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Telling stories and talking facts: First graders' engagements in a nonfiction book club

Increase students' exposure to expository prose in the primary grades by creating a student-centered environment where they can share and respond to nonfiction.

In today's information age, literacy education must be central. Decades of investigations indicate how theory and research translate into best classroom practice. Political pressures in the United States focus attention on basic concepts emphasized in the report of the National Reading Panel (National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, 2000): phonemic awareness, phonics, vocabulary, fluency, and comprehension. Without question, each concept is critical to the process of becoming literate. However, reading and writing are complex, interactive, and social events whereby children construct meaning in wide-ranging contexts. The choices that teachers make regarding pedagogical stance, instructional materials, and lesson-plan management often affect the quality and effectiveness of instruction. Indeed, the art of teaching requires wide-ranging techniques that are responsive to individual student capacities and needs (Pressley, Duek, & Boling, 2004).

The purpose of the study described here was to investigate the power of Book Club, a student-centered management system whereby developmentally appropriate methods and materials support early literacy achievement. The following is my story of how to get from theory and research to classroom practice that meets the needs of all students.

Conceptualizing research

Like most educational research, mine stemmed from curiosity about teaching and learning. My undergraduate students and I had been discussing ways to motivate young children to extend their reading interests beyond narratives. Our professional standards for the English language arts call for the inclusion of all genres: fiction, nonfiction, and poetry (International Reading Association [IRA] and National Council of Teachers of English [NCTE], 1996). Yet recent research suggests a scarcity of nonfiction and expository prose in the primary grades (Moss, 2004; Palmer & Stewart, 2005). If emergent readers were part of an organized nonfiction book club, how would they respond to the information they encountered there? No research that I could find specifically examines first-grade girls' responses to nonfiction during small-group discussions of books read in common.

The idea of organizing small-group literature discussions is certainly not new. Daniels (2001) and others have written extensively on the subject (see, e.g., McMahon & Raphael, 1997; Raphael, Florio-Ruane, George, Hasty, & Highfield, 2004). With the advent of literature-based reading instruction, a host of management systems came of age, including literature circles, book clubs, literature focus groups, and readers' workshop (Heller, in press). I chose to label my project "Book Club" because it implies a familiar gathering. Clubs are social settings associated with having fun. The children might feel special, almost "grown up," if they belonged to a club where books were read and responded to in a risk-free environment.

Sociocultural theory suggests that all learning is a socially based, interactive process (Vygotsky, 1978). Small-group engagements with books naturally generate a good deal of conversation and discussion. In my study's Book Club, would the children's oral and written responses to nonfiction information books be grounded in the facts learned from their readings? Or would their responses be narrative in nature? Rosenblatt's (1978) transactional theory of literature indicates a continuum of response: from aesthetic, or emotional, to efferent, or factual. Would the children in my Book Club tell stories or simply talk about the facts?

Drawing on theory

The links among theory, research, and classroom practice cannot be made unless we fully understand the theoretical framework underlying our inquiries. The following five perspectives are relevant to my research.

Social constructivism

A sociocultural view of literacy development recognizes "that all learning is socially based, that language learning is ultimately an interactive process, that cognitive factors are influenced by context, and that they, in turn, affect the meanings that are produced" (Langer, 1986, p. 7). Social constructivism suggests that children may reach higher levels of thinking during conversation and discussion (Lehr, 1991). A primary objective of Book Club was to immerse the children in a risk-free environment where conversation and discussion would flourish.

Reader response theory

Like constructivist views of reading and writing, Rosenblatt's (1978) transactional theory of literature defines reading as an interactive transaction between the reader and the text. During the comprehending process, the reader creates personal meaning inspired by literature. Meaning resides within the exchange and not in the text alone. Rosenblatt (1978, 2005) made a distinction between responding from an aesthetic and an efferent stance or point of view. At one end of the continuum are readers' personal experiences, feel-

ings, and emotions; at the other end are responses that reflect attention to text features, as in identifying facts or text structure. Book Club members' oral, written, and illustrated responses to nonfiction occurred "in changing proportion[s]" (Rosenblatt, 2005, p. 92) along the response continuum.

