

Making Meaning Through Written Response
An Action Research Inquiry

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Purpose and Rationale

Over a leisurely summer lunch with the school year quickly approaching, my colleague and I began asking each other some tough questions about reading. How can we raise test scores without compromising authentic curriculum? How can we get students to thoughtfully respond to literature while analyzing and evaluating? As I recall, the conversation strayed to the quality of the food and the lovely weather that we'd soon be missing, but the original ideas were not forgotten. Early in September, Rosemary Barilla and I began discussing our reading classrooms again in search of some answers.

“The reading of a text is an event occurring at a particular time in a particular environment at a particular moment in the life history of a reader” (Rosenblatt, p.20). As reading teachers, we strive to capitalize on that moment. We decided to combine our efforts as we attempted to improve our reading instruction for the fifth through eighth grade students at Sauganash School. Our inquiry stems from the desire to better understand what students think about while they read and what meaning they create as a result of that interaction.

Through the use of reading journals, it has been our observation that we gain more insight into student thinking and comprehension based on their writing. As reading teachers, we share the common goal that all students should be able to reflect on what they read, make personal connections, and contribute ideas to a discussion. We hope by examining student responses, we can better support developing readers reach that goal.

Currently, we both use reading journals for instruction and assessment. Students respond to literature read in class based upon student and teacher generated questions. In fifth grade, Ms. Barilla uses the reading journals mainly in conjunction with novel studies. In seventh grade, Ms. Dreyfuss uses the reading journal continuously and utilizes it as the primary assessment tool in her classroom.

On a school-wide level, we hope to make the reading journals an integral part of our school's reading instruction and assessment. Contrary to our beliefs, our school endorses the use of the Scott Foresman reading series as the primary teaching tool. Teachers are encouraged to use all components of that series, including weekly selection tests. We have found the multiple-choice format limits our ability to understand students' thinking when assessing their comprehension. Keeping the school-wide goal of raising

reading scores on the state and national standardized tests in mind, we hope to better understand how the use of reading journals can help provide more insight into student comprehension and effectively guide reading instruction to better meet the needs of all our developing readers.

Context

Sauganash Elementary School, located on Chicago's north side, serves a population of 420 students in grades K-8. The student body consists of 63.3% White, non-Hispanic; 17.6% Hispanic; 1.2% Black, non-Hispanic; 17.3% Asian/Pacific Islander. There are more than twenty languages spoken at Sauganash, and an ESL teacher serving 16.4% of the population. Eleven percent of our student population receives special education services. This year the school has moved from a pull-out program to inclusion as the school model for special education.

Our school population has grown quickly, including 70 new students this year. Also, Sauganash is now a No Child Left Behind receiving school with sixteen transfer students from under-performing schools in the district. The student-classroom teacher ratio is 28:1. Our staff consists of fifteen classroom teachers, three special education teachers, a No Child Left Behind support teacher, a physical education teacher, an art teacher, a music teacher, and a bilingual teacher.

Standardized test scores have been on the rise at Sauganash. 2003 IOWA reading scores show 82.3% of students at or above national norms, and 81.8% at or above national norms in math. Sauganash offers a variety of academic and enrichment programs for students outside of the regular school day. Remediation classes for reading and math are held after school, as well as enrichment classes such as Spanish, and Adventure Gym.

Teachers in grades sixth through eighth specialize in the content areas of math, science, language arts, and social studies. Mrs. Dreyfuss teaches the language arts classes. Seventh grade, one of the sample groups, consists of two classes averaging twenty-three students. Student performance on standardized tests and classroom observations indicate a wide range of performance from students reading several grade

levels above or below their peers. Seven special education students are clustered in one homeroom with the intent to support inclusion and differentiated instruction. Two non-English speaking students are also part of that homeroom. The second homeroom is more homogenous with average to high level readers.

Fifth grade consists of two self-contained classes of twenty-six students each. Ms. Barilla teaches all areas of the curriculum for one class, and teaches social studies for both classes. Students in Ms. Barilla's classroom have standardized test scores indicating an average to below average performance in reading. Five special education students are in Ms. Barilla's classroom. These children are pulled out for special instruction in language arts and math. The No Child Left Behind support teacher often takes a small group of students from the classroom for further instruction during one of the language arts periods.

Research Questions

We designed the following questions to implement our inquiry of the use of reading journals:

- How do reading journals guide instruction to improve student learning?
- How do readers with varying abilities respond to literature?

Review of the Literature

Reader-Response Theory

Louise Rosenblatt's transactional theory of reader response asserts the significance of students' actively making meaning when reading a text (1978). The meaning of a text is not contained in the text itself, but rather within the interaction between the content of the text and the individual reader's prior knowledge and personal interpretation. This process is continual and individuals will experience and interpret texts differently. "The reading of a text is an event occurring at a particular time in a particular environment at a particular moment in the life history of the reader" (Rosenblatt, p.20). Rosenblatt also differentiates between the aesthetic and efferent

stance a reader may take, and explains that the reader can be anywhere on this continuum within any one reading event. The reader decides if the goal of the reading will be for the enjoyment and experience of reading a text, or for the purpose of gaining information. The aesthetic stance encourages personal thoughts, real-life connections, and subjective interpretations of a text. "In aesthetic reading, the reader's attention is centered directly on what he is living through during his relationship with that particular text" (p.25). Thus, the use of written personal reflection in reading logs is one way to encourage the aesthetic stance of readers and to provide students with the opportunity for the personal interpretation of a text.

