

LITERATURE RESPONSE JOURNALS IN A FIRST-GRADE CLASSROOM

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Writing and reading come together in response journals for first graders, motivating a variety of reactions to literature and showing us that even young children have a range of responses to literature that they can express through writing.

Literature response journals can encourage students to participate actively in reading by foregrounding their personal responses to books (Rosenblatt, 1938, 1978). Many teachers have tried using such journals, and a number of authors have described what happens when students express their responses to literature in journals (Atwell, 1987; Barone, 1990; Fulwiler, 1987; Hancock, 1992, 1993a, 1993b; Kelly, 1990; Simpson, 1986; Wollman-Bonilla, 1989, 1991). Yet the research in this area has focused primarily on Grades 3 and above. This article describes an exploration of literature response journals in a primary classroom by a teacher-researcher and college-researcher team.

Aware of the power of personal, self-directed writing as a tool for thinking, reflecting, and discovering (Mayher & Lester, 1983; Emig, 1977; Fulwiler, 1987; Vygotsky, 1962), many primary grade teachers invite students to write and draw in journals. Sometimes these journals are personal journals for recording events and communicating with a teacher (Milz, 1985); sometimes they are learning logs for reacting to experiences and activities across the curriculum (Avery, 1987). However, there are no systematic descriptions of teachers introducing literature response journals to kindergartners or first or second graders. Perhaps this situation reflects the focus in these early years on teaching children to read, rather than to respond to their reading. Of course, first and second graders must develop awareness of textual cues and reading strategies, but we believed they could develop personal engagement in books at the

same time. We wanted to involve students in actively reflecting upon books, tapping the potential of writing to stir thinking. We wanted them to be able to place themselves at the center of their reading from the start because we felt this kind of engagement was an important component of literacy and the foundation for becoming a lifelong reader.

The Classroom Context

Barbara has been teaching primary grades in suburban Rhode Island for 25 years. Working from a child-centered philosophy, she developed a literature-based reading program that she has been using in her first-grade classroom for 7 years as part of her theme-centered curriculum. She and her first-grade colleagues had selected good children's literature and purchased multiple copies for small-group work. Children typically worked with a book for one week, reading chorally and silently, participating in teacher-facilitated discussion, and extending their reading with art and writing activities. Their morning was devoted primarily to language arts, with blocks of time for reading and discussing in small groups and working on independent and collaborative writing activities. Barbara also read aloud to the children every day after lunch.

After reading Julie's book, *Response Journals: Inviting Students to Think and Write About Literature* (Wollman-Bonilla, 1991), and two articles on literature response journals by Hancock (1992, 1993a) in a graduate course, Barbara became interested in integrating such journals into her reading program. She decided to try response journals in her classroom and invited Julie to join her in this exploration.

In September 1993 there were 20 students in Barbara's first-grade class: 11 boys and 9 girls. The children reflected the ethnic and socioeconomic makeup of their community—they were all Anglo children from working-class or middle-class families. Some of the children were emergent readers and writers; many

were beginning readers and writers; and a small group had mastered predictable and environmental print.

Julie visited Barbara's classroom throughout the year, approximately twice a month. She observed Barbara and the children reading and writing responses, occasionally worked with some of Barbara's reading groups, and met with Barbara to discuss ongoing practical concerns as well as research issues and preliminary findings.

Introducing and Maintaining Literature Response Journals

Literature response journals were an extension of the writing activities Barbara had already been using in her reading program. She hoped that introducing the journals to her class would enhance their understanding of literature and stimulate higher level thinking about books. In addition, she hoped that the children would react personally to books, become excited about reading, and want to read more.

During the first full week of school Barbara began reading aloud a chapter each day from *James and the Giant Peach* (Dahl, 1961). For the first 2 days after reading she modeled a response, expressing a few ideas by thinking aloud and then writing a sentence such as, "James is very sad because his parents are gone," or, "James does not like living with Aunt Sponge and Aunt Spiker."

