RESPONDING TO BOY READERS A Closer Look at the Role of the Teacher in Dialogue Journals

Donna E. Werderich
Northern Illinois University

In this qualitative study, the author examined the ways middle school literacy teachers responded to their boys' dialogue journals. The participants were 3 middle school literacy teachers and 19 middle school boys. The findings of this study indicated that the teachers took 4 roles (teacher as reader, teacher as responder, teacher as facilitator, and teacher as encourager) when engaging boys in a reciprocal process of dialogue about literature and the act of reading. Example excerpts of the teachers' responses are shared.

The concern for boys' literacy achievement has taken on increased urgency in light of recent reports. National test results suggest that the reading performance of middle school boys has been relatively steady, showing no significant growth, and the overall performance of high school boys has declined (National Center for Education Statistics, 2005). In the area of writing achievement, results from the 2007 National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) report showed modest improvement in writing achievement for most students across racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic lines (Salahu-Din, Persky, & Miller, 2008). However, significant gaps remain between girls and boys. Female eighth-graders outscored their male peers by 20 points in 2007.

Such statistical reports fail to take into consideration other factors that influence boys' literacy abilities. For example, many suggest that variables such as low socioeconomic background, or a particular racial or ethnic group (e.g. Alloway & Gilbert, 1997; Dutro, 2003; Luke, Freebody, & Land, 2000; Tatum, 2006, 2008), affect boys' achievement in literacy. Another key variable in boys' reading performance is their motivation. While many boys do desire to read, others face an "abrasive rub between literacy and masculinity" (Gilbert & Gilbert, 1998, p. 220). Many boys view reading as a feminine activity (Katz & Sokal, 2003;

• **Donna E. Werderich,** Assistant Professor of Language Arts, Northern Illinois University, Department of Literacy Education, DeKalb, IL, 60115. Telephone: 815-753-7639. Email: dwerderi@niu.edu

Middle Grades Research Journal, Volume 5(2), 2010, pp. 91–106 ISSN 1937-0814

Tenebaum & Leaper, 2002). Such views can affect their motivation toward and participation in school-based literacy activities (Brozo, 2002; Coles & Hall, 2001; Probst, 2003). Some researchers have recognized the need to better understand what literacy looks like for boys and call for a broadened understanding of the impact of masculinity on boys' participation in English language arts classrooms (Martino & Kehler, 2007; Young, 2000, Young & Brozo, 2001; Zambo & Brozo, 2009). According to Blair and Sanford (2004), boys morph (adapt and reshape) their literacy practices based on their interests, strengths, and preferences. These transformations may be different from the traditional notions of school literacy. In a more recent study, Sanford and Madill (2007) report on the successful literacy learning of boys with video game play. These researchers attempted to address the complexity of literacy for boys and examined their successes with alternative literacies. In this qualitative study, the researcher set out to contribute to the discussion on boys' literacy by examining the roles middle school literacy teachers play in facilitating boys' literary discussion in dialogue journals, a traditional school-based literacy practice.

The challenges of ensuring boys' success in literacy is, in part, based on a variety of factors, but perhaps most important is the role of the teacher in helping boys connect to reading.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND RELATED LITERATURE

This study was grounded primarily in two bodies of literature: scholarship on reader response theory (Bleich, 1978; Iser, 1978; Langer, 1989; Probst, 1984; Richards, 1929; Rosenblatt, 1938/1995) and scholarship on dialogue journals, a response-based approach to literature instruction (Bloem, 2004; Holmes & Moulton, 1997; Nistler, 1998; Regan, 2003; Wollman-Bonilla, 1989). Literacy teachers at all levels use response-based approaches in their classrooms such as literature circles, books clubs, and dialogue journal writing. In response-based approaches to teaching literature, the teacher's role is to encourage students to share their individual responses to what they have read through guidance and support that focuses on the students' construction of meaning from text (Fountas & Pinnell, 2001; Hancock 2004, 2007). This view of literacy instruction is grounded in reader response theory (Bleich, 1978; Iser, 1978; Langer, 1989; Probst, 1984; Richards, 1929; Rosenblatt, 1938/1995).

Reader Response Theory

Reader response theory takes into account the students' personal responses to a text, allows literature to be relevant to the students' lives, and makes it possible for multiple interpretations to be accepted rather than just one correct interpretation. Hence it is important for the teacher to consider some of the selective factors that may mold the student's response to literature. In continuing the discussion of how a student responds to literature, it is helpful to consider two basic assumptions of reader response theory which formulate a foundation for response-based literature instruction.

Multiple Interpretations of Text are Acceptable. Because meaning is influenced by the significant role of the reader, multiple meanings are to be expected and accepted. The individual reader extracts his or her own, unique meaning from a literary work. The student's reaction to what is read will be in terms of that student's temperament and background, and this reaction will constitute the personal meaning of the work.

Of course, multiple interpretations of a text are possible because students make meaning based on their prior knowledge and experiences (Probst, 2004). Consequently, teachers who want to establish a response-based literature program should encourage students to find personal meaning in literature (Hancock, 2004, 2007).

Making Meaning From Text. The research into to the making of meaning process sug-

gests that the reader is active and central to building understanding from text (Bleich, 1978; Iser, 1978; Langer, 1989). Similar to the ideas proposed by other theorists about the reader's stance (the way in which a reader relates to the text), Langer's (1989) research suggested that the reader moved through four stances: (1) *Being out and stepping in*—during this stance, the reader uses background knowledge to attempt comprehension of the text. (2) *Being in and moving through an envisionment* —here the reader interacts with the text to build more complex understandings. (3) *Stepping back and rethinking what one knows*—during this stance, the reader reconsiders his knowledge, assumptions, and attitudes brought to the reading. (4) *Stepping out and objectifying the experience* —finally, the reader reflects on the reading of the text and the experience of reading it (Werderich, 2006). The role of the reader, therefore, is seen as an integral part of the response process and the construction of meaning. Since the construction of meaning is to be determined by the reader, the role of the teacher is significant in guiding students' understanding of the text. Hence, examining the role of the teacher in dialogue journal writing may provide insight into how to enhance boys' literary experiences.