Writing to Learn/The Use of Reading Logs

Reading and writing exist in relation to one another in that one act presupposes the other. Writing used as a tool for reflecting upon what has been read encourages students to actively engage in the construction of meaning (Hancock, 1993; Lackey, 2004; Mulcahy-Ernt & Ryshkewitch, 1994; Pantaleo, 1995; Raphael, Pardo, & Highfield, 2002; Wollman-Bonilla, 1989). "The written response, like the reading process, is a way for readers to work through their understandings and interpretations of texts in personally significant ways where the uniqueness of their responses is accepted" (Pantaleo, p.78). Mulcahy-Ernt and Ryschkewitch maintain that written response to literature allows the reader to accept, reject, and redraft reflective thoughts as well as search for connections to the text. They describe the exploratory nature of journal writing in which "the reader can converse with the text, forming an interpretation that creates a personal meaning of the text" (p.328). Wollman-Bonilla believes the use of expressive language allows readers the opportunity to explore ideas and feelings as meaning develops on paper, while developing a sense of text ownership. Research indicates an increased understanding of literature when using written reflective response, especially when responses are shared within a community (Harris, 1991; Mulcahy-Ernt & Ryshkewitch). Students also develop a metacognitive awareness of how meaning is constructed when they are focused on their own thought processes through written response (Wollman-Bonilla, 1989).

Reading Journals in the Classroom

As teachers search for strategies to create “a community of readers,” many have employed the use of reading journals. From emerging readers in primary classrooms to college students, teachers implement reading journals to “place students at the center of their own learning” (Martin, D’Arcy, and Newton, & Parker, p.67). Teachers have found numerous benefits to experimenting with the reading journal. Wollman-Bonilla (1989), a fourth grade teacher, concluded that journals promoted questioning and communication in her classroom. “One of the most valuable qualities of the reading journal is that it is tailored to each child’s interests, concerns, and needs. Moreover, the journals were a powerful tool in helping me assess and develop students’ reading” (p.118). After implementing reading journals in her middle school classroom, Berger (1996) observed, “We had become a community of readers who knew how to make meaning from the texts we shared” (p.382).

Teachers’ methodology varied with the use of the reading journal. Lackey (2004), a high school teacher, ascertains that “students as critical readers, writers, and thinkers were responsible for creating their own meaning of the text” (p.3). She asked students to respond to the class novel using at least 250 words in their journal each night without any teacher-prompts or guides. Berger allowed students to select their own books, but had a response guide outlining four general questions to choose from. After observation, she felt “adolescent readers need a guide when writing about what they notice, question, feel, and relate to in reader response journals. As a result, they deepen their involvement with and understanding of the literature” (p.380).

Student responses and teacher assessment also varied from classroom to classroom. Hancock divided student responses into three broad categories including personal meaning making, character and plot involvement, and literary criticism (1993). She concludes teacher comments should be “nonjudgmental, encouraging, and thought provoking” (p.471). Berger provided a guide for student response focusing on four central questions: What do you notice? What do you question? What do you feel? What do you relate to? She evaluated journals using a point system focused on content, ideas, and writing quality (1996). In her primary classroom, Dekker found student responses fall into three main categories: retelling, simple evaluation, and elaborated

evaluation. She used student responses as an instructional tool to deepen students' understanding and engagement of the text (1991).

Although the reading journals are utilized in a variety of ways, the general goal of written response as a means to express understanding and interpretation of texts is a common thread. This theme is also evident in policy documents distributed by the Chicago Public School's Office of Literacy. According to the *High Quality Literacy Instruction Handbook* (2004), "Writing facilitates learning by helping students explore, clarify, and think deeply about the ideas and concepts they encounter while reading" (p.27). It also states, "Successful readers monitor their own thinking and make connections between text and their own experiences, other texts, and the world through writing and talking about text before, during, and after reading" (p.19). The use of reading journals is one strategy that provides opportunities for students to communicate and deepen their understanding of text.

The Study

Data was collected from six students in a seventh grade language arts classroom and from six students in a fifth grade self-contained classroom. Students read a novel over a three week period, and responded in their reading journals several times a week. The fifth grade readers read *The Watsons Go to Birmingham- 1963*, while the seventh graders read *A Single Shard, A Long Way From Chicago*, and *Millicent Min*. The teachers responded in their personal journals before, during, and after the course of the novel study. Students completed a questionnaire at the conclusion of the novel study.

