McGinley, W. Kamberelis, G., Mahoney, T. Madigan, D., Rybicki, V., & Oliver, J. (1997). Re-Visioning Reading and Teaching Literature Through the Lens of Narrative Theory. In T. Rogers & A. Soter (Eds.), *Reading Across Cultures: Teaching Literature in a Diverse Society.* New York: Teachers College Press. (Ch. 2: pp. 42-68).

CHAPTER 2

Re-Visioning Reading and Teaching Literature Through the Lens of Narrative Theory

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AFTER READING *Song of the Trees* (M. Taylor, 1975), 10-year-old Joseph reconsidered the hardships associated with being separated from one's family and the experience of growing up apart from one's father or other family members. Specifically, in reading about the struggles that the characters Cassie, Stacey, Little Man, and Christopher-John experienced while their father was away from home searching for work, Joseph was reminded of the time when his own father left home. His comments further reveal the joy he shared with these children upon learning of their father's surprising return:

> These people, Casey, Stacey, Christopher-John, Little Man, momma, and pappa, their pappa has been away for many years. . . .'Cause he was looking to find a job and it took him that long. He had to work for some white men. . . . When I heard that, I wondered how could they miss their father that long. Christopher-John and the others didn't even know their father. . . . My first dad had been away, but see, he never came back. And I just liked it because it was about the whole family and the family meeting, like um, how the children met their father [in the end] and how the ma met, saw their father, saw their father again.

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Similarly, after 8-year-old Jamar had finished reading *I Have a Dream: The Story of Martin* (Davidson, 1991) and *Encyclopedia Brown Gets His Man* (Sobol, 1982), he reflected on the meanings he associated with these books that allowed him to envision the possible selves and future responsibilities he might assume as a member of the African American community in which he lived:

> They [these books] make me think that I want to, that I could help the community or go up in space or be an actor or have all three. I have three choices to choose from [when I grow up], helping the community, going up in space, or being an actor. . . . See, if I think about my life, I only think about being an actor, but if I read Encyclopedia Brown or a book about Martin Luther King or Abraham Lincoln, it helps me to think about different things instead of being an actor.

When Joseph and Jamar read these and other stories, they were students participating in two different language arts classrooms in different regions of the country. As part of their participation in these unique programs, they were provided with opportunities to read, write, and talk about themselves, their family and peers, and their communities and cultures. Through a variety of instructional activities that encouraged them and other children to reflect on their own lives and experiences in response to their reading, they were introduced to the idea that stories can be a means of personal and social exploration and reflection—an imaginative vehicle for questioning, shaping, responding, and participating in the world. As Joseph, Jamar, and the many other children who were members of these two classrooms shared their thoughts and feelings about the stories they read, they brought to light a wealth of ways in which reading and responding to literature led not only to an understanding of the conceptual content of the stories but also to a process of reflection that helped them to understand themselves, others, and the world in which they lived.

Taken together, the written and spoken words of the children with whom we have worked over the past few years echo recent themes in the theoretical realms of narrative theory (e.g., Bruner, 1986) and transactional theory (e.g., Rosenblatt (1978, 1983). Collectively, these themes have spawned a renewed interest in the life-informing and life-transforming possibilities afforded by story reading that have only recently begun to be examined by researchers in literacy and literature.

In focusing on this dimension of children's reading, we draw upon data collected during several related ethnographic studies in the class-

rooms of Joseph and Jamar. Across these studies, we explored some of the ways that reading and writing functioned in children's lives as sources of personal, social, or political understanding and exploration. In addition, we sought to understand children's literacy as a function of the particular communities of practice in which they were socialized and enculturated to value reading and writing (McGinley & Kamberelis, 1992a; McGinley & Kamberelis, 1992b; McGinley & Kamberelis, 1996; McGinley, Mahoney, & Kamberelis, 1995). In this chapter, we draw upon this work in arguing that without a better understanding of the specific ways that stories may function as a means of organizing and interpreting experience, we stand to miss significant dimensions of students' development as readers, as well as an understanding of the possibilities that such reading might offer both children and adolescents who are also coming to know themselves, their family and peers, and the society in which they live. In addition, although conceiving of stories as a unique source of knowledge about self and world is certainly not a new proposition, a more complete understanding of the life-informing dimension of reading literature is essential if we are genuinely to evaluate, revitalize, and refine our understanding of the purpose for reading and teaching literature in school.

In the first part of the chapter, we review many of the constructs from the theoretical domains of narrative theory and transactional theory as they serve to outline the interdisciplinary framework and rationale with which we began our studies of the nature and meaning of children's story reading. Second, we present brief portraits of the classrooms of two teachers who sought to provide children with opportunities to reflect upon both literature and life. Third, we offer the written and spoken words of several children from these classrooms, communities, and cultures, as they provide insight into some of the ways that stories functioned as an imaginative resource for exploring, understanding, and re-creating themselves and their world. Finally, we conclude by discussing the implications of such findings for literacy pedagogy and for reconsidering the role and function of story reading in school and in students' lives.

PERSPECTIVES ON THE FUNCTIONS OF STORIES

The potential of narrative to function as a way of understanding one's own and others' experience has received renewed attention from scholars in both the humanities and the social sciences in recent years (e.g., Booth, 1988; Bruner, 1986, 1987; Carr, 1986; Martin, 1983; McAdams, 1993; Narayan, 1991; Ricoeur, 1984; Rosen, 1986; White, 1987; Witherell & Noddings, 1991). In general, these theorists have argued that because narratives are organized around the dimension of time in lived experience, they allow us to interpret our pasts, envision our futures, and understand the lives of others with whom we interact.