Beginning on the third day, children wrote their own responses to Dahl's book in journals Barbara prepared for them. She stapled sheets of 9 × 12 picture-story paper (paper blank on top and lined on the bottom) between sheets of manilla paper, which served as a cover. Students were asked to write about the story, with Barbara prompting: "What did you think about this chapter?" or, "What do you think will happen?" They were also invited to illustrate their responses when they were finished writing, and most began doing so early in the year.

Initially, 4 of the children struggled with writing, although they knew what they wanted to say. Barbara invited them to dictate to her, and she recorded their ideas. Then they copied what she had written. After the first week or so, in an environment that invited invented spelling and supported risk taking, all 4 began writing on their own, sometimes in letter strings, sometimes relying on familiar words, and frequently working to invent spellings.

Barbara circulated as the children worked so that they could share their responses immediately by reading them to her. She often asked a question in reply and recorded the question and students' oral responses in their journals. This routine was followed until the end

of October, when Barbara finished reading *James and the Giant Peach*.

In November, Barbara decided to integrate the response journals into the structure of one of her reading groups, instead of continuing to have all of the children respond to whole-class read-alouds. She made this shift because she wanted to explore more deeply the potential of response journals. She felt she could get a clearer picture of how such journals could work in first grade by focusing on a smaller number of children, instead of trying to circulate to all each time they wrote, and by focusing on children who were relatively proficient at getting their ideas down on paper, as opposed to her emergent writers. Thus, only a small group consisting of her most capable readers and writers, 4 girls, continued to write in response journals. During November and December, these 4 girls responded to a variety of children's books that Barbara first read aloud during reading group meetings. Next the books were read chorally, and finally independently. As before, an illustration was encouraged, and students shared their responses with Barbara right away. She replied orally, and a brief one-on-one discussion followed.

Julie also worked with the group on several occasions during reading group time, reading to them, facilitating discussion, and exploring alternative kinds of written responses in an effort to help them envision a wider range of response options. She shared her own responses and asked the girls to talk about the different kinds of responses they could write. Julie also emphasized that their journals were a form of communication with their teacher, and she would wonder *why* they felt the way they did about a book. She suggested they try to include the "why" in their responses. She left the children with a chart suggesting some possible kinds of responses that had been discussed. These included: (1) Feelings I had. Why? (2) What I liked or did not like. Why? (3) What I wish had happened. Why? (4) What the book reminds me of. Why? and (5) Questions I have. Children asked if it was all right to write about something that was not on the chart and were told that was fine; they were encouraged to write whatever they wished about the book.

Beginning in mid-January, Barbara turned over more responsibility to the 4 girls for their group reading. She started reading each picturebook with the group and invited the children to finish reading on their own, or with a partner, and then write a response. Barbara also felt the children were ready to read her replies independently by this time. She began reading their responses at the end of the day and replying in writing. The children were encouraged to write back to her. Because of time

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constraints, they sometimes discussed their thoughts with Barbara after reading her reply, rather than writing back. At this point, Barbara also integrated response journals into a second reading group. But since the journals were not used as regularly with this group, there were relatively few responses ($n=38$); we categorized but did not include them in this analysis.

Categorizing First Graders' Responses

In order to help us make sense of the 620 legible responses the 20 first graders wrote over the course of the school year, we read through their journals several times, looking for patterns in responses that would indicate categories (10 illegible responses were not included). Based on these data, a categorization system gradually emerged. Categories were defined, and exemplars were selected to distinguish between categories and aid in the categorization process. The categorization system was refined until it accounted for all of the responses (including those written by children in the second reading group, though they are not discussed here). Of course, with fluid, real-world data, it can be difficult to design categories that fully discriminate between response types. Categories are rarely entirely discrete; there is naturally some overlap. With this awareness, we worked to be as loyal as possible to our definitions and exemplars.

We each independently categorized all 620 responses and agreed on 611 of the categorizations. We discussed the remaining 9 responses until we could agree on categories for them. It is important to note that during the first 2 months of school, many of the responses were brief, averaging about 7 words. Though response length increased over time as the children grew increasingly adept at putting their ideas in writing, at the start it was challenging for many of the first graders to painstakingly invent spellings to communicate their ideas. Because students' ideas were not always followed by elaboration, as in the journals of older children who write more easily, it was occasionally difficult to determine exactly what they were trying to communicate. Often the teacher's notes on what students said during the follow-up oral exchange were helpful in categorizing responses.