Tools

Reading journal samples were collected from six students in each classroom, to provide a representative and workable amount of data. Out of each cluster of six, two readers were grouped as low readers, two as average readers, and two as high readers. Standardized test scores, report card grades, and classroom performance determined the groups. Placing students into these groups also helped to depict an accurate representation of the collective student populations of our classrooms. The decision to classify the readers according to ability level helped define the characteristics of each

group and addressed one of our initial questions regarding the types of responses readers of different abilities have.

Teachers also wrote personal journal reflections throughout the inquiry process. There were no set limits as to topic or number of entries. These written reflections were often used to encourage dialogue between the teachers as the process of the data collection and analysis was underway.

At the conclusion of the novel study, students completed a questionnaire (Appendix A) designed to assess their understanding of the purpose of the journal, their preference for teacher versus student prompts, and their decision making regarding student prompts. All students in both classrooms took the questionnaire, but we include here only the questionnaires completed by the twelve students whose journals we used for our data. Selecting only those twelve questionnaires reiterates the relevance of how these particular students view the purpose of the journals and how they understand the teacher and student directed prompts.

Data and Analysis

Reading Journals

The following table depicts the classification of each student sample according to grade level and reading level. Student names have been altered.

	Low Reader	Average Reader	High Reader
Grade 5	Mary Michael	Wilette Kathleen	Joanne Deanna
Grade 7	John Denise	Bill Daniel	Lisa Renee

The student responses were a mix of teacher directed and student directed prompts. Teacher directed prompts included questions to elicit interpretive and personal connections to events and characters in the story. For example, a teacher prompt for the fifth grade asked:

“Byron does something really mean to an animal at the end of the chapter and then feels badly about it. Why do you think he feels bad, even though he doesn’t at first? Have you ever done something bad and then regretted it later? What is a conscience? (Look it up if you need to or ask someone!) What purpose does a conscience serve? How does one develop a conscience?”

Student directed prompts were self-selected either from interest or from a list of sentence starters (“I think...”, “I predict...”). Sentence starter prompts were included in students’ reading journals (Appendix B); they were able to choose which ones to use and how often they wanted to use them. They were encouraged to use them if they felt stuck or could not think of anything to write about. Teacher guidelines for the content of journals include the use of rubrics to guide student entries, as well as the understanding that students are to avoid summarizing the text. The fifth grade rubric (Appendix C) is the ISAT extended response rubric which encourages students to use a combination of textual and personal support to develop interpretations of the text. Fifth grade students were also encouraged to write at least two paragraphs per entry. The seventh grade rubric (Appendix D) endorses the use of text examples and details to clarify points.

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Response Categories

Once the specific entries from the twelve students were collected, we organized entries into six categories. These categories were developed after we read through each of the entries and defined commonalities among the types of responses we read. The following table depicts the six categories:

Category Name	Category Description
Summary	Retelling of events from the story
Interpretation	Expressing understanding of an event
Personal connection	Relating events and/or characters to one’s life/world
Literary elements	Commentary of story structure (theme, plot, problem-solution, climax, setting, characters) and/or author style (purpose, language)
Opinions	Expression of personal ideas (with textual support, experiential support, or no support)
Questions, wonderings, and predictions	Questions related to the events or seeking clarification of text

We began our analysis by examining our teacher reflections to determine common concerns and themes regarding the use of the reading journals. We then categorized the student responses as mentioned previously. We continued our analysis by examining the three levels of readers present in our classroom. As our inquiry states, we were most interested in finding out how reading journals can give us insight to student comprehension and consequently improve students' learning by guiding teacher instruction. Following this model, we have grouped our readers by level and analyzed the data through the same differentiated teacher lens. The format will highlight the commonalities found in each group according to the student journal entries and student questionnaires.

Teacher Reflections

Over the course of the novel studies, we reflected in our journals. These entries covered many topics, ranging from pedagogy and theory to daily frustrations and challenges. In comparing our journal entries, several common themes emerged.

First, we observed that high level readers naturally draw conclusions, make inferences, and connect what they read to themselves and the world. Perfect! As reading teachers, this is what we would like to see all students consistently do. The question was then clear, "How do we get readers at every level to do those same things?"

Sample #1-Ms. Dreyfuss-January 18, 2005

"After analyzing more data, I wonder how/why high readers naturally interpret and how we can get other readers to do the same? I find many kids don't know what to say or don't have much to say. I guess that's my question. If I provide lower readers with more structure, can they also make those higher-level interpretations and connections?"

Sample #2-Ms. Barilla- January 23, 2005

"My lower readers really struggle with this format (reading journals). They are obviously missing basic comprehension of the text. I'm wondering how I can help them improve?"

Second, we were consistently concerned with the quality of the student entries at all levels. When students were not performing well, we weighed the differences in responses when the prompts were teacher-directed versus student-directed. Again, we wondered how to use the student responses to better guide instruction.

Sample #3-Ms. Barilla-November 23, 2004

“Overall, I was disappointed-several of my ‘top’ readers decided to write 2-3 sentences. My ‘lower’ readers did a much better job of writing full paragraphs, and explaining their ideas and understandings of the text. I read one ‘good’ one and one ‘not so good’ example from the student samples and asked the students to explain what they heard.”