Participating in Storied Worlds

The importance of story or narrative in understanding both self and world has been given careful treatment by Bruner (1986, 1990). According to Bruner, the narrative models and procedures for interpreting and organizing experience are embodied in the written and told stories that a culture provides. Drawing on the work of Greimas and Courtes (1976), Bruner (1986) argues that the imaginative use of the narrative form in literature engages readers in the exploration of human possibilities by situating them simultaneously in a "dual landscape" of both action and consciousness. Stories, he explains, locate readers in a particular pattern or "grammar" of events, situations, and goals while also revealing the subjective worlds of characters who are involved in such events. In this way, stories provide "map[s] of possible roles and possible worlds in which action, thought, and self determination are permissible or desirable" (p. 66). In order to achieve such an effect, stories rely upon particular discourse properties that invite readers to enter into the fictional landscape and participate in the lives of protagonists. As Iser (1978) notes in *The Act of Reading*, the meanings of fictional texts are largely open-ended or "indeterminate." This "relative indeterminacy of text" provides readers with the incentive to develop or construct "a spectrum of actualizations" or formulations about themselves and the social world (p. 61). In sum, the discourse of a story invites a certain ambiguity of meaning and events that induces readers to participate in the production of meaning.

In building upon this idea of indeterminate meaning, Bruner (1986) emphasizes the notion of "subjunctivity" to explain the process through which readers enter a fictional landscape and experience or participate in the life and mind of story characters. Stories derive their power to render reality subjunctive or hypothetical through the depiction of the subjective consciousness of protagonists and the consequential alternativeness of the worlds they inhabit. Through the triggering of subjectification and the presentation of multiple perspectives, narrative discourse succeeds in "subjunctivizing reality" by "rendering the world of the story into the consciousness of its protagonists" (p. 28). As readers, we do not see the world through "an omniscient eye" but through "the filter of the consciousness of protagonists in the story" (p. 25) In this subjunctive state, we know only the realities and experiences of the story characters

themselves and we are induced to identify with the plights in which they find themselves. Ultimately the "fictional landscape" achieves a reality of its own as readers construct and "act" in self-made story worlds. This power, Bruner (1986) insists, is at least partially dependent upon the subjunctive force or quality of a given narrative. The plights of characters must be rendered with "sufficient subjunctivity" so that their storied lives and experiences can be "rewritten" through the readers' own "play of imagination" (p. 35).

Moral and Ethical Functions of Stories

In relation to these points, several theorists have focused attention on life-informing and life-transforming possibilities that such a "play of imagination" might afford. For example, some scholars have foregrounded the ethical value of reading literature and the influence that stories may have on the development of an individuals' character or self. Coles (1989), for example, developed the idea that stories achieve their particular force through characters and events that engage readers in a psychological or moral journey. Such a journey or "personal expedition" allows readers to explore life's contingencies and dilemmas through the "moral imagination" of an author and, in so doing, enables them to "take matters of choice and commitment more seriously than they might otherwise have done" (p. 90).

According to Coles, the act of listening, reading, or responding to the stories of others can have important consequences for the ways in which we think about our own lives. The indirections and vicissitudes that inhabit a story and the lives of its characters become our own. A story's energy and emotion solicits our own involvement in the thoughts, feelings, desires, and fears of its characters. As Coles (1989) further explains:

> The whole point of stories is not "solutions" or "resolutions" but a broadening and even a heightening of our struggles—with new protagonists and antagonists introduced, with new sources of concern or apprehension, or hope, as one's mental life accommodates itself into a series of arrivals: guests who have a way of staying, but not necessarily staying put. (p. 129)

According to Booth (1988), the ethical and moral influence that stories exert on our lives and the development of our individual character is simply inescapable. In his exploration of the "efferent effect" or "carry-over" from our narrative reading to daily life and behavior, Booth explains that "anyone who conducts honest introspection knows that 'real life' is lived in images derived in part from stories" of themselves and

others both real and fictional (p. 228). So spontaneous and unrehearsed is this narrative process that individuals often "cannot draw a clear line between what [they] *are*, in some conception of a 'natural,' unstoried self, and what [they] have become" as a result of the stories they have enjoyed, experienced, and appropriated over the course of their lives (p. 229).

Similar to Booth, other theorists have argued that individuals' understanding of both self and society is a function of the repertoire of stories that they have read, heard, and inherited throughout their lives (Bruner, 1990; MacIntyre, 1981; McAdams, 1993; Stone, 1988). As MacIntyre (1981) explains, these stories constitute the "dramatic resources" that individuals use in constructing their own moralities and evaluating the moral and ethical sensibilities of others in their world. Depriving children of stories of social traditions and moral life, he writes, "leave[s] them unscripted, anxious stutterers in their actions as in their words" (p. 201).

The personal, social, and moral functions of stories (or literature more broadly conceived) have also been a central focus among reader-response theorists (e.g., Beach, 1990; Hynds, 1990; Iser, 1978; Rosenblatt, 1978, 1983). According to these scholars, the literary experience can function both as a source of personal, social, and political exploration that provides readers with a means to interpret human experience and as a vehicle through which readers broaden their cultural understanding and sensibility. In her now classic work, *Literature as Exploration* (1983), Louise Rosenblatt argued that literature represents "an embodiment of human personalities, human situations, human conflicts and achievements" (p. vii). Through stories, Rosenblatt explains, we "do not so much acquire additional information as we acquire additional experience" (p. 38).

Similarly, Iser (1978) emphasized literature's power to reveal a "new reality" to readers—one that is different from the world they have come to know, such that the "deficiencies inherent in prevalent norms and in his own restricted behavior" are disclosed (p. xiii). More recently, Straw and Bogdan (1990) argued that the act of literary reading should be understood as "part of the lifelong experience of coming to know . . . part of a person's repertoire of experience to be remembered, reflected upon, and recomprehended" over the course of his or her life (p. 5).

