literal understanding and sensations and emotions, not simply decoding combinations of symbols (Rosenblatt, 1982). The idea of a transaction between reader and text is echoed by The National Reading Panel (2000), which asserts that reading comprehension is what follows from "an intentional and thoughtful interaction between reader and text" (NRP, p.13).

The text is incorporated into the reader's schema as it is processed. The meaning of the text changes as the reader moves through and transacts with it. Overall generalizations about the content are adapted, changed, or confirmed as the reader continues through the text. Conflicts

can be reconciled with new information. Rosenblatt (1991) describes the transaction as constructing an interpretation through an interaction with a “persona” author.

According to Rosenblatt, language is personalized by the reader; the reader reads and speaks about the text from a personal perspective. This personalization of language is part of the reader’s transaction. Language is made up from the individual’s experiences in his or her life, and she or he brings those experiences and his or her perspective to the text. For example, as a second-grade student living on a farm reads White’s (1952) *Charlotte’s Web*, she or he will come to the text with a strong knowledge of farm animals and how a farm works. The idea of killing a pig for money or food will not necessarily come as a surprise. However, when an urban second-grade student approaches the same text, she or he may be taken aback at the idea of killing the pig. According to Rosenblatt, both readers are correct in their response to the text.

Rosenblatt (1991) describes a reading stance continuum on which one end is the efferent (literal and direct understanding) stance, and on the other is the aesthetic (lived-through and experiential understanding) stance. The reader comes to a text with their experiential reservoir, and the reader’s stance “reflects” the reader’s purpose. It is important to note that it is the reader that falls on the continuum, not the text. As a reader approaches a text, the reader adopts a stance along Rosenblatt’s (1991) continuum. Typically, the stance is influenced by the prompts in the text (which Rosenblatt refers to as cues). These prompts can be format or language prompts. For example, a poem might offer a format prompt of large margins and nontraditional punctuation, and a mathematics textbook might offer a format prompt of visual step-by-step directions in boxes. A novel might offer a language prompt through dialogue, helping to indicate date or location. Readers must be able to make a shift in stance when appropriate (Rosenblatt, 1978). For example, a second-grade student might approach Rowling’s (1998) *Harry Potter and the*

*Sorcerer's Stone*, with an efferent stance if it is assigned for homework, and she or he knows she or he will be accountable for the information. But, as she or he reads, it will become clear that while there are some things true to life, it is a fantasy book, and not everything in it should be understood literally. The reader must understand the emotions and excitement of the novel and feel the confusion of the characters and not be baffled by the fact that there are dragons which are not real. The stance can also be altered by teacher input, other readers, or the context in which the text was chosen. For example, the text could be assigned as homework or chosen for pleasure reading.

The efferent stance implies a focus on the meaning of the text and the information the reader wants to carry away from the text after reading. For example, if someone is stuck on a highway with a flat tire and does not know how to change the tire, she or he will read the car manual for directions with an efferent stance. The person simply needs information quickly to apply to an immediate situation. Readers often take an efferent stance with textbook reading. With textbooks students focus on the facts and which facts should be retained after reading. With efferent reading, the purpose for reading is to understand literal meaning. Beginning readers more often take on an efferent stance no matter the reading material.

The aesthetic stance refers to what the reader experiences during the reading of a text. Aesthetic reading involves feeling the emotions the text elicits and understanding the conflicts or emotions in the text. A young child reading Judy Blume's *Superfudge* can identify with the protagonist, Peter, in a variety of ways. Peter experiences difficulties with friends, has to move to a new home, takes care of a pet, and experiences challenges in being an older sibling. Older siblings reading the book might understand Peter's struggles with his younger brother, Fudge. Younger siblings reading the book might begin to understand a new perspective. Each reading

event is unique and allows for a personal connection to the text. The purpose of reading is to achieve the lived-through experience with aesthetic reading.

Often accomplished readers take on a more aesthetic stance with poems or novels. Even very young learners can read aesthetically. Rosenblatt (1982) argues that a reader cannot develop a full response to literature until she or he has had an aesthetic experience. Aesthetic reading, according to Rosenblatt (1982), helps the reader (especially the young reader) to develop a richer experiential reservoir with which to approach new texts and life. Depending on the context, a reader may switch from one stance to another. Reading tends to be more efferent for the young reader, no matter the genre, because she or he is developing in all areas of reading and is not able to absorb all the prompts present in the text. However, Rosenblatt (1978) suggests that we urge our young readers to embrace the full continuum of reading including aesthetic reading with literature.

Rosenblatt (1978) argues that generally schools teach literature from an efferent stance, encouraging students to simply understand the basics of the reading and not to feel the lived-through experience that goes along with aesthetic reading of literature. She claims that we lose a sense of the literature when we ask students to read efferently when we should be encouraging them to read aesthetically. Rosenblatt (1978) notes that reading comprehension assessments often require only efferent reading, and because reading is on a continuum, those assessments do not measure all reading. To measure reading efferently is to ask for efferent reading. Rosenblatt argues that schools teach for efferent reading, even of literature. When students are assessed for efferent understanding it changes the entire purpose for reading.

Rosenblatt (1991) stresses the importance of creating environments in which students can truly connect to text and build meaning from it. Speech, she argues, is a crucial part of the

transactions that students experience. She argues conversation provides a place for students to pose and hear different perspectives and interpretations of text. Each text is written with and read from a personal, cultural, and linguistic perspective. Conversation among students could help the students link the meaning from the text to themselves and therefore personalize the information and clarify where there are gaps in understanding due to perspective. Misconceptions come from approaching a text with a preconceived notion that is incorrect (Rosenblatt, 1978). Conversation is a specific way for students to express their transactions and understandings and to hear alternative perspectives. Rosenblatt (1978) argues that a shift in perspective can occur during a conversation. When participants in conversation hear alternative explanations and reactions to a text, they compare the alternatives to their original understanding. They may decide after that comparison that they feel stronger in their original opinion. Conversely, a student may change her or his mind after weighing an alternate response to her or his own original response. This shift in response alters the student's experiential reservoir. After this experience the student not only changes her or his perspective regarding this text but will now approach new texts with this shift in perspective. Conversation essentially allows for a meeting of personalized perspectives and can result in shifts within personalized perspectives. This shift can be enough to approach new texts and experiences with a more critical manner. The participants may leave the conversation with completely different interpretations. Conversation, Rosenblatt (1978) suggests, is a means toward deeper understanding of text.

Exposure to alternative interpretations offers students an opportunity for critical thinking as they absorb the new ideas and attempt to incorporate the ideas into their personal schema. Rosenblatt's approach to literature will lead to better reading comprehension as defined by the National Reading Panel and the California State Standards. Efferent reading might lead to some

improved reading comprehension skills such as retelling and clarifying, as currently assessed with standardized tests, but aesthetic reading will address the more complex needs and standards nationally accepted, some of which are not sufficiently assessed with standardized tests (Rosenblatt, 1978). As students recognize that one text can elicit different interpretations, they will begin to read with a stronger sense of their own reading process.

Rosenblatt's Transactional Theory speaks closely to the aims of this particular study in that this study examines the transaction between the reader and the text through analysis of student responses. Much of the research in the area of conversation of young learners makes use of Rosenblatt's theory (Almasi, 1995; Sipe, 2000; Almasi et al., 2001; McIntyre et al., 2006; Heller, 2006; Tolentino, 2007). Rosenblatt (1991) argues that transactional theory is appropriate for all levels of reading and that there is a need for research on how teacher's guide conversation at the lower grade levels. This study investigates student expressions of their transactions with text via conversation.

### **Langer's Theory of Envisionments**

Langer (2001) posits the idea of envisionments, which are personalized ideas about a text or conversation, and how the text fits within a personal schema. Langer suggests that readers develop a relationship with the text, as with Rosenblatt's transaction, and that they explore as they read. As readers approach a text, they immediately receive prompts (which she refers to as clues and Rosenblatt refers to as cues). These prompts can be language, context, format, or of another variety, and they lead the reader into the text. Also similar to Rosenblatt, Langer suggests that readers take on either an informative (efferent) or literary (aesthetic) approach to texts (Langer, 1990). The reader cannot help but use prior knowledge to adjust to the text and understand it by linking the prompts to prior knowledge. As with Rosenblatt's concept of a

constantly revised understanding, Langer's envisionments change as the reader progresses through the text and absorbs new prompts and makes new connections (Langer, 1990; Langer, 2001).

Langer (2001) proposes four stances of envisionment and suggests that readers move through them as they dive deeper into understanding. The first of the four stances is being out and stepping into an envisionment. The reader in this stance is making initial contact with the text and picking up on the prompts described above. These prompts help the reader to engage with the text because the prompts will offer the reader hints about the text such as genre or plot. Langer likens this experience to a child starting a new school. As the child begins at the school, she or he will pick up clues to inform her or himself about the school. She or he will arguably use this information to get to know the environment better.

The second stance is being in and moving through an envisionment. Langer argues that readers must immerse themselves in a text in order to understand it. They combine their experiences and prior knowledge to make sense of the text and literally understand its direct meaning (characters, setting, and plot). In the example of the child at a new school, the child will no doubt use experiences from a previous school to help her or him adjust to the new experience. For example, she or he will realize that like the old school, there are routines and schedules, but these routines and schedules might be different.

Once in the text the reader can then go to the third stance, stepping back and rethinking. In this stance the reader can take the new information from the text and actively connect it to prior knowledge. Instead (as in the first stance) of using prior knowledge to understand the text, the reader is using new information to make better sense of the world. Langer's example of the child in a new school is extended to demonstrate the second stance. The child might take a

moment to think about the relationships and use the information to inform her or himself about past relationships at the old school. As she or he realizes it's hard to make friends as a new student, she or he might reflect on a time at the previous school when she or he could have been more friendly and accepting of a new student.

The fourth and final stance is one in which the reader steps back and objectifies the experience. At this point in reading the reader is able to think about the reading as an experience which will help her or him to make judgments about the text, such as about the structure or intended meaning. The new student in Langer's example in this stance might be able to objectify the benefits and drawbacks of switching schools. She or he may realize that indeed the homework is harder, but she or he is more confident in spelling.

As students move from one stance to another, Langer (1990) suggests they develop new perceptions and perspectives. This shift is part of analytic thinking, which is part of reading comprehension. Langer argues that conversation is one reliable strategy toward literary understanding. Further, questions are essential in helping students move from one stance to the next and toward discussion (Applebee, Langer, Nystrand, & Gamoran, 2003). As readers enter the conversation, they use their envisionments as a frame of reference and begin to build deeper understanding as they work with others to synthesize a more developed understanding of the text (Langer, 1990).

Both Rosenblatt and Langer view the reading experience as a progression of understanding through connecting to the literature. Rosenblatt's continuum and Langer's envisionments allow students to map out their thinking process throughout a reading. Langer would argue that in the first envisionment, parallel to Rosenblatt's efferent stance, the reader is engaged and preparing for a deeper experience, whereas Rosenblatt would argue the reader is



only understanding literal meaning. Both would likely agree that the reader needs motivation to move toward the aesthetic stance or fourth envisionment. For early readers the motivation could be prompted by the teacher. Once the student understands the joy and importance of reading, she or he would likely internalize it and develop personal motivation. In this study, Rosenblatt's continuum and Langer's envisionments help to guide the analysis of the content of what is said in the book clubs.

### **Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory**

Much of the research in the area of conversation around literature cites Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural theory because it describes the nature of linguistic and cognitive development through socialization. Vygotsky's theory supports the current study in that it investigates a social interaction (conversation). Students bring certain individual skills to reading, and if those skills are fairly basic (which they can be in the second grade), the reading will tend to be more efferent in nature. Through facilitation the teacher can use questions to encourage a conversation with students that will lead to a deeper reading. The students will use the experience of the interaction to approach new texts. They will embrace each new reading experience with a new perspective which is influenced by the facilitated experience. This can lead to a more aesthetic reading.

Vygotsky (1978) argues that social experiences influence an individual's thinking and perspective. The individual is not independent of his or her social environment. The classroom is a social setting in which the students learn from each other and the teacher. Vygotsky notes the importance of a more knowledgeable other, another individual that has experience or knowledge to share. The more knowledgeable other can support a student with her or his experiences and knowledge. These social interactions stimulate and support student learning, more, Vygotsky

would argue, than a didactic approach where a teacher simply disseminates information. Students can be more knowledgeable in various areas and are therefore able to act as a more knowledgeable peer at different times. Vygotsky would support the role of the teacher as a more knowledgeable other, often referred to in the research literature as a facilitator. In this study, the teacher acts as a more knowledgeable other in facilitating the book clubs, and students have the opportunity to share their knowledge during the conversation.

The individual internalizes language, ideas, and processes learned in social settings. In this study the prompts help to stimulate the social setting (the conversation). Based on Vygotsky, it is theorized that the reader will internalize the experience of the conversation and the reader will then be able to approach a new text with an enhanced ability to read with a critical perspective and better conversation skills.

### **Definition of Terms**

**Authentic Questions:** Authentic questions are questions with no prescribed answer. The teacher poses authentic questions leaving the responses open for alternate ideas. Authentic questions are also known as open-ended questions.

**Book Clubs:** Book clubs are small groups of students (three to six) that meet to discuss commonly read text. In this study, book clubs are the forum in which students discuss books read aloud by the teacher while the students read along with their own copy. Book clubs are also known as literature discussion groups.

**Connection Prompts:** Connection prompts are prompts that lead students to make connections to the text and talk about them. In this study, connection prompts are in the form of questions. There are three different connection prompts: (a) a mid-reading prompt that asks the

students to make a prediction, (b) a post-reading prompt that asks the students if the text reminds them of anything, and (c) a post-reading prompt that asks the students to question the text.

**Conversation:** Conversation involves an exchange between at least two people in which both participants exchange ideas by taking turns talking and listening. In this study, conversation includes uptake on responses in which participants confirm, challenge, or question ideas generated by other participants.

**Discourse:** Discourse is talk in the classroom; it can be between teacher and students or among students. Discourse can be recitation-style or conversational.

**Engagement:** In this study, engagement refers to student involvement and participation in instructional tasks or assignments. Engagement can be *substantive*, where the student is invested intellectually and emotionally and internally motivated to get through the material, or *procedural*, where the student is simply completing the tasks or assignments with no internal motivation or interest.

**Instructional Conversation:** In this study, instructional conversation consists of student and teacher verbal interaction where the teacher-talk supports student knowledge and beliefs and facilitates conversation (McIntyre et al., 2006). Instructional conversation is also known as guided conversation.

**Prompts:** In this study, prompts are statements or questions posed to students to elicit responses with regard to a text. They can be issued by the teacher or used independently by students. Prompts are also known as cues, dialogic bids, assisted questioning, and facilitation.

**Reading Comprehension:** Reading comprehension refers to understanding literal, intended, and suggested meanings of a text and evaluating it critically.

## **CHAPTER II REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE**

Skilled reading is necessary for academic and life experience (Guthrie, 1996; National Reading Panel, 2000b; Guthrie et al., 2004; Council on Advancing Adolescent Literacy, 2010). Reading comprehension instruction involves teaching strategies to students that help them develop questioning skills and make connections to the text. Students can go through the motions of school but will more likely learn and practice these life-long skills when they are engaged substantively. Students enter school with a natural love of learning (Piaget & Inhelder, 1969; Vygotsky, 1978), and teachers can help foster that love of learning by encouraging substantively engaged instruction (Piaget & Inhelder, 1969; Rosenblatt, 1978; Vygotsky, 1978; Tharp & Gallimore, 1988; Nystrand & Gamoran, 1991; Guthrie, 1996; Guthrie et al., 2004). One way to promote engaged learning is through conversation, which can be stimulated through the use of questioning. Questioning as an instructional tool goes back to Socrates. Recently, there has been an examination of questioning and how it influences student discourse. Questions that are shown to promote conversation are open-ended and ask students to connect to the literature and make predictions. Connection prompts are proposed to encourage conversation as they combine the features of questions suggested to lead to substantive engagement.

### **Engagement**

Engagement refers to a student's emotional and intellectual involvement and participation in a classroom activity or task (Nystrand & Gamoran, 1991; Harris & Hodges, 1995; Guthrie, 1996). Nystrand and Gamoran (1991) investigated classroom discourse that supports student engagement with regard to literature in 58-eighth grade classrooms in 16 different Midwestern schools. They identified three types of student engagement: (a) procedural, (b) substantive, and (c) disengagement (no engagement).

Procedural engagement refers to students who are engaged with the assignments, participate when expected, and are on-task in class. Typically, procedural engagement includes questions regarding the business of school as opposed to the depth of the content (i.e., “How long should the paper be?”). Procedural engagement was the norm for the majority of time in the classrooms in Nystrand and Gamoran’s (1991) study.

Substantive engagement refers to the investment of oneself in the act of learning. Nystrand and Gamoran (1991) note that substantive engagement manifests in different ways for different learners, but it involves a passion and commitment to the learning experience as opposed to simply getting through the material. They argue that reading is an authentic task and therefore is best taught through the use of conversation (authentic questioning). According to Rosenblatt (1978) reading is authentic. She would further assert that it is better to discuss literature through authentic conversation, rather than through recitation-style questioning which only asks for an efferent reading of the text (in other words, a literal cognitive understanding).

Using observations of questions in class and measures of achievement in literature, Nystrand and Gamoran (1991) found that there was more procedural engagement among students than substantive. Additionally, teachers ran recitation-style discussion when they led discussions. They found that teachers who used more discussions with an authentic approach were more likely to use uptake comments (which is making use of student comments to further discussion).

Nystrand and Gamoran (1991) found a weak relationship between procedural engagement and achievement and believe it to be due to the lack of investment in the learning. They suggest the monotony and lack of challenge involved in procedural engagement leads to lower-levels of learning. There was a strong correlation between substantive engagement and

achievement. The students who were exposed to more authentic questions were involved in conversation around literature, and they performed better on assessments of comprehension and analysis.

Almasi (1995) examined sociocognitive conflict that arose in peer-led and teacher-led literature discussions of fourth graders. Almasi (1995) found 26% of conversation in peer-led conversations (which were substantively engaging) was of high complexity whereas only 15% of conversation in teacher-led conversations (which were procedurally engaging) was of high complexity. Further, the highly complex conversation in the peer-led conversation consisted mainly of student thoughts whereas the highly complex conversation in the teacher-led conversation consisted mainly of rereading of text. The peer-led conversations involved more engagement by students, which in turn, involved more meaning-making by students (Almasi, 1995).

In describing procedural engagement in a typical English classroom, Nystrand and Gamoran (1990) refer to Meehan's (1979) description of standard classroom discourse, Initiation-Response-Evaluation (IRE). IRE discussions begin with a teacher-initiated topic or question, a student response, and a teacher evaluation (i.e., "good," or "I'm looking for something specific.") IRE is appropriate to test for specific information but does not encourage students to predict, infer, or work together to make meaning of a text. Conversation, Nystrand and Gamoran (1990) explain, is very different from IRE in that it involves turn-taking in which participants take turns listening and speaking.

One of the main findings of Christoph and Nystrand's (2001) study of discussion as a means of teaching literature is that students who are not verbally engaged in instructional conversations are still academically engaged. By analyzing video of the class and in follow-up

interviews with students who did not talk much in class, the researchers found that the students had been actively listening to the conversation. Their gaze followed the speakers, and their responses in interviews indicated they had heard, processed, and integrated what the speakers had said with their own ideas and opinions.

### **Conversation**

When students discuss literature, they construct knowledge together (Sipe, 2000). Alvermann (1987) describes the benefits of discussion and how it aids students in reading comprehension. She begins by explaining what discussion includes (exchange of information among people and listening to and processing different perspectives). Through conversation students can reconcile conflicting information, learn cooperation, develop verbal and listening skills, problem-solve, and hear different points of view. Exposure to different perspectives helps students to view where they are in terms of understanding and to reevaluate their initial reaction to a text. Alvermann (1987) argues that discussion helps students clarify information from texts and determine importance and purpose for reading texts. Discussion also helps students integrate new information into their schema. She further notes that teachers can use discussions to scaffold information and check for understanding.

Conversations around literature offer teachers the opportunity to check for understanding and address student misconceptions or conflicts with the text. Often students are not willing to express themselves until they know whether they are right or wrong. Conversations create a place for students to test out their ideas, hear other ideas and arguments, and return to reform their original ideas (Baumfield & Mroz, 2002). Authentic questioning initiates student participation in conversations and supports student reading comprehension (Nystrand & Gamoran, 1990).

Conversation in the classroom tends to be a form of recitation, or IRE (Nystrand & Gamoran, 1991; Almasi, 1995; Christoph & Nystrand, 2001). The pattern is usually teacher-to-student-to-teacher and rarely flows from student to student. A true instructional conversation engages students substantively and includes discussion about a text (in a variety of forms). The teacher's guidance in eliciting students' understanding as they process the text brings the students to a stronger understanding through conversation (Tharp & Gallimore, 1988). In Tharp and Gallimore's (1988) study of the Kamehameha Elementary Education Program, instructional conversation was present daily in the classroom, always included a discussion of some sort of text, and involved teacher guidance and student response to the teacher. Goldenberg (1992/93), extended Tharp and Gallimore's definition of instructional conversation to include 10 elements: (a) thematic focus, (b) activation of use of background and relevant schemata, (c) direct teaching, (d) promotion of more complex language and expression, (e) elicitation of bases for statements of positions, (f) fewer "known-answer" questions, (g) responsivity to student contributions, (h) connected discourse, (i) a challenging but nonthreatening atmosphere, and (j) general participation. Similar to Tharp and Gallimore's definition and Goldenberg's elements of instructional conversation, conversation in this study refers to a verbal exchange of ideas between two or more people where opinions are shared, heard, extended, and processed.

In a study that investigated the initiation of student discourse, Christoph and Nystrand (2001) note the importance of conversational language. It is important for the teacher to facilitate by modeling natural language as opposed to reverting to the typical IRE pattern (Meehan, 1979).

Conversation is an effective way of increasing student knowledge construction, reading comprehension, critical thinking, and linguistic skills, and yet it is rarely implemented in classrooms due to the difficulty of conducting a true conversation (Tharp & Gallimore, 1988;



Goldenberg, 1992; Almasi et al., 2001; Christoph & Nystrand, 2001; Berry & Englert, 2005). In order to conduct an instructional conversation, teachers must be willing to shift the responsibility of learning to the students more than teachers are accustomed to doing. Berry and Englert's (2005) study of conversation suggests that developing conversations in the classroom takes time. There is a heavy investment of time and effort, but the researchers suggest this is an investment with very positive long-term outcomes.

In a study that examined classroom conversation, Christoph and Nystrand (2001) establish that conversation is beneficial for students as it equalizes them as participants in the classroom community. However, instructional conversation does not happen easily in a classroom because teachers are expected to cover specific standards, conversations take more time than lecture, students need to be comfortable in a classroom before they can participate in conversations, there are possible and unforeseeable conflicts between students, there are unpredictable responses, and teachers often express an unwillingness to change pedagogy (Christoph & Nystrand, 2001). In an effort to better understand how to increase and sustain instructional conversation the researchers observed a teacher in her transition from a mostly monologic classroom to a dialogic classroom. One of the main findings of Christoph and Nystrand's (2001) study is that students who are not verbally engaged in the instructional conversations are still academically engaged. By analyzing video of the class and in follow-up interviews with students that were not heavy talkers in class, the researchers found that the students had been actively listening to the conversation. Their gaze followed the speakers and their responses in interviews indicated they had heard, processed, and integrated what the speakers had said with their own ideas and opinions.

Maloch (2002) followed a teacher's transition to literature discussion groups. Her study specifically investigated the teacher's role in relation to student participation. Maloch's study offers much in the field regarding how to initiate conversations in the classroom, specifically how to get students to take on a large role in the conversation. Three strategies were considered successful in Maloch's study: (a) using metalinguistic interventions, (b) creating shared knowledge, and (c) easing into a student-led discussion. By introducing metalinguistic interventions, the teacher was able to present the concept of initiating conversation. Through conversation the class developed a common language and knowledge. Conversations could return to this knowledge to help students construct more knowledge. By teaching the students how to initiate and maintain conversation, the teacher was able to hand over the responsibility of the conversation to the students and the students were able to accept this responsibility and conduct meaningful conversations.

In Maloch's (2002) study, the implementation of strategies to conduct conversation were used consistently. The researcher notes that the conversations did not happen easily, and the teacher had to continually persist with the strategies and modify them to accommodate the students.

Teachers cannot, by definition, run a classroom conversation by themselves; they need student participation (Nystrand & Gamoran, 1990). Small groups are better for conversations as each student has more of an opportunity to participate. Conversation requires the amount of student talk to equal or outweigh the amount of teacher talk. When students are encouraged to participate in conversations, often the conversation can revolve around what Almasi et al. (2001) refer to as metatalk, talk around what should be talked about. Students sometimes focus so much on what needs to be accomplished that they lose the actual conversation. This study investigates

the use of prompts to increase conversation. If students have specific prompts to stimulate conversation they will not have to concern themselves with what it is they are supposed to cover in their conversation. The prompts help to initiate conversation. Once the students are talking, the conversation should continue if the teacher has modeled good conversational talk.

In previous research, Nystrand noticed a negative relationship between amount of time in small-group work and achievement. Surprised by this finding, Nystrand et al. (1993) investigated the nature of small-group work and how different types of small-group work related to achievement. The researchers observed ninth-grade literature classes engaged in small-group work. They then coded the small groups and noted ones that required autonomy and knowledge production on the students' part. Often the two (autonomy and knowledge production) went together. They noticed a significant positive relationship between both autonomy and knowledge production in small-group work and achievement in literature (measured with a literature test asking a range of higher-order questions about texts they had read throughout the year). There was also a negative relationship between small-group work that was not deemed autonomous or as producing knowledge and achievement.

An important finding from Nystrand et al.'s (1993) study is that teachers cannot simply expect students to break into small groups, collaborate, discuss, and produce knowledge together. They need guidance and clear guidelines of what is expected as the end result. Then they need to be offered a space to explore and not simply to follow a pattern or routine of curriculum. Given this opportunity, students will compare and contrast ideas, clarify misunderstandings, persuade and be persuaded, and develop a new sense of the text being discussed (Nystrand et al., 1993).

## Questioning

Research has examined the role of questioning in classroom instruction. The questions that are posed greatly influence the type of discourse that follows and thus also influence student engagement and conversation. Questions that ask for: (a) open-ended responses, (b) connections, (c) follow-up questions, and (d) predictions are repeatedly suggested as promoting substantive engagement (Nystrand & Gamoran, 1990; Nystrand & Gamoran, 1991; Christoph & Nystrand, 2001; Maloch, 2002; Nystrand et al., 2003; Stahl, 2008).

In an examination of classroom discourse Nystrand and Gamoran (1990) note the use of authentic questions and uptake responses as strategies that elicit substantive engagement. Nystrand and Gamoran (1990) analyzed discourse patterns in classroom conversations, specifically, substantive versus procedural engagement. Students who were exposed to more authentic questions did significantly better on a measure of achievement than their peers who were engaged procedurally. The study was done with eighth and ninth-grade students, but the researchers suggest that practices found to stimulate and support conversation can be used at all levels in education. The practices proposed are (a) authentic (open-ended with no prescribed answer) questions, (b) uptake (building conversation based on student response), and (c) high-level evaluation (a more involved teacher response to student responses).

Christoph and Nystrand (2001) outline elements of productive discussion leadership that build on the aforementioned practices. Questioning is highlighted as one of the main elements of a successful classroom discussion. Specifically, they note that asking for multiple responses, asking for complex responses, and asking open-ended questions all promote productive discussion. At one point in the study the teacher read a text which she had not previously read. She used a teacher guide to help her with class discussion questions. As she had not yet formed

her own personal opinion of the answer, she was open to responses. This allowed for multiple responses. She validated all the responses, and students were supporting their answers and arguing with one another. The teacher guide had a pre-set answer, but the openness of the teacher's mind allowed the teacher to hear and validate different answers.

Maloch (2002) conducted a study following a teacher's transition to book clubs (she refers to them as literature discussion groups). Her study specifically investigated the teacher's role in relation to student participation. Initially, the students had trouble participating in the discussion groups because it was a new learning situation and the language required for conversation differed greatly from the language they were used to using in the classroom. The teacher in the study introduced the idea of book clubs as a natural progression from whole-group discussions. She offered specific strategies, such as questioning, to the students to help them to initiate conversation.