Sample #4-Ms. Dreyfuss-January 6, 2005

“As I continue to assess the reading journals, I realize I needed to model how to use the prompts better. Students continue to summarize chapters or answer their own discussion questions very simply. I also wonder how to improve the quality of the entries. I do notice when given class time (often with a teacher-directed prompt), student entries have improved. I wonder how I can raise the bar for them. How can I better communicate my expectations and support them to be successful? I currently feel disappointed with the general quality and depth of their thinking/writing. I am beginning to think a mixture of teacher-directed and student-directed prompts may be a good start to consistently model higher-level thinking.”

Sample #5-Ms. Barilla-January 17, 2005

“Does the real question become are teacher prompts ‘limiting’ student response? I only raise this issue after reading the student responses, which do cover a broad array of my current coding categories. They get it. Do I create the teacher prompts then for students who tend to need the structure and scaffolding because they aren’t successful with the free response option?”

Sample #6-Ms. Barilla-February 2, 2005

“I’ve been thinking a bit more about the use of the teacher prompt format and the value I perceive behind them. I do like to be sure students are thinking about some of the ‘bigger’ ideas and themes that they might miss otherwise. I do think, and know, most of my ‘low’ and ‘average’ readers don’t yet know how to pull out these ideas, mostly because they are still developing the skills to know how.”

Our reflections centered on students’ use of higher level thinking skills and the quality of student entries. After analyzing our reflections, we then turned to students’ journals. How do students with varying abilities respond to literature?

Low Level Readers

Reading Journals

Low level reader free choice entries were typically short with few details. Ideas and opinions were rarely justified with textual or experiential support. Journal entries lacked structure in that writing was unclear without direction or focus. Readers tended to use the categories of summary and opinion when responding to the text. Michael and Denise’s entries show a response to literature using their opinions, but lack elaboration:

Sample #1-Michael

“I liked the part in chapter 2 when Kenny found a dollar and called Larry Lemmy and said I found a dollar.”

Sample #2-Denise

“I liked that this book, for being so clear, because I’m very able to understand what the book is about.”

Contrary to our expectations and instruction, these students often rely on summarizing as a method of response. The following sample is exemplary of the use of summarizing:

Sample #3: John

“Tree-ear is an orphan because his parents dies because of a fever. There time is in the 12th century. Since Tree-ear parents had dies, Tree-ear lives with Crane-man. They are both nice to each other and they are friends. Both of their hobbies is to make pottery. Tree-ear even knew every potter in the village. All of a sudden, Tree-ear sees master potter Min. He is amazed on what he could do.”

With teacher-directed prompts, students showed some improvement in the quality of their responses. The structure of this teacher prompt encourages student interpretation and personal connections, which these students attempt. These attempts to interpret are not apparent when the students choose what to write about, as illustrated earlier. Entries for the teacher prompt were still very simple, however, and lacked supporting details as evidenced below. Students responded to the following teacher prompt:

On page 24, the text states: ‘Mr. Alums might as well have tied me up to a pole and said ‘Ready, aim, fire!’ What does Kenny mean by this statement? How’s he feeling? How would you react in his situation? Do you have advice for Kenny?’

Sample #4- Mary

“Kenny means that Mr. Alums is mad at him and I would react to this sialotion as a very bad sialotion because it sounds like Mr. Alums is mad at him. I have advice for Kenny and it is just listen to him.”

Sample#5- Michael

“Kenny meant that he’s not interested in reading to his brother’s classmate and his brother. Kenny is nervous because he doesn’t want to read. I would runaway a go home and never come back. My advice for Kenny is tell Mr. Alums that you don’t want to read.”

Questionnaires

Readers’ questionnaires reveal a basic understanding of the purpose of the reading journal. Responses answering the question “What is the purpose of the reading journal?”

included: “For the teacher to know if the student read the book,” “Write about what you think about the book while your reading it,” “Write your opinions,” and “(My teacher) wants our thoughts.” It is apparent this group of students is aware of the purpose of the journals, but after examining their responses to the text, they may not have the skills to accomplish this purpose.

Student responses also indicate a mixture of preference for teacher-directed and student-directed prompts. One student stated, “I prefer the teacher prompts because teachers usually think of good questions and so on. I usually get stumped when I have a free choice.” Students preferring student-directed prompts commented, “I like free choice because I want to talk about the book and some parts I like” and, “I prefer free choice because then I could choose what I want to read and what I’m interested in.” Students responding to the questions “When you have free choice, how do you decide what to write about?” and “What types of topics do you write about?” replied: “Usually something pops into my head while I’m trying to think of something to write about,” “When I have free choice, I usually read the pages and whatever comes up as exciting, I write about it,” and “I decide what I read and what is the chapter about. What they did, where the event happened, and who was there.”