In spite of these theoretical accounts of the processes through which narrative discourse succeeds in rendering reality subjunctive, as well as accounts of the moral, ethical, or political force that stories are believed to exert on our lives, several important questions remain concerning the kinds of insight into one's self and one's world that narrative experiences actually call forth. Though it may indeed seem from recent theoretical perspectives on narrative that children's story reading would be associated with particular life-informing possibilities, these theories are still

largely without empirical foundation. In relation to this point, we might ask what the nature is of the understanding about themselves and the social world that young readers acquire as a result of their transactions with the stories they read and discuss in school. How do young readers emerge from the feelings and possibilities portrayed through the storied lives and experiences of the characters they encounter in books? In addition, according to a recent comprehensive study across a number of different schools (Applebee, 1993), knowledge of such theories is seldom reflected in current classroom approaches to the teaching and learning of literature. As a result, we know little about kinds of classroom practices and experiences that might engage students in reading both literature and life. These discontinuities among theory, research, and practice formed the basis for our initial interest and subsequent exploration into the nature and function of students' story-reading experiences in school.

STORIES OF READING IN TWO ELEMENTARY SCHOOL CLASSROOMS

Over the past several years, we have spent numerous hours on school playgrounds, on the floors of classrooms, in hallways, and in libraries, listening to children talk about a wide variety of books and stories. In sharing excerpts from students' written and spoken responses to literature, we hope to illustrate some of the ways in which stories provide them with a uniquely powerful means through which they might explore and reflect upon experience. In documenting the meaning that children in these classrooms evoked in relation to the literature they read, we relied upon our analyses of small- and whole-class literature discussions, children's literature journals and response notebooks, the in-depth interviews we conducted with children about their reading, and our field notes of classroom literature-related activities.

The Teachers and Their Classrooms

Vicki. Vicki was an experienced third- and fourth-grade teacher in a neighborhood elementary school in northwest Detroit. She had been living and teaching in the city for approximately 20 years. Throughout those years, she had devoted a considerable amount of her time and energy to trying to improve the community in which she and her students lived and attended school. In addition, she often provided children with rides to and from school; she took them to cultural and recreational events; she developed personal relationships with some of the children's parents; and

she became involved with interest groups and activities in the local community. In the classroom, Vicki searched for ways to validate children's personal interests and experiences while also negotiating the numerous school district imperatives to improve children's standardized reading and writing scores. Although she made a special effort to prepare children for such tests, she also wanted students to view their own lives and experiences as important subjects about which they might read, write, and talk.

Motivated by her desire to provide her students with literate experiences that would involve reading and writing both text and life, Vicki searched for literacy activities that "would celebrate the children's voices"—voices that she believed teachers needed to listen to and encourage. Grounded in her "ethic of care" and based on her child- and community-centered educational philosophy, classroom activities were structured to provide children with reading and writing experiences that would be sensitive to their personal, emotional, and communal needs.

Three key events helped to initiate and anchor literacy instruction in Vicki's classroom. At the beginning of the year, Vicki arranged for the children to get to know one another by inviting each child to tell a story about him- or herself. In order to encourage the children and initiate the storytelling, she first asked them to think about what they do when they want to "become friends with someone." In response to this question, children offered a variety of ideas from "talking to them" to "sharing some things" to "asking their name." Vicki then suggested that we could also "tell a story about ourselves." The children then arranged their desks in a circle, and everyone shared some experience or details about themselves or their family.

Second, children were invited to plan and videotape a tour of the neighborhood where they lived and attended school. During the tour, children offered extensive commentary about a variety of local landmarks and related experiences that had particular meaning for them (e.g., churches, homes of relatives and friends, favorite restaurants, neighborhood stores, parks, abandoned homes, and local hangouts). This commentary included historical information about featured landmarks, as well as information about the personal, communal, and political significance of these sites.

Finally, Vicki involved the children in drawing and constructing a number of colorful signs or posters about the particular street where their own home was located. These signs were to be different from those commonly found in most neighborhoods. In constructing these "signs of community life," as she referred to them, children were encouraged to reflect upon and share those aspects of their community that they wished to

celebrate, as well as those they wished to change. After sharing their ideas, the children were presented with the following question: "If we could place a sign in our neighborhood, what would it say?" Vicki then explained that the yellow-papered bulletin board in the back of the room would be like "house lights" illuminating their street signs and pictures. In a few days, these "signs of community life" were displayed across the bulletin board, revealing many of the children's hopes, interests, and concerns as they pertained to their lives and their community. The following examples were representative of the many messages and accompanying drawings that children constructed: "Please Don't Take Down The Basketball Rims," "Be Kind to One Another," "Stay in School," "Let's Clean Up Our Neighborhood," "Please Please Be Smart Don't Be a Drug Addict," "Don't Speed Down the Streets Watch For Children," "Keep Community Clean," and "Street of Peace."

Children in Vicki's classroom were also engaged in reading a variety of fictional and nonfictional texts.[1] In general, children's reading took three different forms: shared reading of stories from the classroom basal series, self-selected reading of school library books, and stories that Vicki elected to read aloud over the course of the year. In addition, as children's interest in reading developed, Vicki continued to supply them with books that represented the range of genres and topics in which they had expressed interest. On most days, children began by reading silently from a teacher-selected basal story or from self-selected books. In conjunction with this reading, they were encouraged to "reflect" or "write a sentence" in their reading-response journals about events or characters in the story that reminded them of experiences in their own lives. Each day after reading, several children were invited to share entries from their reading-response journals, and the other children in the class were invited to discuss these entries in small- and whole-group meetings. In both their written responses and in class discussions, Vicki encouraged children to reflect on and share their feelings in relation to particular texts by posing specific kinds of questions (e.g., "Reflect on what you read"; "How did the story make you feel?"; "What did the story make you think?"; "Did the story help you to imagine being a certain kind of person?"; "Did the story help you to imagine doing certain kinds of things?"). She also encouraged them to explore the reasons why an author might have written a particular piece (e.g., "Why do you think this author wrote this story?"; "What did the author want us to think, know, or do?"; "Is the author trying to change our minds about anything?").

