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UMI
EXPLORING IDENTITY THROUGH RESPONSES TO LITERATURE

by

Sandra Kaser

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A Dissertation Submitted to the Faculty of the
DEPARTMENT OF LANGUAGE, READING, AND CULTURE
In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
For the Degree of
DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY
In the Graduate College
THE UNIVERSITY OF ARIZONA

1999
As members of the Final Examination Committee, we certify that we have read the dissertation prepared by Sandra E. Kaser entitled Exploring Identity Through Responses to Literature and recommend that it be accepted as fulfilling the dissertation requirement for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

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Final approval and acceptance of this dissertation is contingent upon the candidate's submission of the final copy of the dissertation to the Graduate College.

I hereby certify that I have read this dissertation prepared under my direction and recommend that it be accepted as fulfilling the dissertation requirement.

Dissertation Director Dr. Kathy Short 4/13/99
STATEMENT BY AUTHOR

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SIGNED: Sandra J. Kasen

[Signature]
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My children, JoDee, Maggie, and Jonathan who give me so many good times.

My grandchildren who give me lots of reasons to take breaks from writing.

The human mind plans the way.
But the Lord directs the steps.
Proverbs 16:9
DEDICATION

I want to dedicate this study
on constructing identity to Owen.
You are so beautiful to me.
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ABSTRACT

This dissertation is a teacher research study that focuses on reflection and literature response as a way to explore the identity development of children in my own fourth and fifth grade multiage classroom.

I looked at drama, literature discussion, written responses, and visual images to explore how students construct their own identities within a school context. Data sources included audio and video tapes and transcripts, journals, field notes, photographs and student artifacts. The data was analyzed in three ways. The first part of the analysis is a discussion of the categories of students' issues. The second analysis section explores the spaces in the curriculum that allowed these issues to emerge or to be thought about more deeply. The third section of analysis is three case studies presented as photo documentaries. Each case study is an example of one of the three categories of identity construction: integrated, conceptual, and situational.

The study speaks for learning experiences that are open-ended and which allow for collaboration, reflection, dialogue and personal response. The power of literature to support such learning experiences as relate to identity construction is evident. Creating space to consider issues of identity construction is to truly value diversity in the classroom.
Chapter 1
INTRODUCTION

Miguel: I think that corn dancers are like our folklorico dancing
Joe: No, they are not the same. When an Indian dances, it is a kind of prayer. We pray by dancing.
Brad: But, why do you still do that? You pray to the sun and stuff, and you are supposed to pray to God. I am Christian and I pray to God.
Voices: (Murmurs). We are Catholic and we pray to God.
Joe: I am Catholic and I am Indian also. We pray to one God, but we believe his spirit is in all of nature. There is like a spirit for each thing in nature. Indians dance all their lives, like from age three. The whole tribe goes to dances. It’s not like you can choose. (Kaser, 1994)

This dialogue grew out of children’s connections to literature within a classroom context where they were encouraged to bring their lives and cultural identities into school. Through their literature discussions, children considered diverse perspectives about how they viewed themselves, each other and the world. The ways in which children define themselves shape their views of the world and affect the choices they make in daily living. The forces that go into creating such a definition are diverse and lifelong. My interest in exploring diversity has led to a series of studies about how the institution of school both promotes and hinders the development of children’s own social and personal identity.

This dissertation is a teacher research study that focuses on reflection and literature response as a way to
explore the identity development of children in my own
fourth and fifth grade multiage classroom. I looked at
drama, literature discussion, written responses, and visual
images to explore how students construct their own
identities within a school context. I was interested in the
issues that are of significance to ten and eleven-year-old
students as they construct their own identities and how the
classroom learning environment can support identity
construction by creating spaces for students to think about
who they are and who they are becoming. In order to create
space for identity work to occur, teachers can structure
time for learning engagements such as studio or drama, or
time periods set aside for reflection. Students then decide
what they will talk about, work on or discuss during these
blocks of time.

This chapter has two sections. The first section
gives the background to the study with an overview of my
journey to the current questions. The second section
focuses on the theoretical framework for this study through
a review of the related literature in the major areas of
identity construction and the theory of reader response and
transaction.

Background of the Study

As a beginning teacher, I was primarily concerned with
the curriculum handed to me in the form of mandates and
manuals. Our school had a book room filled with the
"adoption" materials representing a variety of publishers.
I viewed my primary responsibility as carefully considering the manuals and plotting a timeline for covering the grade level materials over a nine-month period. When I was assigned a “combination” class with two grade levels, I worked at “flip-flopping students” so that all of the grade level curriculum was covered. Students in a grade level all studied the same thing and those “below or above the norm” were remediated or tested for special education placement in programs such as Learning Disabilities or Gifted and Talented.

With time, I realized that my role as a teacher had become a sifter of knowledge. I studied the curricular materials and then looked for ideas to make that knowledge more accessible to children. This methodology resulted in my development of variety of creative activities to encourage students to understand material in texts without involving them in the often laborious texts themselves. Although this method of instruction was more enjoyable for students and took their age and interests into consideration, the emphasis was on “a spoonful of sugar to make the medicine go down” rather than on getting to know individual children, recognizing the diverse experiences they were bringing to the classroom and creating curriculum accordingly.

Over the years, I have grown in my understandings of diversity in the classroom. My thinking was challenged first when the district moved into an emphasis on ethnic
diversity and multicultural education. Initially, this multicultural education was characterized by a superficial focus on ethnicity in which each ethnic group was studied in isolation as a theme study, a "learning center" in the classroom, a set of books checked out of the library for two weeks, or as a special monthly focus. This approach defined culture narrowly, eliminated important characteristics that shape each of us as people, and implied that ethnicity was static and uniform rather than a dynamic feature of children in classrooms.

I began to explore alternatives to this type of multicultural unit in my fifth grade classroom because I wanted to encourage my students to bring their lives into school. I became interested in classroom research and made a decision to look closely at my teaching practices relating to ethnicity. The first study I completed was in a school that served a diverse multiethnic working class community. Although my students reflected a range of ethnic backgrounds I do not recall any of them ever making a personal response to multicultural lessons or units. There had not been occasions for personal sharing or making cultural connections from these activities. This kind of sharing seemed important for students to gain more knowledge about other ethnic groups and to hear personal perspectives from each other. I felt this sharing could lead to a greater understanding of difference as students grew to adulthood.

I devised a cross-curricular, literature based Family
Studies Inquiry to encourage students to explore their own experiences and family backgrounds in an effort to better understand themselves (Kaser, 1994). I hoped that this curriculum would support children and allow them to value their diverse experiences and ways of learning and to see this diversity as essential to our classroom community and to their own learning. The students themselves became the curriculum with the study of family as a framework and literature discussion as a vehicle for response. The students had access to books that contextualized diverse perspectives in personal and concrete terms. In the study I analyzed picture book discussions that took place with the entire class as well as in small groups who read the same book and held several discussions related to that book. As part of the data analysis, I also examined three students closely to see what issues of cultural diversity occurred repeatedly in their conversations and writing across the year. By looking at these discussions and three specific students, I hoped to understand how children thought about their connections to culture.

As I examined the transcripts, I noticed that there was one aspect of culture that I had overlooked consistently. Students often discussed how a topic or book related to the culture they shared with members of their age group. These issues went beyond differences in their personal histories and ethnic identities to a set of shared “kid” concerns. I realized that students were connecting cultural diversity
with the expectations and culture of their own age group. Although today's students are bombarded with issues of ethnicity, the story of growing up that each student creates is an important focus in his/her life. The struggle to determine who they are as individuals is a struggle all children share, irrespective of differences in their cultural identities.

Based on this first study, I conducted a second smaller classroom research study (Kaser, 1996) in which I examined a whole class picture book discussion, a small group chapter book discussion and a meeting of the girls in the classroom which was held to discuss their concerns. I wanted to see the connections that fourth and fifth grade students would make in a literature discussion and how these connections determined the issues of intermediate students and in so doing define "kid culture." Three themes emerged in this small study. Kids made observational and analytical statements about adult behavior. The importance of "who has the power" was evident in how kids and adults relate as well as how kids relate to kids. The third theme was kids' concerns with defining a system of values for themselves. In all of these themes, talking about literature was a safe way to look at varying perspectives that could develop children's moral and social sense.

Through sharing and talking to colleagues about these first two studies, I came to believe that children are active agents in constructing their own identities and that
their concerns and issues are indicators of the experiences that influence them. Middle school students are the ones we usually connect with identity formation and issues, such as a certain style of clothing, the formation of gangs, and a general sense of rebelliousness. Yet the evidence that schools consider identity formation at an earlier age is apparent in the programs that are now placed in the elementary school. Two of the state adopted programs are DARE which educates students about responses to addictive drugs and Family Life Curriculum which goes beyond the old lessons on the physical changes brought about by growth and considers issues such as birth order and problem solving. Our faculty has also been asked to teach "life skills" which include such traits as integrity, curiosity, and initiative. These programs involve award coupons to present to students who are developing these "life skills." These programs in addition to the previously mentioned multicultural emphasis, indicate that the school district believes that identity formation begins in the early grades and that school has influence on identity development.

As a teacher researcher, I am interested in how children construct their social worlds, how they form their attitudes and relationships with others, and how others influence them. I am specifically interested in the school setting as a place separate and distinct from everyday contexts of learning. I have come to understand that students go about learning in diverse ways and I have
subsequently created flexible class structures so that students can make decisions about how to accomplish the work of school. I encourage children to make and share meaning through a variety of ways such as art, music, drama and language. I highlight literature and dialogue in order to create opportunities for children to talk openly and critically with peers about many issues.

In this study I examine the various elements which form the learning environment in my classroom. I particularly focus on how responding to literature serves to capture children’s thinking as they construct an identity by forming personal and social perspectives. The following research questions are the foundation for this study in my intermediate multiage classroom:

1. What are the issues that are significant to ten and eleven-year-old students related to the construction of their own identities?
2. How does the classroom learning environment provide spaces for students to explore or construct their own identities?
3. How do students work at constructing an identity within a school context?

Review of the Literature

It has been my privilege to learn from my students even as I am teaching them. In a classroom, teachers and students hold daily conversations in which they respond to one another and learn from one another. Yet gaining entry
into the social worlds of children requires far more than casual conversations. Rather teachers must attempt to understand a community that is separate from that of adults but that at the same time mediates the relations between the world view of adults and other children. Such an understanding of the social world of children requires some knowledge of the sociohistorical nature of childhood.

Andrade & Moll (1992) in a discussion of the work of El’Konin (1980) and Vygotsky (1978) address the notion that the concept of childhood and the children’s activities (e.g. play, relationships with people, schooling) are societal in origin, content and form. Postman (1982) for example, refers to childhood as a social artifact rather than a biological phenomenon, giving attention to the acquisition of literacy as defining the adult.

The areas of professional literature that inform this study are: 1) the formation of social and cultural identity; 2) the theory of reader response and transaction; and 3) the role of literature discussion and reflection in identity formation. Additional areas of relevant professional literature will be addressed throughout and when I discuss the research questions.

Understanding Social Identity

In a discussion of the social constructivist approach to social identity, Ochs (1993) notes that such an approach “captures the ebbs and tides of identity construction over interactional time, over historical time, and even over
developmental time" (p. 298). Ochs defines social identity as a range of social perspectives, including social statuses, roles, positions, relationships, and institutional and other relevant community identities that one may attempt to claim or assign in the course of a social life. The social identity of self and others is established through performing certain social acts and displaying certain stances. A social act means any socially recognized, goal-directed behavior, such as making a request, contradicting another person or interrupting someone. Stance refers to a socially recognized point of view or attitude. Stance includes epistemic attitudes, such as how certain or uncertain a person is, and affective attitudes which are a kind of emotion or intensity of emotions. Particular acts and stances have conventional links that bind them together to create social identities and as such are a complex inferential and social process that begins with children's concepts of objects in babyhood (Piaget, 1952, Bruner, 1986). Social referencing begins with the role of the mother as children respond to a person or thing in a way similar to the mother's response so that the mother and child construct the child’s relationship to the person or thing together (Vygotsky, 1978). These joint constructions socialize young children into how they should think about the world around them and they come to associate certain actions and stances with the structuring of their own and other's identities. When students come to my classroom,
they may be building lives out of shifting identities which come from multiple experiences or "identities that are subtle and perhaps have no label, blended identities, even blurred identities" (Ochs, 1993, p. 298).

We, therefore, have acts and stances on the one hand and social identity on the other, growing out of interactions. Crossing cultural boundaries means to secure a knowledge of the acts and stances of a particular culture, especially if one should choose to become a member of that culture. As an adult I cannot become a member of the kid culture that exists in my classroom, but I can look closely at the formation of social identity that is taking place.

When Andrade & Moll (1993) attempted to obtain data on a child in South Tucson, they were looking for "intimate glimpses into children's social worlds, thus confirming our philosophical approach to understanding children's lives as they themselves live them" (p. 92). In a summation of their study, they state that contemporary childhood is very different from adult perceptions of it, and that teachers are often ineffective because they do not concern themselves with the reactions and attitudes of children. One way to capture some of the intimate glimpses into the children's social responses that are evident in classrooms is through children's responses to literature.

**Exploring Culture**

Much of the research relating to multiculturalism in education focuses on ethnicity or race (Banks, 1989). Major
researchers in the field of children's literature like Harris (1992) and Bishop (1992) focus their explorations of multicultural literature on ethnic studies. Viewing culture as ethnicity, though perhaps necessary at one time, may now do more to encourage additional separatism in a classroom as teachers implement traditional methods of teaching about ethnicity through special themes or units such as "Black History" or "Native Americans."

Gollnick & China (1990) and Ovando (1989) look at cultural differences and similarities through a perspective that goes beyond race and ethnicity to include gender, language, social class, exceptionability, age and religion. This viewpoint stresses that greater understandings and a sense of equity can come only when world views are examined. That world is created for students through the ways their thinking has been impacted by their over-all life experiences. Students need to develop a consciousness of how they have arrived at their own understandings and perspectives as well as look at the perspectives and culture of others (Grant & Sleeter, 1989).

To do this, it is necessary to look at the variety of "thought collectives" of which they have been a part (Fleck, 1935; Short, 1992). This is consistent with an anthropological view of culture as a person's way of thinking, feeling and believing (Kluckhohn, 1971) or a system of shared rules or pooled knowledge transmitted by people who share a common social or historical experience.
(McCarty, 1989). Certainly race and ethnicity are important in this view, but it can also include many other aspects of our cultural identities and who we become such as age, religion and social class. When culture is defined in this broader sense, there are more ways for students to connect to one another through shared experiences and understandings. Finding commonalities unites us and so allows us to explore areas of difference.

Exploration of culture in classrooms needs to be accompanied by critical, reflective learning (Gollnick & Chinn, 1990) rather than just curriculum add-ons. A study of culture cannot only be a definition of what delineates any one group, but must also include an examination of society’s assumptions about these groups and a challenge of such assumptions, thus developing a critical consciousness (Freire & Macedo, 1987). For example, schools are attempting to raise a critical consciousness stance toward gender. History textbooks are placing greater emphasis on the role of women, and classroom discussion related to the reading of a text can naturally focus on personal experience related to gender and society’s assumptions as to the roles of women and men. The highest level in Banks’ (1989) hierarchy is decision-making and social action which may speak to this critical thinking and social consciousness paradigm. Certainly working to develop students who are thinking and caring and who act on values and beliefs arrived at through thoughtful actions is what schools should
be about (Rasinski & Padak, 1990).

Unfortunately, too few teachers recognize the power of the community of learners to accept as workable or to reject as impractical a teacher's notions of social change. I would suggest that children's acceptance or rejection may be rooted in how the teacher's view of social change fits within the parameters of the "kid culture" in which the students are rooted. Inherent in the word "teacher" is the assumption that we are able to instruct students in any area we choose rather than providing the support needed in order for learning to take place. John Goodlad (1984), author of A Place Called School, concludes that "if teachers in the talking mode and students in the listening mode is what we want, rest assured that we have it" (p. 229). This may work in "teaching" flash cards but it will not work in content that relates to life experience and will be especially ineffective in evoking personal and societal changes. To provide the kind of critical thinking discussed earlier, students must have a voice. There needs to be an understanding of the concerns and issues inherent in the "kid culture" and thought given as to the impact of "kid culture" on the way students are able to assimilate other cultural experiences and perspectives. We need to provide a format for the concerns of kid culture to intermingle with other concerns of cultural identity and with acceptance and understandings across cultures. Nodelman (1992) suggests that we treat kids as if they were human just like the rest.
The Influence of Reader Response Theory

For many of us, our training as educators has led us to believe that reading in school is designed to teach language conventions and the elements of story. The manuals we are given have vocabulary lists and text analysis activities. Rosenblatt (1938), drawing on Dewey (1934), suggests that the connection of personal experience to the reading event is where the power in literature lies:

The human experience the literature presents is primary . . . the formal elements of the work — style and structure and rhythmic flow — function only as part of the total literary experience. The reader seeks to participate in another’s vision — to reap knowledge of the world, to fathom the resources of the human spirit, to gain insights that will make his own life more comprehensible. (p. 7)

When readers approach a text, they bring to the reading experience their own frameworks of experiences and understandings. The term “transaction” refers to the nature of the relationship between the reader and the text during the reading event, each mutually acting on the other to evoke an experience or a meaning for the particular reader (Rosenblatt, 1978). Rosenblatt offers an alternative to the belief that a text carries a meaning that the reader must figure out. Rather, the text guides the reader’s active creation of meaning. This active coming together of the reader and the text is described as the “event” or “poem” (Rosenblatt, 1938). Rosenblatt takes into account the importance of the social context and encourages a variety of
response strategies including feelings as well as the traditional cognitive responses. Readers take a stance toward what they read which affects their response to those texts. Readers who take an efferent stance focus on extracting details or pieces of information from the text. In an aesthetic stance, readers respond according to their own lived through experience and engagement with a text.

Slatoff (1970) agrees that a separation of the reader from the text denies the power inherent in literature to elicit emotional response and Probst (1990) concludes that teachers should encourage students to attend to their own experience of the text. Bleich (1975) argues as well for the public sharing of emotional responses to literature where students are part of a "community of readers" in a cultural or educational context. Bleich's study on personal response to literature verifies the belief that reading produces greater personal understanding in varying degrees with varying educational tasks. Hickman (1983) describes the importance of the physical surroundings and a secure environment for response. The role of the teacher would apparently then be crucial, based on these studies.

Rosenblatt (1978) has much to say to a teacher. She suggests that after a student participates in a reading experience, it is the teacher's function to deepen that experience: "we should help the young reader to return to, relive, savor the experience" (p. 275). This may take the form of non-verbal expression or response such as drawing or
dance, or verbal response either oral or written. Rosenblatt encourages the teacher to have a truly receptive attitude and make strong efforts to create trust so that there is no sense of a testing motive. She suggests that teachers foster expressions of response that keep the experiential and qualitative elements in mind through the use of open ended questioning and further reflection on the text as to what triggered the reaction. Teachers should provide opportunities for students to “talk to themselves, to each other, or to teachers who genuinely want to know what they think” (p. 32).

The importance of the teacher’s role is emphasized in a study by Hickman (1983). She concludes that teachers:

wield a great deal of power over children’s responses to literature. In choosing books that would be in their classroom area, in choosing the way such books would be presented and discussed, in providing ready access to the books, and in suggesting and demonstrating appropriate modes of responding, teachers influenced both the quantitative and qualitative aspects of the responses of children. (p. 12)

Cox and Many (1992) offer advice to teachers on how to encourage personal responses. They suggest teachers offer choice about how students will organize their evocation of a text, both choice in content and choice in the form of response. Time to respond and responding over time is of importance as well. Teachers invite and encourage students to make personal and intertextual connections. Teachers should recognize, support, and encourage a focus of attention on the lived-through experience of the literary
evocation. If the teacher does not give considerable thought to the literature experiences, the meaning making from literature engagements will be limited.

**Literature Discussion as a Vehicle for Response**

As students grow older, the sharing of responses becomes the basis for valuable interchange (Rosenblatt, 1982). Engaging in dialogue while transacting with texts helps readers make meaning themselves as well as explore the meanings of others (Barnes, 1982). Probst (1988) suggests that sharing responses "allows you to be wrong, to make mistakes, to be convinced by the sharper insights of someone else - in other words to engage in the natural activities associated with learning and thinking" (p. 33).

Raphael, et al (1992) support the use of literature discussion in a reading program. Cox and Many (1992) acknowledge the importance of talk in aesthetic responses to literature. Talk in literature discussion with older students has been analyzed by Purves and Beach (1972) according to the ways readers express their responses and how their words may mirror the teacher's interpretations of the piece. In a later study, Broudy and Purves (1982) organized talk into categories of style as in literalists, associationists, construers and analogizers. This research indicated that individual differences in styles of responding reflected the students' use of various cognitive strategies that in turn influence their stance. Hunt and Vipond (1985) discuss similar categories of style saying
that students adopt and "information-driven", "story-driven" or "point-driven" orientation.

Eeds and Wells (1989) explored response to literature as teachers and elementary school students engaged in "grand conversations" about literature. They emphasized the importance of dialogue in the meaning making process related to the reading of books. Peterson (1992) differentiates between responding simply through conversation and response that results in true dialogue. In dialogue there is a focus "and participants join for the purpose of understanding, disclosing and constructing meaning" (p. 103). Peterson suggests that true dialogue encompasses inquiry and critique - the skills necessary for constructing meaning that can lead to change. Rasinski and Padak (1990) make a similar statement:

> Any action needs an impetus. In a multicultural curriculum, there are few stimuli with greater potential to move people to action than literature. Because it tells the stories of human events and the human condition and not simply the facts, literature does more than change minds; it changes people's hearts. And people with changed hearts are people who can move the world. (p. 580)

I believe that sharing and dialogue focused on a piece of literature that deals with issues of culture and identity can be a powerful experience for students.

Given the validity of reader response theory and the research exploring response through discussion and dialogue, the assumption could be made that encouraging literature discussion takes little effort. Short (1991) suggests that
both students and teachers have particular views about learning that make literature discussion difficult, at least in the beginning. Students may not be familiar with thinking together with other learners because they have experienced learning in isolation. They do not see learning as an "active reflective and social process" (p. 10). Students need time to learn how to put their thinking into language to share and explore with others. Short states that teachers also have to move away from a belief system that views learning as an individual cognitive process which is directly taught and move towards believing that learning is active, and all learners must have voice in determining the direction of the curriculum and of their own learning. Engaging students in literature discussion as one way to establish social contexts for learning, Short (1990) cautions teachers against using literature circles as simply adding another method to their curriculum instead of taking a new perspective on learning.

Peterson and Eeds (1990) suggest that bringing children to see themselves as makers of meaning is not a simple matter. They state, "The attitudes and skills involved are not there merely for the taking: They must be learned" (p. 16). The major challenge is to help children perceive themselves as having worthwhile experiences and ideas to contribute. This will be easier if the topics of the books are familiar to the students and when the settings and ideas expressed are relevant (Martinez & Nash, 1990). Students
need good pieces of literature representing diversity as the basis for discussion, books where they see themselves in the illustrations and where they can experience cultures other than their own. Discussions about culturally diverse literature serve as a way to convey knowledge, and yet have the power to change students’ beliefs and values about others who are different from them or from the mainstream of society. They may also provide students with the opportunity to change their views and beliefs about themselves.

The Role of Literature Response in Identity Formation

The motivation to form a response is often driven by the need to share this response with others. Therefore, the very act of speaking with others about a book may assist students in working out an identity issue and in fact such dialogue may be central to achieving understanding. With dialogic theory, there is a difference between “monologic” and “dialogic” perspectives. Monologic imposes a fixed perspective on experience whereas a dialogic perspective entertains multiple layers of competing or conflicting meaning (Bahktin, 1981). Responses to literature can be a place for multiple meanings to be shared and defended.

Holland (1968), the leading advocate of a psychoanalytic perspective on response, refers to an “identity theme or style” which affects a reader’s view of and response to the world. The reader will respond in such a way that he/she gets feedback that feels satisfying and
fills a need. Galda (1982) agrees that readers have a style of response that reflects their personalities and goes across texts. Applebee (1978) found that evaluations of literature change as a function of age and maturation. It makes sense then that looking at literature response is one significant way to get to the students’ understanding of themselves.

On the basis of Rosenblatt’s transactional theory, Beach (1993) identifies a number of specific response processes which relate to understandings of personal identity. One crucial response process is that of engaging with the text or becoming emotionally involved, empathizing or identifying with the text. Bleich (1975) holds that subjective response leads to cognitive understandings and describes this as the “subjective paradigm” in which readers define knowledge by how they are continually responding to and collectively negotiating meaning in specific circumstances with others. He states that readers enter into an inner dialogue between their experience with the text and their own conceptual framework, creating a dialectical tension between private experience and shared public knowledge which leads to a change in perceptions.

A second area of response is “constructing” in which the reader enters into and creates alternative worlds. Langer (1992) discusses “envisionments” where readers construct their own conceptions of the text world. Having experienced a different world through a novel, they then
look at their own real world with different eyes. This can be enlightening or threatening, but in any case expands their personal understandings. In The Call of Stories, Robert Coles (1989) tells about his students describing themselves according to characters in books. This perhaps is a way that readers can step out of themselves and see themselves as others see them, if only briefly.

Other response strategies as related by Beach (1993) are imaging, that is creating visual images of the situations and characters, connecting or relating one’s autobiographical experience to the current text and evaluating or reflecting on one’s experience with the text. In all these ways of responding, readers reflect their membership in competing cultural communities (Bleich, 1978). Eckert’s (1989) ethnographic study examined two predominant cultural categories in a high school, “jocks” and “burn-outs,” and found that the identities of the groups emerged from their perceptions of school and their opposition to each other. Readers then “act out these cultural practices through their responses in ways that define their cultural identity” (Beach, 1993, p.133). Response to literature may also be a way to explore memberships in competing cultural groups outside of school and thus be a way to reflect on cultural complexities and connections.

Reflection: Creating Meaning Through Visual Images and Drama

When children have the opportunity to view people and situations from many perspectives and to share those
perspectives with each other in true dialogue, it would follow that an appropriate thread running through such experiences would be time spent in reflection (Dewey, 1934). Teachers would then support students in finding ways to construct meaning for themselves and to communicate meaning to others through a variety of literacies.

In schools, the making and sharing of meaning has traditionally been through oral and written language. Art is seen as an "add-on" to extend lessons or as a subject in which students are taught some information and then engage in an experience, as in experimenting with a watercolor picture after a lesson using watercolors. The technique is emphasized over the meaning making in the engagement. Eisner (1994) and Gardner (1983) state that language is not the only communication system and that visual forms, drama, movement, music and math are also ways to construct and communicate meaning. Eisner (1994) expresses the notion that one responsibility of school should be:

the expansion and deepening of meanings which individuals may secure in their life . . . . and I believe schools should allow students to become literate in a wide variety of forms . . . This will increase the meanings that all students can secure and expand educational opportunities for those students whose aptitudes are most congruent with those forms now neglected (p. 87).

Essential to our identity is the form of literacy in which we are most comfortable creating and communicating meaning. Yet there may also be the need to respond in new ways in order to find the expression we need. Phyllis
Whitin (1994) studied the use of visual representations for middle school students to gain perspective on literary texts while involved in literature study groups. She based her visual responses on the "Sketch-to-Stretch" strategy (Harste et al., 1988, Siegel, 1984) in which readers create sketches of what a story means to them. The strategy was designed to support learners of all ages in gaining a new perspective on their understanding of a text. Whitin felt this strategy encouraged students to take risks. One student used discussion notes, personal responses and ideas from various literature logs he had kept to create a visual representation of a new understanding. Later, group discussion of the visual images generated further meaning making. Whitin concludes her article with the thought, "We were creating a community where process was more important than product, and where inquiry was more important than certainty" (p. 207). Such opportunities support emergence of identity both in the media used and in the ideas created as well as their integration.

Similarly, drama can be a way to reflect on a text or deepen an experience. Given the opportunity, children will engage in dramatic play about literature (Hickman, 1983). Heathcote (1984) stresses that drama should not be the retelling of stories but rather "human beings confronted by situations which change them" (p. 48) or as personal experience to understand someone else's point of view and thereby expand the self. Drama is a way to reflect from
within a story or experience and make response an ongoing experience as more implications are found in a series of events and more parallels are drawn between "the world of the book and the experiences of our own lives" (Edmiston, 1991).

My belief is that learning is based on both action and reflection and, given a framework that offers personal response, then the choices made while involved in learning experiences will act as a mirror and a window to a student's identity focus. This belief forms the basis for the classroom experiences that are the heart of this study and that I have chosen to document.

Conclusion

This qualitative teacher research study takes place in my own intermediate multiage classroom and explores the significance of children's responses to literature as related to identity construction. The literature that informs this study is the formation of social and cultural identity, the theory of reader response and transaction, and the role of literature discussion and reflection in identity formation.

In Chapter 1 I gave an overview of the journey to my current inquiry and a summation of the theoretical foundations that provide the framework for the study. In Chapter 2 I present a detailed description of the research design and methodology including data collection and data analysis. Chapter 3 overviews the broad curriculum for the
year within which the study took place and a detailed description of the classroom. Chapters 4, 5, & 6 examine the analysis of the research and are organized around each of my three questions. Chapter 4 addresses the children’s issues. Chapter 5 looks at the spaces within the curriculum that allowed the issues to emerge. Chapter 6 looks at three students and their identity construction process through the lens of photo documentaries. Chapter 7 presents the conclusions and implications of the study.

To me it seems that youth is like spring, an overpraised season - delightful if it happens to be a favored one, but in practice very rarely favored and more remarkable, as a general rule, for biting east winds than genial breezes.

-Samuel Butler, *The Way of all Flesh*

(as quoted by C. Zolotow, 1973)
Chapter 2
RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This vision is not of passive teachers who perpetuate the system as it is, but of teachers who see how the system can be changed through their research, and research, like teaching, is a complicated and messy process.

(Hubbard & Power, 1992, p.xvii)

Teachers are posing their own questions, exploring these questions in a systematic way, and conducting research in their classrooms. Many are members of study groups and have taken the time to examine critical issues. Some have mentors from universities who encourage teachers to look closely at their practice. Teachers understand the history of education and become more articulate about their beliefs and practices. Along the way, teacher research has become a satisfying endeavor for many classroom teachers.

Teacher research is based on research methodologies which draw from anthropology, sociology and linguistics and from the traditions of qualitative, interpretive research (Cazden, 1988, Erickson, 1976). The deeper roots of teacher reflection are found in John Dewey (1938) who encourages careful consideration of practice in light of the reasons that support it and the possible consequences of the practice rather than routine acceptance. Instead of automatically embracing the most commonly accepted view of instructional practice, teachers should be "in the moment" and consider what it is we are about (Schoen, 1983; Tremmel, 1993). Hubbard & Power (1993) use a beautiful metaphor as
they view teacher researchers as artists-in-residence who are creating a craft.

A working definition for teacher research is "systematic, intentional inquiry" conducted by teachers (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1993). I consider "systematic" to mean that written records are kept, experiences in the classroom are documented, and information is gathered and organized in a variety of ways. "Intentional" would suggest a purpose and plan as to how I will look at the issues which intrigue me. "Inquiry" implies a question generated by classroom observation as teachers view the classroom as a place to find out about learning. It is a process of discovering what is really taking place within the educational processes in one's own classroom. This process of discovering can happen when teachers look at daily experiences from new perspectives.

Teachers and their classrooms have often been the focus of university-led research, both with and without the teacher as a participant in the study. However, much of that research is carried out primarily to answer questions posed by people other than the teacher. Teacher research provides a view from within the classroom, the view of the teacher who lives and works in that environment and studies their own experiences (Short & Burke, 1991; Goodman, et al., 1987), not an outsider's view who spends a specified amount of time at the school site to explore questions from a different perspective. Teacher research is inherently a
creative endeavor and offers teachers the gift of self-knowledge. It invites teachers to make time to pursue something they really want to know about their practice, classroom environment, or particular students. It gives teachers an opportunity to understand some aspect of their life's work in a more intimate way.

Cochran-Smith and Lytle (1993) state that because the research process is embedded in practice, "The relationship between the knower and the known is significantly altered" (p. 43). For teachers who work at supporting their students' inquiry, important connections are made when the teachers themselves are engaged in inquiry and when students are collaborators in the research process. Rather than looking at a student's work with an attitude of assessment, teachers engaged in research look more closely at what is really happening as the student is engaged in the task. Student comments are taken more seriously, recorded, and carefully compared. This documentation has the potential to set up a powerful dialogue that enables both student and teacher to know more about what it is that happens in the learning process.

Another dimension in teacher research is a teacher's perspectives on continuing to learn through experience and taking risks in new areas of knowledge (McConaghy, 1986). Teachers may study theory but feel disequilibrium at what that theoretical stance might look like in a classroom. In such an instance, teachers might devise a curricular
framework that pushes them toward change. As a teacher researcher, I want to document my process of change. At the same time I want to stay student-centered, observing and questioning responses as I risk new approaches. I keep a journal and collect student artifacts in order to analyze and reflect on what has taken place in my classroom as I move theory into practice. McConaghy feels that researching as a way of knowing becomes an adventure in learning. Through teacher research, she believes one can "own" his/her knowledge. Teacher researchers take on the role of a learner, actively seeking answers to their own questions even if those questions concern only one child (White, 1990). Teacher research is then a significant way of knowing about teaching. Teacher researchers are observers, questioners, and learners; by engaging in these processes, they become more complete teachers (Bissex, 1986).

Research Setting and Curriculum

A detailed description of the classroom layout, daily schedule and curriculum are the substance of Chapter 3. In this chapter I give a brief overview of the research setting and a detailed description of the students.

The site for this teacher research study was my own fourth and fifth grade multiage classroom at Robins Elementary School in Tucson, Arizona. Robins is a new school that has been open only four years. It is in a desert setting with a grand view of the surrounding mountains. The school has a student population of
approximately 275 students with Anglo, African American, Hispanic, Asian American and American Indian ethnic groups represented. All of the students live in the rural community surrounding the school. Homes range from the low to high average socioeconomic setting. We have students with homes in middle income neighborhoods and high income ranch-like settings, and also students from low income apartments and trailer parks. The school usually has from three to seven students from a nearby shelter. Although this shelter is considered a temporary placement for the children, students have sometimes been at Robins for as long as several months.

The principal of Robins is supportive of literature and inquiry based classrooms and encourages risk taking as a natural part of professional growth in teachers. She has allowed me to use two classrooms since the school is not yet filled to capacity. These two classrooms are connected by a small office. I use one classroom primarily for large group lessons and as a “home base.” This first room houses two computers and the classroom library. It has a rug for reading and personal “cubbies.” The second room is a place for small groups to meet and individual pursuits to take place. This room houses musical instruments as well as art and math materials. It also has open space and carpet for drama interpretations and a small art gallery. The students frequently refer to this second room as the studio and the first room as their classroom. Both rooms are set up with tables.
My class had 25 students of which there were eleven girls and fourteen boys ranging in age from nine to eleven. There were fourteen fourth graders and all but two of these students were at Robins the previous year. There were eleven fifth graders. Ten of the fifth graders were in my class the previous year.

Four of my students went to the resource teacher for gifted students for 2 1/2 hours a week. Four students were considered learning disabled. The resource teacher for these groups worked primarily in my room supporting my instruction. Two students were considered to be emotionally handicapped. One of these children presented a discipline concern. The other student had problems with theft and lying. Most of the students were well-behaved and cooperative.

In addition to the special education classes, my students took band and orchestra twice a week, DARE (a substance abuse prevention program) approximately once a week, and were conflict managers (a program similar to patrols) one week a month. I did team teaching with a colleague for focused math concepts and my students were combined with hers for three hours a week of focused math instruction. We exchange classes for music and P.E.

Research Design and Research Questions

This qualitative study is interpretive and descriptive with a focus on understanding identity construction in the school setting by documenting concrete details of practice
and the meaning of these events for students, as well as a comparative understanding beyond the immediate circumstances of the local setting (Erickson, 1976). Data sources included audio and video tapes and transcripts, journals, field notes, photographs and student artifacts. Data collection and initial analysis was simultaneous. The data analysis was based in the constant comparative method (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). With this method I was able to index and categorize data for analysis and to build grounded theory - that is, to construct theory inductively from field work (Schatzman & Strauss, 1973).

As the students and I participated in the curriculum I selected student samples and visual images, keeping track of emerging evidence of "issues" in order to choose students for the case studies. I did some sorting of the artifacts and developed initial conceptual categories indicated by the data (Goetz and LeCompte, 1984). Trustworthiness was established by a comparison of multiple sources of data (Guba & Lincoln, 1985), a member check with the students in their final interviews, a long term data collection process, and a peer check with another graduate student who came to my classroom periodically. I also met with a faculty advisor on frequent occasions for the purpose of discussing my data collection and analysis process.

I organized my data around my three research questions:
Question 1: What are the issues that are significant to ten and eleven-year-old students as related to
the construction of their own identity?
Question 2: How does the classroom learning environment provide spaces for students to explore or construct their own identities?
Question 3: How do kids work at constructing an identity within a school context?

Data Collection

In this section I begin with a time line of the period of data collection and analysis, and integrate the primary data sources into this timeline. I follow the time line with a description of each data source and how that source became significant to the analysis process.

**Time Line of the Study**

- August to December - Exploratory phase
- January to April - Intense data collection
- May - Student final interviews
- June to August - Intense data analysis
- September to March - Continued analysis/writing

The first half of the year from August to December was the exploratory phase of the study. During this time I worked toward creating a sense of community as well as establishing the curricular framework. The fourth graders needed time to become accustomed to working independently. Students participated in literature reflection and response and became comfortable with diverse perspectives. They developed understandings of the inquiry process and had experience working in inquiry groups. Students used their
sketch logs in a variety of ways and had skills lessons on the use of tools for visual art experiences. During this time I read *The Man in the Ceiling* (Feiffer, 1993) to the students. I also obtained permission from parents for their children to participate in the study and considered possible students for in depth analysis (see Appendix I).

