Exploring Third-Grade Students' Ability to Express Their Views on Contemporary Social Issues Following Read-Aloud Book Discussions

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EXPLORING THIRD-GRADE STUDENTS’ ABILITY TO EXPRESS THEIR VIEWS ON CONTEMPORARY SOCIAL ISSUES FOLLOWING READ-ALOUD BOOK DISCUSSIONS

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To Michael, Nathan, Melissa, Robert, Mom, and Dad
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ABSTRACT

This study used contemporary children’s literature as a vehicle for exploring students’ understanding of sensitive issues as reflected in interactions during book discussions and written work. Research has shown that “. . . children’s literature can be a promising avenue for introducing important social issues in the elementary and middle school classrooms” and with authentic literature “. . . it becomes possible for children to make personal connections to characters that are different from themselves and events that are different from those in their lives” (Lewison, Leland, Flint, & Moller, 2002, pp. 216-217). The daily classroom read aloud provided the backdrop for this study.

The purposes of this study were (a) to examine the nature of the interaction between teachers and students on topics of contemporary social issues during book discussions, and (b) to investigate changes in the content of students’ writing concerning their views on contemporary social issues on general and personal levels. The study also examined students’ views of the quality of the book discussions and determined whether students recognized the relationship between literature and their lives. Finally, this exploration took into account how teachers enabled students to identify the issues, what perspectives were heard and sustained during the book discussions, and if opportunities were established that gave all students the option to contribute to the discussions.

The study took place in the natural setting of two third-grade classrooms in a school in the southeast section of the Florida Panhandle. The study team consisted of the researcher, and two graduate assistants, who were trained in the collection and coding of the data. In the course of the study, several different forms of data were collected to gain a deeper insight into study, and to give the researcher a more complete picture of the interactions between the students and the teachers, monitor the students’ perceptions of the social issues, and to ascertain any changes in the content of the students’ writing. The data included observations, fieldnotes, audiotapes that documented the read-aloud sessions and book discussions, and a form that coded the interactions between the teachers and students. The study used quality children’s literature, A Taste of Blackberries and crossing jordan for the read alouds and follow-up book discussions.
Third-grade students wrote a pre-and post-discussion essay for the two texts before the read aloud was initiated and at the completion of each book. During the read aloud, two chapters from each book were chosen as critical chapters. Students and teachers were asked to complete a reflection form immediately following that day’s read aloud and book discussion. At the conclusion of the study, the students participated in a focus group, and the teachers did a self-report and interview. All of the findings along with a content analysis of the students’ statements on the contemporary social issues are discussed in the qualitative data analysis section.

Study results provided teachers with additional information and strategies to strengthen the read aloud, improve the quality of students’ discussions, and enable students to become more effective writers.
CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

Using children’s literature is a very powerful vehicle for engaging students in meaningful and personal reading discussions. In this day and age, children from all walks of life are exposed to a multitude of experiences and problems such as death, substance abuse, and racial prejudice. Authentic literature that addresses such sensitive concerns “. . . may help children (1) think more clearly about particular issues, (2) explore a variety of solutions, and (3) identify with others who may be in similar situations” (Rasinski & Gillespie, 1992, p. 13). The classroom read aloud provided a natural format to introduce such literature and to promote engaging student-centered book discussions. In leading book discussions, teachers have the opportunity to use read alouds to help students stay well-informed, acquire understanding in racial and cross-cultural concerns, and assist students in recognizing peaceful conflict resolution skills. As Thibault states (2002), “Books can promote understanding, provide context, and facilitate conversation” (p. 1). In her writings Louise M. Rosenblatt (1994) often lamented that educators were primarily interested in the cognitive aspects of a reading. When, in reality, “educators should model a balance” between obtaining the informational facts of a reading lesson and providing an emotional tie to the literature that will allow for in-depth discussion (p. 1084). As Ouzts states (1991),

The reading teacher occupies a strategic position in the development of emotions of children, and it is through this development that the teacher is able to help shape the future of children who are experiencing stress and crises in their lives. (p. 200)

However, according to a study by Hoffman, Roser, & Battle (1993), the most “frequently occurring” characteristics of the read aloud experience are that “the classroom teacher reads to students from a trade book for a period between 10 and 20 minutes. . . . . The amount of discussion related to the book takes fewer than five minutes, including talk before and after the reading” (p. 500). Furthermore, most book discussions focused on content, simply questioning recall or text comprehension. As Cazden pointed
out, “In a typical classroom, teacher questions often follow the pattern of initiation/response/evaluation. That is, a teacher asks a usually narrow question . . . , a child answers . . . the teacher evaluates the child’s answer . . . before moving on to the next question” (1988, p. 55). The required answers were often specific in nature and located within the boundaries of the book being read.

Another issue is that book discussions often use literature with primarily neutral content. In a study by Lickteig & Russell (1993), the favorite read aloud books for those mentioned four or more times (The numbers in parenthesis are the number of times the individual books were mentioned) in grades three, four and five were:

Third

*Charlotte’s Web* (7), *The Boxcar Children* (6), *Superfudge* (5),
*Charlie and the Chocolate Factory, James and the Giant Peach*,
*Tales of a Fourth Grade Nothing* (4)

Fourth

*Tales of a Fourth Grade Nothing* (7), *James and the Giant Peach* 5

Fifth

*Where the Red Fern Grows* (6), *Bridge to Terabithia* (4)

( pp. 206-207)

Only in the third and fifth grades did the titles reflect a sensitive topic, death, and homelessness. Most of the favored books had a humorous or fantasy basis.

Children’s “. . . literature is said to provide characters and events with which children can identify and through which they can consider their own actions, beliefs, and emotions” (Mendoza & Reese, 2001, p. 2). An ever-expanding source, literature provides a real-life connection to the contemporary social issues that are pertinent to today’s global students. The Newbery Medal winners from the past decade: *Walk Two Moons, The Midwife’s Apprentice, The View from Saturday, Out of the Dust, Holes, Bud, not Buddy, A Year Down Yonder, A Single Shard, Crispin: The Cross of Lead, The Tale of Despereaux, Kira-Kira* (1995-2005) are excellent sources for books that deal with such concerns as death, coming of age, homelessness and prejudice. Yet, as McBee (1996) found:

Lower grade teachers [2-5] often do not feel properly trained or prepared to address such issues, and they are reluctant to engage in teaching subjects that, they feel, will take up valuable instructional time and lead to a loss of control over classroom behavior. Some are afraid of repercussions from parents or their
administrators while others question their ability to present controversial material from a neutral perspective. (p. 1)

This study filled a much-needed gap in the research of children’s literature at the elementary level. The study focused on students’ written perceptions of teacher-led discussions on contemporary social issues present in children’s literature. It utilized the book discussions that follow a read aloud as a catalyst for helping students to become personally involved with their writing. As Calkins (1986) said, “Students care about writing when it is personal and interpersonal” (p. 14).

Given the prevalence of these issues [sensitive] in students’ lives and the profundity of the issues themselves, it seems entirely reasonable for teachers . . . to talk with their students about the issues, their interpretations of the issues portrayed in the books, and their personal responses and reflections on those issues. (Rasinski & Gillespie, 1992, p. 9)

**Purpose of the Study**

Since most teachers in elementary education read to their students on a daily or weekly basis, the classroom read aloud time together with book discussions provided the conduit for this study. The purpose of this study was (1) to examine the nature of the interaction between teachers and students on topics of contemporary social issues, and (2) to investigate changes in the content of students’ writing concerning their views on contemporary social issues on general and personal levels. The study used quality children’s literature, *A Taste of Blackberries* and *crossing jordan* for the read alouds and follow-up book discussions. The study also examined students’ views of the quality of the book discussions and ascertained whether students recognized the relationship between literature and their lives. Finally, this exploration took into account how teachers enabled students to identify the issues, what perspectives were heard and sustained during the book discussions, and if opportunities were provided that gave all students the option to contribute to the discussions.

Mathis (2001) believes that “story is the essence of communication. Through story, we share our opinions, values, and experiences . . . . the most personal aspects of our culture and the ways in which we identify with a particular ethnicity, geographical
region, religion, or cultural group” (p. 155). In this study book discussions on sensitive, controversial issues were an important platform for students to explore the complex issues of culture, personal identities, and race. “Put simply—there is a remarkable vitality, an aliveness, a level of intellectual engagement that occurs when kids have the opportunity to read about and discuss important, controversial topics that intersect their lives” (Lewison, et al., 2002, p. 216).

Rationale

Book discussions provide a neutral and safe format in which global and social issues can be the basis for the exchanging of ideas. Teachers facilitate the creation of classrooms where students can bond together as a community and gain the emotional understanding of such intrinsic universal issues as race, death, homelessness, poverty, and aggression. “The teacher’s function is less to impart information than to help students reflect on their experience, clarify its significance for themselves, become aware of alternative emphases, discover their own blind spots or reinforce their own insights” (Rosenblatt, 1985, p. 49).

In this age of cultural diversity, it is essential that the important questions of the day are not silenced in the classroom. The read aloud was a vehicle in which book discussions on contemporary social issues were introduced so all the voices within a classroom were given ample opportunity to be heard.

Theoretical Base

In preparation for this study, the researcher reviewed a number of literacy theories and studies that related to students’ interaction with text both individually and socially. She also examined the developmental perspectives of the two sensitive issues explored in this study. Each perspective was instrumental in discussing teachers, readers, text, or context.

Perspectives in Literary Response

Louise M. Rosenblatt is considered one of the leaders in researching readers’ response. In her article, “The Literary Transaction: Evocation and Response” (1982), she stated that, “reading is a transaction, a two-way process, involving a reader, and a text at
a particular time under particular circumstances” (p. 268). She proposed that reading is a highly involved “literary experience” and should not be taken lightly. She acknowledged (1995) that:

- Literature fosters the kind of imagination needed in a democracy—the ability to participate in the needs and aspirations of other personalities and to envision the effect of our actions on their lives.

- Literature acts as one of the agencies in our culture that transmit images of behavior, emotional attitudes clustering about different social relationships, and social and personal standards.

- Literature can reveal . . . the diversity of possible ways of life, patterns of relationship, and philosophies from which he is free to choose in heterogeneous, rapidly changing democratic society.

- Literature may help . . . make sound choices through imaginative trial and error or experimentation—through experiencing in the literary work the consequences of alternative actions.

- Literary experiences may enable the reader to view his own personality and problems objectively and so to handle them better.

- Literature, through which the adolescent reader encounters a diversity of temperaments and systems of value, may free him from fears, guilt, and insecurity engendered by to narrow a view of normality.

- Literature may suggest socially beneficial channels for drives that might otherwise find expression in antisocial behavior. (pp. 212-213)

Rosenblatt lamented that many classrooms used literature as a teaching tool for checking the basic elements of a story and for comprehension. She felt that this approach did a great disservice to the reader and to the text. She believed that classrooms needed to strive for a balance in their approach to literature, identifying both the factual and emotional responses in a story. Her transaction theory proposed that there were two major styles or stances of readers’ response: efferent and aesthetic. The efferent stance utilizes information in order to learn something. The aesthetic stance appeals to our human sensitivity: “We participate in the story, we identify with the characters, we share their conflicts and their feelings” (Rosenblatt, 1982, p. 270).
Lev Vygotsky’s Socio-Cultural Theory

The socio-cultural theory is composed of many strategies that Vygotsky put forward about education. He felt that true learning took place in the natural exchange of language between students and their peers, students and adults in an interactive, social, environment (Green & Gredler, 2002; Hung, 2002; Jaramillo, 1996). “He saw that when students worked in small groups to solve problems, by discussing problems the learners were able to talk each other through to the solutions. . .” (Henson, 2003, A Focus on Social Interaction section, ¶ 5). When such collaboration took place, students initially worked together and supported one another in seeking solutions to a problem. During the analysis phase, students started to form their own conclusions from the evidence that had been jointly collected. Thus as Vygotsky stated (1999), “Each function in the cultural child’s development appears twice on two levels: First, on the social, and later on the psychological level; first, between people as an interpsychological category, and then inside the child as an intrapsychological” (p. 128).

Vygotsky was responsible for developing one of the key strategies of learning instruction, the zone of proximal development. At one end of the zone there were tasks that a student completed independently (his actual development). At the other end of the zone, the tasks were too difficult at this time. The zone of proximal development was the range in-between where students completed tasks with help (his potential development). The zone of proximal development was the optimum learning range for a student. Students’ knowledge was extended with guidance by an adult or in collaboration with “more capable peers.” As Vygotsky stressed (1999),

In the child’s development . . . , imitation and instruction play a major role. They bring out the specifically human qualities of the mind and lead the child to new developmental levels. . . . What the child can do in cooperation today he can do alone tomorrow. Therefore the only good kind of instruction is that which marches ahead of development and leads it; . . . instruction must be oriented toward the future, not the past. (pp. 188-189)

“According to Vygotsky, humans use tools that develop from a culture, such as speech and writing, to mediate their social environments . . . . Vygotsky believed that the internalization of these tools led to higher thinking skills” (Riddle, 1999, ¶ 4). The
most important cultural tool for Vygotsky was language. Kozulin (1999) felt that he was “primarily interested in the development of language in its relation to thought” (p. xxx). “The primary function of speech, in both children and adults, is communication, social contact. . . . In our conception, the true direction of the development of thinking is not from the individual to the social but the social to the individual” (pp. 35-36). Taking information from a table developed by Green and Gredler (2002), the major characteristics of the Vygotsky perspective are:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Goal</th>
<th>Develop self-regulated attention, conceptual thinking, logical memory</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Classroom focus</td>
<td>Interaction with subject matter concepts to develop advanced cognitive capabilities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Role of the teacher</td>
<td>Model, explain, correct and require the learner to explain</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Role of the learner</td>
<td>Interact with the teacher in instruction to develop conscious awareness of and mastery of one’s thinking to learn to think in subject matter concepts.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Example</td>
<td>Reciprocal Teaching (Conclusion section, ¶ 2)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Schema Theory**

Schema theory is about storing, retrieving, and learning new knowledge. “. . . It is concerned with knowledge, particularly with the way knowledge is represented in our minds and the importance of prior knowledge to learning something new” (Graves, Juel & Graves, 2001, p. 4). Schemata were often referred to as “file folders.” As the knowledge about a particular schema grew through interactions with others and the environment, new information was added to that file folder.

In a read-aloud situation a teacher activated students prior knowledge (knowledge or schemata that were stored) through questioning strategies or creation of literary graphic organizers that provided a background for the key concepts that were being presented in the read aloud. In doing so she was stimulating a students’ schema about that concept, adding additional information to that “file folder” and maybe restructuring some students’ schemata to better understand the concepts that she was expressing. Since students came from different backgrounds and experiences, it was noted that in any
classroom there were students who did not have a schema or knowledge base for some concepts. These students needed scaffolding to learn the new material. Scaffolding was a concept developed by Wood, Bruner, & Ross (1976) that provided academic support for students to enable them to learn new material or complete tasks that were too difficult to complete independently.

In attempting to account for the many approaches that learning takes, Rumelhart & Norman (1978) suggested three qualitatively different kinds of learning:

(a) accretion, or the encoding of new information in terms of existing schemata; The new material is consistent with schemata already available in memory.

(b) restructuring or schema creation, or the process whereby new schemata are created or formed or new schemata are modified with the old schemata.