Use of Dialogue Journals in the Classroom

Many teachers and researchers have reported the outcomes of using dialogue journals with different student populations and for instruction in various content areas (Bloem, 2004; Holmes & Moulton, 1997; Nistler, 1998; Regan, 2003; Werderich, 2002; Wollman-Bonilla, 1989). Because of the social nature involved in dialogue journal writing, studies have concluded that teachers and students can develop an interpersonal relationship (Hall, Crawford & Robinson, 1997; Hanrahan, 1999). In a qualitative multiple case study, Bean and Rigoni (2001) observed the mutual relationship that developed during the dialogue writing between five university graduate students paired with five high school social studies students. The pairs responded to a chapter from a multicultural novel on a weekly basis over a 10-week period. In classifying the participants' responses using constant comparative analysis (Strauss & Corbin, 1998), Bean and Rigoni observed the friendly exchange in dialogue between Vince, a university student and his partner, Jesus. Both respondents frequently wrote comments such as "thank you for sharing," which fell into the personal/intertextual response category. Bean and Rigoni also noted that throughout their conversations, "they really began to sound more like pen pals than people engaged in an academic dialogue" (p. 243). The informality of dialogue appeared to nurture a relationship in which the student could write freely without a strong, authoritative influence from the teacher.

Several research studies have shown that having reluctant and low proficient students write about their reading is a way to foster the depth of reader response. Calkins (1986) observed that students' attitudes and efforts related to journal writing seem to have a direct relationship to the frequency and quality of a teacher's response in the journals. In a similar study, Wolman-Bonilla (1989) investigated the written conversations in a fourth-grade classroom. Wolman-Bonilla reported the value of teacher feedback. Providing supportive feedback helped to improve students' reading strategies and comprehension. In addition, Graves (1989) found that students' growth in written response can be measured through their letter transactions with their teacher.

Role of the Teacher in Dialogue Journals

While much of the research on dialogue journals focuses on the outcomes of students' responses, some research has focused more specifically on the written responses of teachers. Research on dialogue journals indicates that teachers often scaffold students' literary understanding by asking probing questions (Adler, Rougle, Kaiser, & Caughlan, 2003/

2004; Berger, 1996; Langer, 1994; Wollman-Bonilla & Werchadlo, 1995). When guiding readers in creating their own unique response to literature, Hancock (2007) recommends that teachers provide "continuous, encouraging feedback with some suggestive, but not demanding comments" (p. 200).

Werderich (2002) also examined the written responses of the teacher. Correspondence between individual seventh-grade students and the teacher was analyzed. Categories of responses that the teacher used included student interests, personal discoveries, setting challenges, and teaching strategies. Werderich found that all four categories allowed the teacher to personalize reading instruction for her students.

Some studies have noted that teachers assume different roles when responding to their students (Hickman, 1984; Short, Kauffman, Kaser, Kahn, & Crawford, 1999; Lehr & Thompson, 2000; Maloch, 2004; O'Flahavan, 1994; Weih, 2008). Short et al. (1999) examined teacher talk in literature circles. In examining the transcripts of the audio recorded discussions, Short et al. found multiple roles teachers play including facilitator, participant, mediator, and active listener. The teachers moved in and out of the roles throughout the literature circle discussions as the needs of students' emerged. Similar to these findings, Maloch (2004) reports the roles that one teacher took during the implementation of literature discussion groups in a third-grade classroom. While the teacher took up all four roles of facilitator, participant mediator, and active listener (Short et al., 1999), the teacher's participation most often resembled the role of facilitator. However, as students transitioned from teacher-led to student-led discussion, Maloch found that the teacher's role of facilitator diverged to that of a meta-facilitator. In this role, the teacher "focused students on their own conversational processes, giving students a meta-language to think about, talk about, and evaluate their discussion" (p. 320).

Additional research has demonstrated an expanded notion of the roles teachers might take in dialogue journals. For example, in a year-long case study of her fifth-graders' responses in written dialogue journals, Paille (1991) found that she assumed different teacher roles as she responded to her students. She assumed the role of enforcer when she stressed certain requirements of the student's writing. To clarify what a student meant in his or her letter, Paille assumed the role of facilitator. When asking specific questions to encourage an expected or anticipated response from her student, she was in the role of teacher. Her final and most influential role was that of a reader. The different teacher roles emerged showing how she helped her students to respond in journals.

More recently, Bloem (2004) describes her analysis of written correspondence with fifth-grade students. Bloem reports that the reflective teacher takes on three roles: (1) the *connector*, who helps students see what they can do well and what is a struggle for them; the *challenger*, who pushes children up the ladder of development while providing the needed assistance; and the *namer*, who names children as part of the literacy club (p. 61).

Research to date on dialogue journals begins to give insight into the role of the teacher and provides some suggestions for enhancing students' literary discussion. However, most of these publications emphasize the students' written responses without fully considering the responses written by the teachers (Hall, Crawford, & Robinson, 1997). Little is known about what roles teachers play in dialogue journals, and even less in known about how teachers respond to boys' written dialogue journals. The current study examines the roles middle school teachers play in dialogue journal writing to enhance boys' literary understandings and experiences.

DESIGN OF THE STUDY

Participants and Contexts

This purposive sample consisted of three teachers (all names are pseudonyms): Mrs.

Cramer, who taught reading at the seventh-grade level, and Mrs. Lyden and Mr. Driscoll, who both taught reading at the sixth-grade level in the same school. The teachers were selected for the study because they met the following criteria: (a) taught reading at the middle school level, (b) implemented dialogue journals using methods comparable to Atwell's (1998) model, and (c) collected boys' journals for analysis of both teacher and student responses. The teachers in this study had varied levels of training and experience with using dialogue journals at the middle school level. Of the three teachers in this study, Mrs. Cramer had the most experience using dialogue journals. Mrs. Lyden was a veteran teacher who had 19 years of teaching experience and 2 years experience using dialogue journals. Finally, Mr. Driscoll worked 30 years in the field of horticulture before becoming a first-year teacher.

The racial/ethnic makeup of the students enrolled in the teachers' middle schools was predominately White ranging between (75%-87%), followed by Hispanic (7.2%-14.6%). Results on the state assessment of reading indicated that between (22%-32%) of the eighth-grade students at these middle schools were performing below basic. In the area of writing achievement, between (24%-31%) performed below basic.

Implementation of Dialogue Journals

The teachers in this study used dialogue journals as modeled by Atwell (1998) and Fountas and Pinnell (2001) as a means of creating a context for students to chronicle their thinking in response to literature. Each letter, approximately a page in length and written in a composition notebook, was formatted as a friendly letter. Students were expected to use their thinking skills to share and explain their "personal reactions, questions, and interpretations of texts" (Fountas & Pinnell, 2001, p. 165). Additionally, all three teachers in this study identified the importance of students demonstrating their understandings of literary analysis in their dialogue journal letters. Furthermore, the teachers promoted student-choice reading as an important aspect of the dialogue journal approach. The teachers recognized the value of student choice in motivating adolescent readers (Moore, Bean, Birdyshaw, & Rycik, 1999). Finally, the teachers in this study indicated that the dialogue journals provided them the opportunity to get to know their students as individual readers, writers, and thinkers.

In most cases, Mrs. Cramer was the primary responder in her students' dialogue journals. On occasion, however, her students did have the option of writing to a peer. While writing to a peer is motivational, Mrs. Lyden and Mr. Driscoll chose to maintain letter exchange solely between teacher and student.

During classroom observations, the researcher observed the teachers use a variety of visual aids to introduce their students to dialogue journal writing. For example, students were first given a copy of an introductory letter that was attached to the inside of their dialogue journal. The content of the introductory letter explained some of the expectations and procedures for writing journal responses. Students were encouraged to write their reactions and questions in response to their reading rather than a summarization. For example, students were encouraged to respond to the following statements:

1. Tell what you like or dislike about a book and why.
2. Tell about parts of your book that puzzled you or that make you ask questions.
3. Write your predictions and about whether your predictions were right.
4. Write about the author's style and how it makes you feel.
5. Tell about the connections that you made while reading.

Dialogue journals also needed much more than a good launching; they required frequent monitoring and guidance by the teachers who used minilessons during whole-group instruc-

tion and individualized letters to help readers hone skills necessary for effective response writing.

Weekly letter exchange between students and Mrs. Cramer was maintained via crates which were labeled for each of her five reading classes. Mrs. Lyden and Mr. Driscoll divided their students into groups of four to help manage weekly letter exchange. Each group of students was assigned a day of the week (Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, or Thursday) as a due date. When their dialogue journal was due, students placed it on a stackable tray located on top of a shelf. Each tray was labeled for a day of the week. When Mrs. Lyden and Mr. Driscoll finished writing back to the students, they returned the journals to the tray.

Data Sources

Dialogue Journals. Data for the study came primarily from dialogue journal correspondence between the teachers and their respective students that took place during an entire school year. The sample included 19 boys' journals and was determined by the receipt of parental consent and student assent forms. From these 19 journals, 268 letters were analyzed. Dialogue journals were examined to identify the roles of the teachers. The dialogue journal data met Merriam's (1998) criteria for providing descriptive information, advancing new categories, and verifying emerging themes.

Classroom Observations. The researcher conducted a total of six classroom observations during which 14 lessons were observed to total 613 minutes of classroom observation. Although the duration of the visits and the total amount of time spent observing varied between the teachers, the data gathered served the purposes of this study. Through observation in the natural setting of the teachers' classrooms, the researcher gained a more complete picture of their classroom context and a clearer understanding of the teachers' approaches to using dialogue journals.

Field Notes. The observations were written as field notes, included verbal and visual descriptions of the classroom context, direct quotations from the teachers and students, and observer comments. Field notes were also written to record any thoughts, ideas, concerns, or questions during the data analysis process.

Interviews. The data collection process continued with initial and follow-up interviews with all three teachers. A semistructured format was used to conduct initial interviews, while a technique called "stimulated recall" was used during follow-up interviews to gain access to the teachers' thoughts during their journal letter writing and confirm the emerging roles of the teachers (Gass, 2000). Conducting interviews of the teachers would help obtain their perceptions for using student dialogue journals and the processes in which they responded to their students.

Data Analysis

The process of data analysis began during the data collection process, reviewing and examining the classroom observations and initial interviews. Although data analysis was ongoing, the majority of the analysis proceeded in several phases. Data analysis was inductive and used the constant comparative method described by Glaser and Strauss (1967).

First, the researcher began her analysis by using a combination of underlining, circling, and margin notations to code the teachers' interviews. During this process, she focused on the teachers' impressions, reflections, and initial concepts related to dialogue journal correspondence with boys. Each concept was then written on a separate index card, which allowed the researcher to collapse like concepts into categories. Many of the initial concepts later developed into categories or formed properties of a category. Some examples of the concepts included (1) shares personal reading experiences, (2) models thinking, (3) offers

recommendations (4) asks questions, and (5) models reading strategies.

After initial coding of the teachers' interviews, the researcher examined the boys' dialogue journals using color-coded tabs to identify specific segments of the teachers' responses. A constant comparative approach was used during this process to identify, compare, and sort teachers' responses according to similarities or differences. After the researcher analyzed and coded data, she recorded any thoughts, ideas, concerns, or questions she had in a notebook labeled "code notes." Written memos were recorded throughout the data analysis process to help the researcher depict the relationships among and within concepts and forced her "to move from working with data to conceptualizing" (Strauss & Corbin, 1998, p. 218). Finally, the data became suitably grouped under one of the four teacher response categories until theoretical saturation occurred in which the teachers' responses became repetitive and no additional data was being found to establish new categories or properties of the categories (Glaser & Strauss, 1967).

Data that led to the formation of the categories were primarily captured from the boys' dialogue journals. However, reading and rereading the teachers' interviews, classroom observations, and field notes were also used to corroborate findings.

FINDINGS

The findings of this study indicated that the teachers assumed different roles when engaging boys in a reciprocal process of dialogue about literature and the act of reading. This section explains the four roles that emerged: (a) teacher as reader, (b) teacher as responder, (c) teacher as facilitator, and (d) teacher as encourager. The complexities of these roles are explained using as much as possible the words and the experiences of the teachers.

Teacher as Reader

The reader role involved teachers responding using their own reading experiences to cultivate boys' literary conversations within dialogue journals. As Hickman (1984) states, "The teacher acts as the classroom's number-one model reader, showing in attitudes, habits, and actions what it is like to find enjoyment and meaning in books" (p. 282). The dialogue journals provided a vehicle for teachers in this study to be model readers. When considering boys' journals, the teachers carefully approached their letter writing, reacting genuinely and authentically as an adult reader (Booth, 2002). To accomplish this requires the teacher to model quality responses, reading processes, and most importantly, the pure pleasures of reading.

In many journal entries, the teachers revealed aspects of their own life that related to experiences of being adult readers. As seen in the following examples, Mrs. Cramer and Mrs. Lyden shared their personal reading experiences with boys in their dialogue journal responses. All students' names are pseudonyms.

> The *Outsiders* [Hinton, 1967] has always been one of my favorites too. I read it in middle school, I think in eighth grade. I guess my favorite character is Johnny. I like how he puts his own life in jeopardy to save Pony from being killed by the Socs. I wish Johnny would have been saved. However, the message wouldn't have been quite the same. I think it surprises most readers because we expect a happy ending. Have you seen the movie? (Mrs. Cramer)

> When I get confused in reading, I try to reread the part that is confusing a few times. That sometimes helps. Also, after you read a bit more, it may become more clear. (Mrs. Cramer)

> I enjoy mysteries too! As a matter of fact, there was one time when all I read were mysteries for a year or two! Now-a-days I can't seem to get into them as quickly, but I still like them. The book I'm reading is a mystery

called *Rebecca's Tale* (Beauman, 2001). So far, Rebecca has been dead for twenty years, but no one is convinced that her drowning was an accident. Yet they can't prove it was a murder. So this "old ex-detective type" man is going to try to solve it. We'll see! (Mrs. Lyden)

It's nice to know you are doing so much different kinds of reading at home! I read different things, too. Sometimes I don't want to read my novel at night so I'll read the newspaper or magazine. (Mrs. Lyden)

One function of the teacher's responses was to encourage readers to make personal connections, empathize with characters, and visualize scenes and events to demonstrate being actively involved in reading. For example, Mr. Driscoll often provided his personal reactions to reading:

This sounds like another heartbreak for Brian. I'm with you on this one. If this had happened to me, I don't know how I could have found the strength to go on. I wonder how this book is going to end.

I know exactly which part you are talking about in the book and I felt the same way you did when I read it. At first I thought maybe the commandant was going to take care of the boy because he felt sorry for him. But then I realized that he was sending him to the gas chamber to "be with his mother" and I got really angry.

In the following correspondence with Dan, Mrs. Lyden shared her experience with re-reading the ending of a book to gain better understanding of the text.

Dear Mrs. Lyden,

I have finished the book *The Hobbit*, but in my rush I have read it but not understood it, so I am going to read the last little bit again and hope to understand it this time. I was wondering if you have ever done what I have and read a book but not understood it.

Write back soon,
Daniel

Dear Dan,

Yes, as a matter of fact, I did with my last book, *The Blind Assassin*. I wanted to finish so badly, that I didn't get the end. So, I had to re-read it! So much for rushing, right?

Enjoy,
Mrs. Lyden

Through the role of reader, teachers served as models for the boys—demonstrating how an "older, person, with more experience of the world and of books, reacts to the work" (Probst, 2004, p. 92). In so doing, boys might feel more comfortable and willing to develop their ideas, thoughts, questions, and concerns as adolescent readers (Bean & Rigoni, 2001; Hall et al., 1997; Jewell & Pratt, 1999).

Another type of teacher as reader response involved teachers recommending books to boys. These responses were written to encourage boys to become lifelong readers. This was a strong driving force underlying the entire premise of dialogue journals. As Mrs. Cramer explained, "I just want to get them [boys] to read because a lot of them don't." This expectation, in turn, resulted in teachers playing an important role in expanding boys' experiences with literature. To expand boys' reading experiences so that they come to enjoy reading, teachers often recommended topics, authors, and genres for boys to explore. For example, after discovering a boy's interest in boxing, Mrs. Cramer wrote:

I would recommend *Ali* [Myers, 2001]. The book is about Muhammad Ali's boxing career. I have a copy of it if you are interested.

In a similar manner, Mrs. Lyden offered a recommendation to one of her boys:

I didn't know you were interested in science. The book *World Almanac for Kids 2001* (Israel, 2000) might be interesting for you to read. Tell me about the most fascinating facts you learn. Keep reading!

The ability to offer such recommendations depended on the teacher's knowledge of young adolescent literature. Although Mrs. Cramer continued to expand her reading repertoire, she openly expressed in her interview that there were limits to her knowledge and experience with reading young adult literature. Mrs. Cramer's reading preferences, for example, rarely included science fiction or informational texts—two genres that predominately interest adolescent boys (Booth, 2002; Brozo, 2002). Mrs. Cramer identified one such situation:

> I've got one student, he just reads computer books and I have a really hard time responding to him … I have a hard time brining any of my experience into the letters because he is reading things that I don't know much about.

Mrs. Lyden also experienced struggling moments like Mrs. Cramer did when recommending books to her sixth-grade boys. To overcome this problem, Mrs. Lyden made a conscious effort to bring novels into her classroom that she classified as "girl kind," "boy kind," and "ones that you know anyone may choose."

Mr. Driscoll on the other hand acknowledged that he was able to relate to the boys because of having similar interests. Mr. Driscoll explained,

> If their book was about Derek Jeter, a pitcher for the New York Yankees that a couple of them [boys] passed around and liked it a lot, they could write to me about this baseball guy and maybe I could write back because I'm a man who would understand.

While Mr. Driscoll often related to boys in a manner that involved common interests, no empirical evidence has supported the claim that male teachers have a more positive influence on learning outcomes for boys (Carrington, Tymms, & Merrell, 2005; Lahelma, 2000; Lingard, Martino, Mills, & Bahr, 2002).

Teacher as Responder

The responder role involved teachers interacting with boys as another learner. In the role of reader, the teachers assumed more responsibility and authority by demonstrating their knowledge and experiences, but in the role of responder, the teachers joined the discussion as a learner, giving the boys the opportunity to become the more knowledgeable participant.

Boys were encouraged to demonstrate their knowledge and experiences as readers. For example, many boys engaged in a discussion about a topic of interest to them such as sports. Although these types of discussions presented a challenge for Mrs. Lyden and Mrs. Cramer, they followed what Booth (2002) recommends in his book, *Even Hockey Players Can Read: Boys, Literacy and Learning*. Booth suggests that when responding in journals, teachers should "have an authentic conversation even if you haven't read the student's book by valuing his responses and acknowledging his thoughts and feelings" (p. 52). The following are examples of Mrs. Lyden and Mrs. Cramer's authentic responses to their sixth- and seventh-grade boys:

> Wow! I really enjoyed reading this letter! I've learned a few things I never knew about football. (Mrs. Lyden)

> I only wish I liked golf. The fact is I don't. Sorry, so I don't play. But I do enjoy learning about it through your letters. (Mrs. Lyden)

> You've written a great letter. I haven't read *Losers, Inc.* (Mills, 1998) or the sequel. I have heard many students recommend them both. Does the main character remind you of anyone you know? Can you relate to him on any level? Keep reading and write again soon! (Mrs. Cramer)

> Your first letter is well done. I am unfamiliar with the topic of your book; however, it sounds very interesting. What is the title and who is the author? I like how you compared the two types of climbing. Keep reading! (Mrs. Cramer)

As is clear above, Mrs. Lyden and Mrs. Cramer accepted that boys may have different reading interests and experiences than from theirs. When such was the case when responding to boys, the teachers valued their responses. They acknowledged the boys' reading choices, asked authentic questions, and most importantly, encouraged their continued reading and responding. In doing so, the teachers gave the boys opportunities to engage in discussion about topics meaningful to them.

Teacher as Facilitator

Within the context of dialogue journals, another role of the teacher was to facilitate the discussion of literature. The following section illustrates the variety of teacher's responses used to facilitate a continuing exchange in literary conversation with boys. One function of the teacher's responses was to make sure that the boys were meeting the expectations of the dialogue journal. For example, the following responses focused on improving boys' writing and reading development:

Dear Mrs. Lyden,

I am getting to an interesting part Athos just got arrested the guards arrested him because they thought he was someone else.

From,
Joe

* * *

Dear Joe,

I'm sorry, but you really haven't given me much to think about. Reread the letter I glued to your inside journal cover. Are you making any connections? Predictions? Why was Athos arrested? Who did they think he was? Please write more details about Athos.

Sincerely,
Mrs. Lyden

* * *

Dear Mrs. Lyden,

I am reading *The Dark Tower* by Stephen King. It is about a gunslinger and he is trying to find and shoot a man in black. It is a good book but I don't like some of the writing because some of the words are hard to understand. Some of the words are hard to read but otherwise this book makes reading fun. Give me about two or three more weeks and I should be done.

From,
Jacob

* * *

Dear Jacob,

I like hearing that a book makes reading fun!!! Now, about those "hard words." I want you to write a few in your journal, and this way I can help you figure them out. Also, when you have time look some up in the dictionary. You'll be expanding your own vocabulary while understanding the plot more.

If it helps any, keep a pocket dictionary around while you read.

Sincerely,
Mrs. Lyden

P.S. Who is this man in black? Describe.

Another type of facilitator response involved teachers asking specific questions to encourage boys to write more than summarizations of their readings. By asking specific questions related to the novel, Mr. Driscoll modeled the type of thinking and responding that he was expecting from Peter:

Dear Mr. Driscoll,

Bryan finds a bear learking around and startes panicking but the bear didn't come by him so he left it alone. If I were him, I would have a hart attack.

Sincerely,
Peter

* * *

> Dear Peter,
>
> This is a start, Peter, but I'll need a lot more than this from you. You're too good of a thinker to go back to just two sentences in your letter to me. Yes, you've made a good connection to your own life here. I think I would react just the same way you would. But you could certainly tell me more about this book and Bryan's experiences. What do you think is going through his head? Is he scared? Does he think that he will survive this awful experience? Is it an awful experience? What kind of conflict is he going through in this book? What is the setting and plot? These are just a few questions that go through my mind as I read your letter to me. You should have all of these and much more. Go for the goodness now, Peter.
>
> Sincerely,
> Mr. Driscoll

Through the role of facilitator, teachers wrote responses to push the boys' discussion further. In this role, teachers frequently asked questions to help boys elaborate or extend their ideas. Probing students' thinking by asking questions can aid in improving a reader's capacity to evoke meaning from text (Jewell & Pratt, 1999).

Teacher as Encourager

The encourager role involved teachers providing encouraging responses. When boys shared their thoughts, ideas, and questions as readers, the teachers provided encouraging responses. The responses shown in the following examples were used by the teachers to "reaffirm" and "bolster" (Fenwick, 2001, p. 38) boys' strengths as a readers and writers:

> I really enjoy our book discussions. (Mrs. Cramer)
>
> Wow! What great thinking you have done! You have written well about what confuses you and how you figured things out! Good for you. You have some fine questions, too! (Mrs. Lyden)
>
> Great connection, man. Now you're starting to write the types of things that are going to turn you into a great writer. (Mr. Driscoll)
>
> This seems to be a really good book for you man. It's all about baseball and that seems to be something that you know a good deal about. You've made another great connection in this letter to me. (Mr. Driscoll)

Even when boys were far from writing a quality response, teachers continued to provide encouraging responses. Mr. Driscoll commented on this approach, stating:

> I always try to encourage the [boys], even when they didn't give me what I was looking for. I tried to find something positive in it.

Indeed, no matter how small accomplishments are, they should be honored and celebrated (Zambo & Brozo, 2009).

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

The purpose of this research study was to examine the roles of middle school literacy teachers within boys' dialogue journals. Though gleaned from only a small sample size, the data showed that these three middle school literacy teachers assumed various roles. This finding is consistent with previous research that examines the role of teacher within literature circles, book clubs, and discussion groups (Lehr & Thompson, 2000; Maloch, 2004; O'Flahavan, 1994; Short et al. 1999). For instance, Short et al. (1999) and Maloch (2004) observed that teachers took the role of facilitator in literature discussion groups. As the facilitator in dialogue journals, the teachers in this study asked questions to invite boys into the discussion, and to evoke their meaning from text (Jewell & Pratt, 1999; Short et al., 1999; Wollman-Bonilla & Werchadlo, 1995). Furthermore, the teachers perceived their role as a facilitator (Close, 1992; Paille, 1991; Short et al., 1999) who continually determined what responses best meet the needs of their boys and the expectations of the dialogue jour-

nal. For example, since the boys enjoyed reading informational texts, the teachers generated specific questions to facilitate boys' responses to this genre.

An additional observation was that the teachers in this study formulated their perceptions of the teacher as reader and teacher as responder roles using gendered lenses. For example, as females, Mrs. Leyden and Mrs. Cramer believed that they were at a slight disadvantage when responding to their boys. Both teachers indicated that responding to boys was challenging, to some degree, because of differences in interests and experiences, while Mr. Driscoll believed that he might be more inclined to relate to boys because of being a male. While much focus is on how teachers perceive boys as readers (Martino & Kehler, 2007), it is also important to consider how teachers think of themselves as readers, and how these perceptions may affect their literacy practices with boys (Blair & Sanford, 2004). Furthermore, changing such attitudes held by literacy teachers might be necessary if we want to encourage boys to read and write more, and promote the image of reading as a masculine, as well as feminine, act (Taylor, 2004/2005).

In examining the ways in which middle school literacy teachers respond to their boys' dialogue journals, the researcher noticed that the teachers were likely to respond by modeling and demonstrating reading behaviors; asking questions to guide boys' understanding; and providing continuous encouraging feedback (Hancock, 2007). A variety of responses can help develop boys as lifelong readers who engage in inquiry as they encounter texts (Fountas & Pinnell, 2001). Moreover, assuming the role of responder and modeling authentic literary experiences may be most important if boys are to become independent readers, writers, and thinkers (Booth, 2002).

A final observation relates to how middle school literacy teachers tried to foster boys' engagement with literature and lifelong reading. Through one-on-one written correspondence, the teachers in this study learned about individual boys' hobbies and interests, which provided "important clues to finding reading material to match" (Brozo, 2006, p. 72). As such, the teachers used dialogue journals as entry points to connect boys with books (Brozo, 2002; Zambo & Brozo, 2009). The teachers' efforts in this study are consistent with the call to match boys' interests with books as described by Probst (2003). Probst wrote, "If we want boys to read carefully and analyze conscientiously, then the works they study have to matter to them" (p. 16). This may be the most important purpose of the dialogue journal. In light of this finding, the effect of dialogue journals on boys' literacy practices may warrant more in-depth examination.

LIMITATIONS

As with most research, there are limitations in, as well as unanswered questions, resulting from, this small sample size. Because this study only involved three middle school literacy teachers, the findings may not be fully representative of the middle school teaching population at large. Many teachers may use journals with their students, but in different forms, using different methods, and in different contexts. The results accomplished the intended purpose of the study: to examine the roles teachers play in facilitating boys' literacy discussion in dialogue journals. Furthermore, the study does not explain whether the teacher's responses influenced boys' responses to their reading. Future investigations of the use of dialogue journals may result in a fuller analysis of the impact of dialogue journals on boys' reading and writing.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR INSTRUCTION

While dialogue journals are not a gender-specific instructional approach, the research reported here offers some instructional recommendations for literacy teachers who want to make discussion about books more appealing to boys.

First, and perhaps most importantly, it is recommended that teachers use dialogue journals as entry points to connect boys with books (Brozo, 2002; Zambo & Brozo, 2009). If we want boys to find reading at school more interesting, then teachers should try to provide boys access to materials that appeal to them. When given a choice, boys have reported that they prefer to read comic books, magazines, adventure and science fiction novels, and horror stories (Worthy, Moorman, & Turneer, 1999). Martino (2001) also reported that boys indicate enjoying humorous and weird stories. Still, it is well documented that teachers and librarians are more likely to select and use texts that may be less appealing to boys (Brozo, 2002; Duke, 2000; McGowan, 2008). The teachers in the present study attempted to offer books that appealed to girls, boys, and "ones that you know anyone may choose" (Mrs. Lyden). As Zambo and Brozo (2009) recommend, teachers should dedicate particular shelves or a separate crate for reading material related to the interests of boys. It is also recommended that middle school literacy teachers introduce good books to boys through book talks (Atwell, 2007; Trelease, 2006; Zambo & Brozo. 2009). By doing so, middle school literacy teachers can demonstrate that they "care about what matters to boys and show boys that they can read about their interests" (Zambo & Brozo, 2009, p. 111).

In order for teachers to gain and hold the interests of boys, middle school literacy teachers should make sure that they understand their boys. To accomplish this goal will require that teachers change their views of teaching young adolescent boys to help eliminate any bias that they have toward developing boys' literacy (Blair & Sanford, 2004; Taylor, 2004). For example, Mrs. Leyden and Mrs. Cramer viewed their identities and experiences as readers to be very different from those of their boys. Although such attitudes may have influenced how they talked to their boys, they did notice and acknowledged when a boy had a genuine passion for a topic such as football, golf, or climbing (Brozo, 2006). The roles of teacher as reader and teacher as responder in dialogue journals highlights how teachers can connect to boys in ways that are sensitive to their individual interests and passions. These insights helped the teachers acknowledge and extend boys' reading choices, and encouraged boys' continued reading and responding (Smith & Wilhelm, 2002).

Finally, when using dialogue journals, teachers might consider extending the conversation beyond the teacher to include their friends. Newkirk (2002) suggests that boys are more likely to read material that can be transported into conversations with their friends. The roles of reader, responder, facilitator, and encourager can provide demonstrations within dialogue journals of what boys might say when responding to other boys. In this way, the role of teacher in dialogue journals is a temporary one, so that boys can transition into a new literacy community such as a boys' book club. Many contend that "boys only" book clubs is a promising method of improving the motivation, engagement, and literacy development of boys (Taylor, 2004; Weih, 2008; Zambo & Brozo, 2009).

Once established, teachers may use dialogue journals to help boys find "entry points to literacy" (Brozo, 2002). As teachers, we need to work to make in-school literacy practices meaningful and authentic for the boys in our classrooms.

REFERENCES

Adler, M., Rougle, E., Kaiser, E., & Caughlan, S. (2003/2004). Closing the gap between concept and practice: Toward a more dialogic discussion in the language arts classroom. *Journal of Adolescent& Adult Literacy*, *47*(4), 312-322.

Alloway, N., & Gilbert, P. (1997). Boys and literacy: Lessons from Australia. *Gender and Education, 9*(1), 49-58.

Atwell, N. (1998). *In the middle: New understandings about writing, reading and learning*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.

Atwell, N. (2007). *The reading zone*. New York, NY: Scholastic.

Bean, T. W., & Rigoni, N. (2001). Exploring the intergenerational dialogue journals discussion of a multicultural young adult novel. *Reading Research Quarterly, 36*(3), 232-247.

Beauman, S. (2001). *Rebecca's Tale*. New York, NY: William Morrow.

Berger, L. R. (1996). Reader response journals: You make the meaning and how. *Journal of Adolescent and Adult Literacy, 39*(5), 380-385.

Blair, H. A., & Sanford, K. (2004). Morphing literacy: Boys reshaping their school-based literacy practices. *Language Arts, 81*(6), 452-460.

Bleich, D. (1978). *Subjective criticism.* Baltimore, MA: John Hopkins University Press.

Bloem, P. L. (2004). Correspondence journals: Talk that matters. *The Reading Teacher, 58*(1), 54-62.

Booth, D. (2002). *Even hockey players read: Boys, literacy, and learning*. Markham, Ontario, Canada: Pembroke.

Brozo, W. G. (2002). *To be a boy, to be a reader: Engaging teen and preteen boys in active literacy*. Newark, DE: International Reading Association.

Brozo. W. G. (2006). Bridges to literacy for boys. *Educational Leadership, 64*(1), 71- 74.

Calkins, L. M. (1986). *The art of teaching writing.* Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.

Carrington, B., Tymms, P., & Merrell, C. (2005). Role models, school improvement and the 'gender gap' *British Educational Research Journal, 34*(3), 315-327.

Close, E. E. (1992). Literature discussion: A classroom environment for thinking and sharing. *English Journal, 81*(5), 65-71.

Coles, M., & Hall, C. (2001). Boys, books and breaking boundaries: Developing literacy in and out of school. In W. Martino & B. Meyenn (Eds.), *What about the boys? Issues of masculinity in schools* (pp. 211–221). Buckingham, United Kingdom: Open University Press.

Duke, N. K. (2000). 3.6 minutes per day: The scarcity of informational texts in first grade. *Reading Research Quarterly, 35*(2), 202-224.

Dutro, E. (2003). "Us boys like to read football and boy stuff": Reading masculinities, performing boyhood. *Journal of Literacy Research*, *34*(4), 465-500.

Fenwick, T. J. (2001). Responding to journals in a learning process. *New Direction for Adult Learning and Continuing Education, 90*, 37-47.

Fountas, I. C., & Pinnell, G. S. (2001). *Guiding readers and writers: Grades 3-6*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.

Gass, S. M. (2000). *Stimulated recall methodology in second language research.* Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum.

Gilbert, R., & Gilbert, P. (1998). *Masculinity goes to school*. London, England: Routledge.

Glaser, B. G., & Strauss, A. L. (1967). *The discovery of grounded theory: Strategies for qualitative research*. New York, NY: Aldine de Gruyter.

Graves, D. H. (1989). Research currents: When children respond to fiction. *Language Arts, 66*(7), 776-783.

Hall, N., Crawford, L., & Robinson, L. (1997). Writing back: The teacher as respondent in interactive writing. *Language Arts*, *74*(1), 18-25.

Hancock, M. R. (2004). *A celebration of literature and response: Children, books, and teachers in K─8 classrooms* (2nd ed.). Upper Saddle River, NJ: Merrill/Prentice Hall.

Hancock, M. R. (2007). *Language arts: Extending the possibilities*. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Merrill/Prentice Hall.

Hanrahan, M. (1999). Rethinking science literacy: Enhancing communication and participation in school science through affirmational dialogue journal writing. *Journal of Research in Science Teaching*, *36*(6), 699-717.

Hickman, J. (1984). Research currents: Research in children's response to literature. *Language Arts, 61*(3), 278-284.

Hinton, S. E. (1967). *The outsiders*. New York: Viking.

Holmes, V., & Moulton, M.R. (1997). Dialogue journals as an ESL learning strategy. *Journal of Adolescent and Adult Literacy, 40*(8), 616-621.

Iser, W. (1978). *The act of reading*: *A theory of aesthetic response*. Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press.

Israel, E. (2000). *World almanac for kids 2001*. New York, NY: World Almanac Books.

Ivey, G., & Broaddus, K. (2002). "Just plain reading": A survey of what makes students want to read in middle school classrooms. *Reading Research Quarterly, 36*, 350 -377.

Jewell, T. A., & Pratt, D. (1999). Literature discussion in the primary grades: Children's thoughtful discourse about books and what teachers can do to make it happen. *The Reading Teacher, 52*, 842-849.

Katz, H., & Sokal, L. (2003). Masculine' literacy: One size does not fit all. *Reading Manitoba, 24(*1), 4-8.

Lahelma, E. (2000). Lack of male teachers: A problem for students or teachers? *Pedagogy, Culture, and Society, 8*(2), 173-186.

Langer, J. (1989). Thinking and doing literature: An eight-year study. *English Journal, 87*(2), 16-23.

Langer, J. (1994). Focus on research: A response-based approach to reading literature. *Language Arts, 71*(3), 203-211.

Lehr, S., & Thompson, D. L. (2000). The dynamic nature of response: Children reading and responding to *Maniac Magee* and *The Friendship*. *The Reading Teacher*, *53*(6), 480-493.