January to April was the period of intense data collection. The primary areas of data collection were audio tapes to students' responses to literature during picture book read-aloud discussions and small group chapter book discussions. Students began with books by Betsy Byars as soon as they returned from Christmas vacation. Once we were well into the reading of Betsy Byars, I read *The Man in the Ceiling* a second time and *Wringer* by Jerry Spinelli (1997) as whole class read alouds. Students used notebooks to record written responses and continued to use sketch logs with more time to work in these books in less directed ways. Students were invited to use these tools to reflect on situations and discussions that occurred in a more general way during the course of the day as well as to make entries that might connect to personal circumstances.

During this time we explored using choice in studio time. I also documented work done with drama as a tool of response to *The Man on the Ceiling* (Feiffer, 1993) and as a way to reflect on student issues.

I used photography to keep records of student artifacts as well as drama and literature discussions. I took field
notes for events that were not taped. I continued to keep a
teaching journal during the second half of the year. I
continued preliminary data analysis and continued to
consider students who would be my case studies. At the end
of the school year I had a possible list of ten students for
profiles.

During May I engaged in student interviews. These
interviews gave me an opportunity to question students in a
more focused way about their issues. I asked them what
pieces of literature were most significant to them and what
learning engagements they found most helpful. In June I
began intense data analysis and I spent the 1998-99 school
year continuing this analysis and working on the writing
about my findings.

**Data Sources**

The primary sources of data collected were: 1) a
teaching journal, 2) student artifacts, 3) audio tapes, video
tapes, and transcripts, 4) photographs, 5) field notes, and
6) student interviews.

**Teaching Journal**

The primary focus of this journal was my reflections on
the process. This journal contains narratives about the
data collection engagements. It was a place for me to
reflect on individual students and on situational happenings
within the classroom and school. It was a place to record
conversations with people who were supportive of the project
and it was a chronological record of the various parts of
the project. It was a place to record questions that arose and form beginning data analysis. It helped me to understand the framework for selecting pieces of data at a later point in time. I wrote in this journal during Sustained Silent Reading and Writing, during lunch time, and in the evenings.

**Student Artifacts**

These artifacts included samples from the students' sketch logs and response journals, selected pieces from projects or art work they did in response to literature discussion, and character webs and other charts or drawings as related to the drama performance. It also includes a folder of essays students wrote about themselves. The essays started with "Who am I as . . ." (a person, mathematician, etc.) The folder was used as beginning information and compared in a general way to the final interviews.

I examined these artifacts for student generated issues. I looked at what students responded to and how they responded. I looked for themes that students pursued over time. Specific artifacts were used to support the analysis of student issues and curricular spaces as well as to create the photo documentaries.

The artifacts throughout the document are not labeled as they are an integral part of the telling of the curriculum and analysis in which words and images together tell the story.
Audiotapes, Videotapes and Transcripts

I taped several of the groups in the literature discussions of the Betsy Byars books and the discussions of the Jerry Spinelli book *Wringer*. I had all of these discussion transcribed. I videotaped a drama performance of *The Man in the Ceiling*. I examined these tapes and transcripts to see what parts of the books were revisited or emphasized by students in discussion or performance. I looked at the characters in the books that the children connected with and how they connected with them. I looked at comments students made related to their personal life, emotions or other connections that they felt related to the ideas in the books. I also took note of how students responded to one another during the data collection engagements.

Photographs

I kept photographs of the data collection period. I took photos of the classroom, students and adults involved in the various learning engagements and student artifacts. In a study of identity construction, it made sense to take photos of the students during the engagements and add a visual component to the study. I took photos of the drama work as a key addition to the field notes since only the final "performance" was videotaped. Photos documented all areas of data collection with special emphasis on the art work and drama.

I used these photos to create the story of the
curriculum process through text and images in Chapter Three and to create the photo documentaries in Chapter Six. The photos in Chapter Three and Chapter Six are not labeled as they are an integral part of the telling of the curriculum and the case studies. The photo documentaries will be described in detail in a special section later in the chapter. The construction of meaning within the curricular chapter and the documentary case studies occurs within two sign systems, visual image and written text. The blending of these sign systems in the “reading” of the text is critical to the understandings in this dissertation document.

Field Notes

I kept field notes of the experiences that I was not able to tape. These were primarily the visits of Paul Fisher, a community resource person for the arts, and his interaction with the class. I also kept field notes of class discussions that were of a spontaneous nature and demonstrated student concerns and issues. I asked the librarian, my student teacher and a graduate student doing her own research in my room to script field notes of picture book discussions which I facilitated. I kept field notes of the curricular background of experiences that I used for data such as a drawing or painting engagement.

Interviews

I interviewed the students during the final week of school. I asked them these three broad questions:
1) How do you feel you have changed as a person this year and why?

2) What books do you remember reading that were important to you?

3) This year I used studio time and drama time. Do you think I should do that again and why or why not?

These interviews were taped and transcribed.

Data Analysis

In order to create a baseline for analysis of data as it related to identity construction, I began by asking students to put together an initial portfolio that described the essence of each of them as a person. We began with a class brainstorm that followed the question: “If I asked you who you are as a person, what kinds of things would be important?” We created a list of their responses. The main question was expanded with the sub-question: What, in general, is important for you to think about?

I asked the students to bring to school objects, drawings of objects, written artifacts, or pictures that might reflect who they are as a person, i.e. as a student, as a family member, as a child, as a Mexican-American. We shared these artifacts. Finally, I asked them to select a few items from the portfolio of lists and artifacts and reflect on the first question: “Who am I as a person?” This gave me a beginning look at each student’s self assessment of identity and became a frame of reference from the child’s own perspectives as I later analyzed transcripts and looked
at class reflections.

Following the analysis period I conducted final interviews as a member check - starting with the beginning ideas in each student's portfolio, looking at the engagements and soliciting student feedback on the analysis or final ideas they were willing to share. I believe these were ways of including the child's voice to inform me as a teacher and researcher.

My initial idea was to base the analysis around the questions with a separate chapter on each question. This idea worked well for me and I reviewed the collection of data with the analysis of each question. Anticipating that the analysis of the issues questions would support the search for curricular spaces, I first organized the data and made a wall chart. The chart had columns with titles such as "Identity Folders," "Literature Discussion" and "Charts". I then entered the data sources for each topic in each of these columns. For example, under identity folders I listed "Who am I?" essays, personal learning time lines, photos of time lines, self-portraits, and so forth. Some of the sources overlapped but that was okay since it was created as a way to cross reference the data sources. For example, I had a column labeled drama in which I listed field notes, videotape, charts, and photographs with short summaries, for example one note would read "Video tape of Man In The Ceiling performance for parents." Then under charts I listed "drama engagements." The purpose of this chart was
to assure that I did not overlook a significant source of
data related to any one area. It is sometimes difficult in
an integrated curriculum to remember where ideas have
crossed over or to recall when looking through examples in
transcripts that there were photographs or artifacts related
to that particular discussion.

I eventually added sticky notes to the chart related to
issues. For example, when I was considering the students’
work related to the issue of "status" and I reviewed the
data, I put a status note next to sources that included some
kind of reference to that work. This chart became helpful
in the spaces chapter in order for me to determine where in
the curriculum students referred again to status besides the
drama engagement where the issue originated. When I was
convinced an issue was relevant, I could see what areas had
contributed the most to that exploration or if the issue had
been considered across all data sources. The issue of
status appeared across all data sources. Although the
students initiated the conversation in drama they referred
to status in their literature response logs, sketch logs,
literature discussions and in studio work. It was a
touchstone to other issues. Finally, this chart was helpful
because it enabled me to keep the data sources in tact. It
served as a map for finding things so I did not have to
disassemble student work in order to organize the artifacts.

What are the issues?

Once I had the data sources organized, I began to
consider Question 1: What are the issues that are significant to ten and eleven-year-old students as related to the construction of their own identity? To answer this question, I looked across all the data sources, merging them to form a list of issues. These issues were then organized according to categories. I chose the Lincoln and Guba (1981) file card system and technique as a way to work with category formulation. I considered categories by looking at frequency or recurrence of an issue, the audience of the research, the possible uniqueness of an idea, or an area not otherwise recognized. The specific findings related to this question are discussed in Chapter Four.

To help me think about question 1, I purchased a notebook that had lines across three quarters of the page, but along the left side of the page there was a blank margin. I began with the final interviews and made a list for of the ideas that each student discussed in that interview. During the process of data collection I decided on ten students whom I felt had worked consistently throughout the year and participated in most of the engagements. I interviewed Shane, Claire, Ralph, Shanna, Estevan, Danny, Liz, Bryan, Lucas, and Jessica. Six of these students were in fifth grade and five were in fourth. Here is a partial sample of the initial list created from Lucas' interview:

- said he learned math this year
- he commented on his negative behavior
- discusses how he feels about literature response
- discusses the status of each of his family members
- says kids have low status
- says people between 25 and 40 have high status
- compared himself to Palmer in Wringer, "I go along with things even if I don't want to."
- said he didn't like "the arts" because he wasn't good at it.

After I made a list from the interview for each student, I created a list from each set of transcripts in which all of the students were involved. Then I created a list from the written response logs and the sketch logs. I chose these data sources because they reflected the students' voices directly. Later I looked at the field notes and teaching journals. The longer I worked on these lists, the more I became immersed in their talk. Patterns or big ideas began to form across the talk although clearly I was not yet fully understanding the issues.

I met with Kathy Short, and colleagues Judi Busche and Leslie Kahn. They helped me fill in the left margin with questions and comments. For example, in several comments I saw fears being addressed. I saw the idea of wanting to be popular but not wanting to do all that the group does. There were comments about "being yourself." I also talked with my colleagues about literature discussions that I thought were unproductive. I wanted their perspective on whether they saw anything in this discussion that I missed.

Finally after reviewing everything, I ended up with about fifty "big ideas" that I felt were the most significant and could be considered issues. I read about student issues in child development books and dictionaries.
and finally created this definition: An issue is a subject of discussion or interest that arises in students' responses and seems related to identity construction. To be considered an issue, the topic needed to arise repeatedly in one student's responses or be seen repeatedly across the group. I put these emerging issues on file cards. I then recoded the transcripts and journals based on these big ideas until I was satisfied that I had not missed anything of significance. During this phase, I rewrote some of the issues to make them clearer.

Next I organized the cards of issues in general groups in order to arrive at broad categories. I made a web of the issues that went with that category. I sorted the cards a different way and I would web that idea. I established a number of different ways to look at the data. Sometimes I would go back and read directly from the data again to be sure I had not distanced the issue from the context. Then I met with my colleagues again and shared my various webs. Through this talk I was able to look at the categories I created with a different lens and see connections or differences I had not been able to see by myself.

The major categories that emerged from these data organizations are: constructing an image of self, constructing relationship, constructing a sense of place, and constructing viewpoint. I believed I could support these categories across the data sources and for all the students.
I reconsidered sub issues within these major categories by using the cards. I pulled quotes and samples in anticipation of the writing and for finding words to title the subcategories that, whenever possible, would reflect more closely the talk of students. For example, the subcategories under “Constructing an Image of Self” are: Thinking About Thinking, Meeting in the Middle, Just Be Yourself, Ridicule Leaves a Lasting Impression, and Personal Integration. As I began to write about the issues and pull samples from the student work, the case studies began to simmer in the back of my mind.

Creating Spaces for Identity Construction

Writing about the curriculum and working on the analysis for the issues chapter became a strong foundation from which to consider my second question: How does the classroom learning environment provide spaces for students to explore or construct their own identities?

I define identity construction as the creating and shaping of ourselves as human beings as we form the values and beliefs that motivate us and govern what we perceive to be important. These identity constructs shape our perceptions and purposes as we live from day to day. I define curricular space as an interval or period of time when students work on issues of interest to them through dialogue and reflection (Miller, 1990).

To consider curricular spaces, I asked myself several questions: What learning engagements allowed issues to be
introduced and what learning engagements allowed students to think more deeply about the issues? Besides the learning engagements, what were the essential characteristics of my classroom and teaching behaviors that held the most potential related to identity construction? My wall chart was a good place to start. It was covered with sticky notes of where I would find examples of issues in the data. It therefore was an indicator of the spaces that might allow these issues to be addressed.

I returned to the student interviews in order to gain insight about this issue. I had asked a broad question of the fourth graders: "What did we do this year that you would like to see us continue next year and why?" and of the fifth graders: "Of the various kinds of things we did this year, what do you feel was most beneficial to you?" Asking the question "How do you feel you have changed this year as a person and why?" also gave me insights into the areas of the curriculum the students saw as having the greatest significance. I asked the students directly about areas I was thinking about, "Do you think choice is important? Why or why not?" Although these interviews may be seen as cued responses, they were relevant when the two areas were merged, that is, the spaces where I saw possibilities for identity thinking and where the students felt they experienced the most growth.

For the question of spaces I also needed to do self analysis. The spaces were offered by me in order to examine
ideas such as choice and studio time through the lens of identity construction. I needed to consider my own selection of the possible spaces for the study and the worth of these spaces in the emergence of student issues. I wanted to look at my role within the spaces I had created.

To assist in this analysis, I interviewed Principal Rosanna Gallagher and fellow teachers, Leslie Kahn and Judi Busche. These were people with whom I had worked closely and who had often been in my classroom. Generally, each had an area they focused on in the interview with only some overlap. Rosanna talked primarily about the tone in the room. Judi talked about my responses to kids. Leslie talked about my expectations. After taking notes from them and reflecting on my own belief system, I read through my journals and all of the transcripts of discussions in which I participated. I made a list of ways I responded in talk and in curriculum development as related to exploring my students' identity issues.

Finally, I went back through the chapter I had written on the curriculum. I made cards with words like "inquiry," "dialogue" and "traditions." With these three areas of information - the curriculum and self reflection, responses taken from the data and the wall chart, and the comments of my colleagues - I began to think through this with drawings. I used stars and webs and gradually I could see two broad areas forming, that is, choices I make that relate directly to interactions and assessments of students and those that
relate to the broader learning environment. I took the list of comments and ideas and sorted them into these two categories. Literature response is a decision about the learning environment. Questioning students about their responses is a way I relate directly to the child. These are both examples of choices I make to create space for identity issues to emerge and to be explored and that would be considered for categories related to spaces.

I worked on the list until I had it divided into the broad areas and then I worked on subcategories. In the area of working directly with the students, the subcategories I arrived at include Knowing the Child, Challenging the Child, and Offering Choices. In the broader environment, I felt everything that was of significance to understanding spaces fell within the categories "Literature Based Classroom," "Valuing Diversity" and "Creating Community."

The Photo Documentaries

I considered writing case studies as a way of responding to the third question of the study, How do kids work at constructing an identity within a school context? I spent the better part of a year looking at artifacts and photographs and attempting to interpret them as to identity construction. The idea of creating a photo documentary as a case study made sense. I decided to put together a series of photos and quotes from a student’s writing, the student’s conversation in literature discussion groups, and comments from the student’s final interview to show the work that
each student was doing related to identity exploration.

Bogdan & Biklen (1992) say photographs are "closely aligned with qualitative research and can be used to provide strikingly descriptive data, are often used to understand the subjective, and are frequently analyzed inductively" (p.138). Bogdan & Biklen go on to say that photographs such as those of a classroom can provide a cultural inventory and be a way to freeze a moment for later discussion and interpretation or immortalize a moment in an ongoing flow of events. As I reflected on photography as analysis, I saw similarities to Rosenblatt in the issues raised: "Is the camera like a typewriter that has nothing to say on its own? Is it only an instrument, dependent upon the skill and insightfulness of the one who is holding it? Or is there something about the relationship between the holder, the camera, and the understanding that is transcendent?" (p. 144-145).

The photography is only part of the case study documentary, however. There are also copies of clippings from transcripts, excerpts from response journals and copies of artwork. The photo documentary format for the case study embodied the definition of a qualitative evaluator as stated by Guba and Lincoln (1981) "they do what anthropologists, social scientists, connoisseurs, critics, oral historians, novelists, essayists, and poets throughout the years have done. They emphasize, describe, judge, compare, portray, evoke images, and create, for the reader or listener, the
sense of having been there" (p. 149).

In composing the case studies there were two areas of decision making: who to profile and which pieces of that student's work to include. There were lesser decisions like how the length and what the order of the images in. Then followed the actual construction which included scanning and labeling all the pieces, printing once or twice or three times until all the shades were adjusted and then making decisions about the layout and background of the pieces.

Deciding on the students was the primary decision. I wanted the images to stand alone and so I chose students with a central focus that could be recognized in a few pieces of work. My photographs had been taken randomly throughout the year without particular students in mind so I needed to be sure I actually had a reasonable number to work with for any one child. I wanted the students chosen to be representative of the larger group and I wanted students who had considered their issue or issues from a variety of perspectives so that it would add interest to the documentary. It would seem difficult to find students who met all these criteria, but I had several students I initially could use.

I returned to my original list of the students and their issues. I tried to arrive at a few central ideas for each student. For example, with Shane there was always talk of his interest and ability in art. With Shanna there were many references to her parent's divorce. Jessica was
thinking about the concept of lying and trust.

Three categories emerged across the students that were descriptive of their process. These three identity themes were situational identity construction, integrated identity construction, and conceptual identity construction. These categories are discussed in greater detail in Chapter 6.

One way of thinking about themselves was situational. The student was somehow involved in a situation that was a life change and they were deeply focused on what this change meant for them. Both Shanna and Danny were focused on situational themes, but Danny used a number of ways to make meaning and better fit the overall criteria of the photo documentary case study which was to have responses across all data sources.

Shane and Liz both had a strong identity that they worked at integrating across the curriculum. Shane had an art focus and for Liz it was math. I eliminated Shane because he had many things going on that would be difficult to communicate in the photo documentary format. That meant my choice for an example of integrated identity construction would be Liz.

Others like Claire, Bryan and Estevan were seeking to define particular issues which I defined as a "concept" in identity exploration, and how those issues related to them. Estevan's issue was that of adoption and related cultural concerns. I felt this issue to be of a private nature though the parents had signed a permission form. Estevan
talked about his adoption but his parents were mute on the subject. Claire and Bryan remained. Claire had many interesting issues that she considered, one of which was a mental block she had in math. As a researcher on issues of identity, I found Bryan to be the most intriguing. I also felt his work in drama to be significant. I therefore reasoned that Bryan should be my case study for conceptual identity formation.

Once having chosen the three case study students, I collected all of the year's work these students as related to their identity issues and put the work in plastic sheets in a three ring binder. I highlighted everything they said in the transcripts and final interview with a marker. I went back with the notebooks to my collaborative team. "Do you see what I see?" I asked them. "Do you find it interesting?" I asked them. "Could you see it without my telling you it was there?" I asked and watched their faces. The answers were "yes", "yes", and "I think so." I recognized that they were looking at the student's entire body of work. Fewer samples could create a shorter path to the central theme of identity construction, but I would still need to incorporate an introduction to each student. The artifacts and photographs could not stand entirely alone. I composed a draft of what I might say for each case study introduction. I then began reducing the artifacts.

Eliminating items from the notebook was tense work. I considered the possibility that I was making connections
across the selected pieces because I was subconsciously remembering the others. My criteria for selection was that the piece connect with the issue or in some way show a side of the student that was important. Again I looked for diversity in approach. Did they talk? Did they write? Did they draw? What photographs did I have to document issue

I generally organized the case study pages around one aspect of the student’s identity construction. For example, one page would focus on responses in drama. Another page would relate to literature discussion. All the first pages will laid out the same. What would make a strong finish for the last page? In this way, each photo documentary case study was developed.

Although not directly a part of the analysis, the time spent designing the layout is important. The readers would initially be analyzing the data themselves as they read through the documentary case study prior to reading my discussion on each student. I spent several days scanning and then trying page layout formats. Should I box the pictures with black on a white background? Should everything be uniform or should I change size? Should I keep similar things together even if that means the page is nearly all language or seek a more visually pleasing format of language and image together? Bryan’s documentary was longer because he was looking at his issues in small ways over time so I needed more. Liz and Danny had a more focused issue exploration and may not have needed even the
length I gave them. I reduced the introductions to a page or two and added a discussion of the categories at the end to emphasize the ways in which these students represented the class.

Conclusion

The major focus of this study is on ways students work at constructing identity within a classroom setting as evidence through their responses to literature. This focus led me to ask the following questions:

1. What are the issues that are significant to ten and eleven-year-old students as related to the construction of their own identity?

2. How does the classroom learning environment provide spaces for students to explore or construct their own identities?

3. How do kids work at constructing an identity within a school context?

I explored these questions in my own intermediate multiage classroom by collecting and analyzing children's responses to literature through literature discussion, written response logs, sketch logs, and through responses during studio time when students used art and drama. Student interviews, teaching journals, field notes, and audio and videotapes were also part of the data collection.

The data analysis process was a tiered process. The analysis of issues helped in arriving at an understanding of the spaces. The analysis of the issues and spaces then enabled me to form categories of individual identity construction which supported the case studies. All data
sources were analyzed using a constant comparative analysis (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). I compared the students' responses to identify tentative categories. The tentative categories that had similar properties were reduced to a small number of conceptual categories. The data was recoded with each set of categories and the resulting analysis is in Chapters Four, Five and Six.

To ensure trustworthiness in this study I incorporated the strategies of triangulation wherein I used multiple sources of data, member checks by means of the final interview, long term observation, and peer examination in which I asked my colleagues to comment on the findings as they emerged (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The findings are credible based on Goetz & LeCompte's (1984) factors that lend support to high internal validity including working among my students in a naturalistic setting that reflects the life experiences of the participants and by including their voices in my analysis through their talk and samples of their work.

It was my goal to understand human behavior and experience, as relate to my students' personal identity construction. I wanted to grasp the process by which my students construct meaning and to describe what those meanings are (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992, p. 49), with the ultimate result being that of becoming a better teacher.
CHAPTER 3
LOOKING AT THE CURRICULAR FRAMEWORK

One of the things I appreciate about working as a researcher in my own classroom is the unique opportunity to reflect on the year. This kind of deep reflection is vital as a way to pull together my thinking about theory with the daily instructional practice in my classroom. Although as a rule my understandings of theory are ahead of my practice, I do feel a sense of satisfaction that the practice reflects a core set of beliefs. Teachers spend a great deal of time considering curriculum in the broad sense. We take summer workshops in subject areas such as math instruction or we take classes at the University. Sometimes we work on district committees to consider the implementation of new curriculum adoptions such as designing an effective portfolio system. We belong to professional groups such as Teacher's Applying Whole Language where meetings and conferences focus on curriculum. We read books and journals and curriculum guides. We engage in reflective dialogue with colleagues to gain perspectives on our own developing notions.

The thinking that is generated from these various forums changes who we are as teachers and this becomes evident in the minute by minute decisions made each day in the classroom. I also find it interesting as I continue to strive toward student centered curriculum to see how a research study design is shaped by the students in the
classroom. I have completed two major studies and several smaller projects. I started all of them with a broad framework and specific questions. Sometimes in planning a study I would have the most recent group of children in the back of my mind. Considering curriculum is impossible without the spirits of children floating through your mind. Since I normally plan a study ahead of the group of children I intend to work with, the study moves and changes in relationship to that particular group. By conducting research with my own class, I do not have the freedom to choose groups or schools that might seem more interesting or cooperative. This again gives the project life and interest and makes the research a force as dynamic as the classroom itself.

In this chapter I reflect on starting the year of this study based on how my students explored identity construction through responses to literature. I begin by giving a brief flashback of the curricular history of my work at the school as it relates to the context of this study. I describe the setting and the beginning of the year decisions that I made based on this particular group of students and the demands of this particular school. I then give an overview of the first half of the year. During this time we were developing a strong base of community and literature response.

Starting the Year

I stood in the doorway surveying the room. I didn’t
bother to turn on the lights. The desert sun streamed in through the windows, the blinds drawn up to the ceiling as the custodians had left them after the summer cleaning. Tables were pushed together on one side of the room and blue plastic chairs were in stacks. My eyes took in the empty bulletin boards . . sunflowers . . I would decorate my room with sunflowers. It was too hot in August to return to a school with no air conditioning. Only the "swamp" coolers blew in air and with little effect. Even on full blast, the temperature in the room registered in the 80's. In eight days the kids would be here with serious eyes and sweaty faces. A garden atmosphere of green and yellow flowers would be inviting.

Perhaps sunflowers would perk up my wilted spirits as well. I had just left a disturbing meeting of the intermediate team. My colleagues had initially greeted each other with enthusiasm. We picked up our class lists determined at the end of the last school year. Judi would have a straight fifth. This was the third year for many of her students who started with her in a 3/4 multiage two years ago. Linda would have a fourth grade. Leslie and I would be teaching a 4/5 multiage taking our previous fourth graders up to fifth. There would be additions to the list on the first day of school. In less than two weeks, the students on these lists would become our focus for the year.

Not that we hadn't already given these kids a great deal of thought. We met over the summer to plan how we
would work together as a team. We had been working on a teaching method that we simply called "rotations." The idea was based on considering all the classes as one unit for part of the day. Judi and I initiated the concept in our second year at Robins to facilitate an inquiry study in astronomy. We planned together with student teachers and support staff and then mixed our classes to form small groups who rotated through the various learning engagements. Rotation experiences included browsing text sets and making webs, visiting "centers" for purposes of exploration and generating of questions, science experiments, oral storytelling, technology related to the inquiry, and various connections to math and the arts throughout. The power of the rotations was in the planning. Judi and I pushed one another’s thinking and discussed educational theory and beliefs together. We gave each other advice on the lessons, perhaps how the lesson could be made more powerful or questioning the purpose of the lesson and how it fit with our developing theory and the students’ responses. On the practical side, it meant that fewer materials would be needed for any one group. The time we took to collect books and materials or research a lesson would benefit a greater number of students. We would teach a lesson more than once so we could refine it and compare responses of different students. As we reflected with each other and with the students after each set of rotations, teachers and students would make a decision together as to the next turn the
curriculum would take. Sometimes the next turn might be recognizing the need for a lesson in skills, like how to read large numbers if we were going to continue with space travel issues. More often it meant finding people and materials to support further student inquiry. For example, the students were excited about the artwork in many of the posters we hung around the room. We were able to find a local artist who worked with the graphics of space art to come and speak to our group.

The astronomy study was so successful that we continued the next year with a focus study on the planet Earth. Leslie joined us that year which meant three classes were involved in the rotations. Leslie had a strong interest in math. Together with Judi’s science expertise and my interest in literature and the arts, we were a strong team. Formerly, Judi and I had moved students through rotations daily. The second year we elected to keep each group of students for one hour a day for three consecutive days. This would give us more time for dialogue and reflection within the learning engagement. Again the year was highly successful. Now Linda wanted to get on board. We met over the summer and settled on our umbrella concept, “The Art of Reflection: Inquiring Minds.” The use of the word “art” was a play on words meaning that reflection is an art to be developed. We also wanted more time to be spent on reflecting through the visual arts, music and drama. At the summer meeting we decided to start the year with rotations
on art techniques so that students would immediately have visual literacy tools for reflecting. We would incorporate in the lesson an example of someone "famous" who used the technique as a way to think. We had also been asked to teach "life skills" such as honesty and integrity as a school wide theme. We thought this could be incorporated into the discussions of the people we mentioned in the rotation focus study. We felt that this foundation of reflection would add depth to any studies that were occurring in our separate rooms. It would certainly be a great start for my research on developing a sense of identity.

We came to the first meeting of the school year sharing our plans with Rosanna, the principal. Leslie was going to work with pastels and she had educated herself over the summer on this media. Judi loved watercolor. They would introduce various artists and illustrators as part of the study. Linda planned to begin with drawing and a discussion of Leonardo de Vinci. Since we were tentatively considering a visit from a children's author who worked with fantasy, I decided to start with Chagall. Later, at the urging of a student, we incorporated Van Gogh's theme of yellow and his "Sunflowers" piece into this rotation.

At this first meeting, Rosanna seemed pleased with our plans but she carried a stack of papers and looked somewhat preoccupied. Finally she handed us another list. "These are the students you are getting from third grade who are moving
into the intermediate wing. On the left are students who scored above the 50th percentile on the standardized test. On the right are the students who scored below. You each have a list for mathematics and reading," she said.

I don't put a lot of stock in test scores but I was still aghast. On my mathematics list I had three children on the left and everyone else on the right. Leslie's was the same. Linda had only one child on the left. The reading scores were better but not much. Rosanna saw the looks of consternation on our faces and rushed to support us. The scores for the fourth graders of the previous year were excellent, she said. Those scores were published in the newspaper over the summer. The kids in fifth who went on to middle school also did well. "If these third grade scores had been published, many parents in the school would have criticized our program." she said. "If we don't bring up these children's scores before they are published in the paper this coming year, the parents will not see last year's students and this year's as different groups with differing needs, but will interpret it that our scores are 'falling' and we will be spending a great deal of time defending our program." We understood that Rosanna had received the same message from her assistant superintendent.

The parents of Robins' students see our program as "innovative." We use textbooks only as a resource. We use children's literature instead of basal readers. We do not have weekly spelling tests. We write for real purposes
rather than working our way through language skills sheets. We emphasize math, visual arts, music and drama as forms of literacy as well as reading and writing. We have multiage classes.

We face the "test score emphasis" dilemma yearly but the vision of the scores in next summer's paper with this group made our stomachs tighten. Clearly Rosanna was worried. She finally spoke again. "You all do wonderful things in reading. I know you will bring them up in no time. I know you once talked about emphasizing mathematics in your rotations. Can you work on basic math skills in rotations? Perhaps you will need to refer some of these children to child study or we might be held accountable for not following the correct procedures."

Now, as I looked around my vacant classroom, memories of the remainder of the meeting blurred in my mind. What was it she said? The kids had a long-term substitute one year. There were many behavioral problems. Many of the students were on medication for hyperactivity. Several of the kids were from the local "group home" or shelter. A feeling of pressure crept up my neck. Basic skills. Test scores. An unusual group of children who are experiencing difficulty learning. How would this affect our curriculum? Would this list of scores limit my teaching? Would it limit my research? I picked up my keys and headed out to find sunflowers.
Setting Up the Room

The next day my daughter and I arrived early to organize the classroom space. The school is only four years old and has not reached capacity, so I was fortunate to be allotted two classrooms connected by an office.

One room would be the "home base". Students would come to this classroom in the mornings and leave from it in the afternoons. This room would be used for direct instruction and for most reading and writing blocks. It would house the large classroom library in the built-in shelves and it would have a large rug area for class meetings and read alouds. The built-in cubbies that would hold student’s looseleaf notebooks (portfolios), their writer’s notebooks, rotation notebooks, sketch logs, journals, and library books were organized. We arranged seven rectangular tables together and placed the rug over by the bookshelves and cubbies. We took out the sunflower decorations we had purchased and in a few hours there were sunflower accents all around the room. We took a lunch break and then tackled the second room.
This room would take more thought. I envisioned it as a "studio" - the primary place for music, art and drama. I was not sure which room would house math. My goal was to create a "studio" experience in which students could respond freely to literature. Although more time was needed to prepare students and to expand my own thinking, I wanted this room to signal the possibilities. I assumed the content and eventual arrangement of the room would evolve throughout the year.

It began simply as a room with a lot of tables. We arranged them in a "wheel" with a circle table in the middle and rectangular tables extending out. We filled the built-in cubbies and shelves with a variety of art supplies, stacks of newspapers and magazines, and for now, the math materials. We hung old long-playing records from the ceiling and decorated the bulletin boards with themes related to art and music. We set up an easel. I strung crayons that would light up around the top of the bookshelves. We organized all the musical instruments into one corner. We placed books that related to the arts around the room.

By the end of the year the room would look very different. Half of the tables were removed to give more floor space for movement and drama, or simply room to work on projects on the floor. I covered large pieces of cardboard with black cloth to make a backdrop for drama or for a "gallery." At different times during the year, the
gallery held student work, photographs of student engagements which we call “talking pictures,” or the work of a professional artist. I was able to get another large rug which was, in turn, a meeting place to share works in progress, a stage when placed in front of the backdrop or a workplace, most usually for music and blocks. I covered the blackboards to make more room for displays and added plaster pillars that served as sculpture displays or held plants to add aesthetic appeal to displays and performances. One corner was set up with rugs and pillows and a tape player and often the students or I would pair a print of a painting with a book on the floor in this area. This enabled students to examine art prints at eye level. I kept a cart filled with math strategy games in this room to encourage students to come in during their breaks and play games in small groups.

Gradually students began to call this room “the studio” and to congregate regularly. They left their musical instruments in this room and often came in before school or during their lunch time to practice or give demonstrations to each other. They played games and worked on paintings. At times I found clay sculptures sitting around and fresh paintings on the easel that had been created during lunch. Although I was delighted, the messes they tended to leave were not as wonderful and it seemed as though we were always cleaning up. I wondered if true artists have a higher threshold for creative disarray than I do.
The students were to have a place to work that was relatively unscheduled and "unmonitored" by adults. I was always finding interesting projects going on in the room.
The studio would also be an available space for the various people who would be working in my room throughout the year. The two people who would be coming on the most consistent basis would be Paul Fisher and Cheri Anderson. Paul Fisher is a member of The Tucson Council for the Arts. He was hired by the school to work with teachers and students in drama. Paul wanted to help us to feel comfortable with drama as a way to think. He wanted to move us away from the concept of drama as only presentational. He was willing to work closely with me on my exploration of identity in any way that would make sense. Cheri Anderson is a full time employee of the school district who is working to complete a doctorate in visual literacy. She asked to work with students in my classroom on a research study. Her focus would be children's understandings of the connections between written language and illustration in picture books. She planned to come out to the school a day and a half a week to work with students that she would identify for case studies. She scheduled additional times to work with my whole class on visual literacy engagements relating to literature. She was willing to give me advice and support in the development of the studio and studio time as well as share any identity themes that she saw emerging in the responses from the students she was working with individually. As colleagues, we hoped to support each other in our data collection and beginning analysis.
As I think back on that day that my daughter and I climbed up and down ladders and arranged and rearranged, I am struck with the potential that lies at the beginning of a school year. I wondered what kinds of experiences these children were bringing to the two rooms that were organized in readiness for their arrival. Did the test scores really reflect the reality of their abilities? Would I get caught up in literature and studio responses or would I fall into a panic state of skills lessons, child study referrals and behavior problems? Yet even as I walked down the hot, darkened hall of that August evening, I felt hope and anticipation beginning to bubble inside me. I knew it would be a great year.

_The Students Enter_

I started the year with thirteen fourth graders who were new to me and twelve fifth grade students. As they filed in on the first day of school I was struck with how young the fourth graders looked. They were small and manifested more childlike behaviors than would be usual at that grade level. A quick perusal of cumulative folders later revealed that several of them were nearly a full year younger than their classmates and therefore two years younger than the fifth graders. I had a “young” student nearly every year but to have several in one class was highly unusual. I came to feel this issue accounted to a large measure for their test scores and overall performance in both academics and “behavior.” They were a chatty group, preoccupied with
social issues and displaying a general lack of focus on school work. As I gave the usual fall assessments, I noted that most used only "sounding out" as a reading strategy. Their writing pieces were short, forced and displayed a lack of understanding of conventions of writing. No one could write in cursive. Addition and simple subtraction were about the only math they seemed comfortable with. Problem solving exercises generated blank looks. Even the two students who were in the Gifted and Talented Education Program (GATE) seemed lost. The GATE students did, however, display an interest in school and an eagerness to participate that was generally lacking in the remaining students.

Normally when faced with such a challenge of incoming students I would look to the fifth graders as guides. One of the blessings of multiage classrooms is the core group that returns the following year. But of my twelve fifth graders, only seven had been in my class the year before. Of the remaining five, two had started out in my class the previous year as fourth graders but were taken out when crowded conditions forced the hiring of a new teacher. Three other students were moved into my room at the fifth grade level by parent request. Two of these students were gifted and the other was diagnosed with depression. By January I had lost two fifth graders, one to relocation and one to a private school, and I had added four more fourth graders. Now I had seventeen fourth graders and only ten
fifth graders.

Twenty students were new and only seven were my returning students. The academic range was basically from third grade to sixth or seventh grade level understandings.

"It's a good year to study personal identity," I wrote in my journal, "because there are sure no two kids that are alike." Although such could be said of all classes, it seemed to be more exaggerated this year. I scheduled parent conferences immediately instead of waiting for the usual district assigned days in October and faced the fact that in many ways I was starting from scratch.

First Semester: Laying the Foundation for a Study of Identity

The first half of the year was spent primarily in building community, introducing and maintaining classroom procedures, and giving very careful consideration to building reflection and response strategies in students. Some engagements were planned from "the get-go" and some engagements were highly extemporaneous. Given my goals, however, all learning engagements worked toward creating the foundation for the study of identity. The engagements that stand out in my mind as being the most significant are the student created time lines of their own learning process, our author studies, the book reviews we did for the librarian, the read aloud *The Man in the Ceiling* (Feiffer, 1993) with related drama responses, the Tom T. Hall music study and the inquiry project that began with a district
science kit on rocks and "took off" when the children refused to let go of it. The thread that wove these seemingly unrelated engagements together was reflection and thoughtful response, consideration of thoughtful and responsive people, experiences across all sign systems, and many opportunities for dialogue and collaboration.

Given the differing experiences and abilities of students who are new to a teacher, the curricular beginnings of any year can appear choppy. Learning engagements that on the surface seem to have potential may fall flat. Students may choose to explore an idea that at first does not seem to fit with the overall objective for the year. Spontaneous things happen that pull us away from our predetermined plans. As a teacher it is at times frustrating and it is difficult to refrain from rushing the process. Yet given time and patience, students begin to make connections and to think more deeply. The following section details the primary curricular engagements of the fall semester that provided a foundation for the period of intense data collection that took place beginning in January.

**Building Community**

It was important for me to begin with meaningful activities that pulled me and my students together as a class and that encouraged the students to see themselves as learners. Homework on the first day was to bring in an artifact that reflected something each of them had learned over the summer. The next day I asked them to share their
artifact with the class and eventually to write about that learning experience. Bryan wrote about his rock climbing fears at learning to "repel." Raquel wrote about learning to take care of her little sister while her mom was working.