We found that there were two qualitatively different types of responses: *text-centered responses*, which focused on what was happening in the book, and *reader-centered responses*, which focused on the reader's thoughts and feelings about the book and the experience of reading the book. Within these two larger types were a number of categories. We have defined the categories and offered examples that represent the range of types

of responses within each category. For example, some responses reflect more inferential or creative thought than others that are closer to the information stated in the text. Similarly, some students included a reason for the feelings and ideas they shared, but others did not.

Text-Centered Responses

1. *Retelling*: recounts text events

James sad kols uwo ye.

[James said close your eyes.]

Hua u tt i t ah sp.

[Alligator tongues turn into something special.]

2. *Understanding Characters*: expresses understanding of characters' thoughts or feelings, either stated or implied in the text

James lost pop tov his lif.

[James lost part of his life.]

The centiped is happy because the cinder storm stordid two rain and oal fo the pit cam oaf.

[The centipede is happy because the thunderstorm started to rain, and all the paint came off.]

3. *Question*: questions or expresses curiosity about plot or characters' actions

Yho James gni the peach?

[How did James get in the peach?]

I bnedr if James gneiagi to rk.

[I wonder if James' idea is going to work.]

4. *Prediction*: predicts plot or characters' actions

Tomro will bea u spis.

[Tomorrow will be a surprise.]

The crlhrs and James rad gan gat idig.

[The creatures and James are gonna get eaten.]

Reader-Centered Responses

1. *Personal Reaction*: expresses students' thoughts or feelings about the text

I su James will feel betten.

[I wish James will feel better.]

I thec the cadn way sel. Bkus he saed slle tetthes.

[I think the captain was silly because he said silly things.]

2. *Relating to Experience*: relates text to students' own experience

I don theke theat neu bne.

[I don't think that anybody has ears on their knees.]

I d n the m in hp.

[I didn't know they had music in them.]

3. *Self in Story*: expresses students' sense of being in the story or desire to be participating in the story events

James lath afebut eut the pehs but i wat to be anh the book.

[James let everybody eat the peach, but I wanted to be in the book.]

I hd be srea f i ws iwn.

[I would be scared if I was him.]

Most of the children's responses fit into only one category. However, 12 responses fit into more than one category and were tallied in two categories.

Table 1 represents the entire class's responses to *James and the Giant Peach*, written in September and October, when the whole class was using the journals. The 519 responses categorized here account for 84% of all responses written throughout the year in Barbara's classroom.

Table 1

Students' Responses to *James and the Giant Peach*

	<i>n</i>	%
Text-Centered Responses	433	83
Retelling	234	45
Understanding Characters	118	23
Question	54	10
Prediction	27	5
Reader-Centered Responses	86	17
Personal Reaction	75	14
Relating to Experience	3	1
Self in Story	8	2
Total	519	100

The majority of responses in the first 2 months of school were text centered, yet nearly half of these were not simply retellings but reflected students' thinking about the text and concern for the characters. For example, many children expressed understanding of James' feelings ("*James is sgig from the gost.*" [James is scared from the ghost.]) or worried about the characters ("*Y g h to the chchyah & the p.*" [What's going to happen to the creatures and the peach?]). They appeared to be engaged in the text, curious about how a peach could grow so big and insects could talk, and eager to find out, "What's gonna happen tomorrow?"

Further, Table 1 shows that first graders can and do write reader-centered responses (17%), reflecting a high level of personal engagement with a text. They not

only understood how James felt, but they also shared his feelings ("*James s.*" [I feel sad for James.]). A number of children also expressed their desire to enter the story world and enjoy the fantasy ride with James and the creatures or take a bite of that huge, delicious peach.