Average Level Readers

Reading Journals

Average readers appeared to create a format in their written responses. For example, Bill’s entries always began with a summary and followed with personal commentary. Daniel’s entries consistently included his opinion on the book and he revisited past predictions to verify his initial predictions were correct. Wilette’s entries followed a question-answer format in that she began with a series of unrelated questions she had created, and then proceeded to answer each one. Even though each journal varied in format, each student kept consistent with his/her format. The following examples show Kathleen’s choice of format, which was to state her opinion and then use a personal connection for support.

Sample #6-Kathleen

“My favorite part in Chapter 1 is when Kenny’s lips was stuck on the cold glass because it was funny, but also embarrassed. It kind of relates to me because when I did a play it felt funny and I was really embarrassed. So you see I know how Kenny felt when his parents and brother laughed at him.”

Sample #7-Kathleen

“My favorite part in Chapter 2 was when they say that there was a kid that could be a king because if I was a queen I could do anything anytime I want, and it kind of relates to me because when I was in Jordan I was a Queen because I just tell my mom to take me anywhere she just takes me.”

Another common feature we discovered with this category of readers is that they regularly used text support to explain ideas. Journal entries reflected some variety when students had free choice. These included summary, opinion, predictions, personal connections, and questions. Students also included more details to support their ideas, making their entries more focused. The following samples are illustrative of this observation:

Sample #8-Wilette

“Why did Kenny see his Wool Pooh out of the water? How do you think Joetta saw Kenny when he really wasn’t there? Why do you think people would throw a bomb in the church? What was the reason Joetta went on the porch of the church?”

Kenny saw his wool pooh out of the water because it’s just his imagination. It’s like his version of the grime reaper (grim reaper). Joetta saw Kenny, but she was really hallucinating. I think two reasons they would throw a bomb in a church is because either racism reasons or jealousy. Joetta went outside on the porch because it was really hot in the church.”

Sample #9-Daniel

“Wow, this book is starting to really touch me inside...NOT! This book is so boring and confusing. Like on p. 204, Maddie keeps saying all these sayings that would be in like “The Karate Kid” movie. For instance, “Millicent before you apologize, make sure you know why you are. I wonder why Maddie keeps saying things like this. My old prediction was right. Emily does hate Millicent.”

In response to the teacher prompt, students in this category showed more use of details to explain their interpretation and understanding of the character's situation. Students responded to the following:

On page 24, the text states: 'Mr. Alums might as well have tied me up to a pole and said 'Ready, aim, fire!' What does Kenny mean by this statement? How's he feeling? How would you react in his situation? Do you have advice for Kenny?'

Sample #10- Kathleen

"I think what Kenny means is that Mr. Alums think that Kenny is really smart. He feels like he is one of the big kids know. If I was in Kenny's place I would just read the book and get over with it. Well I got advice for Kenny and that he could be apsent for a while or read what Mr. Alums told him to do and be done with it."

Sample #11- Wilette

"He doesn't want to be in front of the class. Ecspecially because his brother was in that class. He's scared of what his brother might do to him. I would just cool myself down and read and just don't think of anything but reading. I would say "just because your older than me dosen't mean you get to boss me around."

Questionnaires

Average level readers' questionnaires reveal an understanding of the purpose of the reading journals. Students' explanations of the purpose of reading journals include: "To record what we are reading about and what our thoughts are on the book we are reading," "Having to explain our opinions. Or it could be questions on a story," "Record what we're reading about and what our thoughts are on the books we're reading," and "To express your feelings about the book/story."

This group of readers also stated a mixture of preference for teacher-directed and student-directed prompts. One student commented, "I would like both of them because they are both easy and fun to learn how to write a response." Students preferring student-directed prompts wrote "Sometimes it's hard to think of something to write. Sometimes I don't understand the topic my teacher gives." Students preferring teacher-directed prompts commented "It's hard to think of your own questions," and "I can usually write more about that topic than when I write with a free choice." This group of readers had similar comments to the low level readers when discussing how they select topics for

their student-directed entries. “I decide to write about things that have happened recently or events that will happen,” “Sometimes I’ll write about exciting parts from the book or if I like that chapter or about the reason I like that part or chapter,” and “The types of topics I write about are what is my favorite part, how it relates to me, and I start writing.”

High Level Readers

Reading journals

High level reader entries can be described as having ample literary analysis, a variety of topics, and textual support for their ideas. Their writing is also more expressive, reflecting a stronger engagement with the text. Deanna and Lisa’s writings below reflect the interwoven nature of the use of categories:

Sample#12- Deanna

“In this part of the book, it was a very good part in the book because it was like the book was slowing down and getting away from the commotion. When they first met grandma sands they seemed a little shocked because she was very little. The author has really kept me into the book with all the events. Especially when Kenny was asleep and Joey’s head was on him and drool was coming out of her mouth. I got so mesmerized I felt drool on my leg but really, it was my dog drooling on my leg! Also I liked the part when they first introduce Mr. Robert. He was very kind. The part when he was telling the story was very exciting. I really like how the author was very clear on how the story was told.”