The conversations surrounding these learning experiences created some controversy as students argued with one another. "You didn't just learn that this summer," they said. This most often came up when students related feats of swimming. Although I had already considered a time line assignment, their discussion gave me a great lead-in. "What about creating a life-long time line of your learning achievements?" I suggested. "Then you could put them on your time line, for example, when you first started to learn to swim and how that skill developed with focus and practice." At first they seemed dazed, as happened often when I made suggestions throughout the year. The first reaction was that I was asking the impossible. "Our whole lives?" they asked. But when I offered it as a two week homework assignment, they were comforted and thought it not as bad as some homework.

The final projects were amazing and we had an inroad into reflecting on our own inquiring minds, recalling the intermediate theme which was The Art of Reflection: Inquiring Minds. As the students shared their time lines, we immediately grasped the kinds of lifestyles we shared and the things that were important to us and our families. Even the style in which the project was presented was relevant.
Bryan presented his as a computer that flashed on and off. Round circles of paper resembling computer disks lifted up to reveal his various learning accomplishments. Liz put her title on a baseball bat and her acquired skills were printed on baseballs. They picked three of their timeline entries to write about more extensively.

I organized another community-building activity at this point based on a need I saw for parents to get more involved with their children in the classroom. Although I traditionally have a Student-of-the-Week, this year I scheduled each student's week well in advance and sent a letter home inviting the parents to come into the school to volunteer for up to four hours. They could share a personal or career interest, help with clerical work, or do some reading or play learning games with a small group of students. Over 50% of the parents participated. Much of our writing was in response to these visits by creating books of student letters complete with photographs that were sent home following the parents' visit. We had a parent team involved with the math program for the district who taught an excellent math lesson. Another parent team dressed in camouflage to give a demonstration of bow hunting. A father demonstrated tools he used in surveying. These presentations demonstrated inquiring minds and taking the time to reflect and share as well as the notion that the business of learning takes a lifetime.
A sense of community also marked the first change in the studio. We drew each other's profiles and cut them out of black paper. We hung them around the top of the studio walls. They served as a visual representation of the importance of the individual members of the group and witnessed that the studio was a place created for them.

Author Studies

The umbrella concept of "The Art of Reflection: Inquiring Minds" led naturally to a study of authors. I used a set of books about authors that are produced for children. Each book is a story of an author and includes photographs. These books are excellent because they include
discussions of the author's creative process. I introduced the books with a "book pass." This meant that I gave out the books and each pair of students could look one over for a few minutes and then pass it on.

The students were familiar with many of the authors and suggested bringing in books written by these same authors. Most of the books were picture books and within the reading ability range of all the students. I took out plastic tubs and the kids, the librarian and I put together a set of books for each author. I added to the text sets any information or pictures I had in my personal files along with the original book about the author. The class read the books at tables and on the rug and discussed the books in small groups. The students were relaxed about reading in spite of the range of skill levels and seemed excited by personal knowledge of many authors. During our daily read aloud on the rug, students volunteered to choose one book from a text set and read it to the rest of the class. This led to informal comments about the authors and sometimes about the illustrator and illustrations. Occasionally I was able to find another book by a particular illustrator to extend the study.

I continued gathering observational notes on the students' responses. What kinds of books were they drawn to? Who paid particular attention to illustrations? Which children appeared to be the struggling readers? Which ones worked well together? The study created a tone for the room
by conveying that books were important here, that picture books and novels had equal status even at the intermediate level, and that knowing about authors and illustrators was a good thing.

**Book Reviews**

One morning the librarian came into our room and asked to speak with my class. "I have noticed," she said, "that you are very interested in the people who write picture books and the stories they tell. I have several new books that I have been asked to review so that other people can make decisions whether they want to read these books. I need your help. I want to know what you think." The class agreed to read the books and give her their responses. I found out later that she also considered our class because the books dealt primarily with American history traditionally taught in the fifth grade.

Up to this point we had only responded to books through dialogue. "How will we share our thoughts with the librarian?" I asked. A sea of eyes looked at me and one lone hand went up. "We could write book reports," a student suggested. Everyone else was shocked. They were quick to emphasize that the stack looked to be about ten books high. TEN book reports? They scanned my face.

Hmm. My research mind was thinking about a tape recorder. Hmm. No. I rejected the idea. It was too soon. They would sound stilted. They weren't that strong in response strategies. Response strategies? Here was an
opportunity to share with them some ways to respond to books. I wanted to avoid their tendency to retell the story or make simplistic value statements. Rather, I was looking for connections.

I chose several of the books that looked the most promising. With each one I also discussed a specific response strategy that I asked the children to use. For example, with the book *Train to Somewhere* (Bunting, 1996) I introduced the concept of Sketch to Stretch (Short & Harste, 1996). I urged the students to try each strategy but did not insist on it. We allowed time for students to share their work. As we continued through the books they eventually chose their own method of response. With the students' permission, I typed all the written responses each time and passed them out to the class. It gave them a chance to read what others wrote and served as a support for the next literature discussion. Seeing the words in print also gave importance to the responses. Here are some of the early responses to the librarian's review books:

I didn’t know that women couldn’t go to college back then. In the part when Judith had a paper for the girls to sign, I would have signed it. I liked this book because I thought that most of the characters were very brave. (Tori)

The book was good, but I don’t think what they did was fair. I loved the illustrations. I really liked the story. I like the title, too. I’d rather go to school instead of working. (Freddy)

I think that it was not fair to work twelve hours a day and only get $1.75 per week. I think that is so cruel and hateful. I don’t think that is right a bit.
Judith was right all along. I would be like Judith. I think that Judith is very brave to risk her job and fight for her rights. A lot of other people have been abused besides women, like Mexican, black people and the Chinese. (Liz)

Train to Somewhere
by Eve Bunting
Illustrated by Ron Himler

I can relate to the girl in the train. Like when we first went to California. I kept thinking when are we going to stop, what's going to happen to me or when I was adopted.
When we sent the last of the books along with our drawings and comments off to the library, we reflected on the experience. One student commented that many of the books were sad. He mentioned as an example the story of the slave who traveled with Lewis & Clark but was never given his freedom and a story about a young girl who worked in the early mills. These observations seemed somehow related to the larger concept question of "What makes people great?" The idea of the struggle for greatness became a touchstone for the class and eventually led to a focus study of inequity. We read books and watched videos relating to child labor which moved us into the issues of early mining and Mexican miners. Later in the year we read a story about a woman who posed as a man in the Civil War and we read stories of Japanese internment camps. When a historical perspective of the Vietnamese Mai Lai massacre came out in the newspaper, we discussed it and watch taped interviews of the pilots involved.

In many ways, responding to these books led us to a stronger focus on people and the choices they make. Although not done on a formal inquiry basis, as I looked through my journals and lesson plans, the concept of inequity often guided our selection of materials and was the focus of many worthwhile class discussions.

Introducing Sketch Logs

I asked Cheri Anderson to talk to the class about sketch logs. She came equipped with a variety of her own
sketch logs and a set of books. She began by asking students to create a web with her about purposes for a sketch journal. She shared her sketch logs and talked about the circumstances surrounding her various drawings. She discussed the media that she used for each of the reflections in her logs. The books she brought were journals that had been kept by the authors using different styles of writing and using sketches for different purposes. We passed out the sketch logs. Cheri asked them to turn to the second page of their sketch logs for a short response activity. She explained that the first page of a sketch log was a special page - "the page you would see every time you open up your book." Therefore she suggested students spend some time thinking about what to draw on that first page and complete it at a later time.
Cheri then read to the students. She reminded the students of what the sketch to stretch strategy was all about and asked them to use that strategy in their sketch logs as a way to think about the story she read. Music played softly in the background. At the end of the session she shared the sketch she had done and she shared mine. She then asked for volunteers to share their sketches. Cheri used the strategy "Save the Last Word for Me" (Short & Harste, 1996) in which the artist shows his or her work and remains silent while the rest of us made comments. The artist got the last few moments to share his or her thoughts of the piece. These moments of sharing were important to the process of reflection that I was working on with the class. It gave them opportunity to consider the work of others and to think more deeply about their own.

Following this introduction, the sketch logs were used for a number of purposes. Besides as a way to think about literature, they were used for sketching during the science inquiry and as a place to reflect on the learning captured in photographs. They would glue the photo that I returned to them into the sketch log and write about not only what was going on in the picture but the importance of that moment of learning to them (Short & Harste, 1996). These reflections became the basis for our "talking pictures" gallery. We hung enlargements of some of their photographs and students could talk to others about the learning that was going on in the photo. Other pieces of artwork were
also eventually taped or glued into the sketch log.

It took the first half of the year for the students to become comfortable with picking up the sketch log to draw whenever they felt like it. In the beginning they tended to pick up paper from the stack of newsprint in the room to use for drawing instead of turning to their sketch logs. By the second half of the year they no longer asked permission to write and draw in their sketch logs and were trying to use media such as watercolor in their logs along with the drawings they did in pencil.

Cheri used her sessions with the whole class to introduce illustrators and techniques and she usually began a class session by reading a picture book. On one occasion, students were drawing a still life in their sketch logs. Cheri commented to a student that her work was very similar to the style of Chris van Allsburg. The students brought in copies of Van Allsburg’s books and studied them carefully. Cheri took her cue from their interest and introduced charcoal. Students copied illustrations from Van Allsburg’s books onto large sheets of paper with charcoal.

Another time the students happened to be drawing cartoons in their sketch logs and Cheri introduced Steven Kellogg. She brought us a set of books with cartoon-style illustrations to examine and also a set of books illustrated by Steven Kellogg. She urged the students to try putting Kellogg’s books into chronological order based on the drawings, then to check the copyright date.
I heard many rich discussions as students worked with each other to see how Steven Kellogg had grown and changed as an illustrator.
The Man In The Ceiling and Drama

A few weeks into the year, I began *The Man In The Ceiling* (Feiffer, 1993) as a read aloud book. I felt this book would be a good choice as a read-aloud because it involved a kid who felt different from the mainstream due to his interest in art rather than sports. One of the students coming to my classroom also viewed himself as a cartoonist and I thought the book would pull him in. Cartoons may be counted on as a drawing strategy at the intermediate level and all of the students were immediately captivated.

This book was used deliberately on my part to support children in literature discussion and analysis. They would need these skills later in small group literature circles. We kept a running list of issues in the book that surfaced in our class discussions and we talked about each character's development throughout the story. Eventually we worked together to categorize the list of issues. The class then divided into small groups and selected one of these issues to discuss more deeply.

Paul Fisher and I felt that *The Man In The Ceiling* was a rich story for dramatization and would be an excellent place to support students in drama strategies that could then be included in their reflection and response "toolbox." The drama work on this book took the entire year and resulted in another reading of the book during the second semester.

As we began the drama work, we concentrated on the
characters, asking the children to pick any character and any scene involving that character and to do a brief sketch. This allowed us to begin developing skills in drama as well as giving us a chance to see which issues of the book were coming most into focus. We were also able to clear up any contextual misunderstandings. We often asked students to reverse roles in these short sketches and pushed them to understand the characters well enough to “ad lib” conversations rather than trying to remember the exact words from the book. This work really enabled the students to be immersed the story and they began to take on the viewpoints and emotions of the characters. I could sense them still carrying some of that character’s personae into lively class discussions that criticized or defended the character’s decisions and motives.

As a way to initially look at issues from The Man in the Ceiling, we brainstormed words or phrases that came to mind when thinking about the story. After filling a large chart paper with these responses, the students formed small groups and chose a word or phrase from the chart. They then organized themselves into a tableau or snapshot pose that was a demonstration of that phrase. They could use situations from the book or choose a scene from life at school or home. This strategy proved successful with all the students because there was no speaking or “acting” involved. It moved them in and out of the book to consider more broadly the issues growing out of the story.
Tom T. Hall, the Songwriter

On our school secretary's birthday, my class was seated on the floor in front of her desk singing, "I love little baby ducks, old pickup trucks, slow movin' trains, and rain. And I love you too." This is probably the most famous of songs written and recorded by the "inquiring mind" of Tom T. Hall (Country Songs for Children, 1995). I still am not certain how I convinced my class to sing this song which was frankly, a little hokey. I am sure why I wanted them to sing it. Tom T. Hall's songs for children are generally funny and deal with things kids know about like "Lonesome George, the Basset Hound." and his songs have heart. I figured I could have the kids put the words on chart paper without too much difficulty so we could all follow along and practice reading lines and phrases. The main reason for presenting Tom T. Hall was because I thought my kids could do what he did, that is, to put everyday feelings, reflections and stories into "tunes."

We sang a new Tom T. Hall song every few days. "I Wish I Had a Million Friends" and "The Mysterious Fox of Fox Hollow" were among the favorites. Although I am sure students realize the power of music as a way to create meaning, the possibility of writing their own music seemed remote. Yet, as with the authors, they felt they knew Tom T. Hall and rushed to tell me when he made an appearance on the television or when they heard one of his songs on the radio. I incorporated other kinds of music as
demonstrations for composing or ways children could use music as background for their other creative works. We listened to music that incorporated sounds of nature. We listened to musical styles such as rap and reggae. I was not, however, as conscientious about giving them specific reasons to try using music as a way to respond as I did with literature, drama and the visual arts. Some students did work with musical instruments during studio time to create a composition as a response to Wringer (Spinelli, 1997).

What Happened in Rotations?

The year began with the rotations relating to "The Art of Reflection." Judi worked with watercolor, Leslie with pastels, and Linda with drawing. All included artists who
worked in the media. I had planned to make Chagall the focus of my session and include fantasy literature and some music. A student brought in a print of "Sunflowers" by Van Gogh and the students and I elected to include him in our rotation as well. We looked at prints of both artists and briefly studied their lives and how their work changed over time. We discussed the mandated topic of life skills stressing which life skills the artists had in abundance and which ones they were short on. Students could then choose to create a piece in the style of Chagall or Van Gogh.

Each teacher had one group of students for one hour a day for three consecutive days. Rotations took place four days a week. By the end of four weeks the students in our classes had visited all four teachers. The teachers then met together to discuss the direction the next set of
rotations would take. We remembered that we had been asked to devote at least some of this rotation time to working on math skills. For us, however, teaching skills other than in context was contradictory to the purpose of the rotations. We felt the reason Rosanna, our principal, had asked us to do this was because one of the teachers in our group was not a strong math teacher. Rosanna wanted the students to receive math instruction from the rest of us. Although we were willing to support her, how could we do this without losing the inquiry focus of the rotations?

Our solution was for each teacher to select an early mathematician to discuss. Again we felt the mathematicians were "inquiring minds" who spent a large part of their lives reflecting on the natural laws they observed in the universe. We would incorporate the life skills again and work on any algorithm skills that would seem to fit without giving up the exploratory nature of the rotations. Judi and I elected to work together on the idea of Archimedes and principles of balance. I had difficulty giving up the literature and visual art concept which is integral to my way of thinking. As I researched the lessons, however, I discovered Calder, the creator of the mobile concept. The students and I explored his life together. I think it is worth taking the time here to outline how the lesson developed as an example of the way in which integrated curriculum flows in my teaching.

Bringing together math and art in a significant way
began with Aristotle's principles of balance. We worked initially with water and float lines. After doing some reading about principles of flotation, we designed boats and made them out of aluminum foil. We experimented to see how many pennies would float in our boat.

We moved to other forms of balance. Students considered a teeter-totter and how they would be able to make the teeter-totter go up and down if they had partners of varying weights. We examined a traditional back patio mobile and noticed how carefully each bird on the mobile was arranged for perfect balance and freedom to move in the wind. I drew a diagram of a large mobile using blank circles for all weights except one. Students worked in groups to figure out the weights on the mobile.
We were only a small step to a study of Calder, the creator of the mobile concept. Students were intrigued with how Calder brought together his education in engineering and his artistic abilities. We talked about how he pushed himself to work on new ideas and how even though he was considered by some to be eccentric, he had the confidence to be himself.

Calder's work interested students at the intermediate age level not only because of the construction of his mobiles, but because many of them were created from metal formed in basic geometric shapes and were painted in primary colors with an emphasis in red. We continued our exploration by finding the balance points of geometric shapes cut from paper. We then made mobiles by running a piece of yarn through the balance points.

The interest in Calder extended beyond this rotation and students talked about him all year. I brought back pictures and posters from his exhibit that coincidentally was in Washington, D. C. at the National Gallery of Art when I visited there later that spring. One student brought a video that was on television of Calder's life. Another student was excited to share that Calder was on a postage stamp. Even the principal became involved and stated that she couldn't believe she had learned so much about an artist she had not heard of before this year. The introduction of artists, illustrators and authors in meaningful ways that tie to other curricular explorations leaves lasting
impressions on students. Although many people such as Calder can be introduced during the school year, I find we are able to study only a few in depth if the studies are done in an integrated and meaningful way.
The intermediate team made a decision to abandon the rotation after the second set in November. One reason was because of behavior and management problems. The teacher team felt that this particular group could be better served by building community within the classroom rather than mixing students up and moving students from room to room. It was also difficult to schedule meetings with four teachers to come together to plan and we lost the collaboration that is essential to this curricular approach.

A New Approach in Math and Science

The principal visited in our classrooms and observed the difference in math capability between our returning fifth graders and our new fourth graders. As explained earlier in this chapter, she was very concerned about the mathematical progress of this particular group of fourth graders. As teachers, we felt these differences were experiential with the fourth graders not having participated in many of the learning engagements our fifth graders had who also were particularly strong in math. Many of Judi's fifth graders had been in her class for three years. We also felt the new group of fourth graders had more than the one year difference because of extenuating circumstances in their educational background. For the first time since I have been teaching a multiage I found student collaboration difficult. This may also have been in part because of the lack of balance of new to returning students rather than grade levels. Several of my new fifth graders also lacked
significant mathematics understandings.

Our principal referred to the difference as a "canyon" and I felt I had to agree. Since Judi and I normally team teach, we made the decision to separate the students new to our program from the returning students. It was not a separation by grade level as we both had fifth graders who were new to our program. I taught the fourth and fifth graders from both Judi's and my room who were new and I sent my few returning fifth graders to her classroom. My class worked with hands-on math materials to explore basic concepts in numeration and problem solving. A resource teacher worked with me during these three sessions a week. It was not an easy math class and I will not ever do this kind of exchange again. Judi would do math in her room other than at the exchange time and my students who went to her missed vital one-on-one tutoring time and felt out of step. Her fifth graders were reluctant to come to my room which was predominantly fourth grade.

But ... the test scores for the fourth graders went up. The new students across all classes jumped an average of ten points on the standardized test and placed above the 50th percentile on all tests the following spring. Although when printed in the newspaper it appeared our math scores had gone down because this year's group scored lower than last year's, in reality the increase for the students when compared to their own scores from the previous year was significant.
This way of "teaming" is intensely uncomfortable to me. Judi and I did not plan together, the math was not integrated in any way, and it felt like ability grouping. At the end of the third quarter (after testing) I dropped the exchange. I include it in my curriculum summary only to demonstrate the pressure teachers are under with regard to test taking and the choices they sometimes feel forced to make. My own sense of inadequacy in math and the inability to articulate how my theory in other areas applies to the field of math made me vulnerable to an arrangement set up purposefully to improve test scores.

Understanding math in context, however, is a more comfortable area for me. Math in context was part of the early rotation system and even after the rotations were abandoned, math understandings in context were integrated
into the science inquiry that took place during the first half of the year. We are required to use the Foss Kits produced by the District. We are asked to use two per year. We usually integrate one kit in with an inquiry in a thorough fashion and emphasize the second kit far less. The first kit we received was on rocks and minerals. This is a particularly good kit and the students became deeply involved. We also had a parent come in who extended our understandings in powerful ways.

As the students worked through the three weeks of activities, I kept a record of their discussions and ideas. When the kit was returned I posted the list and we organized categories of related studies. These categories were
monuments, mining, caves, the history of money, birthstones and fine jewelry. The kids organized text sets around these topics and explored them for several days before choosing a group to do further exploration and research. The focus ended before winter break with an individual report and a group presentation. Individual reports each semester are another form of assessment required by the district. The presentations varied with each group, some using drama and others using demonstrations or models.

Summary of the First Half of the Year

My days go by like I am in a race. It is hard to get everything in. We rarely get an outdoor break. I try to stay organized but every day unravels.

(Teaching Journal Entry, Sept. 29, 1997)

It was a busy but exciting beginning to the year.

Figure 3:1 shows all of the learning engagements of the first half of the year. The spiraling represent the process of coming together as a reflective community through these experiences. Students were seeing themselves as learners. They could use books in ways that made sense and contributed to the ongoing curriculum. They were beginning to use art, music and drama to think. They were more confident in literature discussions and knew something of authors and illustrators. They had experienced an in-depth inquiry study. They found reasons to read and write and were less nervous about those areas. They were beginning to acquire a mathematical stance. Although far from perfect,
Exploring Personal Connections to Literature:
Reviews for the Librarian Author Studies

Introduce Literature Logs Sketch Logs Journals

Introduce Math, Reading, and Writing Workshops

Tom T. Hall Music Experience Foss Kit Inquiry

Building Community:
Identity Folders - Who am I as a Learner? Setting up the Classroom Creating a Studio

Intermediate Rotations:
The Art of Reflection and Inquiring Minds (Focus on Van Gogh and Calder)

Dialogue and Reflections:
Man In The Ceiling Read Aloud

**Figure 3.1 - First Semester**
their behavior was improving and we were functioning most
days as a community with our parents, Paul Fisher and Cheri
Anderson as established members of the classroom community.

The Second Half of the Year: Exploring Identity

It is Monday after vacation. Kids wander in as early
as 7:20 a.m. I walk in with Richard, my student teacher.
We chat about the day. I speak to students as I make coffee.
Students do not have to wait for the bell but come in when
they choose.

Students comment on my haircut. Tori talks about his
brother winning the Black Engineer of the Year award. I go
over the day’s schedule with the class. We are going to
begin Betsy Byar’s books today. I mention that I will be
out next month to a conference. Lucas and Ralph cheer under
their breath.

I announced that Ubi, Lucas, and Jessica will no
longer go to Ms. Busche’s math class the second semester
because they continually do not give her their homework.
They became defensive. We agreed to discuss it with Ms.
Busche present.

We shared our vacations. Ralph and Lucas continued to
talk, united in “bad behavior.” waiting for me to notice. I
moved Ralph to another table. Jessica shared that her house
burned down over the holidays. She began to cry and was
unable to go on. She left for the restroom.

I went over homework for the week. Since I was
unprepared, I gave out an essay contest entry and the Test
Smart Times packets that Rosanna has put in my box.

I finished reading The Man In the Ceiling. For the
last chapter we turned out half the lights and I asked
everyone to put their heads down in order to focus. I
wrote the quote “Every failure is a piece of future luck” on
the board. We discussed why the last chapter of a book is
so important. After I showed them the picture of the hand,
they wrote in their journals for twenty minutes.

Then we begin working on our holiday customs,
collecting data for a graph of traditions. We are back.

( Teaching Journal Entry, Monday, Jan. 5, 1998 )

Even the first day’s notes are evidence of how
children’s responses and issues of identity intermingle with
the work of school. The second semester generated five
significant curricular events: a collection of personal
responses that composed an "Identity Folder." literature
discussion groups focused on books by Betsy Byars, a drama
focus on the issue of "status" emerging from The Man In the
Ceiling (Feiffer, 1993), dialogue and journal entries
related to the read aloud Wringer (Spinelli, 1997) and two
significant "studio" experiences, one in response to a
picture book and one in response to all of the literature
used during the year. Since these events form the body of
my research and will be discussed at length in other
sections, I will limit myself to an overview of the
engagements and a small selection of student responses.

Also significant during the second semester but not
included in my research analysis was a study of Norman
Rockwell that emerged from the students, the opening of our
$2.00 bookstore, and assessment night with student-led
conferences. These three activities took up a large portion
of our time during the second half of the year.

Drama Engagements Based on The Man In the Ceiling

During the second semester the drama work intensified.
We worked as a class on defining what we felt were the major
themes in The Man in the Ceiling. We ended up with four:
downtimes, the relationship between Jimmy and Uncle Lester,
family relationships, and the importance of drawing for
Jimmy. Students picked the topic that they wished to
explore and met in groups to generate a web or list of the
vignettes from the book as well as personal connections.
The groups then moved from web to web. They read what other groups had written and added their own thoughts. The webs were used as a basis for drama work on Paul Fisher's visit.
Paul pushed them to show how Jimmy feels when he was criticized by his father or "put down" by Charlie Beemer.

While working through such analysis on scenes that reflected personal connections, Lucas made the statement that popular people have a higher status in school. From that moment on, personal and changing status was the focus of much of the drama work. The references to status carried throughout the curriculum, appearing in literature discussions relating to other books and in journal entries. Even in a small inquiry on Norman Rockwell, a student asked if Rockwell had low status as an artist because he illustrated the covers of magazines.

We found we had to reread The Man In the Ceiling in order to dig deeply into the issues. We used free writes and Sketch to Stretch in between drama sessions to help us
grapple with the four themes of the book. At the end of the year, we pulled together what we had developed into a small presentation for parents. Shanna wrote in her journal:

Today we used The Man In the Ceiling and did drama with Mr. Fisher. I thought that this was fun. We tried to do scenes that were in the book. Mr. Fisher was very nice and he helped understand more about what we have to do and everything. Mrs. Kaser was noting everything down. To tell you the truth, I don’t like it when she sits down and notes every single thing that we say. It makes me feel uncomfortable when she does that. If you are reading this now, Mrs. Kaser, I don’t mean to be rude but I don’t like that. (Shanna)

Suffice it to say, I was less obvious about my field notes and scripting after that.

**Identity Folders**

The identity folder was primarily a collection of short pieces of writing. These pieces were collected over the second half of the year at times when it seemed most appropriate. As discussed further in this section, some pieces were influenced by other things going on in school or in the curriculum and some pieces were predesigned in my research proposal. The pieces were designed to be reflective writing that represented each student’s voice. The pieces were usually very direct statements about self.

I first asked the students to find out how they were given their name. The next day we shared:

I learned from last night I was named after a slave who was Indian and traveled with Cortez on the search for the Seven Cities of Gold. My name in English is Stephen named after Stephen in the Bible and after two uncles. (Estevan)
Wow! Last night's homework was a blast! I had no idea that I was named after my Dad's favorite book! Man, books have a major impact on people! If my Dad hadn't read it I might have been name Milo! Not good!

(Shane)

First my Dad's Dad's name was Ralph and then my Dad's name is Ralph and that's how I got my name, Ralph.

(Ralph).

Following the sharing, we moved into small groups to create an identity web. We made circles with "ME" in the center. I made the analogy that their circles are bubbles we have inside, like the bubbles in ginger ale. If we add something, like a new relative or we read a book, we rearrange the bubbles. I asked them if we could ever pop a bubble. They weren't sure but Lucas said he thought some bubbles could get too big. One group had bubbles with the following labels: learner, teacher, collector, student, peacemaker and citizen, athlete (smaller bubbles connecting say performer and fan), family member, actor, artist, musician, dancer, culture (smaller connecting bubbles say age, gender, ethnic, religion) and STATUS, a very large bubble. Some students later did a web of themselves in their journals.

They followed this with short essays starting with "Who am I . . . as a learner, as a reader, as a writer, as a member of an ethnic group, as a member of my family, etc."

I found that several students had created individual webs in their journals that were detailed in describing themselves.
Often I used a piece of literature to introduce these writing engagements. Some of my favorites were the recent books by Tom and Debbie Birdseye, such as: *Under Our Skin: Kids Talk About Race* (1997). The student’s responses included:

If you ask me who I am as a member of an ethnic group, I would say that I am all Mexican and so are my parents. Some of the special traditions that I do the most are folklórico. The thing I do is talk in Spanish to my family. (Jessica)

I am white. I am part Mexican, Irish, Indian, and German, but I don’t do their religion or celebrate any of their holidays. I do not speak Spanish but lots of my friends do. Some people think they run the world and call me white trash and say Mexicans are better. (Bryan)

If you want to know about me and the arts I would say that I really, really like art, all art. I think that when you draw you are free to do anything you want. Art takes practice and concentration. (Liz)

I also used the folders to house personal webs or artwork that referred to the individual. For example, students took the rough drafts from the silhouettes they made at the first of the year and filled the heads with magazine images that symbolized something about themselves. Cheri taught a lesson on self-portraits and they added their self-portrait to the folders. Students used the *My Map Book* (Fanalli, 1995) as a model for mapping families. Making this folder helped the students understand what is meant by
the phrase “constructing an identity” as did the various books we read in conjunction with the writing.

The Betsy Byars Literature Study

I chose books by Betsy Byars for a class literature study first of all because they deal with children’s issues and secondarily because there are several titles. I was able to get an ample supply from used book stores. The class browsed the books for several days and then turned in a card with first three choices. We ended up with seven groups of four students each. The titles we used were: The
Cartoonist (1978), The Pinballs (1977), The 18th Emergency (1973), The Not-Just-Anybody Family (1986), The Cybil War (1977), Summer of the Swans (1970), and Good-Bye Chicken Little (1979). The students met approximately three times. The first meeting was usually to share favorite parts of the books and general reactions. The usual practice was to end that first meeting by making a web of the general topics of conversation and then choosing one to return to on a deeper basis at the next meeting. Sometimes the third meeting continued on that topic and some groups covered all the topics in three meetings. They had special literature logs and sticky notes in order to remember their ideas for discussion as they were reading the book. We did not do any kind of closure presentation. Students simply shared as a group about the book and about their discussions. All of the books were then set out for wide reading over the next six weeks or so. Some students read all of the discussion books and other Byars titles in addition to their own literature discussion choice.

The students did not write a lot in their literature logs, most used them for charts or a sketch to stretch. Other issues from the classroom filtered into these
discussions. One topic that surfaced in every group was the issue of "status" that was the focus of our work with drama.

Liz drew the foster children in *Pinballs* (Byars, 1977) as smaller than other people on a page in her literature log to reflect the difference in their self-esteem.

Character analysis was strong in these groups, which could have been in part due to the time spent on analyzing characters in the *Man In the Ceiling* (Feiffer, 1993).
Personal connections and interpersonal relationships were also part of the conversation.

Status: adults have a ton of status and take over everything and kids don’t have as much feeling of hopelessness

adults in the book are only concerned about themselves instead of what matters - the children.

Pinballs Web

sense of wanting to know where you belong

love

kid’s issues
Carlie - attitude
Harvey - broken legs
Thomas J. - alone
Journal entry - Pinballs:

I have a connection with the kids because sometimes I feel like my mom loves her boyfriend more than me and Georgie. I did not want to say this out loud.

(Shanna - after Discussion #1)

Jessica’s sketch of the pinballs inside Carlie’s heart:

Most of the groups finished the books and worked well together with the exception of the boys reading The 18th Emergency. They all had experienced reading difficulties in the past and somehow they all elected to read this book,
perhaps because it had to do with a school bully and they had also had experience in that area. I read parts of the first chapter with each student and they seemed to be doing fine. Left alone to read the book, however, they apparently disconnected at some point.

After they finished the book and met for discussion, I realized that even though they could read the words, they had little sense of what actually happened in the story and less understanding of the underlying "big ideas." We ended up going back through the book chapter by chapter, rereading sections and using drama to act out the various roles and scenes. In one incident in particular the students thought that an old blind man who was being led home was a dog. As they enacted the chapter the realization struck them that it had to be a person. I believe it was the phrase "and he reached for the doorknob" that did it.

Norman Rockwell and Ruby Bridges

It is interesting to see how once a focus has been created in a certain area, it causes you to notice or explore things you might have overlooked. It adds significantly to the serendipity feel of school. Today we were reading in the magazine Story Works. It was an article relating to Black History Month. At the end of the article was a small picture of Ruby Bridges painted by Norman Rockwell. Even with only seven students from last year, they remembered our reading and dramatizing The Story of Ruby Bridges (Coles, 1995).

This time the focus was on Rockwell, the artist. We discussed his purpose and how he gave a strong message in that painting. We discussed how we can truly reflect on something through art. The kids came up with how the "guys" guarding her were white - so either white people felt differently from each other or they at least, as Lucas said, agreed to uphold the law. The dripping tomato showed violence (Shane) although we
did not see it directly. The rulers and pencils the little girl was holding engendered an emotional response because “you felt sad that a kid needed an armed guard to go to school.” (Jessica). Bryan said he thought the artist made her “really dark black” to show contrast with her white dress. Bryan said he thought the artist put her in a frilly dress “so that she would look sweet and we would feel really sorry for her”.

Shane, who sees himself as our resident “artist” asked if he could go to the library to find out about Norman Rockwell. Shane was able to find something he copied out of an encyclopedia of artists. He stood and read it to the class. The librarian came by after school and promised to find more materials for us.

We discussed a bit about how Rockwell might have felt. Lucas said, “He’s on her side” and recited all of the reasons given earlier - the dress and the tomato. I asked if they felt he had strong feelings about this situation. Estevan said, “Well, yeah, or he wouldn’t have painted the picture”. Lucas said, “Well, he could have just painted it to sell.” Shane interrupted, “Not if he is a REAL artist.” Shane insisted that if he were a real artist his work would be good and it would sell. Then they went off on how much paintings cost.

I ended the discussion by asking if a real artist would paint magazine covers. Time was up. I said, “Think about it. We’ll come back.”

(Teacher Journal Entry, Feb. 4, 1998)

We ended up getting a copy of the Ruby Bridges print in a much larger size as well as prints of various other pieces and thirty copies of a magazine that was devoted to Rockwell and his style. We came to think of him as a storyteller. His stories were taken from American history. He became another one of our “inquiring minds” coupled with “the art of reflection.” The class was fascinated that he used models for his paintings, setting people up in ways similar to our still “snapshots” in drama. He then would take several dozen photographs and paint from the photos.
making slight alterations and putting in a few things from
his imagination. We tried the technique ourselves. For a
while, the corner of the studio with rugs and pillows held
his prints at eye level as well as several books relating to
Norman Rockwell for browsing. My student teacher assisted
students in creating a bulletin board from a Norman Rockwell
calendar that one of the students had brought in.

I felt it was important to take the time to follow
through with the students' interest generated from the drama
of the previous school year yet relating to the current
thinking in the classroom. We outlined the possibilities
for the study and the students helped in procuring resource
materials for the "mini-inquiry." I was a learner along
with the class. Who would have thought Norman Rockwell
could be so exciting?

Studio Time

Throughout the year I worked to prepare my students and
myself with tools and techniques to be better equipped to
create meaning through music, the visual arts and drama. We
studied the process of artists and devoted blocks of time to
thoughtful reflection from which artistic expression could
grow. Since literature was at the core of the curriculum,
responding to literature was a way to think more deeply
about all areas of our endeavor. To consider issues of
identity, it was necessary to give them the opportunity to
think in a range of literacies. We therefore had many
opportunities for studio time during which we created art
with Cheri and on our own, enjoyed musical experiences and used drama to push our understandings. Two studio experiences stand out in the year however. They illustrate the deeper meaning of studio and were especially informative to me.

The first studio experience that stands out in my mind related to a picture book I found that I thought would be powerful and I wanted to try it. We gathered on the rug for a read aloud. I lit the story candle and we turned down the lights. I read the picture book *I Never Knew Your Name* (Garland, 1994). This is a touching story about a young boy watching a high school kid who often seems to be alone. He is tempted to speak to him but never does. Eventually he finds out that the older boy killed himself and regrets that their similarly lonely paths never crossed. With the increasing suicide rates among teenagers, I felt it appropriate to present this short book.

The class asked me to read it again. They were intrigued with the illustrations none of which were graphic. I then shared with them that the studio was set up with math, art and music materials. I reminded them that they could use drama, sketch logs or journals to respond to this book. They left the rug and set to work.

Even given my limited expertise in the sign systems and the studio experience, I found the results amazing and affirming. Lucas created mathematics symbols depicting the loneliness of both boys and their lack of connection.
Daniel built a church out of blocks in the Mexican style. There were paintings. Ralph created a saxophone piece.
At the end of studio time, we shared our pieces. Students were articulate about what it was in the book that prompted their thinking and what it was they were trying to achieve with their choice of media. Some had made a second attempt with various changes, others expressed what they would do if they could do studio time on this book again. Clearly the story had impacted the class in individual ways and they found individual means of expression. Although some students drew their ideas from others who had already begun, I did not see that as negative. Rather, it meant that students looked for support when it was needed and certainly this process was a risk for all of us.

I made a sculpture of a guy’s head. It doesn’t have any eyes, mouth or nose. I made this piece of art because I wanted to do something in clay and I thought that it would go well with being a nobody. I think that the art helped me wonder about the older boy and why everyone made fun of him.

(Liz)
I drew my picture with dark colors to show both boys were sad and lonely. I drew a wall in between the two boys. The younger one was thinking in his head, “He is too busy to play basketball.” The older boy was thinking, “Tonight’s the night.” I would have done drama if I did anything else.

(Bryan)

I did a response on the geoboard. I think I like it. At first I could not think, but I got better. What I did was an abstract picture. It showed the guys life going down and all the people watching at the bottom when he died. The most important idea in this book was not having friends.

(Lucas)

I did geoboards. It was a basketball court. It had two hoops. I used nine rubber bands. I chose this because I like using symmetrical patterns and shapes. The boys could have connected with basketball.

(Estevan)

I was pleased that rather than dwelling on the death in the story, students seemed to think mostly about the friendship the boys could have had and the lack of self-worth the older boy felt.
The second studio time that was especially significant took place toward the end of the year. It seemed appropriate to use a major block of time to think back over the literature we had used this year as read alouds and literature circles. It took us the better part of an hour simply to make a list of the books we had read together. We made a second list of all the tools we could use for response. We decided to set aside one entire morning for studio time. All materials available to me would be available to my students. We pulled as many of the books as we could find for revisiting. Students read through their journals and sketch logs. I found all the webs we had created and hung them around the room. Cheri agreed to come and lend support. I wanted someone there who would probe the students into deeper comments about their pieces.

I asked the students to write a plan listing three projects they had in mind and the books to which the projects related. I wanted them to quickly move to a new idea if they discovered that the first one wasn’t going to work out. Following the studio time they would be asked to return to these planning sheets for reflection.