Intertextuality

Intertextuality, a term often used in the context of literary theory, refers to the connections that we make across written and visual genres, including popular culture, as reflected in television, movies, video games, and computers (Kristeva, 1980). Also included in the concept of intertextuality is our ability to make connections to our own lives, as well as the lives of others in the world at large. Text-to-text, text-to-self, and text-to-world are examples of these observable connections (Keene & Zimmerman, 1997). An analysis of the children's responses to nonfiction information books revealed categories of intertextual connections, which inform our understanding of the children's organization of knowledge and construction of meaning.

Cognitive flexibility

Over time, readers actively build up conceptual knowledge of text structure as they listen to or read any genre (Spiro, Coulson, Feltovich, & Anderson, 2004), such as expository prose or nonfiction. During Book Club, the children responded to 10 information books, thus strengthening their conceptual knowledge of how expository prose is organized. Retrieval of knowledge about expository text structures supports the process of constructing meaning and, in this study, comprehending the facts. Observations of the children's oral, written, and illustrated responses provided insights on the children's prior conceptual knowledge of factual information as well as new knowledge gained from the lessons.

Narrative representation

Listening to stories, storytelling, and story retelling helps young children to internalize the concept of story and ultimately to comprehend and compose narratives of all kinds (Applebee, 1978). Theories of narrative representation (Bruner, 1991) do not initially come to mind in the context of research grounded in nonfiction. In this study of re-

sponse to information books, however, the children used narratives to organize experience, understand events in real life, and engage in dramatic play to enact intertextual connections.

Planning and organizing

The content and organization of Book Club takes advantage of all modes of communication. Listening, speaking, reading, writing, visualizing, and visually representing are essential forms of communication that may overlap throughout the process of constructing meaning. The integration of the English language arts across the curriculum enhances children's ability to comprehend and to compose.

Setting. Book Club took place in a Title I elementary school in the midwestern United States. Literacy instruction occurred daily from 9:00 to 11:30 each morning. Ms. Taylor (all names are pseudonyms), a veteran first-grade teacher, ran a child-centered reading and language arts curriculum, which included the district-adopted basal series supplemented with literature for children.

The ultimate advantage of my university's professional development school model (Lefever-Davis & Heller, 2003) is that I work closely with district teachers and administrators in collaborative efforts to renew ourselves professionally. Ms. Taylor is a master teacher whose only agenda is to meet the needs of all the children in her first-grade classroom. Furthermore, her first graders knew me well from my frequent visits to their classroom to observe student teachers and on occasion to read aloud picture books.

Participants. Ms. Taylor and I identified four girls—Annie, Elizabeth, Robin, and Morgan—who knew one another well socially, having shared kindergarten and dance classes. I wanted to observe girls in the context of reading and writing in response to information books. A common, stereotypic vision of girls is that they are more interested in narratives than nonfiction, in contrast to boys. Coincidentally, two girls were reading at the primer level, while two were reading at the second-grade level, according to informal reading assessments. This convenient, heterogeneous reading group en-

abled me to take advantage of the more capable peers (Vygotsky, 1986) who could model fluent reading behaviors.

Materials. *Standards for the English Language Arts* (IRA & NCTE, 1996) articulates the need for students to read and write across all literary genres. Teachers are not necessarily prepared to use nonfiction effectively in the early primary grades (Palmer & Stewart, 2005), although it is highly recommended to do so. Nor do children necessarily select nonfiction as their genre of choice, when given the opportunity (as in, for example, Children's Choices, IRA's project with the Children's Book Council; see www.reading.org/resources/tools/ choices_childrens.html). Online professional resources for high-quality nonfiction include the Orbis Pictus Nonfiction Award (www.ncte.org/elem/ awards/orbispictus) and the American Library Association (www.ala.org), which publishes an annual guide to its Newbery and Caldecott medals.