Sample#13- Lisa

“...Some of the pictures the author has left in my mind are of the beautiful pots and the making process for the pots. It seems like I’m there next to Min as he is throwing the pot or as he yells out in frustration at an imperfect one. Over all the book has not improved much yet. I just hope it’s all building up for the climax of the book. Right now I’m getting used to the style of writing the author uses, so the book is tolerable. When you look behind the boring parts of the book it is in fact beautifully written.”

Readers in this group also had entries that exhibited personal connections often reaching beyond the parameters of their own lives. Students were able to make broader generalizations highlighting their knowledge of other texts and the world, as Renee’s work shows:

Sample #14- Renee

“I noticed that when Tree-ear was sneaking around Min’s house that he could have faced some major problems if he had been caught. I wonder what are some of the punishment they would use in Korea for people who are caught sneaking around another person’s property? I think that some Korean laws are kind of strict, so who knows what could have happened to him if Min, the potter, had turned him in to the Korean law enforcers for breaking his pot. I’m surprised that Min let Tree-ear go so easily.”

Regardless of the use of teacher prompts or student directed prompts, these students are able to articulate their ideas while using a variety of the categories identified. Joanne's response to the following teacher prompt exhibits a mix of her interpretation, personal connections and opinions.

Teacher prompt: "Byron does something really mean to an animal at the end of the chapter and then feels bad about it. Why do you think he feels badly, even though he doesn't at first? Have you ever done something bad and then regretted it later? What is a conscience? (Look it up if you need to or ask someone!) What purpose does a conscience serve? How does one develop a conscience?"

Sample #15- Joanne

"Well, what Byron did was cruel and mean, but there should be no difference on how he feels. He is a human being and any human would feel badly. Even a man that went insane. (He probably went insane because he killed the bird. But clearly stated as my answer, yes I think he felt badly about it.

Yes, I have done something and then regretted it later. When I was like five years old, I bit my friends finger it bled. She never forgot about that so, she rates our friendship seven out of ten. The purpose a conscience serves is to try to sort of convince you not to do something stupid. I could have listened to my conscience and not have bitten her finger. You develop a conscience once you have some sense in you, and when you sorted out what's right and what's wrong. Those are the essential things to having a conscience. Of course what I think anyway."

Questionnaires

The questionnaires of the high level readers reveal a clear understanding of the purpose behind the journals: "To journal about what we read so the teacher can see what we think about what we read," "To review a book and understand it better than you did before," and "To get a better understanding of what is going through the student's mind while they are reading." These students express an understanding of the process they are engaging in when they read, and the role of the journal as a place to record their reflections.

Students in this group showed a preference for the student-directed prompts because they found the teacher prompts limiting. Students commented "I can write about anything and not have to worry about answering specific questions," and "You get to talk about any topic in the book. Sometimes in teacher prompts it's hard to write two paragraphs with the questions." When selecting topics for student-directed prompts,

students exhibited confidence in selecting from a variety of topics. Students wrote “I write about all sorts of things like what I read about, how I feel about what I read, what I think is going to happen, and one million other things that go through my mind,” and “You can write about the events that are happening in the book, the characters, anything you want!” This level of confidence in selecting topics is not apparent in the responses of the low and average readers’ questionnaires.

Conclusions and Connections to the Literature

Our generalizations are based on a small sample of twelve students over a short period of time. We were able to examine their work thoroughly, but realize the generalizations made are limited to our study. Future investigations would benefit from a larger data sample over a longer period of time. Our data and analysis lead us to conclude students at all levels are able to actively make meaning as they read a text. This notion is the basis of Rosenblatt’s theoretical explanation of reader response (1978). Students are engaged in a continual process of explaining their understanding through personal interpretations of the text. We are able to see this process taking place with the use of the reading journals in our classrooms. As described by Pantaleo (1995), the written response is one method for students to work through their understandings and interpretations of text.

Students in our classrooms are encouraged to attempt different formats for how they respond to assist in the development of their understanding. These formats are provided through teacher directed or student directed prompts. Student writing is reflective of the variety of their understanding when they select different means of communicating their responses. In our data analysis, responses were placed into the six categories of Summary, Interpretation, Personal Connection, Literary Elements, Opinions, and Questions, Wonderings and Predictions. Similar studies of student reading journals exhibit observations of these types of student responses as well. Dekker (1991), Hancock (1993), Berger (1996), and Lackey (2004) all describe various patterns in the types of responses they received when students used reading journals.

It is significant to note that no matter what type of format students utilize, we recognize some are more indicative of higher level thinking skills than others. For example, the use of summary does not lend itself to a description of student’s thoughts or

feelings regarding the text and is therefore, not a higher level thinking skill. As a result, all types of responses should be used as an instructional tool to help deepen student understanding. Teacher modeling and scaffolding of the various types of responses would be an effective way to deepen student understanding. Student discussion and sharing in literature circles would be another effective way to model the various types of responses. It is also apparent from our data that the degrees to which students are able to effectively describe their understanding in writing vary depending on students' abilities as readers. In general, we noticed specific characteristics to be true of different level readers. As teachers aware of those different traits, we are able to differentiate our instruction to better meet the needs of each type of reader and to improve student understanding at each level. This is possible through our examination of student responses, as well as the use of rubrics and teacher comments in the journals. Hancock (1993) clearly supports this notion of teacher responsibility in her description of the teacher's role in maximizing the use of the reading journals:

Striving to awaken new modes of response within the reader is the responsibility of the teacher in the role of facilitator and response guide. A teacher's first step in enhancing response to literature begins with an assessment of the kinds of responses the student is currently sharing (p. 470).