Vicki's discussion of *To Hell With Dying* (Walker, 1988) was emblematic of many of the literature discussions in which the children took part. The story is about a loving relationship between a young child (Alice Walker) and her aging friend (Mr. Sweet). Vicki began by asking the children to share their ideas about why the author might have written such a book. As the discussion developed, Vicki helped the children to identify the qualities and traits of the characters they admired and sought to emulate in this book as well as in other books. In this discussion, as in subsequent conversations about a variety of fictional and nonfictional texts, the children were frequently invited to "read" the experiences of such real and imaginary characters as Alice and Mr. Sweet, Rosa Parks, Harriet Tubman, Malcolm X, Sojourner Truth, Martin Luther King, Maniac Magee, Lulu and Sandy, Encyclopedia Brown, Romona Quimby, and Nate the Great as "dramatic resources" for reflecting upon important experiences and issues central to their own lives and the lives of their friends, families, and members of their immediate community.

Jeff. Jeff was a fourth- and fifth-grade teacher in Boulder who, like Vicki, was concerned with finding ways to help his students bring literature to life. We first met Jeff in 1992. He had been living and teaching elementary school in Colorado for approximately 20 years. In the classroom, Jeff devoted a considerable amount of time to fostering children's interest in reading by providing them with opportunities to understand and experience some of the ways that literature might function in their lives as a vehicle for examining and understanding experience. In particular, children in his classroom were often involved in wide-ranging, literacy-related activities designed to make literature and literacy a meaningful part of their lives both in and out of school. Among the many activities in which children participated, the following are examples of experiences that occurred regularly in Jeff's classroom: storybook read-aloud and personal story sharing in the group center, outdoor nature walks involving poetry reading and writing, storybook writing and reading projects with older adults in the community, student-organized story-reading clubs, student dramatizations of selected storybooks, composing original storybooks, in-class publication of student writing, independent reading, and visits from local writers, poets, musicians, and visual artists.

Although all children participated in these literacy activities over the course of the schoolyear, we became most interested in the story "read-aloud" time that took place in "the group center"—a small carpeted area separated from the rest of the room by a sofa, some chairs, and a bookshelf. On most mornings, children gathered on the floor of the group center to listen to Jeff read aloud from a children's storybook book or a young adult novel. These stories or novels were usually selected by Jeff and often related to particular themes or issues that he believed the children would enjoy discussing.[2] Once children were seated comfortably in

a circle near their friends, story-reading time officially began with the ritual lighting of "the dreamer's candle" followed by the whole-class recitation of the poem "Invitation," by the well-known children's author Shel Silverstein (1974). The poem reads as follows:

> If you are a dreamer come in,
> If you are a dreamer, a wisher, a liar,
> If you're a hope-er, a pray-er, a magic bean buyer . . .
> If you're a pretender, come sit by my fire
> For we have some flax-golden tales to spin.
> Come in!
> Come in!

In conjunction with the stories he read and shared, Jeff often encouraged children to respond or react to such stories in particular ways. Similar to Vicki, Jeff's oral story-reading practices were frequently accompanied by invitations to the children to "read" or revisit their own lives and experiences through the lives and experiences of the characters they encountered in books. These invitations usually took the form of questions and often asked children to (1) tell a personal story related to particular story events, (2) share a related personal experience, (3) participate in the consciousness or subjective worlds of story characters, or (4) envision or celebrate a possible self or possible world in relation to a given story. Although Jeff frequently concluded each read-aloud session by asking children if they had "any comments, reactions, or responses," he often used these moments to model a way of reading and responding to literature that involved sharing a personal story or experience from one's own life. Consequently, after Jeff had narrated and shared an experience from his own life, children responded to his story by sharing a personal experience of their own or by responding to one of the specific questions that Jeff sometimes asked. Some of the most frequently asked questions included: "Does the story remind you of anything in your life?"; "Did anything like that ever happen to you?"; "Do you know anyone like that character?"; "What do you think that character is feeling or thinking about right now?"; "What would you do if you were in that character's situation?"; "What do you think the character will do next?"; "How is that character the same or different from you?"

Jeff's discussion of the novel *Everywhere* (Brooks, 1990) was emblematic of many of the literature discussions that took place in the group center each day. The story describes the experiences of a 10-year-old boy and his grandfather, who suffered a life-threatening heart attack. Together with his friend Dooley, the boy dreams of bringing his grandfather "back to life" by performing a "soul switch"—a magical process through which the soul of a dying person is exchanged with the soul of a particular animal with whom the person "got their soul mixed up . . . way back when the world was made" (p. 26). After sneaking a closer look at the grandfather's face, Dooley decides that a turtle would be the most appropriate animal for the switch. The first day's reading concluded with both boys searching for a suitable turtle at the foot of small creek in the woods filled with the wonderfully rich smells of "sap and waterlife" that often inhabit such places. As the grandson openly laments and regrets his decision never to have shown his grandfather this special place, Dooley turns to him and describes the way such places often get "captured" by those who visit them: "When a man gets to a certain spot and it strikes his fancy, he takes it on into his soul, see. It become his. And all the critters in that spot become his right along too" (p. 23).

Jeff initiated a discussion on this first day by asking a question ("Does that remind you of anything?") and then sharing the following memory or personal experience about the woods near his home in Virginia:

> I'll tell you what it reminded me of was, the place. The way he described the place reminded me of being in the woods in Virginia when I was probably about the age of the kids in the book. And seeing turtles and there was a little creek down there. But I liked the way he said, "you can take a place into your soul" because that's kind of how it feels to me even though, like now, when I go back, there are houses built on it, all in there and stuff. But I still feel like I carry around the place. I think that's what he meant by that. I don't know. Anyone else?

In response to Jeff's story and question, nearly every child shared a personal experience or told a story about a special place he or she had visited, often drawing connections to "that place" in the story. In addition, several of these children shared memories of their relationships with older adults (e.g., grandparents). In these accounts, they frequently reflected upon the importance of particular individuals in their lives, expressing personal regrets about missed opportunities for spending more time with older members of their family or immediate community. On this day, story reading was a imaginative vehicle through which students revealed themselves to one another as they shared and reconsidered the nature of their relationships with family members and friends.