A Closer Look at Students' Responses and the Teacher's Role

In addition to what we learned from quantitative analysis of the responses, we also made some interesting discoveries by observing and interacting with students as they wrote, and by frequently reading their journals. We found that oral interaction around the journals was crucial. We also discovered that the journals provided a unique opportunity for students to express their ideas and for the teacher to recognize each one's thinking. Finally, we learned that, like older students (Hancock, 1993b), the first graders had individual styles of response.

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The Importance of Oral Interaction

The children willingly wrote responses and eagerly shared what they had written with Barbara. This sharing, as Barbara circulated among them, made it possible for her to take notes on what they had written, which was important in the early stages when some students' writing was still precommunicative. More importantly, as they read their responses to Barbara, students sometimes spontaneously elaborated on what they had written—they had more thoughts than they could get down in writing. This oral interaction allowed Barbara to better understand and appreciate what each child was thinking. John, whose responses were generally short strings of letters, reflecting no awareness of letter-sound correspondence, was able to "read" confidently his responses immediately after writing them. For example, he read: "I feel good because they made it down to the ground" and "I like James because he made it up [the idea to save them]."

Children's written responses also served as a valuable springboard for discussion, which further revealed

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their text comprehension and thinking. Barbara generally replied to their responses by asking them a question in return. For example, Josh, who struggled to get letters onto paper and generally wrote brief responses, wrote "*Jame*" but read, "I think James is happy." Barbara asked, "Why?" and Josh responded, "Because he's inside the peach, and he's not with his aunts."

Similarly, Corinne wrote, "*I thic James is mad.*" When asked, "Why is he mad?" she thoughtfully elaborated: "Because the creatures are making him think too fast." The value of the response journal was that it encouraged students to take time to think about what had been read, and their writing gave them a foundation upon which to build when they shared with the teacher. The children's responses also helped Barbara to work from their interests and concerns—she encouraged each child to think more deeply about or elaborate on whatever topic that child had raised.

A Place for Self-Expression

Although students met in small groups to discuss their reading, there were students who routinely chose not to share their ideas and questions in this context. These children included both strong readers and those who were struggling to learn to read. The response journals provided a safe context for these students to express their ideas—only the teacher would see what they wrote and discuss it with them.

Through the journals, Barbara learned a great deal about the students that she never would have known otherwise. For example, Bobby rarely spoke during group meetings, but his responses showed that he was thinking about the story and actively trying to make sense of the events. One day he questioned: "*Y di James sa luc aot sadp?*" [Why did James say, "Look out centipede?"]. On another day he ventured a question that reflected his effort to visualize the story: "*Wd du hu cad mn luc lu?*" [What do the cloud men look like?].

Not only did the journals allow children to share their questions and feelings freely, but they also ensured personal attention to each child's ideas. Barbara's attention to and interest in whatever they had written was important to building children's self-confidence and their trust. They saw it was okay to write what they really felt or wondered about.

Individual Response Patterns

Individual children developed their own response patterns. For example, 50% of Zach's responses were personal reactions, and only 19% were retellings; yet Don, a reader of similar ability, wrote almost all retellings (86%). Many students favored understanding charac-

ters' responses, but a few, like Matt and Laura, tended to write questions, which accounted for about 50% each of their responses. The response journals allowed each student to follow his or her personal patterns, although every student explored a range of types of responses, and all wrote both text-centered and reader-centered responses.

Further, we found that reading level and writing vocabulary had little impact on the quality of thinking reflected in children's characteristic responses. Some of the weakest readers in the class wrote responses that included personal reactions and reflected inferential thinking about the plot and characters. For example, Josh wrote, "*I like rle groshpr bkz he srav.*" [I like the old green grasshopper because he is strong]. Similarly, John was clearly engaged in the story: "*I hope sigcasi home james.*" [I hope James gets home]. When the peach grew large and juicy, he commented: "This is a yummy story."

On the other hand, Jill and Robin, very strong readers, favored simple retellings at the beginning of the year, such as, "*The centipede is stoc* [stuck]," or superficial personal reactions, such as, "*The story is good. I like the story.*" The only ability-related difference we found was that stronger readers were generally more able writers and tended to write longer responses, so they had even more to work from during the oral follow-up phase.