Wollman-Bonilla (1989) also describes the valuable nature of the reading journal: it "is tailored to each child's interests, concerns, and needs. Moreover, the journals were a powerful tool in helping me assess and develop students' reading because I was learning so much about and from them (as readers)" (p. 118).

The use of reading journals has shown our students are engaging in meaning making and that they have a forum available for developing their knowledge and understanding of literature. Students are able to practice the communication of their ideas through writing, and provide us with the basis for further instruction in developing reading comprehension. Identifying the various types of student responses is only the beginning in our endeavor to understand how we can best facilitate instruction in our classrooms that will meet the needs of our students.

New Questions

Reading journals have a positive impact on student learning and instruction. Students actively engage with the text through written response. We gain insights into student thinking and understanding of the text. The journals help to create a community of readers who are able to discuss and reflect on what they read. The format of the journal lends itself to communication within the classroom.

Our current inquiry has led us to several new questions. We are most interested in examining the role of journal assessment and instructional strategies to support student learning.

- What does our assessment of the reading journals entail? How does this assessment affect instruction? How often does assessment need to take place to be effective? Does the assessment have an impact on student response?
- What instructional strategies facilitate the use of reading journals? How can scaffolding be implemented to encourage higher level thinking? How often should students respond in the journal? How would teacher strategies and student responses change with the use of different genres?

Policy Implications

At the school-wide level, we recommend the consistent use of reading journals across grade levels, which entails extensive professional development to introduce the rationale and purpose of the reading journals, and subsequent information regarding their implementation. Students should be provided opportunities to respond to literature in a variety of ways. Teachers should move away from a whole group instructional model to differentiated smaller group instruction. Teachers currently rely on the Scott Foresman reading series as the provider of whole group instruction – reading journals are one way to differentiate instruction to better meet student needs. With respect to our school improvement plan, we would be able to examine how the reading journals correlate with student achievement on the ISAT extended response. Our current principal has advocated a desire for the staff to focus on the average students in our classrooms, with the intention of moving them up to the higher bracket. The journals are but one tool teachers could use in helping to reach this goal.

At the district level, there are two main implications for the use of the reading journals. As mentioned previously, documents such as the *High Quality Literacy Instruction Handbook* demonstrate a push for the use of written reflection as a means of thinking about literature. This message is also apparent in the district literacy meetings with administration and school literacy leaders. The use of writing is clearly supported by the Chicago Public Schools district, and the use of the reading journals is one way in which teachers can implement meaningful writing into the curriculum. Again, it is important the district provide opportunities for teachers to learn new strategies and to attend professional development opportunities in which they can learn how to develop and implement approaches. The district also advocates teacher use of The GROW Network, a database highlighting student standardized test scores and classification into low, average, and high groupings according to IOWA test scores in reading and math. The network offers specific areas that a particular student is deficient in; however, it doesn't provide a wealth of information in specific strategies to help the student. The other difficulty with the design of the network is that it is a database containing stagnant information; it does not reflect a student's changing needs as he/she progresses through the school year. There is a pressure for administration to be sure faculty is signing on to the GROW Network on a regular basis, although the information that can be utilized is only relative for a specific period of time (such as the beginning of the school year when teachers are establishing knowledge of the student body in their classes). Although the GROW Network has some useful information, we recommend a more meaningful database be generated if teachers are to consult the database on a regular basis.

On a state-wide level, there are clearly written state standards that depict the need for students to demonstrate knowledge of the various genres of writing. According to the language arts standards, writing is one way students can reflect upon literature. Students are expected to write an extended response to reading samples on the ISAT standardized tests, and rubrics are provided assessing the student on his/her ability to provide textual support for interpretations as well as present student generated ideas. Although students in grades three, five, and eight are tested in this particular format, it is imperative teachers of all grade levels help to prepare students for this formal assessment. Therefore, teachers need to be aware of strategies that can be utilized in the classroom to encourage

success in this forum.

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Appendix

(A) Questionnaire

1. What is the purpose of using the reading journal?
2. Do you like/dislike using the reading journal? Please explain with details.
3. Do you prefer teacher prompts or when you have free choice? Why?
4. When you have free choice, how do you decide what to write about?
5. When you have free choice, what types of topics do you write about?

(B) Journal Prompts

I noticed ...

I wonder ... ✓

I predict ...

I think ...