Once again the results were gratifying. Students were deeply engrossed in using their imaginations to create ideas relating to books. Although some students chose more presentational ideas such as a diorama representing a scene from a book, I knew they had found that piece of literature to be significant. Other students used symbols to represent
their thinking. Liz and Freddie made a spiral of tiles. The inner circle was one color, the middle circle a different color and the outer circle a third color. They said the circles symbolized the relationship of the son and father in _Wringer_ (Spinelli, 1997) and how the pigeons, represented by the middle color, would always keep them apart. Only by removing the problem of the pigeons would the two colors come together.

There was a good feeling at the end of the day and an excitement at the power of this process. Yet the necessary understandings for myself and my students even in this beginning way were a long time in developing. Yet, students were using studio time to reflect deeply on the literature:
I did music for *Wringer*. The music was to help me think about the fear Palmer had of wringing the bird’s necks. I would like to do more music from different books.  

(Jessica)

**Plan:** I want to reflect on the book Frank Thompson with Nick. Why would a woman want to join the army? I want to try oil pastels, music and geoboards.

**Reflection:** I learned that you could reflect on books in lots of different media. I found out that I can write if I do art first. I do the best when I draw. Next, I would like to add music to my oil pastel piece.

(Bryan)

**Other Curricular Engagements**

There were a number of other engagements during the second half of the year that were significant in some way to my students. We closed the year with the read aloud *Wringer* (1997) by Jerry Spinelli. The class was moved by the book and many responded to it during the final studio time. The book raised kid issues of “gang” membership, ridiculing others, and hidden fears. Students wrote in their journals and made sketches. We met in small groups one time for further discussion of the issues in the book. The students’ connections to *Wringer* are discussed in the chapter on student issues.

As part of looking at their own identity, we also organized an assessment workshop night with student led conferences. Students took parents through an agenda that included the pieces in their identity folder and their participation and response to the various curricular
engagements of the year.

My students in conjunction with the Student Council opened a school bookstore. All books in the store sold for $2.00. They worked at organizing the books into the categories they considered appropriate and taking care of the financial records. They were also the store's best customers aside from the principal and me. I believe this experience also contributed to a stronger sense of empowerment and was at least in part related to their gain in mathematical skills. They also felt they were "walking the walk" as well as "talking the talk" about an appreciation for books and reading.
As noted earlier, we had a student teacher the second half of the year. He taught a theme study on the Civil War as well as two physical education units. During this theme study the class focused on Brian Pinkney’s work and tried their hand at scratch board.

Summary of the Second Semester

The work completed by the students in the second half of the year demonstrates the importance of a strong foundation in reflection and response. This was especially crucial given the nature of the class and the high percentage of students who were new to the program despite the fact that it was a multiage class. Activities that were ongoing such as drama, sketch logs and journals demonstrated a greater depth in thinking during the second semester. New learning engagements such as small group literature discussions and studio time were made more powerful by the time spent the first semester establishing a dialogue about books. Figure 3.2 shows how the class came together into a community of learners through the meaningful learning engagements of the second semester with the focus on exploring identity.

Considering the lives and talents of individuals such as Calder, Rockwell and Tom T. Hall gave a personal connection to the various literacies and helped the students feel empowered when they engaged in studio time. All literacies were seen as possibilities. Students saw themselves as artists and mathematicians as well as readers.
The Focus: Exploring Identity

Betsy Byars Literature:
Discussion Groups

Studio Time:
Responses to Literature Across Sign Systems

Identity Folders Continue
Response Journals Continue
Continue Math, Reading, and Writing Workshops

Norman Rockwell Study
Civil War Study

The Man In The Ceiling:
Exploring Issues Through Drama

Wringer:
Read Aloud and Discussion Groups

Figure 3.2 - Second Semester
and writers and could express themselves in creative and imaginative ways.

Conclusion

In this chapter I discussed the curricular decisions I made as I began the year with a new group of students. This class presented more than the usual considerations of academic and social development. Primary to the development of curriculum are the needs and interests of the students. Curriculum development also integrates the goals of the school, the expectations of the principal, parents, and other teachers in the building, and my theoretical belief system. These understandings must find a way to mesh and sometimes this process is foggy and frustrating.

When the school year started the intermediate team had the broad concept or theme: "The Art of Reflection: Inquiring Minds." Entering this theme study I had three focus questions: How do people think? What do people value? What makes people great? Woven throughout this study were opportunities for children to respond and reflect in a variety of ways with the eventual goal of being able and willing to examine their own thought processes.

During the second half of the year I emphasized literature discussion, drama and studio. This framework gave me spaces to look closely at children’s responses through the lens of identity construction. The curriculum flowed in an irregular fashion, yet the class came together and I felt a strength in the learning process that was
evidenced in their ability to articulate issues and understandings. As I listened to students share their feelings about the year during their final interviews, I knew that each of them had discovered significant meaning in their days at school.
CHAPTER 4

ISSUES IN IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION

This chapter will address the first question proposed in this study: What are the issues that are significant to ten and eleven-year-old students as related to the construction of their identities? The data sources used to answer this question were transcripts from literature discussions, response journals, writing samples from the identity folders, and the final interviews. Responses taken from all of the students were analyzed. I first listed all of the ideas discussed by each student and grouped the topics that seemed connected. I went back through the data to see how the ideas were addressed and if an idea should be considered as an issue.

I considered an "issue" to be an area of interest raised in their discussions and responses which appeared to be related to their identity construction. The subject or topic was raised by several students across the class, or repeatedly by a single student. For example, Bryan considered the issue of leadership in many of his personal responses. The issue of a child's status was raised, however, in large and small group discussion, written artifacts, and in drama and studio.

Sometimes a student's response is not an issue for that student, but signals a broader issue in identity construction. For example, Matthew participated in a literature discussion in which students talked about taking
dares and whether or not we should step in to prevent someone from harming themselves by deliberately doing something risky. Matthew expressed an opinion. As I read all of Matthew’s pieces throughout the year, taking dares and saving people from themselves was not a personal issue to him and apparently did not come up again in his thinking nor in anyone else’s. Matthew’s comments about this book were not so much evidence of his own personal construction of identity as was his experiential process of articulating a viewpoint which may or may not have just occurred to him. Many students worked at articulating opinions and so it was the construction of viewpoint that was the issue for Matthew rather than the subject of the comment itself for which there was no other supporting data.

The process of arriving at categories of issues is explained in depth in Chapter Two. This chapter will consider four categories of identity construction as determined by the grouping of issues. These major categories are: constructing an image of self, constructing relationship, constructing a sense of place, and constructing viewpoint. Each section gives an overview of the issues the students considered relative to the major category. The following is an outline of the categories and subcategories discussed in this chapter:

1. Constructing an Image of Self
   a. Thinking About Thinking
   b. Meeting in the Middle
c. Just Be Yourself
d. The Need to be Noticed
e. Ridicule Leaves a Lasting Impression
f. Personal Integration

2. Constructing Relationship
   a. Lying Breaks Down Trust in Relationship
   b. Everyone Gets Picked on and Put Down
   c. Competing for Friends Makes Everyone Crazy

3. Constructing a Sense of Place
   a. Exploring Culture: Ethnicity and Race
   b. Exploring Culture: Religion
   c. Exploring Culture: Age
   d. Exploring Culture: Gender
   e. A Sense of Place in the Family
   f. Am I Popular or Not? That is the Question

4. Constructing Viewpoint

Samples of dialogue and writing are included as examples of the active construction of meaning as it related to identity for each of the categories.

Constructing An Image of Self

It is difficult to make people feel miserable when they feel worthy of themselves.

Abraham Lincoln

Students in the fourth and fifth grades have passed through the imaginative years of early childhood. Child development manuals (Santrock, 1997) state that at no other
time are children more ready to learn than during the "older child" phase. Children of this age are described as having a "thirst to know and understand" (p. 21). In addition to school work, my students are generally engaged in some kind of outside learning activity such as piano or dance lessons, sports, or religious classes. With this emphasis comes the knowledge that we do not all learn the same things at the same time or in the same way.

In school, students begin to consider how their school work compares with that of other students. It becomes evident that some students are better at soccer than others and the sour notes in band and orchestra are all too obvious. In time, bumping up against other children involved in similar pursuits or having praise or criticism heaped upon them contributes to the formation of an image of self. This image may be blurred at first but through time and growth the image becomes more clearly defined. Issues under consideration in a young person can become the personal characteristics of the adult.

Thinking about issues is in itself exciting for my students. Each becomes increasingly conscious of the mind as an active, constructive agent capable of selecting and transforming information (Wellman, 1990). They understand the importance of connecting new knowledge with existing information and that this process then changes their feelings and understandings about themselves and the world around them. I will now discuss sub-categories of issues
grouped under the main category of Constructing an Image of Self. These sub-categories are: Thinking About Thinking, Meeting in the Middle, Just Be Yourself, The Need to Be Noticed, Ridicule Leaves a Lasting Impression, and Personal Integration.

**Thinking About Thinking**

I first became aware of my own thought processes when I was in fifth grade. I was sitting with my older brother who was a university student. I stared at him silently. I became aware that I was thinking. I told him that I had figured out that I could have ideas in my head and he would not know what they were unless I told him. He smiled, looked at me intently and nodded. It was a powerful feeling of self and of control.

My students made similar statements about their minds and how they think. These quotes were taken from Claire and Shane’s final interviews:

**Claire:** I felt like my mind opened up. I understand how to go deeper into my writing. It’s like getting your thinking out.

*(Claire: Final interview)*

**Shane:** Sometimes there’s words for stuff but if there aren’t any words you have to figure out another way to say it. And I have to say it through art because I can’t . . . . I’m not a very good writer. I’m writing on a piece of paper, just letters and spelling out words, I’m insecure and I feel no power over what I am doing. But when I get a blank sheet of paper, I can just fly. I can really make my hands work when it comes to art. I mean I can say anything I want.

*(Shane: Final interview)*
Getting their thinking out, however, can be a risky business. Their thinking may be judged by others as inadequate resulting in self images that take on darker tones.

Claire: I couldn’t like open my mind because if I got it wrong I felt really bad and I didn’t try to understand why I got it wrong. All those other years, I just felt like I couldn’t do math.

(Claire: Final interview)

Ralph: I like that book where the artist was painting his daughter’s smile. Like that kind of related to me cause like I try to get some stuff right but like I try my hardest and I keep on at it and like sometimes it comes out wrong. I still try to go at it and I keep thinking like the way he did.

(Ralph: Final interview)

Meeting in the Middle

Students at times see personal characteristics as black and white “either-or” categories. Softening understandings to include the “gray areas” happens often through insights gained when students analyze characters in literature. During discussions of Palmer in Wringer (Spinelli, 1997), students debated over whether he was weak or strong. Some thought he was weak for getting into the gang. Others thought he was strong for getting out. Daniel thought getting out was a weakness because “he was afraid.” Nick thought Palmer showed strength by going after the pigeon in front of a crowd of people.

Bryan called himself shy. He showed insight in the following comment based on his own life experiences that the
simplistic idea that "gangs are easy to get into and hard to get out of" should be revisited. He makes an interesting comment about all the trouble Palmer went through to be accepted by the gang:

Bryan: I think it's weird about the gang cause people say it's real easy to get in but it's hard to get out. But for him it was hard to get in, too.  

(Wringer: Discussion Group 1)

He then went on to reflect on his own similar predicaments, in this case going rock repelling with some classmates and their fathers. Though not "gang" connected, he recognizes that given certain personality traits, it may take a great deal of fortitude to not be part of the group:

Bryan: It's hard to leave 'cause sometimes my friends do this stuff and they think it's really fun and then when I do it, it's really scary. And then so I say it's fun. But then I try and get away but then they keep doing it and so then I kind of give in to them. If I don't, when I try and get away, I don't really want to cause I think it's cool when I'm doing something with them.  

(Wringer: Discussion Group 1)

Bryan's desire to belong within this particular group meant participating in an activity that he really preferred not to do, even though that activity was an acceptable sport. He even worked at convincing the others that he thought it was fun.

Just Be Yourself

In situations such as the one that Bryan shared there is the tendency to say, "Just be yourself." This is
probably not a useful phrase because children at this age are naturally working at constructing who they are and don't really know what it means to "be themselves." They are still finding puzzle pieces as well as working at putting the puzzle together. In an attempt to facilitate this process, I asked them about "being themselves" during a literature discussion:

Mrs. K.: Do you think it is hard to just be who you are?

David: Sometimes.

Bryan: A lot of times.

Liz: No.

Nick: Not really.

Bryan: It depends on who you are. Like if you're a strong person, a leader, like Liz and Nick, that's why it's not really hard to be their selves cause everyone does what they want. So they're like the leaders and they just go. But other people, if you're weaker and you don't really, you're not really a leader, then you follow the leader.

Liz: So, that means that if you are a weak person, being yourself means not being a leader.

(Wringer: Discussion Group 1)

Liz can state the solution because she does not struggle with the same issue as Bryan. He was not ready to accept a self image that says he is weak or a follower and he continued to explore this issue in a variety of ways throughout the year.
The Need to be Noticed

Other notions that children ponder as they consider self are related to their personal needs. One theme was the need for privacy and time to be alone which was often difficult with siblings around. Yet another issue approached in a number of ways was the need to be noticed:

Shanna: I kind of can relate with Jimmy in the Man in the Ceiling. Because he’s like my brother, he’s like Georgie. Georgie gets all the attention and he’ll sit with my dad and my mom, just play and everything and I’ll just do my own thing. Go in my room and listen to my music. He’ll be the one that’s always there. I go, “Oh, it’s ok.”

(Journal entry during The Man in the Ceiling read aloud)

Claire: In The Man in the Ceiling, Jimmy’s dad was really busy and I feel like my dad’s really busy sometimes. He’s there but it’s just he’s really busy and going on trips a lot. And he’s been getting home early but he’s going to work all summer. So he isn’t really there.

(Journal entry during The Man in the Ceiling read aloud)

Bryan: I think it was so important (for Palmer in Wringer) to be with those guys because then everybody would notice him more so that’s why.

(Wringer: Discussion Group 1)

Children want to feel that they are important, or at least constitute a presence in someone’s life.

Ridicule Leaves a Lasting Impression

Sometimes being noticed by others is not good. Being noticed by being made fun of or embarrassed is a major blow to most kids. Many adults can remember times in school when
they were ridiculed or felt shamed. After the reading of *Amber on the Mountain* (Johnston, 1989) in which a young girl does not know how to read, Shanna talked about her experience of feeling noticed in a negative way at school:

Shanna: When you read this book I thought of when I was in Mrs. Norton’s class. We had this chart that had planets on it and we would move to another planet if we passed our math test. I was the only one who was behind and I was only on the third planet or so. To me, it was very embarrassing. I think I connected with Amber because she could not read and I could not do math. But I finally learned how and so did she.

(Field Notes: Picture Book Discussion)

It has been my experience that few kids construct a self image strong enough to resist being laughed at by other children and the notion of “being yourself” becomes a mute point again. Being yourself will generally not be a option if hurt feelings are at stake. Some things are out of your control and are “traditional” sources of teasing. Jessica wrote in her log that she is called “four eyes” because she wears glasses. In the following section taken from his final interview, Danny says that the fear of being made fun of interferes with his educational process:

Danny: I just don’t get some of this stuff that we do. Cause my Aunt Lois said that we should always, cause she got an A, because she didn’t always understand all the stuff, she says it’s ok to raise your hand about some things though. It doesn’t matter.

Mrs. K.: So you don’t do that much, do you? You don’t ask questions a lot. How come?

Danny: I guess. I think, I’m afraid that they’re just going to laugh at me, the way they understand
and I don’t.

(Danny: Final interview)

The next piece of dialogue listens in on a literature discussion group on *Wringer* (Spinelli, 1997) as the children attempt to make sense of why kids make fun of other kids. It is especially interesting to note in this conversation that Lucas has a reputation in the class as a person who ridicules other people:

Jessica: Sometimes when you’re trying to act like yourself, you get put down. Like if you’re real smart in class they’ll pick on you. If you’re real popular with your teacher and you’re smart, they’ll call you smarty pants and teacher’s pet and stuff and you’re just being yourself.

David: Some kids are like not smart and they call them stupid and stuff. Sometimes it’s either way, you get made fun of, either if you’re smart or you’re not as smart as the others.

Mrs. K.: So why do kids put other kids down?

Lucas: Because they can. That’s not a joke either. It’s like I guess because just to make themselves feel better cause like if they’re losers in something then when they make fun of somebody else it makes them feel bigger.

Mrs. K.: Do you think people who make fun of other people are losers?

Lucas: I don’t know. When they’re making fun of people they are.

Lucas: I think they do it just because they like to.

Mrs. K.: They like to do it.

Lucas: Yeah. They like to get that one face that .. where they go like ahhhhhh.

Mrs. K.: Oh. They like to see the face of the person that they make fun of. The reaction. They
think that is fun.

Lucas: Yeah. They why they were getting mad at Dorothy in Wringer because she wasn’t even making a face.

Claire: And that’s why they stopped. Cause later in the book it said they got bored.

(Wringer, Group 3 Discussion)

A girl who began the year in our classroom was taken out and put in another school by her mother because two students consistently teased her about being “smelly.” Despite intervention by adults, the remarks was never completely stopped. The counselor visited our classroom after this student left. She read a true story about a girl who had a nervous breakdown from the kind of “terrorizing” that Dorothy experienced in Wringer and to a lesser degree, that their classmate had endured. She discussed how deeply this experience could affect self-confidence and a sense of self worth. Students related more stories of their own experiences and felt that even if you use Dorothy’s strategy (ignoring the situation and the people) to get the heat off, the teasing takes a toll and one is apt to live in fear of when it will start up again. This, they reasoned, was why the girl had changed schools. I asked if anyone could tell me how things like this could go on and I not be aware. David said, “They try to hide it.” Bryan said, “There’s so many kids.”

Personal Integration

Putting the pieces of self together can be confusing.
David, in his discussion group related to *Wringer*, suggested that Palmer was a different person with different people and "That’s ok. Try to have multiple personalities," he said and that is what David tried to do all year. He was as rough as the best of the bad guys, defensive of the underdog if they were picked on by someone other than himself, apologetic and sincerely sorry to his parents when they had to come in to the principal’s office. He conceded that Palmer was probably more himself with Dorothy but since that was a kind of “wimpy” self maybe he should not let that self win.

David continued all year with a short fuse and angry outbursts and often, tears. He felt he was trying to make everyone happy and no one was happy. The pieces to his personal puzzle seemed mixed up with everyone else’s pieces and he didn’t know where to start.

Some students rush to a completed puzzle too quickly. Shane viewed himself as an artist and continually drew one kind of comic book character. No matter what the drawing was related to, it looked like the same character. This particular character had fingers with long nails like claws and teeth that more closely resembled fangs. The comic book series he was copying had to do with the battle of good and evil. I realize that it is possible for an artist to develop a style at an early age. With Shane, however, I sensed that the artist self-image, although certainly based in talent, might also have to do with his lack of success in other
areas. In his final interview, Shane compared himself to Jimmy in *The Man in the Ceiling* (Feiffer, 1993):

> "Because Jimmy and me have a lot in common. I’m really a flunk at being a person and I, me and him imagine the same thing. Imagine going on to grandeur. The first time we read it, I felt the story was actually about me. That’s how close it came to my life."

(Shane: Final interview)

I remembered back at the beginning of the year when we studied Van Gogh. Shane had contributed to a class discussion about how true artists usually have “problems.” I was reminded of this when I asked Shane later in his interview if any of the other books we read during the year had issues that he saw as relating to his life. He responded by discussing a book in which one of the characters commits suicide:

Shane: Even though it’s a picture book, it’s the one *I Never Knew Your Name*. Last year and the year before that I was on Zoloft because I have depression, or had it. I’m not sure but I think that was what caused this kid (in the story) to go over the edge. I mean I was actually thinking of going over the edge like he did. But I’ve been doing really well. I’ve been off of it for about three months.

Mrs. K.: So you stopped taking it this year shortly after Christmas?

Shane: Yeah. And I’ll tell you, it feels, I mean I was really relieved to get off of it cause every day, every morning and every night, going out, having a little pill and having to take it down with water . . (shakes his head from side to side and voice drops off.)

Coming into the school year, Shane had identified
himself as an artist who therefore would have "problems" and be a general failure at everything but his art. It was my feeling that this was not a true perception of who he was and he was attempting to solidify this self image too early.

Students in my classroom usually do have at least a tentative goal for their adult life. Shane wanted to be a cartoonist. In the final interview, Shanna discussed being a teacher so "I can hang things around the room." Ralph wants to work for United Parcel Service like his uncle. Though not as dramatic as Shane's, most of us cross at least one personal precipice in life on our way to fulfilling or redefining our dreams. Whether my students reach their adulthood in a whole and healthy way may be determined by how they view themselves and that self-image may be determined, in part, by classroom experiences.

Constructing Relationship

Hold a true friend with both hands.

Nigerian Proverb

Relationship is central to the students in my classroom and literature responses often relate to family, friends, and even pets. They become analytical in their talk as they reason why a friend stopped being their friend or a parent chose to embarrass them in the cafeteria. Peers support each other in these extended conversations, offering suggestions for resolution or perhaps sympathy at recent turns of events. Through these discussions, students begin to figure people out and consider their "place" in various
relationship circles. They develop an awareness of power; that is, who has it and who doesn’t. They know the kids who pretend to have power through “put-downs.”

They consider altering their clothing, hairstyles and even behavior so as to fit in with certain groups or to distance themselves from others. Underneath it all I found in their talk two motivating issues that seem most important to kids as related to relationship. One issue is trust. The other is that of status.

Lying Breaks Down Trust in Relationship

In a literature group discussion of the Betsy Byars book *The Cybil War* (1977) students discussed the topic of “communication and lying.” This was one issue taken from their web. They worked at the concept of honesty in relationship by examining the characters’ motivations to lie and by looking at their own connections. Jessica drew what she called a “friendship hill” to show how people have to work at building a friendship (climbing the hill) and how failure to trust can make us fall to the bottom of the hill. Sometimes we can get the friend back and sometimes we can’t.

The girls in this discussion felt that the reason Tony lies to Cybil is to increase his status with her.

Michelle: Well, I think for Tony, communication for him is lying. Like when he lied about Simon while he was talking to Cybil.

Mrs. K.: How do you communicate by lying? It seems like lying would get in the way of communication.

Raquel: Tony thinks that lying will get him what he wants, but he doesn’t realize that he’s not
getting any place.

Michelle: The more he lies to Cybil the more she doesn't like him.

(The Cybil War: Literature Discussion 2)

The discussion moved to reasons for lying that would be acceptable and these reasons related directly to relationship.

Michelle: Sometimes it's kind of good to lie. Like if somebody's out of shape or something, and it's not, you don't got to tell them that they are fat and ugly. Because you like them so you want to kind of lie and say you're not ugly.

Raquel: Right. If it's your best friend and they ask you something like if they're pretty or not, and they're not really, you want to tell them something so they won't feel bad about it. It's good to lie about that. But the other kind of lying is not good.

Jessica considered the notion of parents lying. Although students admitted lying to their parents occasionally to keep from getting grounded, it's an upsetting concept for them that parents can at times be untrustworthy.

Jessica: My dad lies a lot.

Michelle: My parents lie to me and my sister. Sometimes it's more like making excuses and sometimes they just really lie.

Raquel: It like hurts us sometimes. But I just go and forget about it.

Jessica: I get really mad and I feel like telling him what the truth is, because sometimes I know what he's lying about and I know what he really did.
Mrs. K.: I wonder if it is worse for a kid to lie or an adult to lie. Maybe it's the same.

Jessica: An adult is worse because aren't grownups supposed to be more mature and stuff?

Michelle: Like set good examples.

Jessica: Because like, my brother might pick that up when he gets older and start lying, too. I think in the book that Tony picked it up when he was younger. He started lying as he got older. But with my Dad mostly I worry that the people he lies to might find out and get real mad at my Dad.

Jessica then made the comparison to the hill and drew as she talks. She related the lying to a breakdown in trust which results in a breakdown of the relationship.

Michelle: Lying mostly gets in the way of, like if you lie to somebody and then somebody else brings it out, they can't really trust you anymore.

Jessica: That's probably how Simon and Tony were when they were younger. When their friendship was really close together. But then as they got older, Tony started lying, so like Michelle said, they got further apart. And the trust started fading away. Without trust, your friendship gets weaker and weaker.

Mrs. K.: So what's your picture?

Jessica: Well, this is like the beginning cause they're going up the hill and they are getting closer and closer. So they walk up a hill growing friends and when they reach the top they are really good friends. Then something goes wrong, they start lying and they go back down the hill and their friendship becomes weaker and weaker.

Raquel: When you are barely going to become friends, you don't lie, you get closer and get to know each other more, but then you start
They acknowledge that it is possible to climb back up the friendship hill. Michelle brought up couples who get divorced. They worked so hard to climb the hill and then fall all the way to the bottom again.

Jessica: I think at the top of the hill bad things happen too like they get into a fight and get really mad and then go back down the hill. But then sometimes friendships grow back up.

Michelle: Like some people who get divorced. Like they took all that time and they finally got on the hill but they started breaking up. They start down the hill.

Jessica: It's like friendship cause after they get married something happens and they start
down the hill and they come apart at the bottom.

Michelle: Like you meet somebody. You think you know enough about them to get married so you do. But then you're on top of the hill and it just doesn't work out as much as you thought it would.

The girls got back into the book to make the hill analogy fit the behaviors of the characters, Simon and Tony. Michelle made a summary statement for the day:

Michelle: If a friend can't keep a secret then it's not really your friend. Or if a friend tells you lies, that person is not really your friend.

(The Cybil War: Discussion 2)

Everyone Gets Picked On and Put Down

Picking on each other seems to be the primary pastime of students in the upper elementary grades. Shane felt it has to do with status:

Shane: Also, like if someone has their status, like someone makes fun of that and that drains their status, well then, when they make fun of someone else their own status goes up again, so they're trying to keep their's up but so is everyone else.

(Wringer, Discussion Group 3)

Three boys read The Cartoonist (1978) by Betsy Byars and agreed that being made fun of is a continual chain. The boys divided kids into three primary groups: the normal, the born weirds, and the wanna be weirds. The "normals" were just the average people with average clothes, weight, and hair. The "born weirds" had slightly off personalities,
strange looking body parts or maybe an "odd" name. The

"wanna be weirds" attempted to shock people with their
dress.

Within all of these groups might be cultural
considerations such as religion that could possibly add to
their normality or their weirdness, and family members or
family activities might contribute to the definitions.

"Normals" could become "wanna be weirds" but "born weirds"
were always just that. "Born weirds" might try to become
even weirder by becoming a "wanna be weird" but they usually
could not pull that off and became an even weirder "born
weird." "Born weirds" could never hope to be considered normal. It seemed a bit confusing to me, but the boys seemed to be very clear as they talked.

Apparently each of the groups make fun of each other according to Bryan, David and Estevan. The "normals" made fun of both the "weirds" and the "wanna be weirds." The "wanna be’s" made fun of the "born weirds" and the "normals." And the "born weirds" made fun of the "normals" and the "wanna be weirds" unless they were trying valiantly to become a member of one of those groups, in which case they would usually hang around the periphery of kids belonging to that group. If Shane was right, all of the "making fun of" was taking place to increase one’s own status which kept getting knocked by being made fun of. And so it goes.

I asked for examples. Shane who was a self-proclaimed artist of the classroom and drew very strange cartoons of characters with fangs and big teeth was considered a "born weird." It was true he put down the normals as if he were somehow superior. Lucas who was part of the cool group of "normals" made fun of the "born weirds". We really didn’t have any "wanna be weirds" in our room they said because, "Those kids usually show up in middle school."

**Competing For Friends Makes Everyone Crazy**

In discussions of *Wringer*, students returned to the decision of Palmer to join a "gang" of three boys which meant that he had to antagonize a girl who lived across the
street from him and had been his friend for years.

Changing friends is often done to achieve a higher status or perceived popularity and often means leaving someone who trusted you in the dust. In the case of Palmer, he never seemed to quite fit with the more "popular" group and eventually left and returned to his relationship with Dorothy. This was a difficult decision for him as he believed his father wanted him to be part of this group of boys and felt it was a position of greater status than hanging out with the girl next door.

Palmer's father had also won a trophy for killing pigeons on family fiesta days. Palmer held secret in his heart his dread of the whole scene where pigeons were shot for sport and boys of ten years of age wrung the necks of the pigeons who did not die from the gunshot wound.

David says joining the gang would have been an easy decision for him.

Jessica: They are like a little gang. They just want certain people and you can't get in unless you get "the treatment". They have their own little ways and they scare people.

David: Palmer wanted to be in it to fit in. Because he didn't have many friends so he wanted to stick with them and have some friends. He lost one and got three.

Daniel: They were popular with kids but not with teachers because they were always getting into trouble.

David: He ended up getting closer to his friends because he got in trouble with them.

Jessica: The book is about his relationship with everybody.
David: It’s like that status thing we talked about in drama. At first he had low status and then he had high status when he was in the gang. In the end he was high with Dorothy again but low in status with Beans and Muddo.

(Wringer, Discussion Group 2)

In Wringer, Dorothy is antagonized by the group. She is made fun of in a myriad of ways but never responds to any of it. Claire referred to the power of the group:

Claire: It was like more power, like we’re going to make Dorothy cry. When she didn’t do anything they got mad.

Shane: They lost power and I think that as humans we are the most of all the species on the planet the most controlling. I mean if humans don’t have absolute control over everything, they freak, and that was why they kept doing it, trying to get a reaction out of her.

(Wringer: Discussion Group 3)

Bryan found himself in a classroom situation similar to that of Palmer’s. Bryan experienced feelings of powerlessness and yet felt the others around him had a great deal of power. He was caught between kids he wanted to hang with and Ralph who wanted to hang with him. The friends Bryan wanted to be with had a higher “status” in the room than Ralph. They were well liked and made excellent grades. Ralph on the other hand tried to be a part of this “in crowd” by using threats and force. At one point Bryan’s father stopped by to tell me Ralph was getting Bryan in head locks on the playground, presumably in fun but he was really hurting Bryan.

Through other things Bryan said during the year, I felt
he was intimidated in different ways by both the "cool"
friends and their accomplishments as well as by Ralph's more
obvious intimidation tactics. This is revealed in Bryan's
final interview of the year:

Bryan: Palmer had a situation with his friends like
Dorothy and the guys. I've had friends like
that.

Mrs. K.: What did you do?
Bryan: Well, it's actually happening right now.
Mrs. K.: O.K. Explain it to me then.
Bryan: Can I mention names?
Mrs. K.: Sure, this is just between us.
Bryan: It's like Ralph and then all my other
friends. And some of Ralph's friends. So
it's the same thing with him. I'm kind of
both their friends. But then when all the
friends meet, like Ralph and his friends and
all of my other friends, they kind of fight.
And if I'm there at the same time, I can't, I
don't know how to explain this.

Mrs. K.: You are doing a great job. Just keep going.
Bryan: They just start fighting and then they start
looking at me. The one group goes, "Bryan,
tell Ralph you're not his friend." and the
other group goes, "If you say that to me."
and then I tell my other group of friends
that told me to tell him I'm not his friend,
I tell them that if I do he'll start yelling
at me and pick on me for as long as I know.
And then he's all like, they say I don't
care. When I start talking to Ralph about
it, he starts getting mad at me. But if I
don't and I start being his friend he's like
my friend. I can barely explain it.

Mrs. K.: Do you have people within these two groups
that you would rather be friends with and
some that you would rather not be friends
with? Or do you want to be friends with all
of them? I mean, is it your fear of being picked on by Ralph that you try to stay his friend, or is it that you really would like to be Ralph’s friend?

Bryan: It’s the fear of being picked on by Ralph. Cause I really don’t want to be his friend any more but somehow we just kind of stay friends. So it’s like the end of Wringer where he really wanted to be Dorothy’s friend and not the guys. That’s how I feel with Ralph.

Mrs. K.: Why do you think kids pick on other kids?

Bryan: Well, because they want to be their friend. They are jealous of the other kids so then they feel like they have to pick on you and make you scared so you will be their friend. That’s what happened in Wringer, too. That’s what I think.

Mrs. K.: So they threaten you so that you stay their friend.

Bryan: Yeah.

Mrs. K.: Because they want you to be their friend.

Bryan: Yeah. Cause they can really hurt you. They say they can really hurt you. And sometimes it’s true.

Mrs. K.: That must be pretty scary.

Bryan: Yeah.

(Bryan: Final interview)

Clearly Bryan did not know who to trust and was immobilized by his fears - both of Ralph’s violence and also by the fear of losing his position or status with the “elite” set of friends. His parents were unsure of when to step in. Although they wanted him to solve his own relationship issues, they did not want him to begin
perceiving himself as a victim.

As students work at the construction of relationship, they need support in addressing their issues when making connections and choosing friends. Sullivan (1953) found that relationships with peers in this age of child is a good indicator of how "well-adjusted" they will be in later life. As teachers we sometimes feel this takes too much time away from "the academics" but perhaps through literature students may develop more understandings and perspectives about relationship.

Constructing a Sense of Place

As I reviewed students' comments and responses throughout the year, it was apparent that my students were beginning to develop a sense of place in the world. In this section I consider students' talk as related to issues of culture. The issues presented are based on a belief and definition of culture as the shared patterns of living (Geertz, 1973). The sub-categories in this section are: Exploring culture: Ethnicity and Race, Religion, Age, Gender, A Sense of Place in the Family, and Am I Popular or Not: That is the Question. The latter sub-category looks at one aspect of kid culture (Kaser, 1995) in how students worked to define the term "popular" and find a sense of place in the classroom pecking order.

Students at times discussed their developing sense of place with reference to the notion of status that was introduced through drama work during the reading of The Man
in the Ceiling (Feiffer, 1993). Primarily through literature discussion and drama, they began to consider the possibility of stretching their role in the group or redefining it. My observation was that they were considering how the broader world worked, their place in that world, and the power they had or did not have to make changes.

**Exploring Culture: Ethnicity and Race**

Woven throughout the year were pieces of literature that highlighted issues of ethnicity and race. Sometimes the books were integrated into a study as, for example *Nettie’s Trip South* (Turner, 1987). Usually books with multicultural themes were included as part of the many read alouds we found interesting such as *Under Our Skin: Kids Talk About Race* (Birdseye & Birdseye, 1997). These books generated comments that were sometimes directed at “the other” and sometimes related to self regarding issues of ethnicity and race.

For some students, their ethnicity was clearly defined. Others students felt some confusion and were not yet certain what ethnicity means to them:

I have a family of Mexicans. We speak in two languages, English and Spanish. I am learning to speak Spanish at home and next year when I am in 6th grade I want to learn more Spanish in school. It’s fun to be Mexican because we get to do fun stuff like make tamales and celebrate Cinco de Mayo.

(Jessica: Journal entry, undated)

Most whites talk about what their race screwed up on, not what the other race did to them. It used
to be that whites said that other races were incomplete. Now we say that we’re at fault, never the other races.

(Shane: Journal entry, 2/26/98)

I think Jason in the story is very mad about his skin. I’m very sad about my skin but there’s no way I can change it. Sometimes I want to paint myself beige. No one wants to be around me and that is why I want to change my type.

(Danny: Journal entry, undated referring Under Our Skin)

I am white. I don’t get laughed at, only I get called white boy sometimes by Mexicans or African Americans. I am not racist but other people are. I think Martin Luther King, Jr. was right. That speech really helped.

(David: Journal entry, undated)

Sometimes I get confused on if I’m more white or Mexican. My dad says I’m more white than anything and my mom says I’m more Irish than anything. At my school there is not much racism. Only when there is a fight people will say like racial slurs like white trash. I hope people can stop all racism on earth soon.

(Lucas: Journal entry, undated)

Each student demonstrated a consciousness of their skin color and described it in terms of how they felt others responded to them.

Exploring Culture: Religion

Many students seemed accepting and even proud of their religion. Others were thinking through what the notion of religion meant to them.

Me, well, I’m not really anything. Yeah, sure, I’m white and I celebrate Christmas, Easter and my favorite, Halloween, but I don’t go to church and I don’t attend Mass, yet I think I am an American. Sure, you might think I am not an American, and I know why. You think to be an American, you have to:
1. Go to church.
2. Go at least every Sunday.
3. Worship the Lord.
That’s all you need to be an American, right? Wrong! You don’t have to go to church, you just have to obey the law.

(Shane, Journal entry, undated)

That was a good book. I am Mexican and I am Catholic. I have friends who are African American, White and Mexican. I don’t feel Mexican because I speak English.

(Geoff: Journal entry undated)

I like my religious traditions. Every Christmas Eve we have friends over and family come for dinner. We talk and give presents to each other. We do all this after church. At church I’m either in a Christmas play or I sing with a group of people. We dress up really pretty before we go to church. The church brings pine trees as a symbol that we live forever.

(Claire: Journal entry, 2/27/98)

As far as religion, I really don’t have one but I believe in God.

(Lucas: Journal entry, undated)

Exploring Culture: Age

Issues relating to the culture of age were significant in the drama discussion related to The Man In the Ceiling (Feiffer, 1993). David raised the issue that kids as a rule are judged to be less important than adults. He related the story of going to a fast food restaurant. He was unable to give the order until his father returned from the restroom because he could not get anyone’s attention. They automatically took the order of the next adult. When David’s father returned he asked the counter person why he had not waited on David. The counter person lied and said David told him he was waiting for his Dad. We acted this
scene out and David was able to play different roles in the story. Then he played his role again more assertively.

Lucas agreed that kids are low in status and compared them to old people. He said that kids and old people are the low ones on either end and people in their forties are high. He then elaborated that old people were slightly higher than kids and forty-year-old males were higher than females of the same age.