The types of questions the teacher introduced to initiate and promote conversation were follow-up questions, asking the students to make connections to the text, student-generated questions, and asking students to find evidence in the text to support their ideas. The teacher also highlighted student use of strategies. She would note the fact that the student used a strategy, named it, and then she would offer it as a strategy other students could use. In doing this, she made students aware that they could be responsible for the conversation (Maloch, 2002).

Maloch's (2002) study offers much in the field regarding questioning and how it can be used to initiate conversations in the classroom, specifically how to get students to take on a large role in the conversation. She offers strategies to help initiate conversation and strategies to further conversation.

Evans (2002) examined student-generated questions that demonstrated personal connections to the text. She noted that research confirms the value of discussion for reading comprehension at the elementary and secondary level, and that there is a lack of research in the area of student perception of these discussions. The purpose of her study was to examine student perceptions of their learning in peer-led discussions.

Students were able to describe five conditions they felt necessary for effective literature discussions: (a) basic requirements, (b) respect issues, (c) people you can work with, (d) task structure, and (e) text being read. Basic requirements included simple items like having the actual text and time to talk. Respect issues included turn-taking and listening. Students cited people they could work with as hard workers and smart students. Task structure involved the teachers providing topics to cover. Finally, students noted the importance of everyone in the group reading.

One of Evans's (2002) major findings was that student-generated questions increased conversation dramatically. Combined with the fact that students appreciated task structure as a major component of a successful discussion about literature, it seems natural to investigate the success of specific types of prompts including those that ask students to connect to the literature.

Table 2 outlines features of questions, based on research, that elicit substantive engagement versus features of questions that elicit procedural engagement. Typically, teacher talk dominates the classroom conversation and leads to procedural engagement. McIntyre et al. (2006) note the importance of teacher-fronted conversation in the beginning in order to set the tone and model conversational dialogue. They further note the use of specific prompts as stimulants for conversation. These can lead to substantive engagement.

Table 2  
Features of Questioning for Substantive Versus Procedural Engagement

Features of Questions that Elicit Substantive Engagement	Features of Questions that Elicit Procedural Engagement
Open-Ended	Closed
Follow-Up	Summarization
Dialogic Bids	
Predicting	
Connecting to the Text	
Questioning for Textual Evidence	

### Connection Prompts

Student conversations can be scaffolded through the use of probing questions and the elaboration of student responses (Clark & Graves, 2005). Because initiation and facilitation can be difficult due to time, energy, and shift in teacher and student roles, teachers either avoid conversation, allow it to be mostly procedural, or give up on it before it is successful. There are types of questions (see Table 2) that lead to substantive engagement. Connection prompts are open-ended questions or statements that lead students to make connections. The prompts in this study are questions.

Berry and Englert (2005) examined the role of teacher support in student conversations. Their study of students using prompts to initiate conversation suggests that student connections to literature help students to be more active participants in conversation. Berry and Englert observed conversations in an inclusive classroom with primary-age students. The teacher was interested in stimulating more conversation in the classroom with the hopes that it would be a way for students with special needs to better participate in knowledge construction. Their findings suggested that time, experience with conversation, and comfort in the classroom are all conducive to conversation. Additionally, at the conclusion of the treatment of using connections,

students appeared to be much more comfortable with conversation and better able to initiate and moderate it independently of the teacher.

The researchers found that when suggested topics were posted clearly for all students to see, students tended to address the posted topics more than initiating their own topics. Posting the topics was a productive scaffold in that it helped to initiate conversation, but it also hindered natural flow of conversation as students appeared to simply address each topic and move on.

Berry and Englert (2005) found that at times conversations were stunted, and even the teacher appeared unable to carry them further to elicit more analysis. This study examines the use of prompts that can help teachers to lead conversations and help students to carry the conversation forward. At the same time, students, as they grow comfortable with the prompts, may begin to automatically use them individually (as self-regulated readers do) or with each other. Berry and Englert (2005) found that students began to mimic teacher language with one another in an attempt to further conversation, suggesting that students are capable of using the language of the prompts.

Martin (1998) used connection prompts in a study of book clubs (she refers to them as literature circles) with second-grade students. Specifically, the study investigated the effect of the book clubs on students' ability to apply reading strategies and student motivation. The strategies Martin examined are prediction, self-questioning, and connecting to the text. Reading comprehension scores were declining in Martin's school. The teachers, in an effort to improve and formally structure their reading program, reviewed the research literature and noticed an increase in the use of book clubs in schools. Martin began using book clubs in her classroom and documented the results in a qualitative study with the hopes of increasing reading comprehension.



Martin observed her 12 second-grade students during book club conversations with respect to their ability to use reading strategies she had already taught them. The students were assigned roles for their participation in the conversation. The roles were: (a) discussion director, (b) summarizer, (c) word wizard, (d) creative connector, and (e) artful artist. The roles were originally introduced during her large-group instruction (in which the whole group assumed one role), then in small groups, until the students were each able to take on a role individually. They worked in small groups with one student in each role per group. Students took home books to read over the weekend for homework and prepare their role for the upcoming book club.

Martin (1998) analyzed data based on seven book club conversations. She used a pre and post-test to assess student ability to apply reading strategies (predicting, questioning, and connecting to the text). She used the Individual Student Discussion Rubric to assess student ability to question and connect during book club conversations. Finally, Martin measured student enthusiasm for reading through student interviews and a student attitude survey.

Most of the students in Martin's (1998) study increased their ability to use the three reading strategies while reading independently. Seventy-five percent increased their predicting scores and 83% increased their questioning and connecting scores. All students improved their questioning and connecting scores during book clubs. Reading enthusiasm was increased as students were excited about reading different books and preparing their roles for discussion.

Martin's (1998) study was extremely small, but also informative. She had only 12 students, and thus her results are not generalizable. However, her results do suggest that time spent on conversing about books helps students use reading strategies and builds enthusiasm for books. Her study also demonstrates the importance of preparing students for new reading experiences. In addition to her study using a small number of subjects, Martin was the teacher

and researcher in the study. This combination role would limit her ability to make objective observations. Further, there is no indication she recorded the book club conversations. A review of the actual conversations would help to document evidence of students using reading strategies. In the current study, the researcher observed a teacher implementing the treatment, and all conversations were recorded with video and audio digital recording devices.

The current study combined two effective instructional tools: (a) questioning and (b) connecting. By using connection prompts in the form of questions that ask students to make connections, the teacher helped students to use strategies that promote aesthetic conversation. Research suggests that aesthetic conversations have a positive effect on increasing substantive engagement.

Blum et al. (2010) noticed an increase in conversation when using connection prompts (in the form of statements). Following reading, they investigated the effectiveness of four connection prompts in initiating and conducting instructional conversations to encourage language development and focus on understanding books that were read. The connection prompts used were: (a) “talk about your favorite part,” (b) “this book reminds me of,” (c) “tell me in your own words what happened in the book,” and (d) “add something new to the book.”

The teachers used the prompts stated above to elicit conversation after reading to the students. The prompts were used verbally, and then posted on a large wheel with an arrow, making the process more like a game. Students had small versions of the wheel to work with during paired reading (two students reading together) to reinforce use of the prompts.

The researchers note teacher perceptions that students focused more on meaning than on simple decoding of text. According to the teachers, the prompts helped the students connect to the literature and also encouraged standard reading strategies (such as summarization).

Additionally, the researchers queried parents, volunteers, and reading buddies who all reported that using the prompts helped students talk about books and that the talking helped them understand the books better.

Blum et al. (2010) note suggestions for implementing prompts in the classroom. They recommend: (a) making students aware that talking about books helps to understand them, (b) introducing the prompts, (c) modeling using the prompts, and (d) practicing using the prompts in groups, in pairs, and independently. In the current study the teacher introduced the concept of reading with connection prompts (at the beginning of book clubs), introduced the prompts before reading (with each read), modeled use of the prompts (prior to and during reading), and practiced using the prompts in small groups (book clubs).

Blum et al. (2010) suggest that consistent use of connection prompts can help teachers initiate and facilitate conversation. Further, the conversation initiated by the prompts is valuable in that it helps students understand that reading relates to meaning. They worked with teachers who were comfortable using the prompts. The researchers do a good job of describing the introduction and use of the prompts. The article is primarily concerned with presenting the connection prompts and is based on action research. It does not present much data beyond teacher perception of the value of the connection prompts and does not include a description of how the data were collected. The current study examines student and teacher dialogue and teacher perception which were all collected by audio and video recordings. Finally, Blum et al. (2010) talk mostly about students in large-group settings, and the current study looks at book clubs of five students each.

As in Blum et al.'s (2010) study, the connection prompts in the current study also focus on reading strategies, but are different in that they were in the form of questions. Questions are

an effective instructional strategy to elicit student thought and inference. Additionally, one prompt was used in the middle of the reading to encourage prediction, which is another research-based effective reading strategy.

### **CHAPTER III METHODOLOGY**

The purpose of this study was to investigate the type of conversation about literature that follows the use of teacher-initiated connection prompts with second-grade students. This study contributes to the field of research in the area of conversation concerning literature for primary-aged students. Rosenblatt (1978) asserts the need for aesthetic (a lived-through experience) reading with literature as opposed to purely efferent (reading for meaning) reading. Conversation is a way to encourage aesthetic reading. Young learners generally need help in initiating and sustaining conversation. Prompting with questions and connections are both effective in helping young students engage in conversation. One particular type of prompt, the connection prompt, is by the research, theorized to be especially effective.

This study addresses the following research questions:

1. What is the nature of conversation during book clubs after the connection prompts are introduced as measured by student responses?
  - a. What are the social discourse patterns?
  - b. What is the content of the discourse?
2. What are the experiences of the teacher with regard to the use of connection prompts during book clubs as measured through teacher interviews and observational field notes?

#### **Research Design**

This study implements a descriptive qualitative research design in which the researcher looked for key themes that emerged in field notes prior to and following the intervention and in transcripts over four classroom lessons with book clubs, three of which included the treatment of connection prompts as well as transcripts of interviews with the teacher following each book

club session. The researcher observed the teacher implement the treatment, recorded the conversations, and qualitatively analyzed the conversations. Much of the research in the area of instructional conversation with literature uses similar qualitative methods (Almasi, Garas-York, & Shanahan, 2006). These methods are appropriate for this study as they are commonly used to examine talk as the main form of data. Conversation in this study consists of interactions and took place in a shared social environment within an academic setting.

### **Sample**

The subjects in this study were 20 second-grade students at a small, private school in San Francisco, California. There were 12 girls and 8 boys. All participants, as of January 2010, were between the ages of seven years, four months and eight years, six months (average age was seven years, nine months). Ten were white/Caucasian, four were African-American, one was Latino, and 5 were Asian-American. They all lived in the San Francisco Bay Area and came from diverse ethnic backgrounds. Thirty-four percent of all students at the school receive financial aid for the tuition and more specifically, 30% of the second-grade students at the time of the study received financial aid. Data were also collected from the teacher in post book-club interviews. The teacher had nine years of teaching experience. She taught at the school for two years and was new to the second-grade classroom.

This convenience sample was appropriate for the study because the teacher was already using reading strategies promoted by the aforementioned research. She was interested in how to promote conversation around literature through the use of book clubs. She implemented the proposed connection prompts to help initiate and facilitate the book club conversations. Additionally, the research suggests that second-grade students are capable of participating in conversations about literature, but it is not a well-investigated area. Further, second grade is a

foundation year for literacy skills. It follows to investigate conversation as an instructional tool which can help second-grade students build their conversation skills and substantive engagement related to reading.

### **Treatment**

One way to approach conversation is through book clubs. Book clubs are small groups in which students discuss a common text. Book clubs facilitated by the teacher help to guide the students through authentic conversation which leads to substantive engagement. Conversation acts as a scaffold for student reading (Palincsar, 1986). One way to increase conversation in book clubs is through questioning and prompting.

The teacher in this study had been teaching reading comprehension strategies as outlined in previous sections, such as self-generated questions, predictions, and connections to the literature in large-group reading sessions and with partner reading. She was interested in implementing book clubs in the curriculum and had an interest in learning how to increase conversation during club sessions.

The prompts in this study were connection prompts in the form of questions. Connection prompts lead readers to connect text to prior knowledge. It was theorized that conversation following the use of prompts would help students build knowledge collaboratively using connections. In this study there were three connection prompts. The first connection prompt was used during the story (the teacher paused in the middle of the story to pose it). The first connection prompt is: "If you were writing this, what would happen next?" The prompt allows students to take on the role of the author and to voice their opinion on what would logically happen if they were writing. Prediction is a commonly used strategy for reading comprehension. The second and third connection prompts in this study were used after the reading. The second

connection prompt is: “Does the book make you wonder about anything?” This connection prompt asks the students to be creative and question the text. The questions can be in any form, from plot-related to author’s purpose. Research indicates the use of student-generated questioning as a useful reading strategy. The final connection prompt in this study is: “Does this book remind you of anything?” This final prompt asks students to directly connect to the text in any way they feel comfortable (for example, prior knowledge, prior experience, or other texts).