- **Tell about a character you like and why**
 - **If you could give advice to a character, what would you say?**
 - **Describe the setting/Draw your setting**
 - **Give 3 reasons why someone should/should not read this book.**
 - **Tell about something funny, sad, exciting that happened in your book**
 - **Tell something funny one of the characters said. Who did he/she say it to? Why did he/she say it?**
 - **Did you find an interesting word in your book? What does it mean? Tell the sentence it was used in.**
 - **If you wrote a sequel, what would the next book be called?**
 - **Why do you think the author wrote this book?**
 - **What did you talk about in your literature circle today?**
 - **What character most reminds you of yourself? Why?**
 - **What was the most exciting or turning point in your book?**
 - **Pick a character. What do you think his/her bedroom looks like?**
 - **How did the main character change in the story?**
 - **Rate the book 1 - 10 and tell why**
 - **Where would your characters go on vacation?**
 - **How does this book make you feel?**
 - **If you could meet your character, what would you tell/ask him or her?**
 - **If you could meet your character, what would you do with him or her?**
 - **If you could be one of the characters in your book, which one would you choose? Why?**
 - **Did you find any "lovely language" in your book?**
 - **Write an advertisement for your book**
-

(B) Journal Prompts

Author

Why do you think the author wrote the book?
What is the author trying to tell us?
What did the author have to know in order to write the book?
What would you ask the author if he/she were here? Why?
What did the author do to "hook" you on the book?

Characters

Who are the main characters? Describe them. Would you like them as friends? Why or why not?
Do some characters seem more "alive" than others? Which ones? Why?
How do the characters change in the story? What makes or helps them change?
Are any characters like others you have "met" in other books? Which ones? In what ways?

Plot

What happened in the story?
What was the sequence of events?
Were you able to predict the ending? How?/Why not?
Which part was MOST important to the story? How?/Why?
What other ways might the story have ended?
What is the main thing the author is saying?
Is there one big point to the story? What is it? How do you know?

Setting

Where and when does the story take place? How do you know?
Which part of the story best describes the setting? Why? How?
Do you know a place like the one in the book? Where is it? Describe it.
How does the author create the atmosphere for the setting?

Mood

How did you feel while reading the book? Why did you feel that way?
What was your favorite part? Why?
What was your least favorite part? Why?
How did the author make you feel the way you did?
Does the mood of the story change? How? Where in the story? Why there?
Why did the author select this mood?

Style

How does the author keep you interested in the story?
What picture(s) has the author's writing left in your mind? Describe it (them).
What special words does the author use to help you see, smell, taste, or feel things in the story? Keep track of these words or quotes by writing them in your journal.
Is there anything that makes this author's work unique? What?
What kept you reading the book?

- * Did you have questions as you read? What are they? Write them in your journal (or on your bookmark) to use in your discussion group!

(C) Fifth Grade Rubric

Student-Friendly Extended-Response Reading Rubric GRADE 5	
SCORE	CRITERIA
4	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• I explain the important information the author stated and the author meant.• I connect the important ideas to my own ideas or experiences.• I include examples and important details to support my explanation.• I use the author's ideas and my own explanation in a balanced way.
3	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• I explain some of the important information the author stated and the author meant.• I connect some of the important ideas to some of my own ideas or experiences.• I include some examples and important details to support my explanation.• I use the author's ideas and my own ideas, but they may not be balanced.
2	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• I explain only a few of the important pieces of information the author stated and the author meant.• I connect only a few of the important ideas to a few of my own ideas or experiences.• I include only a few examples and important details to support my explanation.• I use mostly the author's ideas or mostly my own ideas (unbalanced).
1	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• I explain little or nothing from the text.• I connect very few or none of the important ideas to my own ideas or experiences.• I include incorrect or unimportant information from the text to support my explanation.• I write too little to show I understand the text.
0	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• I write nothing.• I do not respond to the task.

(D) Seventh Grade Rubric

Sauganash School
Reading Response Journal



Name: _____

Teacher: Ms. Dreyfuss

Date : _____

Title of Work: _____

	Criteria				Points
	1	2	3	4	
Organization	Few entries are labeled and follow in order. Many entries are missing.	Some entries are labeled and follow in order. Some entries are missing.	Most entries are labeled and follow in order.	All entries are labeled (date, author, title) and follow in order.	—
Clarity	Entires are unclear and do not include supporting details.	Entires rarely make the question clear and use few supporting details.	Entires explain most of the question and use some supporting details.	Entires fully explain the question and use many supporting details to make the answer clear.	—
Supports ideas with examples from the text	Entires never include examples from the text.	Entires rarely include examples from the text.	Entires sometimes include examples from the text.	Entires always include specific examples from the text.	—
Higher-level thinking	Students rarely evaluate what was read and do not generate connections.	Students occassionally evaluate what they read and generate insightful connections.	Students consistantly evaluate what they read and generate insightful connections.	Students always evaluate what they read and generate insightful connections.	—
Effort	Few entries reflect a great deal of effort.	Some entries reflect a great deal of effort.	Most entries reflect a great deal of effort.	Every entry reflects a great deal of effort.	—
				Total —>	—

Teacher Comments: