READING AND RESPONDING TO Multicultural Children’s Literature with Preservice Teachers: A Qualitative Study of Pedagogy and Student Perspectives

Dissertation

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* * * *

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ABSTRACT

While many scholars have considered how young people read and respond to multicultural children’s literature, few studies have contributed to our knowledge about how adult readers make sense of these texts. This research investigates how preservice teachers in an undergraduate children’s literature class read and responded to multicultural children’s literature. Teacher educators have been struggling to understand how to prepare teacher candidates for the diverse classrooms they will enter. Despite their hard work in both inquiry and teaching, we still need more research on how to teach teachers. Accordingly, this study examines student responses alongside the pedagogy of the teacher.

During the spring of 2003 at a small college in a major Midwestern city, the activities of a children’s literature course with 22 students were documented. This qualitative project emerged from a constructivist paradigm and involved narrative methods. Data sources included: student writing, whole class and small group discussions, artifacts from class activities, fieldnotes, and a researcher reflective journal. Analysis and interpretation was conducted to develop understandings of the ways preservice teachers map their personal stories onto the stories in multicultural books and what those maps can teach us about preparing them for diverse classrooms. The context of the class and pedagogy of the teacher were considered alongside the responses.
The students’ writing and talk about the texts suggested five broad kinds of response: (IA) intimate disclosures: life-to-text connections; (IB) intimate disclosures: text-to-life connections; (II) dialogue and difference: text-and-life collide; (IIIA) disconnections and difference: “intolerance”-of-difference; (IIIB) disconnections and difference: “tolerance”-of-difference; and (IV) transcendence-of-difference. Analysis of pedagogical moves resulted in the delineation of tensions that teachers face in doing this work with preservice teachers. These tensions are related to how teachers occupy authority, how students perceive classroom community, how the teacher uses silence, and how students address and are addressed by each other. These patterns and tensions led to pedagogical implications based on new understandings of how preservice teachers’ read and respond to multicultural texts and how the teaching they experienced contributes to those readings and responses.
DEDICATION

Poem for Snow Girl
Ah, the softness as it falls
is but a whisper, winter calls
with these white words, chilled and true;
flakes, like stars, make dreams come true.
(Rebecca Kai Dotlich)

This dissertation is dedicated to all those friends, family members, teachers, and students who helped make this dream come true.
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As I look back on what I have written, I can see that the very persons who have taken away my time are those who have given me something to say.

Katherine Paterson

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thesis and this dissertation and I count her among my dearest friends. Her name may not appear on the cover page, but her contribution is obvious to anyone who knows me. I thank Pat for her commitment to me for over ten years.

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CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION:
PRESENTING THE STUDY

1.1) Introduction

This dissertation examines a single undergraduate class of 22 preservice teachers and their teacher in their efforts to make sense of multicultural children’s literature. Teacher educators have been struggling to find ways to prepare future teachers for the diversity of today’s classrooms. A children’s literature course like the one under scrutiny here is often one of the first places teacher educators and teacher candidates meet. It is also one of the first opportunities the students have to begin exploring their perspectives on literature and reading, diversity and equity, and books and children. In turn, these classes provide a chance for teacher educators to learn about those perspectives, and perhaps challenge and extend those ideas. Increased knowledge about how these students read and respond to multicultural literature will improve the ability of teacher educators to meet their needs and ensure that they are prepared to meet the challenges of their future classrooms.

This qualitative inquiry project relies on narrative sources of data, occurs in a naturalistic setting, and utilizes a constructivist paradigm. Students’ responses to multicultural children’s books were collected in the forms of written work and taped
transcription of classroom encounters. This corpus of data was supplemented by field notes and classroom artifacts (mainly, work completed by students in class). Data related to my pedagogy was also captured through audiotapes of classroom encounters, field notes, and classroom artifacts (such as course evaluations), but was complemented with a researcher reflective journal. Theories from the fields of multicultural education, reader response, and teacher education inform the research. By investigating my students’ responses to multicultural texts alongside my pedagogical approach, I was able to develop understandings about their work as meaning-makers and my work as a teacher educator.

1.2) Problem Statement

It is generally understood that while K-12 classrooms are filled with an increasingly multicultural student population, prospective teachers remain quite monocultural. Specifically, predominantly white, middle class, monolingual women continue to populate the teaching force while classrooms continue to grow in racial, ethnic, linguistic, and socioeconomic diversity. Nieto (2000) reports that “the nation’s teachers have become more monolithic, monocultural, and monolingual” while United States census information indicates increasing diversity in the student population (p. 182). Currently adequate research or documentation does not exist regarding the outcome of efforts to prepare teachers for diverse classrooms.

In Zeichner’s (1999) comprehensive review of teacher education research and practice, he outlines several prevalent and productive types of inquiry projects. My work fits in Zeichner’s category of research which investigates the nature and impact of teacher
education activities and self-study. These studies include methods such as case study, narrative inquiry, and life history methods. According to his review, there has been a push for teacher educators to study their own practices. Some of this work has focused on the connections between their lives and their practice as teacher educators (Clandinin & Connelly, 1995; Zeichner, 1995). The goal is to reveal the struggles teacher educators face with regard to issues of diversity and the “contradictions between their professed philosophies and the reality of their practice” (Cochran-Smith, 1995). Studies like these, and the one reported on here, “can both inform the practices of teacher educators who conduct it and contribute to the knowledge and understanding of teacher education for the larger community of scholars and educators” (p. 11). Zeichner (1999) further asserts the value of this research by suggesting that “teacher educators conducting research about our own practices can play an important part in communicating the complexity [of this work] to those who themselves are not involved in the work of teacher education (p. 22). My research follows in the footsteps of many teacher educators who have conducted small-scale qualitative projects in order to examine how preservice students experience coursework that addresses multiculturalism. These studies seem to focus on consciousness-raising about issues of diversity and equity with predominantly white preservice teachers (Clark & Medina, 2000; King, 1997; Allen & Labbo, 2001, for example). Data sources for these studies include: student papers, student reflective journals, and interviews with students. My study takes on similar issues, but fills a gap in the literature by featuring a student group that is characterized by racial, cultural, and socioeconomic diversity. Furthermore, my study places issues in multicultural literature at the center of the inquiry activities in the classroom.
Many teacher educators are interested in investigating their students’ evolving understandings of diversity and its role in society and classrooms. In her recent critical evaluation of the teacher education, Sleeter (2001) points out four major epistemologies: positivist, phenomenology, narrative research, and emancipatory research. My research does not fit neatly into one of these categories, though it certainly does not fall under the positivist paradigm since I do not expect to identify solutions or interventions that will be effective regardless of local context. Phenomenological research has the potential to help teacher educators “think better and more complexly” about their own practice. The main purpose of this brand of research is to “uncover how preservice students interpret human diversity” and, in the case of my project, how they interpret stories about human diversity. My work is also aligned with narrative research which opens spaces for researchers and participants to theorize themselves. Narrative research situates teacher education experiences within the life of the teacher educators and preservice teachers. Neither of these genres of research attempt to connect programs with predictable outcomes or best practice. While I strive for an emancipatory approach in my teaching, I do not claim an emancipatory research paradigm because this project does not substantially meet the criteria. The heterogeneity of the students in my class inhibits me from making the generalization that my work will be conducted with historically marginalized people or from naming myself as an “indigenous or external insider.” Similarly, I could not expect my students to be willing to co-construct knowledge with me in the analysis and writing phases of the work. However, the self-reflexivity and political agenda of emancipatory research appeals to me and I agree with the epistemological assumption that knowledge must be located within the “social history of
the knower and his or her community” (p.234). The goal of social liberation also resonates with my research stance, however my project is more focused on studying what does and does not work in this classroom setting. The purpose of this study, then, is to develop a better understanding of how preservice teachers’ read and respond to multicultural children’s literature considering the contexts and opportunities that exist as a result of my teaching.

1.3) Research Questions

Although they are interrelated, the research questions were divided into two sections for clarity in data collection, analysis, and interpretation. The questions for this study were the following: In the context of an undergraduate survey course in children’s literature for preservice teachers,

• *In what ways do preservice teachers map their own personal stories onto the stories in multicultural children’s literature? What do their articulations of connection and disconnection with multicultural texts suggest about engagement, determinations of quality, and the meaning making process?*

• *How does my pedagogy help or hinder my students as they engage with multicultural literature? How are my pedagogical moves implicated in my students’ responses?*

1.3.1) Origins of the Questions

Bob Fecho spoke at OSU around the time I was beginning to formulate my dissertation proposal. A recent winner of the National Council of Teacher of English Purves Awards, he emphasized how important it is for researchers in general, but especially novices like doctoral students to articulate what he called “the story of your
questions.” In earnest, I took that advice to heart and went about the process of unearthing the origins of this inquiry. That story follows.

My undergraduate children’s literature professor was an older white woman. She was also a lesbian. I surmised this from some stereotypical and superficial cues such as haircut and attire, but my assumption was confirmed when we encountered each other in the local gay community. My heterosexual classmates (fellow elementary education majors) came to the same conclusion when our professor shared books like Annie On My Mind (Garden, 1982) and Heather Has Two Mommies (Newman, 1989). Unlike most of my cohort-mates, I was delighted to discover children’s literature that explored gay and lesbian themes. Over ten years later, our heated and frustrating class discussions of Annie On My Mind and Heather Has Two Mommies are still fresh in my memory. In addition to these two books, conversations about several other texts stand out when I recollect my time as a preservice teacher learning about children’s literature. I have lucid memories of my first exposure to the following texts: Hamanaka’s The Journey (1990), de Paola’s Oliver Button is a Sissy (1979), Speare’s The Witch of Blackbird Pond (1958), and Hamilton’s The Magical Adventures of Pretty Pearl (1983). I also remember discussing books that I came to consider biased in some way such as Brother Eagle, Sister Sky (Jeffers, 1981) and Knots on a Counting Rope (Martin, 1987).

Now, as a teacher of children’s literature for undergraduate preservice teachers, I find that my passion and praise or criticism and disdain for these books have endured. I find myself using these texts as examples in my own classes, causing me to wonder: why did these books and our discussions about them make such a lasting impression on me? was I somehow predisposed to connect with these texts in such an intense and lasting
way? how did my beloved professor’s pedagogy and my interactions with my classmates influence my determinations about these texts? These personal ruminations led me to a dissertation research project that enabled me to examine and rethink my current pedagogy through a descriptive study of my students’ experiences with multicultural children’s literature. My commitment to multicultural literature is shaped by my belief in its potential to affect readers’ dispositions toward teaching for social justice, understandings of the meaning of difference, and conceptions of the purposes and functions of reading. Since these readers are future teachers, I pursued an inquiry project that provides insight into how preservice teachers experience and make sense of multicultural children’s literature based on the pedagogy implemented by me. The study contributes to the body of research concerned with understanding the outcome of efforts to prepare teachers for these diverse classrooms. Further, it presents evidence of the potential of multicultural literature in that effort.

1.3.2) Regarding the Questions: Part I

- **In what ways do preservice teachers map their own personal stories onto the stories in multicultural children’s literature? What do their articulations of connection and disconnection with multicultural texts suggest about engagement, determinations of quality, and the meaning making process?**

The acts of reading and responding to literature have long intrigued teachers and scholars. As I have forged new understandings of theories of reader response and multicultural literature and gained new knowledge about working with preservice teachers, I have became particularly interested in the above questions. As a teacher of children’s literature, I consistently find myself pleasantly and unpleasantly surprised by

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my students’ responses. I wanted to know what kind of personal stories might be called up as preservice teachers read multicultural literature. In order to promote multicultural literature among these future teachers, I needed to know more about the ways they engage with the literature, how they judge the merit of a book, and how they make meaning. I wondered how the matches and mismatches they experienced while reading were manifested in their reported responses and interpretations. I knew students would endorse a text even if it does not map closely onto their own personal experience, yet such matches seem important for engagement and meaning making. I hoped that by investigating engagement, evaluation, and meaning making I could learn more about what those processes require of students, what factors they are dependent upon, and what I might do to make those processes more explicit and thus more negotiable.

For years I have been fascinated by the metaphors of literature functioning as windows and mirrors. I was particularly curious about how those windows and mirrors work with multicultural children’s literature. Did different kinds of interpretation or engagement result when mirrors dominated compared to windows? Would the meaning-making work done around these texts demand more or less focus on the familiar or would the differences be accentuated? I set out to study my college-level children’s literature classroom compelled by an interest in the matches and mismatches readers experience during interactions with multicultural children’s literature.

I see multicultural children’s literature as a site for dialogue, cultural awakenings, and personal and political transformation. As poststructural theory indicates, “texts give life to previously unimagined possibilities” (Davies, 2000, p. 180). It is naive to believe that literature can do the work of changing the world; my belief is that literature holds the
potential, through the provision of metaphorical mirrors, windows, and even stained glass windows, to compel change in readers. While the consequences of that kind of change may not be clearly measurable, it does offer some measure of hope.

I recognize that there are voices, histories, and perspectives that have been excluded from the curriculum. This exclusion limits students’ knowledge and understanding of a broad segment of our society. Accordingly, along with other multicultural teacher educators, I believe we need to implement pedagogical strategies that encourage preservice teachers to reflect critically on the meaning and implications of living in a pluralistic society. Pedagogical strategies that serve these purposes are still under construction.

1.3.3) Regarding The Questions: Part II

• *How does my pedagogy help or hinder my students as they engage with multicultural literature? How are my pedagogical moves implicated in my students’ responses?*

Most scholars and teachers of children’s literature are passionate, avid readers. We tend to idealize the reading experience. While I share traits, my own history as a reader also differs from many of my colleagues. Because I do not have memories of bedtime read-alouds and other traditions that reinforced the value of books as a young child, it is easy for me to understand why our students do not always enter our classes with the same level of passion for reading. My awakening to the power of literature came late in my teens as I read young adult classics like *Go Ask Alice* and my favorite teachers’ favorites like *Siddhartha* (Hesse, 1951), *Beloved* (Morrison, 1987), and the
poetry of ee cummings and Langston Hughes. I hope the literature I share with my
children’s literature students will awaken them as well.

However, that is not an easy task and teachers of children’s literature classes for
preservice teachers have to decide what invitations they will offer students. Since breadth
is often the priority, it is tempting to provide a survey course full of bibliographies for
students; lists generated by the teacher and lists compiled by students. It is also tempting
to promote a hierarchy on children’s books. Every time I teach children’s literature, I
urge my students to refrain from using “cute” as a primary adjective for describing
illustration. I often neglect humorous literature and series books because students usually
are already familiar with those. I am biased against them while they are biased towards
them. To bridge this divide we learn how to match books with children based on
developmental stages and sociocultural factors. In an effort to bridge the divide between
my preference for multicultural literature and their lack of knowledge or interest in it, we
learn to examine texts for stereotypes. To push their conceptions of what makes a good
children’s book, we take into consideration the opinions of professional critics and
academics. We talk about genre and literary elements and didacticism. All of this is done
in an effort to help teacher candidates select children’s books that feature the best the
field has to offer. It is essential that my students grasp all that children’s literature has to
offer. Often they enter classes with preconceived notions about the tradition being
quaint, sanguine, and always easy to access and understand. My job, therefore, is to
engage them with the literature in such a way that they are challenged to see the range of
quality offered and to experience the complex and sophisticated literary forms available.
Children’s literature should not be degraded as a sub-form of literature. One way to enable students to see the potential of these books is to share texts with them in a way that invites aesthetic responses. My students tend to be predisposed, or at least assume they are supposed to be, to approach texts from an efferent stance. It takes explicit work on my part to convince them that I do value aesthetic responses - emotion and personal expressions of the reading experience. I do not discourage efferent responses and my students certainly are held accountable to more analytic responses to text. It should be noted that most teachers predominantly use an efferent approach (Cox & Zarrillo, 1990; Sacks, 1987). In fact, Many & Wiseman (1992) discovered in their research that aesthetic responses did not occur as easily in the classroom as efferent responses, particularly if students were not guided toward the aesthetic through instruction. We know that teachers’ actions legitimize responses, and thus directly and indirectly influence the actual responses (Hickman, 1983). This evidence fuels my motivation to focus on reader response activities and aesthetic response in my classroom. Unless preservice teachers are given ample opportunities to experience aesthetic approaches to the reading, it is unlikely they will incorporate such an approach into their pedagogy as a teacher. Many and Wiseman’s study examined the responses of both third graders and preservice teachers and found that both were likely to depend on efferent responses unless encouraged by the teacher to live through the text in the spirit of aesthetic response. To achieve balance between efferent and aesthetic, I think the ultimate goal is to enable my students to reflect on what the author did in order make their aesthetic evocation possible.
Hade (1993) suggests that there are four "different and disparate" ways teacher regard the role of literature in classrooms. These include: promoting reading proficiency, initiation into the discipline, increasing self-understanding and self-actualization, and fostering social responsibility. Preservice teachers have not yet made up their minds about literature and reading instruction in the classroom. Teaching a course like the one under scrutiny here affords teacher educators the chance to emphasize Hade’s latter two roles. Increasing self-understanding and self-actualization are worthy goals not only for literature programs in schools, but also for teacher education programs.

I have only been teaching children’s literature at the college level for a handful of years. During this short time I have struggled with how to reach my students. I have consulted with fellow teachers of this content about how to meet the broad goals of a survey course while honoring the literature and the act of reading. As teachers, we need to know more about our students as readers. Since preservice teachers hold the future of literacy instruction in their hands, it is crucial that we nurture in them a love of reading, an appreciation for multicultural literature, and an understanding of the complexities of the reading process. We need to know what reading is like for them, what it means to them, how they think literature works, and what they feel is the value of literature.

1.4) Limitations

The limitations of this study reflect the limitations of all classroom research. It describes the experience of 22 unique students in a unique setting. While I provide robust examples and thick description, extensions beyond local knowledge will be determined by readers. Similarly, qualitative research demands that researcher
subjectivity be taken into consideration, rather than diminished or denied. Further methodological and paradigmatic choices are explained in chapter three.

In studying preservice teachers responding to multicultural children’s literature, I was only able to consider what they were willing to express or reveal about their interpretive work. There was no way for me to have complete access to their intellectual and emotional work around these texts. The scope of this project did not include an investigation into why or how much my students were willing to make visible to me about their reading. Accordingly, the data sources constitute what the students recounted to me as opposed to what actually transpired between reader and text, student and teacher, and among peers. Students’ motivations and intentions were not readily available for me to witness. Instead, I had to piece together my understandings from fractured bits of what was expressible in their written and oral responses.

Additional data sources would strengthen this study. However, delimitations were set to reflect the constraints of my students’ lives. Out of respect to participants, I asked only that they consent to be audiotaped during class sessions and that they allow me to make copies of all written work. Data from interviews or pre- and post-surveys would have provided insight how students’ synthesized their experiences in the course. However, my status as an adjunct at the college and many of the students’ status as part-time conspired against that. Inviting students to enter into the study as co-investigators and recruiting them for member checks was also not feasible.
1.5) Significance

Preparing teachers for diversity is one of the greatest challenges currently facing teacher educators. Understanding issues of diversity and equity and recognizing their own sociocultural identities are ongoing processes that all teacher candidates much experience. This study describes and analyzes the myriad ways preservice teachers responded to multicultural stories in light of my teaching of a course on children’s literature. The study seeks to broaden our knowledge of how adult readers respond to these texts and how teacher educators can facilitate their reading and learning.

Literacy scholars regularly conduct inquiry into how young readers make sense of literature. However, investigations into how adult readers, such as preservice teachers, construct meaning have been neglected in the field. When adult readers are the object of inquiry, their responses are usually considered in light of their current teaching practices. Additionally, adult readers are often portrayed as misguided or unenlightened in studies. While conducted with good intentions, this research fails to address how readers negotiate meaning with relation to classroom interactions which implicate the teacher. A few studies involve students in studying their own literacy practices. My study differs from those dominating the field because it aims to scrutinize both my practice and my students’ responses. Additionally, my students represent a unique demographic and the setting stands out as significantly different from the contexts in which most studies like mine take place. Since my classroom features a diverse population of students, socioeconomically, racially, and academically, opportunities for dialogue about and across differences were abundant.
1.6) Researcher’s Perspective, Definitions, Chapter Overviews

In the chapters to follow, I speak as a researcher, teacher, and learner. Accordingly, my chosen discourse style throughout document reflects more of my voice than may be traditional in research reports of this nature. Since my study is grounded in personal experience methods and seeks to honor students’ voices, it seemed important that my write-up reflect a similar tone. Working within a social constructivist qualitative paradigm with an emphasis on critical literacy, inherently affords me the opportunity to unpack my subjectivities as a researcher throughout this document.

Throughout this paper I use the umbrella term “response” to refer to the main corpus of data I collected. The conversations caught on tape, student papers, and artifacts from class activities all count as responses. Response reflects students’ descriptions of engagement as well as their statements about a book’s “quality” and their own meaning making. I also use the terms “interpretation” and “literary understanding” to describe students’ meaning making work. The language used throughout chapters four and five, positions the “responses” as subjects of sentences. This is a direct effect of how I designed the study. The understandings I have developed related to my students’ engagement, interpretive work, and determinations of quality all emerge from the responses they provided me as a result of our class together. Their disclosures were made after reading texts I assigned, their explanations of engagement were prompted by my assignments, their arguments for or against texts were compelled during class interactions. Everything I have discovered here is a result of our life together as a class. I only had access to what they volunteered to me. All of my discoveries are limited in
that they are based only on *their account* of their reading experience to me, and to some extent those experiences were shaped by me.

Chapter two consists of a literature review which outlines the scholarly work that informs this study. Research and theory are discussed as they pertain to the investigation at hand. I begin with a review of the history and trends of multiculturalism, with particular emphasis on critical literacy and anti-racism. Next, those theories are contextualized within the frame of teacher education research and practice. The direction of the literature review then shifts to theories of multicultural literature and response to literature. Definitions and conceptualizations of this literature are examined, including a clarification of the term multicultural children’s literature for the purposes of this project. In this context, multicultural children’s literature includes books that feature stories of those who have historically been marginalized, underrepresented, and misrepresented in the literature, including people of color, gays and lesbians, the homeless, and people with disabilities. Next, researcher’s and theorist’s attempts to understand response to literature are considered. Finally, I conclude with descriptions of studies that are similar to this one, exploring how my work complements and extends the work of those scholars and further contextualizing this work.

Chapter three chronicles the data analysis process and provides contextual details. Capturing the qualitative analysis process in an academic paper of this sort poses a substantial challenge. Data analysis takes place throughout data collection and write-up, yet it must be isolated in the discussion in order to convey to readers what approaches were used. Myriad paths of analysis were explored but many themes and patterns had to be sacrificed (at least temporarily) to create a coherent presentation of the findings. Data
sources for this study hold the potential to provide more insight into the nature of multicultural literature. The data could be reviewed again in the form of case study material focusing on individual student’s development as readers or literacy teachers. Our discussions of “the right to write,” hope in stories for children, and our histories as readers are also ripe for study. Throughout data analysis I found myself rethinking my questions and my assumptions about students, literature, and the research process. Accordingly, this methods chapter is descriptive in nature with an emphasis on providing the reader with a sense of what actually happened in the classroom and in each phase of the research.

Chapter four consists of two parts. In the first part I present the data representing my students’ responses. The second part explores the data related to my pedagogy. Both the student responses and my teaching have been categorized, analyzed, and theorized. This chapter reflects only a small portion of the data collected and only one slice of my analytic work. However, I have selected the most compelling pieces of data with the most robust strands of analysis. It should be noted that my tone throughout this document reflects a tendency on my part to politicize what I observed in the classroom. Readers may detect a slightly more positive tone when I describe the responses focused more on connections and a less positive tone when I describe responses focused on disconnections. My intention was not to create a hierarchy or otherwise “pass judgment” on the responses. Instead, I tried to make sense of the different responses I was examining. In doing this, I saw relationships across and within responses, but eventually had to isolate patterns for the purposes of this inquiry. I am enamored with some of the patterns, while others puzzle me beyond explanation. Some of the patterns cause me to
question my abilities as a teacher of children’s literature while others are encouraging and affirming. Still other responses cause me to envy the reader’s experience because it is so unlike mine - more intense or more detached in ways that escape me. Despite these subjective reactions of mine, the reporting of the findings in the chapter reflect careful and deliberate analysis guided by the questions posed in the study and my commitments as a teacher.

Chapter five concludes the dissertation with consideration of the understandings the findings from the study contribute to the broader field. Those concerned with preparing teachers for diversity, promoting multicultural literature, and understanding response to literature will be interested in these contributions. In this chapter, I explore what my students’ responses demonstrate about reading and responding to multicultural literature. Based on the patterns discovered in the study, I explore the metaphors of mirrors, windows, and stained glass windows. Additionally, I consider what each kind of response means for me as a teacher of children’s literature and advocate of multiculturalism. My hope, as a literacy teacher in the academy, is that this study will provide me with descriptions, perceptions, and interpretations that will lead to a more complex understanding of preservice teachers’ readings of multicultural children’s literature.

1.7) Conclusion

Although it is not always apparent, large shifts in thinking, like large changes in the natural world, are always preceded by a complex choreography of small changes. This helps us understand why it sometimes is necessary to develop sustained and close relationships with literary texts over time, if deep insight is to be generated. (Sumara, 2002, p. xvi.)
I believe in the power of multicultural children’s literature to promote responses that may result in transformative thinking for readers, much like Sumara describes above. As Strehle (1999) found, through literature her students “affirmed, expanded, and helped define realities” (p. 293). Similarly, Stott (1994) asserts that “we relate to and are a part of life, not escape from life” through reading experiences. Multicultural children’s literature, in particular, allows us to consider ways in which we might reconstruct our understandings of ourselves and our lives through reading and talking about books.

While I advocate for a transformative kind of literacy, arguments and backlash against multicultural texts are raging. Taxel (1997) reports on critics who believe reflecting diversity in children’s books is another perversion of political correctness. These critics seem not to understand that these books aim to present a picture of the world that, as Ladson-Billings (1993) so accurately puts it, “is correct, not politically correct.”

Since the introduction of Rosenblatt’s (1978/1983) transactional theory, teachers and scholars have recognized that meaning is constructed. Based on Rosenblatt’s landmark theory, many researchers have sought to understand the personal and contextual factors that contribute to meaning making. When reading is understood to be a transaction, the ways both readers and texts are positioned becomes relevant to understanding response to literature. In 1990, Bishop described how multicultural children’s literature might be positioned as mirrors, windows, or sliding glass doors for readers. Multicultural literature invites readers to see reflections of themselves and others through the sharing of stories that have historically been excluded. Alternately, this literature may challenge readers who do not see themselves reflected, but instead
gain access to lives of people unlike themselves. Readers may see themselves and others both reflected and refracted as multiple perspectives and divergent realities come into view when engaged with multicultural texts. As readers see reflections of themselves they may come to understand their lives and worlds more deeply or with more clarity. However, sometimes these reflections confuse or challenge readers’ understandings of reality. Considering the dynamic nature of readers’ identities and engagements with reading, multicultural texts, in particular have the potential to contribute to how preservice teachers will make sense of themselves and their students, and their approach to both multicultural children’s literature and classroom practice.
2.1) Introduction

A wide range of scholarly work informs this study. I am inspired by and hope to contribute to the work of teacher educators who have been researching and theorizing the challenges they face in preparing teachers for diversity. The political and ideological debates about multiculturalism and multicultural children’s literature have shaped my commitments as a teacher researcher and advocate for that literature. Theories of literary understanding from Rosenblatt to post-structuralism inform my understanding of how preservice teachers make sense of multicultural literature. My interest in preservice teachers’ experiences with multicultural children’s literature does not fit neatly into one particularly body of research. Both classroom teachers and university researchers have investigated how young readers make sense of this literature. Teacher educators have studied the same phenomenon alongside their preservice students. However, relatively few studies exist in which teacher educators examine preservice teacher’s experiences as adult readers of multicultural children’s literature and the ensuing classroom practices and interactions. I begin this review of the literature with an overview of multicultural education including history, definitions, and debates. I then detail the relevant
conversations about diversity and personal narrative in teacher education research and practice. The discussion then turns to theories of multicultural children’s literature and literature in general as it pertains to both my teaching and this study. I conclude with a review of published research that shares methodology or grapples with similar questions.

2.2) Multiculturalism: Movements, Models, and Methods

Terms such as diversity, multiculturalism, critical pedagogy, and anti-racism carry with them multiple connotations and meanings. My use and understanding of these concepts is based on historical and theoretical perspectives which avoid constructing multiculturalism as “studying others,” address issues of white privilege, and see teaching as a site for social and political transformation. Throughout this document I rely on the umbrella term multiculturalism which coincides with the educational reform movement known as multicultural education. According to Banks (1996a, 1996b, 1993) and Grant and Sleeter (1985) multicultural education emerged as part of the marginalized fight for democracy in this country. Debates surrounding multiculturalism take place throughout our society and a wide range of opinions and definitions exist. Of the proponents, some see multiculturalism simply as a desire to promote tolerance. Others think of the idea as a social reform movement and insist that broad-based institutional and structural change is needed to make our schools more equitable (Banks, 1996a). Freire and Macedo (1987) call for emancipatory multicultural education and literacy pedagogy that aims to transform society. Several experts in the field (Sleeter and Grant, 1987; Banks, 1996a; Bennett, 2001) have attempted to categorize and describe the differing notions of multiculturalism that are at play in educational settings. I begin my sorting out of
multiculturalism by providing some historical context, and then proceed to explore various definitions and forms of implementation.

2.2.1) Origins

For decades, African Americans and Native Americans were overtly denied education by the government of the United States. From the inception of our schooling system, only members of the dominant group were privileged as worthy of education. In 1896 with the ruling in the Plessy case, the concept of “separate but equal” became the acceptable standard in education and across other facilities. With separate (though clearly not equal) schools, whites maintained their privileged, unfair advantage in education. Under this doctrine of “separate but equal,” schools continued to disappoint and deny African-American children the right to quality education. Civil rights activists continued their fight and eventually, in 1954, the Brown decision called for court-ordered desegregation in public education. Of course, the Brown decision marked yet another beginning in the struggle for equity in education for African-Americans and other marginalized groups. Throughout the mid-1900’s immigrants from various European ethnic groups struggled to find a way to make a place for themselves in the education system, often relinquishing aspects of their linguistic, cultural, and ethnic identities. This marginalization continues today for many Latino immigrants and other groups. The need for teachers who could reach children from diverse cultures has slowly become more evident. With the Civil Rights movement spurring social and political change, the stage was set for multicultural education to emerge as a priority.
Many disappointments followed the Brown decision, which initially signaled hope for educational equity. Disproportionately high numbers of African Americans, Native Americans, and Latino/as were placed in special education classes and otherwise hindered from success in the classroom. Still more members of these groups were targeted as discipline “problems” or considered lacking in ability to learn and achieve. Enduring and unexamined racist and classist practices were maintained in our schools despite success on legal and political fronts. The path of school integration has been long, violent, and plagued with conflict and resistance; we did not simply arrive at a time and place of diversity. Calls for multiculturalism in children’s literature and teacher education are long overdue and yet still neglected in many ways. A deficit model has pervaded our educational system for far too long, resulting in the diminished achievement of poor children, children of color, and children from other marginalized groups. Throughout this tumultuous history, teacher education has struggled to develop cohesive or sustained efforts toward preparing teachers to meet the needs and realities of diverse classrooms.

2.2.2) Models of Multicultural Education

Sleeter and Grant (1985) describe five main types of multicultural education programs. This list reveals some very passive approaches as well as activist-oriented techniques. Sleeter and Grant’s five approaches include: education of the culturally different, human relations, ethnic studies, multicultural education, and multicultural/social reconstructionist education. Education of the culturally different quite obviously aims to help people of color become more like members of the dominant
culture. This type of program fails the targeted “minority” students by not promoting
critical thinking about the structures of racism in our society. A similar assimilationist
stance occurs in the human relations model of multicultural education which focuses on
multiracial classrooms and the idea of “getting along.” One problem with this model is
that not all classrooms are multiracial. The assimilationist models fail to take seriously
the resistance and antagonism that often accompanies efforts toward multiculturalism.
Ethnic studies is another inadequate approach because it constructs ethnic and racial
“minorities” as secondary or other. That is, while hoping to empower distinct groups this
type of program may actually further marginalize people by acquiescing to the
dominance of white Eurocentric culture.

The multicultural education and multicultural/social reconstructionist education
approaches both address the need for students to develop positive ethnic and racial
identities. By focusing on cultural pluralism and respecting differences these two
programs speak to the need for students of color to have more than “theoretical” equal
opportunity. Multicultural education values multiple perspectives and validates
otherwise disenfranchised students. Multicultural/social resconstructionist education
concerns itself even more with the ongoing struggle for social justice in the United States.
In accord with the efforts of other social activist movements, this approach strives to
empower students to think critically and question systems of oppression. For the
purposes of my teaching and research, I suggest that multicultural children’s literature
has the potential to promote a similar kind of questioning and critical thinking. Through
multicultural children’s literature readers may feel compelled to examine injustice in the
spirit of Sleeter and Grant’s idea of multicultural/social resconstructionist education.
Like Sleeter and Grant, Banks (1993) differentiates between approaches or developments in multicultural education. He outlines five distinct forms of multicultural education: content integration, the knowledge construction process, prejudice reduction, equity pedagogy, and an empowering school culture and social structure. Content integration and prejudice reduction are inefficacious in that they are based on deficit models that reinforce hegemonic practices due to a lack of critical reflection. Banks’ equity pedagogy involves changing classrooms so that teachers implement pedagogy that “facilitates the academic achievement of students from diverse racial and ethnic groups and all the social classes” (p. 27). The approach of empowering school culture and social structure requires a large-scale reconceptualization of school and society. Banks (1996b) also emphasizes the importance of the knowledge construction process, calling into question notions of knowledge and positionality. He argues that knowledge is positional and reflects subjectivity. Accordingly, the way one explains or interprets reality is socially constructed and subject to human interests. Banks insists that identities are relational rather than essential and that the construction of knowledge turns on awareness of positionality. His theory goes on to offer a typology of kinds of knowledge. These include: personal/cultural, popular, mainstream academic, transformative, and school. Students use personal/cultural knowledge as “screens” and teachers can make use of this kind of knowledge to reach students. Popular knowledge is authorized by mass media and results in implicit, institutionalized knowledge. Mainstream academic knowledge describes the accepted understandings of the behavioral and social sciences which support notions of objectivity and universal truth. The selective view of social reality provided at the school level constitutes Banks’ school knowledge. This model presents a
view of knowledge that is static rather than dynamic and complex because it is derived from mainstream academic and popular sources.

The category of transformative knowledge outlined by Banks is the most important in bringing his ideas to bear on multicultural children’s literature. According to Banks, transformative knowledge challenges mainstream academic knowledge, searches for new explanations, does not view knowledge as neutral but rather as reflecting power and social relations, and can improve society. This typology of knowledge is only one element of Banks’ approach to multicultural education, but his focus on the social construction of knowledge is vital to the study of multiculturalism as it is manifested in classroom communities, critical pedagogy, and multicultural children’s literature (Enciso, 2004).

Recently, Bennett (2001) addressed the “lack of definition, clarity, and purpose in multicultural education” (p. 171). She looked at the possibilities of differing perspectives on multicultural education by constructing a conceptual map. Bennett indicates four major clusters of thought around multicultural education: curriculum reform, equity pedagogy, multicultural competence, and societal equity. Each cluster is described in detail based on Bennett’s review of the inherent assumptions, which she calls genres, of each cluster. Curriculum reform requires that knowledge be revealed as contested and constructed. Equity pedagogy is tied to the ideals of culturally-relevant teaching and strives to enable all students to reach their fullest potential. The third cluster, multicultural competence, involves the reduction of prejudice and emphasizes identity development and cross-cultural experiences. Finally, societal equity mandates that structural social transformation is required for democratic values to be realized.
These four broad categories, as outlined by Bennett, undergird much of the research and practitioner exemplars in multicultural education. Scholars continue to struggle to define multicultural education as they theorize their teaching and conduct research. For example, Ladson-Billings (1994) describes effective teachers of African-American children and indicates several characteristics of teaching that make them so successful. She presents the idea of culturally-relevant teaching and outlines strategies and goals for reaching diverse children. Grant (1993) argues for multicultural social reconstructionist methods which aim to affirm diversity while questioning injustice. His research shows that multicultural education should be responsive to the strengths and aspirations of various oppressed social groups and also proactive in promoting social critique and activism. Banks’ (1996b) model of multicultural education focuses on exposing the socially constructed nature of reality and calls for a broad reconceptualization of how schools work. He urges a social action approach as opposed to a “contributions”-oriented or additive model (1994). Bennett’s (1995) summary of the goals of multicultural education reflects these interconnected ideas set forth by scholars in this area. Unfortunately the tenets of multiculturalism are often compromised and deficit models endure.

Calling on the work of the theorists described above, I use the term multicultural to mean a pedagogy and theory of education that calls teachers to work against hegemonic forces in classrooms and society. Nieto (1996), calls teachers to honor and celebrate pluralism in their classrooms and also to interrupt racism and other forms of oppression in children’s’ lives. Multicultural teaching must entail reaching students by connecting with their cultural, ethnic, linguistic, social, and other affiliations.
Multicultural education is a state of mind and a form of activism and should address issues ranging from race and gender to sexuality and disability. Often multiculturalism is associated with calls for liberatory and democratic practices. Anti-racism and critical pedagogy are two more specific approaches that coincide with multiculturalism.

2.2.3) Multiculturalism Through Anti-Racism

According to Derman-Sparks and Phillips (1997), facilitating an understanding of the history, causes, structures, and consequences of racism in their preservice teachers has been a major source of hope and intervention in their research and teaching. They assert that preparing teachers for diversity must involve directly confronting issues of race. While the affective component of teaching and learning anti-racism often takes precedence, this interpersonal friction and prejudice is only one aspect of racism. In their work, Derman-Sparks and Phillips strive to prioritize a critique of white supremacy and structural, institutionalized racism as the primary sources of oppression. They want their students to be motivated by hope, respect for humanity, and a deep desire for social justice. Like many of their colleagues, Derman-Sparks and Phillips agree that multicultural education is a profoundly personal journey for both teacher educators and preservice teachers. Accordingly, they recommend that their preservice teachers as well as other teacher educators carefully try to untie the “knots of racism” (p. 202). In a comprehensive description of their anti-racist pedagogy, they stress four major goals for their students: deepening self-knowledge of the impact of cultural identity and racism, acquiring a new knowledge base regarding race and racism, decentering and extending empathy, and becoming activists. Unfortunately, these goals function much like a linear
developmental model while this process of transformation rarely occurs in such a straight line. Preservice teachers will not move through the stages so neatly and orderly.

McIntyre (1997) also proposes an anti-racist approach to multicultural education. Her model emphasizes understanding the meaning and construction of whiteness because she works specifically with white, middle class prospective teachers. McIntyre calls upon teacher educators to design curriculum that reveals to white students the lives of people of color and challenges them to develop an awareness of their own racial identities and the multiple meanings of whiteness in relationship to education. Similarly, Thompson’s (1997) call for anti-racist teaching involves a “reorientation” rather than an adaptive or additive approach. Since racism is not a mere matter of personal prejudice, its structural, institutional, embodied, and cultural manifestations must be examined for democratic or multicultural education to be realized. Teacher educators and prospective teachers should work together to identify inequity and our role in its continuation. These various approaches to anti-racism emphasize that prospective teachers need a comprehensive view of the sources and consequences of racism. Interactions around multicultural children’s literature can provide a key link to developing this view.

2.2.4) Multiculturalism Through Critical Pedagogy

Considering the effects of white privilege and other markers of power, unexamined assumptions become quite dangerous in the classroom. When whiteness goes “unnoticed,” its status as a constructed and historical marker of privilege and power is maintained. A critical examination of prior beliefs and personal history is crucial in multicultural education because certain systems of values and attitudes are enacted and
legitimated by those with political power while other belief systems are marginalized, ignored, or negated. Through the work of critically reflecting on personal experience and reconsidering the meaning of these stories, we may have the opportunity to perceive political and economic contradictions and injustices and be motivated to take action against them. Freire (1970/1995) calls this “conscientizacao” and indicates that only through naming the world can we begin to change it (p. 68). Reading and responding to multicultural children’s literature is one way to begin naming the world and thus developing a commitment to identifying, challenging, and eliminating racism and other forms of oppression.

Critical theorists like Freire see education as a vehicle for liberation and emancipation. hooks (1994) passionately advocates for education as the practice of freedom. Her notion of engaged pedagogy dispels myths of the separation of the professional and the sacred, the political and the practical, theory and practice. Similarly, Giroux and Simon (1989) describe critical pedagogy as a political and practical endeavor that attempts to influence experiences that will effect understanding of educational issues. Those who devote time to the preparation of teachers and are committed to educational reform certainly face political, practical, and theoretical challenges. The inaccurately dichotomized relationship between theory and practice has long plagued teaching. Yet we know that personal, practical, and intellectual theories shape teacher’s actions at the core. Current scholarly literature on teacher education emphasizes the importance of reflective practice in bridging the divide between theory and practice (Zeichner, 1995, Richardson, 1996). Reflective practitioners critique their own pedagogy, examine underlying assumptions, engage in dialogue with other
stakeholders, and respond thoughtfully to inquiry exercises. Teacher educators have a similar obligation to be reflective practitioners. In their efforts toward multiculturalism, teacher educators must journey with students to help them curb their ethnocentric, unthinking acceptance of biased practices. I believe a profound part of this journey can occur during readings of and dialogue about multicultural children’s literature. The fairly monocultural population of future teachers may not see how their positions of privilege restrict their ability to see the academic strengths of students who do not come to school possessing the normative skills of our education system. The theories and practices described in this section are present in recent research and trends in teacher preparation which will be reviewed next.

2.3) Teacher Preparation: Theory, Research, and Practice

In a recent review of trends in teacher education reform, Cochran-Smith and Fries (2001) analyze the ideological assumptions behind the current movements. According to their review of key documents from professional organizations, government agencies, and large-scale research studies, two major and opposing strands dominate the field. First, the movement to professionalize teaching focuses on certification issues and high standards for teacher preparation. The second movement aims to deregulate teacher education and thus supports high stakes teacher tests as the gatekeeping operative of the profession. Proponents of deregulation dismiss licensing agencies, colleges of education, and state departments of education as “unnecessary hurdles to becoming a teacher” (p. 3). These concerns about accountability in teacher preparation contribute to the already politically-charged nature of education. My own review of administrative and policy
reform agendas in teacher education (Darling-Hammond, 2000; Kettlewell, et al.; 1999; Mitchell, et al.; 2000) revealed efforts to improve education by enhancing technology, increasing parent involvement, decreasing class size, and forging collaborative relationships with K-12 schools, colleges of arts and sciences, and colleges of education. While political and bureaucratic battles rage on, new teachers stream into classrooms each year ill-prepared to meet the needs of diverse students and uninformed of the oppressive forces at work in schools.

Prospective teachers enter preparation programs with a long history of experiences with schooling and education. This storehouse of knowledge is buttressed by the fact that teaching is one of the most public and familiar professions in our culture. Lortie (1975) was the first to bring attention to the need to address the role of prior experiences in the process of learning to teach. The “apprenticeship of observation” describes the massive amount of time (approximately thirteen thousand hours) we spend observing teachers during our compulsory time as students. This extended period of time is not simply a passive event; it results in taken-for-granted knowledge, values, assumptions, and judgments about teaching and classroom interactions in general. Accordingly, learning to teach is more than a mere process of “training.” During teacher education, students learn not only about teaching and learning, but also about the sociocultural contexts of schooling. Throughout their time in a preparation program, prospective teachers engage in multiple and complex negotiations of identity as they make decisions about who they will be in the classroom. Carter and Doyle (1996) argue that “the act of teaching, teacher’s experiences and the choices they make, and the process of learning to teach are deeply personal matters inexorably linked to one’s
identity and, thus, to one’s life story” (p. 120). In my teaching and research, I rely on multicultural children’s literature to gain access to those “deeply personal matters” in hopes of gaining an understanding of how preservice teachers and I negotiate meanings and construct identities.

Cole and Knowles (1995) base their work as teacher education practitioners and researchers in their belief that becoming a teacher is a lifelong process and that ongoing critical reflection is essential. Accordingly, the multiple roles, contexts, and relationships that comprise teaching practice must be considered in the preparation of teachers. In his research and work with student teachers, Preskill (1998) has also found that personal narratives make a profound impact on preservice teachers’ “understanding of what it takes to teach” (p.344). He engages his students in reading and writing several different kinds of personal narratives. These include: narratives of social criticism, narratives of hope, narratives of apprenticeship, narratives of reflective practice, and narratives of journey. Each kind of narrative provides students opportunities to share personal discoveries and delve into their personal quests toward transformative education by inviting the construction of new meanings and new “selves.” Like Preskill, many teacher education scholars and practitioners (Britzman, 1991, Evans, 2002, Gomez & Tabachnik, 1992), recognize the identity work involved in teacher preparation.

Clandinin and Connelly (1995) place narrative at the center of the study of teaching in their work with preservice teachers. Four assumptions undergird their work with teachers: teacher education is a lifelong process; teacher education is always engaged with past, present, and future; teacher education is an educative relationship among people; and teacher education occurs on a continuum. Indeed, prior experience is
always in play as students endeavor to learn what being a teacher is all about. Britzman (1992) agrees with this more recursive conceptualization of teacher education. She sees teacher education as a process of “becoming a teacher” not “learning to teach.” This distinction is significant in that it speaks to the complexity of teacher identity and the ongoing, dynamic nature of the teacher education process. While learning to teach is often constructed as an individual journey, examples from the field demonstrate that it actually is a socially negotiated process situated in multiple settings, demanding reorientations of knowledge of self and others, and involving cultural myths and identity issues (Britzman, 1991a).

Britzman (1991b), Johnston (1994), and others (Clandinin & Connelly, 1995; McWilliam, 1994) have questioned the idea that learning to teach occurs as if following a pre-made map or designated path. Similarly, Clandinin (1995) suggests a “new plot line” for conceptualizing the process of learning to teach. She believes teacher education should be grounded in the acts of retelling and re-living stories in order to reconstruct understandings of the past, future, and present. Clandinin’s work (1993) with a collaborative group of teachers and teacher educators focuses on using stories to make sense of teaching practice, reject the constructed divide between theory and practice, and conceptualize teaching as an improvisational art guided by an ethic of caring. Engaging personal narrative has emerged as an effective tool in the preparation of teachers and an essential element of efforts toward multicultural teacher education.

According to Grumet (1988), the use of story in teacher education disrupts androcentric and hegemonic structures by elevating story to a more substantial status within knowledge hierarchies. By changing teacher education in this way, we increase our
chances of changing not only students’ beliefs and assumptions, but also changing their basic conceptions of knowledge. When knowledge is understood as socially constructed, teaching and learning becomes a site for social and political transformation. Accordingly, helping prospective teachers recognize how their practice is guided by past experiences is an important element of any teacher education initiative. Unfortunately, this process will not always be welcomed by students and may prove daunting for teacher educators. Based on her research and practice, Hollingsworth (1989) contends that student teachers’ original beliefs can only be “changed if students are willing and able to confront their beliefs in deeply personal and academically challenging ways” (p. 91). As teacher educators we can help novice teachers a they engage in the hard work of trying to explicate what they believe about such concepts as childhood, literature, and diversity and equity.

2.3.1) Efforts Toward Multicultural Teacher Education

The multicultural agenda for teacher education can be traced back as far as 1973 when the American Association of Colleges of Teacher Education issued its first commission on the subject (Gollnick, 1995). However, progress has been slow and there is little consensus in the field as to what it means to prepare teachers for culturally-relevant teaching in diverse classrooms (Goodwin, 1997; Zeichner, 1993). Because schools are places embedded in and influenced by the broader political, economic and social climate, the overpowering reality of our schooling system is that we continue to distribute the benefits and advantages of education inequitably. Multicultural teacher preparation aimed at confronting the reality of these inequities and facilitating students’
journey of “coming to grips with their own personal and cultural values and identities” lays the groundwork for the enactment of anti-racism, critical pedagogy, and multiculturalism in classrooms (Banks, 1991, p. 139).

In her recently published study of beginner teachers in diverse classrooms, Ladson-Billings (2001) argues that teacher education should be about a process of change. Rather than “reacting” to the reality of diversity in our schools, Ladson-Billings suggests that we focus teacher preparation on issues of diversity, equity, and social justice. Her vision for the future of teaching and teacher education varies greatly from the arguments posed by administrators and policymakers. Ladson-Billings’ agenda for a transformative kind of teacher education depends on preservice teachers’ perspectives on academic achievement, efforts toward cultural competence, and developing sociopolitical consciousness. Teachers should be called to recognize how their biased thinking may contribute to students’ inability to achieve. Reading and responding to multicultural literature can promote in prospective teachers a deeper understanding of their own group affiliations and how those affiliations mean in the larger sociocultural and political arena.

Melnick and Zeichner (1998) assert that multicultural teacher education is a “critical need and a moral imperative” (p. 92). If teacher educators hope to convince preservice teachers to identify and reject the manifestations and consequences of racism, sexism, and other destructive forces, we must design teacher education programs that focus on openly and honestly exploring students’ values and feelings about these issues. If learning to teach involves coming to terms with one’s intentions and values, multicultural teacher education should begin with self-inquiry and multicultural children’s literature is one avenue to take towards that end. It may facilitate the process
of understanding and uncovering ourselves and others as conditioned and socially
crafted beings, enabling us to deconstruct the myths, privileges, and practices that
have maintained uneven power relations in our society.

Some practitioners have forged a multicultural practice by engaging personal
narrative, calling specifically on autobiography. For example, Allen and Labbo (2001)
describe a cultural memoir project they conduct with preservice teachers. Students utilize
photographs, souvenirs, and journal writing to reflect on significant passages in their
lives. The goal is to help students develop a critical, multicultural approach to teaching
by uncovering and naming their own cultural, historical, and social points of engagement.
Similarly, Clark and Medina (2000) invited students to read and write literacy narratives
in order to expose gendered and racialized aspects of literacy. Narratives of people of
color and women were selected based on the teacher educators’ desire to demonstrate
how language is at the center of identity development. Reflecting on these stories and
writing their own literacy stories provoked the student teachers to think critically about
issues of multiculturalism, literacy, identity, and teaching. Their analysis of this work
revealed that through reading and writing literacy narratives preservice teachers began to
develop “a deeper conception of what literacy is and can be” and came to view literacy as
a “social and political act” rather than simply skills to acquire” (p. 69). Clark and Medina
conclude that narrative work can succeed at:

- disrupting preservice teachers’ stereotyped conceptions of others;
- enabling preservice teachers to make connections between their personal
  narratives and other people’s narratives;
- allowing preservice teachers to make personal connections to theory by
  providing a more concrete context for understanding theory;
- facilitating preservice teacher’s recognition of the limits and partiality of their
  perspectives. (p. 72)
Teacher educators face many challenges in pursuing the goals outlined above by Clark and Medina. In the college classroom, disrupting stereotypes may come with conflict, yet sharing personal stories demands vulnerability. Helping concretize theoretical understandings positions teacher educators as experts, but recognizing limitations and the partiality of any given perspective involves the dismantling of authority (of both the students and the teacher educators). These contradictions and conundrums may frustrate teacher educators who hope their students will embrace multiculturalism. However, we must face these challenges as a way to both model and nurture the development of culturally relevant practices. Dillard (1997) understands these dilemmas of comfort and confrontation and suggests a dialogical kind of teacher education pedagogy involving problem-posing and critical discussion. Additionally, she asserts that participatory learning during teacher preparation will result in more democratic teaching techniques as the potential for a cooperative, self-designed, and creative curriculum is realized. Dillard specifically describes the kind of relationships teacher educators should strive to create in their classrooms in order to foster multicultural teaching in their students:

Preservice teachers should expect honest, trusting, more egalitarian relationships with teacher educators and significant others during their teacher preparation. These relationships must be built on mutual respect and value the personal attributes, language background, and orientation of both the preservice teacher and teacher educator. (p. 94)

Relationships characterized by respect and trust will enable teacher educators and student teachers to tackle the difficult work of confronting our pasts. hooks (1994) advises that
building community is not done “by the eradication of difference, but by its affirmation, by each of us claiming the identities and cultural legacies that shape who we are and how we live in the world” (p. 84). In this spirit, preparing teachers for diverse classrooms should not diminish differences between and among diverse groups of people, but take a look at how those differences function as sources of power and contribute to a deeply stratified and inequitable society. Further, explorations of identities and “cultural legacies” will enable prospective teachers to better understand the meaning of difference in their lives and the lives of the children they will teach.

Mutual respect and collaborative, caring relationships are certainly important in any teacher education effort that calls on personal narrative to promote multiculturalism. However, reflection and “story sharing” must be combined with sometimes painful critiques and revelations because “it is insufficient to allow students merely to make connections to their own pasts without exploring those pasts through multicultural lenses” (Delpit, 1995, p. 126). While teaching a course called “Racism and Human Development” which promotes anti-racism and multiculturalism, Derman-Sparks and Phillips (1997) found that students often struggle with feelings of alienation from their own racial and cultural identities. This process involves a rethinking, reclaiming, and reaffirming of who students are as they come to see racism, sexism, and other forms of oppression as institutional forces that have personal and political impact. One of the most powerful aspects of the teaching approach described by Derman-Sparks and Phillips is the focus on student’s discovery of the contradictions in their stance on racism.

Sleeter (1995) tries to involve preservice teachers in actively constructing a sense of how discrimination works by drawing on their experiences and providing simulations
and inquiry investigations. In Sleeter’s report on her work with predominantly white middle class preservice teachers, she describes a conflict between the students’ worldview and the principles of multicultural education. She describes many of these students as lacking knowledge of the historical roots of oppressive structures and fights for freedom and holding misconceptions about the nature and impact of discrimination. Sleeter recommends direct reteaching of history through texts such as “Eyes on the Prize” and other pieces that illuminate multiple viewpoints and reveal institutional racism. She also proposes student-led investigations and field experiences that push students to confront injustices in schools and communities.

Melnick and Zeichner (1998) present the following as traits of preservice teachers who have participated in successful programs geared toward multiculturalism:

- consciousness of oneself (beliefs, perspectives, patterns of behavior);
- attentiveness to others (skills such as observing, listening, encouraging);
- openness to change (self-evaluation and feedback from others);
- understanding of the cultural dimensions of people’s lives and their impact on learning;
- ability to analyze educational systems and their impact on the learning environment. (p. 91)

Those characteristics provide concrete examples of the goals of multicultural teacher education. Sadly, efforts toward multicultural teacher preparation often begin and end with adding courses or modifying individual course content. While they describe the positive outcomes of several programs that have attempted to prepare teachers for cultural diversity, Melnick and Zeichner (1998) found little empirical evidence of long-term success with multicultural approaches to teacher preparation in their comprehensive review. They conclude that some evidence exists indicating a positive and immediate
impact on prospective teachers’ attitudes and dispositions. However, research also reports unclear effects and distinct forms of resistance (Alquist, 1992; Sleeter, 1995; Melnick & Zeichner, 1997). The lack of consensus regarding the success of these efforts toward preparing teachers for diversity contributes to problems of institutional and broad-based support. Teacher educators are still exploring pedagogy and programs that prioritize self-awareness, personal reflection, and critical examination of texts and lives as methods of cultivating a commitment to multiculturalism in future teachers.

Throughout the late twentieth century, professional groups and scholars began to articulate more specifically the profound need for multicultural teacher education. In 1977, Gay proposed knowledge, attitudes, and skills essential for multicultural teaching and teacher education programs finally began to consider the importance of cultural awareness in preparing teachers (Goodwin, 1997). Throughout the eighties and nineties scholars continued to theorize multiculturalism and the idea that self-awareness should be addressed in teacher education began to garner support. In fact, Sleeter (1992) indicates that self-knowledge ought to precede content and strategic approaches in teacher preparation. Melnick and Zeichner (1997) also see self-knowledge as a crucial step in “socializing” teachers to see themselves as members of a pluralistic society and fostering their ability and desire to value cultures other than their own. In an edited collection of research from the field, Larkin and Sleeter (1995) and their colleagues describe their efforts to “redesign” teacher education curricula to better prepare preservice teachers for working in diverse settings and assert that a “basic reconceptualization of the process of preparing teachers” is called for (p. 9). Many of the instructional strategies described by teacher educators committed to multiculturalism
are grounded in constructivism and critical theory. Therefore, the use of personal narratives and multicultural texts to promote self-reflection fit with the tradition of multicultural teacher preparation.

2.4) Multicultural Children’s Literature

The definitions and characterizations of multicultural children’s literature described next are aligned with the larger agenda of multicultural education. Multicultural children’s literature provides a landscape of hope and struggle through which readers attempt to read not only the word but the world (Freire, 1970). Multicultural literature has the potential to be a powerful force in efforts toward multiculturalism by affirming diversity while prompting a questioning of the status quo. Cai and Bishop (1994) explain that multicultural literature is “one component of the multicultural education movement and is generally intended to further the goals of that movement” (p. 58). According to Nieto (1996) the goals of the multicultural education movement are to “challenge and reject racism and other forms of discrimination in schools and society and accept and affirm the pluralism (ethnic, racial, linguistic, religious, economic, and gender, among others) that students, their communities, and teachers represent” (p. 307). This balance between naming and interrupting racism while honoring diversity occurs in the best of multicultural children’s literature. Multicultural children’s literature that invites readers to see themselves reflected in story answers Nieto’s call to accept and affirm diversity. Multicultural texts that incite readers to reflect critically on their assumptions about reality, identity, and social relations answer Nieto’s call to reject and challenge discrimination. Active and passionate debate and
research about multicultural children’s literature continues (Bishop, 1994; Cai, 1998; Enciso, 1997; Harris, 1996; Shannon, 1994; Schwartz, 1995; Taxel, 1992; Fox & Short, 2003), but Cai and Bishop (1994) attempt to clarify the concept by arguing that its definition is “contingent not on its literary characteristics, but on the purposes it is supposed to serve” (p. 58). For my purposes, the characteristics, definitions, and possibilities of multicultural children’s literature are in accordance with the tenets of the multicultural education movement.

According to Cai (1995), the purposes of multicultural children’s literature should be “to give voice to those who have been historically silenced, to represent those who have been underrepresented, and to give true faces back to those whose images have been distorted” (p. 14). Stories that feature previously silenced voices resonate with readers because they are personal accounts of real-life events. By engaging with these texts readers bear witness (albeit removed and distant) to the events the writer is relating. Multicultural texts invite readers to listen to the stories and hear the voices of young people struggling to make sense of their own realities. Readers are also called to reflect on the issues presented in the texts. Multicultural children’s literature, like all good literature, compels students to bring forth their own stories as they try to understand the story being told. Bakhtin (1981) describes this phenomenon when he speaks of dialogism; "everything means, is understood, as a part of a greater whole - there is a constant interaction between meanings” (p. 426). Multicultural children’s literature invites this kind of dialogic search for meaning by compelling readers to confront their own biases as well as those institutionalized within society through interactions with story.
Multicultural children’s literature is an essential element of any pedagogy that seeks to achieve the goals of multicultural education. Some educators view multicultural literature simply as a way of sharing stories that celebrate diversity. However, mediating multicultural children’s literature demands more of us; both universal themes and representations of difference must be critically examined. In books that accentuate difference, universality can be found too. In books that present themes of universality, issues of difference also emerge. The call for affirmation and the acceptance of pluralism in children’s literature is a positive trend, however this focus should not eclipse or diminish the call to stand against the oppressive forces that divides us. Systematic classism, racism, homophobia, sexism, and other forms of marginalization and oppression must not be overlooked in the name of multiculturalism. In her discussion of Asian Pacific American children’s literature, Yamate (1997) addresses the issue of balancing an emphasis on pluralism with the call for a deeper, more critical kind of understanding across cultures:

Some might argue that if a book is not generic enough to communicate with and appeal to all people, then that may be a flaw in the book. That may be true. But it needs to be balanced against the recognition that the book that is less universal in appeal may be the book that allows a reader to experience a new way of looking at the world, to re-examine long (sometimes blindly) held values, to move beyond the superficial and discover a deeper understanding of other people as individuals, to accept and appreciate difference and diversity, and to truly incorporate tolerance for and understanding of diversity into the reader’s soul. (p. 102)

Huck, Kiefer, Hepler, and Hickman’s (2004) widely used textbook concurs with Yamate’s description of the value of children’s literature. They classify the values of children’s literature as both personal and educational. The personal values include: “offers vicarious experiences,” “develops insight into human behavior,” and “presents the
universality of experience” (p. 6-9). These values are all important elements of multicultural children’s literature. Accordingly, multicultural literature is most successful when it reflects the universality of human experience (much like mirrors) while at the same time providing readers with vicarious experiences (much like windows) and insights into human behavior. In harmony within a text, universality, vicarious experiences, and insights into human behavior provoke responses that facilitate readers’ further understanding of themselves and their world. It is important to differentiate between vicarious and voyeuristic. The main purpose of multicultural literature is not to educate white middle class readers about “others.” Voyeuristic notions of reading only further relegate people of diverse backgrounds to “objects” rather than “subjects” (hooks, 1989). Books that illuminate the common threads that run through all human experience have the power to simultaneously reflect and refract. They show us ourselves, then they redirect or turn our gaze so that issues of power and difference are brought into play. In other words, the more profound and convincing the universality of a text, the more potential there is for the revelation of multiple realities, dynamic identities, and constructed meanings that have previously been obscured.

2.4.1) Windows and Mirrors

Since multicultural children’s literature grew out of the political movements for equality of the sixties and seventies, the goal of this trend has been to “to cultivate and nurture a more inclusive canon of children’s literature” (Taxel, 1995, p. 418). This canon should include books that act as mirrors for members of marginalized groups as well as
books that act as windows exemplifying the beauty and complexity of our shared human
existence for all readers. As Bishop (2000) reminds us:

Literature can help us discover that across time and place and cultures people
share certain fundamental human traits and desires and problems. At the same
time, literature affirms the great diversity that co-exists with shared human
commonalities….Literature emanating from particular socio-cultural contexts
offers multiple perspectives on life and society and history, portraying myriad
ways in which people of different times and places and cultures have dealt with
the problems of human existence. (p. 76)

When children’s literature focuses too much on mirroring the experience of the dominant
culture, a literary tradition of marginalization, self-aggrandizement, domination, and
over-generalization is perpetuated. As multicultural literature continues to emerge as a
powerful force in the world of children’s books, children who are members of oppressed
groups will be able to enjoy the privilege of books functioning as mirrors. Negative
stereotypes or other misrepresentations continue to taint children’s literature and some
children are still eclipsed from the worlds portrayed in children’s books. Additionally,
members of dominant groups are seldom challenged to face the lives of others in their
reading. While I do not subscribe to the naive idea that reading about someone unlike
yourself enables you to understand that other person’s reality or that we can expect
literature to do the work of freeing society from social injustice, I do believe that
multicultural texts have the potential to promote change in the hearts and minds of
readers - the larger consequences of that are unforeseeable.

Readers enter the lives of others each time they break the binding of a book.
Peeking into someone else’s life through a book provides readers with experiences that
have often been described as escapism or living vicariously. Children’s books encourage
young readers to step into other worlds and share the hopes, dreams, disappointments, loves, and simply the daily routines of featured characters. Readers transcend their own limited reality and participate in the construction of meaning and negotiation of alternative realities through reading. Children’s literature, specifically multicultural children’s literature, can enable readers to travel beyond the familiarity of their individual worlds. Galda (1998) and Bishop (1990, 1994) have both explored the metaphor of literature as windows and mirrors in their work on multicultural children’s literature. When readers share common experiences with story characters the metaphor of a mirror applies as they see reflections of themselves. Multicultural texts offer long overdue mirrors to readers whose communities and cultures are under-represented in the canon of children’s literature. The window metaphor applies when readers meet unfamiliar characters or find themselves immersed in a story that describes experiences they have not shared; they take a glimpse into someone else’s reality. Bishop (1994) emphasizes that “children need literature that serves as a window into lives and experiences different from their own, and literature that serves as a mirror reflecting themselves and their cultural values, attitudes, and behaviors” (p. xiv).

As the definitions provided earlier indicate, multicultural children’s literature is valuable on multiple levels. It provides opportunities for readers from diverse backgrounds to see themselves reflected accurately and meaningfully in books, something that is long overdue. All children deserve to see themselves reflected positively throughout our media-ruled culture. Some groups are still completely invisible, marginalized, or inaccurately and negatively represented. Multicultural children’s literature also provides readers from the dominant culture with the chance to
gain insight into lives of people different from themselves. These readers will likely see commonalities between themselves and characters that are different from them; that is the potential of imagination contained in any quality piece of literature. Hopefully both insider and outsider readers will also see how societal forces have colluded to divide and oppress based on such factors as race, class, gender, and culture. It should be noted here that considering the legacy of the “all-white world of children’s books” (Larrick in Sims [Bishop], 1983) children of color have long found reading meaningful and inspiring through experiences of windows. Additionally, the purpose or main function of multicultural literature is not to educate white children about “others.” That would just be further white self-aggrandizement and perpetuation of hegemonic domination.

Multicultural literature invites readers to see reflections of themselves and others through the sharing of stories that have historically been excluded. This literature also challenges or incites readers as they see themselves and others both reflected and refracted as multiple perspectives and divergent realities come into view. As readers see reflections of themselves they may come to understand their lives and worlds more deeply or with more clarity. However, sometimes these reflections confuse or challenge readers’ understandings of reality. Edmiston and Enciso (2003) describe how reflections and refractions function during classroom drama. They use the term refracted to explain how children’s values, relationships, and identities are challenged and contested. Based on their work and Bakhtin’s idea of dialogism, these refractions allow for the "dynamic interplay of contested, yet interrelated beliefs and interests with the potential for continual transformation of meaning” (Edmiston & Enciso, p. 874). Accordingly,
reflections, mirror images, and refracted visions all come into play as readers attempt to make sense of themselves, their world, and multicultural children’s literature.

In the introduction to *Origins of Story*, the editors describe the best literature as that which “unriddles the world, encourages reflection, and deepens appreciation for both the peril and promise of life” (Harrison and Maguire, 1999, p. xii). Indeed, multicultural literature encourages reflection, but helping readers unriddle the world is a more challenging call. The first step to unriddling the world must be *seeing* the world. Texts that mirror reader’s lives only provide a partial reflection. Multicultural literature has the potential to allow readers’ to see more realistically and more deeply both their world and the worlds of others. Young readers’ attempts to understand the world must involve far more than trying to understand themselves or arbitrary and faceless others. With multicultural children’s literature, readers gain glimpses into the realities of people unlike themselves, as if looking through a window. They may also gain insight into their own realities by taking a deeper look at themselves as if with a mirror. Multicultural children’s literature has the potential to dramatically transform readers’ understanding of themselves and the world by bringing into view multiple and divergent images of reality. Bruner (1986) states that literature “renders the obvious less so, the unknowable less so as well, matters of value more open to reason and intuition” (p. 159). He further characterizes literature as an instrument of freedom, light, and imagination. Depictions of multiple realities, negotiable social relations, and shifting identities challenge readers’ taken-for-granted understandings of themselves and their world may be altered.
2.4.2) The Potential of Multicultural Children’s Literature

It is not enough for multicultural books to comfort white readers by proving the commonalities between cultures. It is valuable, but still not enough for members of disenfranchised groups to finally get the long overdue privilege of seeing themselves authentically represented in texts. Books that provide mirrors for one or more groups by accentuating the universality of our common humanity are very worthwhile. However, the potential of multicultural children’s literature depends on its ability to invite and incite readers to construct meaning, (re)position themselves, and grasp multiple realities. By functioning simultaneously as mirrors that reflect, this literature may comfort, but by functioning as windows they challenge or refract to bring into view issues of power and difference at work in our oppressive society. In this way, multicultural literature provides the terrain over which readers may re-envision themselves and the world. As readers engage with children’s literature they may see themselves reflected in the story on a personal and emotional level that provides great comfort and affirmation. This is particularly significant and powerful when children from marginalized groups encounter this through reading experiences with multicultural texts. When readers experience a disconnect with the worlds described in text they may: gain insight into why perceptions of difference, historically and currently, have been the cause of so much injustice and derision; begin to examine how they might be implicated in our oppressive society; and find themselves transformed in some way through these experiences. Mirrors and windows describe the power and potential of multicultural children’s literature, but which way a text will function for readers is not predictable or clear cut. This is due to the nature of the literary transaction (Rosenblatt, 1978, 1983) that occurs during the reading
process. Readers construct shifting meanings, (re)position themselves, and grasp contradictory realities through transactions with multicultural children’s literature.

In her reflections on writing for children, Virginia Hamilton (1993) described several of her texts as fitting into a concept she calls Liberation Literature. According to Hamilton’s analysis, in Liberation Literature

The reader travels with the character in the imagined world of the book and bears witness to the character’s trials and suffering and triumphs. To the extent that protagonist finds liberty, so too does the witness, the reader, recognize the struggle as a personal one and perceive a spiritual sense of freedom within. (p. 375)

Hamilton’s term applies to texts such as Anthony Burns (1988) and Many Thousand Gone (1993) which chronicle stories of survival, rebellion and resistance, and escape from bondage. Obviously, not all multicultural children’s literature involves the same kind of historic and collective liberation. However, texts that can be categorized as multicultural often involve stories of strength and survival and hold the power to transform readers in a way similar to that of Hamilton’s Liberation Literature. By dynamically revealing diverse views of social reality, multicultural children’s literature holds the potential to empower and transform readers. Multicultural children’s literature often enables readers to see themselves, recognize the struggles of others as that of humankind, and experience someone else’s pain and joy as kindred spirits.

Hamilton’s concept of bearing witness in Liberation Literature sheds light on the way readers might respond to multicultural children’s literature. If readers can be transformed by witnessing “trials and suffering and triumphs” in Liberation Literature, other forms or levels of transformation are certainly possible. Felman (1992) and her
colleagues in the field of psychology attempt to further theorize “how the act of writing is tied up with the act of bearing witness.” They explain that “the act of reading literary texts itself is inherently related to the act of facing horror” (p. 2). Felman’s analysis involves texts geared toward adults that present historic and traumatic crises, but her notion of “alignment between witnesses” does provide a way of talking about how young readers may experience multicultural literature that addresses issues of social justice. Felman asserts that a “conflation of text and life” occurs when textual testimony “penetrate[s] us like an actual life” (p. 12). If reading is conceptualized as a form of witnessing, the process of literary understanding compels us to create and recreate our actual selves, much like Hamilton describes. Reading as transformation can only happen if readers have the opportunity to hear the voices of people like and unlike themselves in situations like and unlike ones they have experienced. The act of reading, through response and interpretation, enables young readers to better understand the social construction of reality and the dynamic nature of identities and social relations. Through transactions with multicultural texts, readers negotiate their existence in and understanding of the world by bearing witness to the lives of others.

Davies’ (2000) poststructural analysis of the books of Janette Turner Hospital echoes the ideas of Felman and Hamilton. According to Davies, the experiences and stories presented in texts are “potentially lived again by each reader, in each reading of it” (p. 190). She goes on to explain:

We enter into the novel as another form of living in the world through imagining the lives of others as we bring them to life on the page. In doing so, we live the emotions of the characters, experience life from their point of view, and expand our consciousness to include the possibility that we lived there in the writing/reading. (p. 182)
The idea of expanding consciousness has been embraced by feminists and critical theorists as a means of social and political transformation. In his work with members of Brazil’s peasantry, Freire (1970/1995) refined this idea, naming the phenomenon conscientizacao. This process involves learning to perceive political and economic contradictions and take action against oppressive elements. While it is unlikely that literature will be a sole source of conscientizacao, it does hold the potential to contribute to radical changes in thinking.

Grosz (1995) describes literature as unpredictable and explosive in the spirit of Davies and other poststructuralists: “texts, like concepts, do things, make things, perform actions, create connections, bring about new alignments. They are events - situated in social, institutional, and conceptual space” (p. 126). The situatedness of texts and readers’ responses to them has been explored by scholars who argue that reading is gendered and racialized (Enciso, 1998; Flynn & Schweickart, 1989; Morrison, 1992) and that stories only make sense within sociocultural frames of reference (Hall, 1985). Many researchers have found that multicultural children’s literature provides a powerful reading experience and challenges readers to critically examine the world (Enciso, 1994 & 2001a; Glenn-Paul, 1998; Ford, Tyson, Howard, & Harris, 2000; Tyson, 1999, for example). Reading and literary understanding cannot adequately be explained by the metaphor of mirrors and windows. Multicultural books that grapple with issues of identity and raise questions about social justice complicate the idea of books as mirrors and windows. Texts that present multiple voices and perspectives may interfere with the clear view through a traditional window.
Multicultural literature provides a forum for all kinds of stories to be shared; hopefully some of the stories will remind readers of their mutual humanity while others will alert readers to the fact that there are still walls dividing them from the storytellers. Regardless, if readers’ perceptions of the world can be altered, perhaps eventually the realities of the world can be changed too. It is unrealistic to believe that literature can do the work of changing the world; my theoretical position is that literature holds the potential to reveal something new to readers and possibly compel them to consider changes in dispositions and actions. While the consequences of that kind of change may not be clearly measurable, it does offer some measure of hope.

2.5) Theories of Literary Understanding

A teacher can open a book and begin to read aloud from it to students, but she can never know or control the sense that students will make of it. (Ellsworth, 1997, p. 64)

The emergence of multicultural children’s literature and the ensuing debates exist alongside ongoing theoretical discussions of the nature of reading and literary understanding. Theories of literary understanding have been asserted throughout the twentieth century by followers of formalism, reader response theory, and critical literacy. Formalism focuses on structural elements of text and theories of narrative representation positing that meaning resides in the text. I.A. Richards (1929), for instance, insisted that personality and past experiences hindered reader’s ability to find the “true understanding” of text. Based on my teaching experience, I am confident that these ideas are still embraced by teachers and student alike. Perhaps, as Hamilton (1993) states, “we trust
ourselves least of all to guide and interpret, and to bring our own experiences to bear on the reading of books" (p. 119). Rosenblatt (1978) challenged this concept of predetermined meaning in literature when she presented her theory of the literary transaction. Rosenblatt describes a “live circuit” and the active role of readers in the process of meaning construction or literary understanding. According to the transactional theory a reader draws on experience and identity to construct a personal text or poem out of her reaction. Meaning emerges out of the interplay between, the reader, the text, and the poem which is created by a “specific reader and a specific text in a specific time and place” (p.11). Scholars have not reached consensus on Rosenblatt’s position. Some see her transactional theory as part of the movement toward democratizing education in the spirit of Dewey, while others find evidence of cognitivist leanings or worry that she essentializes individuality (Dias, 1992; Dressman & Webster, 2001; Willinsky, 1991).

Rosenblatt’s description of the transaction indicates a non-linear relationship between reader and text; readers do not act upon text nor do texts act upon readers. While she does not embrace the tenets of critical theory or poststructuralism specifically, she does call on aspects of culture in her explanation of what happens during reading:

Each reader brings to the transaction not only a specific past life and literary history, not only a repertory of internalized ‘codes,’ but also a very active present, with all its preoccupations, anxieties, questions, and inspirations. These have played a role in achieving both the work-as-evoked and his interpretation of it. (1978, p. 144)

In Rosenblatt’s theory, readers “pull the text inside out” thus making the literary experience a “synthesis of what the reader already knows and feels and desires with what the text offers” (p. 272). Her theory begins to address the influence of readers’ cultural
and literacy histories in the meaning making process, something many researchers are grappling with today and will surely continue to explore. Since Rosenblatt, theorists have been struggling to further characterize the processes involved in and nature of literary understanding. The variety of perspectives demonstrates the lack of consensus in the field about how literary understanding emerges and the need for further research into nature of the reading process.

Iser’s (1978) belief that the work of readers involves actively filling in gaps supports the idea of the reader’s active role in meaning construction. According to Iser, literary understanding emerges from reader’s experience of a “wandering viewpoint” as they travel between character’s varying perspectives. Fish (1980) asserts that readers are constrained and enabled by the interpretive communities in which they are reading or learning. According to Fish, both the text itself and the reader’s interpretation are shaped by contextual factors. Holland (1975) takes a psychoanalytic approach suggesting that “identity themes” determine the meaning readers make as they read their own personalities into the literature. Similarly, Beach (1993) describes how social roles and relationships in classrooms and other contexts inform readers’ responses. He further asserts that meaning is framed by personal history. Many scholars have sought to explain how understandings of the imagined world of the text is constructed out of reader’s understanding of their lived experience.

Langer’s (1995) work on engagement and response to literature calls on Rosenblatt and Iser among others as she addresses the imagined worlds or “envisionments” readers create during the meaning construction process. Langer presents four stances: being out and stepping in, being in and moving through, being in
and stepping out, and stepping out and objectifying experience. Langer suggests a reader-based theory of meaning-making. According to her model, in the process of understanding what we read we generate local text-worlds which she calls envisionments. These envisionments represent what the reader understands from the text. “Being out and stepping into an envisionment” describes acts of gathering information in an attempt to build the text world. “Being in and moving through an envisionment” refers to acts of developing an interpretation through the use of personal knowledge in order to build and elaborate textual understandings. “Stepping back and rethinking what one knows” involves reflecting on personal knowledge and using those reflections to rethink previously held ideas, beliefs, and feelings. “Stepping out and objectifying the experience” means taking a critical stance by distancing oneself from the text in order to analyze the reading experience or aspects of the text. These stances only begin to describe the diversity and complexity of experiences readers may have when transacting with and responding to literary texts.

Sipe (2000) also attempts to explain how meaning is constructed during reading and responding to text. He suggests five major characteristics of literary understanding: analytical, intertextual, personal, transparent, and performative. In the analytical style, the text served as an object for the analytic work of the readers. Analytic literary understanding involved comparisons between fiction and reality or a focus on the language of the story, for example. In intertextual literary analysis readers compared the text at hand to other cultural texts or products. In the personal approach to literary understanding readers connect the text to their personal lives. They were drawn to texts or drew from texts as impetus for self-knowledge, growth, or empathy. In life-to-text
examples the children used experience from their lives to understand the text. In text-to-life examples the children use the text to understand something in their own lives. The transparent literary understanding involved intense engagement with the text. These students were the most highly manipulated by the story, they truly seemed to have “lived through” the text in the spirit of Rosenblatt. These readers seemed to merge with the text which becomes for that moment their identity. In the performative component of literary understanding readers entered the story in order to manipulate it for their own creative purposes. The text was a platform for their performance of self-expression.