Following the drama experience, some students wrote stories about times in their lives when they felt age was the issue. Here is Michelle’s story:

Once I was with my Grandpa and Grandma and my cousins over the summer in an RV. My oldest cousin hit my other cousin with his arm and she started to cry. My Grandpa just turned and looked and turned back around. If one of the littler kids did that, like my age they would yell at you and you would get in trouble unlike my oldest cousin. If you don’t get the point, here it is. If somebody older does something wrong then they wouldn’t get in trouble. But if somebody younger does something bad, they WOULD get in trouble.

Sometimes I hate being young. It feels like you have no control. And older people don’t take you seriously. If I tell somebody to stop doing something, they won’t unless I go get a grown up who has control. (Michelle, Journal entry, 2/4/98)

Exploring Culture: Gender

Issues of gender were less obvious in discussion or written work. The story of Wringer (Spinelli, 1997) provided the class with subtle issues of gender in that Palmer chooses to join a small gang of boys which means a sacrifice of his relationship with Dorothy who had been his friend since early childhood.
In discussing Palmer's relationship with Dorothy, students always mentioned her by name whereas the group of three boys that Palmer joined are referred to as "his friends" or "the gang" and seldom are their names used. The repetition of the name Dorothy may of itself have been a way the kids recognized that she was a girl and her gender was a factor in Palmer's decision:

I think Palmer feels sorry for the pigeons and mad at them at the same time. He feels sorry for them because people shoot them. He feels mad at them because they come where he lives and if he does not wring them he will not be friends with the three boys. I think Palmer wants to be friends with Dorothy but he knows he can't.

(Bryan: Journal entry, 4/30/98)

Shanna confronts the gender issue directly:

I think they taunted Dorothy because she is a girl. She even has a nickname that the gang gave her.

(Shanna, Journal entry, 5/7/98)

A month or so earlier, I had read a picture book about a friendship between a boy and a girl. According to the field notes scripted by my student teacher, Michelle commented that it was interesting that the author used a boy and a girl to discuss friendship. I asked if any of them have had this kind of close friendship and several did tell stories of experiences with a boy/girl friendship. This led me to believe that I may have, without realizing it, shut down their dialogue relating to gender issues in *Wrinker* (Spinelli, 1997) because it is apparent from the transcript that I was critical of the treatment of Dorothy.
In a discussion of Dorothy and the "gang," however, the students discussed violence as a gender issue. The conversation began with students critical of Palmer for asking Dorothy to release his pigeon. She released it near the railway station which increased the possibility of capture because the railway station is where the pigeons are kept until time for the Family Days shooting contest:

Lucas: I don't think that was really Palmer's fault because, I mean like I guess he just forgot that she wasn't, she like, oh he didn't forget that she wasn't a boy, but he just didn't think. Because almost all the, everybody knows that that's where they get the pigeons from. And I guess he just took it for granted that she knew that.

Shane: I think that was a boys thing. I mean usually when you think of violence, I mean you usually don't think of a girl going through the town and wringing birds' necks. But when you think of the probability of a boy doing that, because it's more of, well it's kind of stereotyping but it is true that more boys are violent, boys are more violent than girls.

Claire: It's in the chromosomes.

Shane: And I think that was a way for them to get their anger out and get popular simultaneously.

Mrs. K: Boys have more anger than girls?

Ralph: Yes.

Claire: Not all of them.

Shane: Maybe not anger.

Claire: Boys have more violence because at school like the boys get, like they're in more fights than girls. You hardly see girls fight.

Lucas: Well, it's not anger. It's violence. Cause I mean my mom can be, like she can be like always
mad, like a couple, a day or two, she's always like really mad all day. So it's not boys are more angry. Boys are just more violent.

Mrs. K: She doesn't punch you when she's angry.

Lucas: No.

Mrs. K: But now dad, he would punch you. [Laughs]

Lucas: Yeah. No, just kidding.

Claire: That's what happens.

Mrs. K: Oh, is it? How do you mean, Claire?

Claire: Like just like child abuse. I mean the mom can do it but usually it's the dad.

(Wringer: Discussion Group 3)

Raquel, Jessica, and Michelle explored gender interactions after they read The Cybil War (Byars, 1977):

Michelle: Well, when you like a guy you sort of try and impress them and sort of kind of act like you have their hobbies and stuff.

Raquel: You kind of laugh at their jokes when they're not really funny and stuff.

Michelle: Like there was this one girl in third grade, she liked this one kid and he would say something that wasn't even funny and she'd always laugh and laugh and laugh.

Jessica: I think you know right away if someone likes you or something because they always stare at you.

Raquel: Or they chase you. I know that because your brother chases me. And then like there's some boys that don't like chase you, they just like protect you and stuff. I've had that happen to me in second grade.

(The Cybil War: Discussion 3)
A Sense of Place in the Family

The episodes from The Man in the Ceiling (Feiffer, 1993) that involved Jimmy and his parents and siblings led to the initial concept of the status held in relationships. When asked to pick out a scene from the book to act out, the scenes were initially almost entirely family interactions. As we discussed these scenes, students perceived that Jimmy was at once the least important and the most important person in the family. They felt he was least important because his needs were never met, not even by his mother who shared some of his same talents. He was the most important, they felt, because everyone seemed to turn to him for help or as "someone to yell at." It was Lucas who said, "He was important but he had no status."
Students then considered Jimmy's status in his family and also considered the status they held in their own family. The Venn diagram was done in Lucas' journal where he thinks about the connectedness of Uncle Lester and Jimmy. A later entry in his journal shows a bar graph of a status comparison within his own family.

![Status Chart for my family](image)

Palmer's position in his family in *Wrinker* (Spinelli, 1997) generated much discussion. Although seemingly a close family, Palmer felt powerless when it came to pigeons. He kept his dread of being a wringer from his father and the fact that he was keeping a pigeon as a pet was a secret from both parents. Because of this distancing of himself from his parents he suffered, but found inner strength. Lucas
his parents he suffered, but found inner strength. Lucas
and Shane discussed whether a father would pressure a son:

Shane: I can see why he was worried. After holding all that stuff in, someone was bound to find out and I don’t think that, especially not my father, I mean I’m comparing my own dad to this guy. If my dad lived in a town where they usually had shooting contests and my dad won tops, I don’t think he’s about to say, go ahead, do whatever you want, it’s your choice.

Mrs. K: What do you think the dad would say?

Shane: I think he, your dad, my dad, anyone’s dad, would try to pressure him into it.

Lucas: Well, I think he was trying to urge him to be a wringer and I think he was kind of disappointed that he wasn’t but I don’t think a father would say you have to be a wringer, you don’t have a choice. You have to shoot pigeons when you grow up.

(Wringer: Discussion Group 3)

Later in the discussion, Shane mentioned Palmer’s separateness from his parents. Other students considered the notion that the place of girls is with their moms and boys is with their dads:

Shane: I noticed that in the book he almost never asked his parents for anything. I mean he was always saying stuff to himself. He was always talking to Dorothy but his parents, I mean they were .. [shrugged his shoulders]

Mrs. K: I wonder why that was. Why he kept all that to himself?

Shane: I think he wanted to keep it to himself cause he was scared that his mom or dad might be ticked off at him. I mean his dad was like a really good shot and he got that golden trophy or whatever it was.

Lucas: The sharp shooting trophy.
Shane: And his mom, well, I don’t know why he didn’t talk to her her. I mean she didn’t have any trophies, she wasn’t a wringer.

Claire: Well, usually when you’re a girl you mainly, go, I mean I tell my mom stuff. And the boys like my brother he mainly talks to my dad. And so I think if I was a girl I’d want my mom and not my dad, I mean I’d want my dad, too, it’s just like I would depend more on my mom.

Mrs. K: He wasn’t as close to his mom.

Lucas: Yeah, cause like if you’re a boy you can probably relate more to your dad cause he’s like usually been through the same stuff and it you’re a girl you’d probably relate more to your mom.

(Wringer: Discussion Group 3)

Shane closed out this discussion by commenting on the issue of trust in the family. He demonstrated the growing understanding that knowing your place in the family means understanding the positions of others. In this case the father is the confidant of the mother and this makes Shane silent:

I also think that Palmer didn’t tell his mother because sometimes I do this, too. I think that my mom might tell my dad because my mom’s always telling my dad stuff, and I think that she might like, I think that he thought that if he told his mom she might tell his dad and his dad might get angry at him.

(Wringer: Discussion Group 3)

The issue of trust in the family and how the adults in the family have the power to betray trust for their own purposes revealed itself in the stories students told of times their parents have embarrassed them. Students seem to
yet moving into wanting the respect an adult would receive.

After I read a section in *The Man In the Ceiling* (Feiffer, 1993) about Jimmy's frustrations, Ashli told the story of her father coming into the cafeteria to berate her about not keeping her room clean. He had been volunteering in her sister's classroom. Ashli attempted to maintain her own sense of dignity by defending herself in her journal.

My parents embarrass me in front of other people and even my friends. Like when I was at lunch he came over to where I was sitting and told my friends that I have a messy room. He acted like my room is a garbage can. Then he said go on the bus and he bought a lunch and left me there like I was nothing.

(Ashli, Journal entry, undated)
Looking at life through the lens of status gave them a perspective with which to consider the world. Through drama, they explored family scenarios from *The Man In the Ceiling* and from their own families. They were encouraged to reverse the roles they were playing. For example, if Ashli enacted the experience with her father and played herself in the first scene, she was encouraged to be her father the next time. Another way we worked with this issue was to ask the students to figure out a skit in which the status was reversed but the students remained the same characters. In this way, they could think about possibilities.

Although for some students the sense of place in family was an issue, others felt comfortable in their family position. Claire seemed to have a confident family sense of place:

> If you want to know me as a family member you should know that I am the oldest child. I love my family. I have three cousins. They think I am neat. I have two Grampas and one Gramma who love me and think I am beautiful, polite and smart. I have many aunts and uncles who think I am fun to be with and think I have a strong loving heart. My mom and dad think I have a smart head on my shoulders. They think I am opinionated and talented. I love both my mom and dad. I don’t have a favorite. My baby brother has more status than me. I have just a little more status than my sister.

*(Claire, Journal entry, 1/22/98)*

Even as comfortable as Claire was within her family system, she still reflected on her position with regard to her siblings. In similar ways, the concept of status became a touchstone for comments and understandings the remainder
of the year. It was a tool that enabled some students to create meaning within complex situations.

**Kid Culture: Am I Popular or Not? That Is The Question.**

I ran across a study done nearly fifty years ago that reported peer interactions as making up 40% of the day for children between seven and eleven and episodes with peers totaling 299 per typical school day (Barker & Wright, 1951). With the increase in day care and afterschool programs, that number is likely higher now. Even so I was saddened to find that the issue of popularity was so easily talked about with my fourth and fifth grade students. Which kids are "popular" is not as noticeable in elementary school as is which kids are rejected. I wanted to think that perhaps popularity was a middle and high school issue.

As I read and considered books and articles related to social cognition and development in children, much was said about peer status. Hartup did a study in 1983 of sixth graders and their peers which yielded him a definition of the popular child. Stated simply, such children have self-confidence without being conceited, maintain open lines of communication, give out reinforcements, listen carefully, are happy, act like themselves and show enthusiasm and concern for others.

I teach in a school that discourages peer comparisons. We don't play class against class in sports or even hold a field day that awards ribbons. We do not have an honor roll and we work hard at honoring the achievements of all
students. We have no organized sports. We participate in full inclusion programs which means physically and mentally challenged students learn in our classrooms all day. Still my data revealed that students at the young age of nine and ten consider who in our school is popular and whether indeed they themselves are:

At school I have pretty high status with friends and all. I have lots of friends and lots of people think I am good at sports. Me and this kid Manny are the most popular kids out of our class and Ms. Kahn’s class. I am also someone that can make almost anyone laugh. Most people think I am funny.

(Lucas, Journal entry, undated)

I had problems with Lucas in class and I was also aware that he had a habit of putting other kids down. Bryan had been discussing Ralph’s put downs so I chose this opportunity to get a kid’s eye view of Lucas. Here are Bryan’s comments regarding Lucas’ popularity taken from Bryan’s final interview of the year:

Mrs. K.: Lucas picked on kids a lot in here, didn’t he?

Bryan: He didn’t pick on me.

Mrs. K.: How did he pick on other kids?

Bryan: He made jokes about them. I mean, if he was funny he would make a lot of friends and by doing that he picked on people. But then he still had a lot of friends, though.

Mrs. K.: So Bryan, in the books we read or in the class, who do you think would be a role model? Anybody?

Bryan: I think, well, even though Lucas does make jokes about people a lot, it’s too bad he does that, because if he didn’t, I think he would
be a really good successful person.

Mrs. K: Why? Because he is smart?

Bryan: Yeah.

Mrs. K: Why else?

Bryan: A leader. Yeah, he’s like a natural leader.

(Bryan, Final interview)

Liz had her own definition of what it took for her to rank high:

Me as a kid, I don’t have much status when it comes to adults. But with kids I have a pretty high status. I learned that you don’t have to be tall or an adult to have status. The only thing that makes a difference is the way you look.

(Liz, Journal entry, 2/10/98)

Michelle analyzed why it was so important for Jimmy in The Man In The Ceiling (Feiffer, 1993) to give up doing his own drawings in order to draw for the school jock:

I think Jimmy worried that if Charlie Beemer doesn’t like his drawings then nobody will like them or notice or watch him. Jimmy really isn’t very popular but Charlie is and Charlie is like Jimmy’s only friend so he wants to have Charlie as his friend forever. So he wants to make Charlie impressed.

(Michelle, Journal entry, 1/23/98)

In our discussions of Wringer (Spinelli, 1997) students again saw popularity as the motivator:

Shane: Popularity. I think popularity played a lot in this book.

Mrs. K.: How?

Shane: Well, first Palmer is like this perfect little
kid. He doesn’t have any friends that are in high places. Then all of a sudden wham! He’s nine and he gets the coolest kids in town to be his friends.

Mrs. K.: They were cool? With dirty teeth and leaving dead muskrats on people’s doorsteps?

Lucas: Uh hmm.

Shane: They were cool. They were like, they weren’t cool if you ask me but they were cool as in they were popular. They were well known and most of the kids looked up to them.

(Wringer: Discussion Group 3)

The group considered a character in the book, Henry. Henry is part of the “gang” but attempts to warn Palmer that the group is going to break into his house that night. Palmer has seen Henry walking his sister around the block in a wagon and showing other “ungang-like” behavior. So why does he stay with the gang and not get out like Palmer did?

Shane: I think that Henry was like Palmer except he was like Palmer’s possible future. Henry was like he didn’t have the self-confidence to pull off of the gang. I mean he kind of needed their support even if he didn’t.

Mrs. K.: He has seen some compassion in Henry. But yet when Palmer tried to get him to tell him his own name he wouldn’t.

Shane: He’d shy back.

Claire: Why?

Shane: Probably because he was afraid of losing his place. I mean when you get into a popular group, I mean it’s like that means everything to you, everything else can just go away as long as you have that. I mean you can do stuff under the cover of night so that they won’t get ticked off at you,
but if they find out that you did it, you’re in trouble and you’re out. And I think Henry thought he need it.

(Wringer: Discussion Group 3)

Jessica agreed with this and writes in her journal:

I think that taunting Dorothy was a mean thing to do. I think, no, I know that by being mean to her Palmer got respect from his friends.

(Jessica, Journal entry, 5/7/98)

Another group discussing Wringer arrives at the same conclusion:

Nick: Well, you just get like, you’re more popular when you join them or something.

Bryan: I think Palmer seemed kind of not really popular at all before so it was so important for him to be with those guys.

(Wringer: Discussion Group 1)

Liz, however, took another perspective in this same discussion:

Liz: It’s like he’s a follower. He doesn’t go his own way, he follows people. More like a copycat.

In the studio time following the reading I Never Knew Your Name (Garland, 1994) Lucas created a symbol with a geoboard that demonstrated the loneliness of being left out. In the story, a young boy watches a teenager who is not part of the group. They are both lonely but the young boy does not reach out to the older one. The older boy eventually kills himself.

Students think about and work at constructing their
sense of place within the peer group. Who is popular and who is not? Who are the leaders? Do they lead well? Who are the followers? What is my place in the grand order of things? How much do I, or should I, care?
Constructing Viewpoint

Yet within a family or in a classroom, children and their parents and teachers are having conversations, responding to one another, learning from one another;

A reflecting and self-reflecting mind that at some point gives way to a "performing self", deeds enacted, then considered and reconsidered.

Robert Coles, 1997, p. 7 & 9

Many children in my classroom think through issues using concrete referents and others reason in more abstract ways (Piaget, 1955). A student's sense of cause and effect becomes more clearly defined as they attempt to reason out major conceptual understandings about the world. As students create meaning they may make assumptions based on their own experiences or those of their families. They will hold strongly to this opinion based on their personal experiences. Gradually, students begin to see that their classmates may think differently than they do. Students may still assume, however, that the person holding a differing viewpoint is basing it on their own personal experience within the same conceptual framework.

For example, during discussions with students as we analyze people and situations in the news or perhaps in books, I have observed that students' explanations for behaviors are generally accompanied by personal stories, as in "I felt that way when I was sick so probably that is what that person was feeling." Sometimes stories to explain behaviors are simply made up or taken from the imagination.
"Maybe he did it because he had a mother who was mean to him."

Encouraging students to construct viewpoints in an abstract way that can combine both direct and indirect experiences is a challenge. Teachers may give additional examples or talk in metaphorical terms in order to push students into thinking more broadly. I frequently "make up" analogies to help students capture certain big ideas.

Vygotsky (1978) believed children learn best in social situations in which they could voice their thoughts aloud and listen to others who are doing the same thing. This capitalizes on the natural tendency in children to speak their ideas aloud. After listening to themselves and then to the responses of others, they may reorient their thinking or grow stronger in their original thought. In such a way, students create deeper as well as more abstract conceptual understandings and gradually develop what Robert Cole (1977) calls "the language of opinion".

Trends in intellectual development and learning theory as determined by the work of Piaget and Vygotsky have also been observed by researchers in children's responses to literature (Applebee, 1975; Lehr, 1988; and Hickman, 1992). In my experience, students in the fourth and fifth grades, while having variations in intellectual responses to literature, are able to dig deeply into big ideas and take meaning from a story in a way that comes close to real life experiences. Many are able to move from the basic
understandings in a story to a discussion of the higher truths or broader human applications that are represented. To do this kind of critical thinking with literature, they must be given time and opportunities to think with others through small group discussion, as well as through a variety of forms of expression such as art, music and drama. As students share their own responses, they also are immersed in the perspectives created by the other students. Gradually students begin the process of constructing and reconstructing their own point of view. Erikson (1968) defines these transitions as first to unfold, then grow and finally to discern.

Literature discussion was often the vehicle for work on constructing point of view. Although there are many examples in my data collection of students working on developing personal viewpoint, the discussion that stands out for me was the one between Freddy and Matthew after they read *Goodbye, Chicken Little* (Byars, 1979). The story begins with the death of the main character's uncle. He had been drinking and on a dare, he walked out onto a frozen lake. Unfortunately, the ice broke and the uncle fell through and drowned. Jimmy's mother felt that Jimmy should have stopped his uncle from going out on the ice and so the young boy feels responsible for his uncle's death.

Much of what Freddy said in this literature circle is tied to his personal experiences. Matthew's process is to grapple with what he sees as the larger truths in the story,
whether it is truly a child's place to save an adult and how he himself views taking on dares. He mixed this with personal knowledge as he began to use the language of opinion. Since two of the group members were absent on this day, I was participating in the discussion. At times I asked Matthew questions to push his thinking. He then tended to alter his perspective but did not defer entirely to me.

Mrs. K.: One thing I noticed was that it didn't seem like anybody tried to rescue him.

Matthew: I know. They kind of just sat and watched.

Freddy: It was the Monday River.

Matthew: And Jimmy was like calling out to him that he couldn't do that and that he'd like kind of fall through the ice. And Uncle Pete didn't believe, well, he either didn't hear him, didn't care or he just kind of didn't believe him. I found it sad that the people, like the people from the bar just kind of stood there and like watched. I guess they were too drunk, but . . . .

Freddy: I think they had been drinking because it says they were standing by the bar.

Mrs. K.: So, do you think drinking impairs your decision making?

Matthew: Oh yeah! Alcohol impairs a little bit more than just your decision making.

Freddy: I wrote that in my log. Like he's calling for help and no one is coming. Like what Matthew said that no one is helping him cause maybe they're too drunk. He's like just saying help and no one's there.

(Good-bye, Chicken Little, Discussion 1)
The boys go on to discuss the people in Jimmy’s life who have died. Matthew felt the family was not appropriately acknowledging the deaths.

Freddy: It says he closed his eyes when he saw it happen.

Matthew: He developed the bad habit of closing your eyes. You need to watch what happens. Like if someone dies you really kind of need to know what happened and you have to kind of look at the problem that happened emotionally. You can’t just walk through life and close your eyes to every scary thing that happens.

The discussion turned to finding fault in death.

Freddy: My grandpa died when I was three months old and it just felt weird that my grandpa died and now my grandma, whenever she looks at his picture, it’s like, she’s like “I should have stopped him”.

Mrs. K.: How could she have stopped him?

Freddy: He was smoking and my grandma could have stopped him from smoking, but I really don’t think so. She tried to. I think she tried to, but there was a Circle K right next to their house.

Matthew: Well, Uncle Pete was a sort of daredevil.

Mrs. K.: I think the mom thought someone should have stopped Uncle Pete because he was acting like a kid with the dare stuff.

Freddy: Here it is: “If someone is a boy, I don’t care how old he is in age, if someone is a boy then you stop him from doing things that will hurt him. Do you understand me?” That was Jimmy’s mom.

Matthew: Well, I think it was Uncle Pete’s decision. If he thought it was ok for him to walk across the ice, that’s his decision. He was grown up, even if he was a boy at heart.
Mrs. K.: Is that what you think? That we should not help people if they are making bad decisions? We should just let them?

Matthew: Well, we can give advice but I think that it would have been out of place for Jimmy to say, "Uncle Pete, you can't go out on the ice, you'll fall through and you'll die."

Mrs. K.: Even if he's drunk and the ice is thin, there's nothing Jimmy should have done?

Freddy: If you don't stop people, then you have less people in your family. Because they keep on dying. Cause if they are drunk they go do something dumb and then they kill their self.

Matthew: Ok, well, if someone's like impaired from drugs or beer or cigarettes or maybe even something else, I mean if they've done something wrong that's impaired their thinking, then I think it would be ok to help them and tell them don't screw around. But if they haven't been under the influence or anything lately and if they haven't been to a bar, unlike Uncle Pete, I think if they are grown-ups they should be able to do whatever they want.

Mrs. K.: I thought it was interesting that he died because he took a dare.

Matthew: Well, sometimes dares can be fun things, especially when you screw with the other person's mind. I mean if someone dares you to jump off the Grand Canyon and you get permission, but you use a parachute and you're just taking the dare in your own little way.

Mrs. K.: So you could take a dare but you would want to be sure you are safe?

Matthew: Yeah. But there isn't anything that's 100% safe.

Mrs. K.: It seems to me that he's just feeling guilty about the whole thing.
Freddy: Yeah, he is.

Mrs. K.: And you know probably part of that is because his mom sort of blamed him.

Freddy: Yeah, she did.

Matthew: It's like she knew she was in the wrong sooner or later [to blame Jimmy].

Mrs. K.: But for a second, you know, you want to blame somebody I guess.

Freddy: Yeah.

Shane: Yeah, I know what that sensation is like.

In this discussion, I noticed that Freddy is much more concrete than Matthew, giving examples that follow the story line, agreeing with my comments and finding quotes in the book to back up the discussion. He chose to share personal connections probably based on his thinking about the death in his own family.

In contrast, Matthew is forming opinions as he reads the story. During the discussion he is willing to concede a small point but overall sticks with his own view. He sounds personal rather than analytical only when it is apparent a chord has been struck: "I know what that sensation is like."

Responding to literature by agreeing or disagreeing or in other ways analyzing the characters and story development is a safe place for this kind of "point of view" articulation rehearsal to take place. Literature discussion builds on the natural tendency of children to speak ideas aloud. Finding ways to express themselves and in turn
listening to the responses and viewpoints of others means that literature discussion may reorient a child’s perspectives which ultimately could benefit a student’s developing identity schema or lead to more positive social understandings and interactions. Short (1997) stresses that literature can take us outside the boundaries of our personal life experiences to other places, time periods, and even to other peer groups. Literature is a way to “know the world and critique the world” (p. 19).

It is interesting to note that students do see personal knowledge gained through discussion or some kind of personal interaction as a solution to negative situations. Apparently they feel that getting to know someone or about something on a personal level could change opinions in a positive way. For example, in a discussion of Wringer (Spinelli, 1997) the group thinks through why the gang was mean to Dorothy. Jessica says:

> Probably if they would have like met each other, like if Palmer had just introduced Dorothy to the gang, then probably they’d get to know each other and could all become friends.

*(Wringer: Discussion Group 2)*

In the following series of comments pulled from the group discussion, Bryan suggests that it was getting to know the pigeon personally that enabled Palmer to resist the influence of the gang and motivated him to renew his relationship with Dorothy:

> Comment 1: When the pigeon came along . . . that was kind of why he started thinking “maybe I would like being friends with Dorothy”.
Comment 2: But it made it easier with the pigeon cause he would really take care of the pigeon and so that would give him like a reason to not be with them.

Comment 3: He followed the pigeon instead of the gang because he started being friends with the pigeon.

Comment 4: I'm saying he was weak in front of the gang when he had the pigeon because I think the pigeon influenced him to break up with the gang.

Bryan and Jessica realized that connecting in a personal way can powerfully affect your point of view. In many ways throughout the year, I observed changes in opinions related to the handicapped based on Robins’ program of inclusion. Personal knowledge and involvement were not limited solely to relationships but also affected attitudes towards curricular areas. Lucas discusses this aspect of change:

Mrs. K: Do you think you’ve changed in any other area besides learning a lot and your behavior? Any other areas where you have experienced growth or understandings?

Lucas: Well, like responding to literature.

Mrs. K: O.K.

Lucas: This is the first year I’ve really done a lot of that.

Mrs. K: And how do you feel about that?

Lucas: Well, at first I thought it would be boring. But now I like it. Like if it’s a book that I like and then we respond to that, it’s fun. I used the math stuff a lot to respond to books.

(Lucas: Final interview)
If children already see personal knowledge as a pathway for developing positive perspectives then it may be possible for children's viewpoints to be formed or altered through the personal knowledge gained with connections to literature and dialogue with peers. Students who are forming a language of opinion that is growing out of personal experience and reflection can find, at least to a degree, that experience in literature or in stories shared by others through dialogue around literature.

If students are forming a point of view based on less direct connections and more abstract thinking, the literature offers big ideas to consider. As students form and articulate opinions, our curriculum needs to give them constructive and safe places for this kind of critical thinking and dialogue to happen.

Conclusion

In this chapter I have considered the four major issues students addressed relating to identity formation: constructing an image of self, constructing relationship, constructing a sense of place in the world and in the family, and constructing point of view. These are areas of concern for my students and each area has a multitude of situations and perspectives.

Children should be given space for their understandings and growth in these four areas to flow together in a positive, if not necessarily perfect, way. If children were given this space I believe they would then have reasonable
expectations of themselves and others, a greater understanding of their unique role in the world, and the belief that there is a purposeful way to live. In the next chapter I will analyze the spaces I found within my curriculum for these issues to emerge and to be thoughtfully considered.
CHAPTER 5

SUPPORTING IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION IN THE CLASSROOM

For twelve years and eleven months Abby had been the motherless but contented owner of a fine identity in Shorelands. Then, last July, . . . Abby got a new stepmother . . a new school . . and a new place to live.

"You'll have an exciting new life here," Miranda had promised.

Abby looked at the tall buildings, bright lights, exotic people, and believed her. Unfortunately, while she was busy looking, her identity disappeared.

Leverich, K. 1998. p. 2

This quote was taken from a story of a girl's search for a new identity after having experienced major life changes. Although she tries a new hair style and new choices of clothing, it is really through school experiences that she begins to redefine who she is. In a similar way, some students come to my classroom from stable environments while others are in periods of transition. Just as the other characters in the story from which this quote was taken were unaware of the seriousness of Abby's dilemma, so I am unable to tell what is really happening within each of my students. As a teacher my role is to develop a curriculum within which the students have opportunities and are encouraged to reflect on their own issues as they explore various forms of literacy. I call these opportunities "spaces" in the curriculum for identity construction (Miller, 1990).

Street (1993) maintained that literacy must be
understood within the framework of culturally constructed systems that manifest ideologies and values. Schools are such a system as is the culture of childhood. Baynham (1995) in a study of identity and writing, found that learning to write in certain ways raises important questions of identity especially related to power. Templeton (1986) states that print can affect our consciousness and our sense of self. Street (1993) shows that meanings and practices of literacy change from one social context to another and that context makes a difference in the role that literacy plays in the formation of identity. Therefore, not only the kinds of learning that take place in the classroom but the way in which the learning takes place affects the individual and his or her identity (Holdaway, 1986).

In this chapter I look closely at my role as teacher during this study. The question from my research that I will address is: How does the classroom learning environment provide spaces for students to explore and construct their own identity? In searching for a response to this question I considered the transcripts of student interviews and the transcripts of the literature discussions of which I was a member. I reviewed my planbook and how I organized time and I reflected on the broad curricular plan. I considered attitudes as evidenced in my teaching journals.

Finally, I had conversations with people who have observed my teaching methods and who could respond to my teaching. I asked them the broad question: What do you see
in my teaching methods that might create a space for students to work at identity construction? These people included Cheri Anderson who came into my classroom to work with my students on her own research study and could give an "outsider's" perspective. I spent several hours in conversation with my colleagues Leslie Kahn and Judi Busche. I have collaborated with Leslie for ten years and with Judi for five. I talked at length with Rosanna Gallagher, the principal of the school. I have worked with Rosanna for five years. I value her "view from the top" and her expertise in the issue of identity development. I wondered in what ways she felt my teaching decisions supported my students' sense of self. Rosanna and I are "soul mates" in the kind of thinking that emphasizes respect for the child.

I found that three categories of "spaces" emerged consistently across the data sources and conversations as strategies I use in my teaching. I worked at these areas throughout the year regardless of the subjects being explored. The strategies that guided my teaching were: 1) knowing my students, 2) challenging my students by setting the expectation that they will think in new ways, and 3) offering choice, that is, finding ways for students to self-select how they will explore the intellectual and emotional growth process. I think of these principles as being points on a triangle in which no one area is any more important than the other and all are necessary as illustrated in Figure 5.1.
The points on a triangle, however, only add up to 180 degrees. To achieve the full circle, or the whole, these teaching strategies must be nested in the kind of environment that will allow them to be powerful. As shown in Figure 5.1, the primary aspects of the environment during the period of this study were: 1) a literature based curriculum with an emphasis on literature response, 2) work at building community, and 3) a demonstration of respect for culture. In this chapter, I will discuss these categories and their sub-categories according to the following outline and include specific examples from the classroom.

SUPPORTING IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION IN THE CLASSROOM

1) Knowing the Child
   a) Knowing the Child: Responding to Dialogue
   b) Knowing the Child: Responding to Observation

2) Challenging the Child to Think in New Ways

3) Offering Choice
   a) Choice in the Books to Read
   b) Studio as a Choice for Responding to Books
   c) Drama as a Choice for Responding to Books
   d) Choice in Developing Curriculum

4) The Environment: A Literature-Based Classroom.
   a) The Read-Aloud Experiences
   b) Literature Discussion Groups
   c) Literature as a Resource

5) The Environment: Creating Community

6) The Environment: Valuing Diversity
Valuing Diversity

Figure 5.1
At the end of my conversation with Rosanna Gallagher regarding work on this chapter she said:

The success of your program and the spaces you provide are a kind of magic, like good parenting, and may not emerge as something that can be taught with a set of rules. But I hope that you will bring the basic principles as you see them to the conscious level and share them with others so that they can reflect on their own practices.

Much of what I understand about working with children is embedded in an approach that is intuitive for me professionally and has therefore been difficult to isolate and talk about. I give examples from the data to support the categories I have developed, yet I do this knowing that my teaching is not a result of a single year of research. Rather, it represents a belief system that has evolved from experience, reading many books, and sitting in workshops, presentations and classes. Although the particular nuances of my classroom may seem unique, I do not believe my ideas are new. I have been thinking together with Kathy Short for many years. I am sure much of what I have to say will show her influence, especially in the area of my considerable emphasis on literature. I have been influenced by Ken and Yetta Goodman’s theory of whole language as well as the theorists addressed in the literature review. All of this has been sifted through my own experiences with children and has supported my own identity construction as a teacher.

Knowing the Child

Knowing the child takes place through teacher responses within conversation or within frameworks deliberately set up
to encourage dialogue. Knowing the child also means close observation of student responses in a variety of ways. This kind of observation is an example of Yetta Goodman's work on evaluation (1978). In referring to teachers as "kid-watchers" (1986) Goodman states that kid-watchers "know the signs of growth, of learning, of teachable moments. Teachers know how to interpret what kids do, how to see the competence and the need that underlie what they do" (p. 75). This observational teaching also supports students in the identity development process. Goodman goes on to say that "One of the most important kinds of evidence of the value of instruction is in the evaluations the kids are able to make of themselves" (p. 76). It is important for teachers to "know the child" for purposes of assessment and curriculum development but in addition, knowing the child encourages students to work at knowing themselves and to use that knowledge for construction identity.

Two categories that were strongly visible in my own instructional process of knowing the child include the way I respond to dialogue and the way I make use of observations.

Knowing the Child: Responding to Dialogue

In a study on "teacher-watching," Short et al (in press) examine teacher talk in literature circles. This prompted me to look at my own talk in the literature discussions. I noted that my talk in literature circles closely paralleled my routine conversations in the classroom. I found that one way I consistently "pay
attention to kids" is by listening and then asking questions for clarification or making short comments that encourage response. When done over time this kind of interaction offers significant knowledge for the teacher and for the students themselves and so creates space for identity construction.

For example, in a literature discussion of Good-By, Chicken Little (Byars, 1979), Freddy commented on a quote from the book about how losing someone is like missing an ingredient in a favorite recipe. I asked him, "Why did that strike you?" This gave Freddy the chance to ask himself why that passage was of particular interest to him and then to respond or to choose not to respond. Knowing why that passage struck Freddy is important to knowing Freddy. Maybe he thought it was funny, or an interesting comparison, or maybe his life has someone missing.

I think it is possible for teachers to make assumptions that they already know why Freddy chose this passage and it is not important to ask. Certainly I have overlooked many such opportunities myself. In this instance, I could have rushed into a teachable moment on similes and metaphors. Such a bit of instruction would have been appropriate and did come later. I felt, however, that the lesson would be more effective if Freddy's connection was explored first or at least acknowledged by me because I really wanted to know. Then, if it were something that wanted to come back to, I could decide to add it to my observational field notes or
teaching journal.

In this particular instance Freddy’s response related to the death of a grandparent and as such, generated more group discussion and was eventually entered as an issue on the group web as a possibility for further discussion. In this manner, my wanting to know Freddy also gave Freddy space to work at knowing himself. It gave us both a window into what might be an issue for him.

The following list of my questions and comments from a discussion of Wringer (Spinelli, 1997) serves as additional examples of my talk in literature groups:

1. Why do you think that happened?

2. We’re just talking here. You can respond to Ashley’s issue or you can bring up another one. Anything.

3. How do you think Henry was like Palmer, Bryan? (after Bryan says that Henry and Palmer were alike . . )

4. You are retelling parts of the story. How come? Why do you think those parts are important?

5. You said it was a tradition. Was it a good tradition, do you think?

6. What do you think, Nick?

7. Does the book talk about that anywhere?

8. Why do you think that is interesting?

9. Why?

10. That makes sense.

These questions and comments are not limited to
literature discussions but constitute the way I talk to kids in more casual contexts, asking for clarification, for reasons, for responses. Often then, my questions are not to seek information, but rather to encourage a student to articulate his thinking. Leslie Kahn put it this way, "You ask questions of both children and adults to get at what they know but haven't said yet." Implied in this statement is the purpose of this kind of question which is to encourage students to work out their own questions and solutions. They have powerful ideas but often do not recognize them as such.

Freire (1970) believed that dialogue between students and teachers is a crucial communication without which there is no true education. What Freire referred to as "true dialogue" is that which engages the participants in critical thinking. From such encounters all participants become both students and teachers. From the transcripts I found that I also brought my own ideas, questions and personal connections into literature discussions and dialogue of any nature. This sharing of self is intended to encourage critical thinking to be part of the self reflection process.

I analyzed the transcripts to determine how frequently I entered my own experiences or viewpoint into the discussions. I found in the literature discussions in which I coded and counted my responses that personal comments were less than half of the overall number of responses. As a teacher I have a position of importance in a classroom and
too much sharing of self can limit the communication if students feel judged or feel that I am attempting to move them toward my way of thinking. Many topics that come up for discussion have strong kid culture themes and a teacher's participation in that may be limited by definition (Kaser & Short, 1998.)

The following statements cure the questions and personal viewpoints I shared in the same discussion of Wringer that was previously discussed:

1. My question is: Was he afraid he would be kicked out of the group or was he afraid of what they would do to him? I wasn’t sure. Maybe it was both.

2. Well, I think that she just didn’t know. She had never been involved with the shooting of pigeons so she just didn’t know. I am not sure I would call that a mistake.

3. I have found that in life lots of important moments you really have to handle alone. She supported him but he told the guys he didn’t want to be a wringer by himself. He even tried to let the pigeon go by himself. I think it is good to have friends who will support you but you usually have to face things down by yourself. My friends are “there for me” but they can’t do it for me.

These comments were truly ideas I was thinking about at the time just as the questions in the earlier category were sincere. What is the definition of a mistake? Do we really face crucial moments alone? Children's literature has the power to bring out these big ideas in my mind and I shared them with my students. Sometimes they continue to speak to these topics and sometimes not. It is not, however, my agenda for the discussion. A possible exception to this may
be when I pull a book to introduce a specific issue or idea for the purpose of dialogue. Even then, however, I cannot guarantee where the discussion will lead.

