

**Insight & inspiration - literature that transforms:
Using literature that creates opportunities for greater
understanding of self, others, and society**

by

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Dedication

I would like to dedicate this paper to my husband Mike and children Briana, Brandon, and Nathan who left me alone (usually) when I needed to work, gave me encouragement when it was tough, and generally shared in the struggle. I am grateful every day for the blessings of my family.

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ABSTRACT

This thesis explores the impact of quality literature on students' understanding about themselves, about others, and about society. It asks the questions:

1. Does reading literature with complex characters, those with internal conflicts, or issues that need to be worked out in their lives, help children define their sense of self?
2. Can the books we have our students read make a difference in the attitudes they hold about other people?
3. Does introducing students to rich themes through literature help them understand society and the contributions each child can make?

The research took place over the course of a reading unit in two fourth grade classrooms in a suburban school district in the Midwest. It is a qualitative study involving interviews of two teachers and six students, classroom observations, and a review of students' journals and other written work.

I. INTRODUCTION

In elementary classrooms today where a basal is not the primary text for reading instruction, literature selection is critically important to the success of the reading program. Teachers choose books diligently and plan literature units carefully for their students as they focus on reading comprehension, fluency growth, and vocabulary. In the upper elementary grades three, four and five teachers work to select engaging books for their students to read. If chosen carefully, literature can be a vehicle through which students can reflect upon themselves, examining their thoughts and feelings, motives and actions. Books can enable students to look critically at society and come to understandings of others. Literature can even give students insight into how they can make a difference in their world.

In R. J. Lukens' book, *A Critical Handbook of Children's Literature* (1999), the author explains the definition of literature. She says that the reason adults or children read a book is for pleasure – to entertain, or to allow us to escape from our reality for a time. But she goes on to say that to define *literature* we have to look for the source of our enjoyment and question *why* the book gives us pleasure. The answer lies in the fact that through the character we can see ourselves and gain a verification of our humanness.

Beyond giving us pleasure, Lukens says, literature provides us with understanding. Not only do we connect with the character and understand ourselves better, but we explore human nature and come to understand others' motives and actions. The best authors write honestly about human nature, highlighting individuals as well as society and give readers the opportunity to reflect upon and understand others (Lukens, 1999). Critical thinking is defined here as looking at an issue with careful analysis and judgment. This critical thinking about oneself and one's relationship with others is at the core of humanness.

Lukens defines literature then as “reading that by means of imaginative and artistic qualities, provides pleasure and understanding” (Lukens, 1999, p. 5). She advocates using literature, not merely books with children. Children differ from adults in degree, but not in kind. Literature for children can and should encourage understanding, as it does for adults. In addition, Lukens questions whether just giving us a vehicle with which to understand others is enough to qualify writing as literature. She answers this question in the negative. In her viewpoint, the situation the novelist sets up must be *significant* enough to warrant our reflection.

In *Best Practices in Literacy Instruction* (Fisher, Flood & Lapp, 1999), the authors explain their views on the role of literature in the classroom. They suggest teachers select books with:

2. literary quality that has been demonstrated by reviews, awards, and trusted word of mouth recommendations
3. aesthetic qualities that cover a wide array of genre that will elicit thoughtful responses from children
4. concepts and ideas that children can grasp with guidance; and
5. opportunities to lead children to unique discoveries (p. 124).

There are numerous “appeals” Lukens points out, that literature has for readers. The ability to show human motives for what they are allows us to see into the mind of the character and identify with or react to the desires, feelings, and emotions of that character. Another appeal that literature has is that it can cause us to recognize and critically examine the institutions of society. We become aware of the impact family, church, government, etc. have on us. Through the literary character, we can see how these institutions influence our

lives for good or for bad, and we can discover ways to fight against the negative constrictions they might have on us. Literature allows us to see how others make choices, illuminating possible alternatives in our own lives. “Real literature for any age is words chosen with skill and artistry to give the readers pleasure and to help them understand themselves and others” (Lukens, 1999, p. 10).

Research Problem Statement

Teachers today have many considerations when making decisions related to reading curricula in their classrooms. The students within their classrooms have a wide range of reading abilities, making book selection complicated. The school district may have novels that are prescribed for each grade level which teachers feel obligated to use. Some of the best literature for children from which teachers can choose has controversial themes, language, or messages. Many teachers fear frightening or saddening their students or do not wish to deal with issues of racism or sexism (Wollman-Bonilla, 1998). These issues and others make the selection of literature difficult for teachers, so often novels are chosen which give little opportunity for students to reflect upon themselves and others.

Purpose of the Study

From evidence presented in the literature review, it appears that quality literature can make a difference in children’s lives. The purpose of this study was to examine the issue of book selection from the perspective of the teachers and explore the impact literature has on

students. This research was conducted through a qualitative study involving interviews, observations, and analysis of literature response activities.

Research Questions

1. Does reading literature with complex characters, those with internal conflicts, or issues that need to be worked out in their lives, help children define their sense of self?
2. Can the books we have our students read make a difference in the attitudes they hold about other people?
3. Does introducing students to rich themes through literature help them understand society and the contributions each child can make?

Limitations of the Study

There are a few limitations to this study that should be discussed. The first is in the selection of teachers for the study. My goal was to choose two classroom teachers who would be willing to develop and implement a novel unit within their classroom during the time in which I would conduct my study. I purposefully chose teachers who I thought would be willing to do this and who would be open and honest about how they felt the novel was impacting their students. I had some concerns about the inhibitions they might have because of the desire to “do it right”. I don’t think this became an issue. Both teachers acknowledged that they were finding their way since it was the first time either of them had used these

novels, and they simply and honestly talked to me about changes they would make the next time they used the novels.

Many studies have been conducted on the impact the classroom teacher has on students' learning (Pellegrini & Blatchford, 2000). It is difficult to differentiate the impact a novel has on the students from that of the teacher's enthusiasm and expertise in involving students in the novel. However, as is evident in the descriptive analysis to follow, the teachers themselves saw a difference in the way their students responded to these novels and some of the books they have used in the past.

Another limitation of the study is that responses made by students during class discussions may be influenced by the dynamics of the class (Tudor, 2001). Depending on the make-up of the class, students are either encouraged or inhibited to make thoughtful responses. This is a reality of every study conducted in school classrooms. Of benefit to me in this study was the time of year it took place. By spring of the school year students typically feel comfortable with one another and with the teacher, and so their responses during this novel unit can be considered honest and reflective of them.

Because this was a qualitative study, it was expected that responses would be different with the various participants. This study does not attempt to generalize the findings to any other than the teachers and students in these two classrooms. However, there are insights and recommendations that can appropriately be explored based on the analysis, and this will follow in the conclusion.

Significance of the Study

Reading is a vital part of learning, and a very important part of learning is gaining insight into oneself and others. Literature is the main tool that is used in many classrooms to

teach reading. If we want our children to grow in self-identity, in understanding of others and appreciation of diversity, and if we want them to understand that they can contribute to society, then we must reflect carefully on the literature that we choose for them. This qualitative study examines the teachers' as well as the students' perspectives on literature and their responses to quality literature.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Many educators and researchers have explored literature use in the upper elementary classroom. Some have focused on texts that encourage students to explore their identity. Some research has dealt primarily with multicultural literature and its effects on students' views. Often, the research has been concerned with the way the literature is used or the activities the students are engaged in. Little research has been conducted that focuses on the inherent value of the literature itself. Of utmost importance in a literature-based reading program are the novels that are chosen for the students to read and discuss. This study explores the perceptions of two teachers and six students in regards to the books that are already a part of the reading curriculum. In addition, one novel is introduced in each classroom that is rich in themes and character development, and the students and teachers are asked to talk about their reactions to these as well.

Complex Characters in Children's Literature

Respecting the intellect of our students includes providing meaningful reading experiences with quality literature. Children need to be given the opportunity to ponder the

motives of believable characters and reflect on their thoughts and feelings (Strehle, 1999). In *Literature for Today's Young Adults* (1985), Nilsen and Donelson discuss character development. They describe round characters as multi-faceted. After spending time with literature, readers should know the characters so well they can predict how the character would feel and act in any given situation. Changes in the main character are at the heart of literature. The changes are not superficial, but meaningful and life-altering.

Lukens, in *A Critical Handbook of Children's Literature* (1999), also describes the development of a complex character. She says that complex characters are composed of a variety of traits and their thoughts and actions are believable. There are layers to complex characters, and as students uncover each new layer, they gain new insights. A complex character is at the heart of the conflict in the story, and the reader feels as though he or she is living the experience as well. In quality literature, the speech and action of the main character are completely interwoven.

Meaningful Themes in Children's Literature

As Lukens suggests, it is not enough to have a complex character with a believable story line. Literature involves a *meaningful plot*, or theme. Theme is the idea that holds the story together, such as a comment about the human condition or about society (Lukens, 1999). A writer whose work lets us reflect on the complexities of human nature or the difficulties of life gives us new meaning. Theme, along with complex characters, distinguishes quality literature. As Katherine Patterson, one of America's most cherished authors of children's literature, states:

Why should there be classrooms where children read and discuss books that heal and illuminate instead of books designed to teach a reading skill? Why do we need them? We don't need them unless we believe passionately in the democracy of the intellect - unless we cherish the long childhood of the human race as a time of preparation for wise decision making which is the basis of maturity for individuals as well as for the citizenry as a whole (Paterson, 2000, p. 12).

Reading should consist of "an examination of big ideas, rather than a mere completion of activities" (McCall & Ford, 1998, p. 131). Children need to be given opportunities to ponder the human condition and reflect on the actions of themselves and others. In Karen Hesse's Newbery Award winning book, *Out of the Dust* (1997), readers struggle beside Billie Jo as she mends in body and spirit after a terrible accident that left her maimed and her mother dead. This is a book that calls out for quiet reflection as well as serious discussion. The experiences of Billie Jo, living at the time of the Great Depression, will probably never happen to children today, but the fight for survival might, and the struggle for identity most surely will.

Understanding Self

Literature can be the impetus that moves children to new understandings of themselves, of society, and of their place within it. It can be the telescope through which they see the possibilities ahead of them. Through literature, they can examine different viewpoints and come to understand their own identity (Kauffman & Short, 2001). When we offer literature rich in social issues, we give children the opportunity to see themselves and

their world in a new light. They come to understand themselves as they read about others with similar problems (Strehle, 1999).

In Jennifer Holm's novel, *Our Only May Amelia* (1999), the central character struggles with what many children deal with, her place in the family. In a house full of boys, May Amelia, a tomboy herself, feels as though she doesn't get the attention she needs. She struggles to get her own way and sees herself as being bossed constantly. This is such a common theme for children, they can't help but sympathize with May Amelia and grow with her as she learns just how special she is to her family.

Children are often faced with critical events and have to deal with personal problems. This might include facing the death of a loved one or their own illness. Literature can be the force that moves children to discuss these difficult issues in their lives (Johnson & Giorgis, 2000, Paterson, 2000). When we fail to present students with quality literature, rich in real life obstacles, we rob them of the opportunity to reflect upon their own struggles (Koehler, 1996). Sometimes this struggle can be one of life's most trying times. Children can learn to deal with difficult life situations by reading books with characters that are going through similar experiences.

Newbery Award author, Patricia MacLachlan has written a novel called *Journey* (1991) for young readers, about the pain of abandonment. A young boy faces grief and anger after his mother leaves him, but comes to find peace as he discovers the love and support of his grandparents. Reading about the trials of others may be a source of inspiration when children experience difficulties in their own lives. Through a book such as *Journey*, children can face issues that the character faces, find new insights into possible solutions, and try-out

difficult decisions (Johnson & Giorgis, 2000). In Katharine Paterson's essay, "Asking the Question," (2000) she writes,

Well, books are a kind of practice for life. Often people tell me they have given *Bridge to Terabithia* (Paterson, 1977) to a child who has suffered some terrible loss. When they do, I want to say "Too late, too late." The time a child needs a book about life's dark passages is before he or she has had to experience them. We need practice with loss, rehearsal for grieving, just as we need preparation for decision-making (Paterson, 2000, p. 6).

In literature, children can find a common bond with a character much like themselves. They can discover role models, and through these consider how they want to live their own lives (Freeman, Lehman, & Scharer, 1999; Kauffman & Short, 2001). A really good book can help a child to answer that troubling question of *who am I and where do I fit in?*

Gloria Kauffman and Kathy G. Short (2001) studied their own fourth/fifth grade multiage students as they explored "identity" through books. Their students read and discussed books related to the theme of identity and responded to the literature through writing and drawing. The teachers chose literature based on issues such as self-expression, peer pressure, and the need for love. After reading many picture books related to these issues within the overriding concept of identity, the students responded to the literature through discussion, written responses, and illustrations. Although four novels were read aloud to the class, the students themselves only read picture books dealing with these complex issues. The teachers found that using books rich in meaningful themes helped their students grow in understanding of themselves.

Research in the field of literature selection for the classroom has often focused on the value of literature activities, or groupings of students such as literature circles or paired reading, rather than on the inherent value of the literature itself. Darcy Ballentine and Lisa Hill (2000) studied students' literature responses, using what they call "brave novels" in their own second/third/fourth grade multiage classroom. These books were chosen to help children understand difficult issues in their lives. The study's focus, however, was on the effects of the activities the students were asked to do with the literature, rather than on the effects that the literature itself had on the students. They used dance, drama and paper shape cut-outs to give their students opportunities to reflect on the literature and make connections to their own lives. They found that by engaging their students in these creative responses to literature, the children gained important insights into themselves and others.

A novel by Newbery author, Sharon Creech, *Chasing Redbird* (1997) is about finding oneself. Zinny Taylor, with six brothers and sisters, feels quite neglected by her parents. Any boy that has ever shown an interest in her has only done so to get close to her sister May. Feeling the need to discover who she is, Zinny puts all her energy into uncovering an abandoned Pony Express Trail near her home. Through the physical work and mental contemplation she uncovers more than just a trail. She discovers secrets about her family and just how important her place is in it. Using "brave" literature, with serious themes, we allow students a chance to equip themselves with the knowledge they need to work through their own problems (Ballentine & Hill, 2000).

Understanding Others

Quality literature must include characters that allow for insight into human nature and themes in which the events are significant. Unfortunately, some teachers do not believe that children have the ability to critically understand societal issues, or if they do, they should be shielded from them (Wollman-Bonilla, 1998). Teachers feel uncomfortable talking about racial, cultural, or socioeconomic differences in the classroom.

In an article for the April 1998 edition of *Language Arts*, “Outrageous Viewpoints: Teacher’s Criteria for Rejecting Works of Children’s Literature,” Julie Wollman-Bonilla describes her pre-service and graduate students’ responses to literature that explores non-normative perspectives. Nearly all the students in her language arts classes are white, working-class females. She chooses texts for these courses that are powerful and thought-provoking. Most of them deal with social issues. Some of her students were voicing concerns about the use of some of these novels in elementary classrooms, and so she began to keep records of the comments these teachers or pre-service teachers were making. Over the course of six semesters, she recorded data and grouped it according to type of objection. She found that the pre-service teachers had three main reasons for rejecting certain texts: the material might frighten or corrupt children, the text does not represent mainstream values, or the book talks about racism or sexism as social problems (Wollman-Bonilla, 1998).