### **Procedures**

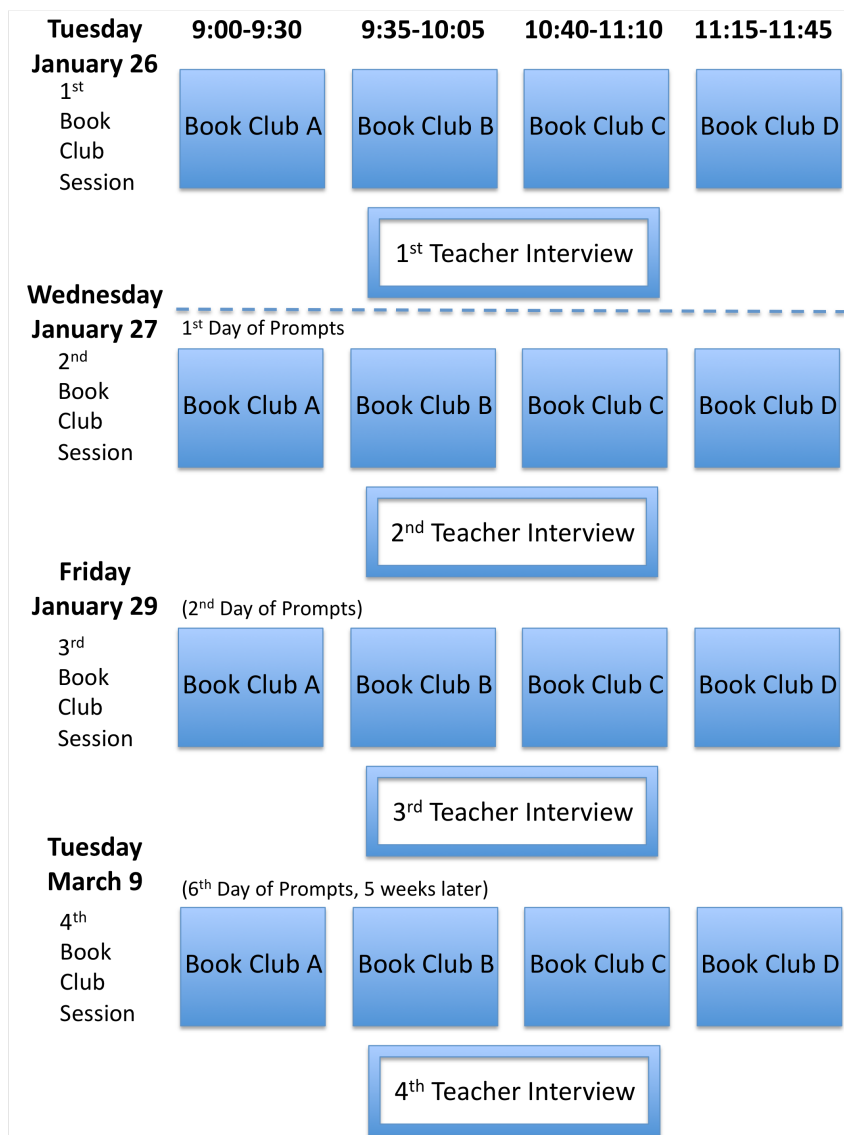
First, permission from the Institutional Review Boards for the Protection of Human Subjects (IRBPHS) was obtained. With authorization, the researcher then distributed consent forms (see next section for details).

Once permission was granted, the researcher visited the classroom during reading instruction to collect general classroom data. The researcher observed the actual instruction and student responses to note strategies the teacher used and student engagement during general reading instruction and the first book club (without the intervention). Notes were summarized the same day and used as data to describe the classroom and instruction. Following the classroom observations, the researcher coached the teacher on the use of the connection prompts. Specifically, the researcher instructed the teacher when to implement them and how to respond and encourage conversation. The researcher and teacher went over each connection prompt to be sure the teacher knew when to use them. Then the researcher and teacher practiced doing a book club session using the prompts.

All students received parental permission and were separated into four book clubs assigned by the teacher randomly (referred to as Book Club A, Book Club B, Book Club C, and Book Club D), with five students per book club. The researcher observed each of the four book



clubs five times (for a total of 20 book club meetings) and conducted four teacher interviews (one after each book club) (see Figure 2). A set of one meeting for each of the four book clubs will be referred to as a book club session.



*Figure 2.* Chronological progression of book clubs and interviews.

Students sat with the teacher in a circle on the floor during book club. The conversations in the classroom were recorded with a digital audio and video device in order to capture what was said by whom and to follow the conversation threads. The book clubs were recorded from the teacher's position in the circle so as to capture the students' voices and appearances during the book club. Interviews with the teacher were recorded with a digital audio recording device, and conversations and interviews were transcribed. The entire process took place over three days in one week (Tuesday, January 26, 2010, Wednesday, January 27, 2010, and Friday, January 29, 2010) and then five weeks later (Tuesday, March 9, 2010). Book Club A met from 9:00 to 9:30 A.M., Book Club B met from 9:35-10:05 A.M., Book Club C met from 10:40-11:10 A.M., and Book Club D met from 11:15-11:45 A.M. While the students in Book Club A were meeting, the students in Book Club B were with the classroom teaching assistant working on another reading project, and the students from Book Clubs C and D were in Art (Tuesday), Spanish (Wednesday), or Physical Education (Thursday). Then the students in Book Club B met, and the students from Book Club A were with the classroom teaching assistant, while the students from Book Clubs C and D were still in Art, Spanish, or Physical Education. There was a short recess period. After recess, the students from Book Club C met, the students in Book Club D were with the classroom teaching assistant, and the students in Book Clubs A and B were in Art, Spanish, or Physical Education. When the students from Book Club D met, the students from Book Club C were with the classroom teaching assistant, and the students in Book Clubs A and B were still in Art, Spanish, or Physical Education.

All three book club sessions began with an introduction of the chapter of the book and concluded with a conversation. As in Stahl's (2008) study, it is important to make the introduction of each book similar in style. The introduction to the chapter included naming the

title and author of the book, a brief description of the subject matter, and previewing new vocabulary. The book used for the three initial days was Marshall's (1983) *Fox at School*. In each session the students read a chapter. The three chapters in the book are: (a) Fox on Stage, (b) Fox Escapes, and (c) Fox in Charge. The book was recommended by the teacher because it is a grade-level book, and it is an ideal book to use when introducing connections. The main character, Fox, encounters situations familiar to the subjects (i.e., being on stage in a school play and fire drills). For the final book club session (and the book club in between during which there was an informal observation) the students read Cameron's (1981) *The Stories Julian Tells*. This book was also selected by the teacher and is at grade level, but more challenging than the *Fox at School*. It has more complex vocabulary and is written in the first person. The teacher felt the students would be able to relate to the main character well.

The students took turns reading a page aloud (round-robin reading). This offered each student the same reading experience regardless of reading level. As the story was read, the teacher stopped for any pressing questions and comments and the prompts (during the second, third, and fourth book club sessions).

During the first book club session all four book clubs (A, B, C, and D) were observed (see Figure 2) with no treatment of connection prompts. It included round-robin reading and a free-form conversation. The teacher attempted to engage the students with reading strategies they had already used in large-group reading instruction (i.e., prediction, summarization, questioning the author) during the free-form conversation. Following the first book club session, there was a teacher interview to gauge initial teacher reactions. This was an open-ended format interview and began asking for initial reactions. The questions used were: (a) "How did you think the book club went?" (b) "Did you feel the students understood the literal meaning of the text?" (c) "Did

you notice the children making connections? and (d) Is there anything you were discouraged by during the conversation?”

After the first book club session and interview the researcher observed three more book club sessions and conducted three more interviews (see Figure 2). The second, third, and fourth book club sessions included the treatment. For the second, third, and fourth book club sessions the teacher described the connection prompts prior to reading. At one point during the reading, the teacher paused to introduce the first connection prompt. After reading the story as a group (round-robin style like the first book club session), the teacher used the second and third connection prompts to initiate a discussion. The first three book club sessions took place on a Tuesday, Wednesday, and Friday of the same week. There were five weeks in between the third and fourth book club to allow the teacher and students the opportunity to get used to the routine of the book clubs and the connection prompts. The teacher went through the entire process with each of the four book club groups four times for a total of 16 book club observations that were recorded (once as a free-form discussion and twice with prompts). She also implemented book club sessions once a week (using the prompts) for the weeks in between the initial book clubs and the final book club, during which there was one informal visit and field notes were recorded.

There were teacher interviews after the second, third, and fourth book club sessions. This time the interview was used to gauge teacher perceptions of the conversation that followed the treatment. The second, third, and fourth interviews were also open-ended, but focused on the use of the prompts (teacher comfort level using the prompts and student use of the prompts). The questions for the second, third, and fourth interviews were: (a) “How do you think the book club went?” (b) “Do you feel the connection prompts encouraged the amount of conversation?” (c) “Do you feel the quality of conversation was different with the use of connection prompts?” (d)

“Do you feel student understanding was different after using the connection prompts?” (e) “Do you think the connection prompts helped the students make connections to the text?” and (f) “Are there any changes you would make?”

### **Data Analysis**

After the book clubs met, the book club conversations and teacher interviews were transcribed. The transcriptions were read for preliminary expected categories or patterns including connections, predictions, uptake, and enthusiasm. Using these categories the researcher then coded the conversations more specifically. The data were categorized through multiple reads of the data.

### **Initial Coding**

The researcher coded the transcriptions of all the book club data looking for the expected categories described in Chapter 3: (a) connections, (b) predictions, (c) questions, and (d) uptake. The patterns in the data supported the four initial categories, but there were unexpected patterns that yielded four new categories: (e) inference, (f) constructing meaning, (g) enthusiasm, and (h) off-task comments. The initial four categories were processing categories. There was a new processing category, inference that expanded on connecting, predicting, and questioning. Further, a product category emerged, constructing meaning. The final two categories that emerged, enthusiasm and off-task comments, were affect categories. Each of the new categories are described below.

The new category, inference, refers to a student expressing a thought that extends the understanding of the text. It includes reflecting on a piece of the text, thinking about it, and forming a new or expanded thought about the text. For example, “Maybe he’s afraid of heights,” refers to the character in the book that is afraid to go down a fire escape slide. The student

understands the literal information that the character is afraid to go down the slide and extends her thinking process to associate a fear of heights to the nervous reaction of going down the slide. Inference is similar to a prediction in that the student takes knowledge from and about the book and applies it to an independent thought about the book. It is different from a prediction because it illustrates more than an educated guess about what will happen and is a statement that attempts to explain why or how. An inference illustrates a student's ability to formulate an idea about the text and not just to identify a pattern.

The new category, constructing meaning, refers to students working with each other's ideas, and it involves inference along with social interaction. An example of constructing meaning is taken from a conversation about *The Stories Julian Tells*. In this excerpt the students are talking about a comment the father of the main character, Julian, makes about how a fig tree "will grow as fast as you grow" (p. 38-39). A student responded, "Um, well, I don't think the fig tree will grow as fast as him..." This comment alone would be considered inference. However, another student responded, "That's like an expression." The first student then said, "Yeah, it's not gonna happen really, cause fig trees take a long time to grow figs..." The students in this example are working together to understand that the expression in the book is not to be taken literally. Constructing meaning is similar to inference in that students are processing ideas about the book and are able to express new thoughts, but constructing meaning includes a social interaction. The social interaction, in this situation, comes from discussion during book clubs. It would include uptake from another student or the teacher. In other words, the student would not necessarily utter the response had it not been stimulated by another student or teacher.

The new category, enthusiasm, refers to student enjoyment of and spirited engagement in book club. Coding for responses that indicate enthusiasm is important as both Langer and

Rosenblatt suggest that a deeper understanding of the literature would enable a student to become more fully engaged and to enjoy reading more. An example of enthusiasm would be “Can we read the next one?” (Book Club B, 1-26-10) in which the student demonstrates she is eager to continue.

The new category, off-task comments, refers to student utterances that indicate the student is not following along, is not engaged in the reading, or is distracted. An example of an off-task comment would be when a book club was getting started on reading and the teacher was talking about staying together when a student said, “... I still remember the last word from book two of *Harry Potter*. It’s ‘world’” (Book Club A, 1-27-10). The comment was not obviously related to anything that had been said in the conversation. The student did not continue, so there is no evidence the comment was related to the conversation.

Responses could be coded for two different categories. For example a student made a comment in response to another (uptake) which was a connection to an experience (connection), “When I was in... a play where Jada was in... you just chose what you wanna be” (Book Club C, 1-26-10). This statement was coded as both uptake and connection. No comments could be coded for both inference and constructing meaning because constructing meaning included an elaboration of inference.

### **Interrater Reliability**

The researcher worked with a graduate student who served as a second coder in a two and a half hour session. The researcher trained the graduate student on all the categories for 30 minutes. Then the researcher modeled two examples of coded book club sessions, which took thirty more minutes. The researcher responded to the graduate student’s questions and then the graduate student practiced coding responses for thirty minutes. The researcher and graduate

student talked about the coding and compared it to a coding the researcher had already done. Both researcher and graduate student proceeded to code a third book club session separately. The coding and conversation that followed (described below) took one hour.

There were a total of 44 responses coded: 12 connections, four predictions, four questions, ten uptakes, four inferences, seven constructing meanings, two enthusiasms, and one off-task. The response totals and agreement are in Table 3.

Table 3  
Coding Agreement for Book Club B on 1-27-10

	Categories	Total	Agreement
Original Categories	Connections	12	10 (83%)
	Predictions	4	4 (100%)
	Questions	4	4 (100%)
	Uptake	10	10 (100%)
New Categories	Inference	4	4 (100%)
	Constructing Meaning	7	6 (86%)
	Enthusiasm	2	1 (50%)
	Off-Task	1	1 (100%)

Of the 44 total coded responses, the researcher and a fellow graduate student had 40 coded similarly and 4 differently (91% agreement). The graduate student coded one response as constructing meaning and connections where the researcher coded it simply as a connection. A student responded to the text, and another student by saying, "...I used to be really scared in, of fire drills, the alarm made me scared." This is considered a connection because the student was remembering a personal experience similar to that of the character in the book. The student was not constructing meaning with the first student together because he was simply responding with a different experience (uptake as opposed to constructing meaning). The researcher and graduate



student discussed the difference and both decided in fact this is an example of a connection and not constructing meaning.

Another student response was coded by the researcher as a connection, while the graduate student coded it as enthusiasm. The comment, “Maybe Miss Moon is you!” was uttered by a student when the teacher in the story went down a fire escape slide even though she was nervous about it. The researcher initially coded it as a connection because the student was relating the story to her teacher. The graduate student coded it as enthusiasm because the student was so engaged that she exclaimed the comment and was able to get excited about the story. After a discussion, both the researcher and graduate student agreed the comment should be coded as both a connection and enthusiasm. For all other categories, the researcher and graduate student coded identically.

## CHAPTER IV RESULTS

This study examined the use of connection prompts in helping to initiate and sustain conversation about literature in a second-grade classroom. The researcher observed reading instruction twice prior to the introduction of the prompts and recorded field notes. The students participated in books clubs of five students each (referred to as Book Club A, Book Club B, Book Club C, and Book Club D). The books clubs all took place on the same days. Audio and visual data were recorded during book clubs for the first, second, and third book clubs. Field notes were taken during an observation of book clubs two weeks after the prompts were introduced, and audio and visual data were collected during the fourth book club, six weeks after the prompts were introduced. The researcher also interviewed the teacher after each book club session and took field notes on site visits other than intervention days (two site visits before the intervention and one after). After the data were collected and transcribed, the researcher developed codes and coded the data by category as described in this chapter. All quotes from the data are cited by book club (A, B, C, or D) and date of the book club, interview and date of the interview, or by field notes and date of the field notes. Transcripts of the book clubs, interviews, and field notes are included as Appendix A, B, and C respectively.