On still another occasion, Jeff read *The Mountain That Loved a Bird* (McLerran, 1985), the story of a mountain made of "bare stone" that "stood alone in the middle of a desert plain." Each year a singing bird

visits the mountain "carrying in her beak a small seed" that she tucks "into a crack in the hard stone." As years pass, plants begin to grow and eventually the mountain is no longer bare and alone. At the conclusion of the story, Jeff directed children's attention to the mountains they could see from the windows of their classroom. As the children looked out the window he asked, "What might the mountain be thinking?" At this point, children were invited to go outside to think and write in their "writer's notebooks." The invitation to write from the perspective of the mountain—to "experience" the "mountain's thoughts"—was just one of the more common approaches that Jeff used in helping children to understand the possibilities for re-creating and revisioning their world that were offered them by the stories.

Throughout the remainder of the school year, Jeff continued to question children and engage them in similar activities designed to help them draw upon the stories they read as a way to revisit and "experience" a number of important personal, social, and political issues. In reading the book *Teammates* (Golenbock, 1990), a story of the interracial friendship that developed between baseball players Jackie Robinson and Pee Wee Reese, students explored and discussed racism as it was "experienced" through the character of Jackie Robinson. In addition, they reflected on moments in their own lives during which they felt persecuted or oppressed.

The Children's Responses to Their Reading

The majority of students in Vicki's classroom were African American third- and fourth-grade children representing a wide range of academic abilities. The elementary school they attended drew its students from the surrounding neighborhood, a community largely comprised of African American families. The neighborhood in which the children lived and attended school was home to many of the social and economic problems that have become all too commonplace in large urban areas across the United States. Over the course of the year, the children in Vicki's class wrote and talked about many of these problems in response to the literature they read. Although such topics frequently captured students' attention and concern, story-related discussions also focused on the aspects of students' personal and community lives that they sought to remember, embrace, or affirm. Not surprisingly, conversations about family reunions and church gatherings, interesting or unique family members, African American leaders, vacations and family picnics, birthdays and holidays, personal goals and aspirations, and a variety of growing-up memories

and experiences were equally popular topics of literature-related discussions.

The fourth- and fifth-grade students in Jeff's classroom were from predominately white, middle-class families. Similar to Vicki's classroom, these children represented a wide range of academic abilities and interests. The neighborhood in which the children attended school was adjacent to a major university campus. In general, although children in the surrounding community had little firsthand experience with many of the kinds of social and economic problems that children in Vicki's classroom experienced on a daily basis, many of their comments and reactions reflected a growing awareness of the problems and complexities associated with growing up in contemporary American society. More specifically, written responses and conversations throughout the year often touched on such problems and issues as poverty and homelessness, racial prejudice, ageism, environmental and conservation issues, health care, religious beliefs, and national and international conflicts as they were experienced at home, at school, in the immediate community, and on the pages of the local newspaper. In addition to these topics, story-related discussions in Jeff's classroom frequently focused on social relationships with family and friends, personal dreams and aspirations, favorite animals and pets, and a wide variety of memorable growing-up experiences associated with birthdays, vacations, holidays, and everyday events in children's lives.

Although the focus of children's writing and discussion about literature in both of these classrooms often differed in specific ways, our interactions and conversations with students over the course of the schoolyear provided insight into some of the humanizing and life-informing possibilities that children in each classroom had come to associate with the experience of reading and discussing stories. In presenting some of these possibilities, we draw upon children's written products, as well as the informal interviews we conducted with them. Our purpose here is not to provide an extensive account of the many ways that reading may function for children (for a more detailed discussion of this topic, see McGinley & Kamberelis, 1996). Rather, we intend to highlight some of the more salient ways that children in both classrooms seemed to use reading to explore and understand various aspects of their life and world.

In general, children's reading seemed to function in personal and social ways. Among the many personal meanings that story reading evoked in children, several emerged as the most salient. Specifically, children's reading often served as a means to envision and explore possible selves, roles, and responsibilities through the lives of story characters, both real and fictional; to describe or remember personal experiences or interests

in their lives; and to objectify and reflect upon certain problematic emotions and circumstances as they related to important moral and ethical dilemmas in their lives. Reading also functioned in more social ways, providing children with a means to understand, affirm, or negotiate social relationships among peers, family members, and community members, as well as to raise and develop their awareness of significant social issues and social problems.

Exploring or Envisioning Possible Selves. Children's narrative reading provided them with opportunities to envision possible selves and celebrate particular role models—to adopt and imaginatively explore a variety of new roles, responsibilities, and identities derived from both real and fictional story characters. For example, after reading several books about well-known African American women, Mary wrote the following in her reading-response journal, indicating how the experiences of these women enabled her to reflect upon possible selves and possible roles for herself:

> Leontyne Price is a famous young lady. I read about her and sometimes I think I want to be like her. I read about lots of Black Americans like Duke Ellington, Barbara Jordon, and I forgot Phillis Wheatly. Some of these Blacks are dead already and I wish people would be alive. . . . Harriet Tubman Helped every one when it was slave wartime. I feel like I help people when I think about her.

Another classmate, Tanya, wrote about the biography of Diana Ross in her reading-response journal, emphasizing the qualities of independence and self-respect that she admired in the singer. She began her journal entry by copying a passage from the biography that described the family circumstances and living conditions of Diana Ross's childhood. Then she paraphrased another portion of the biography that juxtaposed Diana Ross's view of her home with that of the mainstream world. Finally, Tanya provided her own commentary on the singer's character:

> "After Diana [was born] came three boys and another girl. They all lived in a small apartment on the third floor of an old apartment house in the northern part of Detroit, Michigan. All the children slept together in one bedroom." I can see that being hard to sleep. The outsiders of Diana's neighborhood called it a ghetto, but Diana called it home. I really think Diana stood up for herself very well.