(c) tuning or schema evolution or the slow modification and refinement of a schema as a result of using it in different situations. A process that lasts a lifetime. (p. 421)

Anderson (1994) developed six functions of schemata that affected the learning and remembering of information and ideas in a text:

A schema provides ideational scaffolding for assimilating text information. These are the file folders in the mind that information can be added to quickly.

A schema facilitates selective allocation of attention. It selects which pieces of information are necessary to learn.

A schema enables inferential elaboration. A reader’s schema allows the student to go beyond the basic information.

A schema allows orderly searches of memory. It allows categorical searches of stored information.

A schema facilitates editing and summarizing. Once again, the important information is edited out from the existing information and summarized. In this way the significant information is available.

A schema permits inferential instruction. When there are gaps in memory, a rememberer’s schema, along with the specific text information that can be recalled, helps generate hypotheses about the missing information. (p. 474)
Assumptions about how schematic organizations were activated to construct meaning led to the fundamental principle of constructivism. Airasian & Walsh (1997) stated that, “constructivism is based on the fundamental assumption that people create knowledge from the interaction between their existing knowledge or beliefs and the new ideas or situations they encounter” (p. 445). The teacher utilized interactive strategies such as modeling, explanations, small and large group discussions and acted as a facilitator providing scaffolding when needed and progressing with a lesson according to the students’ needs. Knowledge was not transferred directly from the teacher to the student. The students were active learners, constructing knowledge as a result of interaction with the teacher, other learners, and their environment. Existing knowledge was the starting point for new learning (Graves, et al., 2001, pp.4-8).

Therefore, the fact that a student’s schema for “something” was personal and unique presented the potential for involved discussions. “A schema . . . is an organized cognitive structure of related knowledge, ideas, emotions, and actions that has been internalized and that guides and controls a person’s use of subsequent information and response to experience” (Goodman & Goodman, 1994, p. 116).

Concept Development: Death and Race

There are generally two perspectives on how children understand death and race, the Piagetian perspective and the socio-cultural perspective. According to the Piagetian perspective, death is an abstract concept that is not fully understood until a child reaches a state of maturity. The stages range from a preoperational stage (ages 2-7) when children think of death as temporary; to formal operations (11 years and up) when children hold the same view as an adult that death is inevitable and all living things complete the cycle of life and must die eventually (Slaughter, 2005). The Piagetian theory of race maintains that “children acquire multiple and hierarchical classification skills with the onset of concrete operations, around age 7” (Brown & Bigler, 2005, p. 538). Children at this stage who possess these classification skills are able to understand the many attributes of a person and will be able to “perceive discrimination.” This ability will become more mature as children age (Brown & Bigler; Inhelder & Piaget, 1964).

The socio-cultural perspective of death and race contends that children learn by assimilating the influences in their cultural environment. Social norms, situational
patterns, customs, and values have considerable impact on the developing child and produce different forms of social interaction. With this in mind, children’s ideas about death or race may come from the cultural traditions of their peers and families. Additionally, the quality of exposure to the concept of death or race also influences a child’s understanding of the concept (Allport, 1954; Florian, 1985; Florian & Kravetz, 1985).

**Research Questions**

The aim of this study was (1) to examine the nature of the interaction between teachers and students on topics of contemporary social issues, (2) to investigate changes in the content of students’ writing concerning their views on contemporary social issues on general and personal levels.

In this study the researcher examined the nature of the interaction between teachers and students during the book discussions following the read alouds. The graduate assistants assigned to this study coded their extensive field notes using a coding form to see if the interactions initially fell into three categories: text-based interactions, personal interactions with the text, and societal interactions with the text. Additional patterns that emerged during the coding were also noted. The researcher also investigated third-grade students’ ability to express their views on contemporary social issues following read-aloud book discussions of two books, *A Taste of Blackberries* and *Crossing Jordan*. Specifically, the graduate assistants examined, with a primary-trait scoring rubric, what changes in content the students were able to represent in writing their views on contemporary social issues using an essay discussion prompt administered before and after the book discussions. The researcher thoroughly reviewed the coding and scoring data and established interrater reliability. At the conclusion of the study, the students had an opportunity to participate in a focus group, and the teachers completed a self-report and an interview. This study also revealed what each teacher felt were the important discussion points when reading books on contemporary social issues, and how they implemented such discussions so that all students were comfortable voicing their views. Moreover the study examined the students’ view of the quality of the book.
discussions and their level of awareness concerning the relationship between the literature and their lives.

Even though the read-aloud format is more common in early elementary classrooms than upper elementary classrooms, it was the chosen vehicle for conducting the present study for several reasons. The time set aside to read to students with follow-up dialogue was a familiar occurrence in many classrooms. Furthermore, a read aloud made the discussion process an open and very visible process that easily lent itself to auditory inspection. Lastly, classroom sites and additional read-aloud times were revisited for the length of the study.

Choosing books to read during the read aloud was vitally important. Typically books are used to jumpstart conversations revolving around everyday benign issues such as hurting a classmate’s feelings, sharing, and class discipline. Rieckon & Miller (1990) found the following:

In an analysis of twenty-five children’s books for teaching problem solving and decision making, we found problems focusing on the following general themes: being lost, caring for an animal, wanting to belong, adjusting to change, not getting along with others. (p. 63)

Teachers need to discontinue underestimating the wealth of children’s literature that hold the potential to initiate classroom discourse and encourage students to work through real-life topics such as death, divorce, and respect for others. “Open-ended discussions about problems encountered in books empower children from diverse backgrounds to brainstorm their own problem-solving ideas. . . .Children can learn to select, analyze, evaluate, and apply solutions in real-life situations” (Burnett, 1997, p. 2).

A research team of two graduate assistants and the researcher did the classroom observations that included taking extensive fieldnotes during the scheduled reading block for the two third-grade classrooms. In addition to other data collected, the graduate students also did the initial scoring of the discussion essays, and the reflection forms. As they reviewed their observations and fieldnotes, the graduate assistants looked for additional patterns and/or themes of behavior. The researcher oversaw all of the data, reviewed the consistency of the scores and established interrater reliability. The data were analyzed, interpreted and summarized to see if there were any changes in the content of
the students’ writings between the pre- and post-written discussion prompts on contemporary social issues, and to discover the nature of the interaction between the teachers and the students on the contemporary social issue topics. Moreover, the reflection forms, and focus groups provided additional information on (a) the students’ perception of the quality of the book discussions, (b) their ability to recognize the way in which literature connected to their lives, and (c) the differences between the teachers’ and students’ perceptions of the read alouds.

**Definition of Terms**

*Aesthetic stance*. The reader’s stance taken while reading a text where the main objective is to become involved with the text, to experience the text, and to make personal connections with the text.

*Anchor papers*. Papers that are used as an example or model to grade students’ work.

*Authentic literature*. Literature that is about genuine, true-life experiences.

*Contemporary social issues*. Sensitive issues of a social or emotional nature such as death, homelessness, divorce, and racial issues.

*Efferent stance*. The stance taken while reading a text where the main objective is to gather information and facts.

*Inference questions*. Questions whose answers are not found in the text but are implied with students putting together prior knowledge and information from the text.

*Literary responses*. A variety of perspectives and concepts that focus on student responses based on the literature this is being read.

*Primary trait scoring*. Writing scored for the inclusion of certain characteristics or traits.

*Read aloud*. A time set aside each day to share literature orally with the class. It is often an interactive experience. The read aloud may be followed by a book discussion on the day’s reading.

*Scaffolding*. The concept (Wood, Bruner, & Ross, 1975) of supporting and guiding students in completing tasks that they are not able to do independently. The scaffolding may be temporary and will be withdrawn gradually as the student learns to accomplish the task independently (Gunning, 2000, p. 6).
Limitations of Study

The site was not randomly chosen but was one that was available for research. There is a natural bias that can occur with choosing a site that is convenient for the researcher. Although the researcher was not familiar with the chosen classrooms or the teaching methods of the teachers, she taught kindergarten at the school site (beginning in October 10, 2005) and occasionally saw the teachers at faculty functions, such as monthly meetings. The student sample was small, purposely chosen, and a “naturally formed intact group of individuals” (Wiersma, 2000, p. 128). Since no attempt was made to separate the students according to ability level, each class contained a heterogeneous mix of student ability levels. Also, the study was limited to the students and parents who agreed to participate in the study. The teachers in the study were also purposely chosen. Teachers were given a choice to participate in the research. It may be that teachers who chose to participate in the research project were more comfortable and confident with their instruction. Even though read aloud instructions were given to each teacher, their teaching style, methods, and read aloud sessions were not manipulated in any way. The researcher was involved with the study as a participant observer and had her own set of biases that affected the collection of the data. Additionally, the researcher coded and interpreted the data. It should be noted that the results from this study may not generalize to other school sites containing writing programs for third grade students, but have the potential to be a stepping stone for helping teachers incorporate additional writing strategies into their curriculum utilizing the book discussion format with books that contain contemporary social issues.
CHAPTER TWO

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

The purposes of this study were 1) to examine the nature of the interaction between teachers and students on topics of contemporary social issues during book discussions, and 2) to investigate the changes in the content of students’ writing concerning their views on contemporary social issues on general and personal levels. In reviewing the literature on book discussions, three recurring research areas emerge. In addition to reviewing the literature on book discussions, it was also important to review and address the literature on the developmental levels of death and race.

This study is conceptually grounded in three areas of research. The first area of research is reader response. Three categories of reader response are presented that emphasize the importance of allowing students to reflect on books they have read or heard through 1) interactive read alouds, 2) literature discussions, and 3) written responses. For these three modes of response to be successful, teachers need to establish an environment where “. . . significant and enjoyable learning can occur [that] respects the unique responses of readers, encouraging them to make meaning of texts in personally significant ways” (Probst, 2003, p. 822).

The second area of research is about contemporary social issues and the personal connections students make with texts on this topic. This section supports the argument that elementary students are capable of engaging in book discussions that include these issues and stresses the significance of exposing students to these topics in realistic fiction. There is substantial argument for teachers to invest in authentic, relevant literature to read aloud to their students. However, the fundamental question that is often raised is: Should contemporary social issues be introduced at the elementary level (Almasi, 1995; Beach, 1997; Lehr, 1995)?

The third area of research to be discussed in this chapter is the reading and writing connection. Many educators support the premise that writing and reading are a natural combination (Langer & Applebee, 1986; Raphael & Englert, 1990; Tierney & Shanahan, 1991; Tierney, Soter, O’Flahavan, & McGinley, 1989). Reading and writing “. . . are
symbiotic: that is, they mutually reinforce, enhance, and shape each other” (Kutz & Roskelly, 1991, p. 189). “We learn to read by reading and write by writing, but we also learn to read by writing and to write by reading” (National Council of Teachers of English, [NCTE] 2000). As Tierney, Caplan, Ehri, Healy, & Hurd low stated (1989), “Writing and reading activities structured to engage students creatively and critically with varied topics enhance knowledge acquisition, strategy usage, and critical thinking” (p. 207). Each of the three research areas will be discussed in turn.

Reader Response

Reader response concerns itself with three major areas of response: the interactive read aloud, literature discussions, and written response. In reader response theory “. . . the reader plays a central role in constructing the meaning of a text. The meaning is not found in the text or the reader but is found in the relationship or transaction between the two” (Gunning, 2000, p. 348).

Interactive Read Alouds

The Interactive read aloud, a popular literacy event in classrooms, allowed students to interact with the text while the teacher was reading (Campbell, 2001; Deford, 2003). The teacher played a pivotal role in this method because she was able to manage when and where in the text the interaction took place. There was usually plenty of conversation during the reading by both the students and the teacher. “Conversation helps individuals make sense of their world. It helps to build empathy, understanding, respect for different opinions, and ownership of the learning process” (Ketch, 2005, p. 8). The talk was a mixture of clarification and explanations. Often sound effects were added to the story.

In a study by Lickteig & Russell (1993), 183 teachers were asked to name the benefits of reading aloud to their class. “To stimulate discussion” was ranked tenth out of eleven benefits listed; tied with tenth place was reviewing comprehension skills. The teachers’ first and second choices were reading for enjoyment and fostering a love of literature/reading. Interestingly, the top two read-aloud books for third grade that teachers listed in the study were Charlotte’s Web and The Boxcar Children; two books that lent themselves to in-depth discussions on sensitive issues on multiple levels: death of a friend, homelessness, and poverty. Hoffman et al., (1993) concluded in their study that
more teachers may be using a read-aloud time than in previous studies, but the “quality of
the prevailing read-aloud experience is still open to question” (p. 500). Cochran-Smith’s
(1984) landmark research in a middle-class nursery school (fifteen students ages three to
five) brought to light the ways adults in this setting “… socialize their children into
particular patterns of literacy by helping them develop literacy and social knowledge
needed to use and understand print” (p. 1). The study focused on group story reading and
the literacy transactions that took place during that time. Her descriptive transcripts were
observations on reader/listener behaviors, both verbal and nonverbal. Cochran-Smith
grouped the interactions and observations that took place during story reading into three
major interactions that continued to be very applicable models for teachers as they read to
their students:

Type I: “Readiness Interactions” preparatory actions centered on the
norms of story reading behaviors such as visual and aural attention to the
text.

Type II: “Life-to-Text Interactions” information used by the story reader to
help students make sense of the literature: knowledge of the world,
knowledge of literary conventions, knowledge of the narrative, how to
respond as a member of a reading audience.

Type III: “Text-to-Life Interactions” connections for helping children apply a
book’s information, meaning, message, topic, problem, or theme to
their lives. (p.236)

Sipe’s (2000) qualitative study of 27 first and second graders explored the verbal
interactions that occurred during teacher’s read-aloud times. The school was a
kindergarten-fifth grade public elementary school in a working-class neighborhood.
“Twenty-three of the students were of European American ethnicity; 3 were African
American; and 1 had Native American heritage” (p. 261). There were 18 first-graders,
and 9 second-graders. The student’s responses were recorded in three different contexts:
“large-group read alouds read by the teacher, small-group read alouds done by the
researcher, and one-one read alouds also done by the researcher” (p. 262). In analyzing
his data of about 400 pages of fieldnotes, Sipe came up with five main categories for
discussion:
Category 1: The analytical included all responses dealing with the text as an object for analysis and interpretation.

Category 2: The intertextual reflected the children’s abilities to relate the text being read aloud to other cultural texts and products.

Category 3: The personal included responses indicating that the children were connecting the text to their personal lives.

Category 4: The transparent included responses suggesting that the children were intensely participating in the narrative world of the story.

Category 5: The performative included responses that indicated the children were entering the world of text in order to manipulate or steer it toward their own creative purposes. (pp. 264-267)

He also pinpointed three basic literary impulses: “(a) the hermeneutic impulse, concerned with interpreting and understanding the story; (b) the personalizing impulse, concerned with drawing the story to one’s self; and (c) the aesthetic impulse, concerned with having a lived-through experience of the story” (p. 272). The study concluded that young students possessed the ability to interpret and process text on several levels. With these results in mind, teachers should look at their read-aloud format and book choices, and start to provide students with discussions of greater depth and substance.