Response Journals Throughout the Year

The one group of students that continued to write in response journals throughout the year included 4 girls who were typical of the most able first-grade readers Barbara has in her class every year. Analyzing their responses helped us to understand better what may happen over time as first graders continue writing in response journals.

Table 2 represents the all-year group's 107 responses to *James and the Giant Peach* (also included in Table 1), as well as their 63 responses to one novel and a number of picturebooks read as a small group and independently from November through May (see Appendix). Students wrote only one response to each of these books since they usually completed the text in a single day and engaged in other book-related writing activities on subsequent days. (There were only 63 responses because of absence and lost responses.)

There was a dramatic shift in the types of responses these 4 students wrote over the course of the year. Like the rest of their classmates, early in the year they wrote primarily text-centered responses (87%); but from the third month of school on, they began to write far more

Table 2
The All-Year Group's Responses

	Sept.&Oct.		Nov.–May	
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
<i>Text-Centered Responses</i>	93	87	18	29
Retelling	61	57	11	17
Understanding Characters	24	22	5	8
Question	5	5	2	3
Prediction	3	3	0	0
<i>Reader-Centered Responses</i>	14	13	45	71
Personal Reaction	13	12	36	57
Relating to Experience	0	0	4	6
Self in Story	1	1	5	8
Total	107	100	63	100

reader-centered responses, accounting for 71% of their journal entries. Perhaps initially students felt their teacher wanted them only to prove that they understood the book; they needed some time and some discussion of response possibilities to discover that the teacher really did want them to share their own reactions.

Further, text-centered responses, especially retellings, might be a natural place for students to begin because such responses are relatively safe. It may be that students grew into reader-centered responses as they developed confidence in themselves as responders and gained a better sense of their teacher's expectations.

Because this group was followed through the year, a closer look at their experience helped us to think more about the teacher's role as discussion facilitator, respondent, and selector of texts. It is important to remember, however, that this group included only stronger readers. Although we found no difference in the types of responses stronger and weaker readers wrote early in the year, further research with students at a range of reading levels would help determine if the following observations are applicable to first graders in general.

The Value of Discussion Before Writing

With older students, response journals are often viewed as a tool for gathering ideas that might later be shared in group discussion (Villaume, Worden, Williams, Hopkins, & Rosenblatt, 1994; Wollman-Bonilla, 1991). However, reversing this sequence seemed to help the 4 first graders in the all-year group write more thoughtful responses.

We were concerned initially that discussion following reading and before writing would result in students' writing entries based on what had been said in the group

instead of their own personal responses. However, we also wondered about sending the children off to write before allowing them to share their thoughts with peers. There was clearly a lot more to say about each book than any individual ever wrote, and the children sometimes seemed bursting with ideas just after reading. For example, when they read *Owl Moon* (Yolen, 1987) as a group, there were several spontaneous comments as soon as the reading was completed. Children admired the illustrations and wondered out loud how Schoenherr had created pictures that made them feel "like you are there, like you can really see it" or "like you are up high looking down on them." The children also laughed and smiled at Yolen's imagery, especially "whiter than the milk in a cereal bowl." It seemed more appropriate to invite them to talk about their comments than to overlook their astute observations. So we tried initiating discussion before writing.

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This sequence seemed to help the children write better responses, and they were still personal and individual. Perhaps because organizing their ideas and getting them down in writing is still quite a cognitive and physical challenge for these young children, doing some talking beforehand may be a helpful step. Sometimes the discussion also seemed to spark new awareness or new questions in children's minds, which led to deeper and more elaborated responses. For example, compare Sandi's and Corinne's responses to two books read a couple of months apart—*Sylvester and the Magic Pebble* (Steig, 1969), which was not discussed, and *Barney Bipple's Magic Dandelions* (Chapman, 1977), which the group discussed before writing:

Sandi's Response: *it mad me sapist wen sylvester trd bac to hm seaf. [It made me surprised when Sylvester turned back to himself.]*

I like the book because it had magic in it and I like magic. I thing that barney did not lisiin to Minerva Merklese to not make complicated wishes.

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Corinne's Response: *I like the part wen Sylvester trnt into himself. [I like the part when Sylvester turned into himself.]*

I like the book because It had magic. I like magic. Way did Barney want a taking dog and a car. I think that Barney was rog with his wishes. Bareney was not lisining to do esy wishes. I wood start with esy wishes and save sume wishes. [Why did Barney want a talking dog and a car? I think that Barney was wrong with his wishes. Barney was not listening to do easy wishes. I would start with easy wishes and save some wishes.]

Replies That Encourage Thinking and Writing

During the first half of the year, Barbara replied to students' responses orally; and if her reply was a question, the students answered her orally. However, in January, Barbara began writing her reply below their entries and invited them to write back. Students did write back to the teacher when she asked a question, and the length of their answers increased with time. However, the nature of Barbara's questions was an important factor—unless they requested explanation or elaboration, students answered with a single word. For example, consider Corinne's entries on *Amelia Bedelia Helps Out* (Parrish, 1979):

Corrine: *The book was funny because she was doing the rog things.*

Barbara: Corinne, Amelia Bedelia certainly is funny! Has anything like that ever happened to you?

Corrine: *No.*

Or consider a similar exchange about *What Mary Jo Shared* (Udry, 1966):

Corrine: *I liked the book because finaly Mary Jo finely Shard supthing. It raily meened sumpthing to her.*

Barbara: Corinne, she seemed happy to me. How do you think she felt?

Corrine: *Happy.*

On the other hand, open-ended questions often led to lengthy exchanges between Barbara and her students in which the first graders were encouraged to think more about a book or to look for textual evidence to back up their ideas. Here is an entry about *Fly Away Home* (Bunting, 1991) from Jill's journal:

Jill: *I loveb It. I felb gob.*

Barbara: I loved the story, too, Jill. Some people think it is a sad story, but you said, "I felt good." Tell me why.

Jill: *In terpont Becose it med me fel goob Becose I liket it wen he got a donos.*

[In the airport because it made me feel good because I liked it when he got a doughnut.]

Barbara: I like to get doughnuts, too. We get some every Sunday after church. Do you get doughnuts often? Do you think Andrew got doughnuts a lot?

Jill: *Yes I bow I thingc AnandDrow ges them tow Two donos a day sow he dosint get chode.*

[Yes, I do. I think Andrew gets them, too. Two doughnuts a day so he doesn't get starved.]

Text Selection

When we began our exploration, we believed that the texts most likely to arouse thoughtful responses would be stories involving serious issues or moral lessons, such as Bunting's *The Wall* (1990) or Steig's *Sylvester and the Magic Pebble* (1969). However, most of the responses to these books were simply variations on, "I liked the part when Sylvester turned into himself" or "I felt sad when the Grandfather died."

Fortunately, Barbara had a large selection of varied texts—realistic fiction, historical fiction, fantasy, humor, nonfiction—which she introduced to her class every year. Thus, we were able to observe the impact of various types of books.

Counter to our expectations, it seemed that realistic books (those involving experiences and feelings similar to the children's) and light, humorous fantasy books generally evoked more extensive personal responses, reflecting more thought about the book. We were also surprised that nonfiction books, such as *Ibis* (Himmel-

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man, 1990), aroused very deep feelings. For example, Corinne wrote:

It's hard to beleve that It's a real story. Ibis was scard and sore. Sandi and I thot we sae her at the Aquaream. I wold be scard If Sumone was grabbing at me.

Students' responses to *Ibis* suggested that their involvement might be a result of their recent first-hand introduction to whales on a class trip to the aquarium, as well as the fact that whales had played a large part in the class's thematic unit on the ocean. Whales had become important to the children.

The issue of text selection deserves further study. Our observations are tentative and may be more reflective of the idiosyncratic preferences of the 4 girls in the group than of general patterns. Furthermore, although

we collected responses to novels as well as picture-books, more examples of responses to each type of text might help to determine whether the ongoing immersion in a novel leads to different kinds of responses than the reading of a brief picturebook.