According to Sipe, these facets of literary understanding undergird three basic literary impulses. These include the hermeneutic, the aesthetic, and personalizing. The goal of the hermeneutic impulse is to understand the story. It is enacted through analytic and intertextual responses. The aesthetic impulse is enacted through transparent and performative responses as readers immerse themselves in the experience of story. The personalizing impulse is the desire to link or connect ourselves to the text. It is the urge to draw the story to oneself and forge a reciprocal exchange between text and life.

Like Sipe, critical literacy theorists emphasize the role of intertextuality as readers forge literary understanding. They emphasize the dynamic interplay between the reader’s world and the text. According to Belsey (1980) postmodernism, both as an era and as an ideological movement, brought with it a questioning of the nature of literature and how it communicates. She describes critical practice as a break from "expressive realism" which considered art a somewhat uncomplicated imitation of reality. In traditional expressive theory, "meaning was what the author put in the text" (p. 17). Critical theory challenges that assumption, placing the issue of meaning in the reader's hand and
acknowledging the "inevitable plurality" of text (p. 27). The understanding that meaning resides with readers brings with it a variety of questions regarding identity, context, authorial intention, and communities of readers.

Many critical theorists (Giroux, 1993; Lankshear & McLaren, 1993; Street, 1995, for example) argue the value of diverse perspectives and advocate for social and political transformation through literacy practices. Their work explores the relationships among literacy, education, and social change. Critical literacy scholars see literacies as multiple or plural and therefore reject essentializing notions of literacies. Within this framework, multiple and dynamic positionings are engaged by the codes or signs within a text relative to readers’ identities (Bakhtin, 1981; Derrida, 1989). Literary understanding is thus recognized as a complex social process of meaning making involving not only the text and the reader but the myriad influences shaping both text and reader as well as countless contextual aspects related to the act of reading. By emphasizing multiple interpretations, semiotics, and position theory, critical theorists move readers’ sense of self and “reading of the world” to the forefront of discussions of literary understanding. Authorial intention has been more overtly debunked within this theoretical tradition and essentializing the individuality of readers diminished by foregrounding the social.

In Smagorinsky’s (2001) attempt to explain the process of literary understanding, he revisits transactional theory, relies on critical and postmodern ideas, and addresses transformations as part of the reading process. He agrees that meaning is constructed but ponders what it is constructed from. Like Rosenblatt he believes readers create a "new text" in response to the text being read. He describes a "transactional zone" in which readers engage in the interpretation of the signs presented by texts. The meaning derived
from these texts or signs is dependent on culture which Smagorinsky describes as
readers’ histories of "texts, contexts, intertexts, and intercontexts" (p. 163). Again, it
seems clear that determinations of meaning do not emerge exclusively from either the
text or the reader. Rosenblatt rejects the idea of literature as “autonomous texts with
embodied determinate meaning” (p. 294, 1978). This means reading is a mediated act
with a dialogic function. Rosenblatt and others reject the idea of text having an inherent,
authoritative meaning. Yet, as recently as 1993, Applebee found that literary
understanding is still not approached as open-ended in classrooms. Social constructivist
educators are still struggling to change classrooms so that teaching and learning reflects
the interdependence of social, cultural, and individual processes in the construction of
meaning.

2.6) Similar Studies

In my survey of related literature, I found that many scholars (Enciso, 1998; Sipe,
2000, for example) assert that literary understanding or interpretation is based on
associations with text as much as the text itself. Wolf (2001) argues that readers make
sense of themselves through the work of making sense of texts. Sipe (2000) further
proposes that how readers use the text of their lives to interpret texts may reveal more
about the readers themselves than about the text. Based on her work in her own primary
classroom, Gallas (1998) concluded that “understandings of texts and social relations are
collectively forged” within classroom communities which are unique, living, and rife
with evolving understandings and identities (p. 76). Enciso (1997) questions how texts,
along with classroom culture and social structures, position readers and provoke
particular responses. Poststructuralists have pushed the boundaries of social constructivism by asserting that readers approach texts based on certain assumptions and positions determined by social practices. Cherland (1992) considers the role of subjectivity in literary understanding. She defines subjectivity as the socially constructed positions people take up which deeply impact identity and self-understanding. Feminist poststructuralism reminds us that meaning is socially constructed and that our identities are constructed through social negotiations, language, and discourse. As Grumet (1991) reminds us, “no one knows alone. We speak in a world already spoken. We see in a world already seen” (p. 207). In this study, I conceive of reading mainly as a social practice, focusing on response as a vehicle for negotiation of identity, construction of meaning, and judgment of quality.

Enciso’s work addresses how multicultural children’s literature poses questions regarding children’s identities and perspectives and describes how readers “borrow and transfer cultural references” (1997, p. 34). In other words, readers create social positions and definitions for themselves through literature. Readers’ constructions of and participation in story worlds are culturally embedded. Literature calls up personal experience, allowing for ownership of meanings and possibilities of texts. In another piece of research, Enciso (2004) describes her goal of engaging readers in “looking at reading and our work together as the site for multiple, often contradictory positions and interpretations.” Indeed, multiple and contradictory aptly describe the process of literary understanding as readers engage with multicultural children’s literature.

Britzman (1992) uses a poststructural lens to explore assumptions about the nature of identity and social reality. She differentiates between roles and identities.
According to her analysis, roles are related to function whereas identities are tied up with investments and commitments. Her assertion is that identities are “produced and reproduced through social interactions” (p. 26). Reading and responding constitute such interactions. Britzman’s work is useful in discussions of multicultural children’s literature because race, class, gender, and other markers of identity are often at the heart of these texts and the center of our understanding of reality. Multicultural literature draws readers into dialogue about identity and thus a negotiation of positions. In another article, Britzman (1991a) calls teachers and students to “acknowledge identities as overburdened with contradiction” (p. 94). The work of Britzman and Enciso reminds us that perspectives on reality, social relations, and identity positions are dynamic, partial, and socially constructed. Social practices as lived out in classrooms and other communities inform readers’ constructions of text and reality. The limitations and possibilities of these constructions are called into question through critical literacy approaches and multicultural children’s literature.

Athanasas’ (1998) study of two urban tenth grade classrooms provides an example of the possibility of transformative reading. He found students’ process of reading, interpreting, and responding to multicultural texts to be in congruence with the metaphors of mirrors and windows described by Bishop (1990, 1994) and Galda (1998). The students in this study read books such as The Joy Luck Club by Amy Tan (1989), I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings by Maya Angelou (1969), and House Made of Dawn, by N. Scott Momaday (1966). The researcher found that students related to common themes presented in these stories such as family traditions and identity formation. The students’ responses to reading works by ethnically diverse writers also indicated that they were
beginning to reach across dividing lines. Athanases describes the students’ reading experiences:

They reported how their discoveries about diverse groups (identified by race, culture, gender, religion, or sexual orientation) helped them move past stereotyped notions of others….although students in this study identified with characters across lines of ethnicity, gender, and sexual orientation, they also reported a hunger for encounters with engaging literature that reflected their own experiences as defined by these group memberships and that affirmed, expanded, and helped define realities. (p. 293)

Athanases’ study reveals that while readers may sometimes naturally seek out stories that affirm their experience they are also drawn to stories of difference. When difference is constructed as “otherness” the hegemony of patriarchal white culture is maintained. However, when difference is presented through texts as a characteristic of our common humanity, it frees readers to create new understandings. Madeleine L’Engle (1999) points out that stories give shape, pattern, and meaning to what otherwise may have been overlooked or misunderstood by “us human beings who understand ourselves largely through the telling of stories” (p. 111). In this sense, the word “ourselves” refers to a collective notion, to the idea that we are all connected. If we believe there exists a “collective ourselves,” and if we work at fostering the strength and power of such an entity, then there exists not only a potential for understanding but for individual change and societal transformation.

Many teacher educators have taken on the challenges of investigating their own practices and their student’s experiences in literacy courses and in courses focused on diversity and equity. Wollman-Bonilla (1998) investigated pre- and inservice teachers’ views of multicultural literature. She found that her students rejected multicultural books
based on inappropriateness for children. Determinations of inappropriateness were explained with one of three reasons. One reason they reject texts is based on the belief that it might frighten or corrupt children by introducing them to things they are not already aware of. A second reason is that the book fails to represent dominant social values. A third reason given for rejection of the literature is that it identifies sexism or racism as a social problem. Similarly, while presenting multicultural literature to her preservice teachers, Glenn-Paul (1998) struggled to understand her students’ reactions to multicultural texts as well as her own reactions to both the texts and the students: “I stood on the ideological accuracy of my position, when I should have chosen to engage students in a reflective dialogue and present them with opportunities to examine their respective positions and reach their own conclusions” (p. 249). Recently, more researchers have been relying on their everyday classroom experiences to examine issues related to multicultural children’s literature.

Recently, several studies similar to mine in data sources and purposes have been conducted. Smith (2003) investigated her students in an undergraduate methods class. She paired multicultural novels with academic articles addressing culturally relevant teaching. Smith then accessed for student’s response journals as data sources for her research. She discovered that the books and scholarly readings motivated her students to rethink the purposes of literature in teaching and heightened their awareness of the challenges facing novice teachers. Fondrie completed a comparable study with a group of all-white preservice teachers. Their work in the college classroom focused on examining representations of whiteness in children’s literature. Fondrie’s analysis of her student’s journal entries reveal how “a more self-conscious racial identity” can be
developed through open debate about multicultural children’s literature (2001, p. 12). In a related work, teacher educators Brindley and Laframboise (2002) attempt to promote multiple perspectives in preservice teachers through experiences with multicultural children’s literature. They utilized process drama, reflective writing, reader’s theater, and panel discussions with 115 undergraduate students. They found that “in-role” simulations encouraged preservice teachers to reexamine their cultural beliefs. The students in this study seemed to increase their sensitivity around issues of diversity. They also had experiences of personal discomfort which led to further self-examination. Finally, the students began to see the importance of promoting multiple perspectives. Brindley and Laframboise argue for “the power of children’s literature to elicit strong affective responses and to cause adult readers to examine their own presumptions” (p. 415).

Wolf and her colleagues (2001, 2000, 1999) have further investigated the reading lives of preservice teachers. In one study, Wolf, Ballentine, and Hill (1999) reflect on the heated “right to write” debate concerning multicultural literature. In this research endeavor, Wolf invited her students to take up the questions of accuracy, authenticity, and aesthetics that arise when white or outside writers create stories that feature communities of which they are not a part. Through assigned readings, writing tasks, and interviews, the researchers examined preservice teachers’ understandings of these issues and the possibilities of shifts in those understandings. Wolf (2000) has also relied on the writing and sharing of personal stories to build cross-cultural bridges to both literacy and children through her teaching and research. In this project, the inquiry focused on preservice teacher’s literacy autobiographies and reflective journals from field placements. Using this data, the researcher sought to “understand how preservice
teachers’ preliminary understandings of what it means to be a teacher of literature might be transformed through the sharing of stories” (p. 541, 2000). In another recent piece, Wolf (2001) turns her inquiry again to a reading autobiography assignment. However, this time she focuses on a Japanese-American student who did not identify as an avid reader. This is a departure from the other two studies which addressed the challenges of preparing mostly white, avid readers for teaching in diverse classrooms. In her analysis, Wolf describes the text-to-life connections her student made while completing methods work for literacy and social studies. Wolf explains that the experiences in these classes helped her students learn to listen to their students and to reflect on the impact of their own life experience on how they view teaching, learning, literature, and diversity. Wolf concludes that one way to begin to “rework mainstream knowledge so that it becomes transformative” is through “the kinds of reading assigned to preservice teachers and the kinds of activities in which they participate” (p. 173, 1999).

Wolf commonly researches and publishes alongside students from her classes. These students functioned both as students and as researchers. In this way, the preservice teachers offer their own opinions rather than speak through the researcher. The university setting in which Wolf is teaching and researching has very little in common with my setting. My study may mirror hers in many ways and I certainly have used her work as a model, including guiding questions and methods of data collection and analysis. While my participants did not become co-researchers, I did remain always committed to inviting students to offer their opinions and speak for themselves within the context of the class.
2.7) Conclusion

The work of teacher educators has shaped this study. Since undertaking that work myself, I have relied on their research and reports from the field to understand this task. Theories related to multiculturalism are prevalent in the literature and further helped me situate my teaching and research. However, this research reported on here addresses the work or teacher education as it relates specifically to reading multicultural children’s literature with preservice teachers. Theories abound regarding the nature and potential of multicultural children’s literature. Researchers have investigated response to literature with young children, but few have focused on the responses of preservice teachers to multicultural literature in particular. When preservice teachers are “studied”, the pedagogy they are experiencing in the classroom is often ignored. I rely on research from teacher education and multicultural education in my project. I also utilize the theories of literary understanding and apply studies of reader response to my investigation. My research fills a gap in the literature by looking closely at a heterogeneous group of adult readers and considering their responses in light of my teaching.
CHAPTER 3

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY:

PROCEDURES AND PERSPECTIVES ON DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS

3.1) Introduction

Experiences ranging from taking children’s literature courses as an undergraduate to using multicultural children’s literature as an elementary and middle school teacher to teaching children’s literature to preservice teachers informed the research endeavor. Functioning as a teacher-researcher I set out to document my pedagogy and my students’ responses to multicultural texts. The chart below clarifies the timeline of the project.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Event Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>January 21, 2003</td>
<td>Proposal Approved</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>January 25, 2003</td>
<td>First class meeting of LIS 120. Data collection begins.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>January 26, 2003</td>
<td>Transcription and reflection analysis</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>January 26-May 10, 2003</td>
<td>Ongoing data collection and analysis.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>May 10, 2003</td>
<td>Last day of class with LIS 120 students.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>May 10, 2003 – present</td>
<td>Data analysis and writing.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1: Research Schedule

The site for the study was a small Catholic college (the pseudonym SCC is used for confidentiality and anonymity) in a major Midwestern city. Permission to conduct the study was granted from the Office of Research and Risks Protection as well as from the university site where the class took place. I met my students and the participants in the study for the first time on January 21 in our classroom at SCC. Twenty-two students
were enrolled in the class and all of them agreed to participation and confirmed this by signing the informed consent form. Data were collected over the course of a semester during which the class met every other Saturday.

This study is grounded in qualitative research traditions with interpretive, descriptive purposes (Erickson, 1986; Marshall & Rossman, 1989; Glesne, 1999). My inquiry began with an umbrella question which guided the investigation: *In what ways do preservice teachers map their own personal stories onto the stories in multicultural children’s literature?* In order to answer this overarching question, I needed to ask more specific questions about my students as readers, interpreters, and future teachers of multicultural children’s literature. I wanted to understand how my students negotiate identity and understand diversity through interactions with multicultural literature and each other. Accordingly, I investigated the following question: *What do their articulations of connection and disconnection with multicultural texts suggest about the role of personal stories in engagement, determinations of quality, and the meaning making process?* The project also demanded that I consider my pedagogy, which was specifically designed and enacted to promote the articulation of the necessary responses from my students. *How does my pedagogy help or hinder my students as they engage with multicultural literature? How are my pedagogical moves implicated in my students’ responses?*

In order to accomplish the goals of both my inquiry project and my pedagogy project, I approached the study as a practitioner-researcher choosing to utilize narrative methods within a critical/constructivist paradigm. This chapter explicates the methodology employed in the study. It is comprised of two distinct sections. The first
focuses on my research methodology while the other explores the methodology of my pedagogy. This division is artificial and serves mainly as an organizing structure. I begin the first section by contextualizing my methodology within the traditions of practitioner-research. I continue by describing narrative methods and how they fit with this study. I then go on to detail the data sources utilized and how I approached analysis, interpretation, and the writing process. In order to clarify my values and intentions as a teacher-researcher, I next include a section on ethical and epistemological issues. In the second section, pedagogy as research/research as pedagogy, I introduce the class. I describe SCC, my students, and my pedagogical approach to the course. I also provide my own responses to the multicultural books featured in the study.

3.2) Practitioner-Research

Terms such as teacher research, action research, classroom-based inquiry, and practitioner research all refer to ways of investigating classroom practices and pedagogy conducted by actual teachers rather than outside observers or researchers. These methods have gained both credibility and popularity in the field, particularly among elementary and secondary classroom teachers, but also among teacher educators. Traits of teacher research include: teacher-researchers act out of their own social, cultural, political, and ideological framework as opposed to one dictated by others; teacher-researchers rely on their own experiences in the classroom for problem-posing, data collection, and theorizing; and teacher-researchers seek answers to questions which are local or specific to their teaching life and classroom context (Baumann & Duffy-Hester, 2000). Ideally,
teacher research improves classroom practice and also provokes critical conversation with current trends in both theory and research.

This inquiry fits with practitioner-research because of my intention of improving my practice. However, this study mainly entails describing experience and seeking theoretical explanations for the ways in which preservice teachers respond to multicultural children’s literature. This systematic intentional inquiry about classroom life relies on purposeful action and observation, pedagogical interrogation, and theoretical reflection. Like many teacher researchers (Gallas 1998; Delpit, 1995, for example), my goal is to develop understandings through description of students’ experiences in the course. While I am motivated by a desire to improve my teaching, the primary purpose of this study is to develop local knowledge regarding the nature of preservice teacher’s interactions with multicultural children’s literature.

Practitioner-researchers gain access to communities because they are part of them; my intact classroom community afforded me the chance to better understand both my students and my practice. Working within the tradition of practitioner research, I have built scrutiny of my theoretical assumptions and pedagogical moves into the research process. Classrooms are teeming with opportunities to seek understandings and explanations as called for by qualitative research. We need to document the inner life of our classrooms if we are to argue that they are sites where change is taking place. Demerath (2001) suggests that learning is inherently a process of changing, thus that teaching is a process of persuasion. While my research investigation does not attempt to measure change, the ideas of change and persuasion are present in both my pedagogy and this inquiry. A critical examination of prior beliefs and personal history is crucial in
multicultural teacher education because certain systems of values and attitudes are enacted and legitimated by those with political power while others belief systems are marginalized, ignored, or negated. Through the work of recalling and retelling personal experience and reconsidering the meaning of these stories along with readings and discussions of multicultural children’s literature, preservice teachers may have the opportunity to perceive political and economic contradictions and injustices and be motivated to take action against them. Ladson-Billings (1999) suggests that preparing teachers for diverse student populations is “difficult, if not impossible” (p. 240). Based on these kinds of concerns I chose to use my own college classroom to investigate how preservice teachers map their own personal stories onto the stories in multicultural children’s literature and to consider what those “mappings” tell us about their work as meaning-makers and future literacy teachers. In order to provide answers to these questions, I speak as teacher, researcher, and learner throughout this document.

This inquiry involves collaboration with the students in that we spent a great deal of time as a class examining our work together. I functioned as both the researcher and as a member of the community featured in this study. Relying on an inquiry-based curriculum, my students and I sought definitions and standards for multicultural children’s literature. This work is ethnographic in that I worked with a culturally-defined group. That is, the population identifies as a discrete community. At minimum, students had the chance to make explicit their understandings of the issues being considered in the study. This happened through the normal routines and assignment in the class. Throughout the project I remained hesitant to be the sole interpreter of this data, but more hesitant to burden my students with that labor. In an attempt to mitigate this dilemma, I
attempt to name the weaknesses of my interpretive work while relying on peer debriefing from both fellow teachers and fellow researchers as a safeguard.

Cochran-Smith (2000) has developed a set of research assumptions in hopes of enabling teacher-researchers to make the most of our commitments to anti-racism while also recognizing our limitations to do so. Several of her limitations, or realities, were helpful and necessary reminders for me. Several of these “realities of research” (as I came to think of them) guided my methodology throughout the research process. These include the reality that any single piece of research only offers partial and tentative conclusions and the reality that conflict and incongruities in data are expected, acceptable, and lead to productive interpretation.

3.3) Narrative Methods

Rather than focusing my project on the study of people (i.e., my students), I chose to study experience by relying mainly on narrative sources. This made sense as soon as I read Glesne’s (1999) guidebook entitled *Becoming Qualitative Researchers* in which she declares that “qualitative researchers seek to make sense of personal stories and the ways in which they intersect” (p.1). Narrative provides access to our interior lives as teachers, learners, and readers. Narrative methods enabled me to capture aspects of our experiences reading and talking about multicultural children’s literature. The growing popularity of narrative inquiry in the study of teaching and teacher education has been well-documented (Zeichner, 1999; Carter, 1993; Clandinin & Connelly, 1994). Based on their review of the use of narrative inquiry in educational studies, Clandinin and Connelly (1994) explain that narrative is a vehicle to study the ways humans experience the world.
Carter (1993) adds that stories have become a “central focus for conducting research in the field of teacher education” (p. 5). In considering narrative as an object of inquiry, it must be noted that story knowledge contains rich and nuanced meaning and intrinsic multiplicity. This body of research has revealed that narrative knowing stands apart from singular or paradigmatic knowing; we live storied lives, think with narrative structures, and organize knowledge into narrative frameworks that serve as interpretive lenses.

Richardson (1997) explains that “we are always viewing something through something from somewhere, from some embodied position” (p. 58). Because any story we tell makes possible and impossible different knowledge and practices, the value of this kind of research derives not from its purported truth, but from our ability to use the research in anti-oppressive ways. It is my belief that we gain access to knowledge through dialogue and that reality is constructed through dialogue between knowers. The study of education is inextricably linked to the study of experience. Accordingly, my epistemological and ontological assumptions led me to a narrative project utilizing personal experience methods (Clandinin & Connelly, 1994). Narrative methods feature data sources such as: field notes of shared experience, journal records, letter writing, autobiographical writing, documents such as class plans and newsletters, and writing such as rules, pictures, metaphors, and personal philosophies (p. 5).

3.4) Data Sources

Connelly and Clandinin (1994) argue that data such as researcher journal entries, student papers, and classroom observations should be thought of as “field texts” (p. 419). Accordingly, throughout this document the term “text” refers not only to pieces of
published writing but also to student writing and episodes of human interaction in classroom. These forms of data are created by participants and researchers to represent aspects of field experiences, or in this case, classroom experiences. I tried to allow the stream of talk that permeated our class time together and the written reflective work done during and about the literature to help me understand my student’s personal meaning-making processes around multicultural children’s literature.

Over the course of a 16-week long semester, I collected student assignments, field notes, audiotapes of whole and small group conversations, and documents generated by students through class activities. The appendix details how and when specific documentation was captured. In addition to the data from class sessions, my lesson plans constituted data as well as my observations notes and ongoing researcher reflective journal. Data was collected with the goal of a balance between breadth and depth. Below I have included descriptions of the data sources that emerged as the most relevant to the project and thus are explored in depth in chapter four. A detailed chart of the materials is provided in the appendix.

**Personal Reflection Papers:** Reflective writing was used as an opportunity for students to try to make sense of their responses to particular multicultural children’s books and their experiences in conversations about them. My hope was that “fragments of experience” would be recovered through these papers. Reflective writing is a recognized method in qualitative research and offers suitable means to document life experience (Dillard, 1997). Clandinin and Connelly (1994) indicate that writers “weave together accounts of the private and the professional, capturing fragments of experience in
attempts to sort themselves out” (p. 421). Students selected when and which books to use for their personal response papers (see details later in this chapter and in the Appendix). Many students wrote more than one personal response paper, depending on other assignment choices. While a variety of types of writing were collected, in the end I analyzed 32 personal response papers. This body of materials included at least one paper from every student and encompasses all of the personal reflection papers I received throughout the semester based on student selected assignments and the nature of the work turned in. This narrowed the scope of the project significantly, but made for a coherent and fruitful analytic process. In other words, I was able to focus my analysis on a consistent body of documents with similar traits.

**Conversations:** Conversations and other classroom interactions are considered to be field texts. The discussions that took place were framed by the ideas of Daniels (1994) and Peterson and Eeds (1990). Students participated in literature circles, other kinds of small group discussion and activities (for example - process drama, literature-based reading activities, symbolic representations), and whole group discussions. As the teacher, I participated in the small group conversations only minimally, but audiotapes provided me access to the entire conversations. Both fieldnotes and audio tapes were used to gather and analyze this form of data. I relied on several common language arts methods texts (Yopp, 2001, for example) to guide my work. I wanted to engage students in activities that they could then consider utilizing in the classroom. We debriefed on the activities afterwards, considering theoretical underpinnings and practical application. Therefore, my selection of activities such as a “wow chart” and “symbolic representations” were
grounded in my desire to invite students as readers into meaningful conversation and
interaction around the books but also in my goal of helping my students as future teachers
begin to develop a repertoire of strategies for teaching young readers.

*Observations/Fieldnotes:* Marshall and Rossman (1989) define field notes as "concrete
descriptions of what has been observed" (p. 107). While leading class I was
simultaneously participating, observing, and taking field notes. As I wrote the notes I
used headings to help me organize my thoughts and ideas, then I generated analytic
memos. I typed up my field notes as soon as I could after class, usually within the next
week. My field notes and observations varied according to the nature of the individual
class session and my interaction with small groups. I took more lengthy and detailed
notes when facilitating large group discussions or activities. When visiting small groups,
I usually was only able to note a handful of vague observations or interesting comments
from students. At the end of the analysis phase I found that these notes expanded on the
classroom context helping me recall specific details of the classroom environment,
students, and interactions.

*Practitioner-Researcher Reflective Journal:* Included in the data set are my reflections
on my teaching and the progress of both the class and the inquiry. These comments are
not evaluations of student performance in the course, but instead focus on my perceptions
of the “life” of the course. I committed time and energy to this journal several times a
week, both before and after class sessions. I used this journal in a very informal way. At
times it seemed disconnected from the research process and focused almost exclusively
on the teaching and learning taking place. However, I did explore my struggles as a participant-observer and practitioner-researcher. Additionally, I revisited this journal as I documented emerging ideas regarding analysis and interpretation. This notebook was often filled with ramblings related to the teaching of the course and signs of panic related to the research process. I often found myself regretting not capturing particular interactions on tape and thus trying to document them in my journal. I also used this journal to chart my ongoing questions about teaching as persuasion and my passion for multicultural children’s literature. Some relevant “headlines” from this journal include: my silences, group interactions and conversations related to outside-of-class dynamics, the class seems bored or bullied, and unpacking/overcoming my need to be liked by my students.

3.5) Analyzing and Interpreting

In *The Handbook of Qualitative Research* (2000), inquirers are constantly reminded that “the field leaks.” Researchers can not and should not expect to remain untouched by the field or to leave the field unaffected by their presence in it. In the same vein, qualitative researchers will never be able to record everything while they are in the field and there are some aspects of any social phenomenon that will not be revealed to them. With this reality in mind, I set about the work of making sense of my data.

In their advice to teacher-researchers, Hubbard and Power (1993) describe multiple ways of analyzing student work. They suggest that research memos serve as both an analytic tool and a writing tool for researchers. Such notes or memos constituted my first step in the analysis process. These notes reflected a synthesis of my field notes
and reflective journal entries. I also generated analytic memos as I reviewed the personal response papers and book discussions. Patterns and discrepancies were addressed and I kept track of topics that interested me in these documents. These notes also reflect my wonderings and worries about the research process itself. It was through these notes that I decided to narrow my focus to the personal reflection papers and book discussions. Analytic memos served as a tool to help me analyze my data recursively and maintain my commitment to the pedagogical, methodological, and ethical issues outlined in my proposal. In the next section I provide a detailed description of my analytic process. The appendix contains details of when and in what forms data was collected.

3.5.1) Data “Processing”

Once the class had ended, my first move toward analysis was to transcribe the audiotaped conversations. I considered hiring a professional to transcribe the tapes but realized only I would be able to make the tapes make sense. Knowledge of the books being discussed and the ability to identify students was essential. In the act of transcribing I became intensely familiar with the data, and most significantly with conversations I had not been present for. The act of transcribing comes with the potential for data reduction and data analysis. There was no way I could transcribe these conversations without making interpretive decisions (which I memoed and stored with the tapes and original transcripts). One drawback of doing the transcription myself was the delay that occurred. I did not begin transcription until after the class ended in May of 2003. Some tapes held conversations from as far back as January. I transcribed whole class discussions within two weeks after the classes were held, but small group
conversation participants expected confidentiality until the end of the course. Therefore, when I finally got to the tapes I had to just listen to the conversations first, in order to partake in them from a teacher/participant-observer standpoint. I first listened without transcribing when I worked on the whole group discussion tapes as well, but I was listening with hearty fieldnotes in hand and with recent memory of participation. For the small group discussion tapes, I had to refamiliarize myself with the books, students, and exercises before I could begin the more measured process of transcription.

It was at this point that I stepped back from both the class and the transcription machine to organize my records of the class. This entailed reviewing the demographic information I had collected on each student and designing a chart to help me gain familiarity with the participants. I certainly know each student quite intimately as students, but I needed to reframe my knowledge of them as participants. I documented which books which students had read, when, what kind of written work they had done related to each text, and what kind of taped account I had of them discussing each text. I then generated lists of students by race, gender, socioeconomic status, and tradition or nontraditional student status (which correlates with age). I kept all of this information in sight for easy reference as I proceeded with transcription and other phases of the analysis process.

The layout I designed for the typed transcripts provided ample room for memoing and coding and multiple copies of transcripts were printed for the purposes of analysis. Copies were saved on floppy disk and also printed and stored in a three-ring binder. The multiple copies were organized in folders in several different ways for analysis. Some were filed with papers on the same book. They were also stored by the date of the class
meeting. Still more copies were stored based on groupings of students, because at one point that had emerged as a possible way of organizing analysis. After the tapes were transformed into research texts and combined with the reflection papers and other documentation from class including my reflective journal and fieldnotes, I began to pursue “patterns, narrative threads, tensions, and themes” (Clandinin & Connelly, 1994, 423) across the texts.

3.5.2) Initial Coding

Data analysis was an ongoing process which took place in differing forms from the time I met the students in January of 2003. The process began with the coding, memoing, analysis, and interpreting of field texts obtained through classroom interactions and concludes with this writing. The entire data pool can be described as written documents since tape recorded conversations were converted to transcripts. Papers, conversations, and field notes were read and reread in order to discern themes and patterns of interaction and response related to multicultural children’s literature. These notions emerged from narratives: narratives that were threaded through our communal experiences and personal stories, narratives that described perceptions of literature and diversity, narratives that revealed professional and personal understandings. Using narratives as the main source for a research study on response to multicultural literature emphasizes the connectedness of selves always in relation to others. Bahktin describes the “intimate connection between the project of language and the project of selfhood: they both exist in order to mean” (Holquist, 1990, p. 23). Indeed, this investigation
resulted in understandings of how the texts and my students were made to mean through personal reflection and dialogic interactions.

Data analysis is an ongoing and integral part of every facet of any qualitative research endeavor. All data was collected in context and I intended to maintain that fusion throughout other phases of the project. After all, data collection and data analysis are inseparable and reciprocal in qualitative research. I was limited in certain ways as a researcher because of my local educational commitments to these students. I did not expect to have a neutral stance on the data, but I did want to respect my students by keeping my role as teacher and advocate primary throughout the semester. In May, when data analysis formally began I knew my work would be influenced by my relationship with these real people. I do not see this as a weakness of the study, but I did need to be careful that I did not come to data analysis so blinded by my personal connection to the students that I would be unable to generate meaningful codes and categories. I wanted themes and patterns to emerge from the data, which I played an active part in not only collecting, but in creating by being the teacher. Coding, for me, served mainly as a way to know the texts from a variety of angles. Throughout the process I cross-referenced the transcripts and the papers. When working with a cluster of stories, I would intermittently return to a different set or excluded stories to confirm or deny my current line of thinking.

Additionally, I shared my emerging coding system with peer debriefers on a weekly basis. Both of my peer debriefers teach education courses for undergraduates. One teaches a similar undergraduate children’s literature class while the other teaches emergent literacy. I sought them out as peer debriefers because of their experience with the population on which my study focuses (namely preservice teachers) and also because
they are both in the midst of qualitative research projects. Accordingly they had general knowledge about my participants and were well-aware of some of the common dilemmas facing qualitative research. They were also appropriate choices for peer debriefers because they could offer a critical and divergent perspective since they were not directly involved with my students or my project. I continued to call on my peer debriefers throughout all stages of analysis and writing, relying on them to help me rethink and refine my ideas and interpretation.

3.5.3) Coding Continues

After the initial coding phase, I began to extend the analysis process by linking aspects of students’ responses in order to transform isolated stories into a coherent theoretical context. In general, I engaged in an inductive analysis process in which codes were followed by broader themes and categories which arose from the data. While a priori theories were in play during analysis, I tried to allow for unexpected outcomes and uncertain conclusions. The data were read and reread repeatedly and multiple analysis approaches implemented. I explored the data using narrative tools (Shuman, personal conversation) and discourse analysis techniques (Gee, 1999). An early thematic analysis led to systematic indexing and categorizing, allowing the data to guide the analytic work. In my attempts to manage the data I alternated between using highlighters and colored pencils in my analysis and actually cutting the documents into pieces for comparison and categorization. I used spiral notebooks as well as took notes using a spreadsheet. Interpretation and analysis continued to evolve throughout each of these iterative passes.
In order to move toward data reduction, I generated lists of incidents/responses that could be considered stable categories. This was a risky and intimidating process for me as I struggled to keep track of students, responses, theories, and my own desires for the data. I systematically compared within and across categories in order to isolate patterns. I constantly returned to the detailed analytic memos I had generated while integrating and separating categories. As my analysis reached its height I forced myself to define, refine, and eliminate categories. Through this kind of constant comparison (Glaser, 1969), I was able to reduce my data into narrower, but more deeply interrelated chunks. While I did not rigidly follow the tenets of grounded theory, I did strive for the goal of finding “theoretically saturated” patterns (Glaser, 1969). Like most novice qualitative researchers, I found myself with an excess of data. In addition, there were times during the data analysis process when I was frustrated by the potential of the data. That is, I worried about the seemingly infinite number of paths I could have taken toward interpretations and implications. Most of these paths have been eliminated and will not be explored in detail in chapter four. Some of the most relevant possibilities of analysis that were eliminated include: students’ thinking about the right to write (insider/outsider authors and illustrators), students’ work doing sociopolitical critiques of realistic fiction picture books, students’ beliefs about the nature of childhood and the purposes of literature, and students’ resistance to multicultural texts. I hope to eventually pursue several of these eliminated thematic strands as I believe they hold the potential for further analysis and insight. My analytic and interpretive work can be characterized as a process of “bringing order, structure, and meaning to the mass of collected data (Marshall &
Rossman, 1989, p.111). Accordingly, I found that I had to limit my categories based on my initial research questions and the scope of the study at hand.

In the end, the focus of my analysis was firmly grounded in personal response as it was externalized through writing and discussion. As a researcher and a teacher, I wanted to investigate my students’ “mappings” of their personal stories onto the stories in multicultural children’s literature. To do that, I had to attend primarily to the explicit personal connections and disconnections they made while reading, talking, and writing. I examined the documents available to me by thinking of my students as adult readers of these texts more so than as future literacy teachers. The implications I have developed, however, do reflect a consideration of them as teachers. My interpretations are tied up in concepts from relevant research, my theoretical positions, and my epistemological assumptions. However, my interpretations and implications hinge most dramatically on the immediacy and power of the contextualized individual stories which expose the meaning-making process.

3.6) The Interpretive Process: From Analysis to Implications

Marshall and Rossman (1989) explain that “one purpose of qualitative research is to discover important questions, processes, and relationships, not to test them” (p. 43). With this in mind, my research is framed by an agenda of continual discovery and an emphasis on keeping the inquiry open-ended enough to allow for possibilities and interpretations I have had not imagined or considered. Further, Gallas (1998) points out that, “as teacher researchers, we know what we use as our data: talk, field notes, classroom artifacts, personal journals. We know why we do that; and we know how to go
about it, but we don’t necessarily know...why we choose particular segments of talk, anecdote, drawing, or writing as data to bring to the group, or what our questions about them are” (p. 19). Qualitative research results in understandings rather than findings; results are explanatory and invitational in nature. I am bound to admit my biases and explain contextual factors related to my work. My results come in the form of descriptions and understandings, both local and tentative in nature. All conclusions drawn are interpretive understandings and contribute to a “deepened, complex, thoroughly partial understanding of the topic” (Richardson, 2000, p. 934).

The ideals of validity traditionally embraced by quantitative researchers do not apply in the same way to a descriptive study like this one. Clandinin & Connelly (1995) explain that “like other qualitative methods, narrative relies on criteria other than validity, reliability, and generalizability. The language and criteria for narrative inquiry are under development” (p. 7). In my understanding, transferability is valued over generalizability and trustworthiness has emerged as a more important standard than validity. The issue of trustworthiness ranks highest with me in terms of my ethical concerns. Colloquially, trustworthiness implies more of an opinion than validity. Impressions of trustworthiness are inherently personal and dependent on subjective criteria. Lincoln and Guba (1989) have been the most specific in their recommendations to qualitative researchers, suggesting trustworthiness criteria: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Triangulation is a common approach to meeting these standards; accordingly, methods of data collection in this study were varied (fieldnotes, documents, audiotaped discussions) in pursuit of trustworthiness through triangulation. I concur with Maxwell (1996) who argues that triangulation, feedback (in the form of peer debriefing in
this study), member checks, and the search for discrepant evidence contribute to the validity of qualitative studies. Abstract notions of trustworthiness and validity put too much at stake, yet do not seem to really mean anything unless researchers and readers make clear their agendas. Judgments of validity can only be made in very localized, specific contexts. However, in my study efforts were made through peer debriefing and other measures to enhance the robustness of the data, the plausibility of assertions, and the generalizability of theories. I paid careful attention to Lincoln and Guba’s standards for trustworthiness in designing and executing this study.

Lincoln and Guba (1994) suggest that credibility depends on prolonged engagement and persistent observation in the field as well as triangulation. By cross-checking through multiple sources, varied methods, and different investigators, researchers can enhance both the credibility and validity of their study. Richardson (2000) reminds us that sometimes there is no fixed point of reference that can be triangulated. She suggests crystallization as a technique because “there are far more than ‘three sides’ from which to approach the world” (p. 934). By using a crystal instead of a triangle as the metaphor for validity claims, we see how texts validate themselves and realize there is always more to know. Lincoln and Guba (1994) also include peer debriefing, negative case analysis, and referential adequacy as ways to provide evidence of credibility. Peer debriefing, as used in this study, provides opportunity for the researcher to be critical of her own work. Peer debriefing also helped me find themes that defy the patterns, enabling me to explain my work with more specificity and depth and then develop further questions. Referential adequacy is important to ensure that there is a data trail leading to the researcher’s assertions. In order to achieve referential
adequacy, I was meticulous in my record keeping - from fieldnotes to codebook to analytic memos, and throughout the writing process.

For transferability, Lincoln and Guba urge the use of thick description. They indicate that an account must be rich in detail in order for there be any possibility of generalizability to other contexts. Thick description strengthens the link between assertions and the data (the audit trail) and builds the reader’s confidence in the researcher’s interpretations. Judgments of dependability and confirmability are based on the quality of the audit trail. Dependability calls for reliable and strong documentation. Confirmability is contingent on reader’s ability to actually go back and find the connections between assertions and data. I believe I have organized my data discussion in chapter four in a way that strengthens confirmability and dependability.

Validity is always associated with knowledge creation. Authority is a key issue underpinning debates about validity. Since qualitative researchers arrive at their findings through interpretations and those interpretations are situated within a localized context, absolute authority is an impossibility. Instead, I believe that “having a partial, local, historical knowledge is still knowing” (Richardson, 2000, p. 928). However, critics attack the knowledge claims of qualitative research based on epistemological assumptions. The idea of multiple interpretations unnerves researchers who remain committed to objective reality and authoritarian discourse. Lather (2001) calls into question the processes of legitimating knowledge and verifying claims to validity. She (perhaps somewhat sarcastically) calls herself a “science outlaw.” I would not consider myself a science outlaw, but I do recognize the need to judge the merit of research on political and ideological grounds. I want researchers to be not only up front, but “out”
about their paradigmatic stance. Epistemological assumptions and purposes should be foregrounded so that readers can determine how their worldview fits with the researcher’s. Issues of power should be introduced as unavoidable in the researcher/researched relationship. I want to hear the voice of the researched as much as the voice of the researcher. These expectations of researchers are reflected in my expectations of myself and my standards for this project. My criterion for validity and trustworthiness are based on that fact that I do not think of research endeavors as attempts to establish truth, sanction knowledge, or determine reality, but simply as attempts to understand or explain social phenomenon.

3.7) Writing

The understandings and explanations I have developed must be conveyed through the written word, yet writing is not a separate or discrete aspect of my methodology. Instead writing served as a thinking tool throughout the research process. Writing functioned as an integral part of the analysis and interpretation process for me. Richardson (1994) asserts that “writing is not a mopping-up activity at the end of a research project. Writing is also a way of ‘knowing’ - a method of discovery and analysis” (p. 516). Writing may appear to be an end but it also marks a new beginning. Interpretive research calls us not to “get it right” but to get it “differently contoured and nuanced” (521). Throughout all of the phases of this research project I have considered this endeavor an opportunity for me to journey with my students and allow them to show me who they are and how they make sense of stories based on their experiences.
As I understand qualitative inquiry, it is a process of sharing with others the understandings and knowledges one is able to create. Throughout the study, I attended carefully to the interpretations underlying my observations, the sources of my questions, and the events and interactions that puzzled or moved me. I continually revisited questions as they recurred, were displaced or transformed. As much as I try to explain and detail my analytic process, I know that the process of coming to understand in the context of this project cannot be easily enumerated. I hope that my understandings reveal themselves in the very moment of the narratives. The research approach I have chosen allows me to talk about my investment and involvement in the classroom in a personal way. While working to understand negotiations of meaning around multicultural texts, I also found myself investigating how people shape and are shaped by language, and how people negotiate the multiple aspects of selves. It is my hope as a literacy teacher educator that this “personal experience project” (Connelly & Clandinin, 1994) will provide descriptions, perceptions, and interpretations that will lead to a more complex understanding of how to mediate multicultural children’s literature with preservice teachers.

3.8) Paradigm Talk: Ethical and Epistemological Concerns

According to Gallas (1998), there are two tenets that hold true whenever teachers investigate cultural and social phenomenon in their classrooms. She states that “each individual classroom is a unique, living community; and second, each individual within that community represents an evolving consciousness” (p.146). As a teacher and a researcher I had an obligation to represent respectfully and accurately the unique living
community of our classroom and each of my student’s evolving consciousness. Yet, this was not an easy task. I have grappled with how to “research” my students’ responses to multicultural literature without compromising my role as teacher or exploiting them as students/participants.

My ethical position is defined and characterized by my commitments as the teacher in this class. For me, the role of teacher is a clearly distinguished role which I always mean to occupy ethically in both my pedagogical and research efforts. My intention was to function as a participant-observer as the term is used by constructivists. While my work cannot be considered a critical theory project, ideas of that paradigm shape my own subjectivity as desire for change is central to my work as both a teacher and a researcher. It would be misleading to imply that I worked collaboratively with oppressed groups with the goal of empowerment in mind. However, issues of power are at the heart of my theoretical and practical goals. My research endeavor is openly subjective, political, and ideological in that issues of power are brought to bear in the classroom and throughout the inquiry. In the spirit of post-paradigms, the worldviews of both the researcher and the researched should be called into question and truth acknowledged as multiple and inseparable from the knower.

As a teacher with the power of assessment in my hands, I continue to recognize the vulnerabilities of the student position. Similarly, I know that as my own likes and dislikes of books and my teaching agenda became clear to students, their ability to express themselves freely and openly risked being compromised even further. While I worked hard in my interactions with students to mitigate against deferment to my status and authority, the sociocultural expectations of the role of student would never disappear.
As both researcher and teacher I occupy somewhat conflicting roles. However, since my intention is to consider my own practice as well as describe the experiences of my students I believe I negotiated both positions ethically and productively by troubling the instructional hierarchy throughout the course of the project.

One of my major ethical dilemmas concerns the question of “using” others in my research. Ideally, I would pursue a collaborative project, but in this setting equal status relationships are compromised. As the instructor for the course, I am not able to diminish my assigned authority. Additionally, my students are predominantly working adults with myriad responsibilities and obligations, not full-time students who might have the luxury of the time or energy to invest in a project like this as co-researchers. While that kind of research appeals to me greatly, this endeavor reflects more of a practitioner-research approach with an emphasis on participant observation and shared meaning-making.

In advocating literacy research that focuses on cultural understanding, Greene and Abt-Perkins (2003) make several suggestions for researchers. They argue for several key features of this kind of literacy research. According to their standards, research endeavors must be contextualized, long-term, and self-reflexive. I have sought to meet the “contextualized” standard by emphasizing careful, in-depth description and analysis of context. I attempt to clarify and define the setting for my work and to provide a detailed picture of what transpired in our classroom when we were together. Additionally, chapter four is full of excerpts from the data that I believe provide a strong sense of the reading and talking my students did along with my pedagogical contributions. The “long-term” aspect of this project is somewhat compromised, however, my commitment to this line of research is not. I have taught the course under scrutiny here for several years and
inquiry into the nature of interactions around multicultural children’s literature continues
to be an essential element of my motivation and moves as a teacher. Additionally, I am
still immersed in this setting at the time of this writing. Greene and Abt-Perkins “self-
reflexive” standard speaks to me deeply as both a teacher and a researcher. From its
inception, a major goal of this research has been to scrutinize my teaching practices, my
assumptions about multicultural literature, and my responses to my students. Throughout
the analytic phase of this process I constantly found myself struggling “to describe that
which is hard to explain” and to “represent a reconciliation of our beliefs with our
findings” (Greene & Abt-Perkins, 2003, p.16)

Like most qualitative researchers, my intention is to describe social phenomenon
within a specific context and seek local patterns and knowledge. I aim to describe the
interactions and responses of my students in order gain a better understanding of what is
happening and to improve my pedagogy. These intentions fit with a social constructivist
paradigm which considers the multiple, specific, and local nature of reality. In the
broadest sense, this theoretical framework argues that meaning is constructed
interactively and socially through the medium of language and other symbol systems
(Vygotsky, 1986; Wertsch, 1985). The researcher’s task of interpreting response to
literature and expressions of identity is a formidable one. However, as Enciso (2003)
recommends, I made “the making of meaning” the object both of my study and, to some
extent, of the inquiry activities in my class. I will be examining the classroom dialogue
and dynamics I co-created, witnessed, and participated in. Glesne (1999) uses the term
participant-oriented research to describe the work of interpretivists who may take critical
and/or feminist stands. She goes on to explain that interpretivists and constructivists
interact with “others” to understand multiple realities. The dialectical methodology of the interpretivists appeals to me. Since interpretivists understand reality to be socially constructed or culturally specific, dialogue is the essential element that can enable researchers to gain knowledge of other’s realities. A key assumption of the interpretivists is that the human mind is active in the construction of knowledge and that sociocultural factors play a role in that process. Like those of other teacher educators and practitioner researchers, a major purpose of this study is to afford myself the opportunity to examine my own understandings of equity and diversity as part of my ongoing process of helping students do the same. Gergan and Gergan (2000) advise that since “inquiry is inevitably ideological, the major challenge is to pursue the research that most deeply expresses one’s political and valuational investments” (p.1036). The traditions of practitioner-research and qualitative inquiry have allowed me to greet that challenge.

In the simplest sense, I am documenting and describing relationships and interactions. I am interested in relationships and interactions among students, between students and myself, and between readers and texts. My study examines the transactions and negotiations between readers and texts as revealed through classroom interactions and writing projects. Since many preservice teachers demonstrate little multicultural competence, I sought to learn how and in what ways my class can serve the multicultural teacher education goal of developing cross-cultural knowledge. In other words, this study may shine light on how the multiple interpretations of the meanings of social experience (via text and conversations) come to position one’s identities.
3.9) Understanding Pedagogy As Research and Research As Pedagogy

We cannot separate education from personal experience. Who we are, to whom we are related, how we are situated all matter in what we learn, what we value, and how we approach intellectual and moral life. (Noddings, 1992, p. 12).

In this section I describe the participants and site for the study. In teacher-research, pedagogy and methodology are entwined. Accordingly the details and descriptions that follow report on research as pedagogy and pedagogy as research in order to provide ample contextual information regarding the study.

3.9.1) Introducing the Class

The setting for my work is a small Catholic college with a liberal arts focus and a long history in the local community. The college caters to non-traditional students, namely working adults and individuals returning to school after long breaks. Additionally, the college is committed to a service-learning approach and has earned awards for community involvement. The course I teach is entitled “Literature for Children and Young Adults” and is offered by the department of Library and Information Sciences. The course is populated almost exclusively by education majors; students seeking certification in the areas of early childhood, elementary, middle, or special needs education. Occasionally, a student enrolls in the class as part of a program of certification for school library/media specialists. My classes consistently are characterized by heterogeneity in terms of race, class, ethnicity, religion, and age. Most of the students are women, but classes usually include one or two male students.
I selected SCC for my research site because of the possibilities of having a diverse group of students for my study. I also feel that SCC is a good match for me as a teacher. I am able to relate to the students here and it is easy for me to build rapport. Many of these students are under-prepared for college, or school is not the number one priority in their life. Many of them have not experienced great success in school and their family or community culture often does not support higher learning. This is how I entered my undergraduate years. This recognition of myself made SCC appealing to me as both a researcher selecting a site and a teacher pursuing professional growth. I was deliberate in my choice not to conduct my research at the university where I am pursuing my degree for several reasons. It was important to me that anonymity and confidentiality be maintained throughout the project. I also knew that the semester-long course at SCC would provide more time with the students and allow for more material to be covered. Additionally, I had more teaching experience at SCC and found my experiences there to be challenging and deeply fulfilling. Since my eventual goal was to improve my teaching through gaining a better understanding of my students, I believed these were the students I could learn the most about and from. I certainly would be interested in considering similar issues with more traditional undergraduates in a larger university setting, but I wanted to avoid any conflicts of interest. I felt adjunct instructor would be an easier identity to negotiate as a researcher than that of graduate teaching associate.

In my class of 22 under scrutiny here, I had two male students and two library science students. Both of the male students were white, but one was a non-traditional student. The two library science students were both older white women making career changes. Of the remaining eighteen students, two were African-American, one was Arab-
American, one was Asian-American, and two identified as biracial. Of these, three were older non-traditional (this includes Suzan the Arab-American, one of the African-American students, and one of the biracial students). Eight of the twelve other white students in the class were traditional undergraduates. In order to bring the setting alive, I have generated a composite vignette of a typical day at SCC based on a review of fieldnotes (note that class was held on Saturday mornings).

As an adjunct faculty member, I am provided with office space on the 7-building campus. However, the location of my office is inconvenient and since the space is shared with 6 other instructors it is not conducive to meeting with students. Therefore, I arrive for class between a 1/2 hour and 45 minutes early in order to be available to my students. When I entered the classroom, several students had already arrived. The lights were still turned off, but the wall-length windows made the room bright and the students were chatting among themselves. The classroom is large with tables, rather than desks, organized in an horseshoe shape so that all participants face each other. The school has invested a great deal of time and money into technology so the classroom is well-equipped with resources including: an Elmo projector, cd and tape players, video and dvd players, and an internet-ready computer with LCD panel. I turned the lights on and greeted the students warmly.

Cheryl and Wendy were eating breakfast because they come to class directly from jobs where they work third-shift. Many of my students hold full-time jobs and manage families while in school. This is the norm at SCC and they offer specialized programs to accommodate working people. Cheryl packed her breakfast (dinner for her) but Wendy had picked up fast food from a local chain she passes on her way to class. Wendy complained about the lack of restaurants or coffee shops in the vicinity of the college. The campus is located in a socioeconomically depressed area; the neighborhood is considered unsafe by many of the students (both the ones who live close by and those who travel some distance to be there). These two students and several others were discussing assignments for other classes and questions they have regarding scheduling and tuition payments. Almost all of my students are the first in their families to attend college and they lean on each other for advice and insider information. From a teaching perspective, I do not have to work hard to promote this kind of community because students seek each other out almost immediately during the first class session. More students stream in and several others have packed snacks; one jokingly reads aloud the sign stating that no food is allowed in the classroom but no one responds to the comment. Josie arrives in her uniform from an all-night restaurant where she works as a shift manager. Two other students
arrive in uniforms because they have to report to work immediately after class. As other students arrive, comments are made regarding traffic problems and childcare dilemmas. Suzan approaches me to let me know that she will need to leave class early because she could only find childcare for two hours and our class goes for four. Many students come to class looking physically worn out and overwhelmed with the expectations of work, school, and family.

At SCC, the role of professor carries a different kind of power and authority than I was accustomed to. Many of the students in this class seemed to have little desire to please me. This was most obviously true of the older students who were confident in their beliefs and at times seemed to think of themselves as more expert than myself. Some of the younger students did not possess much of what I think of as a student identity. Many of them prioritized work and family over school and were willing to admit their disinterest in this academic venture. Most of the traditional students claimed middle class backgrounds but also revealed that they were the first in their families to attend college. For both of these groups of students, grades did not seem to be looming in their minds as we went about our time together. Yet, the very real power of evaluation that I hold as the teacher cannot be denied. There were approximately four students who regularly checked in with me about their academic performance and who seemed so “eager to please” that they would make comments simply to garner my affirmation.

3.9.2) Designing the Class

What is possible is to surface autobiographical insights and develop more complex stories through encounters with the written and spoken texts of others. (Berlak, 1996, p. 96)

Since I always ask my students to reflect on their starting places for our work, it is only right that I should do the same with regard to my instructional planning for these preservice teachers. My autobiographical insights must be contextualized by a long list of identity markers including graduate student and white woman. I recognize that I am a privileged teacher designing pedagogy to help my students engage with multicultural literature, see oppressive social practices, and consider their role in the maintenance of those practices and their potential as an agent for change. However, I know it is
impossible that I would be done with that work myself. I share in this struggle with my students as I continue “arousing myself to begin again” (Greene, 1995, p. 109). My personal and academic agenda is also shaped by my identity as a lesbian and my experience growing up in a working class neighborhood and attending under-served schools. In the classroom the authority of my role as teacher combined with my white privilege makes me a potential oppressor. However, being a lesbian places me as a member of oppressed groups (gender and sexuality). My education level alienated me from the class while my history as a struggling student (both financially and academically) allied me with them. My approach to teaching children’s literature at the undergraduate level is based not only on my identity and life experience, but also explicitly on my beliefs about literature, culture, and the profession of teaching.

While I accept that literature is not a central part of life for everyone, I do believe that literacy in some form is. In my courses on children’s literature, and in those I have taught on other aspects of literacy, I emphasize that literature is only one dimension of literacy, just one example of a kind of literacy. I invite my students from the very first day of class to think about and value all forms of literacy in their lives. Often this leads to discussions about other kinds of printed materials such as newspapers, magazines, rap lyrics, and comic books. Eventually we find ourselves talking about movies, dance, needlepoint, and rock climbing, for example. When we are able to share how our participation in these other forms of literacy have shaped our lives, the idea that literature could have the same effect becomes more fathomable. By facilitating activities and discussion around the idea of multiple literacies I am able to help my students understand
why I assert an agenda in the class which promotes the life-shaping, life-affirming (and possibly even life-saving) potential of literature.

My class is also founded on the notion that literature is primarily an artistic endeavor rather than explicitly an educational one. The mission of LIS 120 is to provide an introduction to children’s literature. I am expected to provide an overview, but both breadth and depth are required. Students should emerge from the class with an awareness of the literature that exists. They should also have developed skills for selecting quality children’s literature to share with children. In order to accomplish this goal, I urge my students to first consider texts as pieces of art and then to review its educative promise. They often resist this idea due a belief that children’s literature should be didactic and provide “moral lessons.” This is generally the dominant view at SCC even after students have identified literature they loved, both as children and adults, that did not provide obvious moral guidance. Accordingly, I consistently and overtly spend time with my students discussing the aesthetic and literary value of the literature we read. I also call on reader response theory to help my students develop an understanding of the dynamic and complex negotiations that occur during the meaning-making process. One of my main motivations for the personal response assignments (the source of much of my data) is to enact reader response theory in my own classroom in order to provide a model for how these future teachers might make use of it with young children one day. Reader response teachers favor small group and large group discussions, literature circles, creative writing, and process drama activities which help students engage actively with what they read and express their personal responses and understandings. Reader response is an important
theory for teachers to know about because this approach respects student reactions and insights, recognizing the interactive process of their learning.

As I set the stage for the class I hope students will be willing to share their personal responses to the texts without worry of my disapproval. At SCC I am fortunate to have a great many non-traditional students who, while concerned about grades, often are quite confident in their beliefs. I have found that these students do not see the expression of their personal responses as connected to their academic performance. Of course, the academic and the personal are intertwined, but they seem to understand that their written academic work will stand on its own merit upon evaluation by me. The younger students in the class often have a history of underachievement in high school and college. These students tend to be more hesitant about sharing their personal responses because of fears related to academic standards (again, the personal and academic are inseparable) and a general reticence to participate which seems to be a result of lack of confidence. I often wondered if these students were more likely to refrain from disagreeing with me or other students because of a desire to appear to be aligned with my views, which are made clear early in the course. However, I have discovered that pleasing the instructor is just one piece of the puzzle. In their final papers, many students describe a confusion at being “allowed” to rely on personal aspects of response. They explain that they thought “I” statements would be unacceptable in their writing about literature and wonder if the validation of personal responses is widespread in schools. These issues of authority, confidence, and the legitimizing of the personal are only a few of the dilemmas I face in inviting my students to explore multicultural children’s literature as both students and research participants.
Pedagogy in which teachers overtly position themselves and invite students to do the same has a particular history in feminist classrooms. In these settings, the lived experiences of teachers and students come to bear on subjects and texts of study. By placing the personal in pedagogy, the neutrality and objectivity of teaching is called into question. While it can be argued that bringing empathy and feeling into the classroom might lead to neglect of critical engagement, I believe just the opposite. As Talburt (2002) argues, “reading should be cast as a social process in which private experiences and processes of becoming are in dialogue with the curriculum” (p. 245). Bleich (1998) goes so far as to suggest that individual experience as it connects to the collective of the class should be seen as part of the class subject matter. He explains that teaching through and with disclosure alerts us to the fact that “truth includes the personal, the emotional, the ideological, and sometimes the irrational” (p. 12). I would extend this to suggest that our interactions with each other also became a part of the curriculum in LIS 120.

One of my implicit goals of the class is to help my students become aware of the issues related to diversity and equity that emerge from multicultural literature and to consider their role as professionals who will share this literature with children. I want my students to grasp the realities of under-representation and misrepresentation that have endured in children’s publishing. Like Enciso (2001b), I try to foster a respectful environment in which participation is safe for all. However, the class “is by no means conflict-free or relativistic in nature” (p. 47). The discussion, written activities, and interactions that take place are designed to enable students to reflect on their own perspectives in relation to others.
My curriculum design for the course played a crucial role in what happened to us each time we met to share in children’s literature. Implementing different types of pedagogical strategies to help my students develop effective methods for selecting and sharing children’s literature was fundamental to my role as teacher. hooks (1994) explains that harsh critiques have been issued concerning the place of narratives of experience in the classroom. Yet, like me, she is still convinced that sharing personal narratives and “linking that knowledge with academic information really enhances our capacity to know” (1994, p.148). The course rationale and assignments reflect a commitment to this approach to teaching and learning (see entire syllabus in appendix A). The personal reflection papers are one way that I hope to bring academic and personal knowing together. That assignment is described below:

For this reflection you will need to call on personal experiences to make connections to the text. Discuss how you did or did not identify with characters and events. Speculate on how children might find themselves reflected in this text. Tell what you think the message or theme of the book was, why, and what your response to that is. Describe your feelings of like and dislike, your impressions, predictions, and emotions as you read. You may even want to take notes as you read or keep a response journal for this paper. Basically, this paper asks what did this book mean to you personally.

This is the first response paper students write in the class and it sets the tone for their future writing and class discussions. As students participated in literature circles, other small group book discussions, and whole class conversations they were eager to continue exploring these kinds of responses. The three objectives listed below do not reflect the full scope and sequence of the course, but they highlight some of the most important goals for me as a teacher and the ones that specifically coincide with this research project.
• Students will discover how literature reflects our culturally diverse world and both affirms and expands our own knowledge of ourselves and the world.
• Students will experience children’s literature in ways that encourage the development of positive attitudes toward reading.
• Students will engage in sociopolitical critiques of children literature in order to understand how to carefully evaluate, select, and share literature with children.

These three objectives reflect how I emphasize multicultural children’s literature and an awareness of diversity and equity issues in the class. Since this research project examines preservice teachers reading and responding to multicultural texts, this pedagogical reflection focuses on the aspects of my teaching that addresses those issues as well. The course presents an overview of children’s literature for education and library science majors, but my bias as a teacher is to focus on multicultural literature throughout the class. My duty as a teacher is to help support my students in their work reading and responding to text in ways that will enable them to examine the self and uncover the long-held values and beliefs that drive our interpretations. I want them to see themselves as cultural beings teaching in a multicultural society.

3.9.3) The Texts

A good novel is one that shows the complexity of individuals, and creates enough space for all these characters to have a voice; in this way a novel is called democratic - not that it advocates democracy but that by nature it is so. Empathy lies at the heart of... so many great novels - the biggest sin is to be blind to others’ problems and pains. (Nafisi, 2003, p. 132)

Since multicultural literature often disrupts the familiar, the same has been a goal in my class. I select books that I believe will provide ample opportunities for readers to notice how their values and beliefs are tied to their personal experiences. Most, but not
all, of the books included on the syllabus can be considered multicultural. The students read a wide range and large quantity of texts throughout the semester and this study only examines closely their interactions around seven particular texts. Multicultural books like these seven dominate the class but they read from many other genres (from nonfiction to fantasy) and traditions (from classic folktales to edgy teen fiction) that are not reflected here. In general, I hope the literature I choose will compel readers to think through their assumptions about children, society, and children’s literature itself. Each book is carefully selected so that it also provides opportunities for connecting to the familiar. My expectation is that the literature will come close to meeting Nafisi’s standard, but the design of this course and of the study resulted in some of the texts being included without such deliberateness.

**Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry** (Taylor, M., 1976, NY: Dial)

Taylor’s classic is a book that I first encountered as an undergraduate. This was required reading for my children’s literature class and I was immediately compelled to read the other stories Taylor has created chronicling African-American life in the south during this time period. Taylor’s novel is based on her own personal experience and family history, which results in a palpable authenticity in the pages of the book. Readers feel close to Cassie and allied with the family’s struggle against racism and injustice. Taylor paints a vivid picture of what life was like for an African-American family at this time and in this place.

Critics have described the novel as unforgettable, and that accurately characterizes the impact it had on me. Cassie, the nine-year-old protagonist, struck me as
one of the bravest people I could ever imagine knowing. Her status as the only girl in the family only further impressed me. When I sit down to select books for my children’
literature class I find myself drawn to Cassie as much now as ever. My affection for her dominates my thinking about the novel as I consider sharing this text with my current students. My choice is also based on the fact that I believe *Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry* exemplifies the characteristics of quality historical fiction for children and the best of multicultural literature. From a teaching perspective this landmark Newbery winner (Mildred was the second African-American writer to garner this honor) also provides a chance to discuss the politics of the children’s literature establishment.


I first read this book as an undergraduate. Yep tells the story of the Chen’s family life in West Virginia in 1927 mainly from the perspective of fifteen-year-old Joan. It was required reading for my children’s literature class and I remember being somewhat disappointed in the book even though it had won a Christopher Award, a religious-based honor for books that “affirm the highest values of the human spirit.” At the time I considered the story too simplistic and rather idealistic (the small town bigots were too easily converted for me to believe). I went on to develop an appreciation of Yep’s work after reading the acclaimed “Dragonwings” and “Dragon’s Gate.” While reading both of these novels I was drawn into the personal family experiences and the folklore/fantasy connections Yep incorporates into his stories. Upon re-reading *The Star Fisher*, I felt encouraged by the story. I responded more positively to the humor as well as to the Chinese legend that grounds the novel.
As a children’s literature instructor, I thought it might serve my students well to think about prejudice in this particular context. As I revisited the story I was more sympathetic to Joan and immediately predicted that my students would find her to be a believable character worthy of their time and consideration. Throughout *The StarFisher*, I was drawn to Joan’s narrative voice which is delivered with simplicity, despite the complex emotions she is experiencing. The star fisher legend serves as an overarching metaphor for the aspirations of the Lee family as they are embodied in Joan. By using this metaphor, Yep is able to convey to readers that Joan has two sets of eyes and will live a dual life because of her immigrant status even after gaining acceptance from the community. Yep paints a vivid picture of the time and place featured in the story. The period details and realistic family interactions invite the reader into Joan’s world.

Despite reservations I have about this text, my students generally find it accessible and report “liking” it. It is a worthwhile choice because it features an under-represented group of people in a time period and place in which we rarely see or think about them. The story has universal appeal that students quickly tap into as readers and future teachers. The novel is one that makes white readers feel comfortable and capable of teaching a multicultural text.

**Tears of a Tiger** (Draper, S., 1994, NY: Aladdin)

Draper’s short chapters make this book a deceptively “quick” read. The seriousness of the content made me want to slow down; slow down myself as a reader and also slow down the story. *Tiger* tells the story of Andy, a high school basketball star, who kills his best friend in a drunk-driving accident. The adults in his life and even his
peers do not seem to fully grasp the depth of Andy’s pain and, in the end, fail him. Andy’s suicide, which results from his inability to resolve his feelings of guilt, occurs just seven pages from the end of the novel. The book closes with letters from Andy’s friends after they learn of his death. This was the most reflective part of the novel for me - the place where I could finally catch up with all the characters and events and actually feel with them.

I did not choose this novel as part of my reading list for the children’s literature class. Instead, I presented it in class when sharing an overview of young adult literature. This led to a student using it for a booktalk. Soon after the booktalk, several students requested that I allow them to read Tiger for one of their book discussions. I consented because I was impressed with their initiative and was pleased to see they had chosen a Coretta Scott King Award winning multicultural text that might allow them a glimpse into an unfamiliar cultural context. Additionally, I do believe the book leaves a deep impression on readers because of the nature of the events that take place and the wide range of responses from other students that are included. These responses come in the form of homework assignments, poetry, telephone conversations, newspaper articles, and letters. The alternation between narrators and formats keeps readers interested and creates a feeling of immediacy. While these elements enabled me to maintain my interest in and compassion for the characters, Draper’s heavy-handed, almost didactic tone at times interrupted my engagement. I was deeply disappointed by her obvious lesson on racism - not because I disagree with her perspective or agenda, but because the delivery is somewhat artificial and patronizing. My students did not agree with this critique, or at least did not express similar difficulty with engagement. This may be related to the fact
the students who pursued this text were either men, those seeking certification in upper level teaching, or those drawn to the text because of a background in athletics.

**What Jamie Saw** (Coman, C., 1995, NY: Scholastic)

This Newbery Honor novel tells the survival story of nine-year-old Jamie, his mother, and his baby sister Nin, who escape an abusive husband/father figure by moving to a small trailer in the woods. The story has an explosive beginning in which Jamie sees his baby sister being thrown across the room. His mother successfully catches the baby and they flee to a friend’s trailer. Patty and Jamie are hiding out from the world as a result of the trauma - she does not show up for her job at the local IGA and Jamie stops going to school despite his caring and proactive third grade teacher. Performing magic seems to be Jamie’s greatest source of comfort and his best coping strategy. The family remains isolated in their trailer in the woods, avoiding venturing into the outside world because it just seems to produce more trauma. The book provides a glimpse into a family struggling financially and emotionally to survive. It is a story about the power of fear and of love. Coman tells it with alarming simplicity and powerful imagery.

My affinity for this book is based mainly on my belief that we need more stories about people struggling socioeconomically. Additionally, I have always been drawn to stories that expose and thus disrupt violence and abuse. Two adult novels, *The Bluest Eye* (Morrison, 1970) and *Bastard Out of Carolina* (Allison, 1993), which deal with similar issues had a powerful lasting effect on me. *Jamie* delivers the same kind of literary power as those two texts. The lives of these survivors, as executed by the authors, summon in me a kind of empathy that is not easily shaken. Coman’s writing
invites readers inside Jamie’s head and heart and that intimacy has been unforgettable for me. I do not consider this tale to be bleak. In my interpretation, Jamie and his mother both learn to trust again which results in a hopeful (if not realistic) ending. My personal connections to this story are difficult to unearth and articulate. After close rereadings and concentrated examination, I find that I am fully invested in this story despite a lack of concrete familiarity with the situation. At times, Jamie reminds me of students I once taught (a first grader named Billy in 1992, in particular). I cannot say exactly how I called upon that relationship to better understand Jamie’s world. I believe it is the combination of Coman’s stylistic approach and my deep-seated belief in the need to tell stories like this one that caused me to feel so satisfied by this novel and thus to endorse it so emphatically.

As the professional charged with selecting only a handful of books that a group of future teachers will read together, my decision-making is a formidable process. *Jamie* has made it onto the required reading list of almost every children’s literature course I have taught. Every time I try to eliminate it I am unable to convince myself of a replacement that would serve a similar purposes in the class nearly as well. For instance, I appreciate that Coman includes a benevolent and brave teacher. Mrs. Desrochers appeals to my students’ idealism but our discussion of her inevitably leads them to question the kind of teacher they will turn out to be (several times I have been alarmed to hear students suggest that Mrs. Desrochers was wrong to try to intervene in the situation in any way). This novel also begs the question of age-appropriateness. I often start the course with the novel in order to get the infinite debates we will have about “what children can handle” going. By starting with a novel with such a dramatic mismatch between length/reading
level and likely audience, I am able to immediately gain information about my students’ beliefs about children and their confusion about children’s literature as an art form versus a piece of curriculum. Students always have a strong reaction to this text and that is valuable in and of itself.


The Watsons Go to Birmingham - 1963, a Newbery Honor and Coretta Scott King winner, is consistently a favorite among my students and has become a mainstay of any children’s literature syllabus of mine. Readers are immediately drawn in by the humorous text. Kenny, the main character, is tortured by bullies as well as his older brother. He feels conflicted about being good in school and struggles with his friendships. It is easy to see how most readers will relate to and see themselves in Kenny’s character. There is a universality about the depiction of the Watson family that many readers will readily find comforting and familiar. Readers easily step into the love and warmth of the “Weird Watsons,” but they do not so easily step into the world of the violence that plagued Birmingham in 1963 (and before and after).

The tone of the story shifts from the playful sharing of one family’s idiosyncrasies to the painful exposing of one of the many heinous events of the civil rights era. One of my reasons for choosing *Watsons* as a text for all of my students to read is that as they will learn of the savage destruction of a politically-active community church and the malicious loss of human lives, the distinctions between living in America as an African-American as opposed to a Caucasian become painfully clear. Curtis’ juxtaposition of humor and tragedy compels reader’s engagement and compassion.
Discussion about *Watsons* is always lively and easy to facilitate. Students want to talk about the book and share how they “laughed and cried” like at a good movie. We read the book for the very first day of class and the discussion that ensued seemed to never end. Students continued exploring their thoughts about the book and our conversation in papers they wrote and in ongoing discussions. We were constantly comparing other books we read to the *Watsons*. Curtis’ novel is an excellent introduction to historical fiction and multicultural literature because of the passionate and positive responses it garners.

*From the Notebooks of Melanin Sun* (Woodson, J., 1995, NY: Scholastic)

My points of entry into this story are varied and highly personal. As a lesbian I was likely to identify with and advocate for E.C. and that indeed characterizes my reading of the text. Additionally, I was riveted by Mel and the rest of the community of character's response to an interracial relationship. I have experience in such relationships but only from the perspective of a white person. My love of this novel emerges also from the beauty of the relationship between mother and son. The closeness E.C. and Mel share is unlike any parental bond I have experienced and throughout my readings and rereadings of this novel I am struck by how closely their interactions mirror that of friends. Accordingly, *Melanin* has caused me to rethink and expand my beliefs about parent/child relationships.

In my interpretation, this story is as much about the mother as it is about Melanin, the teenaged protagonist. This perspective clearly reveals my status as an adult reader. However, I think most readers of *Melanin* get to know both Mel and E.C. quite well.
Through her storytelling, Woodson begs the question, whose coming of age story is this? E.C. finds herself coming out as a lesbian and coping with the consequences of that reality. At the same time, Mel is trying to figure out what this revelation might mean for him as an adolescent boy. To complicate this, Mel’s neighborhood friends are sources of pain, confusion, and support as the story unfolds. As always, Woodson provides no easy answers.

Woodson uses an innovative narrative structure to tell this story, which won a Coretta Scott King award. In *Melanin*, multiple voicing and re-voicing occurs through the sharing of Mel’s diary entries as well as his narration. The plot moves quickly as chapters are short and alternate between action and Mel’s journal entries. Mel’s discovery that his mother’s girlfriend has been rejected by her family as he is by his father conveys to the reader that no easy solution will bring contentment to all involved. In this way, the narrative style employed by Woodson invites multiple, differing, and evolving responses.

Most of Mel’s narration occurs in standard English, but he switches language style when he is with his friends or feeling intense emotion. Mel quotes a nurse who says “why he so dark anyway?” (p.8) and his friend as saying, “. . . yeah, so what would she want with your ugly butt? Melon-head’s mom needs a nice older man like me” (p. 22). He also uses a less standard style in his narration when he first meets Kristin, “Not only was she not the fine sister. This woman wasn’t fine or a sister” (p. 31). As a reader, I found that the intermingling of these discourse styles enabled me to feel alternately like an intimate participant in conversations and situations and an outside observer thinking through the events taking place. Questions of identity, perspective, and ownership of
story are more readily contested through complex and varied narrative formats as in *Melanin* which makes it a shrewd choice for my class. This text often leads to important conversations about narrative style and also issues of censorship and defining young adult literature (I do not use this book as a young adult text in the class).

**Miracle’s Boys** (Woodson, J., 2000, NY: Putnam)

*Miracle’s Boys* is yet another Coretta Scott King award winner from Jacqueline Woodson. This novel features three brothers making their way in the world after the loss of both parents. Tyree, Charlie, and Lafayette seem to be on very different paths and each is grieving in his own way. The story is told mainly from the perspective of Lafayette, the youngest and apparently most fearful and lost, but Woodson provides insight into all three of the brother’s inner conflicts.

I chose this novel for the class because of Woodson’s trademark realism. I was excited to provide my students with an award-winning novel featuring an urban neighborhood. Woodson represents that neighborhood as a place worthy of the characters’, and thus the reader’s affection. Similarly, Woodson executes dialogue between the characters with such accuracy and authenticity that most readers will feel like they are part of the conversation. She beautifully captures their anger, heartache, and kinship.

In my reading, the emphasis on the routines of daily life appealed to me. There was something warm and comfortable about the Bailey household even as they struggled against their personal demons. Lafayette blames himself for his mother’s death and this echoes throughout the book, but this inner turmoil is contrasted by his wit and humor.
This balance left me wishing I knew Lafayette in real life. I would love to sit and talk about music and movies with Tyree who has sacrificed college to take care of his brothers and is still haunted after witnessing his father’s death. And Woodson makes it nearly impossible to resist rooting for “Newcharlie.” As usual Woodson provides no easy answers and refuses to tie up loose ends. Tyree, Charlie, and Lafayette are conflicted characters and a tidy, predictable ending would not have been believable to most readers. Similarly, my students are drawn to the family dynamics. Many of them also appreciate the male “leads” in the novel and find it refreshing after reading so many novels with female protagonists for the class.

3.10) Conclusion: Chapter Three Summary

This glimpse into the “life” of the LIS 120 is meant to provide context and background for the research presented here. As a teacher-research investigation, all aspects of classroom life, from the books selected to the lessons planned, are relevant. The details of the methodological decisions, planning, and activities that took place provide more than context. Descriptions and explanations of these procedures are a necessary component of any qualitative research project because they provide readers with an understanding of how the researcher went about the work of data collection, and analysis, interpretation, and write-up.
CHAPTER 4

FINDINGS OF THE STUDY:

READING RESPONSES AND TEACHING THROUGH TENSIONS

4.1) Overview of the Chapter

This chapter is divided into two main parts. In the first part, I present findings that emerged from the analysis of students’ responses in the form of written work and in class conversations. In the second part of the chapter, I present findings that resulted from analysis of my pedagogy. These findings are interrelated and the analysis and interpretation that took place integrated data sources from both parts. However, for the sake of clarity they have been divided for this discussion.

4.2) Introduction to Part I: Student Responses

What if, like the relationship between a film and its viewer, a student’s relationship to a curriculum is a messy and unpredictable event that constantly exceeds both understanding and misunderstanding? (Ellsworth, 1997, p. 46)

I returned to Ellsworth’s question throughout the process of analysis and interpretation. Even at this writing, I am still intrigued by the “messy and unpredictable” nature of the relationship between readers and texts. In this chapter I try to bring order to and provide explanations for the relationships I watched unfold between teacher and
students, students and texts, and among students. In the spirit of Ellsworth, it is clear to me that moments of both understanding and misunderstanding dominated these interactions as well as my interpretive process. My goals in this chapter include presenting the data, detailing the specific categories which were arrived at through an inductive process, and contextualizing these findings within related theoretical frameworks. The descriptions and explanations will enable readers to gain a sense of what my students experienced as readers and learners and what I have come to believe about multicultural literature, preservice teachers’ meaning-making, and my pedagogy.

The data collection process left me with an overwhelming overabundance of data. As Marshall and Rossman (1989) explain, data analysis must result in data reduction so that data can be “brought into manageable chunks’ (p. 113). Through the work of analysis and interpretation I came to realize that I would have to limit my descriptions, but I wanted the data to dictate which stories would be explored and shared here. After revising and limiting categories (as described in chapter 3), my emphasis in this chapter is on the personal mappings that reveal the most about the meaning-making work of this group of preservice teachers around selected multicultural children’s literature. Accordingly, this section is divided into several parts which focus on key texts, conversations, and phenomena. The excerpts throughout this chapter are pulled from written work and conversations, and represent all 22 students who participated in the study. Throughout the course we read across a wide variety of genres and experienced literature from an array of social and cultural perspectives. However the texts referenced here represent only a handful of genres and reflect limited diversity. Three of the books are classified as historical fiction, while the rest are contemporary realistic fiction.
Several could also be described as young adult literature. I regard all of the books as multicultural texts because they feature stories about people who have been under-represented or misrepresented in children’s literature. My goal was to let the data lead my analysis. After the coding, categorizing, and reducing, the most vibrant and illuminating stories were those related to the following novels: *Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry* (Taylor, 1976), *The Star Fisher* (Yep, 1991), *Tears of a Tiger* (Draper, 1994), *What Jamie Saw* (Coman, 1995), *Watsons Go to Birmingham - 1963* (Curtis, 1995), *From the Notebooks of Melanin Sun* (Woodson, 1995), and *Miracle’s Boys* (Woodson, 2000).

The data sources shared here are culled from both conversation and writing. While these explorations of response and interpretation do not rely heavily or explicitly on literary qualities, students do offer arguments on grounds of compelling realism and effective characterization. I found that these two concepts, realism and characterization, constituted the major literary aspects that students commented on in their interpretive work (across the divisions presented here). When literature discussions focused on these aspects, students were most likely to actually return to the text to find examples or evidence. Student talk regularly circulated around the issue of believability of characters and situations. This is usually how personal connections and disconnections were brought into the fold of conversations and written response. This reporting of the data focuses predominantly on those kinds of explorations of response. As a reminder, I did not conduct analysis with questions about my students’ knowledge of literary elements in mind. As described in chapter three, student evaluation of literary quality was one of many lines of data analysis that were deferred or eliminated during data analysis and reduction.
I will describe six major categories of responses. Each of these groups of responses emerged as unique and significant pattern at the end of my analytic process. These categories are certainly interrelated but for my purposes and for the sake of clarity, I will discuss each one individually. The order in which they are discussed is neither arbitrary nor hierarchical. The groups are organized based on similarities among the patterns and ordered based on connections I see across them. The threads of analysis that led to these major groups were generated through examination of written papers, transcripts, and my fieldnotes. Accordingly, the same student or the same response may appear in more than one category. In other words, the categories are not mutually exclusive and, obviously, more than one “type” of responses can happen simultaneously as students read and respond to the novels. Examples are provided to illustrate the characteristics of each group of responses. A brief overview of the six groups follows.

I. Intimate Disclosures
   A. Intimate Disclosures: Life-to-Text Connections
   B. Intimate Disclosures: Text-to-Life Connections
II. Dialogue and Difference: Text and Life Collide
III. Disconnections and Difference
   A. Disconnections: The “Intolerance” of Difference
   B. Disconnections: The “Tolerance” of Difference
IV. Transcendence of Difference: Pretending and Lobotomizing

All of these responses took place in what I have come to think of as “dialogic spaces” (Bakhtin, 1986). These are spaces in which understandings of texts and social relations were forged, with and without my knowledge and assistance. I was not privy to all of these conversations in the moment, but instead gained access to them later when I transcribed the audiotapes. While I was not physically present for all of the dialogues shared here, I certainly was always present in the sense that my role as teacher pervaded
class interactions at every turn. In some of the exchanges, I play a much more dominant role and my participation is active. I always joined each small group for a few minutes, I led and participated in whole group discussion, and the dialogues represented in response papers shared here were written with me as the audience. Accordingly, I use the term dialogue to refer to both oral and written exchanges. For my purposes, dialogue is defined as verbal interactions through which we enact who we are to the world in which we live. The vignettes I share here represent the stream of talk that expressed not only the words and stories we shared with each other, but also the words and stories that determined who we were, who we were becoming, and who we wanted to be as teachers. In the retelling here, I attempt to be loyal to the original tellings.

In the first major group of responses (I. Intimate Disclosures), students’ responses include what I determined to be intimate disclosures. The personal stories featured in the first subgroup (IA) are used to explain and validate their positive responses to the text. These students seem to map their personal lives directly onto the stories in the books. The personal stories featured in the second subgroup (IB) also show students mapping their lives onto the events and characters in the books. However, these responses differ from the responses in the first group because the student readers apply the text to their lives as much as they apply their lives to the texts. In these two groups, students seem to map their lives onto the stories so completely and precisely that intense feelings of identification and empathy develop. These reader’s responses are characterized by elevated engagement, embodied meaning-making, and enthusiastic endorsements. Highly personal narratives and emotional connections dominate the responses in both of these groups.
In group II (Dialogue and Difference) these connections between life and text/text and life are complicated as different perspectives come into play through dialogue. In this category, students explicitly identify and explore the matches and mismatches between their lives and the lives of the characters in the books. With the help of the characters in the books and their classmates, students began asking questions about underlying social ideologies (Nieto, 2000). Emotional responses and reliance on personal history continue be in play here as with the first two groups of responses described. However, these students are simultaneously connecting and disconnecting with the story while maintaining engagement, developing empathy and considering endorsement.

The next major category (III. Disconnections with Difference) includes responses in which students’ disconnectedness with a text dominates their talk or writing. In these examples, the focus is on mismatches between the readers’ personal experiences and the stories featured in the novels. In the first subset (IIIA) of responses in the section, this “un-mappability” contributes to students rejecting the novel. Rejection rather than endorsement is made explicit by these student readers; and I suggest that frustration, indifference, and emotional distance rather than empathy and engagement characterize their responses. In the second subset (IIIB) of responses in this section students express being highly engaged with the text despite the mismatches and go on to endorse the novel. Readers in the second subset maintain engagement and empathy, though in very different forms than the students in the first two sections who make intimate disclosures or engage in dialogic conversations and then enthusiastically recommend the novels. Personal narratives and emotional stances are still present in both of these subgroups (IIIA & IIIB) of responses but take on less embodied forms.
In the last pattern (IV. Transcendence of Difference) of responses described, readers again focus on feeling connected. My students enthusiastically explore points of connection with characters who differ from themselves in significant ways. However, these differences are rendered invisible and even negated in some instances. Students endorse the texts and exhibit characteristics of engaged reading and empathetic responses, but their meaning-making depends on the transcendence of difference. I found these responses to be less embodied and the role of emotion and personal narratives to be diminished.

Throughout my descriptions of each type of response I grapple with the concepts of engagement, empathy, and endorsement. Each shared vignette provides insight into students’ “style” of engagement, their feelings of empathy, and their approach to evaluating the book’s quality. My analytic path led me to take interpretive leaps concerning my students’ engagement, empathy and endorsements. To do this I call on the work of other researchers who have focused on reader response to better understand the meaning-making process, literary understanding, and the act of reading in general. Additionally, I rely on multiculturalists, critical theorists and other scholars who explore issues related to diversity and equity.

4.2.1) IA. Intimate Disclosures: Life-to-Text Connections

We must be vulnerable enough...to allow the realities of others to edge themselves into our consciousness. (Delpit, 1986, p. 297)

Students made themselves vulnerable through personal disclosures that occurred in myriad ways during literature discussion, reader response activities, and reflective
writing. In this section I describe how students called upon highly personal memories in order to validate their interpretation, explain their empathetic response, and endorse a book’s use or merit. I deem the sharing of these personal stories to be intimate and risky in nature because many of them recall traumatic experiences or information that is often kept private. According to Felman and Laub (1992), these kinds of disclosures occur when there is a conflation of text and life for the reader. They suggest that literature functions as an encounter, making reading an act of bearing witness. Based on this conceptualization, a reader, being “a separate human being....will experience hazards and struggles of his own, while carrying out his function as a witness” (p. 58). I discovered that my students’ reflections on their own “hazards and struggles” generally resulted in a positive response to the text.

My descriptions of student responses will immediately bear resemblance to descriptions submitted by Langer (1995) and Sipe (2000). As my students made these personal disclosures, they resembled acts Langer documented with her readers. Specifically, they seem to engage in “being in and moving through an envisionment” which refers to acts of developing an interpretation through the use of personal knowledge in order to build and elaborate textual understandings. Similarly, they obviously are enacting what Sipe describes as the personal aspect of literary understanding in which readers connect the text to their personal lives. They are drawn to the texts because it calls up personal stories which facilitate empathy and identification. In these life-to-text examples my students used experience from their lives to connect with and understand the text. According to Sipe, this is based on the personalizing impulse which is the desire to link or connect ourselves to the text. Indeed, in these
examples I detected an urge on the readers’ part to draw the story to themselves and forge a reciprocal exchange between text on a page and real life.

An alarming number of students shared stories of experience with domestic violence in their personal reflection papers on Jamie. Darina and Lisa, women students in their mid-30’s, shared these stories in their papers after our class discussion but were not particularly vocal in class. This was unusual for Darina who was one of the most dominant members of the class, but Lisa’s quietness during the discussion was standard.

*When we discussed the book in class it made me angry when people blamed her [the mother]. This book was not an easy read for me. I felt the pain all over again. I imagined my daughters and what they must have felt and probably still do today. The fear you experience from this crime is unexplainable. I know why Jamie’s mother hid and I know why he didn’t go back to school. For the first time he felt safe and so did she. I am Jamie, I am his mother.* (DC/RP1)

*This book is an impressionistic portrait of me over a decade ago. I was a senior in high school instead of a young mother and it was a boyfriend instead of someone I lived with. Instead of isolating myself I sought out distractions to help me forget what was happening. I drank a lot and lost a lot of weight. I was hiding but in a different way than Patty was but for the same reasons and with a similar result. Where Jamie has magic, I had music. But the emotions were the same, exactly the same.* (LC/RP3)

Similar disclosures were made during our class discussion of this text. The following conversation was preceded by students offering their responses to Jamie’s mother in particular as they read and reflected on this text. Many students condemned Patty’s behavior and choices, voicing disdain for her. Two older nontraditional students, Dawn and Carolyn, countered with these disclosures:
DH: I think that this book touched me a little more than it would other people because I have family that is living through almost the same thing so I wonder if maybe it wasn’t easier for me to forgive Patty or to at least see her side of it...

CE: Yeah, I think that Patty had a lot of courage, like to up and go...a few years ago my best friend was dealing with something like this although it was almost worse and you know she didn’t have the courage at first but she did eventually and so when Patty left, I knew how much courage that took to pack up the kids and go, knowing that it could have gotten a lot worse.

Disclosures similar to these were also made in writings and discussions of Miracle. Students shared stories of various kinds of loss, ranging from divorce to death. Several shared stories of how they “wasted time” blaming themselves or others rather than focusing on grieving after the death of a family member. In describing her reading of Miracle, Rebecca reflected on dynamics within her own family. Rebecca, a young white woman, uses a nonchalant tone in referencing professional help she has sought for her emotional response to her parents divorce and the consequences in her adult life. This information is shared in order to further her assertion that she felt aligned with the character of LaFayette from the novel.

While reading “Miracle’s Boys” I was so intrigued that I read the entire book in two days. Throughout the majority of the story I felt sorry for Lafayette. I felt as if I wanted to be able to reach out and help him with his troubled life. I think I wanted to reach out to him because I understood what was going on with NewCharlie from the perspective of someone like his brother LaFayette. I have struggled for years to let go of what my therapist calls my “martyr syndrome” (which apparently was caused by my belief as a child that I could save my parents’ marriage). I think I’m a lot like LaFayette and many people with this problem like myself seem to get lost like he did and you just feel so helpless. (RK/RP3)

A similar straightforward tone was also used when Abby, whose remarkable text-to-life connections will be described later, verbalized how she “really really really”
enjoyed *Melanin* by first disclosing that she has a lesbian sister. In a similar matter-of-fact manner, Dawn explains her connection to *Thunder*. During this small group discussion students were questioning the family relationships among the Logans. In particular, several white students found it difficult to relate to and thus find believable the candidness with which the parents spoke to the children about racism. As the conversation unfolded, I expected the students to decide on the time period as an explanation for this behavior. I was surprised when I heard Dawn provide evidence for the believability of such exchanges by calling on personal experience.

**LC:** I don’t know, did your parents talk to you as frankly as these parents talked to her [Cassie]? Because that was the only thing in the book that I was kind of like hmm...my parents never talked to me like that about things like that that way, you know about the way things were.

**DH:** Yeah, I guess my parents did, but I came from an interracial family so I had to, I had lots of questions so I always went to them with like why is this this way and why am I different and why do I get picked on and you know, so I did, I had that.

**CK:** Really, huh? I never got it, never got talked to about it at all.

Dawn’s identification as “interracial” may not seem like an intimate personal disclosure; it may have come as a surprise to some classmates while others in the group may have assumed as much. However, her decision to name this identity and extend from that experience an understanding of the family interactions in the book took a substantial risk. Dawn could have simply agreed with the other white students in the group that the Logan parents were unreasonably frank with their children or let the conversation head toward another explanation (such as the time period, the explanation the teacher in me expected). Instead she chose to draw attention to her difference in the group and explore
how that difference played out in her reading of this novel. As the conversation continued after this disclosure, several of the white students shared how the honest conversations they had with their parents when they were young emerged only after they probed the adults with pressing questions, much as Dawn described. In this way, Dawn’s response and experiences were validated and the other students’ interpretations of Thunder were extended. Through this dialogue the white women discovered a mismatch between their personal cultural experiences and those of the characters and of their classmate. The articulation of this subtle mismatch and the dialogue that ensued enabled the students and me to see how we use personal experience as a road map throughout the meaning-making process. Through this explicit sharing of these road maps, my students revealed their elevated engagement, embodied empathy, and enthusiastic endorsements. In other examples throughout this chapter I will show how these kinds of mismatches consistently shaped meaning-making but with surprising results ranging from the development of insight and empathy across differences to inhibited engagement and outright rejections of books.

4.2.2) IB. Intimate Disclosures II: Text-to-Life Connections

Rather, it [text] is explosive, dangerously labile, with unpredictable consequences. Like concepts, texts are complex products, effects of history, the intermingling of old and new, a complex of internal coherences and inconsistencies and external referents, of intension and extension, of thresholds and becomings. Texts, like concepts, do things, make things, perform actions, create connections, bring about new alignments. They are events - situated in social, institutional, and conceptual space. (Davies, 2000, p. 194)
In the preceding examples, students made themselves vulnerable through intimate disclosures. These disclosures surprised both the teacher and the researcher in me, reminding me of that unpredictability of literature. These sharings of personal experiences involved intense identification and close matches between the lives of the characters and the lives of the readers. While the matches were not exact, the similarities of the situations drew the readers into a relationship with the text and each other that can be characterized by active engagement, embodied empathy, and enthusiastic endorsement. The following examples involve levels of vulnerability similar to the first group described, but also show how such engagement and empathy can lead readers - in the spirit of Davies - to learn something new about themselves or the world.

Personal disclosures during our literature discussions and in student papers often seemed to veer dramatically from the text. As a former middle school teacher, I initially found this worrisome and was concerned that students’ off-topic talking was a sign of disinterest. My usual pedagogical impulse in this situation is to find a way to bring students back to the text. However, as I reviewed the transcripts and reread the papers, I began to see how seemingly tangential talk led to disclosures that are indicative of highly engaged readers, writers, and meaning-makers. In his work with younger readers, Sipe (2000) found that they often made text-to-life leaps as part of the personal aspect of literary understanding. Similarly, Langer (1995) observed readers “stepping back and rethinking what one knows.” In this kind of envisionment, readers reflect on personal knowledge and use those reflections to rethink previously held ideas, beliefs, and feelings. In both of these descriptions, and in the examples to follow, students make sense of their lives while making sense of the text. As I focused my analysis it became
clear to me that these readers were not just applying their lives to the text as in the examples provided in the previous section (IA), they were applying the text to their lives. I use the term text-to-life to mean that the students enact their lives as texts while making intertextual connections and use the literature to better understand themselves, their lives, their world. Readers quite literally apply the printed text to the text of their lives.

As described earlier the book discussion group responding to Thunder was comprised of several white women and one woman who considers herself biracial. This group included both traditional and nontraditional students. As their discussion of parent/child relationships continued, one of the young white women seemed to gain a new perspective on her personal experience in an interracial relationship. This revelation emerged as the group made sense of the Logan family and their struggles. During the conversation below, Hillary not only describes how her dialogue with her parents about her relationship is similar to and different from the conversations between the Logan parents and children, but reaches beyond those reflections to consider further the dilemmas she and her teenaged boyfriend faced.

**HK:** I grew up, my elementary school was completely white, then I went to middle school and it was maybe 50/50 and a lot of my friends happened to be African-American and I think the first time that anything...I never even thought about racism in my life until seventh grade when I was called n-lover, you know and that and it’s coming from like nowhere to me, I mean, wow....

**CK:** God! What does that even mean?

**HK** I know, so then I had tons of questions for my parents and they were confronted with it then...

**DH:** Yeah, like I said I was always turning to my parents..

**HK:** My boyfriend, he, in my situation, he was really sympathetic but I felt I needed so much more information, like I was kind of more afraid of his parents
and he was more afraid of my parents, in terms of reactions, and then our friends were in the equation as well and...it was just really confusing and scary to me, I guess I don’t know if it was the same for him, probably not, maybe his parents did talk to him about it like in the book but I don’t know, I’ve never thought about it really.

**CK:** So it seems like a lot of the time we don’t talk about things that really really, that really really scare us and I guess maybe that’s part of the problem, but do you think Cassie and them were less scared because they were kind of aware of things?

While I was not present when these comments were made during a small group discussion, the tape plainly reveals that this dialogue enabled Hillary to think about her former boyfriend’s perspective/position in a different way than she had in the past. After this, Christa proceeded to direct the conversation to Cassie’s position in the novel. It was common throughout written work, literature discussions, and other response activities for students to align themselves with protagonists with whom they seem to share circumstances or emotions. Several students wrote about their response to *Melanin* by commenting on how well Woodson captures the perspective of the teenaged protagonist. These readers seemed to become so aligned with Mel that they were able to not only see his unique and culturally-situated perspective but also to apply that perspective to some of their own experiences as teenagers. Two young white students, Brandi and Josie, mapped Mel’s experience of learning of his mother’s sexuality onto their experiences with divorce and parental relationships:

*So many children’s book have touched me on a personal level but none so much as “From the Notebooks of Melanin Sun.” I was amazed that a story about an African-American boy finding out that his mother is gay would allow me to reflect on my relationship with my estranged mother. I love this book and will use it in my classroom because it helped me learn about myself in ways I never expected and probably no one could have predicted. (BM/RP1)*
What this book helped me realize was that my father didn’t become a different person when he remarried. I was so young that I thought being her husband would somehow change that he was my father. I’ve known for some time that that wasn’t true but Melanin’s understanding that his mom doesn’t become a different person because she’s in love with a woman was very powerful to me. Young people, especially kids dealing with changing family situations, need to know this. I needed to know it and apparently still need to be reminded of it. (JM/RP2)

During a small group discussion of the same book, Abby reflected on the family dynamics involved in how she recently learned of her older sister’s sexuality. This example included the most obvious link between the content of the text and the reader’s consideration of her own life.

AL: I really really really got into this book. My sister’s gay and they decided not to tell me about it until I was in college...cause...she’s fourteen years older than me so...so I have, I have wondered, you know like you were saying about well, would the girls still want to come over if they found out, if they knew. I really do wonder about that, how I would have reacted if I was this age, you know. And in...in a way I’m I’m glad that it never came out you know before before that because I...I’m...I was adult enough to handle the situation, in a way that is just appropriate. I think it must have just been a really hard decision to decide when and how to tell me and I never thought about it but I guess it was and I guess they had to weigh if I could get hurt somehow you know kind of like Melanin and also if my sister would get hurt by me or whatever.

Abby’s talk during this conversation is characterized by both excitement and curiosity. She does not hesitate when disclosing that her sister is a lesbian. She seems almost pleased to be able to make the connection and contribute in such a substantial way to the conversation. Prior to Abby’s comment above, the students had been discussing how the situation might have been different if the protagonist in the novel was a girl instead of a boy. Abby takes that opportunity to share her story, and as she continues talking it becomes clear that Melanin has led her to more questions and insights about her own life experience. It is clear from Abby’s voice on the tape, and from the summary of
the conversation she provided me when I visited this book discussion group, that she had never before realized that her family may have been protecting her sister as much as they were protecting her as they made decisions regarding the sister’s coming out to Abby. This sort of engaged reflection while responding to a text also occurred for Shannon. Both Shannon and Abby are traditional students completing their third year at SCC. Like Abby, Shannon found that the novel, in this case *Miracle* also by Woodson, caused her to reconsider events in her own life in light of the perspectives revealed in the text.

*I found this book so intriguing because my sister Kristie was similar to NewCharlie...[description of sister’s problems including her arrests]...My parents did not know what to do with her. Finally they sent her to a juvenile detention facility. I remember her going there for only a little while. Unfortunately she is thirty today and has not changed. We know she is addicted to alcohol and drugs. We are concerned but don’t feel there is anything we can do. Seeing the sibling relationships develop in “Miracle’s Boys” made me yearn for a connection like theirs and the ability to really help Kristie, which is something I had put out of my head for a long time. (SC/RP3)*

In these examples and the ones in the previous section, my students’ responses to and interpretations of the multicultural texts feature personal reflection and self-awareness. In all these excerpts, their responses are characterized by intimate disclosures and meaning-making infused with the personal. Readers professed to feeling closely aligned with characters or situations in the novels, but difference in anything from time period to family composition make it impossible for any exact match (or perfect mapping) to occur. However, in these responses the differences did not simply melt away or vanish. The window onto others provided through the multicultural texts enabled readers to see others as well as see themselves differently. Difference in the forms of class, race, gender, and sexuality were not overlooked or diminished as students
read and interpreted. In fact, I think my students’ responses reveal that they were acutely aware of the representation of diversity in the book and also of the realities of difference in their own lives. This acute awareness seems to result in an elevated kind of engagement accompanied by embodied empathy and enthusiastic endorsements.

4.2.3) Summary of Group IA & IB: From Life-to-Text To Text-to-Life

In the previous two sections I shared examples of how personal experiences with issues tackled in the novels were called upon in my students’ work and interactions. In those examples concrete connections were made to some aspect of the text - a character, a set of circumstances, a perspective. In those examples, reader’s responses were steeped in personal experience that mapped closely onto the character’s experiences, but gender, racial, and cultural identities of both the readers and characters were still engaged and honored. Students did not dismiss or diminish the social differences between themselves and the characters, but instead focused their reading of the text and of each other on personal and embodied responses. Davies (2000) describes embodied responses:

We enter into the novel as another form of living in the world through imagining the lives of others as we bring them to life on the page. In doing so, we live the emotions of the characters, experience life from their point of view, and expand our consciousness to include the possibility we lived there in the writing/reading. (p. 181)

As my students made themselves vulnerable by making intimate disclosures, they responded in an embodied manner akin to what Davies described. Accordingly, identity markers such as race, class, and gender were not avoided in these examples, but instead were woven into students’ responses. I believe the multicultural children’s literature the
students read and discussed makes such embodied readings possible by allowing for enthusiastic and heartfelt life-to-text connections while providing possibilities for leaps to text-to-life connections. This potential may exist with all quality literature, but when these issues of diversity are forefronted in literature, similarly relevant issues from reader’s lives become forefronted during meaning-making and interpretations. This may in turn provide us an opportunity to learn more about equity, diversity, and multicultural teaching.

The examples in this section show students focusing on connections while reading multicultural children’s literature and relying on that connectedness to learn more about themselves and the text. Mismatches and disconnections exist, but they are not impediments to empathy, engagement, or endorsement. The mismatches may appear to be overlooked (by both the readers and the researcher), but in my interpretation the students are so moved by the intersection of their experiences and the character’s experiences that their engagement and empathy is heightened and full-bodied. Because of this intensity, the diversity represented in the texts is not sacrificed or diminished. These readers honor and validate both their own experiences and the experiences portrayed in the novels.

4.2.4) II. Dialogue and Difference: Text and Life Collide

To have a voice is to be human. To have something to say is to be a person. But speaking depends on listening and being heard; it is an intensely relational act. (Gilligan, p.17, 1993)
As stated before, Dawn’s sharing of intimate personal experiences during a discussion of *Thunder* illuminated the culturally-situatedness of her response and the responses of her classmates. This exchange also revealed the delicate and relational nature of reading and responding - of speaking and listening. As a teacher I was pleased with Dawn’s risk-taking and impressed with the dialogue that ensued. However, as a researcher I wondered if the dialogue ended there. Did that exchange cause the white students in the group who were critical of the Logans’ honesty to rethink more than just the text after the conversation with Dawn?

Bakhtin (1994) suggests that words are borderzones between self and other, explaining that all conversational moments are drenched in social, cultural, and historical significance. According to Bakhtin, words function as verbal bridges between speakers and listeners. In explaining Bakhtin’s notion of “addressive surplus,” Morson and Emerson (1990) describe a willingness to listen that is active and based on the pursuit of understanding. When we engage in dialogic exchanges with an addressive surplus, at least two people share their perceptions in a reciprocal act which builds a verbal bridge upon which both participants fill gaps in their knowledge. I believe this kind of bridge-building occurred mainly during small group and whole class discussions. Bakhtin (1994) states that “a word is a bridge thrown between myself and another” (p. 58). When we speak we expect someone to catch the bridge at the other end. The person at the other end is not a passive receiver, but rather someone who will actively participate and continue the building of the bridge. The meaning of any give piece of dialogue is dependent not only on the speaker but also on the “addressee,” the one who receives and responds to it. Bakhtin explains this further with the concept of “addressivity” which
underlies our motivation for speaking. Any act of speech is premeditated on the assumption of a chain of interactive responses. The motivation for speaking is the need to receive a response from others, for it is through relationship to others that we come to know who we are in a particular place, at a particular time, or in a particular context.

In the examples in this section, students’ writings and classroom talk illuminate the dialogic process of sharing personal responses and also provide a glimpse into students’ engagement with the text and - most importantly for this category - with each other. In these examples, students continue to rely heavily on life-to-text and text-to-life connections as they explore the novels and the points of disconnection to the texts and to each other actually shape their engagement and empathy. Analysis of these dialogues revealed the culturally-situatedness of interpretation allowing me to consider how identity markers shape response even if those same markers initially seem diminished in that interpretation. The most obvious examples of this juxtaposition involves discussions of Thunder and Watsons.

Earlier I shared a conversation between Lisa, Dawn, and Christa in which readers discovered a substantial example of how personal experience shapes response.

**LC:** I don’t know, did your parents talk to you as frankly as these parents talked to her [Cassie]? Because that was the only thing in the book that I was kind of like hmm...my parents never talked to me like that about things like that that way, you know about the way things were.

**DH:** Yeah, I guess my parents did, but I came from an interracial family so I had to, I had lots of questions so I always went to them with like why is this this way and why am I different and why do I get picked on and you know, so I did, I had that.

**CK:** Really, huh? I never got it, never got talked to about it at all.
It is clear that Lisa is anticipating an affirmative response when she initiates this part of the discussion. Inherent in her address is the assumption that her co-discussants will respond and most likely concur with her comments. This style of address dominates our discourse throughout the class and across forms (small and large group, written and oral). As we have seen before, the students are attempting to use their personal experiences to make sense of the story in question. In this example, they are also relying on their relationship with each other in this conversation to further understand the story and their response to it. Together, they are evaluating character’s actions by comparing them to what they have seen and experienced in their own lives. They soon realize that differences in their own lives both compromise and enhance the dialogic exchange and their meaning-making work.

The most powerful and significant collision of personalal experiences and perspectives occurred with regard to *Watsons*. We started discussing Curtis’s text on the first day of class and the dialogue ensued in myriad ways until our very last meeting. Accordingly, these exchanges warrant being the focus of this section. The following excerpts come from class discussion, my field notes, and written work, but each piece is part of that larger ongoing conversation. To set the stage, I start with a long excerpt from my field notes from our first class meeting.

*The discussion quickly turned to more in-depth reflection and analysis. Students were anxious to draw comparisons between their families and the Watson family. Many students talked about their own sibling relationships, commenting on similarities and differences: “I’m the youngest too and like Joetta I always felt no one ever really listened to what I had to say,” “I think all siblings fight like this. Teasing is just something brothers and sisters always do and always will do,” “I wish my older brother had been more like Byron and had paid attention to my life and tried to protect me.”*
Kathy, an older white student and mother of three, shifted the conversation from sibling relationships to parental relationships by commenting on the mother in the story. She found Mrs. Watson to be “somewhat distant” and “too strict.” Several other white students agreed saying they wished she had been more “loving” and “nurturing.” All of the students commenting on Mrs. Watson in this way were white, but both younger and older students concurred that they were disturbed by the fact that she was not demonstrative in her affection for her children. This seemed to contradict their beliefs about and experiences of motherhood (as both children and mothers). Connie, an older African-American student, eventually spoke up on behalf of Mrs. Watson. She argued that Mrs. Watson was indeed a loving mother, citing personal examples for this interpretation. Connie explained that her mother often made exaggerated threats like the ones made by Mrs. Watson. She also argued that Mrs. Watson’s “strictness” was a manifestation of her care and concern for her children’s well-being and safety. Several of the students who had criticized Mrs. Watson responded to Connie’s comments saying that they can “see” her argument and conceding that Mrs. Watson does indeed love her children, but they still insisted that some of her behaviors were questionable. Next, another African-American student spoke up and explained that Mrs. Watson’s behavior was also familiar to her. Wendy urged the class to remember the time period and thought we should admire Mrs. Watson. She also used a personal story to convey to the class that this dominant style of mothering might be more common in the African-American community. The discussion continued for some time with students on both “sides” of the argument providing examples of the how their mothers behaved toward them. The conversation closed with Connie saying, “Yeah, I think it’s a cultural thing.” (RJ1/p.3)

Our class discussion lingered with students so much that references to this debate about Mrs. Watson’s mothering appeared in many of the reflection papers.

When Mrs. Watson was going to burn By’s fingers I had a hard time justifying what she was about to do. This type of punishment is unbelievable and horrible. It seems to me children services should be called but maybe it was different because of the time period. (KH/RP2)

I really related to how Mrs. Watson felt about her oldest son’s behavioral problems, but I know I could never have actually burned one of my children. I know sometimes drastic measures are necessary to keep from losing them forever but I always feel so bad when I have to discipline one of my children. I know this is a problem I have but there is a fine line between discipline and abuse and you have to always keep in mind exactly where that line is. (DC/RP3)
These students and many others offered passionate critiques of Mrs. Watson. Everyone in the class embraced this text enthusiastically so these conflicting perceptions of Mrs. Watson did not inhibit their engagement, discourage their empathy, or prevent them from endorsing their book. However, the students who were upset by Mrs. Watson’s actions were experiencing a kind of disconnection and they had trouble reconciling this with their intense identification with and appreciation for other aspects of the novel.

My students’ readings and responses were consistently imbued with personal experience and they often sought out the familiar. *Watsons* reached many of them through mirrored images of family interactions. In general, our conversation about *Watsons* focused on these connections, and the issues of racism and violence were minimized. However, students like Connie and Wendy were vocal about race when discussing responses to Mrs. Watson’s mothering. Suzan, an older Arab-American student, was not vocal in class about these concerns but she did comment on how her connections compared to those of her classmates in her reflection paper.

*After talking with some of the students in class, I discovered that some of them related to experiences of being the middle child and other relationships within the family. I wish that I could have focused on that view of the book but unfortunately all I could see was the racial aspect of it which is natural since I grew up in a very prejudiced environment. I truly enjoyed this very funny and compelling book but I must admit that it brought back such a barrage of painful childhood memories. I never understood why my family hated others in society and why were hated by so many.* (SH/RP2)

Suzan’s comments capture the complexity of how readers’ personal experiences bear out in engagement, response, and interpretation. Her reading of *Watsons* reveals how one’s personal experiences shape interpretation. The somewhat generalized connection she may have felt regarding the familial relationships was diminished because of how closely she
was able to map her own life history onto to the racialized events and issues in the story. My analysis of the conversations and written documents revealing this kind of response leads me to believe more profoundly in the power of dialogue. Suzan was awakened to the non-racialized perspective of *Watsons* just as Christa (CK) and Lisa (LC) were awakened by Dawn’s perspective during their discussion of *Thunder*. This demonstrates the reciprocal nature of these verbal exchanges and provides evidence of power of dialogue to cause shifts in thinking.

For my purposes dialogue encompasses both verbal and written interactions. Through dialogue we enact who we are to the world in which we live. Dialogue represents not only the stream of words in our talk and writing about books through which we expressed ourselves, but also the words that determined who we were, who we were becoming, and who we want to be in classrooms with young children. But all these “whos” are not so easily discernible. Ambiguity and multiplicity abide within the individual as well as within interactions with others and texts. It is within these ambiguities and multiplicities that the possibilities for new readings of texts, self, and others arise.

In the first two sets of responses I provided examples of students responding to multicultural texts through a focus on their own personal struggles (IA & IB). In those examples, identity markers such as race, sexuality, socioeconomic status, and gender were in play as students responded from embodied and vulnerable positions. The examples in this section (group II) show students doing similar kinds of meaning-making work. However, these vignettes show more explicitly how readers came into contact with each other. The dialogue between and among students revealed their negotiations of self
during the process of reading and responding to multicultural literature. Our responses and perceptions are shaped by how we view the world and our role in it. Though interactions and dialogue, knowledge of the self becomes constructed and reconstructed as the complexities of human involvement with others in intimate and academic settings are confronted. Enciso explains that “the power of the literature is not in its capacity to present a ‘truer’ version of differences (and resolutions of difference) but to open up dialogues about the construction and negotiation of differences we observe and live” (Enciso, 1997, p. 34). Indeed, these examples are testimonies to how multicultural literature and the ensuing reflections and discussions might invite and incite us to take a closer look at how our lives and the lives of others have been shaped by divisions, differences, and denials.

4.2.5) III. Disconnections and Difference

The data set revealed that sometimes reader’s engagement, development of empathy, and determinations of quality were not conveyed through personal disclosures of connections or reflections on their own lives as just described. In the next set of examples I describe student responses that are characterized by an overt negation or dismissal of difference. Students describe disconnections from the texts based on racial and class differences or by profound divisions between their experiences and the characters in the stories. Students’ lives clearly still informed their reading, but in these cases that tendency takes on different forms.
4.2.6) IIIA. Disconnecting And The “Intolerance” of Difference

If you don’t enter that world, hold your breath with the characters and become involved in their destiny, you won’t be able to empathize, and empathy is at the heart of the novel. This is how you read a novel: you inhale the experience. (Nafisi, 2003, p. 111)

Students were often explicit in their explanations of how racial and class-based differences inhibited their engagement and empathy, causing them to respond negatively to a text. For some students mismatched or un-mappable responses were experienced and expressed in almost confrontational tones. A student argued that *Watsons* did not “do justice to white people” and there was a heated argument in class regarding how whites were portrayed in that novel. During this conversation, the two African-American students in the class and several older white students insisted that the time period in which the story took place accounted for the alleged marginalization of whites in the story. When comparable comments were made regarding contemporary realistic fiction novels, no such compromise of views could be reached. In fact, as students shared disconnections with texts such as *Melanin*, *Tiger*, and *Jamie*, responses developed a more agitated tone, and meaning-making became less about comparing and contrasting experiences and more about negating the text on ideological grounds. In the examples that follow, there appears to be much more distance between readers and text, and the affective aspects of reading and meaning-making are diminished.

Cheryl, a middle-aged white woman with experience in the business world, called on her personal experience to explain her response to *Melanin*. What I found most significant about this piece of writing is that she explains her response as opposed to expressing it. Lived experience is described rather than invoked. Like many of the
student responses in this group, Cheryl’s writing suggests to me that she was unable or unwilling to read or meet the novel on its own terms.

The things Melanin thought and experienced were completely foreign to me. Being Caucasian, it was difficult for me to relate to Melanin’s feelings towards whites. I grew up in a very “white” world. There were no people of color in my neighborhood and I can’t really remember any in my school. The only Black people I really came into contact with were those I saw when I visited my grandmother in Mississippi and these people were vastly different from me because of their socioeconomic background. They lived in shacks, quite literally, and had outhouses as their toilet facilities. That was the difference, it didn’t seem to have anything to do with the color of our skin. In this book the focus should be on sexuality as the important issue but instead it seems to be about skin color. The focus on “Blackness” and the negativity toward the white world was misdirected in my opinion. The main issue is a child dealing with the sexuality of a parent and that could have been the focus without having to make race such a big part of the story. (CH/RP2)

Several other students seemed to stand on ideological ground, not engaging with the story but instead with the “idea” of the story. During a small group discussion of Miracle, a traditional white student lodged a comparable complaint when she commented that she could not “even remember a single Caucasian person being mentioned in the entire book.” Glen’s response to Draper’s Tiger further illustrates this stance. Glen is a nontraditional white student who chose this book after I shared it during my lecture on notable young adult novels. He was one of only two men in the class and one of only a few who intended to go on to teach middle or high school. Throughout the semester he was drawn to books that are traditionally geared toward a male audience such a sports books, adventure stories, and war histories. In this excerpt from one of his response papers he expresses disdain for how race was “manipulated” (per Glen during a private conversation) in Draper’s novel.
I think the novel would have been fine without the little inserts of racism. I know that as students and teachers you can not hide from the race issue, but I do not believe that this book was totally based on race so when it appears throughout the story it seems out of place. The novel is already dealing with the huge issues of death and suicide and these two capture the reader’s attention without the need for race to be involved. (GW/RP3)

As a fellow reader and teacher, I was confused by Glen’s comments. In my reading of this text race is central to the plot. During my junior year of high school one of my classmates was killed in a drunk driving accident. From this experience and others I have developed a strong and almost extremist stand against drunk driving. That aspect of my personal history dominates my reading of Tiger but I do not believe it eclipses the other perspectives and issues in the texts. I wonder what experiences or beliefs Glen brought to his reading of this text. He does not describe any connections to this story, instead he simply criticizes the “insertion” of race. As a teacher educator these comments worried me as I began to wonder about how race and class figure into engagement, meaning-making, and determinations of quality. Based on Glen’s comment, the racial themes in Tiger did not compare with the other issues being tackled but he does not clarify why or substantiate this point. He makes no claim to the parts of the story he thought were worthwhile and proceeds to attack parts he apparently could not relate to at all. It is understandable that Glen may not be able to map his personal experiences as a white man or his worldview onto those of the characters in this novel. However, rather than connecting to the text throughout different aspects of the story, he rejects it outright and dismisses the issue of race completely. Another student who read this book agreed with Glen in her paper as well, stating that “the race issue didn’t need to be included” in the book at all. Both of these students rejected the racial themes in the book as
unimportant and evidence of a worldview or agenda they find problematic. Something similar happened in students’ writing and conversations about Jamie. Students who were unable to make connections with the poor family in this book seemed to hold disdain for the representations and failed to find other experiences to map on to this story in order to engage with the book in a way that would result in the development of empathy and possibly an endorsement.

As I read this book I really had a problem with Jamie’s mother. There did not seem to be a whole lot of depth to her and she is portrayed as a smoking, baby-toting, uneducated, grocery-bagging, trailer park girl....What is wrong with looking at what’s good in life instead of dwelling on the bad?  (KJ/RP1)

Kara reiterated her disapproval of this book in class and several students echoed her complaint about the “depressing” nature of the story. These comments from a white, middle class, young woman resonated with many of the students in the class. Most of these students maintained this position even after two class members with experience in social work submitted that the story is a hopeful one because of Patty’s rejection of Van in the final scene of the book. While several student survivors of physical abuse questioned the realism of that pivotal moment, they agreed that it was hopeful regardless of believability. As the conversation continued in class two students explained their disconnected stance while reading Jamie. Both Chris and Beth identified as middle class, but Beth spoke to me about her work schedule and the burden of paying her own way through college. In this example, these students call upon personal experience to delineate ways in which they felt they were completely unable to map their own personal experiences onto what took place in the text.
**BR:** I didn’t identify with the characters in this story, I do not want to sound selfish by saying that we have always gotten what we wanted, but in a way we have. I just can’t even ima....

**CD:** Yeah, that’s how I felt, the idea of a family living in a trailer park and struggling just to put food on the table boggles my mind. I have always had a hot plate of foot put in front of me when I was hungry....

Like Cheryl, Glen, and Kara, these two students found their reading experience inhibited by the mismatches between their lives and the lives of the characters. It was as if the readers refused to look out or open the potential windows onto other’s experiences the books had to offer. As the class discussion continued, Beth and Chris (above) were explicit in their rejection of Jamie.

Delpit (1995) reminds us that our life experience may create “barriers that prevent us from seeing each other” (p. 134). All of the responses in this section demonstrate how un-mappable life experience and less embodied (or more explanatory) dialogue can lead to inhibited engagement, lack of empathy, and rejection of books. As a teacher, I see these readers as struggling against “the odds of their experience” (Seidl, 2004). The first three sets of responses shared in this chapter show students using personal experience and engaging in dialogue in an emotional, embodied way. The life experiences these students called upon in the meaning-making process predisposed them to elevated engagement, embodied empathy, and enthusiastic endorsement. Additionally, my pedagogy and the classroom environment fostered the integration of the personal and academic. In the examples in this section, students’ personal responses were negotiated in such a way that neither a “mirror” or a “window” experience occurred while reading. Again, my pedagogy and the classroom environment must be taken into consideration when
examining this phenomenon. The students engaged in dialogue and interacted in relationship with others as was the standard in this classroom context. Yet, they managed to remain disconnected from the characters, and to a larger extent the students who responded differently to the text than they did. It seems to me they did not bring themselves fully to the reading or conversations and did not develop empathy for the characters. This was not always the result when responses were characterized by un-mappability, as the next set of examples illustrates.

4.2.7) IIIB. Disconnecting And The “Tolerance” of Difference

Even though empathy is an admirable trait and a needed first step in the education of our students around issues of racism, teaching for empathy is not enough. Empathy has its own dangers. It can, I think, create a false sense of involvement. We can be misled. We can think we have achieved something significant with our students, but we’re actually just getting started, or diverted. (Rosenberg, 1997, p. 83).

Throughout my data, I found yet another set of writings and conversations that showed how students’ readings were marked by a failure to relate or difficulty mapping their lives onto the lives of the characters in the books. However, these students clearly developed empathy. In class they used language similar to Beth and Chris from the previous section, referring to events and situations as “unfathomable” or “out of my frame of reference.” In my initial analysis, I categorized these responses the same way I did the ones described in the previous section (IIIA). However, as I took closer and closer looks at the transcripts and student papers, I discovered that not all students whose disconnections to a text were heightened concluded by negating the experiences of those in the novel or rejecting the book outright. The responses of the students in this group
eventually moved beyond the focus on disconnectedness. They were not necessarily persuaded to change their view of the book, but their response became more embodied and informed through class discussions and further written reflection. An easy causal relationship can not be argued here, but it is clear to me that initial reactions based on unmappable experiences and contradictory worldviews during reading were transformed into what I deem to be more engaged, empathetic, and informed responses.

These students still speak from a more distanced position and their disconnections dominate their meaning-making work. However, the realities of others seemed to have penetrated them in significant ways - and that seems to make all the difference.

_I didn’t immediately fall in love with this book. In the beginning I found the language a bit harsh and I didn’t really identify with the characters at all. But, the more I read the more I became involved. As we discussed “Melanin Sun” in class I began to feel even more involved in Melanin’s struggle with his mother, his friends, and even his race._ (JL/RP2)

In this example Jessica, one of the youngest students in the class, explains her initial dislike for the book because of language and a mismatch between her experiences and those of the characters. She is a traditional white student. She began her reflection with a “teacherly” tone of voice, looking at the book as a concerned but distanced adult reader. Yet, she did become engaged with the book and eventually aligned herself with Melanin. It is not clear whether Jessica’s response was altered through conversation during class or at the time of her reading. Kathy, a nontraditional white student, takes a stance similar to Jessica’s and explicitly attributes her rethinking about this text to something that happened in class. Again, there is not evidence of a causal relationship, but clearly Kathy’s response was informed by class interactions and ongoing reflection on Jamie.
“What Jamie Saw” was too graphic in the beginning and I didn’t like it for a child. When we discussed it in class I soon remembered a classmate and actually a neighbor who lived a similar life. My father tried to keep me isolated from the reality of it all but as curious as I was I wouldn’t let it drop....I’ve decided I would recommend and teach this book if the opportunity arose. I was impressed by the work and wanted to see where it would end up. I still wanted a happy ending though because I liked Jamie. (KH/RP1)

Two other students came to similar conclusions about Coman’s novel. These two passages capture their experience as somewhat disconnected but engaged readers, and demonstrated how the book pushed their thinking.

I did not like this book when I read it. It made me feel uncomfortable. I felt uncomfortable for Jamie, for his mother, and for the safety of the baby girl. My heart truly went out to Jamie. I feel his life is not a very good life and I felt sorry for him. However, the book helped me crawl out from under my rock of thinking how beautiful the world is. I’m glad this book was written. It helped me step inside Jamie’s shoes at least for a minute. (AL/RP1)

It is true that every child may not be able to identify with Jamie in “What Jamie Saw” but they will have taken a little piece of Jamie into themselves so that they may better understand someone like Jamie one day. (JH/RP1)

Jen’s comment above demonstrated her connection to Jamie, but during our group discussion of this book, she focused on disconnections.

JH: It’s so hard for me to imagine what this would be like because I just don’t have any experience with it and it’s even harder to imagine it from a kid’s perspective, I mean I know you get Jamie’s perspective in the book and all but my childhood was so different and I think that’s why it was so hard to imagine what it would be like for a kid. I kept transferring myself to Patty and Earl and even Van and thinking about them and what they were doing so see that’s where my empathy came from, I think, but I do agree about with you about her bad decisions.

In general, many students in the class positioned themselves close to the mother, Patty when describing their responses to Jamie. For some this closeness with Patty came from a shared experience of domestic violence but in Jen’s case she aligned herself with Patty
because of the mismatch between her own childhood experiences and Jamie’s. Based on her reflective writing, Jen was able to develop clear interest in and empathy for Jamie. In fact, she even described alignment with him when she talks about readers taking “a little piece of Jamie into themselves.”

Roman (1997) might describe the above vignettes as examples of a redemptive discourse which enables members of dominant groups to gain “some insight (however partial and interested) into the dehumanizing effects of racism and imperialism on particular individuals and groups and, thus, have certain counterhegemonic or progressive effect” (p.271), but warns that they may simultaneously reinscribe oppressive binaries. I would agree, arguing that there is no way around this dilemma. As readers enter into conversations about racism, classism, sexism, or other forms of oppression, there is always the risk that they will experience pity rather than empathy, apathy rather than outrage. The reinscription of divisions and injustice is always a possible outcome. The multicultural texts shared throughout this class present authentic, realistic characters as they struggle in the face of a variety of forms of bias. As readers meet characters with whom they do not identify or share identity markers, they may simply develop a stance of advocacy for the character or they may find themselves questioning the broader implications of the unjust social structures (including their own culpability). The latter is only possible if students enter the text and the conversation in the spirit of active engagement, embodied empathy, and enthusiastic endorsement.
4.2.8) Summary of Group III (Disconnections): Crossing and Conforming to Differences

Based on these two patterns that focus on disconnections rather than connections, it is clear that mismatches between personal experiences and those represented in literature do not necessarily prevent readers from becoming engaged, developing empathy, and endorsing a text. The readers from the first subgroup in this set may have been engaged and may have held some form of empathy for the characters. However, for those students the inability to map their lives onto the lives of the characters had a negative result, not simply because they reject the novel but because they did not bring themselves to the reading experience in a tangible way - through embodied, storied responses. Their rejection of the text seems to be based on a rejection of the world represented by the story rather than of the story itself. They were unwilling or unable to dwell in the reality of the stories long enough or with enough intensity to respond personally or affectively. The readers in the second subgroup in this set exhibited a more embodied reading experience. They actively negotiate their own feelings of disconnection and seem to be searching for a way to map what they know about the world onto the story they have read. This effort and openness leads to more authentic engagement and the development of empathy and thus to a more embodied interpretation.

4.2.9) IV. Transcending Difference: Pretending and Lobotomizing

...A criticism that needs to insist literature is not only ‘universal’ but also ‘race-free’ risks lobotomizing that literature and diminishes both the art and the artist. (Morrison, 1992, p. 12).

In Bakhtin’s idiosyncratic usage...a pretender is not someone who usurps another’s place but someone who tries to live in no particular place at all, or from a purely generalized abstract place. (Morson and Emerson, 1990, p. 180)
In the examples in this section, readers speak from a purely generalized place, a place of universality that is free of identity markers. Difference is minimized, transcended or otherwise overlooked by the readers. In these responses, there is no mention of race or class in their descriptions of response despite that each book’s plot explores issues related to such identity markers. Meaning-making for these readers was characterized by a focus on connections, but vague and abstract connections, detached and devoid of personal storied knowledge. The omission of race and class differences is significant to me as both a researcher and a teacher educator. This absence may be a testament to the quality of writing in the books (e.g. universal appeal), but failure to notice race equates to a failure to address key issues in the stories and may correlate to a tendency to overlook them when working with children. In these examples readers have heightened their connections while seemingly disengaging any possible disconnections (what is remarkable to me is that they seem to do this without compromising their engagement). If this way of reading dominates, only literature which succeeds in emphasizing the universal - or which is somehow culturally transcendent - will prevail in classrooms. My students’ minimization of mismatches of race and class offers hope because these much-praised multicultural books were embraced. However, the overlooking of difference is questionable considering how factors related to race and class play out in the stories. Morrison reminds us that “transcendent” readings such as these dishonor the text and the author. Perhaps such readings also dishonor the readers since their own stories do not seem to be brought into their acts of meaning making.
In our discussion of Jamie many students expressed disdain for the mother. Students completely dismissed the factors of misogyny, sexism, and classism as concerns and responded to her based on a more generalized connection. Cheryl, and several other older female students, connected to Patty as a mother, and that seemed to “trump” the disconnection in terms of socioeconomic status.

_When we were discussing the book in class and someone stated that they thought that Patty was in some ways a bad mother I immediately disagreed. I felt exactly the opposite. Although I didn’t agree with her smoking habit, I also realized that she was suffering too, only she had no one to take care of her. Instead, she had two young children as well as herself to take care of._ (CH/RP1)

_Although I know it was wrong for Patty not to send Jamie to school, I sympathized with her somewhat. As a mother I can imagine she wanted to hold him close and make him feel safe as long as she could._ (CK/RP1)

Throughout Christa’s paper she repeatedly refers to her alignment with Patty as a mother. There is no commentary anywhere in her paper about Patty’s poverty or history of abuse. This deletion of difference also occurs in Josie’s paper on Star Fisher. There is only a minor mention to the Chinese-American ethnicity of the Lee family in this young white woman’s response. Like Josie, most other readers responded positively to this book when they discussed it in small group. Students seemed to immediately and with great ease align themselves with Joan, the main character. However, they spoke in very general terms about shared experiences.

_Every child feels alienated in one way or another growing up. When I was in second grade my family moved. It is hard as a young child to move from place to place and make new friends without feeling left out in one way or another. The children in the book had these same feelings. Making friends is never easy and after reading this book I realized that it is difficult for many different people._ (JM/RP1)
During the group discussion of this book, this same student noted that “anyone who has ever had to switch schools can relate to this traumatic experience.” I found parallel responses as I reviewed and analyzed responses to *Watsons* and *Miracle*. Kathy, the student commenting on Curtis’ novel, is an older white woman and would have been a young adult during the time period featured in the novel. In her response, the racial tension that characterizes both the book and the time period has completed vanished.

*Reading this portrait of family life in the mid-60’s brought back a lot of good memories and I came to care about the Watsons as if they were neighbors or friends from my past. I hated to let them go when the book ended.*

Another reader described her enthusiastic response to this book only after mentioning that it was “despite the historical significance.” She then went on to explain her interpretation of the novel which focused exclusively on family dynamics rather than considering the importance of how racism and violence affected this family. Another white reader’s reactions centered around the cheerful tone of the novel, again dismissing the racism and violence portrayed.

*I believe the book deals with serious issues, yet keeps the reader in a good mood with the humor throughout. I think kids would get a lot from this book because the seriousness is kept to a minimum. Students would be able to handle the issues because they are few and far between.*

In the following conversation about *Miracle*, race was again absent from almost this entire discussion, though it later appeared in Shannon’s reflection paper. The participants in this conversation included several women who were mothers or who had close relationships with their brothers. Connie, the only African-American woman in this
particular book discussion group, and Shannon spoke excitedly about their strong affinity for the three brothers featured in Woodson’s novel.

**CE:** I kept with it until the end because I know what it’s like to be the mother of a sibling and that kind of thing so I really could relate to a lot of it from my own life, you know from that perspective.

**SC:** Yeah, I wanted to connect more than I did, but I didn’t have a problem getting through it, I just liked that B-to-B thing so much, you know that connection with family, that just feels so good.

**CE:** Yeah, I liked that too.

These students are clearly engaged readers and they express sincere appreciation for the novel. Their own experiences around sibling relations dominated their meaning-making process with this text. They speak in general terms about the positive emotions shared between siblings. Even though one shared the racial background of the characters featured in the story, the pull of the connection to sibling dynamics dominated. Many books feature sibling relationships as the central theme and such an interpretation of *Miracle* is certainly valid. However, the brothers’ racial identity and their experiences living in a diverse neighborhood, which are also central to the Woodson’s tale, were eclipsed throughout the discussion and in written work.

Many of the responses shared throughout this chapter feature readers tracing their points of connection to stories. Some of these readers speak excitedly and intensely about seeing themselves in the book and relating to or identifying with characters. Specific personal experiences are called upon as they try to explain the connections. Other students are not particularly specific or personal in their responses. A student speaks fondly of the 1950s but does not provide an example of her good memories and how they
map onto the story in *Watsons*. Another student talks about the difficulty of relocating as a child but does not specify what was challenging or painful about this experience for her as compared to the characters in *Star Fisher*.

As I read and reread these responses I wondered if I was just missing the power of the connections, the matches, these students were describing. I thought perhaps I was expecting too much, that I unfairly (both as a researcher and a teacher) wanted the readers to experience a certain kind or level of connection. As I read and reread the data, I began to wonder if these students were experiencing something akin to Sipe’s (2000) transparent aspect of literary understanding. Had the story world momentarily become identical with and transparent to the readers? I had considered this with the readers who made intimate disclosures, but came to the same negative conclusion. These are adult readers, responding to a text after-the-fact not during a read-aloud. Intense identification may develop but I have not found evidence suggesting that these adults readers become so totally merged with the text. The silent and receptive characteristics outlined by Sipe never appear. Instead, I have come to see this transcendence as “blindspots” in my students’ readings and indicative of “dysconscious racism” (King, 1991). Dysconscious racism refers to an “uncritical habit of mind” including perceptions, attitudes, assumptions, and beliefs (p. 338). Based on their past experiences, these readers’ responses may be grounded in the belief that identity and culture are unimportant. This ideology often presents as a kind of “colorblindness” but is actually a manifestation of Eurocentrism, white privilege, or hegemony. By focusing on the universal human condition, we lose sight of the consequences of unjust power relations. According to my analysis, these responses reflect an underestimation of the nature and significance of
group affiliations and the pervasiveness of racism and classism. This lack of consciousness about identity, culture, and other sociocultural concerns results in a failure to understand the meaning, significance, and pervasiveness of such factors in their lives, the lives of characters, and the lives of the children with whom they may one day share these books.

4.2.10) Conclusion

Who we are and what we have come to know as being right or true or of value is based on the raced text of our life story. (Greene and Abt-Perkins, 2000, p. 13)

In each and every response example provided in this section, readers believe in their determinations of rightness, truth, and value. And in each case those determinations are caught up in the sociocultural lenses through which students read and respond. Throughout this section I have presented examples of preservice teachers responding to multicultural children’s literature. By examining their meaning-making processes, I have gained insight into kinds of engagement, the development of empathy, and decisions about endorsement. When students incorporated intimate disclosures into their responses, they spoke from embodied positions by invoking intensely personal stories. These stories were shared as students provided evidence of how their lives informed their reading or how their reading informed their lives (groups IA and IB). In both cases, engagement and empathy were heightened and endorsement was enthusiastic. Still other examples showed students focusing on the personal but finding their text-to-life and life-to-text connections called into question through dialogue as they began to make new and different connections with texts and each other (as in group II). In some responses students
focused almost exclusively on disconnections and did not build a bridge by connecting with other students’ real lives through conversation or by attending to the relevance of the social and cultural aspects of the books (IIIA). In multiple cases, readers described mismatches or disconnections that did not inhibit their engagement with or endorsement of a book (group III-B) or completely overlooked disconnections, rendering race, class, and other differences invisible (group IV). For the purposes of clarity I have separated these into discrete categories, but it is obvious that these tendencies are interrelated and interchangeable. Further, my description of categories of response only begins to tell the story of these preservice teacher’s meaning-making work. These glimpses into my students’ understandings and interpretations of multicultural children’s literature provide insight and provoke questions.
4.3) Introduction to Part II: Pedagogy

In self-studies, conclusions are hard-won, elusive, are generally more tentative than not. The aim of self-study research is to provoke, challenge, and illuminate rather than confirm and settle. (Bullough and Pinnegar, 2000, p. 21).

In presenting my students’ responses to multicultural texts, I am simultaneously presenting their responses to me. My teaching, from the planning phases to our parting words on the last day of class, compelled and shaped the nature of those responses. It is impossible to consider how my students made sense of the literature and our interactions without considering how they made sense of my teaching. In order to examine my pedagogy and its impact on my students’ responses, this study demanded that I keep a careful, narrative account of my teaching moves and motives. This self-study component of the project ensured that I did not get too comfortable with my explanations for students’ responses. As Bullough and Pinnegar suggest, turning the analytic lens onto me and scrutinizing my own practices did provoke new lines of analysis, challenge my understanding of my students’ responses, and further illuminate the complexity of the interactions we shared.

Recently, the dissertation of Karen Hale Hankins (2003) was published as a book in the Teachers College Press series. Hale’s narrative dissertation became, with few major revisions, the book *Teaching through the Storm: A Journal of Hope*. The book consists mainly of a personal journal maintained during one school year. She applies multiple narrative theories to understand and explain her work as a first-grade teacher in an urban classroom. In Hankin’s study, and others like it (cite), her “own process of
teaching and thinking about that teaching is data” (p. ix). In this portion of the chapter, I report on my “teaching and thinking about that teaching” as data sources. I tracked my teaching through lessons plans, field notes, and a reflective journal. I complemented these materials with student comments from course evaluations, my comments to students on papers, and personal conversations with students. Later, I generated analytic memos for these documents in order to clarify some of my assumptions, motives, and decisions as both teacher and researcher.

Several threads emerged in my analysis, and I have come to think of these as tensions.” These tensions include: authority and advocacy, community and discontinuity, proactive silence and passive silence, and addressing the teacher and addressing peers. The tension between authority and advocacy considers the multiple positions I occupy as the teacher. I alternate between affirming and challenging students but in doing so, I shift between positioning myself as an authority and as an advocate. It is not that these two roles are mutually exclusive, but they can be contradictory and confusing for students. My expert knowledge is used differently depending on my stance of advocacy or authority. Additionally, students often shape my role as authority or advocate as much I do. The tension arising from community and discontinuity is connected to my enacting of authority or advocacy, but relates more to how students perceive and enact the conventions of class discussions. Students vacillate between seeking my approval, seeking consensus, and accepting unresolved understandings. The tension emerging from proactive silence and passive silence directly deals with my choices, hesitations, and confusions about how to intervene in the classroom. The conflicts I experienced around feeling immobilized versus being motivated and empowered to actively mediate are also
caught up in my concerns about authority, advocacy, and community. The tension of addressing the teacher versus addressing peers considers how and when students spoke to me rather than to classmates, to each other through me, or directly and authentically to each other. These tensions clearly overlap and are interconnected. Each one reflects overarching dilemmas teachers face as they interact with students.

In the sections to follow I discuss these tensions and provide examples through composite narrative reflections that illustrate those tensions particularly well. The exploration of these tensions should help readers understand how my actions as the teacher are ultimately entwined with the students’ responses as reported on in the first half of this chapter. These reflections also enable readers to gain a better sense for the actual classroom context.

4.3.1) Reflections and Tensions

Narrative Reflection #1 (01/25/03)

The students came to our very first class having read The Watsons Go to Birmingham - 1963 (Curtis, 1995). We spent much of this first class getting to know each other and articulating what we know and do not know about children’s literature. I always begin with a read-aloud and on this day I chose Chrysanthemum (Henkes, 1991) which we then discussed in terms of illustration, language patterns, and theme. We then introduced ourselves, talked about our histories as readers, took an informal quiz on basic knowledge about children’s literature (ex, what professional organization is responsible for the Newbery and Caldecott medal), and discussed the syllabus and the nature of the course. After completing these introductory activities we moved on to our discussion of
the book. I modeled how to create a sociogram using a familiar story agreed upon by the class (Johnson & Louis). I asked the class to be creative in how they expressed themselves within the frame of using a sociogram. They could manipulate the thickness of lines, size of circles, and distance between circles to represent “who they felt close to” while reading and also how they would situate the relationships of the characters. I also instructed students to place themselves on their sociograms.

Most students easily assigned a meaningful location for the main characters in the story. Mom, Dad, Joetta, Byron, and Kenny appeared on everyone’s sociogram. Variation occurred in my students’ perception of their relationships. Many placed the three siblings in close proximity because they responded so strongly to the sibling dynamics. Several of the older students placed the parental characters in a more central position and closer to certain children, reflecting their alignment with Mom or Dad and concerns for the children. Additional characters such as Larry Dunn, Rufus Fry, and Grandma Sands appeared on a few sociograms. Closer examination of the sociograms revealed that several students tried to include all the characters they remembered while others were particularly concerned about less central characters or felt a specific connection to them. The great majority of students placed themselves close to Kenny or Mrs. Watson. However, one student placed himself a great distance from all the characters in order to express his dislike of and disinterest in the book. Glen’s sharing of his sociogram sparked our whole group conversation.

Many of his classmates were astonished to hear that Glen somehow did not become involved with the characters and plot of *Watsons*. One student asked, “are you sure you read the same book?” Another was certain Glen had read it too fast or been too
distracted. As the conversation unfolded I was able to ask probing questions of Glen regarding genre. I tried to find out if he resisted engagement with the novel because he disliked history or historical fiction. To the contrary, Glen’s goal at SCC is to become a middle level social studies teacher. At this point in class, our talk about *Watsons* was mainly focused on ways we connected to the story so the interactions around Glen’s negative reaction concerned his lack of connection or emotional attachment. As the teacher, I wanted to direct the discussion toward issues related to genre, history, and multiculturalism. However, in this case I decided to let the banter around Glen’s response play out. I thought this would be a good opportunity for me to convey to the class that I really did want an open forum. I hoped my “acceptance” of Glen’s response and willingness to talk about it respectfully would help them feel comfortable disagreeing with each other and me. In the end, Glen maintained his stance that *Watsons* moved “too slow” and that he felt like he was on that long road trip. He did agree that the characters were well developed and appealing and that the text could be used in conjunction with a social studies unit on the Civil Rights movement. No consensus was reached regarding the humor in the text - Glen’s classmates remained confounded by his indifference to Curtis’ humor.

*The Tensions*

Consistently, some students prioritized pleasing me over all else. Even as the semester progressed and we had spent many sessions together and they had all received overwhelmingly high grades, many students continued to regard me as an authority figure whose favor they constantly needed to strive to win. During the sociogram activity, several students followed my directions by putting each and every character they could
remember from the book on their chart. Rather than being loyal to their personal connections and disconnections as readers, they were loyal to my directions. They positioned me as someone whose order they needed to comply with based, in part, on the way in which I delivered the directions. The language I use created and generated signals my students used to determine how and in what ways they could and should respond. My authority status constrained responses for some students during the sociogram and throughout the semester. My voice of authority or advocacy was particular powerful, depending on the situation, for students who made themselves vulnerable through intimate disclosures, for those who remained always distanced from both texts and classmates, and especially for those who wished to dissent (Glen, in the case of this particular episode).

The conversation about Glen’s dislike of *Watsons* shows students bridging the divide between community and discontinuity and talking to each other rather than to me. As the proponents of the book became frustrated with Glen’s allegiance to his original criticisms, they realized there might not be a resolution to the discussion. Persuasion was not working as a tactic whether students used personal examples or called on the authority of the novel in their arguments. The lack of consensus carried with it a threat to our sense of community as a class. Because Glen’s response was not the same, there was an implication that we had somehow excluded him or not reached him. Yet, to have convinced Glen would only have meant he had been forced into “sameness” through our conversation. This dilemma of how to reconcile discontinuity while holding on to collaboration and community repeated itself in small group discussions throughout the course. Additionally, students continued to reflect on how the “difference of opinions”
voiced in class caused them to reexamine their texts and their thinking about texts. A sense of community along with an acceptance of the reality of discontinuity was necessary for the development of this kind of critical reflection and rethinking.

During this first class, I was astonished by how willing students were to talk to each other rather than to me. In this class, they were speaking to Glen, and, unfortunately, it seemed as if the group as a whole was speaking to him. The class almost unanimously responded to Glen with outrage and dismay when he expressed his response to *Watsons*. They were dismayed by his lack of engagement and outraged by his negative attitude. Initially, they looked at me in wonder, but then they took control of the conversation. His peers offered him arguments for how realistic and authentic the characters were and told stories of how they themselves were similar to particular characters in particular ways. They made direct eye contact with Glen, turning around in their seats if that was necessary. They nodded to the speakers before and after them. My presence (and authority) in the room diminished as this authentic and energetic conversation transpired, simultaneously building relationship among people and alerting us of the complexity of our responses to literature.

Throughout my fieldnotes, reflective journal, and transcriptions of class session, I found instances of conspicuous silences on my part. After closer examination, I noticed how the ways silences occurred and played out varied. A distinction between proactive silences and passive silences became apparent. In the case of the discussion around Glen’s response to *Watsons*, I held my silence in hopes that the students would perceive me as open to dialogue and that they did not always have to agree with me. This proactive silence also allowed the class to generate its own energy. Conflict emerged
because of Glen’s authentic response and his classmates’ sincere interest in his response. Again, my role was diminished, this time by a deliberate silence.

Narrative Reflection #2 (02/22/03)

Many of my students at SCC enter LIS 120 with only a basic and vague understanding of genre and this class was no exception. We spent time during our first few sessions clarifying the concept and outlining the ways we talk about genre in children’s literature. Interestingly, when the time came to discuss picture book art, the question of genre arose again as students experienced confusion. Were picture books a genre all their own? Or were pictures categorized as both picture books and books of a particular genre? Or could we just categorize them by genre regardless of their illustrated status? As we looked closely at multicultural pictures books featuring contemporary realism, it became clear that both genre and illustration mattered. Our conversation quickly transitioned from technical talk about illustration to issues related to the story content.

I began class by asking students to evaluate several different books by one illustrator. We used guidelines and definitions from Huck et al (2004) and Horning (1997) to better understand and analyze picture book art. We discussed such concepts as medium, mood, and style and tried to integrate new vocabulary as we worked in pairs and then shared our evaluations. When a group shared the work of James Ransome, they had questions about Visiting Day (Woodson, 2002). Our conversation diverted from art and aesthetics to realism and stereotypes. The students initially disliked Visiting Day because they thought it was stereotypical. Brandi argued this based on the fact that “everyone in
the book and on the bus is Black.” Rebecca was also worried about this stereotyping, especially if the book was shared with a group of predominantly white children. Connie, one of the African-American students, who was not in the group that initiated the discussion based on reading the book spoke up. She concurred with the concerns about the potential risks involved in sharing this book with any children who do not have personal experience with this issue. At this point I realized that the students might not have noticed the creator’s notes in the back of the book. I asked Shelley to read Woodson’s and Ransome’s comments about how and why they came to create this book. With a better understanding of the creator’s intentions and backgrounds, the students were willing to rethink their positions but many were still hesitant about sharing Visiting Day with children. Accusations that the book is racist diminished a bit but several students still seemed to think it could have a racist effect. Glen pointed out that the race of the guard was unclear to him and that he felt it was problematic if the guard was white and all the prisoners were black. Hillary suggested that there might be different ways to approach sharing the book in different settings. Wendy commented that the message of the story seems to be about the family’s love for the girl’s father.

We transitioned from Visiting Day to several other realistic fiction picture books with multicultural themes, completely abandoning our reports on illustrators. Students responded positively to Amazing Grace (Hoffman, 1991) and seemed unfazed by my criticism of how Native American costume was used. Some agreed that the story seemed somewhat contrived and pat while others, several who had actually shared the book with young children, defended its positive message. Soto’s Snapshots From a Wedding (Soto, 1997) was met with mixed reactions. The students who examined the book closely spoke
highly of both the story content and the illustrations, agreeing that it succeeds as a positive representation of Latino life. However, they questioned the fact that “there are no other kinds of people represented.” Several students who just glanced at the book as it was passed around had an initial negative reaction to the art. A similar complaint was issued regarding Williams’ *A Chair For My Mother* (Williams, 1982). Students generally expressed appreciation of the urban neighborhood and the socioeconomic difficulties portrayed. Beth and Shannon worried that the only white people in the story were “in the bank, the bankers, all the people in there were white.” Beth was particularly eager to point out this criticism and went on to describe how so many different colors are used to represent different shades of people until the scene in the bank in which “there’s not even one different shade of white.” The question of white characters also came up when we discussed *Our Gracie Aunt* (Woodson, 2002). The students who examined this book unanimously felt that the story should have or could have featured a white family. Cheryl was adamant that the foster care system “really does include a lot of white children” and therefore thought it was negative and stereotypical to feature an African-American family. Students also criticized how the elderly homeless people in Bunting’s *Fly Away Home* (Bunting, 1991) were represented. They thought the “scruffy look” was problematic even if it was realistic. At the end of class this day, two students approached me privately to thank me for sharing *Visiting Day* because they had similar family situations and found the book deeply moving. These students had not spoken up at all during our class discussion of the book.
The Tensions

My conflict between being an authority and affirming students was heightened during this episode. As the conversation around Visiting Day unfolded, this tension was palpable for me. I wanted them to see the beauty of this book. I wanted them to recognize that we are overdue for stories like this. I wanted them to trust me on this one. Instead of “correcting” them or persuading them or showing them what they missed, I referred them to the “notes” from Woodson and Ransome at the end of the book. This was not a neutral move and obviously I do not intend to be neutral as the teacher of this class. Yet, a strong negative reaction to my students’ criticisms would have signaled to them that I expect them to just be converted to my way of thinking. I want them to respect my knowledge about the children’s literature industry, about children’s responses to texts, and about how texts and readers work, but not simply defer to that knowledge or to me. I was caught in the tension of affirming my students and asserting my power and authority in this moment. The real dilemma here is not whether or not I do or should have power and authority, but how I use it. This dilemma arose again and again as I responded to student papers and adjusted my lesson plans based on the class’ reaction to read-aloud and other activities. Because of my strong views about Visiting Day and about the naive way we often assume text will “overpower” readers, I did end this discussion by making explicit my agreement with Glen, Hillary, and Wendy and expressing my hope that no one would leave the class fearing this or any book, but rather consider the potential to mediate it with all kinds of students.

Sometimes I was not silent even though I did not speak. As I transcribed the tape of the conversation about realistic fiction books, I had to keep referring back to my
fieldnotes and my reflective journal from that date. I was sure I interrupted more, asserted my authority more, let them know what I wanted them to think too much. I could not figure out why I had so few “lines” when the transcript was done. My fieldnotes and reflective journal supported my assumption that I had indeed been more active in the conversation. Finally, I realized that my non-verbal responses constituted much of my interactions with the students during this episode. Referring the students to the “notes” in *Visiting Day* was probably my most overt move. Yet, there is clear evidence that students sensed my reactions based on my facial expressions - I must have looked surprised and concerned at best and frustrated and outraged at worst. This silence of sorts on my part falls somewhere in between passive and proactive. In retrospect, I hoped students would talk through the books without too much pushing on my part because I doubted my ability to really facilitate the process without dominating.

In order for students to address each other rather than me, I have to avoid dominating the class discussion. This is hard work for me. Certainly how I exercise my authority effects whether students address each other or me. In the case of this discussion, students were filtering their comments to each other through me. As explained above, my responses may have been silent but students were “checking in” with me as they interacted with other students. Mostly, they sought affirmation, but even students who may have thought they were diverging from my opinion of the book made eye-contact with me as they asserted their views. Students usually directly addressed the person who was actually holding the book under scrutiny. Some students waited for the book to be in their hands so the actual texts served as filters through which speakers slowed the exchange of words and thought through their ideas.
As the interactions around these books unfolded, I found myself caught in a tension between functioning as strong advocate of this literature and an open-minded, respectful teacher. I was apprehensive about interrupting, negating, or correcting my students. I did not want to stifle their interpretive and analytical work. They were indeed fulfilling my request that they look critically at these texts, but their critiques were not always what I expected. This is not news in any teaching situation, yet I was disturbed by the oversimplifications and naïveté that characterized their comments. My impulse was to stop and lecture them, to remind them of the history of children’s publishing and the political and ethical dilemmas we face as a society today. I wanted to tell them they were being reactionary rather than critical in their evaluation of the texts. I believe I did engage authentically with my class as these conversations unfolded but I consistently waited rather than interjected. This was due in part to my hope that the dialogue would bear its own fruit, which I was not able to see in the moment. But it was also due to the challenges I faced in trying to occupy a position of authority while encouraging diverse perspectives and the development of their skills as critics of children’s literature.

In the discussion of *Visiting Day* and several of the other realistic fiction picture pieces, I was acutely aware that some students were endorsing the books because they were clear about my agenda as an advocate of this literature. Some of these students are also passionate advocates of this literature while others were eager to please me by agreeing. Further, many students sought consensus and community at all costs. At times, I could actually see students becoming physically uncomfortable during this and other conversations in which we directly named difference. Sometimes, one of the older students in the class would notice this as well and interject into the conversation to try to
change the tone for the sake of the uncomfortable students. I was never sure if these students were uncomfortable because they disagreed but did not want to speak up or if they were just uncomfortable with the style of discourse. The impulse some of my students and I felt to make them more comfortable arises from that tension between community and discontinuity.

Narrative Reflection #3 (03/0803)

Today we learned about the Newbery Award. I provided students with background on the award including information about its historical roots. We examined the criteria for selection and looked closely at winners from across the more than eighty-year span of the award. Students then discussed the particular self-selected text they read in small groups. These texts included favorite Newbery winners of mine as well as several that I think were overlooked and provoke interesting debate about the award. They had several tasks to complete while in groups and spent nearly half the class session on this work. The tasks included: a) engage in a literature discussion, b) create symbolic representations (Enciso, 1994), c) build an argument in favor of the book based on the Newbery criteria and criteria from the textbook and prepare for a mock committee meeting, and d) develop (and then perform) a reader’s theater. The students had experience with literature discussions, symbolic representations, and reader’s theater. We had explored each of these methods as a whole group during other class periods. During today’s class, I was not holding them “accountable” for the discussion and symbolic representations in any explicit way. Instead, they were charged with using those two activities as a guide for their Newbery argument and reader’s theater.
The books with the strongest Newbery advocates included *Roll of Thunder, Hear my Cry* (Taylor, 1976), *From the Notebooks of Melanin Sun* (Woodson, 1995), and *Number the Stars* (Lowry, 1989). *Missing May* (Rylant, 1989), *Lyddie* (Paterson, 1991, and *Tuck Everlasting* (Babbitt, 1975) received the weakest endorsements. Character development was emphasized in all of the Newbery position statements, but with more persuasion and passion for *Thunder, Melanin, and Stars*. Readers found *Missing May* to be “dry,” were not particularly drawn to Lyddie as a protagonist, and suggested that the movie of *Tuck Everlasting* was more compelling than the book. The students’ symbolic representations and reader’s theaters reflected their dislike of and disengagement with these novels. Nearly all of the students who had read *Thunder* and *Stars* created symbols for bravery for characters in that novel. Most chose the female protagonists but a few saw bravery in and felt closer to less central characters. One student attempted to represent Little Man’s vulnerability while two others (one from each group) took the opportunity to develop symbols to represent their own feelings of fear while reading. Several *Melanin* readers used journals to show their position as a reader and their understanding of Mel. One student in the group tore out the symbols for male and female, in diverse pairings, and manipulated them to show his confusion as well as the character’s struggles with gender and sexuality. For their reader’s theaters, the groups responsible for *Thunder, Melanin, and Stars* all chose highly climactic scenes.

*Tensions*

The emphasis on character that emerged in all four of the activities the students participated in on this day correlates with the findings from the first part of this chapter. Liking or disliking characters, feeling alike or unlike them, and approving or
disapproving of their actions seems to dominate engagement and interpretation. As a teacher, I am compelled to bring their attention to other facets of the literature. I would like them to reflect more on how the story is told, narrative devices, subtleties of dialogue, the pacing of the plot, and the role of setting. However, I am not sure how to successfully redirect them without jeopardizing the authentic interactions with the books and each other that are taking place. Throughout these activities, students worked quite independently and demonstrated ownership of the texts, their responses, and their interactions around the texts and tasks at hand. Rarely did a group pursue me for guidance or “answers.” They understood that the goals of these response activities were to promote collaborative interpretation. The students addressed each other in their small groups and again when they came back to the whole group to share. In fact, at one point we transitioned from one book to another without any prompting from me. My authority was not in any way vacated during these interactions, instead the students began to share that authority. They were taking expert positions as they performed their reader’s theaters with pride and spoke passionately about their selected novels. My suspicion is that during the small group work time, some struggles occurred around community and discontinuity, particular around the selection of dialogue for the reader’s theater. The students who read Melanin Sun, chose the passage in which E.C. actually comes out to her son. This was the first time since I have been teaching this book that that passage was chosen and performed. I know from student papers that varying levels of appreciation and endorsement existed among readers of that text.
When we departed class the session before *Walk Two Moons* (Creech, 1994) was to be read, many students expressed hope that this book would be “less depressing.” By this point in the semester, all of the students had read *Watsons Go to Birmingham - 1963* and *Out of the Dust* (Hesse, 1997). Each student had also read two other books based on their personal selections for Literature Circles and Newbery Discussion assignments.

This desire for less depressing texts was not a new phenomenon. Whenever I teach the class I am questioned about “why someone always has to die” or why the texts always seem so “serious.” These comments show that the students are anticipating the next reading, they are curious about my choices, and they have a stake in both the books and the class. This complaint also provides us with the opportunity to reflect on what we read or remember reading as young children. In this way we can begin sorting out our memories of childhood as well as our beliefs about childhood and children. Additionally, the expression of this concern begins our semester-long obsession with the question of hope. This inquiry into the nature of hope and the world of children’s literature is one of the most significant aspects of the class for me as the teacher. Based on final papers as well as course evaluations, I believe it is also one of the most significant concepts for students. As we delve into this conversation with *Walk Two Moons*, students rarely argue that the book does not offer hope, yet they do insist that it is depressing. I continue to worry that this is due to the order in which they read books in the class combined with the intensity and quantity. It is unlikely that I would teach this series of books (*Watsons, Out of the Dust, and Walk Two Moons*) in this way and in this order in a matter of months in an elementary classroom. One of the limitations of the college curriculum is that this
feels like my one and only chance to expose students to children’s literature. That perceived high-stakes situation causes me to make the choices I do regarding the readings for this class. Students certainly become familiar with less weighty materials through other opportunities provided in the course.

In an attempt to show that the death of Sal’s mother does not render *Walk Two Moons* depressing or too serious for young readers, I use a WOW chart as a reader-response activity for this text (Yopp, 2001). Students are asked to generate a list of memorable or salient moments from the story. I urge them not to open the book and “look” for a scene. Instead, they should try to imagine scenes from the novel. I ask “What images stuck with you?” and also provide one or two examples based on my response to the story. Each student makes a list of five memorable moments, next we meet in small groups and share our moments and their relevance. The next task is to narrow the lists of five from each group member into one group list of three moments. This proves to be a difficult task as consensus is necessary to finalize the group list of three moments. Conversation ensues regarding the significance of the moments. After the list of three has been agreed upon, the groups develop a chart to represent the feelings associated with those moments. They list the moments they have chosen on one axis (x) and then assign a range of emotion for the other (y axis). Then they chart each moment using a bar or line graph format. For the range of emotions for the y-axis, students developed headings such as: happy to sad, joyful to depressing, funny to boring, and intense to relieving. The charts were then transferred to overheads and shared with the class. This activity enables students to get a sense of how their classmates read and interpreted the story. Students were surprised to find that they were the only one in their group to be so moved by the
idea of the marriage bed or to realize that everyone in their group was upset by the reading of the student journals in class. The articulation of these moments provided common ground for the discussion and also alerted us to differences in our response to the book.

Almost every group included the first sight of the crashed bus on their charts. This moment represented Sal’s awareness of her mother’s death for most readers, and their own realization of it for some. Sharing when we understood that Sal’s mother had died made for an energetic and active discussion. Some students were embarrassed to admit that they did not know Sal’s mother was dead for most of the novel. Other students were a bit condescending as they explained how they knew based on excerpts from the text. This conversation led to a discussion of how we traveled with Sal throughout this novel and the intimacy that developed between reader and protagonist.

Despite agreement on the kinds of intense alignment most readers felt with Sal, a handful of students insisted on revisiting why they were not certain of Sal’s mothers death. Two older female students and two traditional students intensely related to Chanhassen and described how that deep connection led them to believe she had left them indefinitely due to the miscarriage. Kathy was the first to disclose that she had survived a miscarriage herself. One of her teenage sons was in class with her and I was immediately aware of the intimate nature of this disclosure and wondered how he would feel about the conversation. This son had joined us for class on two other occasions. He has a developmental delay and she would not leave him alone. Kathy made her disclosure from the front row but she turned around and faced her classmates as she spoke. Seated behind her, Darina nodded affirmingly and then shared that she had
experienced a similar loss. She concurred with Kathy saying that she “hooked into the mother’s situation right away.” Both of these women explained that they knew about the miscarriage long before they knew about the mother’s death and long before it was explicitly revealed in the novel. They thought it was realistic that the mother would leave in order to grieve her loss and reasonable to infer that she might be in a mental health treatment center. This is how Kathy and Darina explained their surprise at learning that Sal’s mother was deceased. They presented their argument from clearly vulnerable positions.

As the conversation continued two other women spoke up about having experienced loss similar to Chanhassen’s. Josie is categorized as a traditional student and was one of the least active participants in our discussions. I was surprised when she disclosed to the class that she had recently had a miscarriage and was now pregnant. Again, she explained that based on her experience with this kind of loss, she thought that Chanhassen may have had a nervous breakdown and killed herself. Josie explained that she thought Chanhassen was probably dead due to clues in the novel but suspected that her death was somehow related to her inability to cope with the miscarriage. Josie’s comments were affirmed by Kathy, Darina, and also Carolyn. Carolyn’s demographic information located her as a traditional student like Josie. She explained that she was in the process of adopting a child because she had had a series of miscarriages. The four women were talking back and forth about their experiences but the tone had changed. There seemed to be something almost competitive about how they were talking about their experiences. They were no longer trying to prove a point about the way the plot developed or to redeem themselves as readers. Now they seemed to have something to
prove to their classmates, and maybe even to Sal and her mother, about the trauma and aftermath of miscarriages. Eventually more students became involved in the conversation; some made uncomfortable attempts to divert from the discussion while others struggled to understand the perspectives of their classmates. A debate emerged as to whether or not the topic of Chanhassen’s miscarriage was appropriate for a children’s novel. We considered whether or not children would be likely to focus on this aspect of the novel. Josie and Darina both commented that it probably is not appropriate for young readers and went on to explain that they had not shared their miscarriages with their current children. Josie has a stepson who does not know about the miscarriage or the current pregnancy. Carolyn and Kathy passionately countered saying that they have been very open with their families. Carolyn has been talking about her miscarriages with family members of all ages and plans on talking to her adopted child about the children she feels she lost. Kathy explained that in her family they acknowledge the child she lost every year. She mentioned that they refer to the child by name and prompted her son to confirm this. Naturally, she was adamant that the way her family dealt with the miscarriage was best. Thus, she was confident that young children would benefit from learning about Sal’s mother’s experience. Josie responded equally as adamantly about the rightness of her family’s coping style. However, she seemed to abandon the argument she, Darina, and several other classmates had taken up earlier about the inappropriateness of being open about something like this in either real life or in books. The discussion slowed to a close without intervention from me. The competitive mood had lifted and the students seemed to be in a contemplative space now - contemplative and exhausted. I thanked the students for their honesty and willingness to participate and we took a break.
This narrative description starts with my students issuing a criticism of my book choices. This complaint or concern is welcomed by me because it indicates that my students are willing to be honest with me. It shows they are enthusiastically engaged with the books and the course. It also speaks to the fact that they are comfortable with me based on the ways I have positioned myself as both advocate and authority. This comfort level is also evidenced by the emotionally-charged personal stories shared during this discussion of *Walk Two Moons*.

In my fieldnotes for this conversation I wrote about how the conversation “suddenly spiraled.” In my reflective journal for that day, I comment again about my curiosity about the context and impetus for the highly intimate disclosures that took place. Had they shared these experiences as part of a persuasive argument or as a way to redeem themselves for not reading more closely? I worried that they were overcompensating for what may have looked like poor reading comprehension to their classmates or me. Were they trying to prove to me, the well-read and accurately-comprehending teacher and authority on this novel, that they had done the reading they were supposed to do? Earlier in this discussion I had directly asked for a show of hands to see who knew about Sal’s mother death from the beginning of the book. I do this because every time I read the book with students most of them do not realize she is dead until late in the text, with many not realizing it until the sighting of the bus. I do not intend to embarrass anyone or criticize their reading or comprehension. I believe I approach the discussion with a tone of playfulness and interest, not interrogation. However, this exchange between Kathy and Darina made me question my approach. My
asking of that question may have set a tone of accountability that left them feeling judged by me, and equally as important, others in the class.

The conversation about *Walk Two Moons* had an energy all its own. Students addressed each other directly, personally, and intently. As the discussion evolved, I began to lose track of our lines of thinking. My authority was rightly compromised and a passive silence prevailed. I was listening intently and making eye contact with all the speakers, but I was at a loss. I really did not utter a word after Kathy’s initial disclosure but nodded to assist in the turn taking. I was startled when I realized the discussion had clearly moved beyond these students’ explanations for not realizing Sal’s mother was dead. The conversation had taken an entirely different turn. At the end of this discussion, I was still a bit confused about what had transpired. I did not attempt to summarize the discussion or debrief on it either before or after the break or at any time throughout the class. Discontinuity would abide. I cannot explain my silence for most of this conversation, but am not sure what other moves were possible on my part. For all of the women involved in this discussion, *Walk Two Moons* is about Chanhassen’s struggle with losing a child more than anything else. Yet, it is a fact of the story that does not dominate my reading of the book. Their intentions during this conversation seem to range from affirming each other’s readings to proving one’s survivor status. It is obvious how their personal experience with similar events in their own lives positioned them to read the story differently and to read each other in this way. Part of the power of the way they “mapped” their stories onto the text is that it allowed them to need me less. This was one of the times we accepted discontinuity without excessive persuasive efforts. Students let their personal experiences do the work of communicating.
Kara started our class discussion of young adult literature by asking if there might be a correlation between increased suicide rates and books that are depressing like the one we have been reading. I was startled and disturbed by this comment. I realize that throughout the class I promote the power of reading without making explicit that I mean a positive kind of power. I invite students to think about books that changed their thinking about themselves or the world. I always read from *Dear Author* (1995), a collection of award-winning letters from readers describing how books helped them, saved them, changed them, or freed them. Yet, I was appalled when Kara suggested that a book could increase suicide rates. My passion for and position on the power of literature sets the tone for the class and Kara’s comments reflected that. I tried to offer a different perspective without directly contradicting or negating Kara. I asserted that “there’s just not a one-to-one correlation. It seems to me that there’s not a direct cause-and-effect relationship.” In earnest, I repeated several times, “I think it’s more complicated than that.” Several other students weighed in on this concern. As she was reading the synopses on the back of the young adult books that were being passed around, Jessica commented that “it seems more like just reading the newspaper to me.” Brandi agreed, but used that a similar argument to explain why she was drawn to books like these as a young reader: “even positive teenagers read books like this or about this just to be more informed.” After further dialogue with me and other students, Kara finally suggested that there needs to be “more positive things for teenagers because a lot of what’s out there seems to be too depressing and negative.”
Tensions

This example demonstrates again how the ways in which I occupied authority through my pedagogical moves opened up spaces for and constrained our dialogue. Kara is one of the younger students in the class and she maintained a manner of aloofness throughout the course. On this day, she spoke assertively about her concern with these young adult books. I was delighted that she was interested enough and cared enough to speak up. As much as I disagreed with her comment, I was also impressed that she was willing to take such a risk. I am confident she knew that I would not concur with her, though she may not have been able to predict the range of her classmates’ responses. She held fast to her claim that the books were too depressing and possibly dangerous despite my repeated justifications for why the books are important and worthwhile. Several other students agreed with part of Kara’s argument, stating that none of the books shared in class that day seemed “fun.” I tried to remind students of what they read when they were teens and I alerted them to several of the books we had looked at that were somewhat light-hearted (such as *Angus, Thong, and Full-Frontal Snogging* and *Rules of the Road*). A point-counterpoint dialogue clearly emerged. For quite a while the banter went back and forth between Kara and me exclusively. I had avoided this kind of confrontation with an individual student and was disappointed in the tone it was setting. Kara was clearly only addressing me and discontinuity was dominating.

As the conversation ensued, I did not find any opportunities to disengage from responding to Kara more as an authority than an advocate or to opt for silence and let the class generate its own exchange around this issue. That is why Jessica’s interruption startled me. Both Kara and I had almost forgotten that books were still being passed
around and our classmates were deliberating with us, just not verbally. Community was still intact. Jessica, a student who was usually quiet and did not take a lot of risks in the class, broke the chain or our communicative dialogue (Ellsworth, 1997). This dialogue sought an idealized and dispassionate understanding between Kara and me. Jessica’s voice awakened us to the futility of our current route of discussion, which could only have ended with Kara conforming to my view or me dismissing Kara’s view. Jessica’s contribution extended an invitation to other students to participate and allowed Kara and me to step back and reconsider the differences in our understandings. Jessica’s comment fits into what Peterson and Eeds (1990) calls “approximations.” Her talk was exploratory in nature, sincerely speculative, and demonstrated that she was still working toward understanding. She was seeking her classmates’ help in creating understanding, and that required that she address them as much as me. Jessica was addressing herself, her classmates, and me. The way I exercised authority during the conversation between Kara and me did not compromise Jessica’s ability to address or our collaborative community as a classroom.

Narrative Reflection #6 (5/10/04)

Topics or themes for student’s final cumulative collections included: places to belong, sibling relationships, coping with loss, children with special needs, and being different. Some students chose to focus on a particular genre or time period. Several chose historical fiction while others narrowed their topics to “struggles for freedom” and “times of war.” Many students spoke of the tension they felt between books they like and the ones they think children will like. This dilemma was expressed repeatedly in multiple
forms. Abby and Brandi both explained that they like “depressing or serious books” and that their collection is full of books that deal with controversial social issues. Abby clarified that she hopes to teach middle school and thought her choices were appropriate considering that expectation, but worried that students would wonder why she chose such “heavy” books (she plans on telling them she learned it from her children’s literature teacher). Brandi continued to be concerned that her choices reflected her interests and her own psychology rather than a belief that children would be drawn to the books. She said that as much as she had learned about children’s development as readers and what was available in literature for children, she was still unsure how to separate out her likes from her expectations of them. Dawn, Chris, and Cheryl included song lyrics in their collections, which demonstrated to me that they were making connections across texts and mediums. Additionally, I saw this as a sign that they were beginning to embrace poetry and to grasp the various forms of literacy in children’s lives.

The last student to share their collection was Lisa. She selected books that explore family relationships. She was excited to share Stepping Out With Gramma Mac (Grimes, 2001) because she felt it was the best book in her collection. She described it as a poetry book and novel all in one and then went on to praise it as a multicultural piece. Lisa explained that the themes in the book fit not only with her favorites project but also with her view of the world. I was glad to hear Lisa articulate this thread which had run through all the presentations today. Her selection of these books was based on her evaluation of the quality, an affinity for the topics, and a match between her values and the values reflected in the stories. Lisa is a white woman so her worldview does not match perfectly with the one presented in Stepping Out. She identified with the characters and situations
enough to be engaged with the text and develop an appreciation for the story. At the same time she was able to see the value of this piece for readers who do share the sociocultural context featured in Grimes’ book. I praised her for her choices and ended class by reading “Fences” from Grimes’ poignant collection.

Tensions

On this last day of class the tension between authority and advocacy underscored all our interactions. Students were turning in their final project, a thematic annotated bibliography and philosophy statement, and sharing their favorite books and new understandings with the class. I designed this assignment, insisted on the brief presentations, and would be grading the papers. Accordingly, my power and authority is accentuated as students share their work. Many are obviously eager to impress or please me. Varying levels of sincerity are revealed as students make statements like, “You’d like this one, Lesley,” and “Do you know this one?” Students go out of their way to make connections between authors and illustrators we have studied in class and the ones who appear in their project. Comments like, “I fell in love with Janet Wong when we read *Grump* in class then I found....” and, “Lesley recommended *Henry and Mudge* and then I ended up reading some others by Cynthia Rylant so...” were typical. The impending grades set the mood for class today. It is difficult for me to discern students’ motivations and levels of authentic interest because of how my position as the teacher has to be enacted during this final session. I respond affirmingly to each student, confident the projects are impressive examples of their learning in the class. I am truly interested in the topics and books students have selected and try to demonstrate that through eye contact and positive comments. This advocacy feels hollow in comparison to the reality of
authority for everyone in the room, even though I have developed affection and respect for these students. A lack of a collaborative community spirit has resulted because students are addressing me exclusively. It is disappointing that they see these brief talks about projects as a “report to me” rather than a community sharing experience. My language around the assignment along with embedded assumptions about teacher/student relationships conspired to create the kinds of verbal exchanges that occurred.

Despite all of the moments during our time together - in whole group discussion, in papers exchanged between students and me, and in small group discussions - in which students addressed each other rather than just me, on this last day there was no sign that had ever happened. By addressing me rather than each other, the community was focused on me or on the speaking student and me only. This stands in contrast to most of our interactions. In this case, neglecting talking to each other also negated the connections among projects that existed. Students positioned me as both an authority and an advocate during the course of class, but my overwhelming identity and status in the end was an authority with the power of assessment in her hands.

4.3.2) Conclusion

Teaching about and across difference without driving toward or prizing assimilation or the sameness of understanding requires an ability to allow plural worlds to exist side by side...There is an undecidability to teaching. The good teacher is the one who gives what she does not have. (Ellsworth, 1997, p. 174)

Ellsworth reminds us that teaching is inherently unpredictable and indeterminable. She argues that relationships between teachers and students depend on the positions that are available for each to take up and on our ability to embrace differences by embracing
paradoxes. The findings from my analysis of pedagogy further suggest that incongruities and inconsistencies characterize classroom interactions. Tensions between authority and advocacy emerged as I positioned myself and was positioned by students during class discussion and in written work. The gap between these two roles widened and narrowed depending on my and my students’ needs and the ways we understood ourselves in particular moments. Tensions emerged around community and discontinuity as students struggled to please me, to stay allied with each other, to remain loyal to themselves. My internal conflicts about enacting a position of authority or a position of advocacy manifested in silence. Proactive silence resulted when I attempted to assert my authority in an affirming way. Experiencing increased discontinuity, usually along with my students, led to passive silence. The tension between addressing each other and addressing me captures my students’ inconsistent ways of perceiving themselves, their classmates, and me. Students’ mode of address depended on my teaching moves (including the activity or assignment as well as my words and action in the moment), the tone of the class at the time of their contribution, and their evolving relationships with each other. Whom they addressed and how they addressed each other was always connected to their intentions around community and discontinuity and their positioning of me as an authority or advocate.
CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSIONS:

IMPLICATIONS FOR READING AND RESPONDING TO MULTICULTURAL CHILDREN’S LITERATURE WITH PRESERVICE TEACHERS

5.1) Introduction

All stories of classroom life are built with the particular details of a human encounter.... Stories are not prescriptions for practice; they are material to think with, whether the ultimate goal is to consider pedagogical decisions to help this child or that one, or to probe some theoretical puzzle about school learning. All stories become useful when they inform the telling of another’s tale, when they become part of the chain of communication about teaching and learning. (Dyson, 2002, p. 17)

I intend for findings from this study to become part of that chain of communication about teaching and learning referenced by Dyson. The chain is continued through the stories my students shared as they responded to multicultural children’s literature and through the stories I have told about those responses and about my teaching. I set out to better understand multicultural literature, my students and their interpretive work, and my teaching. Accordingly, the ultimate goals include both pedagogical and theoretical considerations.
In this last chapter, I will summarize the findings from the study and consider broader implications in the areas of teacher education, multicultural children’s literature, and reader response research. I begin by revisiting the questions and connecting the data to these queries. Relying on the analysis of my students’ responses and my teaching from chapter four, I summarize the findings, consider their significance, and relate the findings back to the extant literature. Additionally, I propose pedagogical implications of the study. The chapter concludes with recommendations for further research.

5.2) Findings Related to Personal Stories

- *In what ways do preservice teachers map their own personal stories onto the stories in multicultural children’s literature?*

Six broad categories emerged through qualitative analysis of student responses. These categories describe patterns of how students talked about and interpreted multicultural children’s literature. The categories are (IA) Intimate Disclosures: Life-to-Text Connections; (IB) Intimate Disclosures: Text-to-Life Connections; (II) Dialogue-and-Difference: Text and Life Collide; (IIIA) Disconnections and Difference: “Intolerance”-of-Difference; (IIIB) Disconnections and Difference: “Tolerance”-of-Difference; and (IV) Transcendence of Difference. These patterns elucidate the ways my students made use of personal stories and personal knowledge to make sense of the multicultural literature.
5.2.1) Telling Stories to Understand Stories

Bakhtin (1986) uses the term “particularity of story” to describe a text’s quality of being grounded in a particular moment in social space and historical time. Obviously, each of the multicultural books discussed by my students in the responses feature a unique particularity of story. The stories shared in my students’ responses sometimes vary greatly from that of the book but still feature their own highly contextualized particularity of story. All of these responses are grounded in the moment of the class. Each is a result of a temporal space created by me as the teacher, the class as a whole, the college, and the concurring events of all our lives. Students who shared emotionally-charged stories experienced that space and time differently than those whose responses contained vague or abstract comments. Additionally, all texts possess a quality of being addressed to others, to an imagined audience. Bakhtin calls this quality “addressivity of storytelling,” asserting that every text inherently enacts a social relationship. Dyson (2002) further explains this concept,

As a storyteller turns toward an audience, a social space for communication opens up. And within that space, the storyteller shapes the story. Who the “I” (the teller) thinks “I” am relative to “you” (the audience), and what common symbols “I” think “we” can communicate through will show up in the content and style of the story itself. Of course, one can never be sure how the other will respond. (p. 9)

The social spaces for communication opened up by the multicultural texts we read invited reflections on race, class, gender, and sexuality. These spaces, which unfolded through our reading and writing activities, were laden with wonderings about history, politics, and personal and social values and beliefs. Students’ responses reveal a wide range of ways of being a teller, perceiving the audience, and being a listener in the audience. The
conversations which I describe as dialogue and difference (group II) most notably reveal how students struggled with addressivity. In nearly all of these responses, tellers took for granted that their audience would recognize what they were saying as a natural or commonsense interpretation of the text. Their perceptions of themselves relative to each other were limited - not necessarily wrong, but somehow misguided, ambiguous, and unclear. These mismatches between speaker and audience made the natural or commonsense responses seem less so, thus inviting further questioning of both self and text. Students often shared intimate stories at unexpected times. They told these stories in written form and orally. They addressed the whole group, a small group, or just me. Their reasons for and ways of telling are not completely discernible by me. Stories unfolded out of emotional responses to text, but also out of collaborative interpretive work as students thought through each other’s responses. My responses as teacher, both in person in class and in writing on their papers, represent a similar unknowable range. Just as tellers were rarely able to anticipate responses, I was not always able to understand their perceptions of me as the teacher/audience. My silence and hesitation during several conversations still confounds me. I believe the stories are called up from the texts with or without my prompting but that the nature of our work together and the selected pieces of literature facilitated the sharing of stories and shaped those sharings.

The personal mappings articulated by my students varied dramatically from text to text, from student to student, and from context to context. As students sought understandings, personal stories and perspectives unfolded. The sharing of these personal stories and perspectives depended upon interactions in and beyond the classroom. I designed the course to encourage and even compel personal stories, but I did not and
could not plan for the classroom interactions that would ensue. A wide spectrum of interactions, ranging from confirmation to confrontation, was prevalent throughout the class. When confrontations occurred, they were both communal and personal in nature as texts and other students enabled individuals to explore different and difficult perspectives. Response patterns like those in group II (dialogue-and-difference) clearly demonstrate that individual readers have understandings which others do not, but all readers have gaps in their own knowing that can only be filled with the knowledge of others. Texts and other students filled those gaps through collaborative interpretative work and conversation. The multicultural literature used inherently disrupts authoritative discourse since these texts feature underrepresented stories. There is an implicit invitation to consider stories of our own that may not fit within the dominant culture. In our whole-class discussion of *Walk Two Moons*, I was unable to fill the gap in knowing that my students were experiencing. It was only through the dialogue that occurred in that particular space in that particular moment that the miscarriage survivors were able to fill those gaps. This kind of collaborative interpretation through the telling of personal stories occurred throughout the response patterns. In group II (dialogue-and-difference) students were surprised to realize that their peers did not see the stories the same way. Through their interactions around these issues (the Logans’ honesty, for example) students were enacting social relationships and filling gaps for each other. The stories utilized in the intimate disclosure responses (IA & IB) demonstrate students’ expectations of me (the reader) and their peers (the listeners). These stories are told with emotional force and passion. They seem to be talking to themselves and for themselves, rather than focusing on the audience. Despite this rather internal register of expression, the text and
the class context called them to share these stories. They could not be certain of the audience’s response, yet they were more than willing to act upon the perceived relationship with the class and their enactments of their selves.

The responses that focused on disconnection (IIA & IIB) also imply an audience and a particular moment in social time and space. Both of these sets of response seem detached and devoid of emotional impact. While these responses anticipate an audience and are contextualized within the particularity of our class and the texts, a lack of investment in the dialogue makes it difficult to discern their perceptions of each. The social relationships enacted in the “transcendence-of-difference” (IV) responses are profoundly vague and generalized. Thus, the expectations of the audience are rendered inconsequential. The ways in which stories came to be told depended on the intensity of the personal connections and disconnections, assumptions about the audience, and perceived social relationships.

5.2.2) Making Multicultural Literature Make Sense

I loved standing under the towers - choose any one, depending on the time of day - looking up and farther up, until the back of my head rested on my shoulders. I would hang there until that certain slant of light caught the pendants and made them refract an endless pattern of colors. And then, I would spin around and around, making myself the moving sleeve of a kaleidoscope. And when I stopped, I would look down and watch their still-spinning shadow embroider the ground. (Konigsburg, 2004, p. 12).

In the excerpt above, Margaret Rose Kane, the protagonist from *The Outcasts of 19 Schuyler Place* (Konigsburg, 2004) describes her response to the two giant towers her artist uncles have created in their backyard. The towers are made from metal and steel
and copper, the faces and inner workings of old clocks, and shards of glass and porcelain. As fractured and unsightly as the towers may appear to some, Margaret and the other “outcasts” experience it differently. They find themselves caught up in the refraction of light and color, that movement which so inspires them. Responding to the towers, Margaret focuses, waits, spins and then searches. She absorbs what her eyes take in, she spins to increase the intensity of the experiences, and she seeks that “still-spinning shadow” in hopes of extending her perception and possibly discovering something yet unseen. As my students read and responded to multicultural literature, I hoped they would be patient and focused enough to become engaged with the stories shared in the literature. My students’ stories, which were evoked by the these texts, created a spinning much like Margaret describes as they struggled to make sense of themselves, each other, and these books. Most of all, I wanted them to keep searching for the still-spinning shadows embroidering the ground around us that might increase our perception.

Gazing up from under the towers, Margaret describes reflection and refraction as part of her aesthetic experience. As readers of multicultural children’s literature, my students also experienced reflection and refraction. Often, readers’ experiences with text are compared to the activities of looking into a mirror or out a window. The patterns of response observed and analyzed in this study show that students indeed had window and mirror experiences (Bishop, 1990, 1994; Galda, 1998), but there are also examples of experiences somewhere in between or beyond either mirrors or windows. In order to address the dynamic nature and diverse range of responses, I utilize the metaphor of stained glass windows. Unlike traditional plate glass windows designed to provide a clear, unobstructed view of the world outside, stained glass windows simultaneously
reflect and refract. Stained glass windows artfully use color, light, and shape while providing a view of the world outside. Considering the dynamic nature of reader’s responses to and engagements with multicultural children’s literature as described here, these texts may function in a way similar to that of stained glass windows. Stained glass windows refract images, light, and color. Both windows and traditional mirrors are assumed to provide a transparent view - an accurate vision of the self or an unclouded opening into the worlds of others. Stained glass bends, reshapes, and otherwise alters what is perceived. Since readers take up multiple positions during reading and utilize a variety of lenses, the metaphor of stained glass windows can describe both readers and texts. Like stained glass, multicultural children’s literature artfully confuses and complicates our path of vision and allows for multiple lenses at one time. Additionally, this study demonstrates that interactions around these texts can promote conversations that mirror, distort, illuminate, and refract much like stained glass.

Many of the responses from my students can be characterized as mirror experiences. Readers who I suggest are transcending difference (IV) describe seeing themselves reflected in characters they seem to share little in common with. These readers did not share specific personal stories in their efforts to explain their connection to the characters, so I am unable to ascertain the nature of the connections. My analysis separates these responses from the other connection-focused responses because of the vague examples and impersonal tone in these. These are not grounded in the personal like the others, yet their claims of connection seemed sincere. They did see themselves mirrored in the characters despite the lack of explanation (on my part and theirs). The responses in group IV provide concrete examples of the unpredictability of response and
the unexpected visions readers find in the mirror. Readers from group IA (life-to-text) also describe mirror experiences. These readers relied on intimate personal disclosures to explain their connections to characters and expressed feeling deeply affirmed by the story. Other readers were surprised by the way the characters reminded them of themselves (IB/text-to-life). For these students, what may have appeared to both them and me to be a likely window turned out to do much more than just provide a glimpse into the life of someone different from themselves. The students whose responses are located in group IB could not precisely map their lives onto the stories in the text, but feelings of connection still dominated. For these readers, the reflections of themselves emerged from windows rather than the assumed mirrors. The text-to-life connections made by these students broke down the distinction between mirror and window.

Similarly, the conversations and follow-up written work described in group II (dialogue-and-difference) also trouble the window/mirror divide. These responses show students struggling with both mirrors and windows. When one student found a character or incident unbelievable because of a lack of a mirror, another student described how the text worked like a mirror for them in order to bridge the gap. In this way the windows were made more effective for some readers, perhaps moved from closed to open so the reader could engage more personally and intensely with the scene presented through the window.

Responses that emphasize disconnections with difference (IIIA & IIIB) compel a questioning of both the text and the reader. Perhaps the quality of the literature is to blame for the disconnections. Or maybe the reader did not really invest in the reading experience. As tempting as these explanations are, such simple answers are eliminated
with a closer look at the responses. Readers whose interpretive work resulted in rejection of a book were categorized as IIIA, indicating how disconnection emerged from an “intolerance” of difference. Based on my evaluation of the literature and the nature of the classroom activities, I believe these books presented opportunities for window experiences for these readers. The window metaphor is often called upon to convince outsider readers that a book that reflects a different social or cultural context has value and appeal. However, the windows did not work for these students. This lack of functioning may be a consequence of interactions with classmates and me or related to the text itself or the reader. The windows seemed to be either closed or obstructed. Similarly, the windows experienced by the group IIIB (DD/tolerance-of-difference) do not seem to work quite right either. Readers in this group are positive about the text but in very ambiguous and compliant ways. They seem to like the book because they think they should. They describe their disconnections, which are related to the very differences explored in the books, as something they need to rise above. These readers describe a window experience, yet the very exploration of difference in the texts that cause them to claim windows is diminished in their responses. Rather than examine the social, political, and personal differences that shape their responses, these students simplify the situation. They endorse a book they have no emotional or aesthetic attachment to - perhaps because they believe that is what they are supposed to do. When advocates of multicultural literature use the metaphor of windows to persuade critics of the value of these books, they always risk promoting objectification or exoticization of others. Apparently, we also risk quiet and disconnected compliance. Meaningful engagements
with books as windows depend on reader, text, and context. Looking through a closed window at a distant scene is unlikely to have a lasting or significant impact on the reader.

While advocating for a theory of multicultural children’s literature based on the metaphor of stained glass windows, I do not mean to suggest that this metaphor should be our only way of thinking about the experience of reading these texts. Recently, Sipe (1999) reviewed the past twenty years of research on response to literature and found that researchers have taken four different approaches to inquiry into children’s literary understanding: author, text, reader, context. Scholars will continue to theorize how these four dimensions inform reader’s interpretations. Perhaps an author’s creation sometimes only provides a tiny hole drilled into a brick wall through which to peek into a story. Unfortunately, at times a reader’s lens may be so clouded with misinformation and bias that their view into a story is completely obstructed and distorted. Sometimes the author, text, reader, and context may come together so harmoniously that the best descriptor for the reading process is indeed a mirror. Sharing multicultural literature involves the confrontation of new ideas and calls for a dialogic approach to the nature of literary experiences in which interpretation is recognized as informed by personal history and social context.

Reading and responding to multicultural literature in contexts like the one investigated in this study involves negotiation of identity positions, social relations, and readers’ own realities. Sumara (2002) explains that “immersing oneself in the details of a textual landscape can create conditions whereby other landscapes of one’s life become more interesting” (p. 120). Multicultural texts and interactions that evolve through discussion of connections and disconnections have the potential to illuminate interesting,
new, or yet-to-be-uncovered aspects of ourselves. Personal landscapes were brought to bear on the texts and in our in-class interpretive work. These landscapes became available for examination through reflections and refractions as readers made sense of the texts and each other. The reflections students experienced were not always ones that affirmed something positive; mirrors also had the potential to surprise or disturb us. The window offered through interactions with these texts sometimes became a window onto the self more than the “other” featured in the text. The relationship between reader and text is consistently unpredictable - no metaphor will ever adequately describe the transaction, considering the complexity of intertextuality that is generated through readers’ personal responses. As readers bear witness to the stories featured in multicultural texts, they have the potential to be transformed along with the characters. This potential increases through conversations about texts as students reveal their responses and evolving thinking. This phenomenon is not exclusive to multicultural children’s literature, but becomes more powerful in combination with other elements of that tradition.

5.3) Findings Related to Engagement, Endorsement, and Interpretation

- What do students’ articulations of connection and disconnection with multicultural texts suggest about engagement, determinations of quality, and the meaning making process?

My students used personal stories to account for their connections and disconnections to the stories in multicultural literature. However, students’ connections and disconnections were unpredictable and convoluted. Accordingly, we cannot
predispose how connections and disconnections will correlate with readers’ engagement, decisions about endorsement, and interpretations. Using the metaphors of mirrors, windows, and stained glass windows enables us to describe the experience of reading and responding to multicultural children’s literature. As helpful as those descriptions may be, they do not adequately explain my students’ engagement, determinations of quality, and meaning making. In order to account for how students’ connection and disconnections played out in these areas, I consider the categories of responses once again, this time focusing on character alignment and how meaning is negotiated.

5.3.1) The Character Connection

*I used to wonder what would happen if characters in books could change their fates. What if the Dashwood sisters had had money? Maybe Elinor would have gone traveling and left Mr. Ferrars dithering in the drawing room. What if Catherine Earnshaw had just married Heathcliff to begin with and spared everyone a lot of grief? What if Hester Prynne and Dimmesdale had gotten on board that ship and left Roger Chillingsworth far behind? I felt sorry for these characters sometimes, seeing as they couldn’t ever break out of their stories, but then again, if they could talk to me, they’d likely have told me to stuff all my pity and condescension, for neither could I.* (Donnelly, 2004, p. 84)

In the responses I analyzed in this study, engagement was generally revealed through identification, alignment, and empathy. Much like Mattie from *A Northern Light* (Donnelly, 2003), readers describe identifying with characters, positioning themselves in alignment with them, and feeling empathy for them. In Mattie’s case, the classic characters from the novels of Austen and Hawthorne stuck with her. They invited her to consider the lives of others and inspired her to change her own. Part of the appeal of this
Printz Honor Award winning book is this romantic representation of the potential of literature. Not all readers of the books that so dramatically influenced Mattie will be equally inspired. Mattie feels sorry for these characters, but other readers may feel angry or frustrated with them or find them boring or unbelievable. In this study, readers’ responses to characters dominated their writing and talk about the texts and revealed the relationship between empathy, engagement, and endorsement.

Readers’ identifications with characters and texts are social and political events which create opportunities for empathy, self-reflection, and insight. Sometimes alignment with characters can be almost overwhelming, at others times it is only a beginning. Identifying with literary characters involves noticing how they are similar yet not identical to you, the reader. Based on this study, the exploration of reader’s alignments with characters needs to be sustained, committed, and directed. Using character identification as a starting point seems to come naturally to readers. However, as Enciso (in press) has explained, location often tells us more. According to Enciso “location has to do with how we situate ourselves amidst the connections, images, and perspectives we evoke while reading” (p. 4). By extending our talk about character alignment and pushing students to understand their locations/positions, we increase the likelihood of conversations about identity markers and social relations, about “our ways of aligning with society’s narratives about race, gender, and sexual identities” (Enciso, in press, p.1).

Responses from the “life-to-text” and “text-to-life” pattern (IA & IB) show readers aligning themselves with main characters from the texts. These readers develop intense emotional attachments to the characters. Their empathy is personal and heightened and their engagement is elevated and invested. They offer enthusiastic
endorsements for the books based on the power of these connections. In the “dialogue-and-difference” responses (II), readers were challenged through interactions with peers. These readers also expressed feelings of heightened empathy and elevated engagement. Some of these readers were drawn to the characters but their connections broke down based on mismatches between their worlds and the worlds of the characters. As other students spoke up about their more precisely mapped connections, the readers who experienced mismatches were able to develop a more cohesive alignment with the characters. Again, this alignment resulted in enthusiastic endorsement of the books. The articulation of the disconnection and reflection on difference that occurred in these conversations further enhanced the engagement of all the participants with both the texts and the literature discussion.

Responses which feature “intolerance-of-difference” (IIIA) demonstrate little or no empathy and a lack of praise for the book. These readers seem to respond to the idea of the characters rather than actually engage with them. They express a detached criticism of the characters and story. Mattie from A Northern Light and many of the readers (from examples IA, IB, II) in this study are critical as well, but their criticism reflects an investment in what happens to characters. Interest and concern prevail because those readers make themselves vulnerable to others by bringing their lives to bear in their interpretation. The readers from the “intolerance of difference” group (IIIA), on the other hand, read from a distance and thus do not develop adequate empathy or character connection to compel an endorsement of the text. Readers in the “tolerance-of-difference” pattern of response demonstrated detachment from the characters similar to those in “intolerance of difference.” However, these students (IIIB) did develop empathy
and endorse the novel. Like the other disconnection-centered responses, these indicated an engagement with the idea of the characters rather than an actual investment with them. In this case, the readers liked (or at least wanted to like or wanted me to think they liked) the characters, but did not feel close to them in any way. This generated a less emotional kind of empathy. Their expressions of empathy and endorsement were not dispassionate, but they also did not seem to come from an embodied place in which their personal experiences mattered in the interpretive work. In contrast, responses categorized as “transcendence-of-difference” (IV) featured testimonials of alignment with characters. These readers express feelings of empathy and enthusiastically endorse the texts like the connection-centered readers from groups I and II. Yet, their language varies greatly from those more intimate and personal responses. The maps of connection provided by these students are vague and ambiguous. They have strong feelings of connection to the characters but their empathetic response is blind to the differences between themselves and the characters, causing me to questions their perceptions of both. My concern is that empathy may not matter outside of the reading experience of our class if it does not emerge from an embodied place. If readers’ identity markers and social positions are diminished in the response, then the same will occur when the book is shared with young readers. In the first three patterns of response (IA, IB, and II) personal experience is put to work as intertextual stories used to interpret the stories of characters and classmates. Varying kinds of engagement and empathy can be found in the latter three groups (IIIA, IIIB, and IV), but none of the responses indicate that readers were prompted to examine themselves or society through their interaction with the texts and each other. These responses are laden with ideological or generalized assumptions. Readers link “the world
announced by the text and their remembered, current, and imagined worlds of out-of-text experiences” (Sumara, 2002, p. 34). Yet, the world announced by the text is inherently under construction and subject to interpretation. Similarly, our remembered, current and imagined out-of-text experiences are constantly being invented, negotiated, and refined.

5.3.2) Negotiating More than Meaning

Multicultural literature and reader response activities as utilized in this study confirm that both identity and meaning are negotiated during the interpretive process. As stated in chapter four, several of the categories documented in this study reflect findings similar to those submitted by other researchers (Langer, 1995; Sipe, 2000; Enciso, 1991, for example). As a practitioner researcher I have come to recognize that the construction of meaning depends on both collective and personal interpretive work which is shaped by social context, interpersonal interaction, and the complex nature of dialogue. According to Bakhtin, the meaning intended or taken from any act of expression depends on a “set of conditions - social, historical, meteorological, physiological - that will insure that a word uttered in that place and at that time will have a meaning different than it would under any other conditions; all utterances are heteroglot in that they are functions of a matrix of forces practically impossible to recoup, and therefore impossible to resolve” (Holquist, 1990). Heteroglossia assumes the significance of context over text. The books we read alone do not create interpretation, it is the how and why of individual responses to the books, our personal histories, insights, opinions, and predispositions, that contribute to and actually create our interpretations
The students whose responses were characterized by intimate disclosures (IA & IIA) inferred a personal connection which was then extended as their interpretive work continued. These examples show students experiencing empathy through close and intense character identification. Their engagement is elevated through the precise and personal ways they mapped their own lives onto the story. The subsequent endorsements of these texts are both enthusiastic and emotional. The key difference between the “life-to-text” and “text-to-life” responses is based on the kind of reflection presented in the mirror. In “life-to-text” responses (IA), students see themselves in the story based on highly personal connections. These connections result in what feels like a direct match between life and text. In “text-to-life” responses (IB), the mirror experience is similar, but it is transformed into a window on the self. The perceived match between the readers’ lives and the characters’ lives results in further self-reflection for the readers. Both kinds of responses involve meaningful reflection on the readers’ and characters’ life experiences. The “text-to-life” responses involved more self-reflection, a kind of sustained, cathartic self-reflection that resulted in the development of new self-knowledge. This coincided with Sumara’s (2002) suggestion that “most people do not derive personal insight by studying themselves but, instead, do so by studying the details of other people’s experiences - with particular attention to how those experiences appear when used as the projection screen for their own” (Sumara, p.156). In the case of “dialogue-and-difference” (II) the projection screen was provided by peers, rather than the text alone. All of these responses show how readers lead with their lives as they engage in the meaning making process both individually (written work) and shared interpretive work. The readers who transcended difference (IV) according to my
analysis, also forefronted their life experience but their reflection on both themselves and the characters did not lead to insight as with the other groups (IA, IB, II). These readers’ determinations of meaning were affirmed through our class’s interactions and dialogue with other students. Based on what they articulated in the data I collected, neither their vision of themselves nor of the characters was troubled at any point during the reading and responding. This does not mean identity and meaning were not negotiated; the process may just have been more clear-cut for them or perhaps these readers simply did not make it visible to me in their responses.

In the disconnection-focused responses, mismatches between reader and text serve as a starting place for meaning making. The experience of disconnection compels these readers to make more authoritative statements of interpretation. As stated earlier, their comments reflect a lack of investment in the characters. Thus, their interpretations feature more theoretical or ambiguous conclusions. “Transcendence-of-difference” (IV) and “intolerance of difference” (IIIA) responses also indicate a denial of the significance of the differences highlighted by the text and their reading. The former are interested in connections while the latter are disturbed by their disconnections. Readers with responses categorized as “tolerance-of-difference” (IIIB) used their disconnection to the text to supposedly celebrate the differences. In all of the examples examined in this study, the connections and disconnections are just a starting place. The conditions that created the forum for the articulation of these mappings and the related interactions class-based interactions seem to matter more. Rather than readers somehow extracting knowledge from books or imposing personal perspectives on it, readers and texts and contexts of reading collaborate in the continued inventing and negotiating of meaning.
5.4) Findings Related to Pedagogy

• How does my pedagogy help or hinder my students as they engage with multicultural literature? How are my pedagogical moves implicated in my students’ responses?

In order to understand my students’ responses to multicultural literature, details of the class experience, including my teaching moves, must also be considered. In chapter four, I presented several pedagogical tensions, which shaped interactions within the context of the class. These tensions include authority and advocacy, community and discontinuity, proactive silence and passive silence, and addressing the teacher and addressing peers. These tensions or dilemmas are manifested in class discussion and throughout all forms of student responses. In the next sections I consider how my ways of coping with these tensions helped or hindered, and are thus implicated in, my students’ responses as they made sense of multicultural children’s literature.

5.4.1) Helping and Hindering

Readers do not construct meaning in isolation. Readers’ experiences of engagement, determinations about quality, and construction of meaning take form based on interactions with texts, other readers, teachers, and contexts. In this study, the “dialogue-and-difference” category (II) most dramatically demonstrates how readers made meaning together. However, all of the categories of responses show how students’ bring social worlds to bear in their work with text. In the case of our class, there were ample opportunities during our actual time together for students to share in the meaning making process. My pedagogical efforts aimed to help students rely on each other for
interpretation. The nature and direction of our class discussions depended on whom students addressed and whether or not they saw me as an advocate or an authority. Decisions about address were influenced by the friction between community and discontinuity. Further, my silences also contributed to modes of address, perceptions of my role, and goals of consensus. The understandings that emerged through our conversations about and interactions around text depended both on my pedagogical moves and on our personal and collective interpretive work.

The distinction between personal and collective interpretation is an important one to consider. The data sources for this study include examples of personal interpretations as students wrote response papers. These accounts of their reading were written individually and with a sole reader in mind - me, the teacher. Yet, those interpretations are dependent upon myriad influences. As the class progressed, these personal responses became even less “individual.” Our history, culture, and identity as a class were forged through our interactions, shaping self-knowledge, interpretation, and engagement along the way. The line between collective and personal interpretation dissolved as students’ responses began to reflect emerging awareness of themselves, their classmates, and aspects of the literature. Our collective interpretive work is a manifestation of this heightened awareness. This kind of collaborative interpretive work requires students who are “willing to question, look closely, and think through and beyond assumptions” (Enciso, 2004, p. 17). Students’ willingness is contingent on my pedagogical positions. My stance as an advocate or an authority shaped their actions in our discussions. This was evident in how and when they addressed each other and me. Further, how I enacted my authority and advocacy, either through proactive or passive silence, also contributed
to the ways in which students were able to “question, look close, and think through.”

Finally, our group efforts toward community or discontinuity alternately compromised and enhanced our collaborative interpretive work.

In the case of my class they needed to be willing to question texts, each other, and me. Looking closely entailed examining the texts with freedom and guidance simultaneously. However, their willingness and the effectiveness of these explorations were contingent on my pedagogical positions. They had the freedom to disagree but also actively sought guidance and the expertise of others, not just the teacher. Considering the limited time I spent with these students and the demands of the curriculum, the goal of promoting thinking through and beyond assumptions remains an ambitious challenge. In this course, we only began to scratch the surface of our assumptions about ourselves, social differences, and literature and children. We did, however, begin the journey of seeing how experiences with a book can facilitate an awareness of those assumptions. In each of the patterns I discerned in the student responses, it is the very articulation of these dimensions of our responses that opened up possibilities for engagement and learning.

My teaching moves were intended to assist in the opening up of those possibilities, but their enactment and reception was not consistent or without complication. Sumara (2002) explains that in out-of-school settings, literature usually is experienced as an “open” text. An open text indicates that “readers feel able to insert, while reading, their own experience and interpretation. In school settings, literature is usually treated as ‘closed’ texts” (p. 32). It is essential that texts be treated as open in school settings, particularly in settings like college classrooms. Within the context of this study, regarding texts as “open” opened up new opportunities for engagement and learning.
The goal of a survey course in children’s literature tends to emphasize breadth rather than depth. As my syllabus indicates, students learn about children’s literature through exposure to the genres. Developing awareness of what is available in children’s literature is a central and worthy purpose of the course. Preservice teachers need to learn how to select texts for young readers based on knowledge about the qualities of the child and the quality of the books. This is an intimidating task for even the most passionate and informed teacher. Yet I constantly find that the more formidable task is engaging students with the literature in ways that compel them to become passionate and informed, to truly spark their interest in literature and its potential in children’s lives. It is not that students are apathetic or disinterested in the course. Some students who do not identify as avid readers are wary of the course because they dread the reading load, but most enter the course excited about the topic. At SCC in particular, the course is met with much anticipation because it is one of the first education courses students take and it is appealing compared to many other classes on their schedule. After repeated teachings of this course and others like it, I still find myself focusing on the reading experience. I want my students to have meaningful and intense reading experiences that will stick with them as they enter the profession. I want to persuade them to use multicultural literature; inviting them to read and respond to that literature is the best way to do that I have found.

For students who made use of personal experience in explicit and intimate ways (IA, IB, & II), the additional benefit of their immersion in multicultural texts and talk around those texts is the development of new perspectives or insight. For students whose responses featured less investment in the characters and the intersection of the character’s lives and their own, this immersion and dialogue still hold the potential to help student
see how we read ourselves into text and to better understand how who we are is implicated in the texts we read. Reading and interpreting texts depend on learned practices; and children’s literature classes for preservice teachers offer opportunities to undo some and to create some new ones. From a teaching standpoint, I had to resist the desire to build consensus in literature discussion (community versus discontinuity). A drive to consensus reinforces the myth of a normative social narrative in which all students will find a sense of well-being and identity, accordingly I had to not limit the range of recognizable engagements and responses. By identifying the various and changing lenses, perspectives, and approaches we take to a text, we can begin working within and against them in order to better understand ourselves, the texts, and the way literature works.

Working within and against positions of all sorts is inherently a practice that both teachers and students should take up. For instance, my analysis of my teaching in this course has enabled me to occupy authority with more fluidity. The ways my students’ responded to my multiple ways of exercising authority helped me to differentiate between being “in” authority and being “an” authority, thus allowing me to locate myself as an expert and still maintain an affirming stance toward my students. Similarly, our class found ways to simultaneously work toward and away from consensus. Allowing for discontinuity allowed for fruitful and enlightening collaborative interpretation to take place. Our classroom community was not dispelled during these moments of discontinuity, but simply suspended for the moment. I also noticed students working within and against their desire to address me rather than their peers. My silences need to be more deliberate in order to invite more student-to-student talk and also to indicate
when reverting back to my expertise might lead us down the most productive path. These conclusions about how to reconcile the tensions in my teaching are based on my understandings of the connections between my students’ responses and my pedagogy.

5.4.2) Connecting Students’ Responses and My Teaching Moves

Responses characterized by intense connection (IA & IB) initially appeal to me as a teacher. These students map their lives onto the stories in text with little hesitancy and with great emotional investment. My pedagogical moves certainly helped create the context within which they generate these connections, yet I cannot be sure exactly how or why they came to experience these texts in this way. I am explicit in promoting aesthetic reading with the class. I work hard to affirm their responses no matter how much they differ from my own. I explain that my hope for the class is that reading, discussing, and even writing about these books will be pleasurable. I want them to like children’s literature and I am confident they know this. Since I begin the semester with a “stories of relevance paper” (see appendix), students know that I conceive of literacy as a social phenomenon that comes in many forms. They also know that I see literacy as a powerful identity-shaping force. Accordingly, the connection-focused responses make a great deal of sense in the context of this class. They are reading and responding in the spirit I hoped they would read and respond. In these instances, the students are living the tension between advocacy and authority with them. While they might be responding in this way in part because of my expectation, the responses still involve intense vulnerability and self-reflection. Their responses reflect students’ complying with authority, but the vulnerability involved shows that my efforts at affirming them through a stance of
advocacy was also effective for these students in these instances. The personal maps represented in these response patterns (IA & IB) show readers developing an appreciation for multicultural literature. “Life-to-text” responders bring themselves to the text in specific and personal ways and thus enter the multicultural context of the text from an embodied position. They overtly used their life, with all its social and cultural markers, as they read and responded. This resulted in a positive and passionate response to the text. “Text-to-life” responders developed a similar positive and passionate response. However, their personal mappings resulted in surprising kinds of self-reflection. Through the articulation of their response to a multicultural text, they began to see how reading about someone unlike themselves informed their thinking about their own lives.

Both “life-to-text” and “text-to-life” responses involve a kind of rethinking of one’s reading and of one’s life. This can also be said for responses from pattern II (“dialogue-and-difference”). These responses evidence the importance of shared interpretive work since the rethinking that occurred in these examples profoundly depended on interactions with classmates. They depended on how I enacted authority and advocacy and how our community faced inevitable discontinuity. By allowing for conditions in which perceptions can be interrupted, students were able to critically analyze the text and their responses. This required that they address each other, not just the teacher, and that I resort to silence as a pedagogical alternative. These responses also demonstrate how ideas and identities are always in process during our collaborative interpretive work. These readers all use their personal connections and disconnections (especially in “dialogue-and-difference” but disconnections are present in each) to make
it apparent that their personal associations were central to their reading experience and
enhanced their understanding. Thus, the mapping of personal stories increased their
ability to empathize, their engagement, and their support of the text. Our job as teacher
educators is to continue to refine a pedagogy that facilitates the expression of personal
connections.

In responses in which students “transcend difference” (IV), personal stories are
not used in the same way and do not result in the same kinds of empathy, engagement,
and endorsement. Furthermore, the role of identity and the importance of difference are
eclipsed in these examples. These readers report feeling deeply connected to characters
and are eager to endorse the books. Every time I encounter these responses I am drawn to
the idealism embedded within them. The idea that a text might be so powerful as to
diminish difference appeals to me. I have had reading experiences that feel that way for
at least a portion of the time spent with the book. However, a closer look at these
responses reveals that these students have diminished both the differences present in the
text and the differences they bring to the text. The personal connections described in
these responses were not used to inform the reading of the text nor were they put to use in
helping students understand their own lives. The connection was articulated but
somehow did not hold or lead anywhere. At the very least, they did not show me
explicitly how the connection manifested in their reading or thinking. Their engagement
is still a mystery to me because they seem to have set themselves aside as they read. Their
feelings of empathy are limited because they do not seem to see the relevant social and
cultural aspects of the characters. They enthusiastically endorse the books while
continuing to ignore the issues of diversity that are present in the texts. Exploring these
“transcendent” readings with students requires that we occupy a spectrum of positions as the teacher, from authority figure to strong and affirming advocate of students. It also requires that we expand our conceptions of classroom community so we are prepared to accept and work through discontinuity. If we can expect responses of this nature when using multicultural children’s literature with preservice teachers, we must be prepared to challenge their perceptions of themselves, the reading experience, and the texts. These readers have strong feelings but the “colorblind” aspect of their responses needs to be troubled.

The two sets of students who predominately disconnected with the multicultural texts differ in how they talked about engagement, endorsement, and interpretation. Those who “tolerated difference” (IIIB) come to the conclusion the book is worthy of their support while the others (“intolerance-of-difference”/IIIA) dismiss the book in the end. As a teacher I am drawn to the students who endorse the book because they like the “idea” of multicultural topics (IIIB). These students are not highly invested in the characters or story but they seem to want to be, they think it is important to be. Their engagement and endorsement is based on a commitment to doing what I have asked of them and also a concern about the kind of response they should have. I want to help these students develop empathy for the characters based on an emotional or aesthetic response rather than a theoretical one. These students’ responses emphasize my position of authority. Something about our in-class interaction and in their assumptions about teachers and classrooms compels them to maintain a distance from the text and to refrain from disagreeing with me. On the other hand, the students in group IIIB are not at all afraid to reject a book they recognize as one I respect. My authority as the teacher does
not inhibit their engagement or determinations of quality. Instead, they cling to their own authoritative discourse as they distance themselves from the characters from the books and from their classmates during discussion. The responses in both of these groups exhibit minimal dialogic interaction because they diminish opportunities for addressing fellow readers. The social aspects of interpretation do not seem to penetrate as they remained committed to ideological concerns - concerns about the unimportance of culture (for IIIA/“intolerance-of-difference”) and concerns about the need to appease the teacher (for IIIB/“tolerance-of-difference”).

5.5) Pedagogical Implications of the Study

In order for literature to matter in school, one must abandon theories of learning that insist on excavating Truth, or representing commonsense. This means creating conditions for people to learn to be surprised by what might happen if they dedicated themselves to literary practices that require a sustained engagement with someone else’s structure of thinking. (Sumara, 2002, p. 160)

Many multicultural teacher educators want to help students to reconsider “Truth.” That is, we want future teachers to unearth their taken-for-granted assumptions about education - about children and school and about diversity and equity. Reading and responding to multicultural children’s literature has the potential to promote this kind of thinking when texts and responses are treated as co-constructed and open-ended, rather than sacred and authoritative. According to Holquist (1981), sacred texts do not invite conversation but only reinforce dominance. Sacred texts and authoritative discourse are characterized as “privileged language that approaches us from without; it is distanced, taboo, and permits no play with its framing context. We recite it. It has great power over
us, but only while in power...” (Holquist, 1990, p. 424). Disrupting this power creates more flexibility for readers and learners and invites collaborative interpretive work. In our class, the literature and our dialogue about the literature enabled us to imagine what existed beyond our familiar perceptions. This held true for students experiencing disconnection as well as those actively connecting. As many writers have noted, “involvement with literary forms creates necessary conditions for learning to perceive in more expansive ways.” (Sumara, 2002, p. 44) To promote these “expansive” ways of perceiving, Sumara argues for collective or shared interpretive work. The practice of Commonplace Books involves reading and re-reading books, all the while documenting your reading through markings directly on the texts. He shows how using a Commonplace Book can assist in boundary crossings that may create possibilities for the revision of our own personal narratives and identities (p. 53). For Sumara, interpretive linking occurs through reading, marking, re-reading, re-marking. My observations show that a kind of interpretive linking can also result when the reading, marking, rereading, and re-marking occurs in the form of written responses, classroom talk, and various reader response opportunities. For instance, through repeated readings of continued documentation of responses to *Walk Two Moons*, my students may have been able to more clearly articulate their understandings of the characters and of themselves in relation to the characters. Rereading and re-marking of those readings would enable students to understand and elaborate their responses and to further clarify the positions they enacted in our discussion. The data from my students’ responses as well as my pedagogical reflections suggest that second and third looks at our texts and our responses are needed. By layering our responses both individually and collectively, the work
involved in reading and interpretation becomes more apparent. In this way, my students will learn more about themselves as readers and about the work of interpretation children will be doing in their future classrooms.

This investigation into my students’ ways of responding to multicultural literature enabled me to learn more about them as readers, and about how they construct meaning, describe engagement, and decide whether or not they “like” a text. Through examination of their responses in light of scholarly work related to multicultural literature and reader response, I began to think through what their responses could teach me about my teaching. By looking closely at their responses and interactions, which emerged based on my pedagogy and planning, I can consider new ways to approach children’s literature classes with preservice teachers. My intention was not to judge the responses as enlightened or unenlightened or rank them from best to worst. Instead, I set out to investigate them so that I could understand the nature of the responses, how I contributed to their construction, and ways I might respond to them in order to better prepare them for diverse classrooms.

5.5.1) Pedagogical Responses to the Response Categories

As a teacher educator with a commitment to multicultural literature and teaching, my hopes for my students run high. As stated before, I knew it would be impossible for me to set this investment aside when I approached the data for analysis. At the same time, it was important that I examine how my teacher perspective on my students’ responses differs from my researcher perspective. Since I am an avid reader with a tendency to romanticize the reading experience, I needed to constantly work against my
own assumptions about how my students experience reading. I have high regard for all
the books selected for this class, and thus the study. I had to be prepared for students who
would not be as impressed. Based on my theoretical assumptions about engagement and
meaning-making, I had a tendency to be more enthusiastic about students who made their
personal connections explicit when responding to the literature. I also felt more aligned
with students who entered the class with a predisposition to respond positively to
multicultural texts. These are my obvious biases as a teacher. My awareness and critique
of these biases was essential to me as a researcher.

The responses characterized by intense alignment with characters and the reader’s
precise mapping of their lives onto the texts coincided with my beliefs about reading and
responding to multicultural texts. However, I was surprised by the incidents both from
text and in-class activities that readers drew from to discuss connections. Indeed, even
readers were surprised as evidenced by the “text-to-life” (IB) examples. In “dialogue-
and-difference” (II) examples, readers’ connections and disconnections with stories are
both in play. The dialogic interaction between students demonstrates the potential of
collaborative interpretive work. Readers’ disconnections with text often frustrate,
disappoint, and challenge me as a teacher. As a researcher, I find them mysterious as
well. This investigation taught me to appreciate the way disconnections manifest
themselves in readings of multicultural literature. I harbored assumptions that
disconnection-driven responses would reveal something negative about the students
themselves or even about the texts. While there may things to be learned about both the
students and the texts from the data sources I have collected, the study at hand focuses on
what these responses reveal about meaning-making and about classroom interactions. A
focus on disconnections did not always lead down the same path of engagement and interpretation. Experiences of disconnection can be compelling to students and may facilitate critical reflection on both engagement and interpretation. The exploration of disconnections, as they are articulated through both individual response and group discussion, has the potential to serve as a starting point for exploring the disconnections that may arise between children in these teachers’ future classrooms.

As teachers of children’s literature we have to learn not to discount disconnections. Further, even when readers’ responses look a lot like ours, we need to remember that engagement and meaning-making are complex phenomena. Different kinds of engagement and varied interpretations resulted even when connections dominated the reading experience (IV/“transcendence-of-difference” compared to I/“intimate disclosures”). Students who “transcend difference” may present the greatest challenge. One possible intervention strategy is to invite these students into conflict. Process drama activities would allow students to enter the story world and consider incidents in the story as if they are characters from the story. By pushing students to invest in the characters, in order to respond from that character’s position rather than their own, they may begin to see how difference plays out in both the text and their reading. For this to be effective the literature selected must offer generous room for interpretation and the classroom environment must support risk-taking. I believe that multicultural texts lend themselves to activities such as process drama because they often offer various perspectives within the narrative and inherently push the boundaries of dominant discourse while simultaneously offering universal themes.
Additionally, a classroom focused on aesthetic response is ripe for these kinds of interactions. Teacher energy is often not devoted to the development of aesthetic responses in students (Cox & Many, 1992) in either elementary or college classrooms. The research of Many and Wiseman (1992) has shown the need to teach aesthetic reading overtly in order to invite students to experience text rather than just analyze it. In college-level children’s literature classrooms, literary analysis cannot be set aside since a major goal is to help teachers select the best and most appropriate texts for their students. Yet, the goal of nurturing a love of reading and a passion for children’s book is just as important. Based on the tendencies of the readers described above (IA, IB, II), I am committed to inviting my adult students to experience children’s literature through an aesthetic stance and giving them opportunities for the development of personal insight through the reading experience. I believe that if teachers love what they are teaching, in this case multicultural children’s literature, their invitation to students to love the literature will be received positively as well.

I believe the disconnection-focused responders need to be encouraged to examine texts and their reading more closely and with more deliberateness. This is probably true for all readers; however, attentive reading would likely benefit these students in substantial ways. By asking students to become critically aware of their identifications and non-identifications with characters, they may begin to see how reading is a practice of creating interpretation based on the author’s constructions, our personal experiences, the current context, and the ensuing classroom interactions. Again, I believe activities such as process drama, symbolic representations, reader’s theater, and others will help students unearth their perspectives on the characters and issues in the books.
Creating new practices of all sorts is a goal many teacher educators pursue with their students. We want our students to consider new and unfamiliar pedagogical methods; we want them to see children, their lives, and learning from new perspectives; and we want them to reflect on their sociocultural positions in new and more complex ways. The use of stories, both personal ones and ones in literature, is one way to begin nurturing new practices and new ways of thinking. However, if we choose to rely on personal narratives in this way, we will have to know when and how to listen to our students. My silences and hesitations as revealed in the analysis of my pedagogy demonstrate that it is not always easy to know when or how to listen and respond to students. My silences often resulted from conflict and incongruent perspectives I detected among the students. These unanticipated conflicts emerged from the differences between my reading of a book and the students as well as from clashes of opinion in discussions. As teachers of children’s literature to preservice teachers, we may not be able to prepare for the incongruencies that may result in conflict, but we can adjust our responses to conflict. In particular, adjusting how we listen to our students may improve our ability to meet the challenges of conflict with these students.

Gomez and Tabachnick (1992) characterize teacher educators as listeners who are called to challenge students to share their selves and their stories while maintaining a questioning stance. If we indeed think of our role as listeners, then teacher educators have the opportunity to hear stories in a variety of formats from response papers like the ones I used in autobiographical work of all sorts. We also have a variety of options for the kinds of listener or reader we will be, including advocates or authorities. Since
stories exist within the environment in which tellers and listeners make something of them, teacher educators need to take an active role in exposing the meaning imbued in stories and how they inform teaching practice. Of course, these personal narratives are characterized by a multiplicity of meanings and resist definition. As the responses from this study demonstrate, the educative potential of stories must be approached with an expectation that ambiguities, tensions, and contradictions will persist. The overall goal then, from a pedagogical perspective, is to create new learning through the reading and response work, which in turn may create new ways of seeing ourselves. Seeing ourselves in new ways opens up possibilities of seeing others in new ways. These new ways of seeing can be a step in the process of creating compassionate teachers who are able to see their students as whole human beings worthy of their respect, support, and care. Many of the readers in this study expressed compassion and empathy for the characters in multicultural children’s literature. Feelings of empathy characterized many of the responses, but were less detectable or not present at all in the disconnection-focused responses (IIIA & IIIB). By listening carefully to how students personalize their readings, teacher educators can move their students toward a better understanding of the social and cultural positions that promote or inhibit their development of empathy for characters different from themselves.

Gordon, Miller, and Rollock (1990) describe a “communicentric bias” to explain how one’s own community becomes the only frame of reference for making sense of the world. If we allow a communicentric bias to prevail teachers will rely only their concrete personal experiences grounded in their own cultural, social, ethnic, and economic communities to guide their work with children. This phenomenon is reinforced by Cole
and Knowles’ (1995) description of a clash between preservice teachers’ idealized images of their past experiences and the complex realities of contemporary schools. If these contradictions are not somehow examined and debunked, there is a likelihood that those teachers will simply revert to teaching as they were taught. The mirrors/windows metaphor utilized in discussions of multicultural literature is fitting here. Preservice teachers need to rely on window experiences in order to develop an awareness of their communicentric bias and to begin to reconcile the contradictory realities of schooling. Sustained engagement with someone else’s structure of thinking, as described earlier by Sumara, can be achieved through interactions around multicultural literature and dialogue with classmates. Again, it is the very discerning and articulation of those ways of thinking and being that hold the potential to help teacher educators and their students discover and maintain commitments to multicultural education.

Grumet (1991) wonders “Where does that leave us, we who read other people’s stories in order to improve communities we do not really share with them?” This question has disturbed me since my first reading of it. Indeed, my students and I embarked on a journey that involved hearing other people’s stories, the stories of people who have experienced things we never have. I consistently find evidence in my work with preservice teachers of the need to share in other people’s stories, often people unlike us in substantial ways, in order to develop a commitment to improving our ability to reach children unlike ourselves. However, there are risks involved in sharing in those stories, in entering those communities through texts, and in sharing our own stories in the dialogue that follows. Audre Lorde (1984) spoke of these risks,
I have come to believe over and over again that what is most important to me must be spoken, made verbal and shared, even at the risk of having it bruised or misunderstood. That the speaking profits me, beyond any other effect. . . . The fact that we are here and that I speak these words is an attempt to break that silence and bridge some of those differences between us, for it is not difference which immobilizes us, but silence. And there are so many silences to be broken.

(p. 40)

Multicultural children’s literature inherently involves taking risks. Many of the stories told within this tradition have been left unspoken and unshared for far too long. The risks involved increase when readers open the bindings of these books, potentially bruising and misunderstanding the stories within. Additionally, those readers might will forth stories of their own as they respond to the multicultural texts. The articulation of those sometimes risky stories and subsequent exploration of the intermingling of reader’s stories and the ones contained in the books helps us to break silences and mobilize around difference, rather than be immobilized by it.

5.6) Considerations for Further Research

When I think about the implications this work may have I am most drawn to reporting how I have been affected personally and professionally. However, this report has been created with the hope that other teacher educators will find something in this study that will resonate with their own work with preservice teachers. As indicated in the words of Dyson at the beginning of this chapter, the purpose of sharing classroom research is not to prescribe practice. Rather than relying on theory to explain away my data, I sought to understand the complexities of “theoretical puzzles” such as the metaphor of mirrors and windows based on my students’ responses. Despite the
temptation to present easy answers to the challenges of teaching a class like this one, I struggled to unpack my own pedagogical assumptions, weaknesses, and biases so that I might be better able to “help this child or that one” in my future work with preservice teachers.

Given the classroom atmosphere we forged together at SCC, students made themselves vulnerable, interacted respectfully, and became passionate about particular books or topics. However, I am still left wondering if the heightened awareness, good intentions, and teaching expectations expressed by my students will survive into their teaching careers. Accordingly, more long-term investigations into the way teachers’ read, respond to, and use multicultural literature are needed. If I could follow these students into their classrooms, the questions would change dramatically. Rather than focus exclusively on response, such an inquiry would attempt to illuminate how those responses are manifested in how multicultural literature is shared with young children. On the other hand, if I was allowed more time with these students through additional course work, the investigation would likely take a different turn. I would like to invite these students into inquiry into the culturally-situatedness of their responses and the implications for their teaching lives. As a teacher, I would aim to direct our attention toward the literary elements of the texts we find ourselves enthusiastically engaging with and endorsing and those we find ourselves resisting and rejecting. A closer look at readers, teachers, and texts would extend this study while potentially guiding future teachers of children’s literature to preservice teachers.

Another opportunity which emerges from the limitations of this project resides in the myriad data sources from classes like this which could provide a different set of
glimpses into the reading experiences of preservice teachers resulting in different understandings. This study investigates only one aspect of a children’s literature course for preservice teachers. Further research into what happens in these courses is necessary to help teacher educators in our mission to nurture commitments to multicultural education in our students. As teacher educators continue to investigate their own classrooms, knowledge will be gained regarding appropriate and effective pedagogy. Furthermore, additional studies like this one have the potential to reveal more of the complexities of preservice teachers’ reading practices as well as their beliefs about literacy and multicultural education. Beyond what has been written here, further analysis and interpretation of data from this study will increase our knowledge about how preservice teachers detect stereotypes, their conception about the “right to write,” and about the their understandings of the purposes of multicultural children’s literature in classrooms.

As other teacher educators research their classroom practices they may choose to take a case study approach. Throughout this study, I examined “responses” rather than students. Students can never be divorced from their responses, but based on the parameters of this study I focused on responses rather than students. My familiarity with my students enabled me to put the responses in context for the purposes of analysis, however research that looked at individual students across assignments or across several classes would provide descriptions and understandings of yet another kind.
5.7) Conclusion

These glimpses into my students’ understandings and interpretations of multicultural children’s literature seem to be in accordance with what Noddings (1995) calls “interpersonal reasoning.” She explains that critical thinking which involves searching for an “appropriate response to a living other, not an argument” calls for intellectual and emotional responses to the thoughts and feelings of others (p. 195). In order to do this, rigid expectations of response must be forsaken so that they will not speak in an objective distanced voice. When personal experience is blended with academic learning, embodied knowledge is created. In this way, teachers and students are compelled to examine their emotional lives to find reasons for behavior and knowledge about self and others that does not separate thought from feeling, text from reader, or students from teacher or one another. It is heartening that many of the students described here were engaging in a form of interpersonal reasoning. The students who emphasized disconnections only and those who completely ignored difference are the exceptions, as their responses are characterized by a distanced and disembodied voice. Recently Georgia Heard (OCTELA conference, 02/04) reminded us of the trouble with such distanced and disembodied responses, arguing that “knowledge that is not passed through the heart is dangerous.” Indeed, reading and teaching from the heart is my greatest hope for my students.
I. COURSE DESCRIPTION
The techniques and methods of teaching reading through the use of literature for preschool age through young adulthood will be explored. Emphasis is on genres, author/illustrator study, multicultural and international texts, historical and contemporary publishing trends, and the interrelatedness of reading, writing, listening, and speaking. Appreciating, interpreting, selecting, and using this literature will be facilitated through extensive reading, in-depth discussion, and active participation.

II. INSTRUCTIONAL OBJECTIVES
A. Knowledge Objectives: Students Will...
   • Apply specific criteria to evaluate various genres of children’s literature.
   • Gain knowledge of graphic mediums and artistic styles used in this literature and learn how to expand young reader’s knowledge of the same.
   • Gain expertise in evaluating and selecting books for young readers based on knowledge of the breadth and variety of literature available.
   • Study and apply current research about the role of literature in teaching and learning with regard to individual differences, culturally and linguistically diverse populations, and students with exceptionalities.
   • Integrate reading, writing, listening, and oral language across the curriculum through interactions with each other and through read-alouds, process drama, and response to literature activities.
   • Examine how literature can contribute to student’s development in the areas of vocabulary, word recognition, and comprehension and composition of oral and written texts.
B. Skill Objectives: Students Will...
   • Acquire a measure of expertise in teaching in an interdisciplinary and balanced manner using tradebooks as resources.
   • Develop motivational and interpretive response activities that integrate skills across the curriculum, including the use of technology to enhance children’ engagement with literature.
   • Discover ways to promote reading, writing, and oral language for personal growth, lifelong learning, enjoyment, and insight into the human experience through interaction with books and the meanings they convey.
B. Disposition Objectives: Students Will...
   • Actively participate in class by respecting the opinions and experiences of classmates, taking risks, asking questions, and engaging in meaningful discussion.
   • Acquire and nurture an appreciation for and love of quality children’s and young adult literature by demonstrating a positive attitude as well as enthusiasm and interest in our work.
• Understand social and cultural values books promotes through language and illustration.
• Recognize the value and importance of multicultural children’s literature and the need for socio-political critiques of children’s literature.
• Reflect on the role and importance of literacy in their lives and the lives of children.

III. INSTRUCTIONAL PROCEDURES
A. Basic Methodologies: lecture, discussion, cooperative learning, inquiry, and reflection.
B. Grading Policies: Grades will reflect the standards reported in the ODU Bulletin. See below for specific grading system for this class.

IV. STUDENT REQUIREMENTS
• Attendance is mandatory. If you cannot attend a class session you must contact me by phone or email before your absence. Absences and tardiness will negatively affect your grade in this class. Five points will be deducted for your first absence but you may have the opportunity to make-up participation points. A second absence will automatically cause your grade to be lowered by one whole letter.
• Participation is mandatory. All reading must be completed according to the calendar provided. You will be held accountable for all reading. Participation is a must every class. You will be regularly asked to work in cooperative groups as well as to engage in reader response activities. We will be exploring many different instructional approaches including process drama and literature circles. You will earn points for your active participation in these class events.
• Text Selection: Additionally, you will earn points for text selection. Several times throughout the course you will be expected to bring in additional texts to share with classmates as we explore topics. It is essential that you plan ahead and familiarize yourself with your local library in order to complete this requirement. You will need to be discriminating and informed in your choices by relying on resources such as your textbook.
• Assignments: The assignments for this course have been designed to be both practical and meaningful. Major assignments will be reviewed in more depth during class before the due dates and you will receive handouts describing the requirements for each. Several of the assignments are ongoing and will be evaluated throughout the course of the semester. Late assignments will be penalized.

- Stories of Literacy Paper (DUE: February 8) 30 points
- Attendance/Tardiness (5 points per class) 35 points
- Additional Text Selection (illustrator, non-fiction, poetry, Cinderella) 40 points
- Class Participation (all in-class assignments, 5 points daily) 40 points
- Three Reflections (DUE: 3/8, 3/22, 4/5 - 20 points each) 60 points
- Book Talk and Read-Aloud (between 2/22 and 4/26) 25 points
- Independent Read-Aloud Project (DUE: 4/5) 20 points
- Final Project (DUE: May 10) 50 points
NOTE: Students who have documented their disabilities with the director of the academic center are encouraged to meet with me privately to discuss arrangements for approved accommodations.

LIS-120 READINGS
Because this is a survey course, the textbook and several novels are required reading for all class members. However, you will be asked to read many books beyond this requirement. You are encouraged to use the public library or buy in paperback. Additional readings may be provided by the instructor throughout the semester.

TEXTBOOK

REQUIRED TRADEBOOKS
*Out of the Dust,* Karen Hesse (1997)  
*Walk Two Moons,* Sharon Creech (1994)  
*The Circuit,* F. Jimenez (1997)

SELECTED NOVELS (you will choose one from each category)

Books for Literature Circles (2/22)
*Holes,* L. Sachar (1998)  
*Miracle’s Boys,* J. Woodson (2000)  
*Star Fisher,* L. Yep (1991)  
*What Jamie Saw,* Carolyn Coman (1997)  
*View from Saturday,* E.L. Konigsburg (1996)

Books for Newbery Selection (3/8)
*Lyddie,* K. Paterson (1991)  
*Number the Stars,* L. Lowry (1989)  
*Missing May,* C. Rylant (1992)  
*Roll of Thunder Hear My Cry,* M. Taylor (1976)  
*Tuck Everlasting,* Natalie Babbitt (1975)  
*From the Notebooks of Melanin Sun,* J. Woodson

Books for Traditional Literature/Fantasy (3/22)
*Ella Enchanted,* G.C. Levine (1997)  
*Just Ella,* M.P. Haddix (1999)  
*A Stranger Came Ashore,* M. Hunter (1975)  
*The Lost Years of Merlin,* T. Barron (1996)  
*The Golden Compass,* P. Pullman (1996)  
*Green Boy,* S. Cooper (2002)

Selected Picture Book Authors
Kevin Henkes, Jerry or Brian Pinkney, Dav Pilkey, Maurice Sendak, Tomie DePaola, Eric Carle, Steven Kellogg, Chris Raschka, Molly Bang, Allen Say, Lois Ehlert, Chris Van Allsburg, David Wiesner, William Steig, Vera Williams, Robert San Souci, Leo and Diane Dillon, Chris Soenpriet, Jon Scieszka, Patricia Polacco, Paul Zelinsky, David Macauley, Floyd Cooper, David Diaz, Ed Young, John Steptoe, Robert McClosky, James Ransome, Barbara Cooney, Uri Shulevitz, Leo Lionni, Faith Ringgold, Aliki, Tana Hoban, Cynthia Rylant, Jane Yolen, David Small
LIS-120 CALENDAR
This is a tentative schedule. Please be prepared for changes and additions. You will regularly be required to read self-selected texts and bring supplemental books to class.

January 25:  
**Topic:** The World of Children’s Literature  
**Reading:** The Watson’s Go to Birmingham - 1963

February 8:  
**Topic:** Historical Fiction and Poetry  
**Reading:** Out of the Dust, poetry anthology, and HK: 8&10  
- Stories of Literacy Paper Due  
- ALL Bring a Poetry Anthology

February 22:  
**Topic:** Picture Books/Literature Circles  
**Reading:** texts by one illustrator, literature circle book, HK: 4&5  
- First Day for Booktalks or Read-Alouds  
- Bring completed Literacle Circle Role Sheet  
- ALL bring self-selected texts (multiple) by one illustrator

March 8:  
**NOTE:** Spring Break Begins AFTER classes on March 9th  
**Topic:** Realistic Fiction/Newbery Discussion  
**Reading:** Walk Two Moons, a Newbery selection, and HK:1&9  
- Reflection Paper #1 Due  
- Bring Newbery Discussion Preparation Sheet.

March 22:  
**Topic:** Traditional Literature and Fantasy  
**Reading:** selected novels and HK: 6&7  
- Reflection Paper #2 Due

April 5:  
**Topic:** Short Stories & Young Adult Literature/ Internet  
**Reading:** Lani Garver OR The Circuit  
- Reflection Paper #3 Due  
- Bring Internet Homework Assignment  
- Independent Read-Aloud Project Due

April 26:  
**Topic:** Non-fiction/Information Books  
**Reading:** selected non-fiction books and HHHK: 11 &12  
- ALL Bring Non-Fiction Selections  
- Last Day for Booktalks or Read-alouds

May 10:  
Presentations and Wrap-Up  
Course evaluation and feedback/Where do we go from here?  
**Favorites Project Due**
DATA CORPUS

PRP - Personal Reflection Papers (written, collected on 3/8/03, 3/22/03, or 4/5/03)
CRP - Critical Reflection Papers (written, collected on 3/8/03, 3/22/03, or 4/5/03)
RRP - Professional Reflection Papers (written, collected on 3/8/03, 3/22/03, or 4/5/03)
LA - Literacy Autobiography (written, collected 2/8/03)
A - Artifacts (written, collected classes 2-11)
FP - Favorites Project (written, collected 5/10/04)
FN/0 - Fieldnotes/Observation Notes (collected classes 1-12)

LC - Literature Circle Conversations (transcribed audiotaped conversations, 5 groups, on 2/22/03)

ND - Newbery Discussion Conversations (transcribed audiotaped conversations, 5 groups on 3/8/03)

WH - Whole class Conversations (transcribed audiotaped conversations, classes 2,3,5,6,8,9,10,11, &12)
LIST OF REFERENCES


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**CHILDREN’S LITERATURE REFERENCES**


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