To answer my research questions, I chose 10 illustrated nonfiction books by award-winning author Seymour Simon. Each book in this series, published by SeaStar Books in 2002, is developed as expository prose. The books are beautifully illustrated with photographs of the concepts under study.

The readability of these leveled books is approximately primer to second grade. I provided each child with a copy of a book to hold and read along with me. The children kept their written and illustrated responses in a Book Club journal, a colorful pocket folder containing lined and unlined paper, along with a handout titled "Book Club Notes: Tips for Parents." Basic suggestions for parents included talking with their child about Book Club, reading the book at bedtime, responding to writing and drawings, and relating concepts to everyday home and family experiences. After each Book Club event, the children slipped the paperback book inside their journals and brought it home to share with their parents. Home–school connections are powerful ways to extend the experience and instill the value of literacy learning. The girls' parents were informed and willing partners, being members of Ms. Taylor's established family community of learners.

Time frame. Working collaboratively with Ms. Taylor, the girls came to Book Club from 9:15 a.m.–10:00 a.m., on Mondays, Wednesdays, and

Fridays. My graduate student, Sandi, and I video-taped a total of 12 sessions, which included an introduction to rules and procedures and a final party. While the girls were at Book Club, their first-grade peers participated in the regular small-group literacy center activities Ms. Taylor had planned.

To facilitate a quality learning environment and a quiet workplace, Book Club met in a mobile classroom just across the schoolyard from the children's regular classroom. The first day was an orientation. I introduced the children to an organized club where members discuss books read in common. As we talked, the girls shared their thoughts and feelings about their concept of Book Club: "It means we get to read; it means we get to have fun; it means we get out of class!"

"What is nonfiction?" I asked, seeking baseline information on their prior knowledge of the genre. They were all quite familiar with the term. "Nonfiction is true; it's stuff you learn; it's factual; it's important." The girls expressed an interest in books with factual information, although each reported that she usually chose a storybook to read when given the option. Their preferences reinforced the gender stereotype. Robin was the exception—she admitted to being "obsessed" with an international cookbook series for children, which she had discovered in the school library. "Did you know that coconut chicken is a Caribbean dish?" she asked, smiling.

Our objectives for Book Club were clear: to listen to and read nonfiction in order to learn new information; to talk, write, and draw in response to nonfiction books; to enjoy sharing books with friends. Does Book Club have rules for behavior? We talked about the possibilities, and I listed the children's and my negotiated suggestions on chart paper, which remained visible in the classroom throughout the project (see "Rules of Conduct" in Figure 1). For the next 10 sessions we engaged in our nonfiction Book Club, reading aloud Seymour Simon's illustrated information books.

Conducting Book Club

The daily procedures for Book Club were straightforward and predictable (see Figure 1). Predictability creates a secure, risk-free environment where conversation and discussion flourish.

The focus of our discussions was on the conceptual knowledge central to each book. *Conceptual knowledge* refers to one's comprehension of general, abstract ideas. Our conceptual understandings of everything in life influence the ways we construct meaning. The conceptual understandings and misunderstandings that children bring with them to the classroom influence literacy development and learning (Heller, in press).

The before, during, and after phases of comprehending and composing provided the basic structure for Book Club lessons.

Before reading

I began each session by activating prior conceptual knowledge of the topic at hand. During this initial phase, the children engaged in a conversation about the central concept while I encouraged intertextual connections and helped them to establish a purpose for reading.

Teacher:	Tell me everything you know about [Seymour Simon's book] *Super Storms*.
Robin:	Look, it's root lightning [on the cover]!
Teacher:	How do you know it's called "root lightning"?
Robin:	I've seen it in a weather book. It looks like the world is about to crack apart.
Elizabeth:	It looks like roots.
Robin:	I like it when they play the music on the [TV] weather channel.
Teacher:	What have you learned from the Weather Channel about storms?
Elizabeth:	It can be overcast, really cloudy. They tell the weather, how cold it is, and how hot it is. They are weather people.
Annie:	Some weather can be dangerous. A meteorologist studies with satellites way up high in the sky. They point all around the world.
Morgan:	Some weather can be two things at once. It can be cloudy *and* windy.
Teacher:	You know a lot about weather already. Let's read to learn more information about what Seymour Simon calls *Super Storms*.