### **Characterizing the Reading Instruction Prior to the Intervention**

Before introducing book clubs, the teacher led reading in large groups, broke students into pairs, or had them read independently with specific strategies. The researcher was in the classroom to observe a reading class which started as a group and then broke off into independent reading. The teacher worked with half of the class (10 students), reminded students of reading strategies they had learned earlier in the year, and asked the students to try to use

those. For example, the students were familiar with asking questions, writing them on post-it notes and putting them in the book where they had a question. She asked for questions and modeled writing them on post-it notes for the students. The talk in the classroom was teacher-dominant, but the students felt comfortable raising their hands to ask or respond to questions. When there was student-teacher interaction, it was almost always in the form of teacher initiation-student response-teacher evaluation (IRE format).

During a different site visit the teacher split the half-group in two and worked with groups of five students for reading instruction in small groups to prepare for the book club experience. These groups of five students each then became the groups referred to as Book Clubs A, B, C, and D in the book club sessions. Teacher instruction during small group reading instruction was unstructured but involved support with vocabulary words, reading fluency, and connecting to the text.

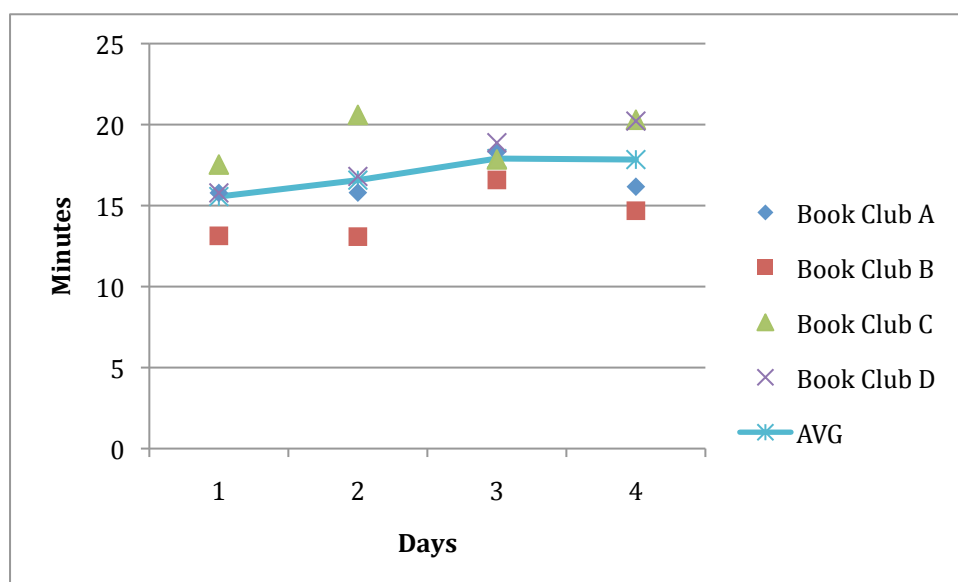
The teacher introduced the book (*Fox All Week*). The students in each group went around the circle taking turns reading. The teacher checked for connections. The students offered some reactions; they finished the chapter and then moved on to the next chapter. The teacher again asked for connections to the text. There were no formal or consistent stopping points or check-in points for the book clubs.

The students in all the small groups participated in short conversations at one or two points in each chapter. They were able to make it through two (and sometimes three) chapters because conversations were kept short. The focus for the students appeared to be on fluent reading, not on meaning.

## Characterizing the Book Clubs

### Time Spent in Book Clubs

The book clubs took place during the morning reading period over the course of four different days (January 26, 27, 29, and March 9, 2010). Figure 3 outlines the time averages. The book clubs on the first day lasted an average of 15.56 minutes. The book clubs on the second day lasted an average of 16.57 minutes. The book clubs on the third day lasted an average of 17.90 minutes, and the book clubs on the fourth and final day lasted an average of 17.84 minutes.



*Figure 3.* Average time of book club sessions in minutes.

**Book clubs.** Teacher instruction during the first book clubs (in which students were recorded and no intervention was used) was similar to that of the typical classroom reading instruction. It was unstructured, but the teacher did use some spontaneous prompts to get students talking about the book. She asked for connections and reinforced a student when he made a prediction.

Book Clubs following the first (in which the intervention took place) were more structured. Students were in the same original groups of five, and they were generally more

engaged in the reading and more on-task. There were fewer distractions, and the teacher was more able to bring the students back to the text when they did get off-task.

**Teacher Role.** The teacher introduced the books and used the prompts to help stimulate conversation. She aided students in general reading with corrections. During the discussion portions, she began to model responses to the prompts (predictions, connections, and questions). She allowed for students to respond to the prompts and her responses. She encouraged conversation through her use of the connection prompts and her own talk (follow-up questions and responses). In this excerpt the teacher is encouraging the students to make connections. She uses an example of her own: “You know what I always feel in a fire drill? Even if I know they’re coming? Startled. That’s my connection to the fire drill” (Book Club A, 1-27-10). The students then responded, “I feel some things,” and “I’m scared.” The teacher tries to encourage more connections, “Now, have any of you ever gone down a slide on a piece of cardboard, or on anything?” And to this the students can relate. Three of them reply, “yes” at the same time and they continue to have a conversation about a concrete slide at a local park.

The teacher continued to model responses to the prompts throughout the book club sessions. The modeling became more complex over time. During the third book club session she built on a student response which was relatively simple and illustrated a text-to-text connection which helped the students to see how the characters had developed through the Fox series. After using the basic prompts, at the end of the discussion one day, the teacher asked, “Does anyone else want to add anything more to the discussion of this chapter in the Fox books? Did you make any connections to the other stories in this book?” (Book Club B, 1-29-10). She was attempting to stick with the prompts, but also added her own encouragement to it. A student responded, “This book has Dexter in it whose really funny... Junior is in all of them too.” The teacher

expanded on this with, “In the story about when Fox is in the play, Fox doesn’t mind Miss Moon, does he? He doesn’t practice his lines, but who does mind Miss Moon?” The students very quickly answered her, “Dexter.” They began to understand her point: the character, Dexter behaves in two very different ways in two different chapters. One student said, “He gets in trouble.”

**Student participation.** Students were actively participating in general reading instruction and during book clubs. They appeared to enjoy the reading material and to want to talk about the books. During the first three observations (two reading instructions and the first book club) the discussions were almost entirely lecture or of the IRE format. Students raised hands, responded to teacher questions or comments, and the teacher moved on with reading. During the intervention, the students began to speak impulsively without raising hands, listened to other comments, and started to take up other student comments, responding to them and expanding on them.

**Books.** The book used for the first general instruction observed was *The Children of China: An Artist’s Journey*, by Song Nan Zhang. During the second observation, the teacher introduced *Fox All Week*, by Edward Marshall. She wanted to introduce *Fox All Week* as it is one in a series to which some of her students had already been exposed. She also planned to use another book from the series for the intervention. The choice was based on the teacher’s belief that the students would be able to connect easily to situations in which the character, Fox, finds himself (such as being in a school play, not liking his lunch food, or not doing what he has been asked to do by the teacher). *Fox on Stage*, by Edward Marshall was used for the first book club and the intervention (one chapter for each day). The teacher moved the children to a more difficult text, *The Stories Julian Tells*, by Ann Cameron for the final book club that was observed

(one month after the intervention). The teacher felt *The Stories Julian Tells* had a character to whom the students would be able to relate and that it was a natural progression of challenge for their reading ability.

### **Findings**

The previous section describes the nature of the instruction and book club sessions. Data were gathered and patterns emerged in the coding scheme that led to a theory of change. There were expected codes based on the theoretical framework (the reading continuum and stances). It was theorized that having students connect, predict, and question would encourage more critical thinking which would in turn lead to improved reading comprehension. The connections, predictions, and questions combined with the socialized structure of the book clubs led to inferences and then constructing meaning. It also led to enthusiasm, which indicates aesthetic reading. This section will explore the patterns in light of the research questions.

There were three data sources: (a) student responses during book clubs session, (b) teacher interviews, and (c) field notes. The researcher proposed to examine the frequency of student connections, predictions, questions, and uptake. All of these categories were present in the coding and counted. Four more categories emerged during the coding process. It was originally thought that uptake would define the social element of the conversation. While it does help to describe the social interaction during the conversations, two other variables were defined to help to describe the thought process occurring during the interaction: (a) inference (which is an independent thought process) and (b) constructing meaning (which involves a social interaction helping to form thought). Enthusiasm and off-task comments were the two final categories.

The book club sessions were coded by category and the number of utterances in each category was tallied. Table 4 reports the total occurrences of each category across four book club sessions. Each category increased from the first book club to the fourth, except for off-task comments, which decreased from 13 in the first book club to two in the final book club.

Table 4  
Total Occurrences by Category and Book Club Session

Category		Session			
		1	2	3	4
Original Categories	Connections	36	57	33	76
	Predictions	5	27	45	32
	Questions	2	14	22	25
	Uptake	17	76	72	79
New Categories	Inference	2	25	25	14
	Constructing Meaning	29	49	58	88
	Enthusiasm	4	15	18	17
	Off-Task	13	3	2	2

There were four teacher interviews, one after each book club session. The researcher observed the class three times (once before the first book club session, during the first book club session, and once after the three-day intervention and before the final data collection). The field notes were summarized.

The first research question asked what is the nature of conversation during book clubs after the connection prompts are introduced as measured by student responses? Specifically, what are the social discourse patterns and what is the content of the discourse? In the first book club the conversation was teacher-fronted and followed a typical IRE pattern. As the book clubs progressed with use of the connection prompts, the conversations became more authentic. Figure 4 illustrates the connections between the categories of talk. The category that best describes the discourse is uptake. It increased dramatically as the book clubs progressed. There are five



categories that make up the content utterances: (a) connection, (b) prediction, (c) question, (d) inference, and (e) constructing meaning. Uptake influences further connections, predictions, and questions, as indicated on the model by the double-sided arrows. Uptake increases with the increase in connections, predictions, and questions. The content of the discourse can be described by the connections, predictions, and questions. These lead to inferences and ultimately to constructing meaning (through the use of uptake), as indicated by the flow of arrows within the content utterances. Enthusiasm and off-task are affect categories. They do not directly indicate discourse or content, but they certainly affect it, as indicated by the dashed arrows.

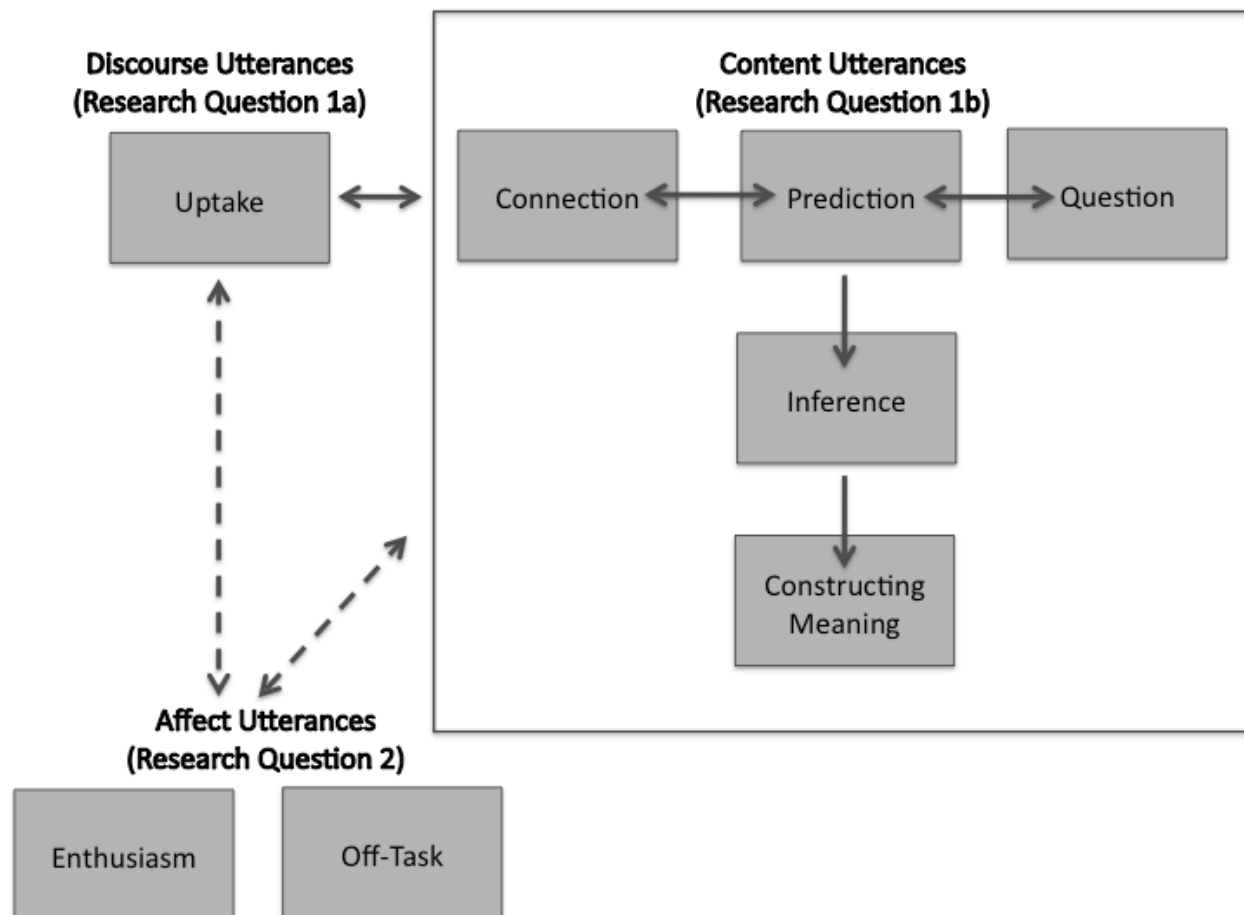


Figure 4. Interconnectedness of categories.

Following is a description of the findings with regard to each of the eight categories. The patterns for each category are discussed, as well as the interconnectedness of the categories. The

categories are presented in order of complexity, starting with the most simple (Off Task) and building to the most complex (Constructing Meaning).

### **Off-Task**

Off-task comments decreased from the first book club session (13 utterances) to the second (three utterances) and remained low (two utterances) for the final two book club sessions. The nature of the off-task comments remained similar throughout the book club sessions. During the first day of book clubs the comments ranged from, “I just have to say Mercy Watson!” (Book Club A, 1-26-10) to “I love your [the teacher’s] earrings” (Book Club C, 1-26-10). In the final book club session an off-task comment was, “I’m so tired” (Book Club C, 3-9-10).