Rather than frightening children, literature that addresses social realities can help break stereotypes and encourage acceptance. Literature has the power to change students’ perceptions and perspectives (McCall & Ford, 1998). Reading about the experiences of people different from themselves helps children acquire sensitivity toward the plights of others (Wollman-Bonilla, 1998). In Jerry Spinelli’s award winning book, *Maniac Magee*

(1990), students can come to understand homelessness and discrimination as they read about the boy whose views changed a town. Through literature rich in themes and issues, students have the opportunity to grow in understanding of others. According to Strehle (1999), discussing difficult societal issues through literature may instill a genuine concern for others and an insight into their lives.

Steven Z. Athanases (1998) conducted a year-long study of two urban tenth grade English classes to see how students interpreted and felt about the quality texts they were asked to read. He wished to discover if it made a difference to students from diverse ethnic backgrounds to read literature that reflected their own culture. He felt this study was needed because many supporters of multicultural education had written about the benefit of such practices, but few researchers had actually asked the students themselves to reflect on their experiences.

He met with the students over the course of a year and also followed up with the students from one of the classes two years later. He asked the students questions such as which texts were the most memorable to them and why, and how did reading these texts help them. What he found was that the students could identify with the literature that reflected their own cultural background. These texts validated their experiences and gave them a sense of cultural pride. He also found that students learned about cultures that were different than their own and let go of some of the stereotypes and misconceptions that they had of others. This study is very informative of students' responses to quality literature, particularly that from culturally diverse writers.

Exposing students to different lifestyles and viewpoints will help them acquire the skills to get along with others and the mindset to appreciate pluralism (McBee, 1996).

Reading about cultures and lifestyles different from their own can help children embrace diversity and celebrate differences. It encourages an analysis of stereotypes and the creation of a more accurate image of other people (Koehler, 1996). Every child needs the opportunity to explore their heritage and take pride in their peoples' accomplishments, strengthening their own identity. Reading life stories or novels of people outside the mainstream culture can be an enlightening experience for those within the dominant culture and can promote respect and appreciation of others (Buley-Meissner, 2002).

A quality novel that could be used in upper elementary is *Sing Down the Moon* (1970) by Scott O'Dell. It is a piece of carefully researched historical fiction about the Navajo's forced removal from their home in Canyon de Chelly to Fort Sumter. The novel deals with racism and slavery. The forced removal of the Navajos by the United States government is an important issue for children to ponder. The use of this book would allow students to explore this segment of the Native American experience. If we believe strongly in teaching the mistakes of the past so not to repeat them in the future, this book could be an important addition to the reading curriculum.

Cat Running (1994) a book by Newbery Award winner, Zilpha Keatley Snyder, encourages children to examine discrimination and its effect on people. Cat lives during the Great Depression and is one of only a few people in her community that does not look down upon the "Okies" who live in the Dust-Bowl refugee camp and attend Brownwood School. When little Samantha Perkins, one of the Okies gets deathly sick, it's up to Cat to fight against the town's discrimination and ask for the help that little Samantha needs. A book such as this allows children to understand the world of others and fight issues such as class systems when they face them in their world (Strehle, 1999).

Quality books are reflections of life, and help students to understand the world around them. Unfortunately, these realistic novels are often lacking in school curricula (Leland, et al., 1999). Rejecting particular books because of the mistaken belief that we need to shield children from society's problems implies that school is a place that is separate from society rather than a place to teach children how to act with compassion and responsibility in their world (Leland, et al., 1999; Wollman-Bonilla, 1998).

The Wanderer (2000) by Sharon Creech, is a novel that brings readers on a journey across the ocean with Sophie as she works through the long-suppressed reality of her parents' death. The book is full of inner conflicts, which is at the heart of the story, as well as conflicts among the characters. The message is one of hope and understanding as Sophie comes to deal with her parents' death. Children can learn through a book, ways of dealing with life's most difficult problems.

Moving to Social Action

As quality literature encourages children to ponder issues and come to understandings about the situations of other people, it also suggests solutions. Issues such as poverty, homelessness, racial discrimination, and bullying are realities in the world of today's children, but issues that are often not discussed in our schools (Leland, et al., 1999, Wollman-Bonilla, 1998). Some of these are problems that children can actively work to improve if given the opportunity. Literature can inspire children to act to right some of the wrongs they see in their world. When we view children as capable of recognizing injustices, we empower them to make a difference in their world. Books can be the vehicle through

which students begin to understand their civic responsibility, that they can and should work to make the world a better place (Strehle, 1999; Tyson, 1999).

In studies that have been done in the elementary setting in the area of using quality literature, texts used were often picture books rather than novels, even when the students were in grades three, four, and five. Cynthia Tyson (1999) conducted a qualitative study with seven African-American males in an urban school, looking at the impact reading and discussing quality literature with societal issues had on the students. Her concern came from a conversation she had with a fifth grade African American boy who seemed disenfranchised from the reading program because the books he was asked to read did not pertain to his culture. The traditional books used for reading instruction in this classroom were simply not pertinent to his life. Tyson wondered what would happen if contemporary realistic fiction was used that dealt with issues in the real world.

Tyson met with the seven boys in her study over the course of a year. She read picture books to them with socially significant events and analyzed their oral and written responses to the books. She found that the boys made many connections to the characters and events. The students began to discuss issues of concern in their community and ways in which they could address those issues. Not only did the boys talk about ways to make a difference, they acted on some of their ideas. They gathered names on petitions and wrote letters to their congressional representatives and local newspapers and television stations dealing with the issues of guns, drugs, and homelessness. Although the books used in this study were all picture books, this study showed how using quality literature with meaningful, contemporary themes can affect student engagement in literature and learning.

Jean Craighead George has written numerous books dealing with environmental concerns. In *There's an Owl in the Shower* (1995) Borden Watson hates spotted owls. It's because of the laws to protect the spotted owls that his father has lost his job as a logger. But when he finds an orphaned owlet, Borden's ideas begin to change and eventually so does his dad's who can't help but like the little owlet that imprints on him. George's writings give children an honest look at more than one side of each environmental issue and encourage them to get involved and work to make a difference.

Sometimes books are rejected by teachers because they reflect non-normative ideas, or involve issues of racism or sexism that teachers do not feel comfortable addressing (Wollman-Bonilla, 1998). Consequently, in today's elementary classrooms, the reading material that is chosen often represents mainstream values and non-controversial themes. Discussing these issues with students, however, may give them the support they need when they face them in real-life.

An example of a book that deals with some of these issues is Mary Downing Hahn's *Stepping on the Cracks* (1991), a book about life in small-town America during WWII. The book depicts the concerns and fears of a young girl whose brother is fighting in Europe. But other issues are also brought up in this book such as physical abuse when it is discovered that the father of a town bully abuses the boy. The author deals with multiple issues in a way that can help children understand and sympathize with others. Teachers reject novels such as this because of a fear of frightening or saddening their students, but when we fail to provide opportunities for students to respond to issues in society we short-change them (Strehle, 1999).

Quality literature with complex characters and significant themes allows children to discover universal truths that unite us all. It encourages critical thinking about human life and the problems that we all face. It also allows for problem solving and working toward eliminating injustices (Koehler, 1996). “As children begin to ask the ‘why’ rather than just the ‘what, who, and where,’ the door is open to also construct the ‘how’” (Tyson, 1999, p. 157).

III. METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this study was to inquire into the use of quality literature in the form of novels for students in upper elementary grades. I felt this could best be accomplished by using a qualitative research approach with in-depth interviews, analysis of classroom discussions, and literature response activities to selected novels. I wanted to discover why teachers choose the literature that they do for use in their classroom and to learn which literature students view as meaningful. I wanted to know if literature impacts students thinking about themselves, about others, and about society.

Qualitative research proposes to search for the human meanings of social life as it is experienced by the participants (Gay & Airasian, 2000). The nature of this kind of research would allow me to capture the words and actions of both teachers and students as they explore literature in the classroom. According to Gay and Airasian, the focus of qualitative research is to tell about an activity from the perspective of the participants. Most qualitative studies have the following five characteristics:

1. The sources for data are real-world situations.
2. The data are descriptive – interview notes, observation records, etc.

3. A holistic approach is used where the natural setting provides the basis for understanding the participants.
4. The data is analyzed inductively – generalizations are made by collecting data from specific instances.
5. The researcher describes the findings from the perspective of the participant.

Qualitative research comes from the Interpretivist paradigm that views reality as complex, changing, and socially constructed. To understand a person's reality, a researcher must interact with the participants to learn about their perceptions (Glesne, 1999). In doing so, the researcher can see patterns of behavior as well as develop trusting relationships with the participants, increasing the likelihood of full disclosure. Because I wanted to know the teachers' and students' views on literature selection, I felt that a qualitative approach would best serve the research purpose.

Setting

I conducted this study in two elementary buildings in an upper middle-class, suburban school district in the Midwest. Each building has approximately 500 students in kindergarten through grade five. In one building, 8% of the students are minority students and 10% are on free and reduced lunch. In the other building, 4% are minority students and 3% are on free and reduced lunch.

Although I was interested in grades three, four and five, I knew that collecting data from three different grade levels would be too broad, so I chose one grade level in which to conduct my study. I learned that in fifth grade, most of the literature chosen for the students is historical fiction and integrated into the social studies' American history curriculum. In third grade, the focus for reading is primarily on learning to read and building fluency. I

suspected that the teachers' concerns at this grade level would revolve around choosing books at the appropriate reading level for their students, rather than on the quality of the literary themes. For these reasons, I chose fourth grade teachers and students for the study.

The reading program for fourth grade in this district seems to be in a state of flux. Teachers in different buildings, and even among themselves within one building, don't agree on which books to use with their students, or even which are "good" choices. I was aware that a district language arts committee had been meeting to try to work toward consistency in a reading program among the elementary grade levels, but no decisions had as yet been made in regards to literature selection.

Respondents

I wanted to learn about the issues that guide reading selections for classroom teachers and I wanted to see how students respond to the literature. I chose for teacher respondents, two fourth grade teachers from different buildings, so that they would not be as likely to share their interview responses with one another. All respondents have been given pseudonyms. My first respondent, Kara, has taught four years in this district, all in fourth grade. She is an energetic person, very vocal and expressive. My second respondent is Mitch who has taught for five years, one year in third grade and four years in fourth, all in this district also. He expresses himself well and gives an aura of sincerity in all that he says.

In the selection of student respondents for the study, it was my goal to have a representative sampling of both genders as well as a range of reading abilities. I was concerned that students be selected who would openly talk about their response to the novel, as well as their likes and dislikes of other books that they have read. To make the student

selection as random as possible and yet yield respondents who would be informative, I asked the classroom teacher to divide the students into low, average, and high readers, then draw the names of two students from each group. Next I asked them to choose one of each two who would be effective informants. This method seemed to work well, resulting in four female respondents and two males. All six students selected agreed to be respondents in the study.

Kara gave me the names of two girls and one boy from her class. Steph is a soft-spoken, thoughtful girl who generally likes to read books to learn about other people. She is the highest reader of Kara's three. Jeff, the average reader was very outgoing, but unsure of his ability to answer my questions. He asked me more than once why my questions were so difficult. And Lisa, Kara's more challenged reader, is a spunky girl who claims her teacher chooses funny books for her because she knows that's what she likes. From her I received a range of answers, sometimes shallow, and at other times very insightful.

From Mitch's class I also interviewed two girls and one boy. Julia, the higher reader, is a very conscientious, ambitious student who thought through her answers carefully before responding. Kevin seemed to want to say intelligent things, but often went off on tangents telling me many minor details of the humor or fantasy aspects of a book. He enjoys reading very much and is proud of how fast he can read and the length of novels he has completed. My final respondent, Natasha, is one of Mitch's lower readers. I found her to have very insightful thoughts about the literature that she has read. Her answers showed that she thinks deeply about the issues in quality literature.

Procedure

Before beginning, I asked permission to conduct this study from the appropriate personnel of the school district. In addition, I gained written consent from each of the teacher respondents and from the parents of the student respondents. All participants in the study were treated in accordance with the Institutional Review Board as approved through Iowa State University's Human Subjects Review Board (Appendix A).

As I began the study, I was concerned about my position as a teacher of talented and gifted, not wanting to be seen as an authority simply because I do reading and writing with high ability students at each grade level. To downplay my position, I explained to the teachers how interested I was to know the issues and concerns they have as a classroom teacher in regards to the teaching of reading (Taylor & Bogdan, 1998). I think this helped them feel more comfortable with my questions.

I prepared for the initial interviews by writing ten substantive questions that I wanted to ask each teacher (Taylor & Bogdan 1998). These questions were the same for each teacher (Appendix B). The questions had to do with the criteria they use to select books for their classroom and what effect they see these books having on their students. I used descriptive questioning to allow my informants to tell me what it is about teaching reading that is important to them (Taylor & Bogdan, 1998).

I met with the teachers on three separate occasions each for the interviews. After each interview, I recorded field notes, describing their speech and non-verbal actions. I transcribed the tapes from each interview, then analyzed the data for themes as well as words that carry emotional impact. From the coding that I did, I was able to see trends in what they said and this guided my questions for subsequent interviews (Ely 1997, Taylor & Bogdan,

1998). For the second and third interviews with each teacher, the questions were specific to that teacher, based upon our previous discussions (Appendices C-F).

In addition to questioning the teachers about the books they have used in the past, I asked each teacher to choose a novel to use in their classroom that is considered to be quality literature by the literary community, as evidenced by the numerous awards to their credit (Appendix P). Each teacher selected one novel and developed a reading unit to be used during this study. Further details about these novels will be given in Materials.

I met with each student three times for approximately one-half hour each time. The initial questions were the same for all of the students (Appendix G). These first interviews took place as the students began the selected novels. I tape-recorded the interviews and transcribed each before meeting with the student again. In this way I was able to ask follow-up questions based on earlier responses and probe further for deeper reflection (Appendices H-M). The final interview with each student was based on questions about the novel introduced in the classroom for the purpose of the study (Appendices N-O). As is to be expected with individuals, their levels of reflection and response varied greatly.

In addition to interviews, I observed three times in each classroom during the selected novel units. I listened to the discussions the students were having about the literature, observed the interactions of student to student and student to teacher, and noted the activities the students engaged in. From these observations I recorded field notes and compared this data to that from the transcribed interviews, looking for patterns and trends. See Table 1 for a complete timeline of interviews and classroom observations.

Table 1: Dates of Contact with Respondents

	Interview 1	Interview 2	Interview 3	Observation 1	Observation 2	Observation 3
T1 - Kara	4/3/02	4/17/02	4/24/02	4/19/02	4/22/02	4/24/02
S1 - Steph	4/1/02	4/15/02	4/22/02	same	same	same
S2 - Jeff	4/5/02	4/19/02	4/26/02	same	same	same
S3 - Lisa	4/3/02	4/17/02	4/22/02	same	same	same
T2 - Mitch	4/8/02	4/16/02	5/16/02	4/18/02	4/30/02	5/9/02
S4 - Natasha	4/9/02	4/16/02	5/6/02	same	same	same
S5 - Kevin	4/9/02	4/16/02	5/6/02	same	same	same
S6 - Julia	4/11/02	4/18/02	5/9/02	same	same	same

I also collected the students' literature responses that were a part of the daily work or periodic activities for the novel units. I analyzed class activities such as the charting of questions and the recording of connections they were making to the text. In this data I again searched for responses that would support what the respondents were saying in the interviews and would answer the research questions.

Materials

As stated earlier, I asked each teacher to choose a novel to use in their classroom that is considered to be of high literary quality. I gave some suggestions for books, but left the final decision to each teacher. Kara decided on *Lily's Crossing* (1997) by Patricia Reilly Giff, a Newbery Honor book. I recommended this book for the many awards it has won, as

well as the social issues addressed in the book. In addition to being a Newbery Honor selection, it was named a Boston Globe-Horn Book Honor Book, an American Library Association Notable Children's Book, and a Virginia Jefferson Cup Honor Book. I found book reviews by both educators and students attesting to its appeal on the Internet.

Lily's Crossing is historical fiction and portrays life on the Homefront during WWII. Lily is a young girl who spends every summer in Rockaway, New York with her father, Poppy and her grandmother, Gram. Lily is dealing with life without a mother, as her mother died when she was a baby. The United States has just joined the war, so this summer when Lily goes to Rockaway everything has changed. Her best friend moves away and Poppy is called into the army.

Lily spends much of her time feeling sorry for herself and arguing with Gram, until she meets Albert. Albert has fled Hungary with his sister Ruth after their parents were captured by Hitler's army for printing an anti-Nazi newspaper. In France, Ruth becomes ill and Albert leaves her in order to continue on to America. This leaves him with deep-felt guilt and he is determined to get back to Europe to find her. As we watch Lily and Albert's friendship unfold, we see Lily change from a girl full of deceitfulness and self-pity to one who cares for others and recognizes the importance of telling the truth.

There are many issues in *Lily's Crossing* that children can experience and discuss. The protagonist is a girl and lives in a one-parent extended household. When Poppy is called into the war, Lily deals with not only the separation from her father, but the guilt she feels from refusing to say goodbye to him. Lying is a dominant issue in this story. Lily is what we might call a habitual liar, but in finding friendship with Albert she turns away from this self-destructing habit.

Interestingly enough, Mitch also chose a historical fiction novel, but this time with a male protagonist and a male author. His choice was *Bud, Not Buddy* (Curtis, 1999), a humorous, yet serious look at homelessness during the Great Depression. This book was awarded the 2000 Newbery Award, the Coretta Scott King award for historical fiction, and the Golden Kite Award, the only award given to an author by fellow authors.

Bud is an African-American boy of ten whose mother died four years ago. He runs away from an abusive foster home as well as the orphanage that placed him there, carrying his few belongings around with him in a beat-up old suitcase tied with string. But these belongings give him clues to the father he never knew, and so he decides to set out for Grand Rapids, Michigan, in search of his father.

Along the way he faces discrimination in many forms – in the billboard signs at the soup kitchen advertising the good life of white Americans, in the white folks who refuse to cook over the same fire as the blacks even though their baby is terribly sick, and in the warning he gets from Lefty Lewis not to be found out on the road alone because he's black.

Bud's desire to find his father doesn't work out exactly as he had planned when he finds Herman E. Calloway, a worn-out musician with a grumpy disposition. But what he discovers in the end is that Herman E. Calloway is not his father, but his grandfather. Calloway's poor treatment of those around him is a result of the pain he's lived with since Bud's mother ran away from home as a teenager. Bud finds a home with the band and we're left with hope that he and his grandfather will grow to find a family in one another.

As with *Lily's Crossing*, *Bud, Not Buddy* has many issues that can be explored. Discrimination in the 1930's can be discussed and compared to today. Bullying is a concern, as Bud fights to escape from the abuse of his foster brother. And growing up is touched upon

when Bud visits Hooverville, a cluster of homeless families living near the railroad tracks where he experiences his first kiss. But probably the most prevalent theme is the idea of family. Bud loses the only family he's ever known, his mother, and sets out in search of his father. What he finds is not what he expected, but the promise of a family, in the form of Herman E. Calloway and the members of his band, gives him the home he so desperately needs. These two novels form the backbone of this study.

The study took place over the course of four weeks as the novel units were implemented by the classroom teachers. Each teacher planned and taught the unit independently, focusing on those aspects of the novel that they perceived as pertinent to their students' academic goals and interests. Both teachers had their students engaged with the novels for approximately 60 minutes each morning, which included reading, discussion, and written assignments.

Each of the teachers gave letter grades for specific written assignments as well as culminating activities. In addition to journal entries, Kara composed a final exam that included open-ended questions regarding Lily's change in character. Mitch took grades throughout the unit from teacher-directed questions about *Bud, Not Buddy* and for a final project the students researched an aspect of The Great Depression and composed newspaper articles about their topics.

IV. RESULTS AND FINDINGS

Making Connections vs. Experiencing the Unknown:

The Teachers' Perspectives on Literature

Before I began to look into how these students would respond to the selected novels, I wanted to know how they and their teachers felt about the books that were currently a part of the curriculum. Which novels did the students like, and which would they rather not read? Which books did they seem to learn from? Were there any that they would like to leave out of the curriculum? From the teachers' perspective, what were important considerations in the selection of books for reading instruction in their classrooms? How did their students respond to the novels they selected for them?

While both teachers talked about their perceived duty to use at least some of the titles on the grade level list provided by the district, they also ventured from that and developed their own reading units. What I found high on Kara's list of criteria was the consideration of reading level. She believes in the importance of having kids read books at their individual reading level, rather than at their grade level. She told me that she uses some of the books selected by this district for fourth grade, but she supplements these books with others at various reading levels for her students that need modifications. She said, "There's a lot of good books out there but they're just a little bit above my kids, so I really have to look at that, because it's a really big struggle for my kids to read a book they're not ready for."

When she does use grade level books, Kara typically has every student read the same book, but she will partner a lower reader with a higher reader for assistance. When she teaches a whole-class book, she uses questions which are usually teacher-directed rather than

student-generated. She chooses books with particular themes in mind such as friendship or by genre such as biographies. When I asked her if there were some books on the grade level list that she does not use, she named *The Great Brain* (1967) and *Mr. Popper's Penguins* (1938), saying that because she wasn't interested in them, she didn't feel her students would be either. Kara said that although some teachers have told her that kids like the humor in *The Great Brain*, she doesn't like the way the chapters are independent stories that don't fit together. As for *Mr. Popper's Penguins*, she just thinks the whole book is too silly for fourth graders as well as being very outdated.

Mitch has been a little more aggressive with the way he's gathered books for his classroom. He explained that he used the district books the first year or two of teaching, but then he wanted to branch out and develop some thematic-based units, so he applied for a grant from the Parent Teacher Organization (PTO). The PTO purchased three sets of thematically based books for him to use in literature circles. He has developed a unit on mysteries, one on survival, and an author study with Sid Fleischman books. When I asked him why he chose the books he did for these units, he said he looked at what 3rd grade uses and what 5th grade uses and wanted to expose the students to different kinds of literature than what they would get in those grades. He's also very particular about the style of writing the author uses. He focuses on choosing books with descriptive writing, encouraging his students to carry it over to their own writing.

Kara spoke of choosing literature to build fluency and comprehension. She talked about the difficulty of having students who are expected to read novels at a fourth grade level, but their fluency isn't there yet. She also had a lot of concerns about some of her

students that seem to only get surface level meaning out of a book rather than the deeper, more abstract meanings. She did say that the books she chooses to use for read-alouds are usually a higher level than the students can read on their own and often with a more challenging theme. She cited *Holes* (Sachar, 1998) and *Small Steps: The Year I Got Polio* (Kehret, 1996) as examples of her read-alouds.

Mitch seemed to come at the issue of book selection from a different angle. He talked often of looking for books rich with descriptive writing. He especially likes Sid Fleischman's writing with his use of similes and metaphors. He tries to pick books that are just enough of a stretch for his students to give them a challenge. Books that he mentioned using this year at different times as part of literature circles include *The Whipping Boy* (Fleischman, 1986), a story set in Medieval times with Old English language; *Far North* (Hobbs, 1996), a book Mitch feels is more middle school level; and *Search for the Shadowman* (Nixon, 1996), a genealogical mystery. He feels that choosing books at an advanced level for his students makes them work to understand the text, and in the process they grow and learn.

I try to have the kids read, at least once or twice a year, a book above their reading level. I think you learn more that way. If you can understand every word and know exactly what it means, you're not really thinking. But if you have to pause and think about what it means, and if you've worked through it with a partner, I think you become a better reader.

Like Kara, Mitch often chooses books for read-alouds that are more challenging than the students can read independently. Mitch shared with me his students' reactions to *The Giver* (Lowry, 1993) which he has read to his class of fourth graders the past two years. He

said although it is a novel that would be too challenging for them to read independently, his students are intrigued by it, and he is intrigued by the thinking he witnesses.

They were shocked when they found out what ‘releasing’ meant. And in the end when he slides down the hill toward the cabin, they’re like, “Wow, I can’t believe he found that cabin.” And another kid goes, “I don’t think he did. I think he died and he’s dreaming that he’s dying.” We talked about utopias and they wrote about their own utopias. They thought it was neat that there wasn’t any crime or starvation, but they were talking about how boring it would be and they wouldn’t get to choose a wife or anything. So yeah, they like their freedoms.

Mitch found *The Giver* to be a book that really allows kids to think deeply about society, how they want it to be, and their role in it. Using brave literature such as this will help equip children to deal with social injustices when they face them in real life (Ballentine & Hill, 2000).

I asked both teachers, “Of all the books you use with your students, which do you think has the most impact on how they think?” Kara quickly responded with the title, *The Pinballs* (Byars, 1977). This book is about three children who are not able to live in their homes and so are sent to a foster home. It deals with the struggles of loss and of self-identity. Kara commented that the background most of her students are from is so different than the children in this book that it is really “an eye-opener” to them. She said that her students commented that reading *Pinballs* made them realize how lucky they were and that other kids’ home life may not be like theirs. She commented that, “Maybe books are a way to expose kids to some of those things without having to experience them themselves.”

Mitch's response to which book he has used that really made his kids think was *The Whipping Boy* (Fleischman, 1986). The theme of friendship is prevalent in this book so the students had some strong discussions about that. Mitch commented that the book made his students think about justice, what's fair and what's not fair. Books are an excellent way for students to explore social issues like freedom, civil rights, and justice (Koehler, 1996).

I discussed with each of the teachers how controversial issues affect their book choices. Their comments were quite interesting. Mitch said that the only book he has used that he considers to be controversial is *Bandit's Moon* (1998) by Sid Fleischman. It is a fictional account of a Mexican bandit, Wakeen Murieta and how he came to be captured by authorities. In the author's notes in the back of the book, Fleischman tells readers that the head of Wakeen as well as the hand of Three Fingered Jack, his sidekick were placed in jars and put on display at county fairs. This is rather a gruesome practice to expose children to, but Mitch feels that kids should know about the past so not to repeat such acts in the future. The book also realistically portrays the racism of the time period between the white *gringos* and the Mexican *wetbacks*. Mitch sees this as a learning opportunity for his students and they discuss the insult of racial slurs. By reading about historical racism, we provide an opportunity for students to think about their own racial interactions today (Johnson & Giorgis, 2000, Strehle, 1999).

Kara spoke to me of more than one time she has used books with her students that contained possibly controversial material. *The Best Christmas Pageant Ever* (Robinson, 1972) is a book that is an option for fourth grade teachers in this district, and Kara has used it each year she has taught. Until this year, the entire fourth grade has read the book and then attended a live performance based on the book. Kara explained to me how last year she had

a Jewish student in her class who chose to not read the book. This perhaps would not have been an issue in itself, but the student wanted to share information about Judaism with the class, which led to a parent of a Christian student asking why her daughter could not share information about Christianity. Kara said she had a hard time keeping church and state separated. In spite of this very troubling experience, she read the book again this year with her class because of the positive response she receives from so many students. If she had had students from diverse religious affiliations she contends, she would be less inclined to use this novel.

She described a different experience she had this year when reading about racism with her class. The fourth grade social studies text has a section on Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and the racism of the 1960's. She has two African-American students, and she shared with me how much more uncomfortable it was for her to discuss this issue with this year's class. She said that she didn't want them to feel singled out, or "different."

We do get into some serious classroom discussions about that. And it's hard, especially this year, because this is the first year that I've had any African American students in my classroom, and I really don't want to offend them, but at the same time, I'm just trying to relay what history has said.

As with other teachers, Kara finds it difficult to deal with issues of racism in her classroom (Wollman-Bonilla, 1998). I suggested that perhaps discussing issues such as this would validate for these students, their ancestor's racial struggles. Kara said that one of the students is "just like everyone else" and doesn't want to be different. But the other student wanted to talk about how the whites should be blamed and how he is different than the rest of the kids. This troubled Kara greatly. Like many teachers, she is comfortable discussing

controversial material as long as it doesn't directly affect her students, but when she has students that the issue might touch on more of a personal level, she is reluctant to bring these issues to the forefront through literature. However, books can give students the space to explore identity issues (Kauffman & Short, 2001).

I asked both Kara and Mitch what they think draws kids into a book. What makes them want to read on? Kara spoke of making connections. In a study group this year she has been reading and discussing with her colleagues, *Mosaic of Thought* (Zimmerman & Keene, 1997). This book explores teaching reading comprehension and of major concern is the idea of helping students learn how to make connections to what they read. Through modeling of text-to-self, text-to-world, and text-to-text ways of making connections, Kara has been working on boosting her students' interest in reading and their ability to comprehend what they read.

Kara feels that a text has to have something that the student can relate to on a personal level. She said she believes strongly that everyone reads a book differently. What might be meaningful to one student for a particular reason might be meaningful to another student for a very different reason. Interestingly enough, as we talked further, she also spoke of "new and different" as something that gets kids excited about a book. She seemed to think through her ideas as we conversed, and concluded that in her opinion, either there has to be a strong connection made or the story has to be something entirely new to the student. In between, she said, won't hold their interest.

Mitch also shared the strength he saw in a story being new and different to the students. He stated that kids are naturally curious – they want to learn. So when it's something they've never experienced before, they're intrigued by it. He talked about

building on this curiosity by using literature that exposes students to events they may not have heard about before.

There were two books that both the students and the teachers talked enthusiastically about. Both Kara and Mitch had chosen *Holes* (1998) to use as a read-aloud this year. The positive response of the students to this book was tremendous. The character is Stanley Yelnats, an unfortunate boy who happens to be at the wrong place at the wrong time and gets accused of stealing the shoes of a famous basketball player. He gets sent to Camp Green Lake, only to find that the warden is using the resident boys to dig for a long-lost treasure in the desert. The treasure, it turns out, was left by Stanley's great-great-grandfather, and with a twist of fate, is recovered by Stanley.

Holes has two stories intertwined, that of Stanley and that of his great-great-grandfather. It is not an easy book to follow, but the kids thoroughly enjoyed it. Perhaps it is because of the humor. Kevin talked about the unusual names for the characters. Perhaps it's because it's about a kid like them who doesn't do anything wrong, but gets in trouble anyway. Julia talked about that. Or perhaps it's because it combines humor with suspense as Stanley struggles to overcome great odds. Whatever it is, Kara and Mitch both described the students as being on the edge of their seats each time they read aloud from *Holes*. They told me how the kids would beg them to keep reading when it was time to move on to other things for the day.

Holes is one that I've read aloud to them, that for some reason the kids just absolutely love. I think it's because of the twists and the way that the two stories mesh together, and they just love it. And I also think there's so many suspenseful parts in the book. When he takes off and leaves, what's he gonna do? There's no water. Where are

they going to go? And Nero gets really sick. Is he going to make it? There are just so many questions. You've gotta keep reading to answer them. If I could have read it for two hours every day they would have let me. And I don't know whether it's my love for it too that comes through, because I love that book – it's so good, but that is a book that they just absolutely eat up. They begged me to keep reading every day.

- Kara

They loved it. Oh, it was great. Drawing all the connections between Madame Zeroni and Stanley's family and how they met at the camp. When a connection's made, you should see all the hands going in the air. "I have a prediction!" They don't have any problem interrupting me to make predictions, so it's nice. That is a good quality story, and so I think they really like that.

- Mitch

Both teachers talked about the cliff-hangers used by Sachar that leave the kids begging for "just one more chapter!" Both explained how the unusual situation Stanley Yelnats found himself in intrigued their students and how the mystery of how he was going to escape the Warden and Camp Greenlake excited them. Kara said, "They were able to look past the fact that it was about a boy, but rather it was a kid and he was in this situation, and how was he going to get out of it?"

Another book that both teachers talked about as intriguing to their students was *Small Steps: The Year I Got Polio* (1996), an autobiography by Peg Kehret. Kara and Mitch came about this book in very different ways in their classrooms. Mitch used two of Kehret's adventure books as part of his literature circle selections. When the students became familiar with this author and looked in the library for more books written by her, they came across her

autobiography. As the book passed from one interested student to another, the students made the connection that perhaps she puts a handicapped character in her stories so often because she herself was in a wheelchair! This was quite an exciting discovery for them.

In Kara's classroom, a student happened upon *Small Steps*, read it, and recommended it to a fellow student. These two students shared it with Kara, who then chose it as a read-aloud to supplement her unit on biographies. She reported that both her boys and her girls were very interested in this book. She felt that the interest came from the fact that the situation was so new to them, and the main character overcame such a debilitating disease. Kehret contracted three different strains of polio, including one that constricted her throat, making it difficult to eat. Many of the students had never even heard of polio. Along with the interest in the topic, the kids really liked the humor Kehret used, particularly in the titles of her chapters. Here is Kara's perspective on how the students reacted to the book:

You know, I think they're mesmerized by somebody having polio because it's different than them. I think to hear about somebody who's paralyzed and then slowly but surely being able to work their way back to being able to walk again, I think that they're really interested in that process. And the author writes it so well, because she uses such simple terms for the kids but she puts little funny innuendoes in there that the kids really like.... I've had two kids who said it was their favorite book. And one was a boy and one was a girl. And I thought that was really interesting, because it's about a girl. Boys usually wouldn't say that.

Kara explained that as with *Holes*, *Small Steps* was so intriguing to her students that they were able to look past the fact that the main character was a girl. The humor - and the fact that polio was such a challenging obstacle to overcome in the author's life - kept her

students on the edge of their seats. Books that are not so well written, or “silly books” as Kara called them, those with shallow depth, don’t allow for this transcendence of the gender barrier.

In summary, from the interviews with Kara and Mitch, there are obvious characteristics that classify a book as quality literature in the eyes of these teachers. They talked about the descriptive writing, the similes and metaphors that enrich students’ language. They spoke of the cliff-hangers that make their students want to read on. They talked of the power of questioning and how books that cause students to ask questions get them thinking more deeply about the text. Books that make their students feel the story is about them, allowing for connections, are valuable. And books that break the gender barrier and keep both girls and boys intrigued by the story, are books they look for.

Let Me Just Imagine – Students Response to What They Read

The students had many interesting things to say about what they read and how they feel about the books their teachers choose for them. I began each student interview by asking each student to tell me about a book they’ve read that they feel really made them *think*. Interestingly enough, they interpreted this question differently than I had intended it. I had in mind *thinking* as meaning reflecting on something of importance. Their answers show that they interpreted thinking to mean “work really hard” or “search for answers”. The books they cited in response to this question are ones they perceived as difficult for them.

Julia talked about *Far North* (Hobbs, 1996) as a book that made her think because so many things happened in the middle of the book that she had to keep track of. Steph talked about *Sacajawea* (2000) by Joseph Bruchac as a book that made her think. She explained

that it was too difficult to follow because it was told in two voices. The author volleys between a narrative written in Sacajawea's point of view and that of William Clark.

We had to try to figure out what they were saying, and there were two stories in it, and we had to try to figure out how they fit together. We had to try so hard to figure out what they were saying, we didn't really get anything out of it. It seemed like he wasn't with her, but he was.

-Steph

Not surprisingly, the name of *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone* (Rowling, 1997) came up quite often in my discussions with the kids. Both Jeff and Kevin cited it as their favorite book. They spoke of their enjoyment of the fantasy aspect of the book. In Kevin's words: "I just like knowing that that isn't possible, but pretending it's possible. And that makes a cool thing in my head." In my discussion with Jeff though, when I asked him if there was ever a book that he had a hard time finishing, he said *Harry Potter* and explained that it didn't get interesting until half-way into it. I asked him why he kept reading it, and he commented that so many of the other kids in the class were reading it, he wanted to too.

Linda B. Gambrell has researched extensively on reading motivation and has found that children are more motivated to read a book if they have heard about it from someone else (Gambrell, 1996). Julia as well, said she tried to read *Harry Potter* because other kids were reading it, but she found it too frightening, "And the movie was even scarier! My older sister didn't even want to finish watching it!" Lisa commented quite honestly, that she didn't like the book because it went on too long about when Harry was a little boy.

The students were all very clear on what they do like in literature. They all said they like to use their imagination when they read. They like adventure and many of them

commented that they enjoy reading about characters overcoming obstacles in their lives.

Natasha said, “Somebody getting lost and then getting found, or getting a disease, then getting healed. Stuff like that. Adventure ones and ones that teach you about what other people are like.” We can build upon this and provide literature that not only teaches students about others, but helps them develop insight and understanding.

All of the students said that they like humor in a book. What they *don't* like are books that go on too long about the same thing. Steph's response when I asked her what she doesn't like in a book was, “Books that don't get involved very quickly. Like if they just start off and tell about themselves too long. Or if it's not challenging enough.” Kyle cited *Hot and Cold Summer* (Hurwitz, 1984) as a book he didn't like because, “It was so boring. It just went on and on about stuff that was not even close to interesting.”

Holes was definitely intriguing to the students with all its twists and turns of plot. Natasha had a very insightful comment about this book: “Like a lot of movies, you have to see the whole thing to understand one part, and with this, you had to read the whole book to understand one part.” Lisa cited *Holes* as one that made her think, “Because it kept switching between two stories and in the end they came together. It's like a mystery sort of, but not really.” All of the kids responded with something like Julia's, “I *love* that book!” when asked how they liked it.

Lisa gave high praise to *Small Steps*:

I think it's really, really good. She went to the hospital and then moved to a different state and then a different state again because she had like five different kinds of polio. And then she can choke if she drinks milk. But she got better and she drank a shake. And the name of the chapter was “Chocolate Milkshake” and then it goes “Yum,

yum, yum.” One day she yelled, “I can move my legs! I can move my legs!” And now she can walk.

Lisa said that the book taught her that if she ever gets sick she should keep trying to get well. Natasha told me how *Small Steps* taught her that, “People are different and not all people are healthy. Some people have diseases.” Biographies of people who go through life-changing experiences can be the role models for children when they need them most (Freeman et al., 1999).

The students talked of how they like to be challenged by the books that they read. I asked them why they think their teachers choose the books for them that they do, and many of them responded with, “To challenge us.” Kevin said at one point that he was disappointed in the book his teacher selected for him for the adventure literature circles, because it was, “No offense, but not very thick, and I’m used to reading BIG books.”

The girls remarked that they like reading about people who are different than them. Besides making her think, Julia said that in *Far North*, she liked learning about the Native culture, especially the potlatches. I asked if she knew anyone from a culture that was different from her own, and she said one of her classmates is from Serbia. She enjoyed telling me about the holiday traditions her friend celebrates. Both Julia and Steph mentioned the book *Bloomability* (Creech, 1998) as one that exposed them to what it would be like to be poor. Julia said, “It just makes me know how lucky I am. And it lets me learn about other people’s lives.” Steph said, “Some people don’t have as much money and it’s hard for them.” Through books, these students are reflecting on the lifestyles and life circumstances of others and coming to understand people’s differences.

The boys reported to like fantasy. In response to what he liked about *Harry Potter*, Kevin said,

Well, everything is make-believe. And I don't like real things, because... if you've ever read a non-fiction book like about a state, it's really boring. But in *Harry Potter* there's always adventure and he's always doing something with dragons and his wand and Professor Flickwick – he's really small, so he's different than most other ones.

Interestingly enough, although the girls claimed to like realistic fiction and biographies, they seemed to like the genre for the same reason the boys stated they liked fantasy. It all came down to using their imagination. They talked of the interest they have in learning what it was like in different time periods. Lisa said of biographies, "It would be cool if you could go back for a day and be them." And Steph commented, after reading a biography on Harriet Tubman, that it "made me think about how I treat other people."

For these students, quality literature is that which leaves them wanting to read more. It intrigues them. It leaves them in suspense. Quality literature is full of adventure, with fascinating characters overcoming great obstacles. It is sometimes hilarious and almost always allows them to use their imagination. Often, it gives them insight into others' lives.

In the following section, I will relate how literature was used that met the definition of quality from both the teachers' and the students' perspectives with an additional dimension. The two novels used in the classrooms by these teachers for the purpose of this study show that students can be engaged, intrigued, and motivated by a book at the same time they can learn about themselves and others. The section is divided to reflect the responses to the two separate novels. After a brief introduction describing the reaction to the novel, each research question will be addressed separately. To review, the research questions are:

1. Does reading literature with complex characters, those with internal conflicts, or issues that need to be worked out in their lives, help children define their sense of self?
2. Can the books we have our students read make a difference in the attitudes they hold about other people?
3. Does introducing students to rich themes through literature help them understand society and the contributions each child can make?

Insight and Inspiration: Literature that Transforms

Students and Teachers Response to Selected Novels

Before using *Lily's Crossing* and *Bud, Not Buddy* in their classrooms, choosing literature to give their students insight into themselves and others was not of critical concern to Kara and Mitch. According to the first interviews, Kara's chief concern was the reading level of the book. Mitch focused, for the most part, on descriptive writing when choosing a novel. Kara was surprised, and both she and Mitch were pleased with the degree of critical thinking their students engaged in with these two novels. They reflected on issues such as families, relationships, and growing up as these two novels unfolded.

***Lily's Crossing* – Bridges to New Understandings**

The first day that I observed in Kara's classroom I could see the constructivist practices that she uses to involve her students in learning. The students were not answering the questions; they were asking them. They were sitting together on the carpet, sharing with one another the questions they had recorded on sticky notes as they read. Kara had giant

pieces of chart paper on which she was recording their questions. The students were fully engaged in thinking critically about the book as they asked questions and discussed possible answers. Kara told me afterward that she has never had a time when the kids went back into a book so much to explain what they're thinking or to find evidence to support their claim. She was worried that the amount of time they were spending in discussions would cut into other subject areas. "We could talk for an hour every day about this book!"

The class had developed a very elaborate yet effective system of reflecting on the many questions they were asking (See Table 2). If the questions became answered in the text, they marked it with an "A". If they could infer the answer from the text they marked the question with an "I". If someone in the class knew the answer from previous experience, or if there was a consensus by a class discussion it received a "D" and if a student researched to find the answer, it was given an "R". Not only were students asking their own questions about the text, but through discussions or research they were discovering answers and monitoring their own learning. Allowing students to pose the questions, search for information, and evaluate their answers is a very effective technique for learning from a constructivist or inquiry perspective (Heald-Taylor, 1996).

"Constructivist teachers encourage and accept student autonomy and initiative. Students who frame questions and issues and then go about answering and analyzing them take responsibility for their own learning and become problem solvers and, perhaps more important, problem finders" (Brooks & Brooks, p. 103). Kara was experimenting with student autonomy, encouraging them to ask the questions rather than answering teacher-directed ones. In a previous unit, what she calls Reading Journey, she had students select their own books to read and write their own questions, but this was the first time she had

used questioning as a teaching tool to this degree. Questioning was in fact her main focus for the class discussions with this novel.

Kara told me in one of the interviews, that the books her students get involved in the most are those that leave them with a lot of questions. We talked about the high interest her students had for *Lily's Crossing* and she felt that much of this was because of the questions the students had. They wondered why Lily lied so much, and why Albert left Ruth in France, both questions that show how the students are intrigued by the struggle to understand others. I asked Kara how much of a role questioning plays in her students' interest in a book. Her answer was "Huge!" This is how Kara told me the questioning played out as the students read and responded to *Lily's Crossing*:

We have two wall chart papers and they probably come up with twelve to fifteen questions a day. And then we go back every day and reflect on it. What have we answered, what have we not? What can we research? What can we not? We've gone to the nurse. We've gone to the encyclopedias. We've gone to the Internet to research different things about WWII that we're learning about. The principal helped the kids figure out what D-Day was and where Normandy was. So it's been really neat to watch them grow and take it beyond the literal meaning of the book.

Table 2 shows a list of some of the questions Kara's students asked and answered as they read *Lily's Crossing*. The questions are in chronological order, taken off the wall charts on which they were recorded. Most of the questions answered Research Question #2 about understanding others. This is not surprising, as the nature of this book lends itself more readily to the understanding of others. However, as the students came to understand Lily, many applied this knowledge to themselves as well.

Table 2: Lily's Crossing							
Student Created Questions	Answered in Text	Answered Through Discussion	Inferred From the Text	Researched	Understand Self	Understand Others	Move to Social Action
Why is the book called <i>Lily's Crossing</i> ?			X			X	
Why do the chapters have stars?		X				X	
Does Lily cross over a bridge?	X					X	
Why does she always peel a star from the ceiling?	X					X	
Why was Lily spying on the Orbans?			X			X	
Why does she tell so many lies?		X				X	
Why does Lily sit last seat, last row?		X				X	
Where is Normandy?				X			
Who are the Allies?		X					
Will Lily and Gram get closer when Poppy is gone?		X				X	
Why does Albert need to find Ruth?			X			X	
How will Gram support herself and Lily?		X					
What and where is Coney Island?				X			
Why didn't Albert stay with Ruth?	X					X	
How long did WWII last?				X			
Why is the anthem called Marseillais?				X			
How will Lily get out of her lie to Albert?	X					X	
What is a destroyer?		X					
What is blood poisoning?				X			
Will Albert convince Lily that music is good?			X			X	
How will Lily tell Albert she lied?	X					X	
Will they lie on the ship?		X					

Research Question #1:

Does reading literature with complex characters, those with internal conflicts or issues that need to be worked out in their lives help children define their sense of self?

As the students read and discussed *Lily's Crossing*, some of the students were able to critically analyze Lily's actions and create hypotheses about her motives. In addition, some of the students were able to transfer this understanding of Lily and her actions to themselves. Here is what Kara's three students had to say in the final interview with each as we discussed *Lily's Crossing*:

Steph:

Q: Does reading about Lily's lies help you to reflect on how important it is to be honest?

A: Yeah, because if I've told a bunch of lies, they won't know what's true and what's not and they'll just wonder and wonder.

Jeff:

Q: Were you ever dishonest about something?

A: Yeah.

Q: How did you feel?

A: Mad at myself. And it's hard to get away from a lie. Like Lily did. She had to tell the truth.

Q: What about lying in your life? Is lying bad?

A: Yeah, because my mom and dad always tell me to tell the truth and sometimes I lie. But they always say, “We’re counting on you to tell the truth.” And if you really did lie, you feel guilty.

Lisa:

Q: Do you think some bad habits start and then it’s hard to stop them, like Lily’s lying?

A: Friendship sometimes. Like getting in a fight with my friends, and I’m like, “Don’t talk to me, I’m messed up right now! I just wish I could get away. My mom and dad are divorced.” And I was sad, so I wasn’t very nice to my friends.

Lisa explained to me how she got over her “bad habit” of being difficult with her friends when her parents started getting along and visitation times were set up with her dad. Both Steph and Jeff talked about the times in their own lives when their lying has hurt themselves or others. Lying is a strong theme in *Lily’s Crossing* and one that is an important issue for children to reflect upon. As Strehle (1999) pointed out, children should be given books with themes that allow them to reflect on their thoughts and feelings.

During the third time I observed in Kara’s room, the students were discussing what it means to have a true friend. They were commenting that Lily lied to Margaret, but you don’t lie to a *true* friend, so Albert is a true friend to Lily. This friendship with Albert is what the kids felt turned Lily around from a deceitful and boastful person to a caring and honest person. Lily is a complex character who goes through life-altering changes (Lukens, 1999).

Another student question that the class discussed this day was “Will Paprika (the cat) change Lily’s life?” This was a very thoughtful question for them to have come up with and their answer astonished me even more. A student raised his hand and said that Paprika

helped Lily make friends with Albert, and Albert has helped Lily stop lying, so yes, the cat has changed her life. Lisa described Lily as “addicted” to Albert because he was the first true friend she had. Exploring the meaning of friendship can help children understand themselves as well as others.

Helping students make personal connections to a book is a powerful technique to capture and hold children’s interest as well as understand the book’s important issues. With her study of *Mosaic of Thought* (Keene & Zimmermann, 1997), Kara has been working with her students to recognize ways they can connect to a text. On a wall poster in the classroom, Kara recorded any personal connections the students were making to the book. Some of them were reflecting on Lily’s relationship to Gram and her father, writing about their relationships to their own parents and grandparents. Kara shared with me this emotional connection her students made to *Lily’s Crossing*.

In *Lily’s Crossing*, one of the connections is that it takes place in WWII and we’re in a war situation now. I think that before they may not have been able to understand what Lily was feeling, or Albert was feeling, to have a plane flying low and they were scared. But now they can understand what it feels like to them to always be scared when a plane’s flying over. Or feeling on the edge because you don’t know what’s going to happen. Or what’s going on overseas. Or people you love being sent over there. I think they’re better able to understand the book because they’re making a connection because they’ve actually experienced that too.

Through this historical fiction novel, these students were able to explore their own feelings about the September 11th attack on America. They discussed the horror of learning how people were used as weapons of terror and the fear they feel now when airplanes fly

overhead. They are able to understand their own feelings as they read about someone else in a different time and place going through similar experiences (Paterson, 2000).

Journal entries collected from Kara were sparse and did not yield much in the way of data to support this research question. Jeff wrote however, that he is like Lily because he fights with someone in his family, his brother, and he doesn't like it when someone in his family leaves. Most of the journal entries, however, were predictions for upcoming chapters.

Research Question #2:

Can the books we have our students read make a difference in the attitudes they hold about other people?

The first time that I observed in Kara's classroom, the students were checking their chart of questions to see which they might be able to answer. One question that had been recorded from a previous class session was, "Will Lily cross over a bridge?" I inferred from the conversation that this question was in response to the book's title *Lily's Crossing* and the fact that the cover shows a bridge behind Lily. The students were engaged in discussing what the bridge might be. Lisa, my respondent who struggles in reading, raised her hand and said, "Maybe Lily is crossing over a bridge. Not that bridge, but how she used to lie and now she's promised not to lie anymore, so maybe we can think of that as a bridge." This is deep metaphorical thinking! The students examined Lily's actions and discussed the effect lying has on themselves and others.

I asked Kara if she thought her students might understand why Lily lied in the beginning of the book, or why anybody lies. Her response was that she thought it would be difficult for them to identify why Lily lied, but she would ask the kids to see what their

responses would be. Later in the day, as I observed the final class of this unit, she did ask the students this question. They surprised Kara with thoughtful answers such as, “Maybe because her mom died, so she was trying to get everything her way and have it be the way she wanted.” Or, “Maybe to make herself look better.” And yet another student said, “Maybe because she’s sad and it makes her feel better.” These students were exploring the reality of lying and they were coming to understandings of others.

Jeff mentioned in an interview, that Lily was a lot like Imogene in *The Best Christmas Pageant Ever* because “they both started out mean, but became nice when they made some friends”. He told me of his response to an essay question that his teacher asked on the final exam about the meaning of the bridge:

I put down that Lily crossed over from her mom dying and Poppy was gone, and she changed from being a lying person to a good person. So she was trying to change her life from being a bossy, mean sort of person to a nice person.

Jeff, like so many of the students, was coming to understand how people change because of circumstances in their lives. The students were also exploring how people’s actions affect others. These are meaningful issues that were addressed through this book.

I asked Kara if she thought her students felt empathy for Lily. Kara responded that because Lily was a deceitful person in the beginning of the book, it took the students a while to feel empathy for her, but when Poppy went off to fight in the war, the students began discussing what it would be like if someone close to them had to go away. Jeff reflected on how sad he would be to have his father leave to fight in a war. He said his dad could die and he’d never see him again. By reading about Lily and her fear of losing her father and

reflecting on what it would be like to lose someone close to you, these students have a greater understanding of others who lose someone close to them.

Steph talked about how sad she'd be if her mother died, but she'd be glad that at least her dad and her grandma were with her. She liked the tradition Lily had each summer she arrives in Rockaway of hanging a star on her ceiling in memory of her mother. In Steph's words, "Putting up a star helps her remember her mom and go through her feelings." I asked Steph for clarification and she said, "Like how she feels about her mom dying. That helps her feel better when she puts up a star every time she goes to Rockaway." As Katherine Paterson (1999) said in her interview for *New Advocate*, we need to provide children with books that illuminate and heal.

Near the end of the book, Lily gives one of her precious stars to Albert. Steph wrote in her journal, "It was so important that Lily gave Albert a star in a lot of ways. Lily thought that she could give out her love to Albert by giving him the star to give to Ruth. Lily also thought that Albert missed Ruth so much." The kids were looking at the deeper meanings of the book and coming to some important understandings about loss. This can help them understand how difficult death is for someone who loses a loved one. Death will, at some point in their lives, affect them directly.

Kara talked about the empathy her students felt for Albert in *Lily's Crossing* because of all he went through to get to America – having his parents taken by the Nazis, being separated from his grandmother, and then leaving his sister Ruth behind in France. Steph remarked that Albert wants to be courageous, but it's hard for him. She was exploring the idea that life's hardships might come between how a person wants to be and what they actually accomplish.

Lily's Crossing not only offers the opportunity to explore typical themes for children such as lying, friendship, and one-parent households, but there are deeper themes imbedded in the story for students to find. I asked Steph why she thought Albert's parents published the newspaper slandering the Nazis when they knew it could get them in trouble. Here was her response:

A: I think they did that because they were trying to be like people who were slaves.

Like slaves were trying to get free from the white people. I'm thinking that they were trying to get free from the Nazis.

Q: So you think it was worth it to them to risk their lives and the lives of their children?

A: Uh-huh. To save the people's lives. To try to.

I found this to be a very insightful analogy she made to compare the struggle against Hitler to that of slaves against their oppressors. Reading about the plight of one group of people can help children understand the struggles of many more. Quality literature that deals with issues such as the struggle for freedom helps students create accurate images of others (Koehler, 1996).

Kara found herself surprised by this level of thinking some of her students were doing as they read and discussed *Lily's Crossing*. She confessed that she was unsure about trying this novel with her class, feeling that she had some lower readers who would struggle to comprehend it. What she found was that some of her students surprised her.

One of them in particular was her lower reader, Lisa, one of my respondents. Here is what Kara said about Lisa:

She doesn't have a very easy time reading, but she's a very insightful kid. So I'll think, "Oh, she doesn't get it," but then she'll come out and say something and she does get it. She'll make predictions of what's going to happen and it will be what happens. She'll use clues from the book to get to that point. Or she'll connect something to her life and I'll be, "I didn't even realize you understood what was happening!" Probably she has an easier time with inferential than literal, which is usually backwards, but she'll say something and I'll be like, "Oh my gosh, that's so great!"

I asked Kara how many of her students, like Lisa, would get the deeper meanings if given books to read like *Lily's Crossing*. Her response told me a lot about how she struggles with literature selection choices, especially for her lower readers:

I think I make the mistake of so often thinking that if they are literal they aren't gonna get it. And I think that it's hard because you don't want them to get in over their head, but sometimes we don't just take the risk and let them try and see what's going to happen with it. But everything you read says kids need to really read at their instructional level. It's just a challenge, because if they're lower you want them to be better, but maybe if you give them something like that (*Lily's Crossing*), that they really like, it might drive them to read more.

Then Kara reflected aloud upon her teaching and the students' learning:

But there's a lot of books we read that aren't very good about grasping deeper meaning. It's just scary because you don't want those kids who aren't getting it all the time to get frustrated. But I'm glad I took a chance with *Lily's Crossing*, because I was worried about a few of my kids. I'm glad I took the leap and did it, because

they're learning a lot. I was very worried that some of my students weren't going to get it. But there are some students who have really surprised me and gotten the deeper levels of the book and asked some awesome questions. Like the meaning of *Lily's Crossing*. They've come back to that question so many times. "Maybe crossing over means this." "Maybe crossing over means this." And they just keep coming back to it, and it's so cool. And it makes me think that they can maybe do a little bit more than... maybe I need to raise the bar a bit. Maybe they can do a little bit more than I was anticipating.

3. Does introducing students to rich themes through literature help them understand society and the contributions each child can make?

Data to support this research question was not readily observable through the interviews, classroom observations, or review of student journals. This is perhaps due to the nature of the book itself. As evident in the questions students were asking and the discussions they were having about *Lily's Crossing*, the book seems to lend itself to questions and answers about other people. By gaining insight into other people, the data shows that many of the students were able to transpose this knowledge into insights about themselves. Understanding self and others is important to understanding society, but there is a larger step to take to move to social action.

Bud, Not Buddy – Trains to Take Us There

Mitch was pleased with the quality of *Bud, Not Buddy* (Curtis, 1999) and the enthusiasm with which his students tackled the novel. He considers it one of the best books

he's used. Being challenged and giving them a "good story" according to Mitch, keeps his students interested and learning more.

Bud, Not Buddy, begins with Bud's horrific experience in the foster home of the Amoses. When he escapes, he decides it's time to set off on his own to find his father. In the meantime, he becomes reunited with his friend Bugs who convinces him that riding the rails to the west would be a great experience. What fun the students had with Bug's explanation of going to the bathroom on the train. "You just kind of lean out of the door and go. You get a real nice breeze." Bud responds, "Oh, man! That sounds great! Count me in, I can't wait!" (p. 63). The train is Bud's hope for a new life, a life away from the loneliness and humiliation he's known as an orphan. But, as fate would have it, he misses getting on the train with Bugs and so sets off on his own once again, determined to find his father.

Because Mitch had not used *Bud, Not Buddy* before in his reading program, he looked for a teacher's manual on the internet. He found one that he liked published by Small Planet Communications (2002) and available on Book Club's web site. Mitch chose activities for his students from the many possibilities suggested in the novel guide. He gave the students a sheet on which to record the allusions - references to people and events from the 1930's. He was thrilled that his students were volunteering to research these allusions. At one point in the book, Bud describes himself as "sneaking around the street like Pretty Boy Floyd." One student researched on the Internet at home that evening and reported back to the class the next day, that Pretty Boy Floyd was a famous bank robber who robbed banks and was involved in other criminal activity from 1904-1934. When I asked Mitch why he thought the allusions interested the kids so much, he said that fourth graders are naturally curious and like to learn new things.

In our second interview, Kevin said the language of the book intrigued him. He commented that, “They don’t use proper English because it’s a long time ago, and Bud, he doesn’t talk correctly, so it sounds just really neat when he talks.” He said he really enjoyed the author’s style of writing. Natasha told me that she liked learning about The Great Depression. As a culminating activity, Mitch had each student choose a topic related to the Depression to research and write about as a newspaper article.

Throughout the book, the students were making predictions of what would happen next. During my third observation they were nearing the end of the book and the excitement was obvious as they tried to put the pieces of the puzzle together. They knew that Bud was surprised that Herman E. Calloway was so old. They had wondered with Bud about what was hidden in the locked closets, and they knew that Bud thought he was sleeping in a little dead girl’s room. In addition, somehow there was a connection between the rocks Bud had kept all those years, and the ones Herman E. Calloway had in his glove box. I watched and listened as the students began to make sense of it all and then began to guess that Herman was Bud’s grandfather, and the dead girl’s room was his own mother’s! They finished the book the following day and Mitch told me how excited the students were to discover they were right!

Research Question #1:

Does reading literature with complex characters, those with internal conflicts or issues that need to be worked out in their lives help children define their sense of self?

After reading the first chapter where the students learned that Bud is an orphan, Mitch read poems to the students by African-American poet Langston Hughes. They read “Dreams”

(in *The Dream Keeper and Other Poems*, Scholastic, 1994) and then wrote about their own dreams. After reading “Mother to Son” (in *The Dream Keeper and Other Poems*, Scholastic 1994) where a mother tells her son to never give up even when times are tough, Mitch asked the kids to write about how the poem relates to the novel. They shared these reflections with one another and Mitch said they had “an awesome discussion”:

It’s an African American mother writing a poem to her son, and it starts out, “Life ain’t no crystal stair, there are bare patches, there are tacks.” And the kids – their interpretations! I gave each group time to interpret the poem, and their interpretations were incredible! This one kid raised his hand, and said, “Well, there’s no such thing as a crystal stair, but what I see that as is perfection. You know how a crystal stair would be absolutely perfect and beautiful. And life really isn’t like that. The tacks represent the bad things in your life.” I mean he went completely...and the other kids are going, “Oh, yeah, yeah!” I mean, we had probably, the poem’s not even twenty lines long, and we talked about it for probably forty-five minutes, and they were relating... “Well, I’ve had some tacks in my life...” They were raising their hands...It was incredible. I wish you’d been in here for it. It was absolutely...It was about the neatest thing.

By engaging in dialogue about a character in a novel, these students were finding the opportunity to explore their own lives. As Kauffman & Short (2001) explained, they were coming to understandings about their own identity. They were reflecting on accomplishments and joyous occasions as well as the “tacks” which are a part of everyone’s life.

Some students felt a connection to Bud because they too live with only one parent. The following journal responses were from students who were not my respondents. To answer the question, “What has Bud learned about families?” one student responded:

He’s learned that some have a mom and dad, and some only have one. Some families have brothers and sisters and some don’t so families are different like my mom and dad are divorced and my dad is in Arizona living there.

Another student wrote:

What I think he has learned about is that even if they are gone they are still with you.

And yet another wrote:

Bud would say family is who you take care of. Bud thinks that even though he couldn’t see his mom she loved Bud.

After this inspiring conversation about “Mother to Son” Mitch brought in a collection of poetry books and gave the students time to read poems by a variety of authors. Their assignment was to then select one poem that reminded them of their own life. They copied the poems and illustrated their paper; then they wrote a paragraph or more on how the poem connected to their life. Julia selected a poem about a working mom who takes her daughter to work with her and how the daughter helps with all the things her mother does wrong. Julia commented how she likes to be with her own mother and help her with the work she does. These students were reflecting on themselves and the relationships they have with their own family members because the issue of family was prevalent in the book. They were coming to understandings about themselves as they read about others (Strehle, 1999).