During this prereading phase, I also had on hand a reference book (e.g., *Volcano & Earthquake*, Van Rose, 2000) or a prop (e.g., a plastic whale, a stuffed teddy bear). I shared these

FIGURE 1
Book Club instructional guidelines

Book Club is a student-centered management system that takes advantage of the social nature of learning and cele-
brates children's voices. All six of the language arts communication areas—reading, writing, listening, speaking, visualiz-
ing, and visually representing—are central to planning and instruction.

Organizing for instruction

Objectives. Target one or more standards-based literacy objectives.
- E.g., develop critical thinking and reading of nonfiction, information books

Membership. Configure group membership based upon your objectives.
- Select three to six students
- Create a heterogeneous or homogeneous grouping by gender, genre, reading level

Materials. Select high-quality, developmentally appropriate books.
- Collaborate with students to choose common titles to be read by the group
- Have students share recreational reading or books on topics of interest to the group

Time frame and setting. Incorporate Book Club into the daily classroom routine.
- Allow 30 to 60 minutes during the regular reading–language arts time block
- Designate two to three days per week
- Disband and reform groups after objectives are met

Managing Book Club lessons

Leadership. Model for the whole class how to participate in Book Club.
- Move among concurrent groups, lending assistance as needed
- Use paraprofessionals or parent volunteers to facilitate group discussions
- Designate a scribe to record the groups' oral or group-written responses
- Work toward having the children lead their own discussions

Rules of conduct. Post agreed-upon rules of behavior for Book Club, such as this:
"To Do" list
I will listen to and read the book during Book Club
I will discuss
- what I thought about the book
- how it made me feel
- my favorite part
- what I learned
- the special message or main idea
- ideas for writing or illustrating

I will listen carefully and be respectful toward everyone in the group.
I will help my classmates talk about the book.
I will write a story, poem, or nonfiction passage inspired by the book.

Steps in conducting Book Club

Before
1. Activate prior knowledge of concepts central to the book.
- Engage in conversation and discussion (leader/facilitator): "Tell me everything you know about…."
- Use visual aids, props, or other books to stimulate memory and cognition
- Encourage intertextual connections
- Record ideas on paper, easel, or computer (scribe)
- Establish one or more purposes for listening or reading

During
2. Engage in an interactive read-aloud event:
- One or more persons in the group read the book aloud
- Reading fluently and reflectively, pausing to engage members in conversation and discussion about the text and illustrations

After
3. Encourage reader-response questions, critical responses, and creative thinking via open-ended prompts:
- What did you think about the book?
- How did it make you feel?
- What was your favorite part?
- Did the story, poem, or nonfiction passage remind you of anything in your life?
- Did you learn anything new? *(continued)*

- • What was the special message, main idea, or theme?
- • Did the book give you ideas for writing or drawing?
4. Use why–because prompting to encourage elaboration of one-word responses (e.g., "Why did you think the book was *good*?").
    - • Group members take responsibility for maintaining the discussion
5. Discuss ideas for writing in any genre or drawing in response to the book.
    - • Use the composing process to encourage drafting, revising, and sharing
    - • Encourage developmental spelling
    - • Keep written and illustrated responses in a Book Club journal
6. Evaluate students' oral language, reading, and writing using authentic assessments.
    - • Anecdotal records
    - • Checklists and benchmarks
    - • Narrative observation logs
    - • Videotapes and audiotapes
    - • Written-response journals
    - • Student creative writing and drawing samples

materials to stimulate memory and cognition and motivate the children's interest in the topic. Visual and tactile stimuli also aid in the process of activating prior conceptual knowledge—a critical component of effective literacy instruction. I recorded the children's prereading contributions on chart paper, labeled "What We Know." Writing and displaying the children's initial thoughts reinforced the links among oral language, writing, and reading.

During reading

On the first day of Book Club, I alone read aloud Simon's *Planets Around the Sun* while everyone followed along. In all sessions thereafter, I asked for volunteers to help me read the book. In the beginning, the more fluent readers eagerly participated. By the end of the study, all four girls were reading aloud—either alone, in pairs, or chorally as a group. Small-group settings provide a literate environment in which to model fluent and reflective reading. In this highly social setting, the girls were quick to scaffold one another's oral reading, naturally supporting phonemic and phonological awareness. For example, when reading *Wild Bears* Elizabeth struggled with the words *large* and *dangerous* in the sentence "Some bears are very large and dangerous" (p. 1). Robin said, "It means really, really big; say '/l/ /ar/ /j/.' And the 'd' word means scary, really scary: /d/ dangerous!"

Often we read and reread sections to clarify or emphasize meaning. "Let's see what kind of planets there are that we didn't say," said Robin, who went on to reread the names of all of them. Repeated reading is a time-honored, research-based method that can dramatically improve a child's fluency and comprehension of concepts (Samuels, 2002).

Dialogue between teacher and students is the hallmark of a truly interactive read-aloud event. Partnership models of literature response encourage dynamic, shared construction of meaning that is significant to the reader (Sychterz, 2002). Furthermore, talk surrounding small-group reading instruction gives voice to children's thought processes, which in turn enables teachers to assess and responsively assist student performance within individual zones of proximal development (Estrada, 2005). I encouraged the girls to talk about text content as the story unfolded. Following my model, the girls occasionally stopped reading to make observations and encourage verbal interactions. Talk focusing on text content revealed the children's growing conceptual knowledge, as in Morgan's response to Simon's *Fighting Fires*: "I thought there was just one kind of fire truck that drove around and looked for fires, but there's actually more than one kind of fire truck."

Interactive read-aloud events encourage active participation in the reading process. Teachers may also take the opportunity to model metacognition

(Palincsar & Brown, 1984), such as thoughtful reflections and critical thinking. Throughout Book Club, the girls frequently asked questions and then continued reading. Questioning while reading is a metacognitive strategy that indicated thoughtful reflections among these emergent readers, as demonstrated in the following dialogue.

> Annie: If the government set that [forest] on fire, then the animals would probably be crying.
>
> Robin: Why would the government set the forest on fire?
>
> Elizabeth: Maybe because they need more wood to make homes for people. Because maybe they just don't like animals.

After reading

After reading each book, I engaged the children in a discussion framed by the following reader-response questions:

- What did you think about the book?
- How did it make you feel?
- What were your favorite parts?
- What did you learn that you didn't know before?
- Did the book give you any ideas for writing or drawing?

Open-ended questions create an environment where children are free to respond aesthetically or to express their feelings and attitudes about what they have read. At the same time, reader-response questioning appears to promote critical thinking about literature (Many, 1991) and does not necessarily preclude direct instruction in comprehension skills (Heller, 1997; Spiegel, 1992). Open-ended questions may be followed up with a line of why–because inquiries, encouraging attention to conceptual knowledge and intertextual connections. Here is an example.

> Teacher: What did you think about *Giant Machines*?
>
> Elizabeth: I thought it was good.
>
> Teacher: Why was it a good book?
>
> Elizabeth: Because I liked the pictures, and it's about big things. I like big, huge things.

Open-ended questions also inspire creative responses to literature, in the form of written and illustrated stories, nonfiction, and poetry. The girls' talk while writing and drawing was further evidence of the social nature of becoming literate. They engaged in playful, yet meaningful, dialogues.

> Teacher: Did *Planets Around the Sun* give you any ideas for writing or drawing?
>
> Robin: I could write about space. I'm going to draw a picture of Mr. Solar System.
>
> Annie: Me too!
>
> Robin: Mr. Mars is talking with Mr. Solar System.
>
> Annie: I like Mr. Mars, too. Ooh, I'm huge. He's going to have a big eyeball. And he's going to have a green smile.
>
> Elizabeth: I'm going to write "Hello, I'm Mr. Solar System."
>
> Robin: Mr. Solar System won the bookmark. I'm going to draw it right here.
>
> Annie: Well, so who cares? Look, he has teeth. Brown teeth. Two on the bottom. He's gonna have hair. Two bows on top. She lost a tooth. I lost a tooth in kindergarten. Twice in a row my mom has not seen me pull out one of my teeth yet. She's gonna have a necklace, and I'm gonna make her dress. And her hands are gonna be like this. And a pink dress. And they lived happily ever after. This is Mrs. Solar System, and this is Mr. Solar System. These are feelers and eyeballs.

Annie's contribution to this conversation illustrates the complexity of a child's cognition during the process of constructing meaning. As she thinks out loud while drawing, Annie's responses fall along the aesthetic–efferent continuum. She responds emotionally to her peer's comment about a bookmark, "Well, so who cares?"; compares herself to Mrs. Solar System who has lost a tooth, interjecting a personal narrative about having lost a tooth herself in kindergarten; and describes in detail her illustrations of characters (Figure 2) who take on the fairytale lifestyle of living happily ever after. Annie's thoughts are exemplary of the children's propensity to tell stories and talk facts within the social setting of Book Club.

Reporting results

The data analyzed in this study comprised the children's oral conversational turns and written re-

sponses to Seymour Simon's nonfiction books. A conversational turn is "everything said by one speaker before another began to speak" (Sinclair & Coulthard, 1975, p. 231). In addition to the conversation and discussion before, during, and after the read-aloud events, talk surrounding the writing process also gave further insights regarding my research questions. The results of open, axial, and selective coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1990) of data revealed two broad conceptual categories of verbal responses: Telling Stories and Talking Facts (as categorized in Table 1). A content analysis of the children's written responses indicated narrative and expository genres, in addition to drawings. An outside peer reviewer confirmed data trustworthiness by coding a random sample of 10% of the final categories. Agreement with my coding was 95%.

Throughout the study, I observed a continuum of response, from aesthetic to efferent, in varying proportions. It was not surprising to observe the girls responding emotionally to the beautiful pictures in all 10 of the books. They were in awe of the splendor of the planets in our solar system and the beauty of an erupting volcano. They laughed at the sweetness of the baby animals and lovable wild bears and expressed wonder at the massive killer whales. They shuddered in fear of blazing fires, devastating earthquakes, and violent weather patterns. They were enthralled with amazing aircraft and giant machines. The photographs and drawings in these picture books supported the comprehension process, motivated reading, and stimulated

FIGURE 2
Annie's drawing of Mr. and Mrs. Solar System

creative and critical thinking. Visualizing and visually representing support literacy learning, as children become proficient readers and writers. For most children (including the girls in this study), drawing and writing are parts of a communication system that work together to convey meaning and emotion (Galda & Cullinan, 2005).

TABLE 1
Conceptual categories of oral and written responses along the aesthetic-efferent continuum

Telling stories (30% of conversational turns[a])	Personal narratives (80%) Fictional narratives (20%)
Talking facts (70% of conversational turns)	Literal telling/retelling (80%) Intertextual connections (15%) Critical media literacy (2%) Critical thinking (2%) Questioning (1%)
Writing (50% of written responses[b])	Fictional narrative (1%) Personal narrative (5%) Literal interpretation (94%)
Visually representing/drawing (50% of written responses)	

[a]$n = 3,756$; [b]$n = 60$

The children also responded aesthetically to factual information presented in each book. Tone of voice, body language, laughter, facial expressions, and dramatic gestures were evidence of aesthetic and efferent responses interacting synergistically as the children expressed awe and wonder about new and interesting information. In this sense, every response was emotional, because the girls were wildly enthusiastic about everything we read and talked about during Book Club. As Annie said, "Venus is hotter than Mercury? Wow! I didn't know that!" And, from Morgan: "I never knew volcanoes were so pretty!"
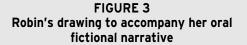
Telling stories

Storytelling occurred throughout the read-aloud events and accounted for 30% of the conversational turns and 6% of the written compositions. Personal narratives dominated the storytelling episodes, which occurred before, during, and after the read-aloud events. Simon's *Baby Animals* inspired the greatest number of stories told, including Morgan's: "It [picture of dog in book] doesn't look like my dog, Rocky. He's a herder dog, and his breath smells bad. He herds us, me, and my mom and dad and brothers."

Bruner (1991) suggested that narratives are crucial ways of organizing our experiences, because stories can be used to interpret, control, and cope with life. During Book Club the girls often made connections to their personal lives and at times fictionalized these events, verbally and in illustrated writing. Although fictional narratives accounted for only 20% of the stories told during the study, these tellings were nevertheless powerful indicators of the children's creative responses to information books. In a study of first graders' and second graders' oral responses to read-aloud events, Sipe (2000) identified five types of expressive, performative engagement with fictional stories: dramatizing, talking back (to the characters), critiquing/controlling the plot, inserting (oneself or new ideas), and taking over (using the story as a launching pad). In the present study, the girls' overt interactions with nonfiction were manifest in fictional storytelling. They often used the book itself as a prop in support of an ongoing narrative. For example, before writing and illustrating her story, Robin used *Planets Around the Sun* as a puppet—

flapping the pages as if mouthing the words, dramatically telling her story, and talking about her plans for writing and drawing (see Figure 3).

Oral language is the foundation of literacy. It is therefore essential that teachers encourage talk surrounding the comprehension and composing processes. Such talk provides evidence of children becoming literate. Throughout the project, I kept anecdotal field notes of the children's verbal and social behaviors. At this point in Robin's early literacy development, her oral language facility, as well as her second-grade reading ability, outstripped her written language skills. It is ironic that she wrote the words to her solar system story backwards, an anomaly that appeared only once in her writing during Book Club. In response to *Super Storms* Robin admitted, "I don't like to write. I hate to write. I hate storms. I hate writing more than [I hate] storms." She therefore chose to draw pictures more often than engage in written language play. While drawing, Robin often described her pictures and provided a narrative that further elaborated her artwork.

Informal, daily assessments enable teachers to meet the developmental needs of all children learning to read and write. Although Robin was a verbally astute first grader whose written language skills were emerging, her attitude toward writing

FIGURE 3
Robin's drawing to accompany her oral fictional narrative

Robin's narrative: "Has anyone traveled to Mercury? I think yes, and they blew up. Maybe Mercury and the Sun are married. Mr. Solar System, have you ever tried to take a bite out of the moon? I'm going to draw a picture of Mr. Solar System. Mr. Solar System won the bookmark. It's going to be like a comic book. I'm going to write words on the picture."

was in jeopardy. I took every opportunity to encourage her to engage in written language play, which ultimately helped her feel better about the composing process.
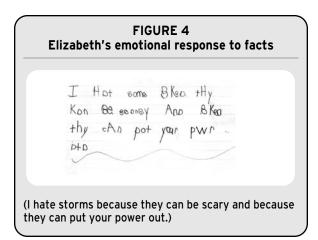
Talking facts

Seventy percent of the children's conversational turns were expository telling and retelling of facts. For example, Annie knew that "baby animals live all around the world." Annie learned that a baby deer is called a fawn. In addition to factual information already known and subsequently learned, I also observed factual misconceptions, which accounted for less than 1% of the responses. Robin thought that "Mercury is the hottest planet," and subsequently learned that Venus is the hottest planet. The children were naturally curious about topics of interest, as seen in their questioning behaviors, which accounted for approximately 1% of their responses. Morgan asked, "How many times can a volcano erupt?" Elizabeth questioned, "Why are there so many cow words in the whale book?"

Intertextuality is a frequent part of social interactions and is privileged during lessons (Bloome & Egan-Robertson, 1993). Teachers may ask direct questions that encourage connections, such as "What does this book remind you of in your own life?" The purpose of the question is to motivate children to become interested and involved in the text, which improves their comprehension. In this study, text-to-world and text-to-text connections often reflected the girls' experiences with nonprint media. It was perhaps the emergence of critical media literacy, a concept that had not immediately come to mind when I developed this research project. Alvermann and Hagood (2000) defined critical media literacy as "the ability to reflect on the pleasures derived from mass media and popular culture practices," as in radio, television, video games, movies, CDs, and the Internet (p. 194). Within this context of thinking critically, the girls' spontaneous connections to world events were sometimes striking, as in Morgan's response to *Fighting Fires*: "They [firefighters] help people escape from large buildings that catch on fire. They helped on the day Osama Bin Laden crashed into the building."

Literal interpretations and retelling facts also dominated the girls' drawings and writing. Their il-

FIGURE 4
Elizabeth's emotional response to facts

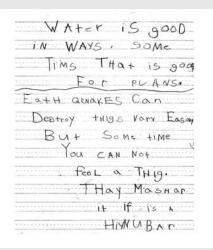(I hate storms because they can be scary and because they can put your power out.)

lustrations were colorful, visual representations of the facts, including pink pigs, brown volcanoes, blue whales, and red fire engines. Interactions between aesthetic and efferent responses were again evident as the children expressed their feelings about the facts. Elizabeth, an emergent reader, effectively communicated her concerns about storms (see Figure 4). I encouraged the girls to "spell words the way you think they should be spelled" in order to keep the composing process going and to assess and reinforce phonological and phonemic awareness (Gentry, 2000). The children's facility with written language play revealed all levels of developmental spelling, from early phonemic to conventional, as shown in Morgan's literal responses to *Super Storms* and *Danger! Earthquakes* (Figure 5). The children rarely asked me how to spell a word exactly but often used the books as references for conventional spellings (e.g., "Killer Whales"). In this risk-free, literacy-rich environment, the girls' oral reading and written language were windows into their developing concepts of sound, symbol, and the construction of meaning.

Translating theory and research into practice

The ultimate goal of educational research is to inform, not determine, teachers' pedagogical interactions with children (Dudley-Marling, 2005). My agenda as a theory-to-practice researcher is to provide preservice and inservice teachers with

FIGURE 5
Morgan's literal retelling of facts

WATEr iS gooD
iN WAYS, SoMe
TiMs THa+ is goo
For PLANS.
EatH QuaKES Can
Destroy tHIgs Vary Easay
But Some time
You CAN Not
feeL a THig.
THay Mashar
it If is a
HiNUBAr

(Water is good in some ways. Sometimes that is good
for plants. Earthquakes can destroy things very easily.
But sometimes you cannot feel a thing. They measure
it if it's a high number.)

guidance on how to implement research-based best practice (see Figure 1). From a pedagogical perspective, student-centered Book Club management systems make sense in both theory and practice. They can be very effective in nurturing the development of oral language, reading, and writing, as evidenced in the research reported here. The content and structure of an organized Book Club encourage teachers to listen to the children's voices, to take advantage of the social nature of learning, and to give children the freedom to tell their stories and talk facts.

The data collected during our nonfiction Book Club provides valuable insights on first-grade girls' literacy learning. Future research could examine other gender groupings (e.g., all boys or boys and girls); literacy levels (e.g., developmental or struggling readers or writers); genres (e.g., fiction or poetry); and culturally and linguistically diverse learners. Results of such studies would add to our growing understanding of how to create what Pearson (2003) termed "just the right curricular mix for one and all" (p. 15). Book Clubs enable teachers to support the process of constructing meaning in a way that may have significant effects on a child's lifelong love of reading and writing. In the end, it is the informed, reflective teacher who artfully engages students in the process of becoming literate, a fundamental goal of education.

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