The thought-provoking literature class is an environment where students are encouraged to negotiate their own meanings by exploring possibilities, interpretations, and learn about features of literary style and analysis through the insights of their own responses. Responses are based as much on readers’ own personal and cultural experiences as on the particular text and its author. (Langer, 1994, p. 208)

In looking at the importance of the teacher’s role in the read-aloud process, Kristo (1993) conducted a two-year observational study of a first-grade teacher and the ways she helped her students experience books. An analysis was done on the data collected from observations, videotaping, and samples of recorded teacher interaction with the students using books. When the data were examined, it became clear that the “read-aloud time in this classroom served as the centerpiece of the curriculum from which all else flows and that the teacher’s role in preparing and orchestrating story time is crucial”
To summarize, the students’ responses were grouped into four categories:

**Nonword responses.** Active listeners often indicated their participation throughout story time by responding in ways that did not interrupt the flow of the story.

**Literal word responses.** Responses of this type fell into two broad categories: Mimicking of unique words or sounds, and questions or statements about the meaning of specific words.

**Evaluative responses.** Just as adults choose and respond to books in a variety of ways and for a variety of reasons, students used the story time arena to offer a variety of opinions about the physical characteristics of the book.

**Extension responses.** As a community of readers—individually, with friends, and as a group—these students developed an extensive background of literature.

The role of the teacher was pivotal in setting the tone for book discussions and providing a safe and comfortable community atmosphere to “learn about books and the language of literature.” Her “…genuine, uncontrived book talk makes for empowered listeners, readers and literary critics” (p. 65).

The above studies highlighted the importance of both the teacher and the reader for setting the stage for meaningful interaction with the text. Students needed literature that was thought provoking, presented the challenge of higher level thinking, and gave them the opportunity to interact with the text. In 1985 the Commission on Education published a report entitled “Becoming a Nation of Readers.” According to Trelease (2001), “Among its primary findings, ‘the single most important activity for building the knowledge required for eventual success in reading is reading aloud to children’ (p. 2). A read-aloud format that presents itself as “I read, you listen” does a great disservice to students who are ready to listen, share thoughtful interpretations, and connect personally with the literature.

**Literature Discussions**

Literature discussions, another mode of interaction of the reader and the text, illustrated that vital verbal exchanges also helped to extract the meaning of the text. Vygotsky showed that higher levels of learning took place when students collaborated verbally and exchanged ideas. The teacher’s role became that of a facilitator, guiding the
discussions that took place. Literature discussions can take many forms in the classroom such as literature circles, literature study groups, and book talks. They can be a whole class discussion, small group discussion, or a reading buddy situation. The students or the readers play the pivotal role in this method, meeting with the teacher to discuss the book they read. The discussions “feature a natural give-and-take and a freedom to offer one’s interpretation” (Gunning, 2000, p. 354). Literature discussion groups such as “literature circles are a way to bring wonderful literature into the classroom, to provide time for children to respond to literature, and to grow in their understanding and appreciation” (Medo, 2001, p. 340).

Villaume & Hopkins (1995) did a study that combined Rosenblatt’s transactional theory of response in which the reader constructs meaning from text with Vygotsky’s socio-cultural theory of language and learning from one’s peers and adults. The study analyzed the responses of the members of a literature discussion group composed of five fourth-grade students and a reading specialist. Specifically, the study wanted to know “the types of transactions between text and personal knowledge and experiences [that] appear in the literature discussions of elementary students” (p. 192). It also considered how the “social dialogue about literature impacted personal response.” Two discussions were videotaped and coded. There were several findings:

1. Elementary students’ literature responses do reflect transactions between the text and reader.
2. Group talk stimulated and served as a scaffold for personal response.
3. The differences in personal responses may be more appropriately viewed in terms of social experience rather than in terms of cognitive development.

(pp. 201-202)

“Grand conversations” was a fitting title for the Eeds & Wells’ study (1989). Suspecting that “almost all of [the] children’s experiences with literature in elementary schools today are in an inquisition mode” (p. 4), whereby direct questions having the “right” answers are posed to the students and “their comprehension of the story is judged by how closely their answers match those in the textbook,” (p. 4). Eeds and Wells wanted to know what happens when you allow students to engage in conversations about the literature they were reading. They designed a study that explored the responses of fifth
and sixth graders in literature study groups over a four to five week time frame. Data included field notes, transcriptions of audiotapes of individual sessions, and teacher journals. The students chose their novel and met two days a week for thirty minutes a day with a practicum student (teacher in training) as a team leader. The 15 practicum students had between five to seven elementary students in their group. Four of the groups were chosen for an “in-depth analysis.” The study investigated what occurs when you plan for open book discussions that provided for a variety of answers and interaction to questions. Also, the “teachers were encouraged to be fellow participants rather than monitors of reading comprehension” (p. 4). The researchers concluded that the students seemed to be adept at

1) articulating their construction of simple meaning, but also changing it as they heard alternate views; 2) sharing personal stories inspired by the reading or discussion, often in poignant and revealing ways which triggered identification by other group members; 3) participating as active readers—predicting and hypothesizing and confirming or disconfirming their predictions as they read; and 4) valuing and evaluating the text as literature. (p. 4)

Overall, they found “. . . that talk helps to confirm, extend, and modify individual interpretations and creates a better understanding of the text” (p. 4).

Although Hickman’s study (1983) focused on three aspects of student response to literature, “the occurrence of spontaneous response; variation in solicited (verbal) responses; and the implications of nonresponse,” she also wanted to know “. . . the underlying importance of the classroom teacher’s role” (p. 8). Ninety students from three classrooms, grades kindergarten/first, second/third grade, and fourth/fifth grades took part in the four-month study. In one portion of the study, students were asked to record their answers. They were given this directive after reading the book or having the book read to them, “Go into a quiet area and talk about the book on tape; tell what you think about it; say anything you wish” (p. 10). The observer also taped individual interviews with the students, had open discussions on the books (“free response”), and focused interviews. Interestingly, the three teachers in the study chose to avoid any discussion or inclusion of one of the books in the study. During the study, books that the teachers read to their
classes elicited more book talk and a variety of responses. Thus, “the role of the teacher proved to be a powerful determiner in children’s expressions of response to literature” (p. 13). In her summary, Hickman pointed out that there were prominent “age-related” patterns. Students in each of the three grade groupings (k/1, 2/3, 4/5) showed that the variation between younger and older groups increased along the following dimensions.

1. reliance on verbal modes of response.
2. confidence in verbal expression.
3. repertoire of response strategies and terminology.
4. appearance of abstracted or generalized language in summaries, classifications, theme statements.
5. evidence of distancing self from story in expressing distinction between real and make-believe and in projecting own behavior as a character. (p. 12)

Galda’s research (1990) was a longitudinal study that investigated the spectator stance through the oral responses of 35 students in fourth, sixth, and eighth grade for two years. He also looked at the responses of eight students in grades fourth through seventh for a period of four years. The students attended a small, private kindergarten-12 school in the southeast. The researcher presented the spectator stance citing Britton’s definition, “As a spectator, one is freed of the demands and constraints of action and can therefore savor feelings, contemplate forms, and evaluate broadly” (p. 262). Galda wanted to see how the “evaluative responses” changed across time and if there was a difference in response when using different genres (realism and fantasy). One aspect that he explored was “whether the ability to assume and maintain a spectator stance when reading realistic fiction occurred at an earlier age than it does when reading fantasy” (p. 264). Galda felt that it would be easier to identify with realistic literature. The summary indicated that younger readers “produced more categoric responses and the older readers produced more analytic responses” (p. 272). As the readers got older, they developed the “... ability to ‘get into’ the stories regardless of character, age, sex, or type, and in spite of the fantasy settings” (p. 274).

**Written Responses**

Read alouds followed by book discussions provide a strong motivational backdrop for writing. Written responses to reading are a personal reflection of the
writer’s thoughts and beliefs. “. . . realistic fiction provides a space for students to learn about their own and others’ lives, it also stimulates ideas and inspires writing” (Piazza, 2003, p. 115). It provides a model for writing and fuels student imaginations.

Students can formulate their own ideas from the discussions, extend the thinking of a discussion, or personally identify with the issues of a discussion through journal writing, summaries, essays, and retellings. “The written response, like the reading process, is a way for readers to work through their understandings and interpretations of texts in personally significant ways where the uniqueness of their responses is accepted” (Pantaleo, 1995, p. 78).

Many (1991) studied the effects of readers’ stance using a written response to literature. She chose 43 fourth graders, 47 sixth graders, and 40 eighth graders as subjects for her study. The students read three short stories and were instructed to “write anything you want about the story you just read.” Her findings indicated that students who focused their responses on the lived-through experience of the story were significantly more likely to interpret story events, to apply the story to life, and to make abstract generalizations than were students who responded efferently or with no single, primary stance. (p. 77)

However, those students who wrote efferently focused mainly on analyzing the story elements. It was important to note how the written response varied according to the stance the students took, and which stance provided students with greater involvement and thus higher order thinking. Students needed to be supported in the classroom to explore the aesthetic stance, and “. . . subjects at all grade levels, who assumed the aesthetic stance, reached higher levels of personal understanding, indicat[ing] that . . . the aesthetic stance can be an important part of the literature experience at any age” (p. 79).

Journal writing is a popular form for utilizing written response in the classroom. “Journal writing is a form of expressive writing that need not follow the conventions and restrictions required in other types of writing. Instead it creates its own special magic” (Piazza, 2003, p. 105). Golden & Handloff (1993) explored readers’ response utilizing journal writing for 19 fifth grade students of average reading ability in an independent reading program. It was felt that the journal would provide insight into the personal responses of students as they identified with the text for both those students who were
active in classroom book discussions and for those who were more reluctant to respond in a group situation. “Thus, the role of the reader in making sense of literature is illuminated in journal writing” (p. 175). Each student was allowed to choose a book that was on his or her reading level. Next the students were introduced to the reader response journal. The teacher explained her expectations for the reader response journal, what types of journal entries were appropriate and modeled some of her writing and the writing of previous students. Each journal entry from every student was labeled. Several patterns of response emerged during data analysis: “interpretive, literary judgment, narrational, personal, personal associational, prescriptive, and miscellaneous” (p. 180). The most frequent responses were narrational (32% of the participants responded with this pattern), the literary response was second with 26% of the students using this as their main pattern of response, followed by personal responses (17%) and interpretive (15%). One of the primary conclusions reached in Golden and Handoff’s study (1993) was that:

. . . the journal provided a valuable means of engaging children in literary response. The journal was valuable for the children in providing them with a forum for sharing their opinions about books and exploring their own feelings in response to literature. (p. 183)

In another study by Many & Wiseman (1992), one hundred twenty third-grade students were divided into three different teacher-led read-aloud groups, with book discussions stretching across the continuum from one group taking mostly an analytical approach on discussing the literary elements of the story, to no discussion on the story to having the discussion center on personal involvement with the story. After the read aloud or book discussion, all the students were told to “write anything you want about the story we just read.” Once again the students in the literary-experience group (aesthetic) wrote responses that “indicated” more involvement with the text. Students in the literary analysis group (efferent) “were more likely to focus on the identification of literary elements.” Those students who did not have a discussion “were more likely to simply retell the story” (p. 265).

Writing is an important way to engage students in reading response. It affords them a personal private space to explore the literary event and to develop one’s own ideas. Writing that is “free” and unrestrained by teacher-imposed restrictions leads
readers to a better understanding of what was read. For teachers, it provides them with a “paper trail” of the growth and development of a student’s writing skills and ability to interact with the text.

**Contemporary Social Issues: Making Personal Connections with the Text**

Many teachers and administrators consider elementary students too immature to be discussing sensitive topics such as death, divorce, single parenting and substance abuse. And yet these are the very issues that they confront in their daily lives. Author McBee (1996) noted that many elementary teachers avoided teaching controversial issues because

In their view, controversy is unsettling and requires a sophisticated reasoning ability, which young children do not possess. They believe that students in the early grades need structure, consistency, and assurance offered by teachers who know the facts and answers, and who provide lessons, and textbooks designed to impart these to students. Young students . . . should concentrate on committing these facts to memory and mastering basic skills in reading, writing, and numerical manipulations that are safely free of political agendas. (p. 1)

Lewison et al. (2002) argued that students today are much more aware of life around them. From an observation of students in four classrooms: kindergarten, third grade, pre-service teachers, and inservice teachers, it was apparent that classroom teachers must take the initiative and provide opportunities for elementary students to engage in book discussions on sensitive, sometimes scary, controversial topics they meet in their every day lives. The authors maintained that

. . . using realistic fiction books in the classroom is an avenue for moving away from a curriculum of consensus and conformity toward one that values diversity and difference . . . [making] it possible for silenced voices to be heard and for multiple perspectives to be explored. (p. 216)

Using books to help students make real life connections can be very compelling and act as a springboard to help students learn to analyze their problems, seek solutions, and formulate a personal plan. Sometimes called therapeutic reading or bibliotherapy, these books need to be chosen with care in order to be effective. Teachers have to keep in
mind the suitability of the book, the maturity level of their students, and decide if the book is best suited for an individual or a class setting. “However, because young children’s aural comprehension ability outstrips their word recognition competence, challenging content can be presented to young children from book selections that are read aloud” (Beck & McKeown, 2001, p. 10).

Shannon’s (1986) study was concerned with the fact that, “the books that children read and those read to them contribute to their intellectual, emotional, and social development” (p. 656). He investigated the social perspective of favorite children books chosen from Children’s Choice books and the Children’s Book Council. Shannon randomly chose 15% of the books listed in the 1978, 1980, and 1982 issues of The Reading Teacher. He trained two reading graduate students to score the social perspectives of the books according to three classifications:

- Individualism—an author presents a “who am I” or an “I have my own goals attitude. . . .
- Collectivism—an author presents an “all for one and one for all” attitude. . . .
- Balanced—an author presents an “I’m important, but I have social obligations” attitude. . . . (pp. 659-660)

The graduate students found that 29 of the 30 books indicated an individualist approach, one had a balanced approach, and none displayed a collective approach. Although he did go on to explain the probable causes for this imbalance, Shannon concluded that the most important aspect to keep in mind was that

- . . . teachers and parents must recognize that children’s books present implicit social messages and that they must be as concerned about what children read as they are with how well children read” in order for students to have a “balanced social perspective. (p. 662).

Anzul (1993) conducted her research in a small k-6 school in a suburban community. Over the course of two years, the subjects in her study fluctuated but a “core group of fifteen students remained” in the reading class and the data are taken from that group of students. Her premise was to develop techniques that would in time help students become more personally involved with the books that they were reading and “tilt the emphasis toward aesthetic reading” (p. 190). She settled on the following methods:
1. Time for reading from the work of literature featured in the discussions was allowed in class.
2. An opportunity for students to write or draw, whatever was uppermost in their minds during the discussion periods was provided.
3. Students were encouraged to be aware of what they were experiencing as they read.
4. Class sessions often began with an open-ended question like “talk about what touched you the most.”
5. Attention was directed back toward the text during the discussions to see what had evoked particular responses or what could support a reader’s interpretations or predictions.
6. Rereading of texts and future returns to a text were encouraged.
7. The accumulation of literary experiences over time was provided for.

(p. 190-191)

Anzul’s findings from this study strongly reinforced the argument that students should be exposed to literature that will provide links to personal involvement. She noted,

1. . . . students move through a succession of response modes and that their thinking is richer when they do so.
2. . . . the segments showing higher levels of thinking also usually were those in which the emotions were the most involved.
3. Although literature is becoming a much more integral part of reading and language arts curricula, its transactional nature is not always understood and honored. (pp. 200-201)

An interesting study by Marlowe & Maycock (2000) sought to change preservice teachers’ “punitive attitudes toward children.” The results from the study are informative for teachers who wish to help their students make personal connections to text. Twenty-nine students enrolled in a university course called, Introduction to Emotional Disturbance, read and discussed five books based on “autobiographical accounts of teaching and building relationships with students with emotional and behavioral disorders” (p. 325). The students were also given a pre-and post self-report form that recorded their tendency toward punitiveness. Additional data included a questionnaire
measuring the impact of the readings on the students and response journals. Results from the pre-and post self-report showed a small decrease in punitiveness and the analysis of the journal entries showed that over time the students began to identify with the protagonist which resulted in “emotional and cognitive learning” (p. 325). In concluding the study, several results were apparent. “Recognition of self is a key to the experience of therapeutic reading” (p. 335). The study recommended that books should be chosen that would enable the reader/listener to connect and identify with real life issues on a personal level. Teachers need to facilitate book discussions that will allow for students to make connections to the literature, explore resolution strategies and outcomes, promote individual growth, and consider diverse perspectives. According to Lewison et al. (2002),

> These stories do not make difference invisible, but rather explore how differences in culture, language, history, class, gender, and race make a difference. Social issues books can enrich our understanding of history and life by giving voice to those who have traditionally been silenced or marginalized. (p. 215)

**Writing and Reading Connections**

Work on reading and writing relationships did not gain influence until the 1970s and the 1980s. This connection represented a shift from the research that took place before the 1970s. At that point in time they were seen as separate entities united by their involvement with the language process. In the late 1980s, Tierney, Caplan, et al., (1989) examined several observations from kindergarten through third grade classrooms to see if “writing and reading were working together.” The results produced a formidable collection of writing and reading interactions. The authors “were impressed” with:

- (a) the social and personal growth of students who explored their own work in the context of sharing their writing and reading with others;
- (b) the growth in learning as students integrated what they read with what they knew and would discover as pen was put to paper;
- (c) the establishment of a framework in which students read more critically whether they were reading their own writing or the writing of others; and
- (d) improvements in their writing and reading skills as students explored an author’s craft. . . (p. 169)
Loban’s study in 1963 reported that students “who read well also wrote well; those who read poorly also wrote poorly” (p. 75). However, it was Stotsky’s (1983) impressive study that reviewed 50 years (1930s to 1981) of correlational and experimental studies on reading and writing relationships that pointed to their interaction. Correlational studies frequently showed that “better writers tend to be better readers . . . , that better writers tend to read more than poorer writers, and that better readers tend to produce more syntactically mature writing than poorer readers” (p. 636). Stotsky reported,

Studies that sought to improve writing by providing reading experiences in place of grammar study or additional writing practice found that these experiences were as beneficial as, or more beneficial than, grammar study or extra writing practice. Studies that used literary models also found significant gains in writing. On the other hand, almost all studies that sought to improve writing through reading instruction were ineffective. (p. 636)

Subsequent research has been directed towards discovering the links between writing and reading. How do these two processes interact? What are the student outcomes from this interaction?

Crowhurst (1990) developed an intervention study to investigate the relationship of reading and writing using persuasive writing. One hundred and four sixth-grade students from two different schools were randomly assigned to one of four working groups.

1. instruction in a model of persuasion with writing practice;
2. instruction in a model of persuasion with reading practice;
3. practice in reading, but no instruction in the model; and
4. group discussion activities (control group). (p. 155)

Her purpose was to discover if “. . . students’ writing of persuasion [can] be improved by instruction, and will instruction and practice reading improve persuasive writing and, conversely, will instruction and practice writing improve the reading of persuasive writing” (p. 157). Through one reading and two writing pre-and post-tests, she did conclude that persuasive writing could be improved by instruction. Groups one and two scored significantly higher than group four on writing quality on the post-test. Of interest
was the improvement of group two that had no writing practice. “Unfortunately, procedural problems prevent us from deciding how far this improvement may have been due to the presentation of the model, and how far to the development of a persuasion schema as a result of reading” (p. 167).

Investigating ways to “improve writing opportunities in the elementary classroom,” Rosaen (1990) states “. . . that teachers infrequently and unproductively use writing to promote knowledge development” (p. 419). In her study, several characteristics of writing assignments are outlined that need to be in place to promote knowledge development through writing: “identification of thought processes, text development as a thinking tool, the choice of written form, developing and using control strategies, meeting students’ learning needs, and the connection to classroom learning” (pp. 421-422). The study was conducted with a mixed-age group of 36 students, ages six through nine. Twelve were first graders, 13 were second graders, and 11 were third graders. For each subject (language, mathematics, spelling and writing) students were given a weekly checklist. Rosaen was interested in the American History unit. Each week the students had to complete several assignments that resulted in a final research report on a time period in American history. These activities included reading several selections about a period in history, picking a topic from the readings to write about, writing a rough draft, having a writing conference with a teacher, and writing the final draft accompanied by a drawing. However, during the third week of observations, the assignment was changed to use reading as a background for the writing assignment. Now the students, after having read about, discussed and seen several inventions, were told to come up with their own invention. Students were expected to be more actively involved in their writing. Overall, this study showed that a good writing assignment “. . . requires careful consideration of students’ current knowledge of the topic, their skill in various thought processes and their knowledge of and ability to produce written forms” (p. 433).

Spivey & King (1989) conducted a study with 60 students from a middle-class district in Texas. The students were from 6th, 8th, and 10th grades, 20 from each grade level. Ten of the students were “accomplished readers” and 10 “were less accomplished.” The students were instructed to write an informational report that included information they had acquired from reading three different encyclopedia articles about the rodeo. The
task of writing the report took three days to complete. Measures were taken on the 
quantity of the content, organization, connectivity, holistic quality and task management. 
Differences were observed in reading ability and grade levels in the “overall quality of 
the reports.”

1. better readers make more use of the sources
2. better readers produced texts with more local coherence
3. better readers were able to organize the material more efficiently
4. better readers made more elaborate plans, spending more time on the report

( p. 22)

Marshall (1987) conducted a study using literature and the students’ readings to 
examine the effects of three writing tasks (restricted writing, personal analytic writing, 
and formal analytic writing) on students’ written products. The study took part in two 
stages. An experienced English teacher and 80 of her eleventh-grade students took part in 
the study. All of the students were in college-preparatory classes and were considered of 
high ability. The study’s design required older students with high academic ability. Six 
students were chosen for the observational part of the study that gathered base line data to 
help with the second stage of the study. In the second part of the study, the students read, 
wrote about and were tested on four stories from Salinger’s Nine Stories.

There were four kinds of writing assignments for each story; no writing (the 
students just read the story), restricted writing (the students answered eight prepared short 
answer questions), personal analytic (the students analyzed the story using personal 
background information), and formal analytic (the students analyzed the story using just 
the text). The results showed that “. . . students scored better on stories they had read and 
written about most recently” (Marshall, 1987, p. 57). They also did better in the personal 
analytic or restricted analytic mode than in the restricted mode.

The thread that binds each of the above research articles together was the strong 
connection between reading and writing. Spanning age and maturity levels from 
elementary to high school, each study highlighted the significance of this connection 
using text to improve persuasive writing, enhance report writing, and examine students’ 
understanding of literary texts as seen in their writing tasks.
Death and Race Concepts

In choosing issues of a sensitive nature, it was imperative that those content areas, in this case death and race, were developmentally appropriate topics for the research’s population. The population in this study was third-grade students ranging in age from 8-10. In researching articles on children and death, several studies and documents confirmed that subject of death was a developmentally appropriate topic for third-graders. Schonfeld and Smolensk (1989) summarized in an article published in Death Studies, that the acquisition of death concepts by children was reached between the ages of 5 and 7. Additionally, in articles by Hospice (Developmental Stages section, ¶ 9) and Sims (2003, Developmental Stages section, ¶ 3) ages 7-9 were listed as the ages children began to understand that death was final and all living things eventually died. Florian (1985) thought the concept of death reached the stage of mature development at the age of 10 or more.

In addition to confirming the suitability of the topic of death for the students, the content of their oral and written statements about death were analyzed against the developmental sub-concepts on death by Orbach, Gross, Glaubman, and Berman (1986). Based on questionnaires by Smilansky & Weisman (1978), these concepts included causality, finality, irreversibility, and universality. The results of the content analysis will be fully discussed in chapter 4.

The second content area in this study was race. In researching this topic several articles substantiated the topic of race as appropriate for the age levels of the students in this study, 8-10 (Aboud & Doyle, 1996; Brown & Bigler, 2005; Quintana, 1998). Aboud and Doyle (1996) found that children as young as 5 years old could be prejudiced. Brown & Bigler (2005) suggested that the knowledge of gender and racial stereotypes began to form about the age of six and increased with age, maturing about the age of 10. In Quintana’s model (1998), children between the ages of 3 and 6 began to form their understanding of ethnicity. By age 10, children started to be aware of the social realities of ethnicity.

The oral and written content of the students’ statements on race were analyzed with Quintana’s model for children’s understanding of ethnicity and race (1998). The model had four levels that were broken down into approximate age ranges. This study
was concerned with level 1 and level 2, ages 6-14. The results of the content analysis of the students’ statements will be fully discussed in chapter 4.

As has been shown by the research presented in this chapter, quality literature has the potential to engage students in meaningful and personal discussions, acting as a bridge to student writing. Though the private space that is created by writing, students are able to further develop their unique voice and expand on the ideas that have been presented in the class discussion.

This study will continue to build on the research that has been presented in chapter 2 by introducing the read aloud format to fill a critical gap in book discussions on sensitive issues. Additionally, it will establish the importance of teachers to initiate discussions of contemporary social issues as part of their elementary curriculum. It will also highlight the reasons teachers should provide both oral and written literacy activities for students to extend and convey their views after a read aloud and book discussion.
The purpose of this study was (1) to examine the nature of the interaction between teachers and students on topics of contemporary social issues, and (2) to investigate changes in the content of students’ writing concerning their views on contemporary social issues on general and personal levels. Contemporary social issues are a category often overlooked by elementary teachers. This study used the read-aloud format as a catalyst to assess the value of using children’s literature with contemporary social issues in two third-grade classrooms.

The design for this study was qualitative in nature. A qualitative methodology has many key components that were compatible with the present study. First and foremost, the data were collected in a naturalistic environment (e.g., the classroom) to provide an optimum setting to observe students. As such the data were gathered directly from the source involved in the study, third-grade students and their teachers. The sample was small and purposeful allowing the two graduate assistants to focus on the interactions taking place within the classrooms. Qualitative research is often used in naturalistic environments to do exploratory work, and offer a comprehensive account of a single case or multiple cases, looking at what themes or patterns might evolve. In this case, the researchers explored small groups of intact third-grade classes to analyze interactional patterns during book discussions (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998).

The gathered data focused on the questions in the study using multiple methods of data collection: audiotaping, classroom observations that included detailed fieldnotes, students’ writing samples, reflective forms, student focus groups, teacher interviews, and teacher self-reports. Since the data were gathered from several different sources, they were analyzed for comparison, collaboration, and consistency. If a certain pattern was observed in one of the data sources, other data sources were cross-checked or triangulated to see if the observed pattern repeated itself.

The specific questions guiding the study included: (1) what is the nature of the interaction between teachers and students on topics of contemporary social issues? (2)
What changes are evident in the content of the students’ writing as represented through prompts on contemporary social issues administered before and after book discussions?

**Subjects**

The school chosen for this study was a K-5 racially and culturally diverse public school in the Florida Panhandle. It was one available for study by the researcher. The school had a population of 57% African-American students, 31% Caucasian students, and 12% other minority students with a combined total of 625 students. Seventy percent of its students were on free or reduced lunch and came from families that were economically challenged, qualifying the school as a Title I school. Student stability at the school was 93%.

This study involved two third-grade classrooms with a total of 24 third-grade students and two third-grade teachers. The third grade was chosen for several reasons. The teachers were interested in finding new ways for students to express their ideas through writing, and they had a range of educational experience. The two chosen classes were balanced for race, gender, and free-lunch count, reflecting the school’s population in respect to gender, social economic status and diversity, with the majority of the students being African-American. Additionally, the researcher did not know the two teachers of the chosen classrooms, had no knowledge of their teaching approaches, had never been in their classrooms, or seen them teach.

Finally, another important reason for selecting the third grade was that third grade is a pivotal year for writing in an elementary student’s curriculum. Considerable emphasis is placed on the ability of third graders to write and compose in order to pass the state’s Florida Writes exam at the fourth-grade level.

The backgrounds of the two teachers in the study were quite different. Teacher A had been a third-grade teacher for one and one-half years at the research site. In her mid-twenties, she had a Bachelors’ Degree, and was certified in Elementary Education. Teacher B had been an elementary teacher for 32 years. Previously she taught preschool handicapped, kindergarten, first, and second grades, and fourth-grade summer school. She had taught at the research site for 18 years, sixteen of those years as a third-grade
teacher. In her late fifties, Teacher B had a Masters’ Degree and was certified in Early Childhood and Elementary Education.

Teacher A’s classroom was a self-contained portable classroom located to the right of the school directly across from a set of double-doors that led into the school. Her classroom had an adjoining wooden walkway that connected to another third-grade portable classroom and to the sidewalk outside the double-doors. Her students sat in dyads in rectangular formation, facing the teacher’s desk and a white board. The teacher’s desk was in the middle along one side of the room. The room was large and spacious with a nicely equipped student library in a back corner, a large, open space at one end of the room, a math area, and a listening area. The room also contained a bathroom and a water-fountain. It was nicely decorated with students’ work, encouraging messages, academic charts, and a star chart that she used for her reward system.

Twelve students took part in the study, six girls and six boys. There were four African-American girls, five African-American boys, one Caucasian girl, one Caucasian boy, and one biracial girl. Eleven students received free lunch and one student had reduced lunch. Three of the students were reading more than one grade above third-grade reading level, four students were reading on third-grade level or within one grade level plus or minus, and five of the students were reading more than one grade below third-grade reading level. Two students received speech and language instruction and two students attended special education classes (other than speech and language) in a pull-out program. All the students had English as their first language.

Teacher B’s classroom was a modified open classroom that was part of a set of four classrooms. Each classroom’s entrance opened into a large shared space that contained tables, chairs and bathrooms. One often heard what was going on in another classroom if the noise level rose. The students sat at individual desks arranged in rows facing a white board. There was a rocking chair in the front of the room and the teacher’s desk was in the back and to one side of the room. There was not a lot of open space. Most of the room was taken up with the student desks and chairs. The room was cheerfully decorated with supportive sayings, such as “Do Your Best,” student work, and a good-behavior bulletin board. There was a chart for work centers such as reading, listening and a small student library.
Twelve students took part in the study, six girls and six boys. There were three African-American girls, five African-American boys, one Caucasian girl, one Caucasian boy, one biracial girl and one Asian boy. Ten of the students received free lunch and one student had reduced lunch. Six of the students were reading more than one grade above third-grade reading level, four students were reading on third-grade level or within one grade level plus or minus, and two of the students were reading more than one grade below third-grade reading level. One student received speech and language instruction. Eleven students had English as their first language. One student had Vietnamese as a first language and spoke it at home.