Lingard, B., Martino, W., Mills, M., & Bahr, M. (2002). *Addressing the educational needs of boys.* Canberra, Australia: Departmental of Education, Science and Training. Retrieved from http://www.dest.gov.au/sectors/school_education/publications_resources/profiles/addressing_educational_needs_of_boys.htm#authors

Luke, A., Freebody, P., & Land, R. (2000). *Literate futures: Review of literacy education*. Brisbane, Queensland, Australia: Education Queensland.

Maloch, B. (2004). Scaffolding student talk: One teacher's role in literature discussion groups. *Reading Research and Instruction, 42*, 1-29.

Martino, W. (2001). Boys and reading: Investigating the impact of masculinities on boys' reading preferences and involvement in literacy. *The Australian Journal of Language and Literacy, 24*(1), 61-74.

Martino, W., & Kehler, M. (2007). Gender-based literacy reform: A question of challenging or recuperating gender binaries. *Canadian Journal of Education, 30*(2), 406-431.

McGowan, M. (2008, March 10). Children's literature conference focuses on what boys like to read, books for boys. Retrieved from http://www.niu.edu/northerntoday/2008/march10/litconf.shtml

Merriam, S. B. (1998). *Qualitative research and case study applications in education*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

Mills, C. (1998). *Loser, Inc.* New York, NYHyperion Press.

Moore, D. W., Bean, T. W., Birdyshaw, D., & Rycik, J. A. (1999). *Adolescent literacy: A position statement for the commission on adolescent literacy of the International Reading Association.* Newark, DE: International Reading Association.

Myers, W. D. (2001). *The greatest Muhammad Ali.* New York, NY: Scholastic Press.

National Center for Educational Statistics. (2005). *The nation's report card: Reading 2005*. Washington, DC: Author.

Newkirk, T. (2002). *Misreading masculinity: Boys, literacy, and popular culture*. New York, NY: Heinemann.

Nistler, R. J. (1998). Preservice teachers, sixth graders and instructors use dialogue journals to extend their classroom communities. *Reading Horizons*, *38*(3), 203-216.

O'Flahavan, J.F. (1994). Teacher role options in peer discussions about literature. *The Reading Teacher*, *48*(4), 354-356.

Paille, E. W. (1991). Interaction in reader response: A one-year study of fifth graders' literature groups and dialogue journals. (Doctoral dissertation, University of Georgia, 1991). *Dissertation Abstracts International,* 52, z1037.

Probst, R. E. (1984). *Adolescent literature: Response and analysis.* Columbus, OH: Charles E. Merrill.

Probst, R. E. (2003). All those texts…. *Voices from the Middle*, *10*(3), 13-17.

Probst, R.E. (2004). *Response and analysis: Teaching literature in junior and senior high school* (2nd ed.). Portsmouth, NH: Boynton-Cook.

Regan, K. S. (2003). Using dialogue journals in the classroom: Forming relationships with students with emotional disturbance. *Teaching Exceptional Children, 36*(2), 36-41.

Richards, I. A. (1929). *Practical criticism: A study in literary judgment.* New York, NY: Harcourt, Brace, & World.

Rosenblatt, L. M. (1938/1995). *Literature as exploration.* New York, NY: Modern Language Association.

Salahu-Din, D., Persky, H., & Miller, J. (2008). *The Nation's Report Card: Writing 2007* (NCES 2008-468). Washington, DC: National Center for Education Statistics, Institute of Education Sciences, U.S. Department of Education.

Sanford, K., & Madill, L. (2007). Understanding the power of new literacies through video game play and design. *Canadian Journal of Education, 30*(2), 432-455.

Short, K., Kauffman, G., Kaser, G., Kahn, L., & Crawford, K. M. (1999). Teacher-watching: Examining teacher talk in literature circles. *Language Arts*, *76*(5), 377-385.

Smith, M., & Wilhelm, J. (2002). *"Reading don't fix no Chevys": Literacy in the lives of young men*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.

Strauss, A., & Corbin, J. (1998). *Basics of qualitative research: Techniques and procedures for developing grounded theory* (2 nd. Ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.

Taylor, D. L. (2004/2005). "Not just boring stories": Reconsidering the gender gap for boys. *Journal of Adolescent and Adult Literacy*, *48*(4), 290-298.

Tatum, A.W. (2006). Engaging African American males in reading. *Educational Leadership, 63*(5), 44-49.

Tatum, A. W. (2008). Toward a more anatomically complete model of literacy instruction. *Harvard Educational Review, 78*(1), 155-180.

Tenenbaum, H. R., & Leaper, C. (2002). Are parents' gender schemas related to their children's gender-related cognitions? *Developmental Psychology, 38*(4), 615- 630.

Trelease, J. (2006). *The read-aloud handbook* (6th ed.). New York, NY: Penguin.

Weih, T. G. (2008). A book club shed light on boys and reading. *Middle School Journal, 40*(1), 19-25.

Werderich, D.E. (2002). Individualized responses: Using journal letters as a vehicle for differentiated reading instruction. *Journal of Adolescent and Adult Literacy, 45*(8), 746-754.

Werderich, D. E. (2006). The teacher's response process in dialogue journals. *Reading Horizons, 47*(1), 47-73.

Wollman-Bonilla, J. E. (1989). Reading journals: Invitations literature. *Reading Teacher, 43*(2), 112-120.

Wollman-Bonilla, J. E., & Werchadlo, B. (1995). Literature response journals in first-grade classroom. *Language Arts, 72*, 562-570.

Worthy, J., Moorman, M., & Turner, M. (1999). What Johnny likes to read is hard to find at school. *Reading Research Quarterly, 34*(1), 12-27.

Young, J. (2000). Boy talk: Critical literacy and masculinities. *Reading Research Quarterly, 35*(3), 312-337.

Young, J. P., & Brozo, W. G. (2001). Boys will be boys, or will they? Literacy and masculinity. *Reading Research Quarterly, 36*(3), 316-535.

Zambo, D., & Brozo, W.G. (2009). *Bright beginnings for boys: Engaging young boys in active literacy*. Newark, DE: International Reading Association.