Remembering and Revisiting Personal Experiences. Children in both classrooms also used reading as a vehicle through which to remember, savor, and reflect upon personal experiences and interests or important people they had met or once known. For example, in an excerpt from her reading-response journal about *Bridge to Terabithia* (Paterson, 1977), Mari, a Japanese American student, wrote about the particular memories of friendship that the text brought to mind:

> When I was in 1st or 2nd grade I had a very close friend her name was Alice. I don't quite know what made he so speical, mabe it was because she was asian and I always felt a little more comfortable around asians. I might have liked asians because they seemed like part of my family.

Similarly, after reading *To Hell with Dying* (Walker, 1989), Gail revisited and reflected upon her relationship with her great-aunt Esther and her grandfather. In particular, she used the occasion to validate and reaffirm the importance of her past experiences with these elderly relatives. As she wrote in her response book:

> MR. Sweet reminds me of my great aunt ester, who dyed a cupple months ago. She was in the hospidle a few weekes and then she dyed and that reminded me of how MR. Sweet dyed. How he was sick and dockders [doctors] would see hem all the time and then he dyed. I thoat that the book was verry sad. and it also remindes me of how the girl would tickle MR. Sweet. I give my grandpa hi fives when ever we pass eachother and we started doing that at north carolina beech on vacation.

Reflecting upon Problematic Emotions. Children also found the experience of reading to be a useful way to objectify and reflect upon certain problematic emotions as they related to difficult or confusing circumstances in their lives. For example, Shanice described how reading *To Hell with Dying* (Walker, 1988) helped her to deal with the emotions she experienced in relation to the recent alcohol-related death of her uncle. In her reading-response journal, she drew a connection between her own experience and the experience of the author, Alice Walker:

> I like this book Because It tells you more what will happen to you if you do those kinds of things. When my uncle died from drinking. I was hurt. and I felt the same way as Alice Walker did. But when I went to the funeral I got Back home and I sat in my room and thought about it. then I learned how to deal with it.

Erika also wrestled with some important problematic emotions surrounding her relationship with her newly adopted infant brother in response to reading *The Cay* (T. Taylor, 1969). The story describes the developing friendship between a young boy named Phillip and his West Indian companion, Timothy. Shipwrecked and lost at sea, the two strangers endure a number of hardships that provide them with new understanding and insight into the differences that have characterized their separate lives. Specifically, the relationship of Phillip and Timothy served as an imaginative vehicle through which Erika revisioned and reconsidered the confusing and sometimes troubling behavior of her new brother.

> I cant sleep when my brother screems ispeshaley [especially] when we just got [adopted] him. he would screem and screem and I would just liy [lie] in my bed and wander what was rong and if I could help him because I felt bad that he had to go through so mach pan [pain] with being with 2 difrnt [different] people [families].

Participating in Imaginary Lives. Children frequently sought to share the exploits and experiences of the characters about whom they read. For example, while talking about the story *St. George and the Dragon* (Hodges, 1984), the story of a "brave and noble knight" who saves a kingdom of people from a "grim and terrible dragon" who was laying waste to their land, Jamar illustrated how the story functioned as a way for him to imaginatively participate in the lives and worlds of fictional characters quite different and removed from his own world:

> The story made me feel that I'd like to be both characters in the story. I would like to beat the dragon, and I would like to be the dragon. I'd like to know how it feels to be something, a giant animal, but then you're defeated by a little person. I'd like to know how it feels to be like, crush cities and stuff, but not hurt people.

Similarly, in response to a series of events in *The Cay* (T. Taylor, 1969), Christa imagined or re-created the "experience" of being lost at sea after Timothy and Phillip tried unsuccessfully to be noticed by a single rescue plane flying overhead. As she wrote in her reading-response journal:

> I would be feeling very sad that the plane had gone and I had been on the island for so long and I for some reason would be thinking of Timmithy and the storm and the war, my mom and dad and just about my whole life.

Negotiating Social Relationships. Although our work in the classrooms of Vicki and Jeff revealed that children's reading was most often associated with these personal meanings, the children also invoked a number of social meanings that seemed particularly important to their development as readers and within various social groups. Among the most salient of these functions, reading presented children with a vehicle through which to understand, affirm, or negotiate social relationships among peers, family members, and community members.

Billy was one child who engaged in reading (and writing) in order to construct and affirm his relationship with members of his own family. Among the texts that Billy read, several included brief biographical accounts of the lives of famous African Americans such as Rosa Parks, Frederick Douglass, Harriet Tubman, Martin Luther King, Jr., and Malcolm X. When we asked him to reflect upon his reasons for both reading and writing about these texts, he often mentioned experiences and relationships that different members of his family had had with these individuals in the context of the civil rights movement. Thus, through his reading (and writing) he was able to celebrate, reflect upon, and deepen his affiliations with family members who valued and frequently discussed the lives and accomplishments of important African American leaders:

> [I like to read and write about black Americans] 'cause my mom met Rosa Parks and my grandfather he met Martin Luther King, and my dad tell me a story about Malcolm X. And then my dad, and my momma, and my grandfather met Martin Luther King. . . . And then after he was marching with Dr. Martin Luther King they wetted his shirt up. They wetted my grandaddy's shirt up when the firemen came. . . . And then, when my grandfather, he travels a lot, he went to Atlanta, Georgia, and then he put some sunflowers on his grave.