Like Kara, Mitch talked about the deep and meaningful discussions they were having in class with the novel he chose:

The discussions were awesome. We talked about the significance of the name Bud. The idea of starting out as something small but with a lot of potential, and growing into something really beautiful. We really had a good discussion of that. And then we talked about doors opening and closing in your life. And at first, some of the kids were thinking in concrete terms. But then one of the kids said, “Well, I think of a door closing as a challenge in your life, and a door opening as an opportunity in your life. One of the kids said that, and then a bunch of the kids were going, “Yeah! That makes sense!”

When Bud visits the library trying to enlist the help of his friend, Miss Hill, and discovers that she has married and moved away, he remembers his momma telling him that when one door closes another opens. Bud wasn’t completely sure what that meant, but the students sure did. According to Mitch, they had quite a lively discussion about it. He told me that several of the students transferred the metaphor to their own lives. One in particular that stood out to him was a student who shared that he had tried out for a select soccer team and didn’t make it, so he went to a different team. He was glad that it turned out the way it did, because he really enjoyed playing for the team he was on. Kevin talked about how moving from one town to another, or even just leaving one grade to enter another could be doors closing and opening. As Katherine Paterson (2000) said, we need to give children books that illuminate and heal. Childhood is a time to learn to make decisions and mature in understanding of self.

In the final interviews, I asked the students about Bud’s sensitivity to being called Buddy. They knew that his mother had told him to never let anyone call him Buddy, that was a name for a dog. I asked each of them if they had anything they were sensitive about.

Kevin told me that he sometimes gets teased about using big words and reading too fast, and that bothers him. Natasha, with light hair and freckles said, “People in my class tease me about my eyebrows because you can’t see them very well.” They both said that they could empathize with Bud because they’ve been teased about something too. Reading about the very real childhood experience of teasing can help a child know that they aren’t alone – it happens to others too. Reading books about the difficulties of life helps children understand human nature (Lukens, 1999, Ballentine & Hill, 2000).

Research Question #2:

Can the books we have our students read make a difference in the attitudes they hold about other people?

Once the students began the book, Mitch had a chart for them to keep track of “Bud’s Rules and Things for Having a Funner Life and Making a Better Liar out of Yourself.” He explained to the kids how each one of Bud’s rules tells them something about him and the kind of life he’s had to lead. Mitch told the kids that it’s like looking at life through Bud’s eyes. Bud’s rules had to do with such complications in life as having your possessions constantly taken from you, people lying to you or about you, and those you care about dying. By understanding Bud’s actions as survival techniques, students can better understand others around them. As Athanasas (1998) found in his study of a diverse high school English class, reading about differences helps students become sensitive to the troubles of others.

A characteristic of this book that may have intrigued Mitch’s students was that Bud’s situation was so different from any of the their own. Most of these students are secure in the knowledge that they have homes with families that love them. They have food to eat and a

place to sleep. According to Mitch, the students talked about appreciating their own homes after reading *Bud, Not Buddy*. Both Natasha and Julia explained to me in the final interviews what Deza Malone's mom meant when she told Deza that homeless children are just dust in the wind. Natasha's interpretation was that "homeless children aren't wanted and nobody notices them or wants them around." Julia described Bud as having no control over where he goes. He had to go to the orphanage and then was sent to the foster home. But she felt that Bud gained control of his life when he made a plan to find his father. Homelessness is an unfortunate reality in our world, but when we give students a chance to explore it through a book, they are one step further toward finding the compassion and understanding necessary to eliminating it (Tyson, 1999).

In the interviews, I asked the students if they had ever lost someone they were close to, as Bud lost his mother. Kevin said his next door neighbor died. We discussed Bud's suitcase in which he carries all the mementos of his mother and the clues to his father, and I asked Kevin if he has anything that reminds him of his neighbor who died. He told me that every time his mother bakes snickerdoodle cookies it reminds him of her because she used to come over and make cookies with them and then have a cookie exchange in the neighborhood. By making a personal connection to the book as Kevin did, students can not only understand their own feelings and actions, but those of others.

As Bud begins his journey to find his father, he experiences some incidents of racism. In Hooverville, the shantytown of unemployed men and their families waiting to ride the rails, Bud witnesses a white family refuse help from the blacks. Later, when he's picked up on the side of the road by Lefty Lewis, he learns how dangerous it is for a brown-skinned boy to be out on the road at night. I asked the students how they felt about the race relations

of the time period. Both Kevin and Natasha said that they had discussed this at home with their parents. Natasha's mother explained to her that sometimes the whites felt superior to the blacks. Kevin was actually upset to read about the race relations of the 1930's. He commented emphatically:

I got really angry. The whites acted like they were chopped liver, as my mom said. Like they were really bad. The white family didn't want to use the same fire as the black ones used to cook their food on. That's like really, really uncalled for. They're all people!

Racism is still one of the most difficult issues facing our children today. By understanding the past, students can make a difference in the future. Cynthia Tyson (1999) wrote that children can and indeed should work to make the world a better place.

When Bud finally finds Herman E. Calloway, whom he suspects of being his father, he's frustrated with what a callous man he is. As adults, we understand that life experiences can cause personality conflicts. I was interested to know if children could understand this as well. I asked the students why they thought Herman E. Calloway was so harsh with everyone. Here are their responses. Note that it is difficult to tell who is the low reader:

I think he might have felt that he was better than everyone else. He might have felt that he didn't need them or something.

-Natasha

Probably because he wasn't having such a good life so he had to just take it out on somebody.

-Kevin

I don't really know, but probably he was sad about his life, and that makes people be mean to others because they want other people to feel as bad as they do.

-Julia

Natasha, Kevin and Julia were all coming to some important understandings about human nature. This will help them find the compassion to help others through life's difficult passages (Ballentine & Hill, 2000, Wollman-Bonilla, 1998).

Mitch said in our final interview, that several of the kids told him *Bud, Not Buddy* was their favorite book they'd ever read. When I asked the students what they thought of the book, they responded very positively. On a scale from one to ten, here are their responses:

Ten, because it's really good. It's kind of sad at the beginning because he didn't have a home and he has to go through all this pain, and then when he finally gets a home it's really, really nice for him. I think that's cool when it goes from sad to happy.

-Julia

I kinda liked it like a nine. I like the way Bud talks like people did back then. He's like full up to the top of his head with poverty. And he doesn't know proper English. The guy writes it the way a poor person would talk. That's one of the best books I've read.

-Kevin

Ten. He didn't just give up and stay in Flint and wait for his body to rot.

-Natasha

As with *Lily's Crossing*, *Bud Not Buddy* has many meaningful themes to be explored.

Like Kara, Mitch was impressed with the critical thinking his students engaged in with this

novel. Near the end of the novel he asked the students to write in their journals about themes they picked up on throughout the book. Here is one student's response:

I think some possible themes are family because he had none so he is striving to find his father. He wants to know about his family. He knows no matter what happens, you gotta keep on trying. He has lived a really tough life and that is why I think that. He hasn't given up yet and doesn't intend to. Another is that you have to look for the good in everything. I think that because he always talks about doors opening and closing.

Quality literature allows children to contemplate meaningful issues in real life, linking their lives with that of the character (Freeman et al., 1999).

Mitch knew that this was not an easy book for his students. On the second day that I observed in his classroom I watched the students tackle direct and indirect characterization. He was telling them, "This is tough, but I know you are up to it." Mitch said to me at one point, "Fourth graders can do so much more than most people give them credit for." I asked him to expand on this, and his response was:

My kids get offended when I ask them really easy things. They're like, "Oh, this is so easy!" They get mad. They think I'm wasting their time. Seriously! It is so funny. So I try to challenge them and set it just a little bit higher than what they can get without a little nudge from me. A lot of times if you just give them that little hint or little clue, you'll see the light go on, and for the most part they got it by themselves. I think you learn more that way because when you're struggling and you're right there, you almost have it, and you get that little push, I think you learn a lot more.

3. Does introducing students to rich themes through literature help them understand society and the contributions each child can make?

This research question is a more difficult one to analyze from the data collected. Although not explicit in the comments of students, their remarks suggest the potential for social action. For instance, as Kevin, Natasha and Julia spoke of the disgust they felt of the racism that was prevalent in the 1930's as they read about it in *Bud, Not Buddy*, it was clear that for these students, prejudice would be something they would fight if and when it comes up in their lives. Reading about different experiences or perspectives guide children to be more tolerant of others. Literature that deals with social concerns can help students envision and create a more equitable world (Wollman-Bonilla, 1998).

As the students explored the concept of homelessness as it related to Bud, their responses reflect that they gained insight into the plight of others. Many of these students come from affluent neighborhoods. Hunger and the lack of shelter are not a part of most of their worlds. For them to experience the fear, the depression, and the fight for survival through the eyes of Bud, they are better able to understand people who are less fortunate than them. A book such as *Bud, Not Buddy* can reflect the reality of others and help children understand the world around them (Strehle, 1999). When we offer children literature that deals with social issues, we give them the opportunity to see with new eyes.

V. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Conclusions

Data in the form of student dialogue in the classroom, as well as responses to individual interview questions yielded much to be considered in light of the research questions. Students' written work was limited however, for a variety of reasons. Kara had meant to have her students journal regularly about *Lily's Crossing*, but because the students were so involved in the class discussions about the novel, journalling fell by the wayside. In Mitch's classroom, rather than journalling, he assigned questions about *Bud, Not Buddy* for the students to answer. Although many of these were higher level questions and guided the students in reflecting deeply about the text, the responses were not the same as if they had written open-ended journal entries.

From the comments of the teachers and students, observations in the classrooms, and a review of the students' written work that I was able to obtain, it is clear that the quality novels used during this study had an impact in the way the students think about themselves. In response to some of the initial interview questions, the students could not always cite a particular book that made them think differently about themselves, but by the time of the third interviews which focused particularly on the chosen novels, they were thinking quite deeply about their own experiences. When given literature rich in meaningful themes with complex characters, we provide students a vehicle with which to reflect upon their own motives and actions.

Kara's students talked about friendships they have as they read about Lily and Albert in *Lily's Crossing*. They examined this friendship and how it changed both Lily and Albert.

The students came up with the term “true friend” as one whose friendship makes you a better person. In both classroom conversations and journal writing, they reflected on the friends they have and how “true” of a friend they are to them.

Kara’s students explored Lily’s habit of lying, discussing times in their lives when they’ve been dishonest. They examined Lily’s life and why someone might become a deceitful person. Extending it even farther, the students talked about the effect lying has on themselves and others. They reflected on other bad habits, why they do them, and how they too could change.

Mitch’s students examined a metaphor from *Bud, Not Buddy*, the idea that when one door closes another opens, and they focused on their own lives as they discussed the idea. Students thought about moving from one town to another as doors closing and opening. One student talked about the disappointment of not making a select sports team, but how much he enjoyed the one he did play on. And they talked about changing classes, leaving old friends but making new ones. They discussed how all of these changes can be doors closing and new ones opening. Through both class discussions and written assignments, these students were able to explore the meaningful themes and complex characters in these novels and articulate understandings about themselves.

From interviews, observations, and review of the students’ written work, the study also shows that when we give students quality literature to read, we give them a tool to learn about others and come to understandings about people who are different than them. Students in both classrooms explored the concept of family, discussing and writing about what constitutes a family. Through Lily and Bud’s eyes they viewed the concept in perhaps a different light than they had before. For some it was a verification that their own one-parent

household is indeed a family. For others, this was a new concept, and it brought an added understanding of those whose family life is different than their own.

A concept in both books was death of a loved one. Some students have lost someone close to them, and for them there was reassurance that time heals. Many of the students have not had to deal with death yet, at least not someone very close to them. Reading about Lily and Bud as they dealt with the loss of their mothers, created an opportunity for these students to gain insight into the feelings of others.

Mitch's students explored the idea of homelessness and what might be the experience of a young child left to fend for himself. For most of them, this was the first time they'd read about anyone who doesn't have a family or a home as they do. They discussed the fear that Bud must have felt to be walking the highways by himself or hitching a ride on a train. They reflected on the reality that some children don't have food to eat or a bed to sleep in. This too, helps them understand others less fortunate than they.

Although not as explicit as understanding themselves and others, the data from this research suggests that providing literature that deals with social issues helps children understand how they can make a difference. As students in Mitch's class read about how people would tease Bud by calling him Buddy, they reflected on how it feels to be teased. This knowledge may give these students a reason not to tease others.

Bud, Not Buddy gave the students an awareness of racism as it played out in the 1930's. Many of them took this knowledge home with them and discussed the issue with their parents, not only learning more about race relations during The Great Depression, but also about racism today. By understanding conflicts of the past, children can make a difference in how they handle today's relationships. These students' reactions to the issue of

racism suggests a potential for further action. Perhaps it will not be immediate, but the insights they have gained by reading about Bud's experiences and talking about racism may make a difference someday in the way they relate to others.

It was interesting that there seemed to be a gender difference in the responses students gave during the initial interviews. The questions for these interviews were the same for each student and they focused on books they had read in the past. In response to questions about books that have helped them understand themselves or others, the girls gave many examples and seemed enthusiastic about learning about others. The boys did not display this desire to learn about and understand others. They were more excited talking about other worlds they have learned about through fantasy books. Yet after reading *Lily's Crossing* or *Bud, Not Buddy*, the boys as well as the girls had gained great insights about themselves as well as others, as evidenced in their writing, class discussions and interview responses.

The responses from the two students who are considered to be struggling readers by their teachers are evidence of the power of quality literature. Both Lisa and Natasha showed through their comments in class discussions and answers to my interview questions that they were deeply engaged in these novels and were gaining insight into themselves and others. It was clear that they were able to articulate this knowledge. Allowing all students a chance to stretch themselves and search for deeper meanings in quality literature is so powerful. As Mitch told me more than once, his students get mad when he gives them a book that is too easy. All students are inspired by the challenge of reading a difficult novel and they delight in the accomplishment of learning from it.

Not enough data was gathered in this study to answer the third research question completely. The question of whether quality literature helps students feel that they can make

a difference will need to be addressed in further studies with literature selected specifically for this purpose. Some literature lends itself more readily to discussing social concerns that require action. Children in upper elementary are capable of planning and implementing service projects that can make a difference in their communities, and quality literature can be the impetus that moves them to action (Tyson, 1999). More research in the area of literature to use with children that will spur them to action is recommended.

Recommendations

We are doing children a disservice when we ignore the quality literature that is available to us as educators. National book awards such as The Newbery Award or the American Library Association's Notable Books were created to honor the best literature for children. The selection committee for these awards and many others search for those novels that contribute positively to the social and emotional development of children. We should utilize these resources, striving to give our students the best literature available.

In the process we'll be doing ourselves a favor because using quality literature with complex characters, meaningful themes and intriguing story lines will keep our students engaged in reading. Mitch laughed as he told me how his students would sheepishly admit that they *accidentally* read ahead a chapter in *Bud, Not Buddy*. Kara worried every day that she wouldn't get all her subjects covered because her students' discussions of *Lily's Crossing* went on for so long. Novels such as these keep children interested. Quality books help create a love of reading.

Kara identified a very real problem of mediocre books when she said, "There are some books we use that really don't have deeper meanings." With the wealth of quality

literature to be utilized, we should be striving to give our students that which nourishes reflection on self, others, and society. If we believe that our goal as educators is not only to teach academics, but to encourage life-long learning and develop character, we should be using the best that the literary community has to offer. We can't afford to waste students' time on literature with little emotional and intellectual impact.

Choosing literature with deep themes can be risky for a teacher. There is a fear, as Kara shared, that our struggling readers will not get the deeper meanings of a complicated text. But what Kara discovered is that her kids were capable of a higher level of thinking than she thought. In Mitch's words, "They (fourth graders) can do a whole lot more than people give them credit for." We need to examine our expectations for our students, give them the benefit of the doubt, and revel in the surprises they give us. Both of these teachers give letter grades in reading, yet this fact did not deter the students' motivation to excel in their discussions and written work for these challenging novels.

Often literature that is of the utmost quality deals with social issues and perhaps even controversial material (Wollman-Bonilla, 1998; Tyson, 1999; Ballentine & Hill, 2000). This is a deterrent for some teachers. More studies on the benefits of using literature with such meaningful themes is needed to assure both teachers and parents that this literature does indeed benefit students. Teachers who use this literature need to be aware of the possible concerns of parents and address these issues with parents before a reading unit begins.

Further research in the area of quality literature in the classroom is recommended. Much of the research in this field deals with the use of picture books to discuss societal issues within the classroom (Kauffman & Short, 2001; Ballentine & Hill, 2000; McCall & Ford, 1998; Leland et. al., 1999). More studies need to be conducted to explore the benefits

of using novels that have complex characters and meaningful themes when working with upper elementary students.

I recommend that schools' Library Media Specialists or Librarians work with classroom teachers to choose quality literature for the classroom. They are trained to recognize good literature, they keep up with the reviews of books, and are aware of the awards that are given to particular books. These people should be invaluable resources to classroom teachers and make every effort to provide ideas, books and expertise to the teachers they work with.

We must not forget the role of parents in the development of their children's sense of self, understanding of others, and motivation to make a difference in their world. Parents need to use the expertise of their local and school librarians, their children's teachers, and reliable book reviews and lists of award recipients to choose quality literature for their children. Just as teachers should be cognizant of the social and emotional growth a good book can foster, parents too should choose quality literature for insight and inspiration.

Continued research in the area of multicultural literature in the classroom is also recommended. The students in this study are from a mainly homogenous community, making literature one of the few ways they have to experience and understand cultural differences (Athanasios, 1998; Koeller, 1996). Learning about the history, the culture, and the beliefs of others is so important to global understanding. Through literature, we can expose children to differing viewpoints, giving them tools they need to get along with and appreciate others.

Gender issues in literature for upper elementary should be explored further. *Lily's Crossing* and *Bud, Not Buddy* are two examples of books that transcend the gender barrier.

Both boys and girls reading these books expressed how much they enjoyed the book. Kara spoke of books that her boys wouldn't touch because the story is so obviously about a girl, yet they read *Lily's Crossing* with great enthusiasm. Kara talked of the aspects of this book that made this possible. It included the connections her students could make to Lily because like them, she had difficult issues to overcome of honesty and friendship. It provided the intrigue of learning about an historical time period they knew little about and the excitement of researching facts about the war. It encouraged the questions her students had from the suspense the author creates, that made them want to keep reading.

Bud, Not Buddy crossed the gender gap as well. Even though the book had almost exclusively male characters, the students read about Bud's experiences with delight and intrigue. The author set up a situation in which readers can't help but feel empathy for Bud, keeping students reading to find out how he solves the mystery of his father. As with *Lily's Crossing*, there's the element of the unknown that captures students' interest. The author's use of allusions entices students to search for clues to their meaning. There was no noticeable difference by gender of the students who praised the merits of this novel. More research into the use of novels for reading instruction that transcend gender lines is important to the development of meaningful and engaging reading programs.

The data collected in this research suggests that even our lower readers are capable of deriving deep meaning from quality literature. Although this was a qualitative study with a small number of respondents, I believe that Natasha and Lisa's responses to these novels leave us with much to reflect upon. Both of these students gave thoughtful and insightful responses to questions of character motives and related these to their own lives. Lisa spoke of the difficulties she had with friends because of her disposition as her parents went through

divorce. She viewed that as a “bad habit” she had to work through as Lily had to work through her habit of lying. Natasha talked about her feelings about being teased. As Bud was teased about his name, she gets teased about her light eyebrows. She could identify with the pain of teasing and shared with me that she does not want to treat people that way.

Lisa, the lower reader in Kara’s class, began the discussion of the symbolism of the bridge in *Lily’s Crossing*, saying that perhaps she was crossing over from being a deceitful person to being an honest person. Natasha thought through the metaphor in *Bud, Not Buddy* that compared homeless children to dust in the wind. Her understanding of it was that “nobody wants them around”. She talked about how sad it would be to be an orphan and have no family and no home. These students, both struggling readers, were able to explore the deeper meanings of these novels and come to understandings about themselves and others. Too often it is our most challenged readers who receive the mediocre books to read because of the concern that comprehension is lacking when a child struggles to read the words. We need to give all of our students a chance to experience the richness of quality literature.

From the first interviews with all of these students, I learned much about what they like in literature and what they do not. In addition, the teachers’ interviews gave reason to ponder the issues that are important to teachers in their reading programs. Finally, both the students and the teachers’ responses to the selected novels provide the backbone to advocate for quality literature. There are books that encompass the qualities that the students are looking for – adventure, fascinating characters who overcome great obstacles, intrigue or suspense, humor, and the chance to use their imagination. There are books that have what the teachers view as valuable in their reading program – descriptive writing, cliff-hangers

that leave their students wanting to read more, themes their students can connect to, and believable characters and action that transcend the gender barrier. Lastly, the student and teachers' response to *Lily's Crossing* and *Bud, Not Buddy* suggests that there are novels that engage the students in reading, meet the criteria of teachers, and at the same time help students grow in understanding about themselves, about others, and about society. We should be searching for the best literature we can find for our students to read.

As an advocate for children's reading, Katherine Paterson talks about literature as art and the importance of giving children the best there is to offer:

That is what literature, that is what art is supposed to do – provide us with a shattering and gracious encounter – make us experience the spectrum of human emotion and somehow make us richer, more compassionate, wiser human beings in the process (Paterson, 2000).

Literature should transform lives, not just transmit content (McCall & Ford, 1998).

With quality literature as the focus of a reading program, we can give students two of the most important gifts of all - insight and inspiration.

APPENDIX A: LETTER AND FORMS

Letter to Gain Entry

January 28, 2002

Community School District
Anyplace, Iowa

Dear Dr. Someone and the Anyplace CSD Board,

I would like to ask your permission to use the students of Anyplace Elementary Schools in my research project for my master's thesis through Iowa State University. Over the past seven years, working as an elementary Talented and Gifted teacher in the Anyplace Schools, I have planned, prepared, and implemented literature units in collaboration with the classroom teachers. I propose that using quality literature with meaningful themes challenges each students' inner character, helping them to understand themselves, the people around them, and the society that they live in.

With your permission, I will gather my data during the remainder of this spring semester. This will involve one fourth grade classroom each in two elementary buildings. For this study the novels will be selected carefully to reflect complex issues, differing viewpoints, and/or cultural diversity.

Methodologies utilized will include interviews, analyzing journal responses, and reflections of literature discussions. In essence, I will be looking to answer the following research questions:

1. Does reading literature with complex characters help children define their sense of self?
2. Can the books we have our students read make a difference in the attitudes they hold about other people?
3. Does immersing students in complex themes through literature help them understand society and the contributions they can make?

Thank you for the opportunity to work in such a fine district. I am looking forward to hearing from you in response to this request to conduct research.

Sincerely,

Barbara J. Mac Dougall

Consent Form – Teachers

February 8, 2002

Dear Teachers,

I am conducting a research project through Iowa State University, and I would like to ask you to be a subject in my study. I am interested in knowing how you select literature to use in your classroom, and how you feel about the effect it has on your students.

I would like to interview you and observe in your classroom. Your name, the name of your students, and the name of our school district will never be used in any of the literature that comes from this study. You will be assigned a pseudonym and the description of you and your room will be neutralized so that it would be difficult to identify you.

If you agree to be a respondent in this study, you will have the right to withdraw at any time, for any reason, and the data will be returned to you upon request. I will share with you a copy of my study before the final draft is written, and you can negotiate changes with me. You will receive a copy of the final study upon completion.

I will be gathering my data during this spring semester. If you would be willing to be a participant in my study, please sign and return the consent form below. Thank you for this opportunity to gain insight into your perspectives on literature and students.

Sincerely,

Barb Mac Dougall

☐ Yes, I give my consent to be a respondent in Barb Mac Dougall's study on literature selections in the classroom during the spring of 2002.

Signed: _____

Date: _____

Consent Form – Parents

February 7, 2002

Dear Parents,

I am conducting a research project through Iowa State University, and I would like to ask your permission for your child to be a participant in my study. Over the past seven years, working as an elementary Talented and Gifted teacher here in the Anyplace Schools, I have planned, prepared, and implemented literature units in collaboration with the classroom teachers. I propose that using quality literature with meaningful themes challenges each students' inner character, helping them to understand themselves, the people around them, and the society in which they live.

The focus of my research will be on analyzing students' responses to quality literature with deep and meaningful themes. I will discuss with students what novels they are reading in the classroom and ask them to share with me what effect these have on their outlook of themselves, those around them, and on society in general. In essence, I will be looking to answer the following research questions:

1. Does reading literature with complex characters help children define their sense of self?
2. Can the books we have our students read make a difference in the attitudes they hold about other people?
3. Does introducing students to complex themes through literature help them understand society and the contributions they can make to it?

I will be gathering my data during a literature unit of this spring semester. I would like your permission to ask your child questions about his or her reading, analyze journal responses, and record some of the class literature discussions. **Your child's name will never be used in any analysis of the data. Any printed documents that would come from this research will use pseudonyms for the students, the teachers and the school district.**

Thank you for the opportunity to ask such meaningful questions of those who mean the most to us – the children. I am available to answer any questions you may have about this study.

Sincerely,

Barb Mac Dougall
Talented/Gifted Teacher

_____ Yes, I give my permission to have my child, _____ included in the literature study with Mrs. Mac Dougall during the spring of 2002.

_____ No, I do not wish to have my child involved in this study.

Human Subjects Research Office
2207 Pearson Hall, Room 16
Ames, IA 50011-2207
515/294-4566
FAX: 515/294-8000

DATE: March 18, 2002

TO: Barbara MacDougall

FROM: Janell Meldrent, IRB Administrator

RE: "Insight and Inspiration: Literature that Transforms" IRB ID 02-375

TYPE OF APPLICATION: ☒ New Project ☐ Continuing Review

The project, "Insight and Inspiration: Literature that Transforms" has been approved for one year from its IRB approval date March 18, 2002. University policy and Federal regulations (45 CFR 46) require that all research involving human subjects be reviewed by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) on a continuing basis at intervals appropriate to the degree of risk, but at least once per year.

Any modification of this research project must be submitted to the IRB for prior review and approval. Modifications include but are not limited to: changing the protocol or study procedures, changing investigators or sponsors (funding sources), including additional key personnel, changing the Informed Consent Document, an increase in the total number of subjects anticipated, or adding new materials (e.g., letters, advertisements, questionnaires).

You must promptly report any of the following to the IRB: (1) all serious and/or unexpected adverse experiences involving risks to subjects or others; and (2) any other unanticipated problems involving risks to subjects or others.

The PI must retain the signed consent documents for at least three years past completion of the research activity. If the principal investigator terminates association with the University before that time, the signed informed consent documents should go to the DEO to be maintained.

You are expected to make sure that additional key personnel who are involved in human subjects research complete training prior to their interactions with human subjects. Web based training is available from our web site.

Upon completion of data collection, a Project Closure Form will need to be submitted to the Human Subjects Research Office to officially close the project. If data collection will continue beyond the approval date, you will receive a letter notifying you a month in advance that the expiration date is approaching. At that time, you will need to fill out a Continuing Review/and or Modification Form.

Both of these forms are on the Human Subjects Research Office web site at:
<http://grants-svr.admin.iastate.edu/VPR/humansubjects.html>.

Iowa State University Human Subjects Review Form

OFFICE USE ONLY		81
EXPEDITED <input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	FULL COMMITTEE <input type="checkbox"/>	ID# <u>02-375</u>

PI Last Name Mac Dougall Title of Project Insight & Inspiration: Literature that Transforms

Checklist for Attachments

The following are attached (please check):

13. ☒ Letter or written statement to subjects indicating clearly:
- a) the purpose of the research
 - b) the use of any identifier codes (names, #'s), how they will be used, and when they will be removed (see item 18)
 - c) an estimate of time needed for participation in the research
 - d) if applicable, the location of the research activity
 - e) how you will ensure confidentiality
 - f) in a longitudinal study, when and how you will contact subjects later
 - g) that participation is voluntary; nonparticipation will not affect evaluations of the subject
14. ☒ A copy of the consent form (if applicable)
15. ☒ Letter of approval for research from cooperating organizations or institutions (if applicable)
16. ☐ Data-gathering instruments

17. Anticipated dates for contact with subjects:

First contact

03/25/02

Month/Day/Year

Last contact

05/24/02

Month/Day/Year

18. If applicable: anticipated date that identifiers will be removed from completed survey instruments and/or audio or visual tapes will be erased:

05/24/07

Month/Day/Year

19. Signature of Departmental Executive Officer

Date

Department or Administrative Unit

Thomas O'Leary

3/4/03

If the PI or co-PI is also the DEO, a Dean signature authority must sign here.

20. Initial action by the Institutional Review Board (IRB):

☐ Project approved

☒ Pending Further Review 3/14/02

Date

☐ Project not approved

Date

☐ No action required

Date

21. Follow-up action by the IRB:

Project approved

☒ 3/18/02

Date

Project not approved

Date

Project not resubmitted

Date

Rick Sharp

Name of IRB Chairperson

Rick Sharp

Signature of IRB Chairperson

3/18/02

Date

APPENDIX B

Questions for Teachers – Interview #1

1. What criteria do you use to select books for whole-class or small-group readings?
2. Do you use any books just because you have whole-class sets, or other teachers at your grade-level use them, but you'd like to eliminate them? Which ones? Why don't you think they're worth the time?
3. How is your decision to use a particular book influenced by the possibility of controversial content?
4. Of all the books that you have your students read, which ones would you say seem to have a real impact on how they think? Why?
5. How do you know when a student makes a personal connection with a book?
6. Have you had any serious class discussions about subjects such as racism, death, etc.? Were they related to a book? Please describe.
7. If you could choose any books to use with your class, regardless of whether they're reserved for a particular grade level, or whether you would have parent complaints or not, what would be some of the titles you would choose?
8. How would you describe the expectations that you have for students in regards to the different reading abilities in your classroom?
9. What preferences do you have for evaluating students after they have read a book?
10. Describe a time when you saw your students get really excited about a book.

APPENDIX C

Questions for Kara – Interview #2

1. You talked about giving kids a choice in what they read with your Reading Journey, and that it gives them ownership over their learning. How important do you feel this is, that they take ownership?
2. You talked about fostering a love of reading with your students. How important do you think this is, and how do you go about doing that?
3. When you were talking about books that you choose, you said that some weren't interesting to you, so they probably wouldn't be to your students. Can you think of some books you've used where your enthusiasm for it has really made a difference?
4. You were telling me about the book units you do throughout the year and you said time just runs out to do more. Tell me how time is an issue in the teaching of reading.
5. How are the kids responding to Lily's Crossing?
6. Why do you think the kids like *Holes* so much?
7. You talked about journalling as being powerful, and that making connections is powerful. That's such a strong word. Tell me more about what you mean by it.
8. You said that you feel it's okay to discuss controversial material in your classroom if you talk to the kids about it. Can you think of any times when you have discussed controversial issues with your students?
9. You were telling me about some of your students who are very detailed oriented rather than big idea thinkers. Do they have a difficult time understanding the deeper meaning of the literature then, and how do you help them see it?
10. Does this make a difference in the books that you select, then?

APPENDIX D

Questions for Mitch – Interview #2

1. You mentioned in our first discussion that you chose your literature circle books around themes. You have a survival unit, a mystery, and an author study with your Sid Fleischman books. Why did you choose these themes?
2. You said that you looked for books that were well-written, quality pieces of writing, and you said *Holes* is a good, quality story. What do you look for in a book?
3. Your favorite books when you were in school were *The Chronicles of Narnia* and *The Hobbit/Lord of the Rings*. You seem to really enjoy fantasy on the verge of science fiction, but none of the books you mentioned that you use with your class are along these lines. Why is that?
4. You told me that you were lucky enough to have the PTO purchase books for your literature circle units. How much is money an issue when you're thinking about using different books?
5. You said you've used *Holes* as a read-aloud, and *The Giver*. What difference do you see between books you choose as read-alouds and those you have the kids read themselves?
6. It sounded like you've used *The Giver* before? How have the kids responded to that? What kinds of conversations have you had?
7. When you were talking about *Bandit's Moon*, you said that things like showing abnormalities at a fair was common practice back then, and kids need to know about it. Why?
8. You said you might like to use *The Chronicles of Narnia* with an advanced group, and you said you could get into some good discussions there. Can you elaborate on that?
9. I really like your idea of having kids read a novel slightly above their reading level because then they have to think about what it means and you become a better reader. Can you think of any specific examples of a student really working to understand a text and growing from the experience?
10. You've been having the kids keep track of really well written parts of *Bud, Not Buddy* and you said you think this improves their writing. How have you seen this happen with other books?

APPENDIX E

Questions for Kara – Interview #3

1. You were talking to the kids the other day when I was in, about the cliff-hangers the author uses at the end of chapters in *Lily's Crossing*. Do you see that as really engaging your students?
2. You mentioned that it surprised you that two of your students, one a girl and one a boy told you to read *Small Steps*, that it was their favorite book. And you said it was the boys who were glued to it when you read it aloud. So, it seems to have broken through the gender barrier. Do you have any thoughts on why?
3. Do you think *Lily's Crossing* has done that? *Holes*?
4. You mentioned time as being a problem as far as getting in everything you want to do. Does it play a part in your book selection?
5. You were talking about your enthusiasm for a book and how you think that plays a big part in how excited kids get about a book. What kinds of things in children's books do you get excited over?
6. You were telling me about the questions that some of your students were researching in various sources to answer from *Lily's Crossing*. And I loved seeing how you do your wall chart of questions and code how you're answering them. How much do you think reading a book that leaves you with so many questions engages your students?
7. You talked about *Holes* and you said that the kids seemed to really connect with Stanley and thought that it wasn't fair what was happening to him because he was a good kid. Do you think the kids feel empathy for Lily or Albert?
8. I found your comments about Lindsay so interesting. You said that she often surprises you because she gets more than you think she will. You said she's better at inferential than literal. It makes me wonder how many of our kids are, if given books with deeper meanings?
9. You said that kids have a better chance of getting the deeper meaning if they can connect to it. So is that something you'll be looking for as you choose literature for your class – ways that they can connect?
10. You said that you're really glad you "took the leap" and tried *Lily's Crossing*. Tell me more what you mean by that.

APPENDIX F

Questions for Mitch – Interview #3

1. Tell me how you felt the kids responded to *Bud, Not Buddy*.
2. Did any of them talk about doors in their own lives opening or closing?
3. Do you think the kids understood in the end why Herman E. Calloway was a grump?
4. Do you think the book helped them appreciate their own families and homes?
5. You mentioned that the kids got excited when there was another allusion to research. Why do you think those interested them so much?
6. When I've observed, there were some awesome discussions going on, but I know you said you like to use literature circles so each student gets more time to talk. Tell me how you feel about the way you used this book, and whether you think the whole-class method was effective for this book.
7. You said something very interesting last time: "Fourth graders can do a whole lot more than most people give them credit for". You were talking about the discussions they had had about the metaphors in the book. And when I observed in your room, I heard you tell the kids, "This is challenging, but I know you're up to it". So, how do you feel about the idea of raising the bar?
8. Do you think doing *Bud Not Buddy* raised the bar?
9. How would you compare this book to other books you've used, as far as student interest and the knowledge they gained from it?

APPENDIX G

Questions for Students – Interview #1

1. Think back on the books you've read this year, or in years past. Which ones do you feel really made you think?
2. Tell me about a time when you've learned something important about other people from reading a book.
3. Are there any books that you've read with your class or in literature circles, or in guided reading groups that you didn't like? Which ones? Why?
4. What is your reaction to reading about books from another culture?
5. What are some big problems that book characters face? Can you describe a time that reading about the problems of a character in a book has helped you with a problem in your life?
6. What's the best book you've ever read?
7. Tell me about a book that you've had a hard time finishing.
8. Why do you think teachers choose to have you read the books they do?
9. Can you tell me about a book that had a really interesting character?
10. What book have you read that really made you feel that you could do something to help someone else?

APPENDIX H

Questions for Steph – Interview #2

1. You mentioned the book *Sacajawea* and you said you didn't like it because it had two stories going, with the perspective of Sacajawea and William Clark. But you also mentioned the book *Holes* and you said you liked that very much because there were two stories that intertwined and then came together at the end. Can you tell me what the differences were and why you liked one book and not the other?
2. You talked about the book *Bloomability* as one you liked. Can you tell me about that book and what you liked about it?
3. You said you liked reading biographies. Why do you like biographies?
4. You said that you thought that books about friendship help you with your friendships. Can you tell me about any books you've read about friends and how they may have helped you?
5. Did your teacher read *Because of Winn-Dixie* to you this year? Tell me your thoughts on that book. Did you learn anything from Opal, the main character?
6. You told me that you don't like books about kids whose parents are divorced. Why is that? Are there other issues in books that you don't like to read about?
7. Have you ever read books about kids making a difference in their community, like doing service projects or caring for the environment? Have they made you think about doing something to help, too?
8. Your teacher told me that you started out the year doing an individual Reading Journey. What book did you read for that? Tell me how you feel about getting to pick what you read.
9. I know you've been learning about and practicing making connections to books that you read. Can you tell me about some of the connections you've made to books as you've read?
10. Tell me how you feel about the book you're reading in your class right now, *Lily's Crossing*. Are there any deep issues that you're talking about or your teacher is asking you to reflect on in your journaling?

APPENDIX I

Questions for Jeff – Interview #2

1. You said you liked reading biographies. Why do you like biographies?
2. Did your teacher read *Because of Winn-Dixie* to you this year? Tell me your thoughts on that book. Did you learn anything from Opal, the main character?
3. What did you think of *Holes*? Is there anything you learned from that book?
4. Have you ever read books about kids making a difference in their community, like doing service projects or caring for the environment? Have they made you think about doing something to help, too?
5. You told me that you don't like books that go on too long about the same thing. What else don't you like in a book?
6. Your teacher told me that you started out the year doing an individual Reading Journey. What book did you read for that? Tell me how you feel about getting to pick what you read.
7. Tell me more about what you learned from *The Best Christmas Pageant Ever*.
8. What is your favorite genre of book and why?
9. I know you've been learning about and practicing making connections to books that you read. Can you tell me about some of the connections you've made to books as you've read?
10. Tell me how you feel about the book you're reading in your class right now, *Lily's Crossing*. Are there any deep issues that you're talking about or your teacher is asking you to reflect on in your journalling?

APPENDIX J

Questions for Lisa – Interview #2

1. You told me your teacher read *Because of Winn-Dixie* to you this year. Tell me your thoughts on that book. Did you learn anything from Opal, the main character?
2. What did you think of *Holes*? Is there anything you learned from that book?
3. You said you liked reading biographies. Why do you like biographies?
4. Tell me more about *Small Steps*. How does reading that book make you feel? Have you learned anything from that book?
5. Your teacher told me that you started out the year doing an individual Reading Journey. What book did you read for that? Tell me how you feel about getting to pick what you read.
6. Have you ever read books about kids making a difference in their community, like doing service projects or caring for the environment? Have they made you think about doing something to help, too?
7. I know you've been learning about and practicing making connections to books that you read. Can you tell me about some of the connections you've made to books as you've read?
8. You told me that you don't like books that go on too long about the same thing. What else don't you like in a book?
9. Have you thought of any books since the last time we talked, that have helped you know yourself better, or understand yourself better?
10. Tell me how you feel about the book you're reading in your class right now, *Lily's Crossing*. Are there any deep issues that you're talking about or your teacher is asking you to reflect on in your journalling?

APPENDIX K

Questions for Natasha – Interview #2

1. You told me that you liked a book you read called *Small Steps*. What did that book teach you about other people?
2. You said that you didn't like *The Chocolate Touch*. What was it you didn't like about that book?
3. Your teacher told me that he read *Holes* to you. Tell me what you thought about that book.
4. Tell me about some of the discussions you're having with *Bud, Not Buddy*.
5. Did you read *Earthquake Terror*? Tell me what you thought about the boy who let his handicapped sister float down the river by herself?
6. If you could have your choice of books to read in class, what would be some you would pick?
7. You said you liked *The Best Christmas Pageant Ever* and how it made you think about other people and what they're like when you meet them. You said that not everyone is nice at first and maybe they're just nervous to meet you. Can you think of any times that learning this about people has helped you when you've met new people?
8. Do you think that the books you read in your class are at a good level for you?
9. What is your favorite reading activity? What do you like best to do in class when you read a novel?
10. Do books ever make you think about yourself and how you might be a better person?

APPENDIX L

Questions for Kevin – Interview #2

1. You told me that you really like fantasy books like *Harry Potter*. What is it about fantasy books that you like?
2. You said that you don't like books that go on too long about boring stuff. Can you think of some books like that?
3. Your teacher told me that he read *Holes* to you. Tell me what you thought about that book.
4. Tell me about some of the discussions you're having with *Bud, Not Buddy*.
5. Did you read *Far North* or one of the other adventure stories? What did you think of it?
6. If you could have your choice of books to read in class, what would be some you would pick?
7. Do you like books that make you think about how people act and why they do the things they do? What can you learn from these?
8. Do you think that the books you read in your class are at a good level for you?
9. What is your favorite reading activity? What do you like best to do in class when you read a novel?
10. Do books ever make you think about yourself and how you might be a better person?

APPENDIX M

Questions for Julia – Interview #2

1. You told me that you liked a book you read called *Small Steps*. Did that book teach you anything about other people or about yourself?
2. You said that you really like mysteries. What is it that you like about them?
3. You said that *Far North* was cool because you learned about other people and things they do like potlatches. Can you think of other books you've read that have helped you learn about other people?
4. How did the boys in *Far North* finally get to be friends? Does knowing that help you with making friends? Do you have any friends from cultural backgrounds that are different from your own?
5. You said that when you read *Bloomability* it made you think about how lucky you are. Why do you think that is important?
6. Your teacher told me that he read *Holes* to you. Tell me what you thought about that book.
7. Tell me about some of the discussions you're having with *Bud, Not Buddy*.
8. What is your favorite reading activity? What do you like to do best in class when you read a novel?
9. Do you ever talk about making connections to a book while you read? Do you think that's important?
10. If you could have your choice of books to read in class, what would be some you would pick?

APPENDIX N

Questions for Students: *Lily's Crossing* – Interview #3

1. What do you think it must feel like to have your mother die like Lily's did? Have you ever had anyone close to you die? Do you think reading about Lily's mom dying might help you if someone you love dies?
2. What did you think about Margaret and Lily eating the candy bars that were supposed to be sent to Margaret's brother overseas? Have you ever done anything dishonest? Does reading about Lily make you think about being honest?
3. What do you think about the way Lily didn't say goodbye to Poppy? Have you ever had a time when you've done something you wish you hadn't?
4. Why do you think Lily lied so often? Do you think sometimes bad habits start and then it's hard to stop them?
5. When she rescues the cat from drowning, why do you think Lily lets Albert claim the cat? Would you have done that?
6. How would you feel if you were Albert and had left Rachel behind? Would you have done anything differently?
7. Why do you think Lily had such a hard time telling Albert that they couldn't go to Europe? Was her lying bad?
8. Tell me about Albert's lie. Why do you think he did what he did? How would you have acted?
9. Why do you think Albert's parents published the newspapers and why did Poppy go to fight?
10. In the end, Lily tells Gram *Szretlek*. How did Lily's feelings for Gram change?

APPENDIX O

Questions for Students – *Bud, Not Buddy* – Interview #3

1. Why do you think Bud's suitcase means so much to him? Have you ever lost anyone close to you?
2. Why do you think it was so important to Bud not to be called Buddy? Is there anything about you that you're sensitive about, and don't want people to tease you about?
3. What do you think about the idea Bud's momma had of doors opening and doors closing? Can you think of any times in your life when a door has closed and another one opened?
4. Tell me what you learned from this book about the way blacks and whites felt about each other at this time in history. Do you think it's changed today?
5. What do you think about the comment that Deza Malone's mom made, that someone who doesn't know who their family is, is like dust blowing around in a storm?
6. What happened to Bud in the restaurant when he started to bawl? Have you ever had anything happen to you that you've just bawled and bawled about?
7. Why do you think Herman E. Calloway was so mean to everyone?
8. Bud hangs momma's picture up with the horses on the bedroom wall and says it looked like it belonged there. He thinks to himself that he carried her around all the time, and now she's back where she wanted to be. What did he mean by that?
9. How do you think Bud feels now that he knows who his grandfather is and knows that he is going to stay with the band?
10. What do you think Bud means at the end when he says to Momma's picture, "Here we go again, Momma, only this time I can't wait?"

APPENDIX P: CHILDREN'S BOOKS CITED

Book Title	Author	Copyright Date	Newbery Award or Honor	ALA Notable	SLJ Best Book	Booklist Editor's Choice	ALA Best Young Adult
Mr. Popper's Penguins	R. & F. Atwater	1938	x				
Sacajawea	Joseph Bruchac	2000					
Chasing Redbird	Sharon Creech	1997					X
Bloomability	Sharon Creech	1998					
The Wanderer	Sharon Creech	2000	X				
Bud, Not Buddy	Christopher Paul Curtis	1999	X				
The Great Brain	J. D. Fitzgerald	1967					
The Whipping Boy	Sid Fleischman	1986	X				
Bandit's Moon	Sid Fleischman	1998					
There's an Owl in the Shower	Jean Craighead George	1995					
Lily's Crossing	Patricia Reilly Giff	1997	X	X			
Stepping On the Cracks	Mary Downing Hahn	1991		X	X	X	
Out of the Dust	Karen Hesse	1997	X	X	X	X	X
Far North	Will Hobbs	1996					
Our Only May Ameila	Jennifer L. Holm	1999	X	X			
Hot and Cold Summer	Joanna Hurwitz	1984					
Small Steps	Peg Kehret	1996		X			
The Giver	Lois Lowry	1993	X	X	X	X	X
Journey	Patricia MacLachlan	1991		X			X
Search for the Shadowman	Joan Lowry Nixon	1996					
Sing Down the Moon	Scott O'Dell	1970	X				
Bridge to Terabithia	Katharine Patterson	1977	X	X	X		
The Best Christmas Pageant	Barbara Robinson	1972					
Harry Potter Sorcerer's Stone	J. K. Rowling	1997		X		X	
Holes	Louis Sachar	1998	X	X	X		X
Cat Running	Zilpha Keatley Snyder	1994					
Maniac Magee	Jerry Spinelli	1990	X				

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