The third kind of talk I noted occurring throughout the day and during literature discussions were comments prefaced with "I wonder . . ." Although it is an expression I use, it also stirs the imagination in children and gets them to think. I used the phrase in the same Wringer discussion: "I wonder why misbehaving in school helps him fit into the gang."

I noticed that the phrase was repeated by students. In commenting on Beans, one of the characters in Wringer, Claire asked, "I wonder about his family." Wondering is essential to considering new perspectives and allows students to think beyond this moment since the thought is not stated as a question that needs an immediate answer. Issues can be raised and placed on the back burner, to be picked up later or not. Although students can be encouraged to "wonder" in multiple ways, just saying the phrase a lot, seems to work.

Another phrase I used repeatedly in the transcripts was "that's fabulous" in response to student's ideas. It became almost a joke between my student teachers and me. One said that my tombstone will read, "That was fabulous!" Since the important result of my teacher talk is that students feel comfortable sharing their own questions and ideas, perhaps saying "I wonder" and "That's fabulous" can only move us
closer to that objective.

**Knowing the Child: Responding to Observation**

A study conducted by Carol Edelsky, et al (1983) in Karen Smith’s classroom looked at how the beginning of the year in a whole language classroom differed from beginning the year in a classroom with a skills emphasis. They found a sharp contrast and identified six characteristics that were apparent goals in Smith’s classroom as they observed her interactions. Although all six relate in some way to a student’s formation of identity, there were three that I especially took note of:

1. To get students to see opportunities everywhere for learning.
2. To get students to think and take pleasure in using their intellects.
3. To get them to be self-reliant and sure of themselves, and to trust their own judgment.

The researchers had hypothesized that adaptation to this classroom would take several weeks but they discovered that the process occurred very rapidly and that the students seemed very different, even by the end of the first day.

I found this study interesting because I have long felt that kids become very different when they truly are participating in a child-centered classroom. In the study, Karen Smith was as busy at the first of the year observing her students as the researchers were at observing her. Kid-watching (Goodman, Y. 1978) begins from the moment I get my class list and continues as I observe the students in a
variety of settings. Observation is a powerful source of knowledge and I have a variety of systems for keeping notes on my students. I think there is also a way to observe students to see shadows of their current identity issues. It is not my job to analyze my students' psyches, but it is my job to teach them academic material and address goals that were similar to those identified in Smith's classroom (Edelsky et al., 1983). Sometimes that means that I not only observe their issues, but that I respond to them in some way.

In this section I tell two stories. Mahiri & Godley (1998) in their study of a woman's identity issues relating to literacy, stressed the need for stories. They quote Kaestle (1985) who noted the need for a shift in focus from the history of literacy to the history of readers. He called for studies of "actual human meanings." It is also important to study identity with stories of kids. There was a time when I felt that these stories I am about to tell were "extreme" cases. But I have the extreme every year. With some I am able to respond to my observations in a constructive way. With others, I probably have not looked carefully enough.

In talking with my colleague, Judi Busche, she reminded me of an incident with one of my students who was living in a nearby "shelter." Students living in shelters usually come to us with little or no background information because most information about them is sealed for legal reasons.
They stay a few days to a few months - seldom for a whole year. Although not all students from a shelter are disruptive, one particular young man was very difficult to manage. His goal seemed to be to destroy any learning situation. He was defiant and was able to push adults to the point of anger. Since I had no idea what had made him so angry other than perhaps the obvious displacement into the shelter.

One day he went behind a bookcase. There was a space of about five feet between the bookcase and the wall. He began making low almost animal-like noises of grunting and he was throwing items from the bookcase against the wall. I moved away from the startled remainder of my class and sat down beside him. He turned a defiant face to me. I told him I felt there must have been adults in his life who had behaved irresponsibly and now he was having to live with the consequences and he must be very angry. I told him it made me very angry, too, because he had so much potential and so much intelligence. I told him I felt like throwing something, too. And I did. For several minutes we continued to throw everything within reach. We looked at each other and I really saw him and he saw me. We came to know something of each other and I could see in his eyes the lack of power he felt. I could also see that he believed I had respect for him and the situation he was in. He was, I believe, at an identity crossroad.

The Edelsky study found that when teachers moved from a
skills emphasis to looking at the whole child, the positive effect on students occurred very soon. For this boy, the change was almost immediate just as the Edelsky research (1983) suggested. He was not okay everywhere, but he was okay while in the social context of our classroom. Through observation and empathy I sometimes isolate a student’s thinking in the classroom and then develop an atmosphere of support that gives the student space to work through whatever is keeping him or her from being a member of our community. I do not stand in judgment or attempt necessarily to resolve the anger issue, yet through the notion of respect the student may begin to resolve the problem of angry outbursts by himself/herself.

I have heard teachers say, “I am not a psychologist.” I could not agree more. There are students in crisis situations or who have had experiences that I am not trained to deal with and should not have to address. But I regularly have students who have identity issues just as crucial as the student just described but which are not acted out in such an obvious way. The notion of close observation and teaching that is tailored to those observations is the point. I believe it is only by addressing the student’s issues through our manner and curriculum that the student is free to learn and to work on his or her own identity construction.

Another story from this year of research comes to mind. Shane was put in my classroom after having spent fourth
grade in another multiage classroom where he was expected to spend fifth grade as well. Although no one gave me any details, there was obviously some kind of a problem. This is a common practice in schools and I have asked students to be removed from my room at times as well. In general, the change is made because of a student-teacher conflict or a parent-teacher conflict. I usually do not spend a great deal of time tracking down the "why" for the placement. The "why" is usually dependent on the perspective of the person I talk to and sometimes becomes a conversation I would consider "teacher, student, or parent bashing."

It was my observation that Shane loved to draw cartoons. Based on my sense that I needed to engage Shane from the first of the year, I made the decision to start the year with a read aloud based on a boy who found his world distressing and so created a different kind of world through his cartoons. A few weeks later when giving choices for literature discussion, I offered a book about a similar character. These books gave Shane an opportunity to make an immediate connection and to develop a sense of acceptance. Based on comments from his parents at conferences, he developed a more positive feeling about what this classroom and school meant to him. I did not realize until the end of the year the crisis Shane was experiencing. The following section of transcript is taken from his final interview:

Mrs. K.: What has been important to you this year?

Shane: Where should I start? I am drawing new things now. And I have started writing stories.
Just little stories. My social life before I came into this class, well, I was very unsocial. I'm not very social right now but I have gone out on more limbs now. I'm making new friends and I'm just trying to have a good time. [He goes on to discuss calling old friends he knew back in New York].

Mrs. K.: What in the classroom do you think helped to support you in making new friends and taking these risks?

Shane: The whole atmosphere. I mean it's just, I mean I was going down and I sprang straight up almost.

Later in the interview:

Mrs. K.: Which of the books that we read this year have issues that you see relating to you?

Shane: Even though it's a picture book, it's the one I Never Knew Your Name. [Note: this is a book that tells the story of a boy who commits suicide].

Mrs. K.: OK. And how did that relate to you?

Shane: I said that I'd hold back saying this and so far I have. But last year and the year before I was on Zoloft because I have depression, or had it. I'm not sure, but I think maybe that was what caused the kid [in the book] to go over the edge. I mean I was actually thinking of going over the edge like he did. But I've been doing really well. I've been off of it for about three months.

Mrs. K.: So you stopped taking it this year shortly after Christmas?

Shane: Yeah.

Mrs. K.: OK

Shane: And I'll tell you, it feels, I mean I was really relieved to get off of it cause every day, every morning and every night, having a little pill and having to take it down with water [He shakes his head and becomes silent].
Mrs. K.: OK. Do you see any of the other books as having issues that relate to your life?

Shane: The Man in the Ceiling.

Mrs. K.: The Man in the Ceiling? Ok. Tell me about that.

Shane: Because Jimmy and me have a lot in common. I'm really a flunk at being a person and I, me and him imagine the same thing. Imagine going on to grandeur and a comic book company or something. Both of us have worked for popular kids. I mean we both, there's so much we have in common. The first time we read it, I felt that the story was actually about me. That's how close it is to my life.

This interview on the last day of school was the first time I was aware of the seriousness of Shane's struggle for identity. At an open house at the end of the third quarter in March, Shane's mother said to my husband, "Your wife saved my son." I had no idea what she meant, but the words came back to me and I felt a chill as Shane walked away from the interview. I had noted that he had adjustment problems in the other classroom and that he liked drawing cartoons. Those observations were where I had acted first.

Knowing the child means not forcing the child into my space. Knowing your students does not mean that I am their "pal" in an informal way. It means that I probe to discover where they are in their thinking and what issues they may be considering. It means that I observe their behaviors and what seems to be important to them. This then affects the decisions you make about the next step.
Challenging the Child

There were times in the work of this research year, however, when I did not stop at open-ended questions and when I did more than make a quiet adjustment in the curriculum based on my observations. There were times when I directly challenged students in their thinking. Ochs (1993) writes that a social constructivist approach to social identity defines that identity as a range of social perspectives that are developed over time. Certain stances are taken which in turn may develop into a point of view by generating an intensity of emotion. As I understand it, each of these stances becomes a link in a chain of identity. Most students are in my room for two years and that gives time for many interactions. In this developing process, students experience "blurred identities" (Ochs, 1993, p. 298). Students know that I expect them to consider alternate perspectives and become more articulate about what they think and believe. This again reflects the classroom goals described by Edelsky, et al (1993) in which students were expected to think, use their intellects, be self reliant and appreciate others who demonstrate diverse viewpoints.

One of the big ideas that emerged from our Wringer literature discussion transcripts concerned joining a gang. As a rule, kids' talk at this level is usually against the idea of gangs. They cast their eyes heavenward as if they just cannot understand why anyone would even think of doing
such a thing. In *Wringer* (1997), Spinelli presents the gang issue a little more softly. The gang is just a group of boys who don't brush their teeth and who play mean tricks on people. The gang's major power is that of intimidation. Yet they are looked up to and the main character in the book turns against his best friend and gets in trouble at school just to be one of "the gang." I saw a chance to get at honest thinking about the social pressure of gangs:

Mrs. K.: Well, do you think this book is possible? I mean, do you think, not so much the pigeons part, but I mean given any situation, do you think it's possible for a person to want to be in a gang or want to be a part of a group so badly they would mistreat their friends and worry a lot about life? This is important. What do some of you think of that?

Bryan: I think that would be possible.

Mrs. K.: How?

Bryan: [no response, looks down as if in thought]

Mrs. K.: Do you think it's possible that a person is not themselves or does things that they deep down would prefer not to do just in order to have a membership in a group or be accepted by a group? Bryan, what do you think?

Bryan: Well, you could feel . . . yeah. If I were Palmer, I would want to do that, too. Cause people would notice me a lot and I'd know a lot of stuff other people don't know.

Mrs. K.: So, if you were Palmer you would want to be with this group of boys then.

Bryan: Yeah.

Mrs. K.: Would you have mistreated Dorothy?

Bryan: No. I would have. . . well, yeah, because I would have wanted to be their friend, so to be
their friend you had to.

Mrs. K.: What do you think, Nick?

Nick: I would want to be in the gang, but I wouldn’t have mistreated Dorothy.

Mrs. K.: Do you see Palmer as a weak person or a strong person?

Liz: Weak. It’s like he is a follower.

[Murmur of “yeah”]

Liz: He doesn’t go his own way, he follows people

Girl: Uh hm. [in agreement with Liz]

Liz: More like a copycat.

This discussion continued and the talk felt more “real” than many of the conversations that had taken place during discussions in more formal gang and drug “programs.” The Wringer discussion gave a brief in-road into the kid culture of which the class is a part. It allowed Bryan to consider the kind of choices he might make and to be challenged in that choice by my comments and those of Liz. Such a dialogue then becomes a place to work at identity construction.

This is not to say that the comments the students made are in actuality what they would do. Sometimes it could be, but other times they “take on” an identity for awhile to see how it feels. It may simply be where they currently are in their reasoning process. Sometimes they flow in and out of their own identity and that of the character. Through dialogue they have the opportunity to articulate and reason
through ideas that may have just been floating around in
their heads and to get the perspectives of other students in
the group (Eeds and Wells, 1989).

This kind of analytic reflection can be extended
through the use of response logs. Although at first
students expect to be given a “prompt” for writing or
drawing, they come to see the logs as a place to consider
and reflect on issues of importance to them or ideas that
are emerging in the curriculum. The challenging talk
surrounding the writing greatly enhances the substance and
quality of those entries. Following the Wringer discussion,
Bryan made this entry in his log:

I think Palmer feels pressure from his dad because
because his dad was a wringer and he shoots pigeons.
I think Palmer feels sorry for the pigeons and mad
mad at them at the same time. He feels sorry for
them because people shoot them. He feels mad at
them because they come where he lives and if he does
not wring them he will not be friends with the boys.
That is important to him, too. I think Palmer
wants to be friends with Dorothy but he knows he can't.

(Bryan, Journal Entry, 4/30/98)

Challenging the thinking and perspectives of children
becomes even more difficult when you bump up against their
developing notions of self. Yet, to support identity
construction, this may become the task. During this year of
research, conflicts related to identity arose with students
over report cards. At report card time kids may come to
realize that the teacher does not perceive them the way they
perceive themselves. One example was the student who was a
"whiz" at computation but became bored in problem solving situations. She couldn’t understand that I did not see her as a top math student.

But the student my data points to the most in this area of discussion was the classroom artist. He considered himself to be the best artist in the room and the other students seemed to agree. The problem for me was that he always drew, painted, sculpted, etc, the same thing. There was one character that he drew over and over. If we were doing scratchboard, he scratched that character. If we were painting, there it was again. It was noticeable because the character had fangs and sort of a “dark side” appearance.

It came time for report cards. Although I know that some budding artists develop their style early, this seemed less like a style and more like a “locked” identity. I felt it was too soon for that, because elementary school is a place to explore and to use art as a tool for concept development and meaning making (Eisner, 1994). In spite of many opportunities to think about art in a different way, nothing changed. I gave him a B in Fine Arts. He was extremely upset. The bottom line was a conference called by the parents at which he was present. “I tell it like I see it,” I said. “When you do art, it is the same song, second verse.” I went on to explain that I was not denying that he was very good at the particular thing he did and his drawings matched the covers of the comic books he brought me almost perfectly. If I was grading on that comic book
character he would get an A for sure. "But the truth is," I said, "You are sitting at a banquet table and eating only your one favorite dish. You owe it to yourself to try a few of the others."

I was on dangerous ground. I was pushing this student to see possibilities in himself that he was convinced were not there and I was not giving him the kind of reinforcement on which he had built his self-esteem. I believed that he was afraid to venture into other areas. The risk of not being as good at something new was too scary. Losing his reputation as an artist in the class was too scary.

The end of the story is that at first he deliberately drew simplistic designs when given the chance to draw and thrust them in my face. "See!" he would say, "I drew a cactus." Although not stated directly, the insinuation was that I should therefore give him an A in Fine Arts at the end of fourth quarter. Gradually I saw a softening of his reaction and there was sincerity in his comments during his final interview:

Mrs. K.: How do you think you have changed as a person this year?

Student: Well, I think I’ve changed by way of what I draw because I’ve started to branch out. I’m starting to try to draw flowers. I tend not to draw them here, but I’m trying that and a bunch of other stuff.

Mrs. K.: Why don’t you draw them here?

Student: "Cause I’m kind of embarrassed. They aren’t quite as good as I would like them to be. And I’m very self-conscious about my art."
Mrs. K.: OK. Is there any other way that you feel you've changed as a person this year?

Student: Well, I think that I’ve changed because, I mean at the beginning of the year I really hated writing, you know, it was a total bore for me. I never wrote anything. And at home I’ve started to write little quick stories.

Mrs. K.: Oh, yeah? What are the stories about?

Student: Oh, just little fantasy things. Stuff like Life on the Plains, The One-Armed Soldier, I don’t know.

This student decided to pursue other kinds of art but was not going to risk his status with the class. He also began to write. By changing his thinking he opened new doors for himself.

There is an ending to the report card story. On the final day of classes after graduation, I handed him his report card. He took the envelope in his hand and said, “So is it an A in Fine Arts this time, Mrs. Kaser?” I kidded him saying, “I don’t know. Did you sing?”

So it is that I question, joke with, and console students into considering multiple perspectives. I do it with literature. I do it through my comments and questions as a teacher. I set up structures for reflection and dialogue. I create a curriculum rich in ideas and I give them the time to consider the possibilities. I encourage them to use their intellect and reasoning abilities to discover more about the world around them and how they might influence that world. But I also encourage them to consider the person within and how that person might be altered or
influenced as well.

Offering Choice

Although Dewey (1938) states that there is no intellectual growth without restructuring and remaking, he is adamant that both teacher and student share in the process of creating spaces for the growth to occur. He refers to such a plan as a cooperative enterprise rather than a dictatorship. As students become more comfortable with the kind of reflection that is a necessary part of this intellectual growth, the concern of both teachers and students is that the curriculum truly becomes a meaning making process. As students strive to create meaning for themselves, their identity issues emerge in the choices that they make.

Offering choices is sometimes an area that is misunderstood among teachers. Some teachers feel that offering choice means throwing out the "mandated" curriculum. This is not the case. It has been my experience that even in the most restrictive environment it is possible to offer students choices. More common is a fear that offering choices means students will take the path of least resistance or worse yet, do nothing at all. My experience has been that when students are given choices, even small ones within tight boundaries, they work harder and feel empowered. In this section I will discuss the areas of choice in terms of books to read, studio time, and drama and their significance in the study of identity.
construction.

**Choice in the Books to Read**

Students read from a variety of materials for a variety of purposes throughout the year. As detailed in Chapter Three which overviewed the curriculum, students read from both fiction and non-fiction. They read biographies, science related books, poetry and newspapers. Choices in reading evolved from what the class was studying and their own personal inquiries. Because we had a beginning theme of "inquiring minds" students read biographies. These books may have contributed to their reflections on self but responses to these materials were not documented for purposes of this study.

As part of the systematic study of identity, I read two chapter books aloud and I also chose an author of realistic fiction, Betsy Byars, for the students to read for literature discussion. I felt that realistic fiction would come closest to supporting students' issues and enabling me as a researcher to get at those understandings. Byars has written many books and so offered a range of reading both in skill level and interest. I did a short book talk on each book and then passed the books from table to table for students to browse. This gave them time to read the cover and short passages within the book before making a choice. Once having made a choice we began reading the books during Sustained Silent Reading. Students could change their mind during this time and exchange their book for any others that
were available. Once they read the book, they participated in a literature discussion group (Short, Harste, & Burke, 1996) and webbed ideas that came out of the initial discussion. Later they decided on one or two areas from this web for a more focused discussion. Students regularly wrote in literature logs as a way to prepare for their discussions and to reflect.

The literature discussion groups reflected my belief in Rosenblatt’s (1978) theory of reading as a transaction. The students bring meaning to the book and also derive meaning from it to create new understandings for themselves. Someone once told me that when we read a book we don’t just add that to whom we already are, but it mingles with everything else so that in the end we are different. Having the choice of a book and the space of the literature discussion group makes that reconstruction as valuable as possible. Peterson and Eeds (1990) refer to such a discussion as a grand conversation.

**Studio as a Choice for Responding to Books**

We regularly participated in studio time. Studio time which lasted anywhere from an hour to all day, gave students the opportunity to engage in literature more deeply through the use of multiple sign systems - drama, mathematics, art, music and language. Students could respond to literature by creating something meaningful that related to their own sense-making process. Although sometimes a particular response strategy such as scratchboard was offered during
studio time, students could choose to do anything using that art medium or some other. For some this meant using their favorite form of response. For most, it meant choosing both a response and a medium that was appropriate to the text or their idea. I felt it was important to offer studio time as a way for students to become more articulate about their responses. Kauffman and Yoder (1990) recognize that these types of engagements relate to one's identity:

Through engagements with art, music, math, drama, language and movement, children not only share ideas with others, but reflect on their understandings and in the process, invent new forms to express themselves and permit growth in their current selves. (p. 139)

An interesting phenomenon took place as a result of studio time. In the end of the year interviews, I asked the students what they thought was the most valuable experience for them. Three students in particular said it was studio time. They felt it helped them to think better in other areas not directly associated with studio.

For Claire, studio time helped her think more clearly in mathematics. "It was like my mind opened up," she said. Bryan, in his final interview of the year, said that studio time helped him to write:

Bryan: I like studio time a lot.

Mrs. K.: How come?

Bryan: Well, if I do art, I can write better, cause it gives me a different way to think about something.

Mrs. K.: You know what I think is interesting, Bryan, is that a lot of teachers do it the other way around. They'll have you write and then draw
a picture to go with your writing. But for you it works better to work with the art media and then do the writing. Let's say you were drawing a picture. Would you then write about that picture or does the art help you to think in a way that you can write about something else?

Bryan: That helps me think about the way I could write something else.

Mrs. K.: Like, anything.

Bryan: Well, more about the book.

Earlier in the year Bryan's mother had called me because he was unable to make progress on a writing homework exercise. He just couldn't get started. I made a few suggestions, such as talking about his idea into a tape recorder and then using his own words as a beginning or having a dialogue with him so he could form a web of his thinking. Through studio time, Bryan came up with his own solution. Somehow art gave his mind the opportunity to think in such a way that he was then able to write. Now he will often begin to sketch in his journal before beginning a piece of writing. Sometimes the sketch relates directly to his writing. Sometimes not.

Shane liked studio because he thought best through his art process and studio time was a good place for that to happen. He said this in his final interview:

Mrs. K.: What experiences stand out in your mind as significant in your development as a person this year?

Shane: I'd have a list that would go on and on.

Mrs. K.: OK. Well, throw out something.
Shane: Going in Cheri’s group. That really helped me because I learned more art. I mean I’m dumbfounded. There’s so many possibilities. The first time we all had, what is it called, art time?

Mrs. K.: Studio time?

Shane: Studio time. Yeah. Having studio time really helped me think.

Mrs. K.: How did having studio time help you think?

Shane: Well, in a play I was in there was a line that one of my costars said. Basically what he said was, “Sometimes there’s words for stuff but if there aren’t any words you have to figure out another way to say it”. And I have to say it through art because I can’t, I’m not a very good writer. And I can really make my hands work when it comes to art.

Mrs. K.: So the studio time gave you that?

Shane: You know, I’m writing on a piece of paper, just letters and spelling out words, I’m insecure and I feel no power over what I’m doing. But when I get that blank sheet of paper, I can just fly. I mean I can say anything I want.

Studio time was, therefore, a place to explore how we think as well as a place to choose ideas we want to pursue, the media we will use and the actual form the response will take. It was a significant space in which to recognize and explore a sense of personal identity.

Drama as a Choice for Responding to Books

Although drama was a choice in studio, we did have some focused drama study in order to give students drama experience they needed to feel more comfortable selecting it in studio time. This focused drama time was a significant
space during this period of research that once again allowed for choice in ways to respond. The students decided as a class to work on the book *The Man In The Ceiling* (Feiffer, 1993) through drama. I read this book outloud to them and they were so taken with the themes of the book that they asked me to read it aloud a second time.

We prepared for drama sessions by first webbing issues from the book and creating descriptor lists of the characters. We began the drama sessions in ways that connected directly to the book by asking students to pick an issue and act out a scene from the book which reflected that issue. They were to pick a character and act out a scene that they felt was a significant point in the story for that character. Within these guidelines, they could choose any part of the book to respond to or to think about through drama. Later they were asked to create scenes that reflected these same issues reflected in their lives at home or in school (rather than from the book). Many of the scenes involved social relationships and family relationships with sibling episodes happening most often.

Claire talks about what she gained from one of *The Man in the Ceiling* (Feiffer, 1993) drama experiences:

> Today in drama I learned that Jimmy's Mom is very emotional. She cared a lot about her brother Lester. In a way, she and I are alike. Both of us are a little bossy and sometimes I act like the mother in my family. ... taking the mother out of the book and putting her to life was something I had never done before. So it was very exciting for me.

*(Journal Entry, 5/7/98)*
The drama was therefore, connected to the curriculum, yet students' were free to move their thinking into areas of their own connections and issues.

Traditionally in elementary schools, drama is used for presentational purposes. For example, students will act out plays that have been written for that purpose, usually in connection with a curricular topic. Sometimes these are plays students have written themselves. Although the students in the research study did demonstrate their process to their parents at the end of the year, they primarily used drama as a way to think about the book. The drama was a way to bring alive their connections and their interpretation of these connections. There were no props or prepared scripts and the only audience was each other. As scenes were acted out, they would unfold according to the interpretations of the actors.

To encourage analysis and interpretation, the class was asked by the drama facilitators (Paul Fisher, a resident artist, or me) to take on multiple roles as a way to understand other viewpoints and perspectives in the situations they acted out. It was in this manner that the issue of "status" came up for the class and was revisited across the curriculum through other discussions, other kinds of reading and in writing. This issue began as a dramatic enactment of the way Jimmy was treated by his family. He was, the class concluded, low man in the family hierarchy. When given the chance to perform scenes with "real life"
connections, David organized a group to perform an experience he had at McDonald's when he was ignored while standing in line, presumably because he was a kid. Whether his "take" on this experience was correct or not, the scene struck a chord and the status of the students in school and at home became a hot topic.

As students enacted scenes related to status, they were encouraged to become other people in the scene and thereby see other perspectives in that situation. They recreated scenes from the book in which Jimmy was able to stand up for himself a little more. We also used this reversal of roles in the personal connections drama for students to understand that there could be alternate ways to handle situations. We talked about body language and students arranged each other in a stance they felt conveyed a person with high status or a person with low status. Again, these were situations which the students presented and not my agenda for any kind of counseling. We were exploring their issues through drama and these were issues that emerged from the literature.

As such, the students begin to see alternatives to being passive receivers or victims of circumstances. Rather they could become active participants in the creation of self and they could see how self relates to others. They could feel at least to a degree like the mom or dad felt or the younger or older sibling. Noddings (1984) and Gilligan (1982) in their ideas of caring and connectedness state that
it is in our understanding of how we care and connect to others that we understand our own individuality. Working with drama as a process created a space where students were open to new ideas and alternate viewpoints. Through drama they could actually experience some of these alternate viewpoints.

Following the drama experiences, students were given a chance to reflect individually and as a group about the drama. They reacted favorably to these experiences as expressed in their journals:

When we did drama today we learned how status works and how it changes with different people at different times. Sometimes how much status you have depends on how you handle yourself, not the real stuff going on. Like, you can have high status even if you are a little person.

(Ashley, Journal Entry, 2/17/98)

I think I did good in drama today. When I was Jimmy, I felt like him. I felt like I was in the book in that time. I felt like Jimmy because he is the strong character in the book and that’s how I am. I am strong in heart. I understood how he felt about all his family members.

(David, Journal entry 5/7/98)

I was Jimmy in drama today. Me and Jimmy are the same image that exist in different dimensions.

(Shane, Journal entry, 1/29/98)

My character today was the mom. She is a real quiet person. It was hard to be her because I’m not a real quiet person, neither am I slow like her. But it was fun.

(Liz, journal entry, 5/7/98)

The importance of drama to the students was mentioned
again in the final interviews:

I thought it was really great just to like connect in different ways instead of just writing. I thought that was really neat. Cause I had, usually in other classrooms we would have to just write about stuff. And we wouldn’t like act it out through drama and understand it more. And in drama, I really did understand. It seems like, oh my God, I didn’t, like for status and all, oh my gosh I never realized that like Sue Sue had more status than Jimmy sometimes. That is the way it was in that family. I never realized that and it made so much sense. And it just popped up.

(Claire, Final Interview, 5/98)

I believe these entries from journals and Claire’s final interview demonstrate the impact the drama had on the children from their perspective. The students indicate that they connected with characters and that they could understand personalities different from their own. It was evident that the drama was significant in their meaning making process of the book and of themselves.

Choice in Developing Curriculum

I offered choice in curriculum development. One example of this was in the study of rocks and minerals. This study comes in a kit which was required by the school district and had to be implemented in a three week period. The information and activities in the kit are worthwhile and give students a strong knowledge base. I took observational notes as students worked and made lists of the kinds of questions and discussions that were surfacing. When the Foss Kit was returned, I continued the study by posting all of the questions and comments that were on my list.
Students were eager to move deeper into the various areas represented and had the knowledge base from which to think critically as a deeper study emerged. After forming categories, students chose the area of study they thought was most interesting for them and they shaped the design and course of the study.

Involving students in curricular choices also indicated my willingness to move into an area that I had not even been considered. For example, the class read a book about Ruby Bridges, an African American girl who was one of the first to attend a formerly all white school. My class became very involved in the book and worked with it on many levels including discussion and drama. As I mentioned in Chapter Three, a student happened to see a painting of Ruby Bridges done by Norman Rockwell. The class began an impromptu study of Norman Rockwell and his stories of American history that he tells through his paintings. I had several students with strong connections to drawing and art and the flexibility to move in this direction gave them space to learn about history through this form.

Many decisions in the classroom were made jointly with the students. We frequently planned the day together, discussing what choices we had in the available time. I do organize the framework of the curriculum with my colleagues and it is based on the grade level district expectations, our own interests and expertise, the interests of this age level student, and this particular group. Such an
organization, however, allows for interpretation of process and many detours and side trips. Each year, therefore, becomes a unique experience that reflects the journey the class and I are currently engaged in, both together and as individuals.

The Environment

In the previous section I discussed three categories of teaching strategies that I determined were vital to the creation of space for identity growth and development. The categories were knowing the child, challenging the child, and offering choices. Cutting across all of these categories are the concepts of dialogue and reflection. Students were given opportunity to participate in learning engagements and then talk with others about those experiences. They were able to reflect through writing and music and art. I wanted to look at the year again and ask a broader question. What was significant in my classroom that created space for this important dialogue and reflection to occur? Every year a school changes. We are given new materials. We are inserviced in new programs. We learn more about how to teach writing or how to teach math. What are the bigger spaces that stay the same for me and that are vital in the dialogue and reflection related to issues of identity? In this section I will discuss the meaning and importance of: 1) a literature based curriculum, 2) a collaborative community of learners, and 3) respect for diversity. I will also give examples as to how these
touchstones looked during the year of this study.

The Environment: A Literature Based Curriculum

The emphasis on books and other forms of reading materials is evident as soon as students walk into my room. There is a long poster that is about twelve inches high that covers two walls near the ceiling. It looks like a single shelf of books and many of my students' favorite titles are on the bindings. The poster says, "A good book is a good friend." There is a large classroom library on shelves that go from the ceiling to the floor. The books are there to take and return at will and without special permission. I started out with a kind of category system with picture books here and chapter books there and poetry on the shelf above, but now they are all mixed together and maybe that's the way it should be. I used to hunt for that special book I wanted to read aloud, but now I just ask the kids. They seem to know the shelves and can find it quickly. There's a rug and pillow on the floor with a bookshelf next to it. This houses current issues of magazines like Time and the daily newspaper. I put the read alouds or other books used during class time there for further browsing. There are shelves with encyclopedias, dictionaries, a thesaurus and an atlas or two. I am fascinated by maps so they are usually pulled down and on display. I can read a map for hours and I find kids do, too. There is an abundance of materials for all kinds of readers. Sam in his final interview answered my question, "What did you like best about this class?" by
saying, "There are books and I like books."

Students can be encouraged in numerous ways to engage with literature. These ways vary from year to year in emphasis. I may introduce an author that children find interesting but later move away from this emphasis, or an author's work may become the focus of an entire year of study as it did one year with Jane Yolen. We may read many books from one genre for a while or a single book may hold our attention. Literature is a living force and interacts with my students in different ways from year to year. During the year of the study, we interacted with literature in three critical ways: read aloud, literature discussion groups, and literature as a resource.

The Read Alouds

Reading aloud in my classroom takes many forms. The most significant read-aloud experiences during this study were picture books and chapter books. I read many picture books throughout the year. The librarian asked us to review some historical fiction books at the beginning of the year and I used these to begin working with the class on ways to talk about books. We discussed both the author's and the illustrator's techniques and style. We shared personal connections and questions. We used specific response strategies like Sketch to Stretch (Short, Harste, with Burke, 1996). Picture books read throughout the year usually tied in some way to the curriculum or to circumstances in the classroom and I read both fiction and
non-fiction. Many of the books connected to our studio time because the students would pick one of these books to think about further through art, music or drama. Using picture books in daily read alouds enabled us to visit with a variety of authors and to consider many of life's issues. Students came to understand that the dialogue following the book was as important as the reading itself. Reflection continued in literature logs or sketch logs or studio time. Students listened and observed the way each person in the classroom created meaning from a book differently and they learned from each other. For example, one of the early historical fiction books we read was *Train to Somewhere* by Eve Bunting (1998). The train took orphaned children from the East on a train to the West. People met the train at various station houses and chose a child to take in. The main character in the story hopes that at each stop she will find her mother. She goes the farthest on the train since no one chooses her. This story struck a chord in the hearts of many of my students. One student shared the story of his own adoption and many of the students did heart-felt drawings in their sketch logs. One drawing was of a train passing through a broken heart.

In this way the class came together around a piece of literature once each day and began to understand its power to evoke deeply felt responses and critical discussion. We learned how to listen and value what we said to each other. We came to understand that a text is not over when we close
the book, but that we can return to that book in our thoughts, in our journals, in studio time or in a rereading.

The first chapter book I read aloud was *The Man in the Ceiling* by Jules Feiffer (1993). I considered many books as read alouds that might connect to issues of identity. I chose this specific one because the main character loved to draw cartoons. Copying cartoon styles is an interest of this age group and was of particular interest to a new student I was getting. Reading chapter books allows for deeper discussion in many ways as the book is lived through for a longer period of time revealing layers of the story day by day. Yet in today’s classroom it is hard to find time when all of the children are present so that no one misses out on the continuity of the story. Although we reflect on each day’s reading, I generally do very little “instruction” or analysis. I would give such mini-lessons only if they came up naturally and usually chose to use other materials for lessons on setting or plot development.

The chapter book read aloud is a place for students to use understandings from their lives to enjoy a good story.

But something happened to change that for *The Man in the Ceiling*. Paul Fisher works with our students in drama as a “resident artist.” The first year he came we worked at games to learn drama techniques. This year he wanted the students, who now had techniques as tools, to use drama in a way that connected more purposefully to the curriculum. The students were involved enough in this book that they wanted
to use drama to think about it in greater depth.

We first asked the children to simply act out parts of the story that they connected with or to act out the connections themselves. The students began to get confused and mixed up characters and scenes. There were indications that certain ideas in the book had escaped some students. They began to disagree. They would grab the book and flip through the pages to convince another person that their interpretation was the correct one. They finally asked me to read the book again. I was truly amazed that understanding this book was important enough to them that we would plod through it again. This time we made charts of the characters and their personality traits. We did a family web that illustrated how the characters related to one another. We did a map of the major "happenings" in the book that led to discussions of the author's purpose in putting certain characters or "scenes" in the book. This deeper study of the book took place in order to facilitate understandings for the drama experiences.

We also began a web of issues that we felt were important in this book. We added to this web after each reading if something important had come up. Personal connections were often made to the book related issues. I would encourage these discussions in order to get at students' own current issues and to support them in ideas for drama. Here is one example taken from my teaching journal dated January 22:
Ralph: Jimmy is forced to apologize to Lisi. That's a new issue.

Mrs. K.: What do you think about that?

Ralph: It isn't fair.

Mrs. K.: Are any of you ever forced to apologize?
[murmurs of "yes"]

Lucas: All the time. [he says this forcefully]

Mrs. K.: This happens to you, Lucas?

Lucas: All the time.

We then continued discussing Jimmy's situation in the book and shared similar occurrences in our own lives. Students could reflect further in one of their response logs. Later, we revisited that issue in drama and considered it from a more critical stance. In this way, reading the book again, discussing the book, forming character and issue webs, and working in studio and drama all flowed together.

At the end of the book we organized our issues into groups or themes: Downtimes, The Relationship between Jimmy and Uncle Lester, Family Relationships, and the Importance of Drawing for Jimmy. Students chose one of these major themes to work with and then listed episodes in the book that related to that theme. This gave them more ideas for drama. Another engagement I used was to ask for single words that came to mind when thinking about the book. We listed all of those words and students were then asked to pick a word and act something out related to it. Some
students chose scenes from the book and some created original scenes. One of the words was "status." Status emerged as the significant issue in the study of this book and in the drama experiences, and eventually emerged as a significant identity issue for the students in this class.

I closed out the year with the chapter book *Wringer* by Jerry Spinelli (1997). This book generated powerful group discussions on gang membership and our relationship with family and friends. Although there was less time to work with this book students were skilled in reflection and critical thinking and used studio time as an effective way to create meaning from the book. One student used a mathematical spiral of tiles to think further about the relationship between the main character and the father. One group of students put together a musical composition that reflected the tension throughout the story. Many students used sculpture, paint and charcoal to create their responses. Such reflective and creative meaning making responses are crucial in identity development. These responses are a visual representation of the "poem" referred to by Rosenblatt (1983) that can occur when a reader interacts with a text.

**Literature Discussion Groups**

When Andrade & Moll (1993) attempted to obtain data on a child in South Tucson, they were looking for "intimate glimpses into children's social worlds, thus confirming our philosophical approach to understanding children's lives as
they themselves live them" (p. 92). In a summation of their study, they state that contemporary childhood is very different from adult perceptions of it, and that teachers are often ineffective because they do not concern themselves with the reactions and attitudes of children. Since the purpose of my study was to catch my own glimpses of contemporary childhood, I chose realistic fiction novels for literature discussion groups. I usually have a common thread that runs through all the groups and this time it was the author Betsy Byars. Her books provided characters and circumstances that would offer my students many ways to relate to identity. I gave a book talk on each title (a brief introduction) and the students browsed the book and then chose one to read and to participate in a discussion group of approximately four students. After reading and sharing the book together as well as reflecting in their various response logs, students webbed what they considered to be the major issues of the book and then spent a day or two examining those issues more deeply.