In the first teacher interview the teacher indicated she had trouble keeping the students on task and keeping their comments related to the conversation. “It’s always a challenge to get them, to know when to like stop and talk and to know when to just keep on reading the story, and then of course to keep everyone dialed in on the story. And then of course to have, like, a civilized conversation. Where everyone’s not hollering out...” (Interview, 1-26-10). During the second interview she noted that she thought the prompts helped promote understanding and keep the conversation flowing and on topic. “I absolutely think the understanding is increased... with the prompts... you’re stopping, you’re thinking, and they are sort of [breath], you know I think every student’s inclination is just to finish it... And then if you’re sort of forced, to stop and think, they’re, that’s where that kernel of joy starts to turn into the, like, pearl. You know?” (Interview, 1-27-10)

The field notes suggest that students had more difficulty staying on task during the independent reading period, specifically transitioning to the reading. “[student] continues to have trouble and walks up to teacher,... [student] struggles to get on task, stands while reading...

Three students still not seated and reading... [student] gets distracted” (Field Notes, 1-5-10). The teacher had to work with several students to get them to choose a book and sit down to read. There were two instances in which the students never sat down to read; they spent the time browsing the books and talking until the period came to an end.

The decrease of off-task comments suggests that the book club environment developed into a classroom environment with more focused attention. This is supported by the teacher interviews and field notes, which suggest that students remained on-task more when they were guided by an activity and/or the teacher.

### **Enthusiasm**

Enthusiasm went from four in the first book club session, to 15 in the second, then 18, and a final 17. The data suggest that with the introduction of the connection prompts students were more engaged readers as enthusiastic comments rose dramatically from the first book club to the second and remained high throughout the fourth. Enthusiasm was a simple, “Can I go first?” (Book Club A, 1-26-10) in the beginning. In a later instance students began chanting, “Book club rocks! Book club rocks...” (Book Club C, 1-29-10). In the final book club session the enthusiastic remarks showed a true engagement as the students were responding to the text with, “Ew, Oh God!” (Book Club A, 3-9-10).

In the third and fourth interview the teacher noted the children were extremely engaged in the reading. In the third interview she noted they were beginning to automatically predict and connect, and in the fourth interview she noted that if she forgot a prompt the students would remind her. Also during the fourth interview, the teacher commented on how enthusiastic the students were and how she felt they could have literally continued the entire day with book club.

The field notes taken after the intervention show the students were focused during book club and eager to read. They enjoyed the story and were able to relate to it. They understood the prompts, responded to them, and their responses were, for the most part, on-task.

### **Connections**

Connections increased from 36 in the first book club session to 57 in the second, dropped to 33 in the third, and then increased to 76 in the fourth. It is not surprising that they increased as the intervention had the teacher prompting the students to make connections. There was a significant drop in connections for the third day as only one connection was made during Book Club C that day. A close examination of the data reveals that the teacher neglected to use the prompt, “Does this book remind you of anything?” which asks students to make connections. She did ask if the students had connections between the text and other texts, but she did not use the wording of the prompt specifically, which they were used to, and which asks students to make all types of connections, not just text-to-text.

The connections made in the first book club were simplistic statements for the most part. In the first book club they read a book in which the main character is nervous and has trouble sleeping. One of the students remarked, “I couldn’t sleep on Christmas Eve” (Book Club B, 1-26-10). The connections made in the later book clubs were more complex, the students had more to say. On the second day of book clubs, when the story was about fire drills, one of the students said, in response to the character being nervous to go down a fire-escape slide, “I’m a little scared because sometimes I think actually it might be real.... I’m scared...” (book Club A, 1-27-10). In another book club that same day another student connected to the scared feeling, “Do you know what [Teacher]? I used to be really scared in, of fire drills. The alarm made me scared... When I was in preschool the alarm of the fire drill made me scared... It was so loud,

like the first time I heard it I was like, I had no idea what it was” (Book Club B, 1-27-10). An example from the last day of book club is a connection a student has to the fig tree in the story. The boy in the story is waiting and watching for his fig tree to grow. She says, “There was this tree, and I always thought it was gonna be growing, but I never knew that it stopped growing already, and so I always thought, ‘Oh, well if it’s gonna grow I should stay out here.’ And I always wanted to camp out in my backyard.” (Book Club C, 3-9-10).

In the first teacher interview the teacher commented that the students appeared to be making more connections than predictions and that the connections, while interesting, were not always related to the conversation or helping the students to better understand or think critically about the text. In the second interview the teacher felt the use of the prompts helped to structure the conversation better. She noted that the students were eager to “just finish it” and the prompts help them to stop and process the text. By the third and fourth interview she noted the students were comfortable making connections and were even building off each other (which is described below in the sections on uptake and constructing meaning). Before the intervention the researcher observed the teacher asking for connections. She reviewed reading strategies (including questioning to the text) before the read-aloud on the day of the first observation, and she asked directly for connections on the second day of the observations. Students were able to make connections, but they were in IRE format. “[Teacher] introduce (review) strategy (connections)... Student stops with a comment... [Teacher acknowledges and] reads from book” (Field Notes, 1-5-10). The field notes suggest the students were making impromptu connections after the intervention, “Impromptu connection ([student] said, “I do that when I make cakes...” Teacher compares to evening up brownies when you cut them.... Students chime in with connections” (Field Notes, 2-9-10).

## Predictions

Predictions went from five in the first book club session, to 27 in the second, 45 in the third, and 32 in the fourth. As with connections, the teacher was prompting predictions, so the increase was anticipated. What was unexpected was the drop in number of predictions during the fourth book club session. However, when looking at the increases of utterances in other categories, it makes sense that given the same general amount of time, the amount of talk would remain the same, and the difference would be in the type of talk. In other words, one could not expect to see an increase in every category or the book club would simply take more time.

In the first book club session the students were able to make predictions and the predictions were simple and based for the most part on predictions about actions (what might happen). One of the students in the first book club session spontaneously guesses, “I bet she messes up” (Book Club A, 1-26-10). The guess is likely based on the fact that the character, Fox, tends to make mistakes. The student offered no specific details about the prediction. In the later book club sessions some of the predictions take into account more information. For example, on the third day of book club, during a reading of *Fox in Charge*, one student stopped and used information from what had already been read and from the title in making a prediction about what would happen next. “...from the title, it seems like if Miss Moon was out he would be substitute and then he had to teach a class...” (Book Club C, 1-29-10). The student processed the story and made a guess using that information and referring back to the title of the chapter.

While the prompts provided structure, the teacher struggled implementing them and sticking to the “script.” As a result of her reflection during the second interview she decided to alter the prompts slightly. She felt that the first prompt (“If you were writing this book, what would happen next?”) gave the students too much freedom and that they made unrealistic

predictions. She did appreciate the concept of allowing the students to think about authoring. As a compromise she altered the first prompt to be: “If you were writing this, what would happen next? What do you think will happen next?” The distinction is that in her version, the teacher is asking for both a personal and a more realistic prediction. What would happen if the student were writing the text and what does the student truly believe will happen as the text is written. The teacher felt the first prompt worked well and elicited many connections. The results confirm that there was an increase in connections. In the third interview the teacher mentioned that she thought the children understood and practiced predicting. Furthermore, she felt the predicting prompt helped to stimulate more conversation.

The field notes show the teacher asking students to make predictions during reading instruction prior to the introduction of the connection prompts. The students were not responsive, and the teacher moved on to ask for connections. The field notes taken two weeks after the introduction of the connection prompts show the students as much more eager to form predictions than they were before.

### **Uptake**

Uptake increased from 17 student uptake responses in the first book club session, to 76 in the second, 72 in the third, and 79 in the fourth. Student uptake showed a dramatic increase, with a small dip in the third book club session. The 17 student uptake responses in the first book club session suggest that students were able to respond to one another. The increase in uptake that followed suggests that they interacted even more when the prompts were used. An examination of the transcripts also shows that as the students were exposed to more book clubs, students returned to previous student utterances throughout a book club conversation which suggests that they were listening attentively and were able to connect the conversation back to earlier ideas.

Further, they connected back to earlier book club sessions, suggesting a change in the nature of the category from simple responses to critical thinking responses.

In addition to general uptake, when a student refers back to earlier comments, another text, or prior conversations, the student is demonstrating a connection to the literature beyond a surface-level understanding and building on prior knowledge. In an example of uptake that refers back to an earlier part of a book club, one student said, “I think the fig tree’s not gonna grow and Huey, and Julian’s gonna be growing and his dad’s gonna be like, ‘Do you know what’s going wrong with this fig tree? It hasn’t been growing,’” (Book Club D, 3-9-10). The conversation continued from there. Fifteen turns later, a second student said, “... If the dad says that, what [the first student] said... I think he will, maybe Julian will be like, ‘Uh, uh,’” (Book Club D, 2-9-10). In this example, the student returns to an utterance of another student after the conversation has proceeded.

In the final teacher interview the teacher was very enthusiastic about the amount of conversation and the students “piggy-backing” off each other (uptake). The field notes suggest that the conversations before the intervention were almost completely IRE format. As early as the second interview the teacher noted the students were building off each other’s comments. She said, “...[the students] make connections off of each other’s connections. And, that’s to me, that’s what it’s all about... if you’re in a reading group, it’s all about the conne, like one thing leads into another and... that’s how you have a deeper understanding” (Interview, 1-27-10). As the book clubs progressed, the students began to talk to one another more and pick up off each other’s comments more.



## Questions

Questions increased from two student questions in the first book club session without prompts, to 14 with the prompts in the second book club session, 22 in the third, and 25 in the final. The questions in the first book club session demonstrated general curiosity (“I wonder what’s gonna happen?” (Book Club A, 1-26-10)) but appeared to demonstrate deeper thought as the book clubs progressed. A question taken from the third book club session, “I wonder why the class lied to Miss Moon?” (Book Club B, 1-29-10) illustrates a student’s confusion over a character’s motive.

In the third teacher interview, the teacher indicated that she was not comfortable with the wording of the third prompt. She felt that the students better understood what a question is, but liked the vocabulary word “wonder” because she felt it opened the idea up to more than factual questioning. She changed the third prompt from, “Does this book make you wonder about anything?” to, “Does this book make you wonder about anything? Do you have any questions?” This reformulation of the prompt, she felt, would help the students know she was asking for a question while retaining the sense of wondering. The researcher believed the change to be reasonable in that the teacher, who was demonstrating engagement in the research, was clearly more comfortable and the essence of the prompt was unchanged.

In the fourth teacher interview the teacher noted that the students struggled to form questions. She stressed that she felt the biggest challenge for the students was to formulate a question, although she did note that the students appeared to ask more questions when reading nonfiction. The nature of the questions did not change much throughout the book club sessions. The students wondered about why things happened, who was involved, and needed clarification at times. Throughout the interview the teacher verbally brainstormed ideas to help the students

form questions and eventually settled on more modeling aloud. According to the field notes, during the observation days, students did not utter any questions about the text or conversation other than procedural questions. They were able to respond to the prompt asking for questions during the third observation day.

### **Inference**

Inference increased from two responses in the first book club session to 25 in the next two book club sessions, and to 14 in the final book club session. The two inference responses in the first book club session suggests the students were not expressing independent thoughts about the reading much in the first book club. They were responsive (as indicated by the amount of talk in the transcripts), but not illustrating an ability to critically think about the text. The increase to 25 in the following two book sessions suggests the students were able to expand their thinking about the text and to think independently about it. The increase in constructing meaning could be one of the reasons the inference decreased in the final book club session. As students began to construct meaning, they used their inferences to build meaning together, thereby decreasing the number of simple inferences.

In the first teacher interview the teacher was concerned that while the students could make connections to the text they had trouble using the connections to understand the meaning. In the second interview the teacher noted that with reading the students' instinct was usually "just to finish it," and that the prompts helped her to get the students to stop and think. This stopping and thinking could have contributed to their ability to form independent thoughts about the book. In the third interview the teacher commented that she felt the students were able to see progression since they were finishing the final chapter in the book they had read together. She felt that the prompts helped the students make connections back to the other stories. Some of

these connections were instances of inference. For example, one student responded to the story in which Fox's friend, Dexter blames Fox for holding up the line during the fire drill (Fox is scared to go down the fire chute). In her response she relates the friend's action to a previous story in which Fox's friend, Dexter also blamed Fox for the class misbehaving when Fox was left in charge of the class during the teacher's absence. The student said, "...and then here, in the other [chapter], he blamed Fox again, but I can, don't really get it cause he's, he's really good friends with him..." The student is picking up on something that has happened before, and forming an independent thought about it.

### **Constructing Meaning**

Constructing meaning went from 29 utterances to 49, to 58 to a final 88. The increase in constructing meaning responses suggests that the students were better able or more comfortable constructing meaning together when using the prompts and exposed to the book club settings regularly over a period of time.

During the third day of book club, the students read *Fox in Charge* in the *Fox At School* book. In it, Fox is left in charge of the students in his class when his teacher leaves the room. The other students misbehave, and the reader is led to believe for a moment that the principal will punish Fox, not the students who were causing the trouble. Mid-reading, a student made an inference, "Wait, but it's not Fox's fault" (Book Club A, 1-29-10). Another student constructed meaning, "Yeah, because Miss Moon left the room with him all alone in there" (Book Club A, 1-29-10). The conversation continued and a third student constructed more meaning, "...It was the class's fault; they wanted to have some, some fun. But, Fox said, 'Open your readers'" (Book Club A, 1-29-10). The student who started the conversation with the original inference added,

“So it was Fox who was good, and the kids who were bad” (Book Club A, 1-29-10). The conversation developed as the students constructed meaning with each other.

In the first two interviews the teacher noted the students were still practicing the basics of the prompts, such as making connections and predictions. There was no comment regarding constructing meaning. In the third interview the teacher noted that the students were getting “into the swing of what it is to discuss a book together” (Interview, 1-29-10). By the fourth interview the teacher commented that the students were comfortable in the book clubs and able to interact meaningfully. She noted they were able to respect one another, listen, and pay attention. She felt the connections and uptake had both increased in a positive way. Respect, listening, paying attention, and connecting are all necessary to construct meaning together.

The field notes indicate the students, before the intervention were happy to participate verbally, but they were almost always prompted by the teacher and did not respond to each other’s comments much at all (typical of IRE format). The observations made between the intervention and the final book club session note that the students participated orally in response to both the teacher and other students. Furthermore, they were speculating together which is evidence that suggests they were constructing meaning. In one note, students were making “connections to trying something and having more and more and more, students are relating to other student connections...” (Field Notes, 2-9-10), and in another note, the teacher asked, “Does this make you wonder about anything?”, student wonders aloud and others expand on the wondering” (Field Notes, 2-9-10).

### **Pedagogical Reflections**

The second research questions asks what are the experiences of the teacher with regard to the use of connection prompts during book clubs as measured through teacher interviews and

observational field notes? The teacher interviews allowed for the teacher to reflect on the book clubs generally and on the use of the prompts. She noticed after the first book club that the students were not able to articulate reading comprehension strategies. When she asked them to review strategies, they spoke entirely about decoding strategies. Reflecting on this, the teacher realized she had posted decoding strategies on the wall, and she decided to post comprehension strategies as well.

Reflecting on the book club and connecting the experience to other students in the classroom with the students, the teacher felt students did not always learn from questioning text, but were often answering her questions and moving on. She wanted to find a way to use their responses to further the instruction. She said, "... Some kids have no problem decoding, but they're reading really superficially... and so... have to like, really kind of push for those questions and those strategies to like, get at the deeper meaning" (Interview, 1-26-10).

The teacher found the prompts helped her structure conversations, keep students on task, help them think more deeply about the literature, and learn to listen, process, and respond to student thoughts. The biggest challenge she had was with some of the initial wording of the prompts. The teacher was comfortable with the prompts because they expanded on reading strategies she was already implementing in the classroom. In using them she found ways to alter them slightly to elicit responses she felt were more appropriate and allowed for better connecting, predicting, and questioning.

In addition to helping structure the class and allow for more critical thinking while reading, the prompts, according to the teacher, were useful for students as individuals. She noted students sometimes reminded her to use the prompts, suggesting they had internalized them and were using them to think about the text.

## Discussion

The use of connection prompts during book clubs resulted in an increase over time in students demonstrating the ability to construct meaning. The meaning construction was a combination of students making connections and predictions, questioning the text and other students, using the connections to think about the text, and working together to build a deeper understanding of the text. Further, the connection prompts helped the teacher and students structure the conversation, keeping student focus on-task.

As the number of predictions and inferences decreased, the number of constructing meaning responses increased. One reason could be that the type of response students used progressed from what might have been a simple prediction or inference to a true conversational thought that expanded the idea of another student, constructing meaning. It follows from the interviews with the teacher that the students were better able to keep their comments focused on the text and conversation when she used the connection prompts to help structure the conversation.

With regard to questioning, the teacher noted that it is hard for students to generate questions, specifically with fiction text. While the number of questions increased from one book club session to the next, there were certainly fewer instances of questions than connections, predictions, and constructing meaning (for all the book club sessions). This finding suggests that while the connection prompts might have helped the students form questions, it was still more likely for students to utter other types of responses than questions.

The combination of the increased enthusiasm and the reduction in off-task comments suggests that the book clubs provided enough structure to engage students and to keep them on

task. This is also supported by the teacher's beliefs that the prompts helped to structure the conversation and keep student comments related to the text and conversation.

In looking at the data from the initial field notes and the first book club, student discourse was limited in general, and also focused on fluency of reading and literal understanding of the text. As the teacher continued to use book clubs, and implemented the connection prompts, students began to expand on their own ideas and each other's ideas.

The teacher interviews highlighted two needs for classroom instruction and the benefits and challenges of the prompts. The two needs were to post comprehension strategies on the wall (in addition to the already posted decoding strategies) and to help students learn to form questions. The teacher found the prompts helped her structure conversations, keep students on task, help them think more deeply about the literature, and learn to listen, process, and respond to student thoughts. In the final teacher interview the teacher indicated interest and determination to continue to use the prompts to introduce new literature, but at the same time she noted that she felt the students were implementing some of the prompts automatically. She said, "... the prompts are embedded in their way of being in the books. So if I forgot to do a prompt, let me tell you, there'd be five children reminding me." The implication is that the students internalized the prompts and were automatically using them.

## **CHAPTER V SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS**

The current study examined the use of connection prompts to facilitate conversation during book clubs in a second-grade classroom. This chapter will summarize key results, answer research questions, discuss findings in light of prior research, recommend future research, and note limitations.

This study contributes to our understanding of reading instruction in three ways. First, the teacher's use of connection prompts encouraged authentic conversations in book club settings during which students participated in building meaning together as shown through verbal responses. Second, this study suggests second-grade students can take part in instructional conversations. Third, the connection prompts appeared to be a useful and convenient tool that combines tried and true practices to support reading comprehension.

The current study investigated how students construct meaning in a social instructional setting, book clubs. The teacher had been teaching a variety of reading strategies including decoding and comprehension strategies. Of the comprehension strategies, she focused on making connections and forming questions. Prior to the intervention, the students were able to make connections, according to the teacher, but were unable to use the connections to further their learning and construct new knowledge. While they were more able to form questions with nonfiction than with fiction, she noted that forming questions was difficult for the students.

The researcher observed reading instruction twice before the teacher implemented the first book club. The first book club did not include the intervention and was considered free-form in that the teacher read with the students and allowed them to react. The teacher interrupted reading at various times to ask directly for connections or to offer reactions of her own. Just



before the next book club the teacher introduced the three connection prompts and used them during the book club sessions. She continued to use the connection prompts (after altering them slightly as was her preference) for the third book club and continued to use them during book clubs once a week. The researcher observed and recorded the first three book clubs (the first with no intervention and second and third with intervention). The researcher observed the class during book club in the third week, taking field notes, and observed and recorded book club sessions in the fifth week. The teacher continued to use the connection prompts once a week during instruction between the introduction of the prompts and the final data collection, 5 weeks later.

Student responses during book clubs were classified as connections, predictions, questions, enthusiastic comments, off-task comments, uptake, inference, and/or constructing meaning. Overall, each category increased from the first book club to the last book club, except for off-task comments, which declined. Connections dropped in number, between the second and third book club, likely due to the fact that the teacher neglected to use the second prompt (reminding prompt) during Book Club C on that day. However, the number of connections ultimately increased from the first to the second, and the second to the last book club.

The increase in connections, predictions, and questions was not surprising given that the prompts were tailored to ask for these types of responses. The development of inferences and constructing meaning indicate that with continued use of the prompts, the students were better able to understand and talk about the text. This discussion led to more meaningful reading and critical thinking.

Of note, off-task behaviors dropped from 13 (in the first book club session) to two (in the final book club session). The drop in off-task comments in addition to comments from the

teacher interviews suggests that the prompts did help the teacher structure the conversations and keep the discussion related to the text.

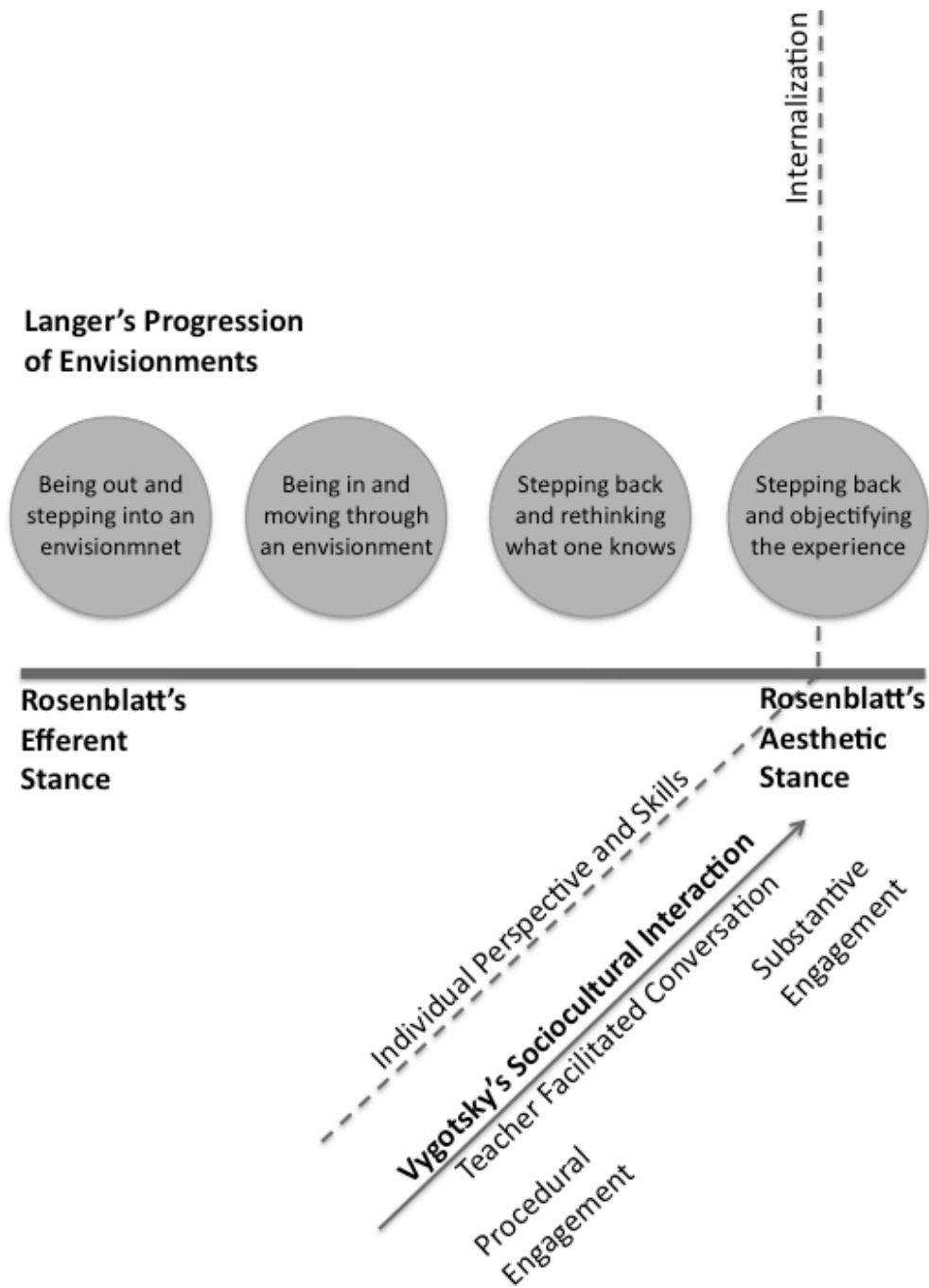
While research in classroom conversation and discourse suggests that conversation is associated with increased reading comprehension, it is rarely used (Alvermann, 1987; Nystrand & Gamoran, 1990; Almasi, 1995; Sipe, 2000; Stahl, 2008). The research suggests that the use of prompts can help to initiate and further discussion (Nystrand & Gamoran, 1990; Almasi et al., 2001; Blum et al., 2010), but no prior research investigates the use of simple question versus connection prompts. Further, most research is at the elementary and secondary levels. This study investigated the use of two different types of prompts and their effect on amount and quality of conversation in second-grade literature-discussion groups.

### **Conclusions**

The major findings of this study confirm the following assertions of prior research: (a) conversations about literature lead to substantive engagement, (b) open-ended questioning leads to meaningful conversations, and (c) primary-aged (first and second-grade) students are capable of conversations about literature. Prior research suggests that conversation leads to substantive engagement and critical thinking (Nystrand & Gamoran, 1991; Almasi, 1995). This study offers evidence to confirm conversation can lead to substantive engagement. The categories uptake, connections, and predictions are examples of substantive engagement while the categories inference and constructing meaning are examples of critical thinking.

This study was conceived using Rosenblatt's Transactional Theory of Reading, Langer's Theory of Envisionments, and Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory (Rosenblatt, 1978; Vygotsky, 1978; Langer, 1990). Rosenblatt notes the importance of the reader's experience in making sense of literature. In this study, the students demonstrated their experience through their connections

and demonstrated their aesthetic reading through connecting, predicting, and enthusiasm. Langer describes four stances, or phases, which she calls envisionments, a reader experiences as she or he experiences, understands, and reflects on literature: (a) being out and stepping in to the experience, (b) moving through the experience, (c) stepping back and rethinking the experience, and (d) stepping back and objectifying the experience. In this study, the students' actual decoding and simple responses demonstrated the first and second envisionments. With continued use of the connection prompts, the students were more able to express their reflections through an increased number of inferences (a more aesthetic reading, and demonstration of the third and fourth envisionments). Vygotsky's sociocultural theory suggests the students were able to internalize the practice of connecting, predicting, and questioning. The teacher's reflections during the interviews confirm that the students were in fact able to prompt themselves at times and that they had taken on some of the reading strategies practiced through the prompts. Figure 5 (a reproduction of Figure 1) is a visual model that depicts the reader's experience according to Rosenblatt, Langer, and Vygotsky. Figure 5 illustrates the synthesis of these three theories and the reader's progression in understanding literature.



*Figure 5.* Theoretical Framework.

Rosenblatt, Langer, and Vygotsky note the importance of the reader as an individual in her or his experience of reading. Rosenblatt (1978) focuses on what the reader brings to the text and how that affects the experience. The experience is new and different each time, and the

information and experience gained contribute to the reader's experiential reservoir. Langer (1990), like Rosenblatt, realizes the importance of the reader's perspective, and focuses on the process the reader experiences as she or he progresses through the reading experience. The third and fourth envisionment Langer describe parallel with Rosenblatt's aesthetic reading.

Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural theory applies directly to this study as it describes the construction of meaning and development of understanding through social interaction. In Figure 5, Rosenblatt's continuum (the horizontal, solid line) and Langer's envisionments (the circles) parallel one another as the student progresses through the social experience (the diagonal, dashed line representing Vygotsky's sociocultural theory). The diagonal, solid line indicates the teacher's facilitation, which also contributes to, and leads, the social experience. As the student reads and interacts with others, she or he progresses from the efferent stance and the first envisionment toward aesthetic reading and the fourth envisionment. At this point the student is able to participate meaningfully in a conversation about the text and engage substantively.

The first research question asked what was the nature of conversation during book club after the connection prompts were introduced as measured by student responses. Additionally it asked what are the social discourse patterns and what is the content of the discourse. Overall, the nature of the classroom conversation during reading instruction and the first book club could be described as IRE format. The teacher introduced the book and talking points, the students responded, the teacher evaluated the responses with comments, and the instruction or reading continued. The students were able to predict in a limited fashion (5 predictions), make connections (36 connections) to the text, and formed very few questions (2 questions). Most student responses were to the teacher and did not expand on any other student ideas (17 uptake responses).

Research suggests conversation in the classroom is supported through the use of open-ended questioning that encourages students to connect to the literature, question the literature, and make predictions (Nystrand & Gamoran, 1991; Almasi, 1995). The connection prompts used in this study were in the form of open-ended questions and guided the students to connect to the literature, question the literature, and make predictions. The conversations started with an IRE format during reading instruction and the first book club and developed into a more authentic conversation with continued use of the prompts as demonstrated through more instances of connections, predictions, uptake, inferences, and constructing meaning. It can be theorized that the students were in a more efferent reading stance, or the first envisionment, during the first book club as they were stepping into the experience. The IRE format and low number of uptake, inferences, and constructing meaning utterances indicate the students were following along and able to respond to direct questions. As the book clubs progressed with the use of the connection prompts, the students progressed through the efferent-aesthetic continuum and the envisionments toward a more substantive or aesthetic reading in which they were able to step back and objectify the experience as demonstrated through the increase of inferences and constructing meaning utterances.

One issue with using conversation in the classroom that is often noted is that conversation takes more time, effort, and skill than traditional didactic teaching (Tharp & Gallimore, 1988; Goldenberg, 1992; Almasi et al., 2001; Christoph & Nystrand, 2001; Berry & Englert, 2005; Clark & Graves, 2005). The connection prompts were a simple tool that led to conversations in the classroom within a day and deeper conversations within six weeks.

After the connection prompts were introduced the talk between the teacher and students evolved into a conversation in its truer definition, including more instances of uptake. Students

not only made more connections with the continued use of connection prompts (57, 33, and 76 respectively), predictions (27, 45, and 32 respectively), and questions (14, 22, and 25 respectively), but they also responded to each other's comments more frequently than previously (76, 72, and 79 uptake responses respectively). In addition to the instruction taking on a more conversational format and the students increasing their participation, the content of the discourse evolved. Student predictions, connections, and questions led to more meaningful thought construction about the text.

Our national standard of reading comprehension is the capacity to recognize, retain, explain, and utilize meaning from a text (Ambruster et al., 2003). In addition to the peer-review research that suggests teachers implement connecting, predicting, and questioning to stimulate conversation and build understanding, The National Reading Panel (2000) suggests that we use questioning and predicting as ways to elicit understanding. The results of this study suggest that connection prompts are consistent with the suggested practices and national standard set forth.

Nystrand and Gamoran (1990), Nystrand and Gamoran (1991), Christoph and Nystrand (2001), Almasi (1995), Maloch (2002), Nystrand et al. (2003) and Stahl (2008) suggest that conversation led through open-ended questioning supports authentic conversation. They further note that guiding the conversation by encouraging students to connect to and predict about the literature can lead to substantive engagement. Through the use of connections, predictions, questions, and uptake, the students in this study were engaged substantively as demonstrated by their use of inferences and ability to construct meaning together. In the first book club, there were only two student inferences. As the teacher implemented the prompts, inferences increased to 25. Inferences stayed at 25 for the third book club session and decreased to 14 in the fourth. At the same time, there were 29 instances of students constructing meaning together in the first

book club, 49, in the second, 58 in the third, and 88 in the fourth. As the number of inferences decreased, the number of responses constructing meaning increased by more than 50%. The decrease of inferences makes sense because constructing meaning involves the use of inferences and expanding on those ideas through uptake. The nature of the talk during book clubs moved from IRE to true conversation as the teacher implemented the prompts. The data suggest that the students were better able to respond to one another and expand ideas together.

The second research question asked what the experiences of the teacher were with regard to the use of connection prompts during book clubs as measured through teacher interviews and observational field notes. It appears that the teacher found reading instruction in general and during her first book club challenging in that she felt students too often got off-task. The field notes make multiple mentions of students having trouble focusing and getting to their reading tasks. There were 13 off-task comments in the first book club session.

While teachers can struggle with the challenge of initiating and facilitating an instructional conversation, students too can be challenged with the procedures of classroom conversations (Almasi et al., 2001; Christoph & Nystrand, 2001; Baumfield & Mroz, 2002; Maloch, 2004a; Berry & Englert, 2005; Clark & Graves, 2005; Anagnostopoulos et al., 2008). Teachers have the option of using directed instruction, such as basal readers in which they could read their instruction from a script. Barksdale-Ladd and Thomas (1993) investigated teacher's dependency on basal readers and direct instruction. They found that teachers do not feel confident that basal readers and direct instruction allow for students to think critically; yet, they use it because it is simple and takes less time than developing their own instruction. Scripted instruction, by its definition, does not allow for authentic conversation. Nystrand (1990) suggests



that guiding is good with the use of open-ended questions to allow for conversations and not simple IRE patterns in the classroom.

The connection prompts stimulated and supported instructional conversations in a relatively quick and efficient manner. It took very little time on the teacher's part to incorporate them into her instruction. This is an important finding in that teachers may choose easier methods even if they know another method might be better academically (Barksdale-Ladd & Thomas, 1993; Commeyras, 2007). The connection prompts offer teachers a relatively convenient method that will lead to meaningful reading.

After the prompts were introduced, there were only three off-task comments uttered during the second book club session, two during the third book club session, and two during the fourth book club session. According to the teacher interviews, the prompts helped her to structure the conversations and elicit meaningful responses from students. She also remarked on how the students were able to respond to one another and expand on each other's thoughts (uptake and constructing meaning), which led to more critical thinking.

This study extends the research in reading comprehension and instruction in that it addresses the lack of research at the primary-aged level. The majority of research in classroom conversations around literature investigates instruction at the third-grade or higher. The primary grades (first and second-grades) are crucial years for literacy instruction as these are the years in which reading is formally introduced. Conversation allows for students to express opinions and understanding about the literature and to build meaning together. The limited research in the area of literature-based conversation with primary-aged students suggests that students in these grades are able to engage meaningfully in book clubs and other conversations about literature (McIntyre et al., 2006; Heller, 2006). This study investigated the initiation and support of conversations at

the second-grade level, and the findings offer further evidence that primary-aged students are in fact able to participate in conversations around literature and that they can extend their thinking during these conversations.

The connection prompts combine elements of reading instruction previously shown to support reading comprehension and critical thinking. Teacher facilitation, collaborative learning, connecting to the literature, predicting, questioning, and conversing are all tried and true tools to increase and support reading instruction (McCarrier, 1995; Sipe, 2000; Baumfield & Mroz, 2002; Nystrand et al., 2003; Berry & Englert, 2005; Clark & Graves, 2005; McIntyre, 2007; Stahl, 2008).

The research indicates the use of teacher facilitation and modeling prompts and supports conversation. The connection prompts used in this study allowed the teacher to model through her own participation and facilitate with the questions. The book clubs and facilitated conversation provided an atmosphere for collaborative learning in which students were able to construct meaning together. The prompts themselves guided the students to connect, predict, and question.

## **Implications**

### **Educational Implications**

According to Rosenblatt (1978), Nystrand and Gamoran (1990), Almasi (1995), McCarrier (1995), Mercer (1995), Gambrell & Almasi (1996), and Sipe (2000), conversation is a meaningful instructional tool to support reading comprehension. When students are exposed to constructive conversations and have the chance to practice participation, they internalize the ability to use the skills in future conversations (Vygotsky, 1978). Further, this nurturing of

critical thinking leads to a more intimate relationship with literature for future education (Rosenblatt, 1978).

Conversation is not widely used in instruction because of the time and energy it takes for a teacher to guide it well (Almasi et al., 2001; Christoph & Nystrand, 2001; Berry & Englert, 2005). While teachers themselves admit to conversation being a valuable tool, not many use it (Commeyras & DeGroff, 1998). The connection prompts investigated in this study provide teachers with a structure to begin and support their classroom conversations about literature.

In Barksdale-Ladd and Thomas's (1993) study, teachers expressed a strong preference for teaching without a basal reader (direct instruction), and yet 92% of teachers interviewed in the study reported using the exact script or sticking close to the prescribed instruction in basal readers. Teachers noted that developing their own instruction would take too much time and effort in planning. Further, teachers stated students preferred non-basal reading instruction (Barksdale-Ladd & Thomas, 1993). The connection prompts used in this study offer students a structure with an open-ended prompt, as opposed to a script, to help them into the literature and the conversation about it.

**Extended Practice of Connection Prompts.** In addition to the classroom benefits of using connection prompts, parents and caregivers working with primary-aged students on homework or free reading can help to support the learning with the aid of prompts. Adults do not always know how to engage a child in conversation when reading, and the use of these prompts could further the experience for both adult and child when reading together. It could have specific significance for children of non-native English speakers. If a student is working at home on reading, these prompts could help parents learn how to speak with their children about the literature they are reading (Zimmerman et al., 2009). The connection prompts are fairly simple

and could be used at home by parents when reading with their children. Research supports reading and practice of comprehension skills to reinforce fluency and comprehension (Blum et al., 2009). The prompts could offer parents a concrete way to participate in the reading experience at home for young learners. Furthermore, if a parent is an English Language Learner, the prompts offer a way to engage in the text with the student, carrying over content-language from the classroom. Blum, Koskinen, Bhartiya, Curry, Hluboky, Gastner, Charlton, Moore, Morrison, Parker-McElroy, Peterson, and Smith (2009-2010) investigated the practice of audio texts and discussion prompts with English language learners in the classroom and at home. In the study they found that practice with the school-home program increased comprehension as measured by The Developmental Reading Assessment, which calculates comprehension based on retelling, questions, and reading accuracy of reading passages. Students using the school-home program also showed increased motivation as measured by student talk about books. (Blum et al., 2009-2010). Zimmerman et al. (2009) were interested in the effects of conversation versus exposure to language in the language development of young children. Their study suggests that while exposure to language is important, it is the interaction through language that truly contributes to language development. The connection prompts used in this study help to initiate the interaction through language.

Similarly to parent use of the connection prompts, research could investigate the use of connection prompts with tutors, classroom volunteers, and/or teaching assistants. The connection prompts would offer a structure to people who may not be as formally trained as classroom teachers.

**Cross-Curriculum.** Elementary teachers usually teach multiple subjects, and the connection prompts could be used in other content areas. There is much research in the area of

inquiry-based learning in mathematics and science. The connection prompts are a way to incorporate inquiry-based teaching at the elementary level in reading. Blum et al. (2009-10) note that an unexpected finding in their study was students automatically carried the discussion prompts over to other content-area books. The teachers felt that the prompts and discussions following the prompts helped students understand that reading was more than simple decoding – it also involved comprehension. It changed the way students approached new texts.

**Work with Younger Age Groups.** The findings from this study support the implications from prior research that primary-aged students can benefit from conversations in the classroom (McIntyre et al., 2006; Heller, 2006). Future research could investigate the use of instructional conversations through book clubs at the first-grade level to encourage reading comprehension with the introduction of reading fluency.

### **Methodological Implications**

Methodologically, the current study used audio data. Future studies could make use of video observations, teacher diary entries, and pre and post-tests. The video could be used to capture physical details to examine student behaviors. In this study, video was used to determine who was speaking. Inspection of video could help to identify student interest, motivation, off-task behaviors, on-task behaviors, uptake, and general participation in future studies. A teacher diary could also be used for future research to offer more information on the teacher's experience with the connection prompts. An audio or written diary would allow the teacher more time to think about the events of the day and reflect. Finally, to measure reading comprehension directly, future research could use pre and post-test evaluations.

It is worth noting that the teacher's engagement supported the implementation and construction of the connection prompts. Because the teacher was invested in the book clubs and

sincerely engaged in the research, she offered input on tweaking the third connection prompt to suit her class and helped to make it, as she believed, more deliverable and understandable for her students. In this regard, the teacher became a co-constructor of the pedagogy with relatively little investment of time. The researcher developed the prompts and arranged for the study, and through the reflections allowed in the interviews the teacher was able to adapt the prompts for her own specific use with her students.

The current study looked at one class of 20 students in one school. The study could be conducted across multiple classrooms with multiple sets of subjects. This would provide different contexts and the information might be more generalizable.

### **Research Implications**

**Long-term Impact.** Future research could longitudinally investigate the nature of conversation with the use of connection prompts over the course of a year and into future schooling. A longitudinal study of this nature could investigate the impact of connection prompts on future learning. Specifically, future research could examine if the practice of connection prompts carried over into future learning as well as the effectiveness of using similar prompts in earlier grades.

**English Language Learners.** The connection prompts could be used to extend research in the area of reading instruction with English language learners of all ages. The Blum et al. (2009-10) study suggests that English language learners were better able to talk about books with prompts that were repeatedly practiced in both the classroom and at home. The students became familiar with the prompts and began to approach new texts anticipating responding to the prompts, thereby thinking more deeply about the reading.

**Impact on Teacher.** The current study investigated the impact of the connection prompts on student talk.. Future research could investigate the impact of the connection prompts on the teacher's speech patterns. The increase in student contributions, which was dramatic in a relatively short period of time, might be due in part to the teacher talk. The connection prompts might have changed the teacher's contribution and that might have impacted what the students said.

### **Limitations**

The study was limited by the fact that all data were collected in one setting and there were 20 subjects. Therefore, the conclusions may not be generalizable. In addition to the sample being small, the subjects were all students in a private school and thus might come from families that value education more than the general public. Methodologically speaking, the researcher did not have more than two days access to the classroom prior to the intervention. The degree to which change was manifest due to the prompts alone is limited. Finally, the researcher had a role in conceptualizing the study and implementing the intervention (present in the classroom during all data collection). Despite the limitations, this study has much to offer in that there is a need for examples of how to generate conversation in the classroom, especially in the primary grades.

### **Summary**

The current study adds to the research in reading instruction. First, connection prompts helped to steer the students toward meaningful conversations about literature in which students demonstrated improved understanding and the ability to elaborate on ideas. Next, second-grade students are ready for reading instruction. They are beyond decoding and eager to dig deeper into understanding. The research in the area of this foundation year of reading instruction is sparse. Furthermore, teachers acknowledge the benefits of using conversation in reading instruction but

also the difficulty in leading it. Finally, connection prompts are a practical and efficient tool teachers can use to facilitate the conversation.



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