Conclusions

Our exploration into response journals in a first-grade classroom led to some exciting discoveries and gave rise to several interesting questions for future investigation. Our finding—that there is considerable interdependence among reading, writing, discussion, and thinking in the response processes of first graders—helps to illuminate how children learn to transact with texts (Rosenblatt, 1978) and how they grow into literacy and literary appreciation. Further, although a great deal more research in this area is needed, we have developed a tentative categorization system, grounded in the data, that can be tested and refined. The majority of responses included in this analysis were written about a single novel, *James and the Giant Peach*. Although the categorization system was also a good fit for the other 16% of the responses, it is just a starting point for thinking about types of responses. It is important to investigate whether the same system would fit different primary grade children's responses to different texts, as well as to explore further how our findings regarding response patterns might differ in another context with different books.

As a teacher, Barbara was pleased to discover that when children were allowed to respond freely, although their responses differed in type, length, and quality of thought, almost all of the entries indicated whether or not students understood what they were reading. There was no need for comprehension questions.

Further, the journals were useful in assessing individuals' thinking and were particularly important as windows on the thinking of those children who rarely spoke in class. At the beginning of the year, because all were responding to a book read aloud, the journals also allowed the weakest readers to reveal their complex thoughts and their appreciation of a challenging text. Barbara felt that she got to know the children faster than usual because of the journals, and she was better able to build on their strengths and address their needs.

In addition, Barbara noted that her weakest readers were more excited about books than in previous years. In fact, all of the children were noticeably more involved in the novels she read aloud throughout the year. Responding in writing to the first novel she read seemed to heighten the first graders' engagement in

books and to establish a habit of thinking deeply and personally about what they read.

One question that remains is how Barbara influenced children's responses. Although the range of responses suggests that they did their own thinking for the most part, there were also some patterns Barbara noticed. For example, on a day when she finished a chapter of *James and the Giant Peach* and casually said, "I wonder what's going to happen next," a number of children wrote about what they thought would happen. She was especially concerned that her comments after reading might have been encouraging retellings, a type of response she hoped students would come to rely on less and less as they learned to give responses involving deeper reflection. Unfortunately, we do not have enough data on exactly what she said each day to form any conclusions, but the teacher's influence is certainly an issue deserving of more attention.

Although Barbara worried that her casual, spontaneous comments might have inadvertently influenced the children, she did feel it was important to guide children to move beyond retelling responses. To this end she felt that it might have been helpful if she had included more modeling of responses, especially at the beginning of the year. In particular, rather than simply modeling her own response, she wondered if it might have been useful to construct some whole-class responses and write them on chart paper. With a number of children contributing ideas, such a response could model a greater range of response types, perhaps introducing children to new possibilities for response—particularly those children who may have assumed that Barbara wanted them to retell the story to "prove" their comprehension. Another possibility would be to have several children share their responses with the class each day and follow with a discussion of the response types that had been shared. In November, when Julie worked with Barbara's reading groups, she did spend some time modeling her own responses, discussing response options, and asking children to share and discuss their responses. These activities may have contributed to the increase in reader-centered responses from November on.

Finally, there remains the question of how to inspire the one or two students who clearly would have preferred a more teacher-directed activity, with one right answer and a clear end. Such students dutifully wrote responses but appeared to put little thought into them. Although some were strong readers and writers, their responses were frequently simple retellings. It seems these students needed more support to risk sharing their ideas. They also could have needed an audience beyond the teacher in order to imbue response writing with

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more purpose and make it worth the effort. Perhaps sharing of responses among students would have helped.

It is August as we write, and school opens again in a few weeks. This year we go back with a better understanding of the potential of response journals in first grade, as well as a sense of the issues that we need to explore further so that we can better facilitate young children's engagement in literature through writing.

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Appendix

Children's Books Read by the All-Year Group

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- Bate, L. (1975). *Little rabbit's loose tooth*. New York: Scholastic.
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- Morgan, A. (1985). *Sadie and the snowman*. New York: Scholastic.
- Polacco, P. (1992). *Chicken Sunday*. New York: Scholastic.
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