Children's reading also served as a means reflecting upon and rethinking the meaning and importance of friendships and relationships with peers. For example, *Lulu Goes to Witch School* (O'Connor, 1987) is the story of a young girl named Lulu and the difficulties she encountered with Sandy, another young girl who picks on Lulu during her first days at "witch school." In responding to the book, Tanya described how the storied experiences of Lulu and Sandy helped her to understand the dif-

ficulties she once encountered in school and the importance she assigned to her developing friendship with a classmate named Mary:

> It brought back memories, when I was little, not when I was little, back when people, when I was picking on people and people picked on me. . . . When I first read the first part of the book, it was talking about Lulu going to witch school and I predict, I said in my mind that this might be how my life was when I first came to school. . . . And as I read on, it kept talking about how I was when I first came to school.
>
> And then it came to the part where Mary [a new student that had just arrived in Tanya's class] came to school, and I started, started thinking on her [Mary]. And then it [the story] went on and on, and started, then we [Mary and I] started being friends.

In later conversations with Tanya, it became clear that reading about the friendship of Lulu and Sandy was a way for her to dramatically revisit the kind of friendship she had developed with Mary. In fact, we believe that in rethinking her relationship with Mary, she refashioned her ideas about the value and importance of friendship in general.

Understanding Social Problems and Social Issues. In addition to engaging in literate activity in order to explore and negotiate social relationships, reading was a means through which children could develop their political sensibilities, especially as it pertained to heightening their awareness of important social issues and social problems. For example, after reading *Farewell to Manzanar* (Houston & Houston, 1973), 9-year-old Mari talked about the experiences and struggles that other Japanese Americans were forced to endure as a result of their imprisonment in internment camps during World War II. In particular, she drew a connection between her own life and the experiences of a young girl named Jeane whose father was "sent away to an internment camp like my great grandfather." Mari used the story of hardship and separation that Jeane and her father experienced as a way of dramatizing and further understanding the difficulties that her own great-grandfather may have encountered in such camps. As she explained:

> The story *Farewell to Manzanar* starts out with an adult and she comes to Manzanar, when, after the war is all over and everything and then she remembers the whole story about when she was a little girl and that and how her father was sent away to an internment camp like my great grandfather was, and didn't come back 'till about five months after the war. . . . I was thinking that one of my great grandparents was this man [in the story] who was very proud, and it was very hard for him to be locked up in this place, so it made him kind of crazy. . . . [And there was a little girl in the story] and I thought that I might be very much like that if I was in the war, 'cause she didn't understand you know, what was happening and why her father was sent away, and what they were going to, like a camp, or something like that. . . . Even though it is something that happened a long time ago, it was a big thing, and it was hard, and I wanted to know just how they got through it.

As demonstrated in children's talk and text, the narrative reading in which they were engaged was associated with a number of life-informing functions and possibilities. As part of their participation in their respective classrooms, children were encouraged to practice and value a way of reading and discussing literature that involved reading both text and life. Over the course of the schoolyear, they used reading to explore new roles and social identities, to affirm their cultural identities, to understand and negotiate human experiences, and to wrestle with vexing social and political issues related to improving the quality of their life and world.

READING LITERATURE AND LIFE

In this chapter, we argued that a more complete understanding of the critical, humanizing, and life-informing dimensions of reading stories is integral to our efforts to further develop and extend our understanding of the meaning and importance of literature (or literacy) in students' lives. In addition, we argued that knowledge of this dimension of story reading is essential if we are to genuinely evaluate, revitalize, and refine our understanding of the role and function of reading and teaching literature in the school curriculum. Toward that end, we examined recent work in the area of narrative theory and reader-response theory as it serves to focus on the important role that stories play in helping us to organize and structure human experience. Although theories of narrative understanding and literary reading are indeed interesting, they have had little influence on the school literature curriculum and the specific manner in which stories are read and taught in classrooms. As Applebee (1993) found, literature instruction is still closely aligned with New Critical or more text-based approaches to literary reading. In the context of such approaches, students have little or no opportunity to experience or understand some of the possibilities for exploring self and world that both narrative theo-

rists and reader-response theorists have come to associate with reading stories.

Unfortunately, recent research in the area of response to literature has done little to mitigate the apparent disjunction between narrative theory and the actual practice of teaching literature in school that Applebee describes. Although a fuller and more comprehensive awareness of the kinds of personal or social insight that literary reading might offer readers would certainly be useful in rethinking the role and importance of literature in the school curriculum, the majority of literature-related research has continued to focus on the *processes* that underlie students' literary transactions (e.g., Earthman, 1992; Garrison & Hynds, 1991; Hancock, 1994; Langer, 1990; Rogers, 1991). So, while some of literature's life-informing or life-transforming possibilities have been suggested by the data from previous studies of students' school-based story reading (e.g., Many, 1991; Many & Wiseman, 1992), few have been made explicit and many have remained largely unnoticed. For example, although many literature researchers have pointed out that children sometimes relate reading and personal experience, the functions of such relations have seldom been investigated.

In sharing a glimpse of the life and language that characterized the classrooms of Vicki and Jeff, we provided a unique look at some of the ways that children were encouraged to use and conceptualize story reading and story-related discussion as unique opportunities for interpreting, negotiating, and reconstructing experiences involving themselves, family members and peers, members of their immediate community, and the larger society. As we explored the talk and texts that emerged from children's reading of literature, we learned that such reading functioned primarily in personal ways. More specifically, children's reading was often related to exploring and envisioning possible selves and identifying with role models, objectifying and reconciling problematic emotions, and remembering and reconstructing important life episodes and events. In addition to these personal uses, children's reading functioned in more social ways, helping them to affirm or transform social relationships in their immediate worlds, to understand and consider possibilities for transforming social problems and injustices, and to fashion social and moral codes.

Through a variety of instructional activities that encouraged children to reflect upon their own lives and experiences in response to their reading, they were introduced to the idea that stories can be a means of personal and social exploration and reflection—an "imaginative vehicle," as Willinsky (1991) suggests, for questioning, shaping, responding, and participating in the world. As Joseph, Jamar, and the many other children who were members of these two classrooms shared their thoughts about

reading, they brought to light a wealth of ways in which reading and responding to literature led not only to an understanding of the conceptual content of the stories they read but also to a process of reflection that helped them to understand themselves, others, and the world in which they lived. In sum, reading for these children involved not only constructing textual understanding of the literature they read but also constructing their identities, their moralities, and their visions for social and community life.