The webs allowed me glimpses into the concerns of my students. The following literature group was discussed in Chapter Four, but I repeat it here to show the power of webbing as a strategy for thinking. I sat in on one of the groups which was my routine, and asked them to fill me in on how things were going. They showed me a web they had created. It was three circles and they told me it was how kids were divided up. One circle was the "normals," and one
circle was the "weirds." The weirds had two sub sections: the "born weirds" and the "wanna be weirds." They explained that the "born weirds" could never be normals and sometimes they tried to be "wanna be weirds" but couldn’t pull it off. The "wanna be weirds" usually started out as normals but deliberately changed their clothing style, hair, etc. and so were considered weird. They often eventually returned to normal, the group said, unless, as one student put it, "they die from drugs or something."

Literature groups allowed my students to come together to make sense of story. It allowed them to share insights and to think about a book in a way that is not dependent on the way the teacher thinks about a book. Making categories such as "wanna be weirds" would never have occurred to me and yet is an important piece of kid culture analysis for these children. I spent the remainder of my time in the group asking probing questions: Why can’t "born weirds" ever be normals? Describe a "born weird" to me. Who in our classroom fits into these categories?

At the last question, their eyes met each others and drifted away from mine and I knew that I was too close. They did not feel safe talking to the teacher about other kids. They answered the question by going back into the book and discussing the categories the story’s characters would fit into, an acceptable response that was entirely appropriate. These students had found a space to reflect and think critically about a book, about the world, and
about themselves. As adults, many of us find it fulfilling to have a person or several people to think with. I believe it is important for students to think with their peers and a literature discussion group creates a space for that to happen.

**Literature As a Resource**

As students spend time in dialogue and reflection around books, they come to value literature. My goal is for students to value all kinds of reading materials throughout their lifetime. To this end we turn to literature for multiple purposes throughout the curriculum. Since our curriculum had a focus on American History, specifically the Civil War, we studied the Civil War through literature. We read aloud a true story about a woman who pretended to be a man in order to fight in the war. We wondered each day with the reading if she would be caught. We read journals of soldiers, one of which was written by a family member of one of my students. We read fiction set in the period of time. We read Lincoln's Gettysburg Address and we read books about Lincoln. We read essays related to reasons the war began. We read poetry. Our involvement with the literature stretched our understandings and our perspectives.

Literature was also our resource for language study. We looked at how words are used - "four score and seven years ago" - and we compared our own story beginnings to the way certain authors begin. We found metaphors in story. We noticed the difference in how fiction is written and how an
essay or a speech is written. We noticed in our literature pieces how writing is organized and we saw demonstrations of simple rules of mechanics that can make our writing clearer.

Students use literature to pursue their own interests. For some it may be a science or sports interest. For others it is a genre or an author. The father of one of my students came in and said gleefully, “It finally happened. My son read for three hours straight on Sunday. He NEVER reads. We couldn’t believe it. He finally connected.” It turns out his son was reading The Giver (Lowry, 1993). He had discovered science fiction.

Students in a literature based classroom not only are able to read but they choose to read many kinds of literature for real purposes. That says something about the person they are and the person they may be becoming. To set up a framework in which students are free to explore multiple resources is to create an important space for identity formation. You can fill a classroom with books, but it is what happens when kids and books come together in purposeful engagements that changes lives.

The Environment: Building Community

Making a class list of children into a collaborative community who are able to think and grow together is a challenge that goes beyond literature discussion groups. Vygotsky (1978) stresses that our social side, that is how we interact with others, is a determining factor in the development of our own intellect. Short (1990) discusses
the difficulty of establishing new social contexts for learning when schools have long traditions of "hierarchy, competition, and individualism" (p.35). Short makes some suggestions that have already been covered in this chapter, this is, learning through action, reflection and demonstration, and offering choices within a "predictable framework." Short also suggests that students simply come to know each other.

In this study, I felt my students could come to know each other by coming to know more about self and then sharing that self with others. The students began the year by telling the class about something they had each learned over summer vacation. Students brought in an artifact for a brief "show and tell." We discovered that Bryan climbed mountains and Raquel learned about little kids because she had to babysit her little sister all summer. At this point there was some disagreement about when things were learned. Some felt that they could not learn to swim over the summer even if they had lessons, if they could swim to some degree before that. So we made learning time lines complete with posters. The visuals that went along with presentations told us as much about each student as did their time line. Bryan created a computer and his learning experiences were behind pop-up computer disks. Liz did the same using baseballs with a big bat in the middle. Throughout the year we continued to participate in these kinds of engagements. We "mapped" our families. For homework one night students
were to find out how they each got his or her name. Shane reported that he was named Shane because his Dad was reading a book about the West. Up to that point they were going to name him Milo. "Milo!" he exclaimed, "I would have been Milo if it hadn’t been for that book!" We wrote essays that described who we are as readers and writers, mathematicians, scientists, and artists, and we shared them in author’s circle. All of these essays and responses became part of a personal folder students kept for the first quarter of school. The purpose of all the activities was to build a community by coming to know each other better.

Peterson (1992) in his book *Life in a Crowded Place* discusses the importance of ritual in building a community. One suggestion he makes is the lighting of a story candle before reading. This has worked very well for me. I started with a small candle on a shelf near me, and now I have a tall candle stand that sits next to a rocking chair. Students enjoy bringing me all kinds of story candles and we faithfully light the candle before beginning to read. We have used variations on the theme. While reading the *Chronicles of Narnia* we turned on a lantern each day. We celebrate birthdays every Thursday with a special read aloud and treat. Just as the "real world" has traditions within cultures, so a classroom enjoys traditions and with these routines comes a class personality. We call ourselves "Kaser’s Kids" and to us that has a definition that means something.
In an interview Rosanna, the principal, commented that sometimes spaces in an environment are simply "felt" and are difficult to isolate. She provided me with a list of my tangible teacher behaviors that she believes fosters the intangible classroom environment. This comparison based on her observation of my classroom is shown in figure 5.2. Based on her experience as a principal, she views my teacher stance as contributing to a community that fosters personal growth.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Tangible</th>
<th>Intangible</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Manner of speaking to students that reflects caring and respect</td>
<td>A tone of acceptance and support for each child</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Listening to what students are saying and responding in a manner that encourages them to talk to you for both formal and informal reasons</td>
<td>Students know that their opinions are valued because there is follow up</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Explanation(s) of what is happening and why</td>
<td>Each child is important</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Expectations of how all members of your community should treat each other are discussed and modeled</td>
<td>Mutual respect for each member of class</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Room environment is inviting and interesting as well as an intricate part of the learning</td>
<td>Sense of pride at being member of your class</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cheerleader for each student’s success</td>
<td>A desire to live up to expectations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Time for each student</td>
<td>A sense of “I matter/I can”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Figure 5.2 - Rosanna Gallagher's Chart**

Dewey (1938) talks about "mutual confidence" and that in community it is not the will or desire of any one person,
but "the moving spirit of the group" (p. 56). Dewey warns however, that "community life does not organize itself in an enduring way spontaneously - it requires thought and planning ahead" (p.56). In a community, learners will find that sitting silently or making predictable responses is not exciting. Taking the responsibility to be makers of meaning is exciting. As discussed in greater detail in Chapter 3 on Curriculum Development, my class was so diverse at the beginning of the year that working diligently at building community was imperative. That community came together, endured into the second half of the year and into the following year in my multiage classroom.

Environment: Valuing Diversity

When students enter a classroom, they bring with them funds of prior knowledge, personal experiences both in and out of school, and values constructed through membership in social communities. Gender, economic differences, race, and ethnicity also affect a student's approach to learning (Beach, 1994). When this diversity is viewed as a resource and each person is valued for what they have to offer, the community is strengthened (Fleck, 1935). Students come to respect the knowledge, ideas and personalities of others and truly can come to recognize the contribution each one makes to the intelligence and energy of the class as a whole.

One area that is given considerable attention in schools is "multiculturalism" which most often refers to race and ethnicity. The emphasis in most schools is on
building more culturally pluralistic attitudes in students. Ruiz (1984) maintains that multiculturalism should be an orientation toward learning in schools that values a diversity of viewpoints and experiences. All people are seen as contributors to society. Ramsey (1987) holds that this valuing begins with self, and suggests that students need experiences that help them develop positive racial, ethnic, gender, linguistic, social class, religious, exceptional and national identities about themselves. This self-defining then encourages awareness and curiosity about other people leading to inquiry. Such exploration must be accompanied by critical, reflective learning (Gollnick & Chinn, 1990) rather than just curriculum add-ons. Any study of cultural elements cannot stop with definition of what delineates any one group, but must include an examination of society’s assumptions about the group and a challenge of such assumptions thus developing a critical consciousness (Freire & Macedo, 1987).

Moving children toward the decision-making and social action level (Banks, 1989) may speak to this critical thinking and social consciousness paradigm. One powerful way to support students in developing such an identity is the use of multicultural children’s literature. The literature reflects human life as a mirror to reflect self and a window to look at others (Sims, 1992). The literature when used in a meaningful way, can help students understand their own cultural heritage and those of others inside and
outside the classroom.

Recent studies show the positive effects that using appropriately diverse literature can have. Ramsey (1992) examined the impact of a unit of Native American literature on young children. Ramsey found that through their study, students began to alter their basically stereotypical perceptions of Native Americans. In a similar study, Spears-Bunton (1992) found that African American students engaged the literature strongly and linked it to life experiences related to cultural differences. Previously failing African American students strengthened their overall literacy performances. In a literature response class room, groups entertaining a text form a socially constructed experience that may affect one’s view of learning (Vygotsky, 1978).

Although I find selecting and locating children’s literature that is representative of diversity to be a challenge, I feel strongly that I must be selective of the literature as well. To present stories in which women or people of color are perceived of as weak or victimized, or to establish a woman’s place is to invite resistance (Fairbanks, 1995). Although gender and ethnicity have been a focus for my selection of books in the recent years, I now am finding more material on the homeless and children with disabilities. I feel all children need to see themselves represented in the stories we read. I also use more realistic fiction than I once did as evidenced by the books
chosen for this study on identity formation. I once felt that kids live their lives every day, why read about it? That body of literature seemed somehow less important to me than other kinds of literature. I still find that children love some of the classics. The Chronicles of Narnia by C.S. Lewis are always loved by fourth and fifth grade students. Realistic fiction, however, speaks to their kid culture (Kaser, 1994) and gives them a chance to look at problems and situations vicariously. The need for this was demonstrated by my students' deep focus in studio and drama on the realistic fiction by Spinelli, Feiffer and Byars.

As Short (1990) suggests in her discussion of honoring diversity, there are other classroom engagements that honor diverse perspectives. Having regular sharing time where students could talk about what they were reading, writing, or experiencing was important. Every Monday morning our class shared weekends. We heard about games lost and won, favorite movies or video games, and pets and people who were sick or who passed away. When we returned in January of, we shared our holiday customs and it became important for us to actually chart the various customs and observances. In this instance, the sharing time had a specific focus.

Another curricular engagement is brainstorming. In one of our brainstorms we did a web on what is important about "me" when we define ourselves. As I stated earlier, students created bubbles in the web for words like learner, artist, culture, citizen, family member, collector, teacher
and status. We discussed that the bubbles can move around and sometimes one bubble grows bigger while other areas diminish in importance.

Respect for diversity means having activities that offer choice and that are open ended. I do not expect all students to get the same thing out of the same experience. I provide activities that have the potential for being understood at many different levels, such as literature response and personal or group inquiry. The learning students achieve is not inherent in the engagements or books themselves but lies in the students’ transactions and reflection. Meaning making depends on children’s past experiences and cognitive maturity, and to allow these engagements to happen is to honor diversity.

Finally, I believe in the arts as one way to create space for diversity in the classroom and in identity formation. Garbarino (1991) states that art can heal deep wounds and prevent negative outcomes including substance abuse. In a long term developmental study of children succeeding in spite of the “odds,” Werner & Smith (1992) state that “creativity is foundational to human resilience. Participation in art related activities establishes self-righting tendencies that move children toward normal adult development under all but the most persistent adverse circumstances” (p. 2).

I value the time spent in studio where students are invited to use many materials to create meaning. I value
music and drama as tools for self-expression and meaning making. Bryan said that when he does art he can write. Claire said that doing art "opened up her mind" and her blocks to math have disappeared. Many of the identity issues detailed in Chapter Four were evidenced through the drama. Burke (1996) states that effective arts programs are shaped by the children themselves and therefore create a space for diversity. Fox (1994) speaks in glowing terms, "To experience our own creativity . . . constitutes a rebirth of self that holds the key to the rebirth of all society's ailing and tired structures" (p. 34).

I found some lines by Dewey in a forward to *The Unfolding of Artistic Activity* (Schaefer-Simmern, 1970).

Creativity . . .is manifested not just in what are regarded as the fine arts, but in all forms of life that are not tied down to what is established by custom and convention. In recreating them in its own way, it brings refreshment, growth, and satisfying joy to one who participates (p.ii).

This statement echoes Dewey's treatise *Art as Experience* (1934) where he advocated that artistic creation is not just the special talent of special people but a universal "life" factor all humans share. It is important that my classroom environment honors diversity by creating space for creativity through the arts.

**Conclusion**

In this chapter, I reflected on the spaces in my teaching and the spaces in the curriculum that allow issues of identity to emerge and to be thoughtfully considered. As
presented in Figure 5.1, my primary teacher stance is to know my students by responding to them through dialogue and observation, to challenge students by setting the expectation that they will think in new ways and by finding ways for them to have choices in the learning process. These form the corners of the triangle which is then nested in the classroom environment represented by a circle.

The environment is also critical to students' understandings of self. That environment is centered in a literature based curriculum, an emphasis on creating community, and a respect for diversity. These three areas became the touchstones for our meaning making work in reading, writing, discussion, music, art, math and drama.

Shelley Harwayne in her book Lasting Impressions (1992) quoted the author Jean Fritz as saying, "When I discovered libraries, it was like having Christmas every day" (p. 94). I want my students to find spaces in school that are uniquely theirs so that they will continue to lead lives out of school that are reflective and meaningful.
CHAPTER 6

WORKING AT IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION: CASE STUDIES

In this chapter I address my final research question: How do students work at constructing identity? To answer this question, I have chosen to look at the issues and engagements of three students over the year. The case study of each student will be presented as a photo documentary with an introduction preceding each documentary and a discussion of all three students at the end of the chapter.

Some time ago I visited two showings at the University of Arizona Center for Photography. The first show was a series of photos by different photographers. There was a title to the photo essay but no other words were included. I was struck by the stories that were told through photographs. For me there was a connection to the characters in the photos that seemed to go deeply inside of me. I felt, at least in some, that I was present in the experience and knew these people. Later I took my students to the "Talking Pictures" presentation. The gallery was filled with single pictures that were meaningful to well known people. Each picture included an explanation by the person who had contributed the picture. Many of the photos were of an ordinary nature, for example one was of a cow, and the explanation gave me a lens with which to view it. The photograph then was of greater significance to me as I came to understand what it meant to the person who had chosen it. These two experiences came together in my mind.
as a format for the case studies included in this study.

I chose these particular students because they represent the three categories of the identity construction process that I identified as occurring during the year. I call these categories: integrated identity construction, conceptual identity construction, and situational identity construction. These categories organize the discussion following the documentaries.

Each case study starts with an introduction giving background information on the student. The documentary itself begins with a picture of the student and his or her drawing of a self portrait. The first page also has a quote from the student. On the pages that follow are photographs of the student participating in class engagements, photographs of artifacts the student created in studio, segments from literature discussion transcripts, response log entries, identity folder entries and excerpts from the final interview. My method for the selection of the items in the case studies is detailed in Chapter Two on methodology. As I noted there, my criteria for the selection of pieces was to demonstrate a student's identity work over time and through as many kinds of engagements and responses as that student chose to explore. I also wanted to include a sample of the different perspectives that were part of that child's construction process. The work is not presented in chronological order but rather arranged in a way that the reader can make sense and meaning from this
short documentary that is representative of a large body of work.

There is no written interpretation or explanation within the documentary itself because I want the images to indicate the identity construction process in each of these children. The interpretation lies in my careful selection of the images and language of each child. Hammer (1958) contends that every response of an individual in some way bears his stamp. In these documentaries these responses are most often related to the literature through which the students "acquired not so much additional information as additional experience. New understanding is conveyed to them dynamically and personally. Literature provides a 'lived through' not 'knowledge about'" (Rosenblatt, 1938, p. 38). Richard Meyer (1996) says that life is a story we live and one we can "periodically stop and retell and analyze" (p. 58). Through their responses in these documentaries, my students tell their stories.

The telling of stories through these multiple responses is consistent with the definition of speech or language as given by Klepsch and Logie (1982) who say that:

"... in drawings, language is given its broadest meaning for we communicate not only with words but with unconscious gestures, ways of sitting, standing and walking, styles of dancing and handwriting, choreography, creative writing, music and art. Whether willing it or not, the self is in each of these activities. (p.5)"

I focus on the responses of three students and the issues of self they present as they work in the available spaces
It is not my intention to analyze these students and their issues of identity psychologically. Rather, I chose the documentary format so that the reader can see what it is I see as a teacher and the kinds of information that guide me in making curricular choices.

Case Study: Liz

We are what we love.

(Erik Erikson, 1968)

Liz was a fourth grader. She considered herself a mathematician and announced that math was her favorite subject. She told me that she was not especially skilled in mathematical procedures because there had not been much math instruction in her third grade class. This lack of math skills frustrated Liz and she wanted us to have lots of math classes so she could “catch up”. At first, she resisted reading and any work connected to the language and visual arts. Her mother told me during the fall conference that getting Liz to read books or do any writing was a source of frustration for them both.

As Liz continued through the year, her mathematical and analytical approach was evident in her literature reflection and response. She thought about books in a mathematical way and created meaning through responses related to structure, size, line, form and perspective. Studio time and response logs gave her the opportunity to integrate her mathematical
thinking into her language arts meaning making process. She came to look at reading differently.

This case study includes photos of studio artifacts as well as entries in Liz’ sketch log, written response journal and entries in literature logs that were specifically created for a literature group discussion around one book. The piece ends with a portion of her final interview.
If you want to know who I am as a mathematician, you should know that I love math and that it’s my favorite subject. I know all of my subtraction, addition, division and fractions. I need some work on times tables a little bit. I am very good at math.
In this piece of art the blue represents the father; the yellow represents the pigeons and the green represents Palmer. Palmer never tires of the father because he doesn't want to wring the necks of the pigeons so they don't connect.
I made these people real small because in the story they weren't telling real big.

This is a diamondback rattlesnake I made. The diamonds are all different because we were learning how to mix colors.
Where do I go from here? What do I plan on doing next that builds on this experience?

I want to do more with building stuff with things like blocks, tiles, and other stuff. I want to try building things up like buildings and houses. I think that would be fun.

Building Blocks
Understanding

Bramm said he didn't like his dad at first. Then when he started going into the black house and met his dad as a little kid, he then started to understand his father.

Block house
Draw a picture of what happens in your thoughts when you think about this book. What does it remind you of? Write to explain your ideas.

Changes

The little square inside is the beginning of Jimmy's life.

All the different shapes and colors stand for all the changes in his life.

To me changes are important whether you like it or not.

It makes me think of lots of lines.
This is a picture of a girl with a book in her hair.

Liz

Me poem

Liz
Funny Tall has long hair daughter of Jhon and Julie
Who loves Animals Family and Pizza
Who feels happy with my family
Who feels sad when my sister hits me, (Who feels good when I do something right)
Who fears Snakes, Posin Ivy, Roller coasters
Who would like to go to Italy
Who would like to be on TV
Who would like to get a degree in Electronics
Native of Tucson Arizona, Stapleton

I need my spelling and grammar.

It means that everyone needs reading in our life!

If I were a writer I would write in a newspaper because I think it would be fun and neat.
SK: One of the big issues that you talked about when you were in Pinballs, I noticed reading back through some of those transcripts, was the issue of the status that kids have in the world. Do you think kids have high status or low status? What do you think?

Liz: You can have both. It just depends the way you are.

SK: Give me an example of that.

Liz: Like say you, everybody thought you were a nerd and you were real short, you probably wouldn't have real high status. But then again if you were like, if you didn't feel bad about yourself and you were kind of popular, you would probably have high status.

SK: Ok. Is status an issue with you?

Liz: I can be both at times.

SK: Liz, do you have anything to say about being your own self? Is it hard to be your own self?

Liz: No. Not for me it isn't.
Case Study: Bryan

I suggest that the only books that influence us are those for which we are ready, and which have gone a little farther down our particular path than we have yet gone ourselves.

E. M. Forster

I chose the above quote to begin the introduction to Bryan's story because he was particularly ready for the books we read during the year and I believe they greatly influenced him. He strongly identified with the main characters in both *The Man in the Ceiling* (Feiffer, 1993) and *Wringer* (Spinelli, 1997).

Bryan was a fourth grader who considered himself shy. He had close friends whose families interacted socially and he found it difficult to enter into some of the activities they enjoyed. For example, the families climbed up and down the sides of cliffs together, using heavy chains. Bryan's friends found this fun and exciting. One of the fathers informed me that Bryan would walk up to the equipment, start to pick it up, and then walk away. He would force himself to return, only to walk away again. Finally he went through with the task and at the first of the year brought in the chains to show his learning from the summer. One of the issues Bryan looked at was being part of a group. He wondered about getting into groups and getting out of them. He considered how important it was to sacrifice self in order to be accepted.

In another instance involving Bryan's shyness, his
father came in to speak with me. It seems there was a problem with another student in the class who wanted to be Bryan’s “friend”. If Bryan didn’t “play” with him or choose him to work with in groups, the student would call him names and get him in head locks on the playground. Although this student was nearly a year younger than Bryan and much smaller, Bryan was intimidated by him. Bryan’s father was concerned that Bryan would begin to see himself as a victim because of his inability to take control of the situation. Bryan’s friends urged him to tell the young boy and those with him to “get lost” but Bryan was genuinely afraid and was torn between the two sets of “friends.” The issue of being in or out of the “in crowd” and of what defined a leader stayed with Bryan all year.

Another issue that concerned Bryan was that he felt he could not write. I noticed in the fall that during journal writing time Bryan would often just sit and stare down at paper. The paper would have a carefully printed title and a date on it, but nothing else. One night when I had given a short essay as homework, I got a call at home from his mother. Bryan just couldn’t get started and she wondered if I had any suggestions. His documentary contains his resolution of his problems with writing.

Bryan’s documentary illustrates his involvement with the arts and how he began to work in studio and drama with surprising results. His talk in literature discussion and his final interview are also provided.
My name means strong and brave, it is Bryan. I like my name.

Writing
Page 101 (The Man in the Ceiling)
I don't think school is about luck. It is about learning and having a little fun I think.

Who am I at school?
I have a lot of friends because I am nice to them. I fit in at school. I have been here since it started. I am not perfect at school. I am a slow writer. I am improving in math sometimes. I don't pay attention to what's going on. I play the violin. I just started.
SK: In that one scene where you jumped up and said, "Maybe I'm not going to be a cartoonist and maybe I stink at cartooning." That seemed like that just came from inside, you know. How did it feel when you said those words?

Bryan: Well, it was kind of embarrassing but I kind of knew how he felt when I was doing that. Cause I was just shouting.

SK: So you felt the way you're sure Jimmy must have felt.

Bryan: I've done that with things. Like sometimes I didn't want to be, do this one thing, like a sport or something and then I would just, I wouldn't jump up and yell but I would kind of be mad and explain it, how I felt and stuff, like he did.
SK: Do you think “the treatment” they gave kids when they turned ten was a good tradition, do you think?

Bryan: It's good and bad. Cause it makes you feel proud. It makes you feel cool at this age. I went through the treatment and I'm, like a cool kid. But then it's bad because you have to get hurt to do it.

Bryan: It's like Ralph and then all my other friends. And some of Ralph's friends. So, it's the same thing with him. I'm kind of both their friends. But then when all the friends meet, like Ralph and his friends and all my other friends, they kind of fight. And if I'm there at the same time, I can't, I don't know how to explain this.

SK: You're doing a great job. Just keep going.

Bryan: They just start fighting and then they start looking at me. The one group goes, Bryan, tell Ralph you're not his friend. And the other group goes, if you say that to me and then I tell my other group of friends that told me to tell him I'm not his friend, I tell them and if I do he'll start yelling at me and pick on me for as long as I know. And then he's all like, they say I don't care. When I start talking to Ralph about it, he starts getting mad at me. But if I don't and I start being his friend he's like my friend. I can barely explain it.

SK: Yeah. Do you have people within these two groups that you would rather be friends with and some that you would rather not be friends with? Or did you want to be friends with all of them? I mean is it, I guess what I'm asking is, is it your fear of being picked on by Ralph that you try to stay his friend, or is it that you really would like to be Ralph's friend?

Bryan: It's the fear of being picked on by Ralph. Cause I really don't, sometimes I really just don't want to be his friend any more but somehow we just kind of stay friends.

SK: Ok.

Bryan: So it's like at the end of Wringer where he really wanted to be Dorothy's friend and not the guys, that's how I feel with Ralph. I still know him and stuff but then I really want to be with my other friends.
SK: Do you think choice is important?

Bryan: Yeah, I like that.

SK: How come?

Bryan: I like that because we, if we do a choice we can think of things different and we can see what everybody else has, so if we like one idea better we can use that instead of everybody coming out with the same thing.

SK: It helps you to see what other people do.

Bryan: Yeah. It gives me ideas.
Bryan

Final Interview

Bryan: I think, well, even though Lucas does make jokes a lot, it's too bad he does that, because if he didn't, I think he would be a really good successful person.

SK: Because he's smart? Why else?

Bryan: He's like a natural leader.

SK: Do you think you're a leader, Bryan?

Bryan: In some ways, like cause I have a lot of friends. And lots of my friends aren't leaders except for Nick and that's about it. So I'm like kind of above my friends so I would be a leader for them. But if I met someone new, the'd probably be a better leader than me.

SK: Has shyness always been an issue for you?

Bryan: Yeah.

SK: So how do you feel that you got less shy? You have thought about it this year it sounds like.

Bryan: Yeah. Well, it starts at school. I feel more comfortable talking to people cause I know them, and then when I go places I feel comfortable talking, so then I started talking in a lot of places.
SK: Is it hard to just be yourself?

Bryan: It depends on who you are. Like if you are a strong person, a leader, like the gang was and Dorothy, well's that why it is not hard to be their own self, cause everyone just does what they want. So they're like leaders and they just do it. But other people, if you're weaker and you don't really, you're not really a leader, then you follow the leader.

Bryan: I have to connect with what Freddie said. When Palmer is around the gang, he feels kind of like self conscious. He wants to be someone he can't be. Like he wants to be a hot shot wringer but he just can't.

Bryan: It's hard to leave when other people do things. Cause sometimes my friends do this stuff and they think it's really fun and then when I do it, it's really scary. And then so I say it's fun. But then I try and get away but then they keep doing it and so then I kind of give in to them. I don't... but when I try and get away, I don't really want to cause I think it's cool when I'm doing something with them.
Bryan: Well, you would feel, yeah. Even if I were Palmer, I would want to do that too. Cause people would notice me a lot and I'd know a lot of stuff other people don't know.

SK: So if you were Palmer you would want to be with this group of boys then?

Bryan: Yeah.

SK: Would you have mistreated Dorothy?

Bryan: No. I would have, well, yeah, because I would have wanted to be their friend so to be their friend you had to.

Bryan: I think Palmer seemed kind of not really popular at all before so it was so important to be with those guys because then everybody would notice him more and so that's why.

Bryan: I think it's weird about the gang cause people say it's really easy to get in but it's hard to get out. But for him it was hard to get in to.
Bryan: I liked studio time a lot.
SK: How come?
Bryan: We should do that.
SK: Ok.

Bryan: I liked studio time a lot.
SK: How come?
Bryan: We should do that.
SK: Ok.

SK: Ok. Is there a particular kind of writing you like to do more than others?
Bryan: Yeah, I like to do like stories, like personal narratives more than reports and that kind of writing.
SK: How come?
Bryan: Cause I know in personal narratives what I'm going to write because mostly it's happened to me. I like to write nonfiction. I mean real
SK: Real stories. Yeah.
Bryan: About me. And so it's easier cause I know what to write. Cause it's happened.
SK: You were part of the drama program and you acted Jimmy out in the drama program. What was that like? How did that, did that help you identify with Jimmy or help you, how did you feel doing that?

Bryan: Yeah, I felt like I could understand him more.

SK: OK. So how are you different? Can you explain?

Bryan: Well, I'm not as shy any more. I'm still shy but not as shy as I was. And I'm better in work.
Estevan: (reads from trade book) “I’ve got a lot of studying to do after supper,” Alfie said. “Studying” these days means drawing comic strips...

David: Okay - so that defines...

Bryan: His mind.
Case Study: Danny

Midway in life's journey I was made aware
That I had strayed into a dark forest,
And the right path appeared not anywhere.
(Dante, The Inferno)

Danny entered my classroom when he was in the fourth grade, but when a new teacher was hired, he was moved to her class. He would stop by my room for a few minutes every now and then and I would greet him in the hall. He was placed in my room for fifth grade at the recommendation of the principal.

I was told that his mother died from a drug overdose two years previously. He had moved to Tucson to live with his half-brother. This information came from the special education teacher although Danny was not in the special education program. That was all I knew of Danny until his half-brother's wife came in for the fall conference. She said Danny would be returning to his father at the end of the year. She told me Danny's mom was addicted to alcohol and drugs and she had ultimately died from her addiction.

Danny's family was concerned with Danny's slow academic development. They were especially disappointed with his progress in math. They said they had expressly told Danny that two years had passed since his mother's death and he should get beyond it and focus on his school work. He was not allowed to talk about his mother at home.

What was Danny like in the classroom? He spoke very little of his mother's death with the exception of
literature discussions and his final interview. He was a "loner" and spent his lunch hours helping out in the kindergarten instead of going out to the playground. He turned in very little work during the day in spite of prodding. His homework was usually done because of the support of the brother's wife. He hid things in the classroom. I remember one day when I was about to start music class and the tape for the recorder was missing. I looked everywhere and then went on without it. Danny got up to get a drink and happened to find it in the cupboard above the sink. Things like this happened fairly frequently and Danny would admit to having hidden the objects.

Danny found drama intriguing. When the class explored status, he always took on the role in each vignette as the person with the lowest status. Paul Fisher had him reverse roles and attempt the role of the person with the higher status. Students would "adjust" Danny for his role by bringing his chin up and shoulders back. This was not only done for Danny but was the practice in the drama exploration.

In studio he would drift and accomplished very little. The documentary of Danny then, focuses on his sketch log entries, journal responses, talk in literature circles and comments made during his final interview. Because of the sensitive nature of Danny's issues and responses, his name has been changed or eliminated from his artifacts and there are no photos of him as there are of the other students.
I think it is sad that Jennifer has to change her name. I'll be so angry. I won't let all my cries out either because they will call me a big baby.

It made me like a real dad. It makes me feel grown up. I thought I had a family. But now I realize it was acting. Acting helped me understand acting is a serious thing.
SK: Which of the books that we've read this year or that you've read this year to you see relating to your life?

Danny: The book *I Never Knew Your Name*.

SK: Can you explain why?

Danny: Because of the kid dying. And this little kid, the little kid, he always wanted to cheer him up, but he was always scared to cheer him up. And it's like when my mom died. It's like I knew she was going to do that because my grandma did the same thing. Cause when I really think about the kid jumping off there with the ... I think of my mom.

SK: You think of your mom ... 

Danny: Just dying.

SK: Just dying. Do you identify with the little boy at all.

Danny: A lot.

SK: How do you identify with him?

Danny: Like when my mom's sad, I like to cheer her up, but I never did. That would bother her. Cause she'd say, "Leave me alone, I hurt."

SK: Now would this be Fran you want to cheer up or your mother?

Danny: My mother who is dead.
Claire: Well, it's usually because I'm hurt or... Like if you have something in your eye and your eye's trying to get it out.

Danny: My parents say it's ok to cry.

SK: Do they?

Danny: Un hm.

SK: Do you cry sometimes?

Danny: Uh hm. I cry a lot. Like whenever I, every time I pray to my mom, I cry all the time.

SK: You pray to her?

Danny: Uh hm.

Claire: Do you talk to her when you pray?

Danny: Every night.

(Literature discussion: The Summer of the Swans, Byars, 1970)
Soon as my mom came for the Doctor. That day she had to go. The next day I said are you scared mother? She said yes. She went at 11:00 clock she passed away.

If you want to know me as a writer, you should know that I read books and wrote a lot about them. I like to write a lot in my practice notebook. The more I write the better I get in writing. I write a lot of stories and some pages are front and back. The piece I worked on was my friendship essay. I love to write a lot. Every single book I read, I write about it.
Bryan: Well, you would feel, yeah. Even if I were Palmer, I would want to do that too. Cause people would notice me a lot and I'd know a lot of stuff other people don't know.

SK: So if you were Palmer you would want to be with this group of boys then?

Bryan: Yeah.

SK: Would you have mistreated Dorothy?

Bryan: No. I would have, well, yeah, because I would have wanted to be their friend so to be their friend you had to.

Bryan: I think Palmer seemed kind of not really popular at all before so it was so important to be with those guys because then everybody would notice him more and so that's why.

Bryan: I think it's weird about the gang cause people say it's really easy to get in but it's hard to get out. But for him it was hard to get in to.
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Danny: Well, I liked the pictures, the colors. I like everything about books, picture books. I like to learn how to do them cause I want to be an artist in them.

SK: So you'd like to make a picture book.

Danny: Uh hm.

SK: Really? What would you make a picture book about?

Danny: My mom.

SK: Yeah. Wouldn't that be great?

Danny: It would be about a little boy who lost his mom, and he thinks about how he used to have fun and all that stuff.

SK: And you know? If you wrote a picture book, you could make it end any way you want. It wouldn't have to end the way the real life thing did. People take ideas and they turn them into stories and they mix up characters so you could have people who never knew your mother in the story kind of. You know? That's kind of what they do. So you could make one.

Danny: I can put like a kid who's talking to his mother. That's what I'd like to do. And it would be a great ending when I end up with my dad having fun, and we would think about her all the time.

SK: I think it's a great book. I hope you'll write it. I truly hope you'll write it. And you know where to find me, and send me a copy. Ok? Anything else, Ernest?
Discussion

Each of the students documented in this chapter explored an identity theme that extended throughout the school year and through multiple engagements. I was therefore able to see how they worked at their identity construction within the spaces I made available as part of the curriculum and what value, if any, these spaces had for students. Other students worked within similar themes. Shane explored his identity as an artist throughout the year in a way somewhat similar to the way Liz explored math. Many students were considering their own personalities and peer relationships in ways similar to Bryan. One student from a recently divorced family worried about her situation and her mom’s new boyfriend. She was much like Danny.

Although not all students had a consistent theme that extended over time, the issues that were woven throughout their work fell into the three categories of: integrated identity construction, conceptual identity construction, and situational identity construction. How I arrived at these categories was explained in Chapter Two on methodology. I will address each category briefly within the constructs of the documentaries.

Integrated Identity Construction

Liz saw her identity as that of a mathematician. When given the room to expand on that interest, it became integrated into other areas of her life in such a way that those areas became stronger and more meaningful to her. I
could see the way she thought mathematically by observing her responses. When she considered the foster children in *Pinballs* (Byars, 1977) she felt they had a low self image and she drew them smaller than the other figure on the page. Many of her drawings demonstrated unusual perspectives. She drew the wringer’s hands from a close-up perspective giving the action of wringing all the attention. Many of her drawings look like diagrams and maps. She chose the tiles to construct a spiral as a representation of the father and son’s relationship in *Wringer* (Spinelli, 1997).

Up until fourth grade, Liz saw school subjects as separate. She was good in math but she hated reading. Writing was a chore and was defined by language systems such as spelling. By using studio time and her response logs to think about books through an imaginative mathematical lens she found that she loved reading. In one picture she drew a girl with a book in her heart because “everyone needs reading in their life.” She even entertained the idea that were she to become a writer, she would like to write for a newspaper.

In Adlerian theory, scholars talk about a “guiding image” in individuals that is purposeful and consistent and defines the uniqueness of the individual (Powers & Griffith, 1987). Though I am not a scholar of this theory, I do see in some students such as Liz, a characteristic response that seems to interject itself into most aspects of their work. If not allowed to integrate this way of creating meaning for
herself across the curricular areas, the student feels a sense of frustration and discouragement. Liz did not continue to grow in new areas or even in the way of thinking in which she was most comfortable as evidenced by the request in the fall for more math lessons, until this integration occurred.

**Conceptual Identity Construction**

Bryan’s exploration of leaders and followers is an example of the category of identity construction. I could see from many of the research artifacts that some students worked at conceptual understandings because they sought to define the issue itself as well as their role in that issue. Bryan was not only seeking to understand his shyness, but also to explain what really defines leaders and followers. He drew a picture from a book about suicide in which the characters are “thinking.” He commented in a literature discussion that what a book character is studying defines “his mind.” Bryan spent time in his mind. He liked to concentrate on computer skills and on the violin. He recognized that most leaders in school, however, are more “outgoing” and often have a connection to sports. He felt the only time he was a leader was when he was good in sports. In Bryan’s photographs, he was often over to the side, contributing but not taking visible leadership.

Bryan was also able to isolate the difficulty he had in writing. He realized that if he did some kind of art experience first, he could write more easily. He found out
that he liked to write about "real stuff," not fiction. He was able to consider different aspects of the writing process as well as what writing meant to him. In this way the issue was not a problem to be solved but a concept to consider. It is this kind of quest for understanding that I delight to see in my students. It usually means teachable moments are sitting like presents to be opened.

For Bryan, these teachable moments came through his participation in drama. He said he "became" Jimmy for awhile and felt Jimmy's frustration with Charlie Beemer. He felt the sense Jimmy had of being left out and the strength Jimmy had in the end. Bryan was marvelous as this character and surprised all of us with the intensity he put into the role. The literature became a way that he was able to explore, through discussion and drama, concepts that were significant to him.

Situation Identity Construction

I believe that for Danny his mother's death and his feeling about her death became who he was. It was a bubble in which he floated. When given the opportunity to draw or write he always reflected somehow on his mother and on his sadness. He discussed his prayers to her and the sadness he was afraid to reveal. A flower and a cup came to symbolize her for him. In one poignant drawing he brings everything together, his mother, the cup, the flower, the death scene, and himself in tears. There is even the desperate statement that he would do anything to be with his mother again, even
kill himself.