The written and spoken words of these children have a number of important implications for the reading and teaching of literature. In particular, children's experiences with stories in the classrooms of Vicki and Jeff suggest the need to reconsider once again the role and function of literature in the school curriculum—to rethink our current conceptions of what it means to read and study literature in classrooms. We believe that this reconsideration would involve shifting attention from comprehending, analyzing, or interpreting literature texts to reading life through texts and texts through life. Indeed, the children whose reading and responses we shared prefigured this shift in the ways in which they readily took up their teacher's invitation to read and talk about themselves, their friends, their families, their community, and their culture. In this regard, these children enacted what many narrative theorists and reader-response theorists have claimed to be one of the most fundamental dimensions of reading stories—their potential to engage readers in the exploration of possible selves and possible worlds through the depiction of the subjective worlds of protagonists. In relation to this point, it may be that literature instruction that focuses primarily on the analysis and interpretation of literary texts denies students access to significant personal, social, and political possibilities and consequences that might be afforded by adopting different and perhaps more life-informing perspectives concerning the functions of literature.

Surprisingly, although our understanding of this dimension of story reading remains only partially developed, assumptions about the life-informing and life-transforming function of literature continue to figure prominently in the conceptual frameworks of recent curricular reforms that fall under the rubric of multicultural education. Such reforms currently place considerable faith in the unique power and quality of literature to transform students' perceptions and understandings of individuals whose life histories, memories, and cultural backgrounds differ significantly from their own (see Desai, Chapter 7, this volume). Literature, from this perspective, is often linked to promoting cultural awareness among students as the basis for social change and the foundation for developing such democratic principles as social justice and equality for all citizens (e.g., Harris, 1993). These assumptions are clearly evident

in a recent article by Yokota (1993) in which she revealed some of the more common transformative themes attributed to literature and story reading within recent multicultural pedagogies. As she explained:

> With the increasing cultural diversity of students in American schools, we as language arts educators face the need to provide literary experiences that reflect the multitude of backgrounds from which the children in our schools come. . . . For *all* students, multicultural literature provides vicarious experiences from cultures other than their own; and these experiences help them understand different backgrounds, thereby influencing their decisions about how they will live in this culturally plural world. (p. 156)

However, in a recent study Beach (1994; Chapter 3, this volume) found that mainstream students often develop "stances of resistance" to much of the multicultural literature they encounter in school. According to Beach, such findings raise important questions about the role of multicultural literature in combating racial stereotypes or prejudice. More specifically, several questions related to understanding the functions of stories suggest themselves: Can literary reading and study engender the kinds of transformative possibilities attributed to it by multicultural reformers? What are some of the meanings and functions that students actually evoke in relation to their reading of multicultural literature? In what ways does such reading inform students' lives, as well as their perceptions of others in their school and their world? What is the nature of the instructional context and practices in which students might experience and learn about this dimension of literature?

In light of these questions, possibilities, and consequences, we are led to underscore the importance of developing English or language arts programs that focus on the life-informing dimensions of literary reading and actively engage children in exploring some of the humanizing and transformative functions of stories or literature. The specifics of such programs and the kinds of understanding that literature makes possible are further discussed by Beach, Enciso, and Rogers (Chapters 3, 1, and 4, respectively, this volume). Indeed, we join these authors in suggesting that literature programs should be built upon an integration of the ideas and constructs embodied in the work of narrative theorists and reader-response theorists that we outlined in the beginning of this chapter.

Some of these ideas were embodied quite fully and explicitly in the classrooms of Vicki and Jeff. Others remained only emergent and partial. Yet by providing the children in these classrooms with personally and culturally relevant materials, occasions to read and talk about issues close to their own hearts and lives, we think that these teachers provided a catalyst for children's efforts to explore and understand some of the life-informing possibilities that might be associated with reading stories in school classrooms. As they became familiar with this aspect of reading stories, the children seemed to appreciate more fully the humanizing and transformative possibilities and consequences of such reading. The children's appreciation of these possibilities and consequences suggests the value of articulating, implementing, and studying the ways that stories may function in readers' lives. In addition, they suggest the need to better understand the kinds of pedagogical practices that make such possibilities a reality.

NOTES

The research on which this chapter is based was funded by the National Council of Teachers of English Research Foundation and the International Reading Association Elva Knight Research Award. Special thanks to Daniel Madigan for the intellectual energy he so willingly devoted to helping develop and implement the curriculum in Vicki's classroom. Also thanks to Lucia Kegan for her assistance in collecting and organizing data for much of this research.

1. Some of the more popular texts included *Here Comes the Strikeout* (Kessler, 1965), *Honey I Love and Other Love Poems* (Greenfield, 1978), *Harriet Tubman: The Road to Freedom* (Bains, 1982), *Encyclopedia Brown Gets His Man* (Sobol, 1982), *Diana Ross: Star Supreme* (Haskins, 1986), *To Hell with Dying* (Walker, 1988), *The Chalk Doll* (Pomerantz, 1989), *Ragtime Tumpie* (Schroeder, 1989), *I Have a Dream: The Story of Martin* (Davidson, 1991), and *Maniac Magee* (Spinelli, 1990).

2. Some of the texts that Jeff elected to read included *Bridge to Terabithia* (Paterson, 1977), *A Grain of Wheat: A Writer Begins* (Bulla, 1985), *The Mountain That Loved a Bird* (McLerran, 1985), *Heckedy Peg* (Wood, 1987), *My Name Is Not Angelica* (O'Dell, 1989), *To Hell with Dying* (Walker, 1988); *The Chalk Doll* (Pomerantz, 1989), *Ragtime Tumpie* (Schroeder, 1989), *Everywhere* (Brooks, 1990), *Teammates* (Golenbock, 1990), and *Uncle Jed's Barbershop* (Mitchell, 1993).

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