Although I understood his aunt's irritation at Danny's involvement with the death of his mother, time does not always take care of grief and even given time, feelings do not always go away. Perhaps with some, the wall becomes thicker and higher over time until the learning that should be happening in the classroom cannot penetrate it.

Situational identity does not necessarily have to be something that has happened "to" the student. It could be a situation with other students. I have had students who are self-conscious because of their appearance. I can see how this situation begins to define them and they think of little else. Bryan's father was afraid that coming to see himself as a victim was a real possibility for Bryan and would then define him in later life.

I find situational identity to be the most frustrating from a teacher's point of view. For though I might have compassion for the student, often there is little I can do. Sometimes I have only a feeling that it is situational identity that is interfering with learning because I may not see the evidence anywhere. Students from the local shelter often function at lower levels of skill and participation that I instinctively feel are not representative of what they are capable of doing. They usually do not speak of their situation and we simply struggle on together. Often there are counselors and other adults involved and yet we struggle because the identity lies within the child and it
is from within that the focus has to change. I feel that the arts may be a key and I address this in Chapter 7 on Implications.

Summary

In this chapter I analyzed how students work at identity construction by examining three students over time by means of photo documentaries. These three categories of situational identity construction, integrated identity construction and conceptual identity construction are ways to understand the identity development of each student. These students represent other students in the study who worked at identity construction in these areas. The case study students used all the forms of reflection including dialogue, art, drama and written responses to work at meaning making. Students involved in integrated and conceptual identity construction demonstrated more growth across the academic areas than did the situational identity student who appeared to be stuck. There was evidence of "possibility thinking" by students in all three categories.

For Liz, responding to literature gave her a way to think mathematically and she came to value the reading and writing parts of the curriculum as well as the math. Bryan used the literature as a way to come out of himself. Responding through drama was of special significance for him even though he still had not fully resolved the leadership issue at the time of the final interview.

Although Danny, the student in the situational identity
category, did not make significant academic progress, he did find a lifeline in literature and as such it was meaningful to him. This is evidenced by his comments in his final interview of wanting to write a book about his mother. His drawings may have represented a safe place to consider the events in his life but there is no real way for me as a teacher to measure the long term benefits of this experience.

Rosenblatt (1938) urges us not to consider reading as a passive act but rather, when a piece of literature is successful for readers, that success comes from the fact that they bring to the selection all they have experienced and all that they are. The book and the reader come together and there is a new creation that can never be duplicated because it is the unique quality of a single reader. As Danny, Liz, Bryan and the others in my classroom responded to literature, they were all creating their own poem. The diversity of valid responses that these students evidenced and that permitted them to grow as individuals is the excitement of literature and the reason it is the foundation for identity construction in my classroom.
Chapter 7

THE IMPLICATIONS OF IDENTITY EXPLORATION IN THE CLASSROOM

What does education often do? It makes a straight cut ditch of a free, meandering brook.

Henry David Thoreau

It is important for me to understand the unique approach that each of my students has towards learning. I am interested in how they construct their social worlds, how they form their attitudes and relationships with others, and how others influence them. I am specifically interested in the school setting as a place separate and distinct from everyday contexts of learning. I have come to understand that students go about learning in diverse ways and I have subsequently created flexible class structures so that students can make decisions about how to accomplish the work of school. I encourage children to make and share meaning through a variety of ways such as art, music, drama and language. I highlight literature and dialogue in order to create opportunities for children to talk openly and critically with peers about many issues.

In this teacher research study, I looked at these various elements which form my classroom learning environment and carefully examined how responding to literature serves to capture children’s thinking as they construct an identity by forming personal and social perspectives. I wanted to understand what it is students are thinking about during their construction of identity. I
wanted to know in what way my classroom instruction could be supportive, could build on their thinking and honor them as individuals. After several years of exploring a literature based curriculum in my classroom, I noted that children made powerful connections to literature. I felt that looking at these connections and responses could give me a window into their minds as they worked to construct their identities. With a greater understanding of my students as well as the ways curriculum can support identity construction, perhaps school could be more meaningful and make a greater difference in my students' lives and in the choices they make.

The following questions guided this teacher research study in my intermediate multiage classroom:

1. What are the issues that are significant to ten and eleven-year-old students as related to the construction of their own identity?
2. How does the classroom learning environment provide spaces for students to explore or construct their own identities?
3. How do kids work at constructing an identity within a school context?

The areas of professional literature that inform this qualitative study are the formation of social and cultural identity, the theory of reader response and transaction, and the role of literature discussion and reflection in identity formation.
I examined student responses to read alouds of various picture books throughout the year as well as the chapter books *The Man in the Ceiling* (Feiffer, 1993) and *Wringer* by Jerry Spinelli (1997). I used sets of books by Betsy Byars for literature discussion groups with four or five students reading the same book. The responses to these books took the form of literature discussion, written responses, and responses in studio that included art, drama, music and mathematical representations.

The primary sources of data collected were student artifacts such as written pieces and the sketches in their identity folders and response logs, as well as projects completed during studio time. I also kept field notes and a teaching journal. I audio taped literature discussions and had those discussions transcribed. I video taped a small portion of the drama experience. I interviewed students and had those interviews transcribed. I took photographs of artifacts and students involved in the process of webbing, literature discussion, drama and studio response.

The first half of the year from August to December was the exploratory phase of the study. During this time I worked toward creating a sense of community as well as establishing the curricular framework. This period of time included the reading of *The Man in the Ceiling* and work in the identity folders. January to April was the period of intense data collection. The primary data collected during this time were responses to literature with both picture
book read-aloud discussions and small group discussions of Betsy Byars' chapter books. *The Man in the Ceiling* was read for a second time and I read *Wringer* aloud to the class. We worked in studio and I documented drama as a tool for response and as a way for students to reflect on personal issues. I took photographs throughout the entire year. I closed out the year with student interviews.

I did some preliminary data analysis during the 1997-98 school year to determine the students who might be considered for individual profiles. I worked on data analysis throughout the summer and into the fall and I wrote the dissertation during the 1998-99 school year. I was supported in the data analysis by my teaching colleagues: Judi Busche, Leslie Kahn and my principal, Rosanna Gallagher. I also worked closely with a doctoral student who was doing research in my classroom, Cheri Anderson, and my dissertation director, Kathy Short.

Research Findings

The data analysis was a tiered process. The analysis of the issues of identity construction that I addressed in question one, helped in arriving at an understanding of the curricular spaces I addressed in question two. The analysis of issues and spaces then enabled me to form categories of individual identity construction which I revealed in the three case studies that became the analysis of question three. In this section I review the findings for each question.
Issues of Identity Construction

These findings relate to my research question: What issues are significant to ten and eleven-year-old students when constructing their own identity? The data sources used to answer this question were transcripts from literature discussions, response journals, written pieces from the identity folders and final interviews. I found four categories of identity exploration as determined by the grouping of issues. These categories are: constructing an image of self, constructing relationship, constructing a sense of place, and constructing viewpoint. To summarize these findings I define each of these concepts and give an overview of the issues the students considered relative to the major concept.

Constructing an Image of Self

In school, students at this age may begin to consider how their school work compares with that of other students. They begin to notice that we do not learn all the same things in the same way nor do we have the same skills. With this may come praise as well as criticism from others. A blurred image of self begins to form as they think about their significant issues. I found that the issues under consideration can be grouped into the following categories:

1. Thinking about Thinking: a recognition of student’s own thought processes.

2. Meeting in the Middle: the discovery of the gray areas as opposed to either–or situations which
make their decision-making more difficult.

3. Just be Yourself: the wondering of what "being yourself" is going to mean for each of them.

4. The Need to be Noticed: wanting to feel that they are important, or at least constitute a presence in someone's life.

5. Ridicule Leaves a Lasting Impression: the negative impact of being made fun of or embarrassed.

6. Personal Integration: putting together pieces of the puzzle to create self. What do we keep? What do we let go? Who do we please? When do we please?

Whether students reach their adulthood in a whole and healthy way is determined by how they view themselves and that self-image may be determined, at least in part, by classroom experiences.

Constructing Relationship

Relationship was central to my students and they were highly analytical in their talk about social circles, especially with regard to who has power and who does not. The following sub-categories of relationship deal primarily with the issues of trust and status:

1. Lying Breaks Down Trust in a Relationship: students considered the damaging aspects of lies.

2. Everyone Gets Picked On and Put Down: Students talked about the cycle of status in put-downs. Kids may make fun of others to make up for the
pain that had been inflicted on them. It's the thing to do.

3. Competing for Friends Makes Everyone Crazy: The issues of making connections and choosing friends also has to do with trust and status. When students talked about issues of relationship, they often found it difficult to articulate the issues and became easily confused.

Constructing a Sense of Place

As students worked at constructing a sense of place in the world, they considered aspects of culture. For some, their ethnicity was clearly defined. Others were not yet certain what ethnicity means to them. They tended to discuss this issue in terms of how others treated them. Most seemed accepting and even proud of their religion. They felt their kid culture was not generally respected by adults. They were developing gender definitions and were aware of stereotyping.

Other sense of place issues included children's place in the family as related to parents and siblings. Much of their thinking also related to their place or significance in the classroom as related to popularity and leaders and followers.

Constructing Viewpoint

In responding to literature, students engaged in critical thinking. Although frequently beginning with personal stories, students would respond to each other's
comments and consider other perspectives. The focus of much of the talk about viewpoint centered on the issues of personal involvement and personal knowledge, and how they can alter viewpoint.

Supporting Identity Construction in the Classroom

The findings in this section support the research question: How does the classroom learning environment provide spaces for students to explore and construct their own identity? The findings are concerned with how learning engagements and my role in the classroom support identity construction. The data analyzed were the student interviews, transcripts of literature discussions in which I participated, the curricular plan as evidenced in my plan book, my teaching journals, and interviews of colleagues who observed my teaching methods.

As shown in Figure 5.1, three areas guided my teaching: knowing my students, challenging my students by setting the expectation that they would think in new ways, and offering choice, that is, finding ways for students to self select how they will explore their intellectual and emotional growth process. These three approaches were successful when embedded in an environment that offered a literature based curriculum with an emphasis on literature response, worked at building community, and demonstrated a respect for diversity.

Knowing the Child

Knowing the child was achieved through the use of two
strategies, responding to dialogue and responding to observation. I found that one way I consistently "paid attention to kids" was by listening and then asking questions for clarification or making simple comments that encouraged response. These were simple statements but when done over time offered significant knowledge for me and for the students themselves and therefore created space for identity construction. I also observed students closely and found ways to respond appropriately either by taking personal action or by considering the observation in curricular planning. Thus, my behaviors and lessons plans moved in a path that related closely to the behaviors and thinking of my students.

Challenging the Child to Think in New Ways

I documented times during this research when I did not stop at open ended questions or adjustments in the curriculum but directly challenged students’ thinking. I used probing questions and sometimes it meant bumping up against the students’ preconceived notions of self. I set up structures for reflection and dialogue. The curriculum that evolved over the year was rich in possibilities and opportunities. I saw ways to urge students to use their intellect and reasoning abilities and to consider multiple perspectives of an issue. I encouraged them to consider the person within and how that person might be altered or influenced as well.
Offering Choice

My analysis indicated that I frequently allowed students to self select. I offered choice in the books and other reading materials that were used in the curriculum. The students regularly participated in studio which was designed to offer a choice in response across the sign systems - drama, mathematics, art, music and language. I found that drama was the significant tool of response in issues of identity construction during the research year. I was somewhat surprised to find that I offered choice in curriculum development. I believed that I was uncomfortable moving in a student directed way to any large degree. I found, however, that I used several strategies for offering choice. At times the class moved from the curriculum I had constructed into inquiry groups based on student ideas or discussions during my preplanned engagements. I documented that on several occasions I moved into an area of study that I had not even considered until a student or group of students presented the idea. I often made decisions jointly with the students. For example, I often asked them how they would like to schedule the day and how much time they needed for various tasks. Though seemingly unimportant at the time, when I reflected on the frequency of these negotiable moments and the students responses to these opportunities, I saw it to be significant to my students' identity development as learners.
The Environment

Cutting across all the areas of knowing the child, challenging the child, and offering choices were the concepts of dialogue and reflection. I looked at the spaces in my environment that allowed for powerful dialogue and reflection and that stayed the same for me from year to year regardless of changes in specific learning engagements. I found these spaces to be a literature-based classroom, a collaborative community of learners, and respect for diversity.

A Literature Based Classroom

My classroom emphasis on books and other reading material encouraged students to engage with literature in three critical ways: read alouds, literature discussion groups, and literature as a resource. The read alouds were supportive of larger group discussion and responses in studio and in group drama engagements. Read alouds and literature discussion groups encouraged students to revisit the text for understanding. Literature discussions groups also played a crucial role in helping students develop multiple perspectives and allowed me to see their issues. These engagements enabled students to come together to create a sense of story and to share insights or to think about a book in a way that was not dependent on the way I thought about the book. Literature as a resource stretched students understandings and connected literature to language study. Students used literature to pursue their own
Creating Community

There are many examples of community building that came out of the data analysis. There is evidence of classroom rituals and social contexts for learning. There are frequent frameworks for personal sharing. Students also demonstrated evidence of sharing responsibility intellectually and in the running of the classroom.

Valuing Diversity

The literature used represented diversity throughout the curriculum. Occasions of sharing and brainstorming were evidence of respect for diversity. Many learning engagements offered choice and were open-ended. There were times of direct discussion of student differences such as ethnicity and religious traditions. There was an emphasis on the arts in the curriculum which created space for diversity of expression and identity formation.

Working at Identity Construction

These findings relate to the research question: How do students work at constructing identity? To answer this question, I looked at the issues and engagements of three students over the year. These students were presented through individual photo documentaries which included an introduction and summary statement. The students were identified as representatives of the three categories of the identity construction process. These categories of identity construction are integrated identity construction,
conceptual identity construction and situational identity construction.

**Integrated Identity Construction**

Integrated identity formation refers to a student who has a strong approach to life or a specific area of interest. When given the room to expand on that interest or approach, it becomes integrated into his or her life in such a way that those areas become stronger and more meaningful. Liz was an example of integrated identity formation. She took a mathematical approach to life and wanted to do more math and less reading. When given the freedom to respond in ways that made sense to her, she often responded in mathematical ways or found mathematical meanings in the context. This resulted in a renewed interest in language arts and the fine arts. Another student saw himself as an artist and when given ways to create meaning through art, demonstrated a more positive approach to life.

**Conceptual Identity Construction**

Many of the students worked at conceptual identity construction. They considered issues in relative isolation, attempting to define the issue itself as well as understand their role in that issue. Bryan represented this kind of identity construction. Bryan considered himself shy and was seeking to understand not only what it would mean to be shy but what really defined leaders and followers. The literature was significant to these students in that it gave them room to reflect and to share perspectives on these
issues with their peers and with me. The issues could be discussed impersonally at first through characters and situations in the book and then gradually, if the issue was truly significant as it was with Bryan, it would emerge in other discussions or in written responses or interviews. Many of the issues emerging as a result of the analysis to answer the first research question show students working on conceptual identity construction.

Situational Identity Construction

Situational identity construction was represented by Danny. This kind of identity construction occurs when a situation comes to define a student in that he or she is able to think or deal with little else. For Danny the situation was the death of his mother and his subsequent displacement. For others in the class it was a parent’s divorce or being identified as a student who is learning disabled.

The Implications of The Study

Knowledge which is acquired under compulsion obtains no hold on the mind.

Plato

As I was considering the implications of this study, I happened to be in conversation with a woman in her twenties who is a senior at the University of Arizona. She was the valedictorian at a large Tucson high school. She talked about the pressure she felt during her years in school to achieve and how she came to see achievement as figuring out what the teacher wanted. She said it was all about
completing assignments and getting A's, and that she never had the urge to expand or build on her learning. Generally she was getting one assignment done so she could go on to the next one. She felt there was no real choice in school because the choices were really a selection of assignments originated by the teacher. Determining which assignment to do was based on superficial things like the kinds of materials needed. She felt most of her teachers considered her to be a good writer so she usually went for written assignments, choosing journals or papers. She could guarantee a good grade that way. Yet she does not enjoy writing and has never written for her own purposes. Towards the end of the conversation she became more thoughtful. "I feel I got a good education and I am doing well in college, but I think I became inflexible. I keep trying to approach life like I approached school. Now I am a parent and I keep thinking there is a way to do it right. I don't trust myself and I don't feel like I can reason things out. I am just developing that now because I have to. I feel bad a lot and I don't feel successful in any place but school. Now in college I am doing the same thing. Some classes are more enjoyable than others, but I just keep trying to figure out how to get the good grade."

I realize that this young woman may not necessarily represent all kids in all schools. I do feel, however, that we have developed a definition of school that force some students into certain behaviors in order to be successful at
the sacrifice of their creative intellect. There are important aspects of individuals that may be overlooked. Eisner (1994) concludes, "... a culture or a school program that dulls the senses by neglect or disrespect [of the individual] thwarts the development of human aptitude and undermines the possibilities of the human mind" (p. 29).

Although the findings in this study are in many ways the implications as well, I want to revisit some of the central ideas. These will be organized into two sections, implications of identity construction for the classroom teacher and implications of identity construction for the curriculum. Following these two sections, a third section addresses the implications of identity construction for children. In this third section I share the passion I acquired as I worked through this study. I consider the questions: Why should we care if kids work at identity construction? What difference does it make in children's lives? The chapter closes with a reflection on teacher research and the new questions that are percolating in my mind.

Implications for Classroom Teachers

Classroom teachers need to see education as meaning making and should support students in their individual forms of creating meaning as well as challenge them to consider new perspectives. This implies that teachers come to know their students in ways that go beyond skills assessment. Dewey (1938) states that education must begin with insights
into the child's capacities, interests and habits. My study demonstrates that this is done in small ways throughout the day when teachers are interested in understanding what is important to students. The purpose in this kind of knowing is to cultivate students' thinking, encourage a growth of knowledge, and stimulate different kinds of responses in children.

For example, a teacher who "knows" a student will choose a book that may "grab" the student's interest so that he or she will read the book and improve reading fluency. In my study I chose books by Betsy Byars because I thought the stories would interest the students and also give them big ideas to think about. Central to this concept is that the students really are deeply considering issues of importance to them and this kind of thinking should be explored in the classroom. By finding ways in the daily life of school to address students' issues, teachers honor and support the culture of childhood without necessarily listening to rock music on their lunch hours or knowing the current popular brand of athletic shoe.

Teachers need to encourage students towards a knowledge of self. Many years ago there was a movement to build self esteem in children through classroom instruction. Although begun with good insights and intentions, what followed were commercial programs and activities that resulted in a cheerleading of self with the theme "I am special." Indeed, all students are special, yet to most teachers and students
alike these kinds of lessons are superficial. What truly is it that makes each child unique? To write about who I am as a reader can work to support students on a number of levels and takes no more time than the writing of the over-used book report.

Teachers should consider Dewey's (1938) concept of reflection in order to challenge students in coming to know themselves. Engagements such as literature discussion are effective for reflection that helps students challenge their current thinking. All kinds of sharing experiences help students see the thinking and perspectives of those around them and this contributes to their own meaning making and risk taking. I know when I feel pushed for time, it is my time for sharing and reflecting that is eliminated. We can get caught up in finishing this project or unit so that we can move on to the next one. But it is crucial to take the time to ask questions such as: What do we know so far? How does this connect with other things we've learned? What kind of learning do you think was taking place in this experience? Did we learn anything not directly connected with the specific engagement? In this way students can be challenged beyond the experience itself to think in new ways.

When students share, one student may use another student's idea the next time around. I saw this happen in our studio times. Using other students' ideas as demonstrations means a stretch in the intellect. For one
child it is filling a void, for another it is representing a risk, but it isn’t copying. Teachers make it safe for students to challenge themselves by looking at the work of others for examples.

Finally, teachers need to find as many ways as possible to offer choice within the expectations of the educational process. When given choice, the students in my study chose to work in areas that most closely related to ideas they were currently exploring. Teachers sometimes believe that all students must study all things in the same way and at the same time. Yet if as adults we look closely at personal experiences, we will see times in life when learning took place because we were motivated to pursue an idea. I recognize that teachers have curricular restraints, but within that framework students should have many choices about how to go about considering curricular material. Whatever various students or groups are exploring, it is always shared and becomes the joint knowledge of the group. This is a very interesting phenomenon to me and demonstrates the peripheral learning that is going on constantly in the classroom.

Children can project a false self or a false intellect in order to please a teacher, a parent, or a group of friends. I saw Bryan do this with mountain climbing. He was trying valiantly not only to do accomplish the task but to pretend he was having a wonderful time. The classroom climate should be a place of acceptance for the self with
the challenge to grow. There is room for the educational process and the work at identity construction to mesh in the classroom but it is dependent on teachers who see it as important and want it to happen.

**Implications for the Curriculum**

A curricular implication from this study is the power of literature to reach into the minds of children and draw out their thinking. Readers think about past experiences in life to make meaning from text and this gives other students with an opportunity to expand their own learning. It provides students a chance to consider how that person's experiences differed from their own and how those experiences have affected that person's thinking. Hollindale (1997) suggests that children have a need to construct their childhoods of the mind through their encounters with the imagination of literature. Literature brings together the real with the imagined and new perspectives are envisioned.

It is important to remember that in literature discussion groups, there was not a predetermined meaning that the students were expected to glean from the books. Rather, the reading was viewed as a life experience for which a variety of interpretations could exist. In the dialogue that follows or is part of the reading experience, students become critical thinkers. Being a part of literature discussion allows students more opportunities for interpretation and self-reflection than simply reading.
Literature also encourages response in ways other than discussion. This study demonstrates that the way in which students choose to respond to a book should allow for many forms of representation in order to strengthen identity construction. The studio time concept worked well to enable students to choose the tool with which to think about the meaning a book had for them. Some used art materials, some used drama or music, and some used written forms of language or materials traditionally used for mathematics. Eisner (1994) stresses that education should not only help students create meaning through these various forms but students should be given the opportunity to "read" the unique meanings that different forms of representation make possible. I think when students are responding to literature, their created pieces make sense to each other and they begin to develop the kind of understandings that Eisner emphasizes.

Allowing students to work across sign systems also allows them to have experiences within their aptitudes or interests. This allows them to work at identity construction and allows teachers to honor diversity and work toward equity. For example, a student may be able to perform an idea from a book that assures the teacher of understanding and meaning making from that book, whereas he or she may not be able to demonstrate such understanding in writing. Although the student and teacher should work at improving the student's written language, there should be a
way within the curriculum for that student to share meaning and subsequent intellectual growth.

As I considered the responses of students in this study, I could see their fragments of understandings. They had little to connect these fragments which were nearly always built on personal experience. It is truly exciting for me to see students gain confidence as they begin to explore ideas as Bryan did with his questions related to leaders and followers and come to a larger picture of the issues he was exploring. This kind of exploration occurred through dialogue and reflection in multiple ways in class and during studio time. I was amazed at the pieces the students created and the meanings that were represented.

Studio time meant for me a giving up of the control of outcomes. I saw understandings, abilities and thinking in children that I had no idea were there and there was a richness in the diversity of responses that was amazing and humbling. Students took pride in the creations that represented their meaning making process. Since the projects were diverse I saw the removal of fear that they were being graded by comparison or judged against a presumed "right way."

It was Liz and her mathematical responses that supported Eisner's notion that students learn in a way that strengthens the ways in which they use those skills later in life. His thinking about schools accommodating diversity was supported by the findings of my study. I saw students
build connections across curriculum. I saw how thinking visually helped Claire in math and Bryan in writing. I saw how Ralph improved in all areas when given the chance to see himself as an artist and not only as a student labeled learning disabled. Eisner (1994) suggests that concept formation is biologically rooted in the sensory systems that human possess. It makes sense to me therefore that the sensory systems be used in learning not in artificial ways but as a meaning making tool for students. Supporting such learning allows them to engage authentically in problem solving in order to explore issues of identity construction.

I am convinced that what Eisner calls a separation of the mind from the body results in a narrow intellect. Along with him, I believe that one role of education is to support kids in deepening the meanings they can secure in their lives, and in order to do that teachers must respect and support the aptitudes that are inherent in their identity configurations. Such a focus in education enriches the culture of the classroom and cultures at large as well.

As Elliot W. Eisner (1994) states:

In the context of education, the creation of conditions that lead to self-realization is, I believe, a primary aim . . . . . . .

Education is not a horse race. Speed is not the ultimate virtue. What people can become through an educationally caring community is.

The provision of opportunities for youngsters, indeed the invitation to use means that draw upon their strengths, is a practice that can be fostered and its consequences appraised. It seems to me that such a practice has much to commend it, despite the complexities it is likely
The curriculum should encourage community building. This study demonstrates that students have issues that can interfere with the learning process. Not all of these issues are revealed in the classroom and not all can be directly addressed. But in my experience, a strong learning community softens these issues and carves a gentle path for students to safely walk. This means deliberately putting in place traditions that are consistently followed like the lighting of the story candle or the honoring of students' birthdays. Yet there is also the deeper community that is built through trust and negotiation. This is not equivalent to "giving up control" of the classroom, but is one way of making students partners in the instructional process to accomplish the work of learning and encourages students to see themselves as learners and not as only receivers of information. The curriculum then is at the center of the community building process.

Teachers must remind themselves of the importance of community in the classroom and school, especially as we decide to explore multiage classes and students with multiple emotional and physical disabilities. I have a colleague whom I deeply respect. We encourage and support one another. She has a difficult class with low skills and behavior problems. She shared one day that she no longer did read alouds. There just wasn’t time between trying to raise their “skill levels” and also manage their behavior.
We discussed how building a story through a read aloud draws students together. We discussed a possible choice for a read aloud that would be meaningful to her students. We agreed that teachers sometimes allow time to "run out" before getting to the very things that might be the most productive in reaching the class. Teachers must constantly assess student learning and the direction the curriculum is taking.

The ideas I have suggested require thoughtful planning to implement. To use literature effectively, teachers must know something about literature and resources related to literature. Students need to be introduced to the concept of discussion by using various engagements. Using studio time effectively means that students need experiences in multimedia. Building community is a daily effort. I think we should subscribe the adage "less is more" is something teachers should subscribe to. One or two powerful literature studies a year is meaningful to students. It is not necessary to have a new set of books every six weeks. Studio time can occur once or twice a month instead of every Friday. Maybe spending that hour in sharing and reflecting is more important today than using our computer lab time. Teachers need to avoid teaching a straight ditch instead of a meandering brook.

Implications for Kids:

Is Working at Identity Construction Important?

There are those who would say that "getting kids to
know the states and capitols and multiplication tables is what school and teaching is about." They would say it is not about children constructing identities nor the teacher’s role in supporting that construction. To be truthful, I have heard such statements said directly to me lately. There are some who say there are very few kids who conform anymore and kids are so full of their own identities that the classrooms have become just short of a three ring circus. I do understand that teachers are tired of being amateur psychologists and counselors. Why should they work on "issues of identity" when they are already tired from the burden of making the newest top-down innovation work and from the emphasis on standardized test scores that is sweeping the schools? As expressed in Chapter Three, I am not immune to these pressures. So why is it I think that teachers have to consider issues of identity construction in school? What difference does it make in the lives of children?

I believe it is important because true education has to grab the mind and heart and dare I say, the soul. If it does, then knowledge is increased, personalities and intellects are strengthened, lives change. In my county in Arizona, the DARE (Drug Awareness and Resistance Education) program has been dropped for financial reasons. They say there is no evidence of a difference in the drug involvement of students who have experienced DARE and students who have not. They say the money should go into more personalized
programs such as "Big Brothers and Big Sisters." A colleague says she understands that. The "no smoking" curriculum was in effect when she first started teaching and she thought it was the greatest thing ever. With such an education no kids would ever start smoking. Yet, middle school and early high school is still the highest entry level for cigarette smoking. Why are kids still smoking, taking drugs, joining gangs, and committing suicide in spite of these special programs? It has to do with personal decision making, and our decisions come from our perspectives of the world and of our selves.

I think my journey towards a study of identity construction in school really began several years ago when I read the work of Paulo Freire (1995). Although I have always cared deeply about children, it was this book that pushed me to consider the human aspects of my classroom. I was reminded of Freire when I heard the young woman speak to whom I referred at the beginning of this chapter. A "fear of freedom" had developed in her. She had come to trust the rules and the criteria for success but not herself. She mirrored the interests and personalities of her teachers; she did not build on strengths within herself, although her teachers recognized those strengths. She would no doubt be the first to say she had good teachers. The notion of domination was pivotal for me. How important is control to a teacher? It can be a daily mantra - control the students, control the curriculum, control the time. I could decide
when students can sharpen a pencil, when they can go to the bathroom, when they can read a book and which book that will be. Freire states that the oppressed nearly always express fatalistic attitudes towards their situation. How many times have I heard adult students say, "I have to jump through the hoops . . ." to achieve? As the young woman recognized, Freire notes that the oppressed distrust themselves. The disturbing part of all is that this is what is happening to the best students, those who work the hardest to succeed along with many others. Freire (1995) suggests dialogue based in action and reflection as the answer, but he stresses that it is necessary to "trust in the oppressed and in their ability to reason. Whoever lacks this trust will fail to initiate (or will abandon) dialogue, reflection and communication" (p. 48). He explains the "banking" concept of education in which students are expected to store deposits of information, yet at the same time they are filing away their own identities through the lack of creativity. Can anyone be "truly human" in this setting? In reading the work of Shirley Brice Heath (1983) I was again struck with how inflexible classrooms can be and how individual cultural and social identities can be trampled on.

This is heavy stuff, as the kids say, but this is serious stuff. A student in my class during the period of this study was depressed and considered suicide the previous year. A friend of one of my students committed suicide
during the research year. He was in the middle school band and was an A student. Could it be that the banking aspect of school has robbed students of a critical consciousness? Perhaps they are unable to see themselves as transformers of the world and have a passive role imposed on them that encourages them to simply adapt. Some adapt well, and some choose to exit the system in one way or another. This may have more to do with the lack of social and educational progress than whether or not a school has prevention programs like our DARE program.

To those who question building self image in school, I say that many of the students who currently cause problems in classrooms are not doing so out of an insistence on voicing a personal identity. Indeed, they may be without a meaningful self concept of any kind. They may be caught in a situational identity that should not define them and yet so often does, and continues to define them into adulthood.

The better thing to do, it would seem, is to give students the right to develop their own purposes for learning and not require them to mirror those of the teacher. To establish frameworks for students to explore multiple perspectives and establish viewpoint makes more sense to me in creating lifelong learners than thinking for students or imposing my thinking on them. Freire refers to these frameworks as a "problem-posing" education in which students and teachers engage in dialogue and become jointly responsible for a process in which all grow.
This is consistent with Rosenblatt’s (1938) transactional theory in literature in which students reflect on their background awareness in light of new understandings generated by transaction with literature or what Freire calls a “learning situation.” In these transactions and learning situations, students’ learning becomes truly authentic.

Students are involved in the process of becoming as “unfinished, uncompleted beings in and with a likewise unfinished reality” (Freire, p. 65). This can, it seems to me, give hope to all the various students in our classrooms, if we can give them the gift of a sense of power through their incompleteness. They can see that the past and the present is a way to “understand more clearly what and who they are so that they can more wisely build the future” (p. 65). Students start from where they are at, so to speak, and no one is ahead or behind but simply on the road. It means to shake up the conforming and find direction in the lost. If, as we go about the business of school, we can inspire students to be conscious human beings who know how to work at decision making and understanding themselves, then perhaps they will overcome situations which limit them. Perhaps they will transform themselves rather than succumbing when they are in situations which seem to have no criteria and no rules to follow. Sadly, students are in these situations at younger and younger ages.

It is crucial that teachers recognize that when we are
givers of information, work on process or discuss issues, we are working with minds. I believe more than ever before, children's minds are searching for what is meaningful. What will satisfy that quest is unique to each child and is made up of the social, the intellectual and the emotional. When "school" supports this search for personal meaning, then focus and energy is brought to a task and students take from moments spent on that task a sense of personal satisfaction.

The work on brain based learning by Caine & Caine (1991) talks about engaging a student's dream. For the age students I teach, the "dream" may be as yet unconscious, but I believe the dream is there. The findings of this study may indicate curricular keys to unlocking dreams, but it is not just one key, just as changing student's perceptions cannot be done with one district or state initiated program. Rather, our mind makes infinite adjustments when a mental shift occurs that involves both the learning that is taking place and the emotions.

Caine & Caine (1991) argue that change is not a matter of reprogramming the brain, but rather change comes about by using It's full capacity. Relating to identity formation, they state, "A person has an infinite capacity to differentiate between what enhances the self and what does not. The human brain moderates its own programming and has access to the enormous capacity of the emotions in that venture" (p. 137). I believe that by offering meaningful learning experiences and transactions within the entire
classroom context, we support students in a reorganization of their brain in a positive way that has consequences for their developing self identity and the way they perceive others.

Reflections on Teacher Research

I believe that we learn from experience. In my classroom I set up "learning engagements" that will become experiences for learning. A book is an experience. Creating a piece of art is an experience. Similarly, teacher research is an experience. It is the way I experience the theory I have been reading about. So many books, articles and lectures climb into my thinking when I look closely at my classroom practice in a systematic, intentional inquiry. It is the way I experience my students and curriculum and change who I am in the classroom.

Teacher research fine tunes what I do. I see subtle differences in definitions and the subtleties in teaching. I become more articulate and confident in why I do what I do, or what I am working to change. It has made me more flexible in a way that strengthens my work. I am more comfortable (but not always completely comfortable) with discussion about my methods and critical feedback. I think I see trends in my classroom and in the profession more quickly because I have done classroom research.

Teacher research gives me peace. I feel comfortable letting certain things fall away. I don’t fritter around the school trying to keep up with this or that person.
Although I am rarely able to study the same topic twice, I repeat what has become basic for me, the literature, the reflective responses, the negotiation, the deeper purposes. All of the factors that this study suggests are important to students are also important for my growth and development. I need to search out and explore and reflect on what interests me and this works to change my thinking about instruction and about myself.

Teacher research changes time spent with colleagues. Planning sessions look and feel different. Discussion of students and curriculum feels bigger and has more depth. Ideas and understandings are generated by taking a closer look at classroom practice. We encourage one another to see in new ways so that the probing notion of research is carried within us even without the structure of a formal study.

Although teacher research is hard work and can be fatiguing, in reality it guards against teacher burn-out. There is an energy and enthusiasm that comes from this kind of focus that is a challenge to the intellect and that leads us to challenge the profession. What a difference it makes in our lives and in our schools when we are willing to risk becoming learners ourselves.

Teacher research leads to more learning, wonderings and wishful thinking. I wish in the light of this study on identity construction that class size were smaller. Wouldn't students learn more efficiently if there were fewer
of them? I wish there were specialists to support students in art, music, drama, and dance. I am only one. I wish I had time to talk with kids more. Even lunches are spent in meetings or running to the copy machine or signing out the VCR. I wish we didn't have to give grades. It feels threatening. The more I think about it the less sense it makes and the more harmful it seems. And four times a year? I wish students didn't have to have mothers who took harmful drugs in pregnancy or parents involved in substance abuse. I wish students didn't have to live in shelters. I wish children were not disabled. And on and on the list could go.

What does teacher research really do for me? It puts me on the side of the kids.

Conclusion

This study looked at the way children construct identity within the school setting. The purpose of the study was to look at my classroom practices especially related to the use of literature and how I did or did not support student's exploration of personal and social issues. I wanted to deeply consider individual identity and how that relates to a student's learning within the social context of the classroom.

This study has, however, taken my thinking closer to understanding the larger issue of what constitutes a democratic classroom. I have further questions about equity and about student empowerment. I still do not feel
satisfied that I have found the best way to support students
to make sense of themselves as individuals, their school
life, and their world. They and I will continue researching
and learning together. I close this study of identity
construction with a poem I found in my mailbox one day:

**AVERAGE**

I don't cause teachers trouble
My grades have been OK
I listen in my classes
And I'm in school every day

My teachers say I'm average
My parents think so too
I wish I did not know that
Cause there's a lot I'd like to do

I'd like to build a rocket
I've a book that tells you how
And start a stamp collection
Well, no use in trying now

Cause since I found I'm average
I'm just smart enough to see
It means there's nothing special
That I should expect of me

Nobody ever sees me
Because I'm in between
Those two standard deviations
On each side of the mean

I'm part of the majority
That "hump" part of the bell
Who spends his life unnoticed
In an "average" kind of hell

(author unknown)
January 7, 1997

Parent Permission Form

Dear Parents and Family Members,

This spring I will be conducting a study in my classroom to describe children's responses to literature through art, drama, literature discussion and response logs. Your child will be participating in activities related to children's literature as the routine part of the reading and American History curriculum. The drama work will be done with Paul Fisher and we will be dramatizing parts of a children's book. The art experiences will be connected to books and the activities will sometimes be directed by Cheri Anderson who is in the District Department of Visual Literacy. This study does not involve special testing or removal from the classroom.

I am writing to you to ask for your permission to tape record literature discussions, collect writing samples, and take photographs of the classroom activities. These items will be used by me to better understand your child's learning and may also later be used in presentations to other teachers and to write an article for teachers.

The project has been tentatively approved by the Tucson Unified School District and has been previewed by Rosanna Gallagher. The results of the study will be kept confidential and reports of the study will not include the names of the children.

If you have any questions about this project, please feel free to call me here at Robins.

Sincerely,

_____________________________________

I give my consent:

1. For my child to be audio and video taped in small group discussions or drama.

2. For photocopies to be made of writing and webs my child makes related to the study focus.

3. For photographs to be taken of my child's participating in activities related to the study.

4. For photographs to be taken of my child's art work.

I understand that my child's actual name will not be identified in future presentations or publications that may result from this study.

Signed ___________________________________________

Child's Name ______________________________________ Date ______________________________
REFERENCES


CHILDREN’S REFERENCES