The two classes of third-grade students listened to their teacher read *A Taste of Blackberries* and *crossing jordan* on separate occasions. *A Taste of Blackberries*, an 85-page-chapter-book was read over a series of seven sessions in Teacher A’s class, and nine sessions, in Teacher B’s class. *Crossing jordan*, a 140-page-chapter-book was read over fourteen sessions in Teacher A’s class and sixteen sessions in Teacher B’s class. A book discussion followed each read-aloud session or was embedded into the day’s reading. Teacher A had allocated 15 minutes for the entire session. The sessions averaged 20 minutes. Teacher B allocated 20 minutes for the entire session. The sessions averaged 20-25 minutes.

In this study the focus was on the nature of the interaction between teachers and students on topics of contemporary social issues presented during the read alouds, on the essay prompt completed before the book was read and at the end of each book, and on the teachers’ and students’ immediate written reflections of the discussion and sensitive issues of the pivotal chapter in each book. At the end of the study, a delayed reflection of both books, in their entirety, was represented in student focus group discussions and teacher interviews.

**Selecting the Contemporary Social Issues and the Books**

Students encounter many contemporary social issues such as racial relations, death, homelessness, poverty, divorce, substance abuse, sex, and aggression as they mature into adulthood. However, such a broad range of issues cannot be sufficiently covered in one study. In deciding which social issue to choose, steps were taken to select
and limit these topics. Initially, the researcher reviewed an extensive array of reference material such as *Children's Literature: An Issues Approach* (Rudman, 1995); J. Burnett’s paper “Opening the World to Children: Using Books to Develop Problem-solving Strategies” (1997); *Journeying, Children Responding to Literature* (Holland, Hungerford, & Ernst, 2001); *Sensitive Issues, An Annotated Guide to Children’s Literature K-6* (Rasinski & Gillespie, 1992); and *The Read-Aloud Handbook (5th ed.*) (Trelease, 2001).

The content of the references ranged from summarizing contemporary social issues to discourse on using literature as a springboard for book discussions and personal writing. In the process of reviewing the material for topic selection, the researcher also took into account the availability of quality literature on contemporary social issues and appropriate topics for students spanning the ages from eight to twelve years. After considering all these factors, the researcher selected two sensitive issues: the death of a close friend and racial relations. These social issues are considered appropriate topics for the participants’ age range; thus, providing students with a vital link in making personal connections to literature, and in establishing meaningful opportunities for stimulating discussions.

Once the topics were chosen, the task became one of book selection. Even though some controversy surrounds the teaching of these contemporary social issues in schools, many award-winning authors are writing about these subjects in a variety of genres such as fantasy and realistic fiction. In separate studies in the book, *Battling dragons: Issues and controversy in children’s literature*, Kiefer, Lehr, McClure, and Tomlinson discussed the dangers of “stifling critical thinking” in children’s literature (1995). Lewison et al. (2002) felt that, “When critical conversations become part of the regular curriculum, school has the potential of becoming an exciting place where stimulating intellectual work is the rule rather than the exception” (p. 216). Nicholson & Pearson (2003) felt that today’s primary students were aware of many of the social issues of the day” (p. 6).

To locate books involving racial issues and the death of a close friend, the researcher reviewed and evaluated book lists such as *The Read-Aloud Handbook* (Trelease, 2001); *Adventuring with Books: A booklist for Pre-K- Grade 6 (5th ed.*)* (Jensen & Roser, 1993); The American Library Association’s Best Books for Young Adults (ALA); Jane Addams Children’s Book Awards; and the Chapman Awards for
Best Classroom Read-Alouds. In reading and evaluating the recommended titles, the compiled book selection criteria by Tu (1999) were also followed. These criteria included recommendations by Burnett (1997); Huck, Helper, Hickman, & Kiefer (1996); Ouzts (1991); and Rudman (1995):

1. Be appropriate to the child’s developmental level.
2. Provide stories using language familiar to children that is realistic in terms of their life experience.
3. Honestly portray the condition and future possibilities for the characters. Illustrations should also portray problems in an honest and straightforward manner.
4. Offer potential for controversy.
5. Present multidimensional characters.
6. Explore the process of working out problems. (pp. 1-2)

Several recommended books met these criteria. However, in light of the purpose of this study, additional criteria were considered:

1. The book was written by well-known, established authors.
2. It is quality literature that has won awards.
3. The issue of death or race had to be considered integral to the theme.
4. The book had to be one that the student and teachers had not read before.
5. The book was short enough to read aloud in four weeks.
6. The genre had to be contemporary realistic fiction.

Two books, *A Taste of Blackberries* by Doris Buchanan Smith and *crossing jordan* by Adrian Fogelin, were chosen for the book discussions. *A Taste of Blackberries* was the winner of the Child Study Association Award and received an ALA Notable Children’s Book Award in 1973. It won the Georgia’s Children’s Book Award (1974) and the Sue Hefley Award of the Louisiana Association of School Librarians (1978). The story written in the first person involved the tragic death of a young boy’s best friend, Jamie, and the feelings of guilt and remorse that plagued him. In the fifth edition of *The Read-Aloud Handbook*, Trelease (2001) stated that,
The sensitivity with which the attendant sorrow and guilt are treated makes this an outstanding book. It blazed the way for the many other grief books that quickly followed, but few have approached the place of honor this one holds. (p. 283)

crossing jordan garnered Pennsylvania’s Young Reader’s Choice Awards (2003-2004), Voices of Youth Advocates (VOYA) 2000 top shelf fiction, ALA 2001 best books for Young Adults, and the International Reading Association (IRA) 2001 notable books for a global society. In crossing jordan, racial tensions and acceptance between a Caucasian and African-American family were explored as two 12-year-old girls, Cass, a Caucasian, and Jemmie, an African-American, began to form a friendship.

Each of the books followed the criteria previously specified. These books were quality literature by established authors. They were on recommended reading lists for young adults such as the ALA list of Best Books for Young Adults, ages 9-12. Both books presented a contemporary issue as the major focal point to be addressed in a book discussion. In both books, the social issue was embedded within authentic experiences that students recognize: picking blackberries and trying out for the school’s track team. The main characters of the books were the “multidimensional characters” that Tu recommended. The characters’ emotions flowed from being very secure in their convictions to times of doubt and uncertainty. Listeners heard the main characters struggling with the problems they encountered and grappling for solutions. The resolutions that the characters eventually settled on were not simple and contrived. Both stories took unexpected twists and turns. It was the twists and turns that set the stage for the exploration of the contemporary social issues and eventual resolutions. The books were interesting, appealing, and contain powerful vocabulary, familiar to children of this age.

Procedures

The study took place in the context of a natural setting, two third-grade classrooms. Before undertaking the study, one of the first steps was to decide on the research site and get permission to conduct the study. The school was not randomly chosen but was one that was available for study. Approval was obtained from the Human Subjects Committee at Florida State University (see Appendix A for copy of the
application) and the Leon County Research Committee at the school district level to conduct the research (see Appendix B for copy of the applications).

Once the approval was obtained from Florida State University and Leon County School District, the researcher met with the principal to discuss the study. Using the criteria that were jointly established with the principal, two teachers and their classes were selected from the six third-grade classes. Since establishing a positive rapport with the participating teachers was crucially important for the success of the study, the researcher next met with the third-grade teachers, who agreed to participate in the study, and answered any questions they had about the proposed research, explained the researcher’s role as an participant observer, introduced the two graduate assistants who were part of the research team, and went over the directions for the study. The researcher then distributed and explained the three consent forms for the study. Teachers were given the teacher consent form to sign (see Appendix C for teacher consent form), the parent consent form to send home with their students (see Appendix D for parent consent form) and a copy of the student assent form (see Appendix E for student assent form).

Additionally, prior to the start of the study, time was spent visiting the classrooms and getting acquainted with the routines, students, and teachers. Two graduate assistants, selected and trained to be members of the research team, observed the third-grade classes during the scheduled reading and writing blocks. As a participant-observer in the study, “the researcher interacts with the participants to establish a rapport and a relationship but does not become a member of the group” (McMillan, 2000, p. 259). The researcher also did classroom observations, listened to the audiotapes, and examined the data that were part of the study.

Strict confidentiality was maintained throughout the study. Participants’ names on essays, reflection forms, and the teachers’ self-report were replaced with codes to insure and maintain confidentiality. In the correlation of the pre-and post-data, students were assigned numbers. All of the study’s data were housed in a locked cabinet and only available to the research team. Results were reported in the form of group information.
Data Collection

The data for this study drew on multiple sources to gain a deeper insight into the study, and to give the researcher a more complete picture of students’ perceptions of contemporary social issues. During initial visits to the classroom, the researcher observed Teacher A and Teacher B’s classes during their scheduled reading and writing times. A classroom visit lasted approximately 60-90 minutes. In this way, a sense of the “typical” reading and writing blocks in these third-grade classrooms was observed. Fieldnotes were taken during the observations. Fieldnotes are, “. . . the written account of what the researcher hears, sees, experiences, and thinks in the course of collecting and reflecting on the data in a qualitative study” (Bogan & Biklen, 1998, p. 108). A list for studying learning environments in educational settings (Bogan & Biklen, 1998, pp. 239-249) guided the observation of the initial classroom visits. The two graduate assistants on the team also visited the same classrooms on separate occasions to observe and take descriptive and reflective fieldnotes.

A member of the research team administered a pre-discussion essay prompt to the third-grade students before the teachers began reading each book to their students, and a post-discussion essay prompt after each book had been read. The pre-and post-essay prompts were identical and had one question that asked the students to comment on the contemporary social issue of each book. The prompt for A Taste of Blackberries was “Friends are a part of our lives. What would happen if a close friend died?” The crossing jordan’s prompt stated “What would happen if you were told that you couldn’t play with someone just because s/he was a different color than you are?” For each question, students were asked to write as much as they wanted and not to worry about spelling or punctuation. The researcher looked for improvement in the students’ ability to better articulate their views on the contemporary social issue in general and to identify with the issue, recognizing and making connections on a personal level (see Appendix F for the essay rubric).

During the course of the read aloud and book discussions, a critical chapter from each book was audiotaped. In each of the chosen chapters, the sensitive issue was central in the book. A critical chapter for A Taste of Blackberries was chapter 6 in which the narrator is struggling and searching for answers to his grief and guilt over the death of a
best friend. Chapter 15 was chosen for *crossing jordan*. It was a pivotal chapter whereby the racial angst that existed between the African-American family [the Lewises] and the Caucasian family [the Bodines] came to an emotional climax. The audiotapes and observational notes were transcribed and scored with the Initial Coding Elements Form developed for this study (see Appendix G for Initial Coding Elements Form). One of the study’s goals was to examine the book discussion that took place after a read aloud and document the ways in which students and teachers were making connections to the contemporary social issue in the two books chosen for the read alouds (see Appendix H for Guide for the Initial Coding Elements Form). The Initial Coding Elements Form included a framework that contained information about three major coding areas: text-based interactions, personal interactions with the text, and societal interactions with the text, categories that followed the work of Cochran-Smith (1984), and Sipes (2000) but were adapted for the purposes of this study. Cochran-Smith’s storyreading guidelines were:

Type I: “Readiness Interactions” that centered on the norms of storyreading behaviors such as visual and aural attention to the text.

Type II: “Life-to-Text Interactions” was information that the story reader used to help students make sense of the literature: knowledge of the world, knowledge of literary conventions, knowledge of the narrative, how to respond as a member of a reading audience.

Type III: “Text-to Life Interactions” focused on helping the children apply a book’s information, meaning, message, topic, problem, or theme to their lives. (1984, p. 206)

Students and teachers were also asked to respond to questions on a reflective form after each of the critical chapters had been read. The same form was used for the critical chapter in each book, chapter 6 in *A Taste of Blackberries* and chapter 15 in *crossing jordan*. The teacher and the student forms were very similar. Each form had two questions and one statement. The student reflection form was: 1) What do you remember about today’s book discussion? 2) Now underline the part in question number one that you felt was the most important. 3) Did you say anything in today’s discussion? If the answer is yes, tell me what you said. If the answer is no, tell me why you did not say
anything. The teacher reflection form was: 1) What do you remember about today’s book
discussion? 2) Now underline the part in question number one that you felt was the most
important. 3) Do you think that all of the students got a chance to participate in the
discussion? If the answer is no, tell me why some students did not participate (see
Appendix I for reflection forms). On these reflection forms, students could clarify for
themselves the significance of the issue and share their perceptions of the discussions.
The reflection forms were also used to see how students and teachers viewed the book
discussions, and if their perceptions were the same and/or different.

After the read alouds, book discussions, and post-discussion essays were
completed, the students had another opportunity to discuss their reflections, although
delayed, through focus groups in which they again revealed their views about the
sensitive issues. Each of the focus groups had five students and each student was asked in
turn to answer the following questions about both books: (a) What did you think about
the book that your teacher read? (b) What did you feel was the most important part of the
book? (c) Tell me about the book discussions that you had. Did you enjoy them? Did they
add to the meaning of the story? Is there anything you did not like about the book
discussions? Were you an active participant in the discussions? (d) Were you able to
make personal connections to the book? In what ways? (e) Do you think these books
should be read to future classes? Why? Why not? (f) If your teacher were to read these
books to another class, what suggestions do you have to improve the read aloud and the
book discussion (see Appendix J for student focus group questions)?

Additionally the two teachers in the study were given a self-report (see Appendix
K for teachers’ self-report) to complete. The self-report had two parts. Part I was given to
the teachers before the study began and used to compile demographic information like
educational background, age, and degree(s). Part II was given to the teachers after the
study had been completed and contained a literacy summary that included questions on
the teachers’ read-aloud strategies, concerns about the nature of the books and their
sensitive issues, literacy activities in their classrooms, professional development, and
their class’s student demographics.

The teachers also had a final interview in which they discussed the books, the
book discussions and their individual concerns on exposing students to literature that
contained sensitive issues. In the interview session, teachers were asked the following questions: (a) What did you think of the books that were chosen for the read alouds and book discussions? (b) What did you feel was the most important part of each book, (c) What did you think of the book discussions? Did you find them meaningful? Is there anything that you did not like about the book discussions? (d) Did you feel that all students got to participate in the discussions? (e) Were the students able to make personal connections to the books? In what ways? (f) Would you read these books to future classes? Why? / Why not? (g) What would you do differently next time you read these books to your classes? (h) When you are reading, are you actually thinking about the type of questions that will be asked on the FCAT? (i) What do you think should have been done differently during the course of this research? (j) What questions would you like to ask me (see Appendix L for teachers’ interview questions)?

In summation, to study the first question: the nature of the interaction between the teachers and students on topics of contemporary social issues, the research team composed of the researcher and the two graduate assistants examined the observational and reflective fieldnotes and coded these observations and the transcripts from the audiotapes using the Initial Coding Elements Form. The reflection forms of the students and the teachers, the student focus groups, and the teacher interviews were used to triangulate the data from the Initial Elements Coding Form.

To study question two: investigation of the changes in the content of students’ writing concerning their views on contemporary social issues on general and personal levels following read-aloud book discussions, the research team examined and scored the pre-and post-discussion essays for each of the two books. The student and teacher reflection forms, classroom observations and notes, and transcripts from the audiotapes were used to triangulate the pre-and post-discussion essays’ data. Additional questions centered on the quality of the book discussions, and the ability of students to recognize the connections between literature and their lives surfaced during the research and were added to the study.
Data Analysis

All of the preceding research data were summarized and interpreted to answer the two questions of this study: (1) to examine the nature of the interaction between the teachers and students on topics of contemporary social issues, and (2) to investigate changes in the content of students’ writing concerning their views on contemporary social issues on general and personal levels. Analyses were completed on teacher-student and student-student interactions and on student reflections and response to the contemporary social issues.

The Initial Coding Elements Form addressed the contemporary social issues as they were discussed by the teachers and the students on three different levels of interaction: text based interaction, personal interaction with the text, and societal interactions with the text (see Appendix H for more information). It was used as the primary framework for coding the transcripts of the book discussions of chapter 6 (A Taste of Blackberries) and chapter 15 (crossing jordan). In the preliminary analysis, each interaction of the teachers and students was tallied for the three different levels mentioned above. Transcripts were segmented by turns and by t-units/sentences. A T-unit contains one independent (main) clause and any dependent (subordinate) clauses or nonclausal structures that are attached to it or embedded within it (Hunt, 1965). Next the data for each of the initial codes were weighted and changed into percentages to give a clearer picture of the amount of time that teachers and students spent on the individual codes. The results for the coded interactions and the percentages were a group score for the students in each class (class A and class B) and individual scores for Teacher A and Teacher B.

Using the coding scheme, the transcripts were repeatedly read in order to detect regularly occurring phrases and content regarding the sensitive issues. In an inductive “grounded” approach (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) to the data, additional emerging themes, constructs, or relationships were considered. Three additional codes emerged: statements that contained the sensitive issue of death or race/diversity; friendship statements; and other issues, such as discipline statements. The issues of death and race were further analyzed and determined to include an explicit and implicit aspect to each.
In the book discussion for chapter 6 of *A Taste of Blackberries*, teacher and student statements in which the issue of death was clearly the topic and contained the words death, dead, or dying were coded as explicit. Statements in which the issue of death was the understood topic were coded implicit.

For *crossing jordan*, student and teacher statements made during the book discussion of chapter 15 in which the issue of diversity/race was clearly the topic and contained the words white or black were coded explicit. Statements in which the issue of diversity/race was the understood topic were coded implicit.

Student responses were the second major form of analyses. One way to measure the response of student understanding was to look for change of the scope and depth of content in students’ written response concerning their views on contemporary social issues with a pre-and post-discussion essay question. The essays were scored using the primary trait rubric (Lloyd-Jones) developed specifically to evaluate the students’ writing performance as it related to the understanding of the social issue between the pre-and post-discussion essay question. A form of holistic scoring, primary trait scoring, “. . . determine[s] whether a piece of writing has certain characteristics or primary traits that are crucial to success with a given rhetorical task” (Lloyd-Jones, 1977, p. 32). In this study the primary traits were based on the contemporary social issue found in each book, death in *A Taste of Blackberries* and race/diversity in *crossing jordan*.

The rubric was based on the presence of the contemporary social issue itself rather than the quality of the students’ writing. Each essay had a possibility of a score from 0-4 with 0 being the lowest score indicating lack of knowledge of the topic or the response was illegible and 4 being the highest indicating an understanding of all parts of the question by providing supportive ideas (see Appendix F for essay rubric). The scores of the pre- and post-discussion essays were compared and analyzed. Using the primary trait rubric, the mean, median and standard deviation for the pre- and post-discussion essays were also computed for each class.

In addition to the rubric, the contemporary content of the students’ essays was further analyzed along cognitive, developmental, and social views. For example, developmental models of children’s perception of death were used to help explain cognitive readiness for understanding the issue based on the development and age of the
child. Along cognitive lines several authors (Orbach et al., 1986; Schonfeld & Smilansky, 1989) have hypothesized and studied the progression along a continuum of four factors: irreversibility of death, finality of death, causality of death, and inevitability of death and old age. Rudman (1995) stated, “It is useful for adults to be aware of the stages through which children progress in their perception of death and of the usual responses to the death of a loved one” (p. 143). From a social view (Florian, 1985), educators have noted the effects of socio-economic groups on the perceptions of death, finding urban children are often more aware of death than middle class children. Such work considered background, life experiences, personal opinions, and value judgments influencing the perception of death.

Knowing that “today, the acceptance of cultural diversity is still a challenge,” (Rasinski & Gillespie, 1992, p. 161), Aboud & Doyle (1996), provide a working definition of racial discrimination as a “predisposition to respond in an unfavorable manner to members of a racial group” (p. 161). A Piagetian framework suggests cognitive ability was involved in recognizing diversity and attaching values to it. Allport’s (1954) theory suggests a cultural rather than a behavioristic view, proposing that children learn prejudice from parents and other socialization agents such as media, friends, siblings, etc. Additionally, Quintana’s model (1998), divides the onset of children’s understanding of race into four levels based on approximate ages of children from age three, when the integration of affective and perceptual understandings of ethnicity occurs, to adolescence, when ethnic-group consciousness and ethnic identity develops.

The reflection forms (see Appendix I for reflection forms) were an additional written response for teachers and students to measure their understanding of the contemporary social issue after each of the critical chapters had been read. The responses were content-analyzed for the contemporary social issue using the final codes, implicit and explicit, against the death/race literature. The reflection forms were also used to examine how students and teachers viewed the quality of the book discussions and to compare their views of the discussion.

After the read alouds were completed, the students had another opportunity to discuss their reflections, although delayed, through focus groups in which they again
revealed their views about the sensitive issues. The focus groups disclosed to this researcher the depth of the students’ understanding of the sensitive issues covered in the two books. Thus, through written and oral responses the researcher was able to ascertain student understanding of such concepts as death and diversity primarily using the models of Orbach et al. (1986) for the concept of death, and Quintana (1998) for the concept of race.

The final two pieces of data were the teachers’ self-report and the teachers’ interview session. The self-report provided an additional opportunity to learn more about the teachers and their individual perspectives on the read alouds, book discussions, and the overall study. The first six questions for the teachers’ interview were very similar to the first six questions that were asked in the student focus groups. This was done intentionally in order to have another instance to compare and contrast the views of both the students and teachers on the quality of the read alouds, and book discussions.

The research team collected and analyzed several forms of data during the course of the study: fieldnotes, observations, audiotapes, transcripts, the Initial Coding Elements Form, pre-and post-discussion essays, reflection forms, teachers’ self-report, plus student focus groups and teachers’ interview sessions were held. The data provided instances for comparison and contrasting plus they were used to strengthen the study through the use of triangulation.

**Researcher’s Biases**

Every researcher brings to her/his study a set of personal biases. To help control for bias, multiple forms of data were collected from the students (fieldnotes, pre-and post-discussion essays, reflection forms, audiotapes, book discussion+ and focus group transcripts) and the teachers (fieldnotes, reflection forms, a self-report, audiotapes, book discussion and teachers’ interview transcripts) in this study. Moreover, other observers, two graduate students, were involved with the study to help diminish the effect of the researcher’s subjectivity. Finally, this researcher was not knowledgeable about the particular routines and curriculum of the third grades. Hired at the study site in October of 2005, and in a portable classroom situated away from the majority of the third-grade teachers, there was no time available to interact with those teachers. As a result, prior to
the study, the researcher had never been in the third-grade classrooms when they were working with students, had no knowledge of their read-aloud/book discussion methods, and knew only three of the teachers in passing. Those teachers were not involved in the study. However, as Bogdan & Biklen (1998) aptly stated, researchers should “Acknowledge that no matter how much you try you cannot divorce your research and writing from your past experiences, who you are, what you believe, and what you value” (p. 34).

As not only a participant observer, but also as a teacher, the researcher was very interested in helping students think through contemporary social issues using the read aloud as a mode of delivery. Aware of the immense value of the classroom read-aloud/book discussion combination, this format has been used in the researcher’s classroom for over thirty years. Initially, the stories did not involve any sensitive issues that might be upsetting to the students. However, when the researcher started pairing books with the real-life issues that students were facing, she saw a tremendous increase in the students’ interest in book discussions, and more importantly, their interest in writing about the topic that was discussed. Making a personal connection became important to the student. Given these factors, every effort was made by the researcher to be consistently aware of any strong beliefs about read alouds, book discussions and contemporary social issues that might interfere with the objectivity of this study.
CHAPTER 4

RESULTS

The purpose of this chapter is to answer the specific questions guiding the study: (1) what is the nature of the interaction between teachers and students on topics of contemporary social issues? (2) What changes are evident in the content of students’ writing as represented through prompts on contemporary social issues administered before and after the book discussions? The study, Exploring Third-Grade Students’ Ability to Express Their Views on Contemporary Social Issues Following Read-Aloud Book Discussions, took place in the natural setting of two third-grade classrooms. Two books were chosen for the book discussions, crossing jordan and A Taste of Blackberries. Crossing jordan by Adrian Fogelin follows the budding friendship of two twelve-year old girls, one African-American (Jemmie) and one Caucasian (Cass), and the racial tensions the friendship evoked in their families. A Taste of Blackberries by Doris B. Smith centers on the tragic death of a young boy’s best friend and his struggle to understand why his friend has died. A critical chapter from each of the two books illustrates the typical pattern of interaction between the teachers and the students across multiple instances of a read aloud.

The results of this study will be addressed as follows. First the read-aloud styles of presentation for each teacher will be analyzed for the “essential components of an interactive read-aloud” (Fisher, Flood, Lapp, & Fry, 2004, p. 10). Next each book, A Taste of Blackberries and crossing jordan, will be discussed in terms of (a) interactions during book discussions and coding results for each book and class, (b) explicit and implicit patterns for each book and class with references to the literature on developmental concepts of death or race, (c) written reflections, (d) pre-and post-discussion essays, and (e) content analysis of the discussion essays, book discussion transcripts, reflection forms, and focus group transcripts on the developmental concepts of death or race. These sections are triangulated with the teachers’ interview and student focus group data.
Read-Aloud Styles of Presentation

Both Teacher A and Teacher B did not vary their styles across the two books that they read, and both are described in the following sections. The “discussion of content” component, the heart of the study, however, will be described in separate book sections.

Text Selection

*A Taste of Blackberries* and *crossing jordan* followed recommended book selection criteria in that the books were quality children’s literature that had won a number of awards and were written by well-known authors (Tu, 1999; Fisher, et al., 2004). The teachers in the study were not familiar with the books and initially had some concern over the sensitive nature of their contents. For their classroom read alouds, they tended to pick books of a “happier nature” not ones that portrayed the sad occurrences in real life. However, they discovered that they really enjoyed reading and discussing the books.

They had mixed feelings on how their students related to the theme of death in *A Taste of Blackberries*. Even though some of the students had had someone they knew who had died, an aunt, uncle or a grandparent, the teachers felt that several students had difficulty relating to the narrator as he struggled with the anger over the death of his best friend. Interestingly, both teachers decided that, in retrospect, they should have talked about the steps of grieving and how anger is one of those steps.

*Crossing jordan* was the favored book of this study for both the teachers and the students. As one teacher said, “It was fabulous! It was wonderful!” They felt that the students easily connected with the story because the majority of the students at their Title I school were African-American. The story also had more action, and moved at a faster pace. At first, the teachers were not sure how their students would react to the segregation issues mentioned in *crossing jordan*. This group of students seemed to have a limited understanding of segregation. Except for a story in their literacy series and possible media exposure, many of the students, in both classes, were puzzled or indignant over some of the racial issues, not understanding why the girls and their families could not just be friends.

Teacher B commented that the read-aloud format was an essential part of her curriculum that she had put aside when FCAT came along. She felt that there just was not
enough time to fit everything into a day and if something had to go, it would be the read aloud. This study revitalized her thoughts and she decided to continue with read alouds when the study had been completed. Teacher B acknowledged that since the study she was having more of a discussion with the books she was reading now.

**Organization of the Class**

Each teacher had a distinctive schedule and organizational structure for her read aloud. Teacher A chose to keep the read alouds for this study at her usual read-aloud time, 2:15 p.m., 35 minutes before the students were dismissed to go home. At 2:15 p.m., she informed the students that it was time for the read aloud and sat on a chair located in the open space at the back corner of the room where the students joined her. Typically, some students took longer to transition to the reading area, or jostled for position of “who would sit next to whom.” Some side-bar talking with a group of girls was observed. Before the reading began for the day, Teacher A reminded the students to follow the rules. Sometimes she reorganized the students seating, separating those with behavior issues. If a student misbehaved, the teacher changed a star on the student’s star chart.

During the story reading, the teacher read in a well-articulated, slightly-raised voice, modifying her voice to complement the tone of the story. She imbedded the book discussion into her reading. At the read-aloud time, which coincided with dismissal, students left the circle, grabbed their backpacks, and prepared for dismissal. There was no summation of the discussion or any follow-up assignment such as a journal entry.

Teacher B chose to do the read aloud and discussion at approximately 1:25 p.m. when the students returned from the Pearson Learning computer lab. As she stated, “it gives us a break” between the computer lab and learning centers. When the students entered the room, they immediately gathered around the teacher who sat in a rocking chair. Several student desks were pushed back to provide the needed open space in front of the rocker. Teacher B read at a comfortable pace with a soft, quiet expression using different tones and volume for the voices of the characters and the action that was taking place in the story. She often leaned forward as she read, as if trying to get closer to the students. The students closest to her seemed more focused on what was being read. However, some of the students who were furthest away and did not seem to be paying attention would later become active participants in the discussion. If a student’s behavior
was unacceptable, the teacher asked that student to please take his/her seat. Teacher B read the entire chapter for the day and the discussion followed the read aloud. After the book discussion, the students were directed to the next scheduled activity. There were no follow-up assignments (e.g. journal entry, writing assignments, dramatic enactments).

**Preview and Practice**

One of the general procedures for read alouds was for teachers to preview and practice the text. Observing effective read alouds, Fisher et al. (2004) stated that teachers who practiced the text were inclined to “pause effectively during the read aloud to model fluency, and their pauses offered opportunities for questioning” (p. 11). It also allowed teachers to select any difficult vocabulary to review with the students. In passing conversation, the teachers stated to the researcher that time was at a premium; they did not have enough time to preview or practice the chapters adequately before reading to their classes. Understanding their time constraints, the researcher knew that *crossing jordan* had some words [like the N word] that would be sensitive to a third-grade class and gave the teachers a list of these words, referenced with their page numbers. Other evidence of this lack of adequate preview was at one point, Teacher A mispronounced the last name of the author and asked the graduate observer for the correct pronunciation of “Buchanan.” Teacher B had a set schedule of reading one chapter a day and found that at times, for *crossing jordan*, some chapters were really too long to be read at one sitting, and her schedule had to be changed accordingly.

**Book Introduction and Clear Purpose of Reading**

Teacher A held up the book for the day, read its name, and usually asked a student to summarize or tell the stopping point of the last reading. She read at a stop-and-go pace, embedding the book discussion within the read aloud. Pausing every so often to interact with the students, she asked a comprehension question, explained vocabulary, invited students’ opinions, or scaffolded what was happening in the story. She frequently set the purpose for reading by engaging the students in making predictions, “Boys and girls what do you think is going to happen with the daddy right now?” Her reading varied from day to day. Some days Teacher A would finish up a chapter and start a new chapter. Other days she would just read five or six pages in a chapter.

At the start of the read-aloud time, Teacher B also encouraged her students to be
good listeners, reminding them that if they were not good listeners, they would return to their seats. Holding the book in her hand, she would set a purpose for the day’s reading, “While I’m reading, remember words put pictures in our mind. I’m going to ask about these and the feelings that you have in your heart when I read.” She also mentioned something from the upcoming chapter for the students to think about. She rarely stopped and asked a question during the reading; her questions were placed at the end of the entire day’s reading. She did not ask too many specific questions. She asked open-ended questions such as, “Who would like to share?” “What do you think?” She called on the students individually, one at a time. Sometimes she would ask for a consensus of opinion, “How many of you think ---?”

**Discussion of Content**

The teachers stated that they were “grateful” to have been exposed to these two books. With the heavy emphasis on the FCAT, Teacher B felt that she did not have the time to review current children’s literature. Both teachers liked *A Taste of Blackberries* but enjoyed *Crossing Jordan* more. Teacher A stated that she probably would not have even read *Crossing Jordan* because she checks out the covers of books first and this book cover did not look very appealing to her. They felt there were some issues in the book that were out of their comfort range. For instance, they did not want to get into a discussion on sickle-cell anemia and felt that discussion should be done by the school nurse or guidance counselor. Teacher B thought *A Taste of Blackberries* was “really good for them [students] to hear.” Teacher A mentioned that the book gave her class “a different feel because I don’t read anything normally like that to them, you know, because it’s real life.” Both teachers felt that the students were able to connect with the book, discussing people who had died in their lives. More will be said about the analysis of content for each teacher in a later section on “Interactions During Book Discussions.”

**Independent Reading or Writing**

The teachers said they probably wouldn’t have the students do a journal entry or follow-up writing in the future. Teacher A remarked that “I think we reflected on it as we spoke about it in class.” Teacher B added, “I think they processed it so well verbally and if you start making them do projects or anything based on the story, they get to where they don’t like story time.” Both commented that read-aloud time was excellent for
listening skills. They may have the students do an Accelerated Reader Test [AR] on the book and the students would listen because they wanted those AR points. These two books were on the AR list and the students who took the comprehension tests for the books did well.

A Taste of Blackberries

One chapter from each of the two books was chosen as the critical chapter for this study. These chapters served as exemplary incidences of student-teacher interactions, thus providing opportunities for explicit and implicit statements about the sensitive issues. Chapter 6 was chosen from A Taste of Blackberries, an eight-chapter book, because the story reached a climax in the narrator’s struggle to find answers to his grief and guilt over the death of a best friend. The critical incident in the chapter was a conversation on death that the narrator had with his neighbor in her garden. He asks her questions that are not easily answered such as, “Why did it happen?”

Interactions During Book Discussions

Using her embedded book discussion read-aloud format, Teacher A normally spent 20 minutes reading and discussing A Taste of Blackberries with the class. Within her allotted read-aloud time of 20 minutes, 8 to 10 minutes were spent on the story’s discussion in a “stop-and-go” manner. Teacher A would be reading along and suddenly stop and ask the students a question such as, “What do you think is happening here?” Then she would return to the story and continue reading until she stopped for another question for the students. Occasionally the total read-aloud time was reduced to 10 or 15 minutes if students needed to complete other work that day or if there were several intercom announcements that interrupted her reading. Teacher A had six read-aloud and discussion sessions and one recap session reviewing the book as a whole. Some days she would read more than one chapter or finish a current chapter and read a few pages of the next chapter.

The Initial Coding Elements Form was used to analyze the transcript of the book discussion between Teacher A and her students. The number, types, and percentages of the questions/statements made by both the teacher and the students in class A were coded by two raters and an interrater agreement of 96% was reached. Table 1 shows the number
of responses and percentages for text-based interactions, personal interactions with the
text, societal interactions with the text, and off-topic questions and statements for teacher
A and her 12 students for chapter 6.

Table 1

*Number and Percentage of Responses From the Initial Coding Elements Form for
Teacher A and Teacher A’s Students for Chapter 6*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Coded sidebars</th>
<th>Teacher A</th>
<th>Teacher A’s students</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>n</td>
<td>%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Text-based</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>(65.0%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal interactions</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>(26.0%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Societal interactions</td>
<td>_</td>
<td>_</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Off-topic interactions</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>(9.0%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note.* The dashes indicate a lack of response in that area.

Chapter 6 was read in one day. Ten of Teacher A’s text-based statements or
questions were literal, based directly on the text. For example, Teacher A asked the
meaning of the words *timidly* and *radiant* as they pertained to the story. The personal
interactions statements or questions were concerned with life experiences, such as her
statement, “I still talk to my mom and dad [when something bad happens].” The students
in Teacher A’s class had two more speaking occasions than their teacher. The majority
[60%] of their statements were personal interaction statements about life experience of
the death of loved ones, “When my great grandma died, I was so sad. I went to my
mother. She held me. I pushed her away and I went to look for myself.” There were no
societal interactions for Teacher A or her students. Both the teacher and the students had
two off-topic interactions.

Teacher B’s routine was to read a chapter a day and the book discussion followed
after each day’s reading. She had allotted 20 minutes for the reading and book discussion,
spending 50% of the time on reading and 50% of the time on discussing the chapter.
Occasionally, when the students were having a good discussion, she continued the
discussion into the next scheduled actively. Teacher B had eight read aloud and
discussion sessions, reading a chapter a day, and one recap session for chapter 6.

The Initial Coding Elements Form was also used to analyze the transcript of the
book discussion between Teacher B and her students. The number, types, and
percentages of the questions/statements made by both the teacher and her students in
class B were coded by two raters and an interrater agreement of 90% was reached. Table
2 shows the number of responses and percentages for text-based interactions, personal
interactions with the text, societal interactions with the text, and off-topic questions and
statements for Teacher B and her 12 students for chapter 6.

Table 2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Number and Percentage of Responses From the Initial Coding Elements Form for Teacher B and Teacher B’s Students for Chapter 6</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Coded</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>sidebars</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Text-based</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal interactions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Societal interactions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Off-topic interactions</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. The dashes indicate a lack of response in that area.

Ten of Teacher B’s text-based statements/questions were literal interactions,
based directly on the text: “Where did the story start?” The types of personal interactions
for Teacher B were personal opinions: “I think that Buchanan-Smith is an extremely
good writer and she puts in so many details to help us see what’s happening.” The
students in Teacher B’s class had seven more speaking occasions then their teacher. Ten
of their statements were also literal text-based interactions based directly on the text of
the story, “He was sad and waited till Mrs. Mullins came.” Their personal interactions
were personal opinions, “You know what? I think Mrs. Mullins helped him out.” There were no societal or off-topic interactions for either Teacher B or her students.

Continuing to use the coding scheme, the transcripts were repeatedly read in order to detect any additional regularly occurring phrases or content pertaining to the sensitive issue of death. In an inductive “grounded” approach (Glaser and Strauss, 1967) to the data, the interactions were re-examined for emerging themes, constructs, or relationships. Three patterns emerged: statements that contained the sensitive issue of death, friendship statements, and other issues such as a discipline statement from the teacher. The issue of death was further analyzed and determined to include an explicit and implicit aspect. The additional patterns for the teachers and students had a direct relationship in studying the nature of the interaction between the teachers and students on the contemporary social issue of death. These patterns were coded as explicit and implicit based on the sensitive issue of death. The content was interpreted further against the literature on children’s perceptions of death and the results of the interpretation will be discussed throughout the chapter.

**Explicit and Implicit Qualitative Patterns for Chapter 6**

The explicit and implicit patterns that had a direct relationship on the interaction between the teachers and the students on the contemporary social issues of death were coded and tallied. In the book discussion for chapter 6 of *A Taste of Blackberries*, explicit statements were student/teacher statements in which death was clearly the topic and contained such words as death, dead or dying. An example of an explicit statement from a student in Teacher A’s class, “When my great-great grandma died, I wanted to talk to my mom.” Statements in which death was the understood topic were coded implicit. An example of an implicit statement from Teacher A was, “Remember how we talked about this yesterday? How the world seems to stop for you [when someone dies].”

Table 3 shows the number of responses and their corresponding percentages for the explicit and implicit patterns for Teacher A and her 12 students for the book discussion of chapter 6. The interrater agreement for these coding results was 88.9%. The numerical data for the explicit and implicit statements were changed into percentages to give a clearer picture of the influence of the critical issue on the book discussions.
Table 3
Number and Percentage of Explicit and Implicit Statements for Teacher A and Teacher A’s Students for the Book Discussion of Chapter 6

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Teachers &amp; Students</th>
<th>Explicit Statements</th>
<th>Implicit statements</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Teacher A</td>
<td>n=4 (11.8%)</td>
<td>n=8 (23.5%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher A’s students</td>
<td>n=10 (23.8%)</td>
<td>n=11 (26.2%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In talking with the Teacher A at the conclusion of *A Taste of Blackberries*, she mentioned that, “It’s [*A Taste of Blackberries*] so much different than what I thought.” Before reading the book, she had reservations about introducing the subject of death to her class. After reading the book, she stated, “I actually liked it. I think the children really enjoyed it.” Therefore, it is significant that when the teacher’s and student’s explicit and implicit statements from the book discussion are combined, 85% of the discussion was based on the critical issue of death, either directly or indirectly. The students alone spent 50% of the discussion time on the issue of death with implicit statements being somewhat higher [2.4%].

Teacher B’s class interactions were also examined. In looking at some student examples of explicit and implicit codes from Teacher B’s class, an explicit example was, “How come the story is at the point Jamie died and how come they call the book *A Taste of Blackberries*?” An implicit student statement was, “He [the narrator] was sad and wanted to talk to someone.” Table 4 shows the number of responses and their corresponding percentages for the explicit and implicit patterns for Teacher B and her 12 students. The interrater agreement for these coding results was 83.3%. The numerical data for the explicit and implicit statements were changed into percentages to give a clearer picture of the influence of the critical issue on the book discussions.
Table 4  
*Number and Percentages for Explicit and Implicit Statements for Teacher B and Teacher B’s Students for the Book Discussion of Chapter 6*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Teachers &amp; Students</th>
<th>Explicit statements</th>
<th>Implicit statements</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Teacher B</td>
<td>__</td>
<td>__</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher B’s students</td>
<td>1 (4.2%)</td>
<td>7 (29.2%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. The dashes indicate a lack of response in that area.

Even though Teacher B felt unsure about reading a story to her class in which the death of a best friend was the theme, she later stated, “I loved it [*A Taste of Blackberries*]. I thought the writer was awesome, so good and I thought she really touched the kids. She touched me too.” When the teacher’s and student’s explicit and implicit statements from the book discussion were combined, over 50% of its statements were based on the critical issue of the book, death, either directly or indirectly. However, it is important to note that Teacher B had no explicit statements on death during the book discussion. The students spent a significant amount of time discussing the critical issue of death, a total of 33.4% discussing the critical issue of death with implicit statements being higher percentage-wise [70%] than the explicit statements. These percentages seem to confirm the teacher’s statements that the students felt comfortable with the book and connected personally to the story.

**Written Reflections**

In this study, students were also given opportunities to write. They completed a written reflection form that briefly summarized the book discussion for each of the critical chapters. The critical chapter for *A Taste of Blackberries* was chapter six in which the main character has difficulty doing the every day activities that usually took place like playing outside with friends or eating because of his friend’s death. He decides to go into a neighbor’s yard so that he can be by himself to think about the tragic death of his best
friend, Jamie.

There were three questions on the reflection form: (a) What do you remember about today’s book discussion? (b) Underline the part of your answer in number one that you feel is the most important. (c) Did you say anything in today’s discussion? If the answer is yes, tell me what you said. If the answer is no, tell me why you did not say anything (see Appendix I for a copy of the reflection form). The reflection forms were analyzed using the explicit and implicit coding criteria reported from the primary trait rubric to see if the students addressed the sensitive issue, death, in writing their answer for number one. Explicit statements were student/teacher statements in which death was clearly the topic and contained such words as death, dead or dying. Statements in which death was the understood topic were coded implicit. These statements were also summarized and interpreted against the literature on death.

Twelve students in Class A wrote a mean number of 1.8 sentences; 35% of the sentences had explicit statements and 52% had implicit statements. The combined totals of the explicit and implicit statements showed 87% of the students’ written reflections were concerned directly or indirectly with the issue of death. Eleven of the students had at least one explicit or one implicit statement concerning the death of Jamie in their answer to the first question, and had underlined that sensitive issue statement as the one they felt was most important. An example of an explicit statement was, “He was sad when Jamie died.” The one remaining student wrote that he remembered getting in trouble during class. In answering question number three [Did you say anything in today’s discussion?] eight of the 12 students or 67% said they had participated in the discussion. Their contribution to the discussion fell into two categories, (a) sadness over the idea of the death of a best friend or Jamie, “He was sad that his best friend died.” (b) having a quiet place to go when they felt sad, “A quiet place to go is under my covers.” The four students who did not participate in the discussion had these reasons for not participating: “I don’t have a secret place where I go if I’m upset; I had to think and it really felt sad; and two said, I did not want to say anything.”

For class A, the students’ reflection forms mirrored the teacher-directed book discussion for chapter six, and the teacher’s reflection form. In her discussion, Teacher A focused on two main themes, how you would feel if a friend died, and do you have
someone or someplace to go and think if you are sad? Some examples of Teacher A’s comments were, “Remember how we talked about this yesterday? How the world seems to stop for you [when someone dies]. The narrator went to a quiet place when he just needed time to think, do you have a quiet place to go to and think?”

The teachers also had a reflection form to fill out after chapter 6. On her teacher’s reflection form, for what she remembered about the day’s discussion, Teacher A summarized the two main themes for the day’s discussion, How would you feel if a friend died? and Do you have someone or someplace to go and think if you are sad? She also thought the two themes were the most important points made in the discussion that day. Initially, she considered A Taste of Blackberries a more difficult text for the students because it was a slow-moving story. However, 67% participated in chapter 6’s discussion, and 87% of the students’ reflections were concerned with the sensitive issue of death.

Twelve students in class B wrote a mean of 1.9 sentences on their reflection form; 4.4% of the sentences had explicit statements and 52% had implicit statements. The combined totals of the explicit and implicit statements showed 56.4% of the students’ written reflections were concerned directly or indirectly with the issue of death. Eight of the students had at least one explicit or one implicit statement concerning the death of Jamie in their answer to the first question, and had underlined that sensitive issue statement as the one they felt was most important. An example of an implicit statement was, “It made me sad when the boy [narrator] had got strange.” Two of the students did not underline an explicit or an implicit statement as the most important in their reflections: “The story was kinda good, that the boy seen kids playing outside and he wanted to play.” Two students misunderstood the first question: “I did not say anything today.” In answering question number three [Did you say anything in today’s discussion?], seven students or 58% said they had participated in the discussion. Their contribution to the discussion fell into three categories: (a) sadness over the death of Jamie, “It was very, very, very sad,” (b) the different reactions of the friend at the death of Jamie, “The friend’s hands commanded him to get some food,” and (c) the friend going into the garden, “I remembered that he went into Mrs. H’s [Mullin’s] Garden.” Five students did not participate in the discussion and these are their reasons, “I didn’t want to say something; It was a short story [chapter] so there is nothing to tell about; I did
not say anything because some people stealed my answer and I could not say anything then; and two, I did not say anything because I did not know what to say.”

Teacher B’s follow-up book discussion for chapter 6 focused on the general attributes of the chapter or the book. One question she asked was, “Where did the story start?” The second focus of her questions was the action taking place in Mrs. Mullin’s garden, “Do you think the garden [Mrs. Mullin’s] was a place to wait?” Her questions also focused on Jamie’s friend, “Did Jamie’s friend want somebody to help him?” The students’ answers on the reflection form matched two of the three themes in the teacher-student follow-up discussion: concern for the narrator [Jamie’s friend] and Mrs. Mullin’s Garden. These two reflections of the students also matched with Teacher B’s reflection form. Teacher B thought that the day’s discussion centered on Jamie’s friend looking for someone to talk to, and what took place in Mrs. Mullin’s garden. At the beginning, Teacher B doubted if her students would understand the introspective nature of the book and the book’s format of having a narrator “tell” the story. However, the reflection form showed that the students were involved in the discussion, 58% had participated in the discussion and 56.5% of the students’ reflections were concerned with the issue of death.

The students’ statements were also summarized and interpreted against the literature on death. In both classes, the student statements about Jamie’s death were perceptive, often realizing the depth of the narrator’s sorrow and his wish that his friend Jamie had not died. Schonfeld and Smilansky (1989) stated in an article, “. . . that prior research has suggested that the acquisition of these death concepts [by children] occurs between 5 and 7 years of age” (p. 594). According to Florian (1985), children “at the age of ten or more, the concept of death has reached the stage of mature development” (p.140). Third-grade students with ages ranging from 8-10 would fit into these age parameters and be at or close to the stage of mature development in their understanding of death, acquiring an understanding of the death concepts of “irreversibility, finality, causality, and inevitability” (Schonfeld & Smilansky, 1989, p. 594).

**Pre-and Post-Discussion Essays**

*A Taste of Blackberries* was the first book read by both third-grade teachers. Before the book was read, the students in each of the third-grade classrooms were given a pre-discussion essay prompt. Once the books had been completed, the students
were given a post-discussion essay with the identical prompt. The prompt for *A Taste of Blackberries* was, Friends are a part of our lives. In what ways would you change if your best friend died? For both the pre-and post discussion essay, students were directed to write as much as they wanted and not to worry about writing conventions such as spelling or punctuation. A primary trait rubric (Lloyd Jones) was developed specifically to evaluate the students’ writing based on the book’s sensitive issue: the death of a best friend. Each essay had the possibility of a score from 0-4 with 0 being the lowest score and 4 being the highest score.

In Teacher A’s class, 12 students took part in the study. The rubric scores indicated a high level of understanding of the essay question. The rubric scores for class A for the pre-and post-discussion essays were scores of 4, 3, and 2. The majority of the scores were either a 4 or a 3 for the pre-discussion essay [three fourths] and the post-discussion essay [two thirds]. There were no 1’s or 0 scores. Sixty-six percent of the students had the same score for both the pre-and post-discussion essay, 17% [2 students] had a gain between the pre-and post-discussion essay, and 17% [2 students] had a loss. Teacher A’s class had a mean score of 3.1, a median score of 3.0, and a standard deviation of .76 on the pre-discussion essays. On the post-discussion essays, the mean score was 3.0, the median score was 3.0 and the standard deviation was .82. If the standard deviation scores were rounded to the nearest tenth, they would be the same, an indicator of how close the scores were dispersed within the class.

Next the students’ essays were coded using the explicit and implicit codes for *A Taste of Blackberries*. On the pre-discussion essay, students in Teacher A’s class wrote a total of 41 sentences. Thirty-four sentences or 83% addressed directly or indirectly the issue of a death of a friend. Every student wrote either an explicit statement or an implicit statement. One student’s essay contained both statements. The results on the post-discussion essay are somewhat higher. The class wrote 34 sentences. Out of the 34 sentences, 29 sentences or 85% contained the issue of death with either an explicit or implicit statement. Every student wrote either an explicit or an implicit statement in their essay. Four students’ essays contained both statements. This content analysis corresponded with a number of studies (Florian, 1985; Orbach, 1986; Schonfeld & Smilansky, 1989) that concluded that children understood the concept of death between
five and seven years old. One study indicated “that children in midlatency [third-graders] are less emotionally reactive [to death] than those in early or late latency [first or fifth graders, respectively]” (Orbach et al., 1985, p. 125), and, therefore, might be able to write more easily about the topic if they were not emotionally attached.

In Teacher B’s class, 12 students took part in the study. The students’ rubric scores from class B also showed a high level of understanding of the essay question. The scores for the pre- and post-discussion essays were scores of 4 and 3. Fifty-eight percent of the students had the same score for the pre- and post-discussion essay, 50% of the students showed a gain in their scores going from a score of 3 to a score of 4, and no student showed a loss on their rubric score. Teacher B’s class had a mean score of 3.4, a median score of 3.0, and a standard deviation of .51 on the pre-discussion essays. On the post-discussion essays, the mean score was 3.9, the median score was 4.0 and the standard deviation was .30. The standard deviation scores are an indicator of how close the scores were dispersed within the class.

In coding for explicit and implicit statements, the students in class B wrote a total of 56 sentences for the pre-discussion essay. Ninety percent of those sentences contained either an explicit or an implicit statement on death. Every student wrote either an explicit or an implicit statement in their essay. Seven students wrote both statements. On the post-discussion essay, Teacher B’s students wrote a total of 61 sentences, 97% of those sentences contained either an explicit or an implicit statement on death. Every student wrote either an explicit or an implicit statement in their essay and ten students wrote both statements. In addressing any difficulty that children may have in their understanding of the “irreversibility” of death, Orbach et al. (1986), found that children “can be very realistic about death and do not tend to develop magical thinking [about the concept]” (p. 125).

The identification of explicit and implicit statements about death were further analyzed against the developmental death concepts (Shonfeld & Smilansky, 1989) for both teacher A and B’s classes based on responses from the focus groups, writing samples, and interaction data of the book discussions. For the death concepts four developmental sub-concepts on death by Orbach, et al. (1986) were used. These concepts bridge both cognitive and social perspectives. The explicit and implicit statements were
also interpreted on how 8-10-year olds exhibited aspects of those four concepts regarding both human and animal death. (cf. third-grade results, Orbach et al.) and how “second grade children reached a plateau in the scores for death concepts on the Smilansky instrument [Smilansky Death Concept Questionnaire]” (Schonfeld & Smilansky, p.596). These concepts, based on questionnaires by Smilansky & Weissman, (1978) included causality, finality, irreversibility, and universality. Orbach et al. (p. 122) defined them as follows: causality (how does one die? Finality (can a dead person feel?), irreversibility (can a dead person live again?), and universality (does everybody die?).

The students in Teacher A’s and B’s classes displayed many instances of the four concepts of death verbally [interactive book discussions and focus groups] and /or in their writings [reflection forms, pre-and post-discussion essays]. They had the opportunity to participate in their class discussions and did participate in the writing exercises and the focus group discussions. As eight to ten year-old third-grade students, they typified research results that stated by age eight, children begin to understand the causes of death and see death as final. The following student statements for the four concepts of death are representative samples from class A and class B. The students made several causality statements throughout the study: in the student and teacher interactions during the book discussions, “I never saw my uncle, he died in a plane accident, I mean jet accident, Jamie was dead and it reminded me of my great, great grandma was dead and she was sleeping in her bed and she died.” in the writing samples, “If my friend died, I wouldn’t be mad if she was sick, I remember that when my friend had to go to the hospital because she had an asthma attack and she did not die.” and in the focus group discussions, “I think it was a sad book because he [Jamie] died just because no one knew that he [Jamie] was allergic to bee stings.” In both class A and class B, the finality statements about death were found only in the writing samples. The following two samples from each class are representative statements. The statements from class A seemed to have a “spiritual basis”, “I will pray for him every day so he will look out for me, I would be good so that my friend would be proud of me.” Teacher B’s students’ finality statements were more on a personal note, “I would go and run to the hospital and tell them what happened so they can sew him up so he can come back to his life, It is just ‘freeking’ me out just saying that my best friend is dead; I just don’t want it to be true.”
By age nine and up, children understand that death is irreversible. Some examples of the students’ irreversibility statements voiced during the book discussions of chapter 6: “When my great-grandma died, I wanted to talk to my mom; My great-grandma passed away when I was a baby; He [narrator] was sad and wanted to talk to someone.” Some excerpts from writing samples were: “I would do stuff different and find a new friend; I would miss the way we used to do stuff together like play and laugh; I will pray for him, then I would go to his grave and give him one of my toys; I would be very lonely and I would tear up my stuff and my toys.” Sample quotes from the focus group discussions were: “And like at the end, when he thought he [Jamie] was safe in heaven and stuff; I didn’t like that book [A Taste of Blackberries] as I liked crossing jordan because it reminds me of my sister and she died and my great-grandma died, and I went home that first day and cried to my mommy, ‘mommy it’s so hard to know that they’re not coming back and they can’t come down and sit right next to you and say, Do you need help on your math Problem?’; If Jamie would have never died, he [narrator] would have had a great time with him; Losing a friend could be heart breaking because I lost my great-grandma and that really hurt.”

Understanding that death is universal “... is a more conceptually advanced one [concept] than those of irreversibility and finality ...” (Schonfeld & Smilansky, 1989, p. 601). There were less student statements in this category. Universality statements were only found in the focus group discussions for both class A and class B: “Everybody has to die sometime and they go to a really good place; People died in my family a long time ago and it made me feel sad; If somebody dies, its very important, its like you love them very much in your heart and you can’t stand the pressure when they die. It really stays in your head for a long, long time because it happened to me when my granddaddy died.”

“It is apparent that the concept of death is complex and multidetermined, and its development is dynamically related to the general patterns of growth and maturation of the child” (Orbach et al., 1986, p. 126). It is also apparent from the above examples that the third-grade students in class A and class B were progressing developmentally in acquiring understanding of the four death concepts and were able to express themselves on the issue of death both in their writing and in their conversations.
Crossing Jordan is a story about two families, one African-American [Lewis’] and one Caucasian [Bodines] who became locked in a state of mutual dislike and mistrust. Even though, their families did not approve, the two girls in the families, Cass [Caucasian] and Jemmie [African-American] became very good friends. Chapter 15 was chosen as the critical chapter because it portrayed the racial angst of the story at its peak and was the pivotal chapter in seeking a resolution to the discord that existed between the two families. In this chapter, Cass’s baby sister became ill and Cass ran next door to get help from Jemmie’s mother who was a nurse.

Interactions During Book Discussions

As in A Taste of Blackberries, the style of presentation regarding the discussion of content was analyzed further. In reading Crossing Jordan, however, Teacher A did not change her read-aloud format. She did not have a set routine for reading the chapters. She would read more than one chapter if the chapters were short or read several pages in a chapter. She spent 15-20 minutes at the end of the day reading and discussing Crossing Jordan with the class. Seventeen chapters were read in fourteen sessions. The book discussion was embedded in her read aloud, as she occasionally stopped reading to ask questions. Approximately 8-10 minutes were spent on discussing the chapter. Since the book discussion took place at the end of the day just before dismissal, there was no opportunity to extend the discussion and often there were interruptions such as the daily announcements. Teacher A said, “I wish that I had more time to hear what they said, because a lot of the times, the bell was going to ring or something like that. There wasn’t really enough time to get what they wanted.”

The Initial Coding Elements Form was used to analyze the transcript of Teacher A’s specific interaction with her students. The number, types, and percentages of the questions/statements that were made by both the teacher and the students were coded by two raters and an interrater. Agreement of 94% was reached. Table 5 shows the number of responses and percentages for text-based interactions, personal interactions with the text, societal interactions with the text, and off-topic questions and statements for Teacher A and her 12 students for chapter 15.
Table 5

Number and Percentage of Responses From the Initial Coding Elements Form for Teacher A and Teacher A’s Students for Chapter 15

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Coded sidebars</th>
<th>Teacher A</th>
<th>Teacher A’s students</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>n</td>
<td>%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Text-based</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>(62.7%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal interactions</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>(6.0%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Societal interactions</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Off-topic interactions</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>(31.3%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. The dashes indicate a lack of response in that area.

Chapter 15 was read over four days. The majority of Teacher A’s questions were text-based. Within that text-based sidebar, 20 of the 42 statements were literal, based directly on the text. For example, she asked, “What’s happening?” referring to Lou Anne’s and Andy’s fight. “Ok, thus far in the chapter, what has happened?” All of the personal interactions sidebar were personal opinions, “That’s what I’m thinking right now, exactly what you’re thinking, that’s what I’m thinking.” The majority of the student statements were text-based in answer to a direct question from the teacher, “She’s dying [referring to Missy’s heat prostration].” The personal interactions were personal opinions, “She [Lou Anne] feels so bad that she was worrying about her boyfriend instead of caring about her sister [Missy].” The two statements/questions for societal interactions were split between moral interpretation, “He’s going to apologize for all the mean things that he said.” and cultural sensitivity, “He [Mr. Bodine] might see that the black person is nice.” For both the teacher and the students, the highest number of questions and statements were text-based, then personal interaction and last societal interaction.

Teacher A had more on-topic speaking occasions than her students, speaking 58.9% of the time. She also had more off-topic speaking occasions than did her students.

Teacher B still set a goal of a chapter a day. Some days it was difficult to follow this pattern because chapters, like chapter 15 and 16 took longer to read. She typically
spent ten minutes reading and ten minutes discussing the story. Occasionally, if the read-
 aloud portion was longer than anticipated and the students were having a good
discussion, she continued the discussion into the next scheduled activity. However, this
extension of time, although needed, stretched her comfort zone. As she stated, “At times I
couldn’t read a chapter at a time because of the way it’s written. I had to read like a
chapter and a half or one half of a chapter because some of the chapters were really,
really long and I just couldn’t give it that much, that length and sometimes I had to stop
and my kids got really angry when I had to stop. But I had to go on to workshop (learning
centers) or something else in the classroom.” Teacher B had 16 read aloud and discussion
sessions for the seventeen chapters that were read.

The Initial Coding Elements Form was used to analyze the transcript of Teacher
B’s specific interaction with her students. The number, types, and percentages of the
questions/statements that were made by both the teacher and the students were coded by
two raters and an Interrater. Agreement of 90% was reached. Table 6 shows the number
of responses and percentages for text-based interactions, personal interactions with the
text, societal interactions with the text, and off-topic questions and statements for Teacher
B and her 12 students for chapter 15.

Table 6

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Coded sidebars</th>
<th>Teacher B</th>
<th>Teacher B’s students</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Text-based</td>
<td>49 (61.2%)</td>
<td>23 (54.8%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal interactions</td>
<td>6 (7.5%)</td>
<td>16 (38.1%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Societal interactions</td>
<td>2 (2.5%)</td>
<td>3 (7.1%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Off-topic interactions</td>
<td>23 (28.8%)</td>
<td>_</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note. % = percentage of response in that category. The dashes indicate a lack of response in that area.*
Teacher B read chapter 15 in one day. The majority of the questions in the book discussion were text-based. Within the text-based sidebar, 25 of the statements were literal, based directly on the text, “Who remembers how she [Missy] got heat prostration?” The personal interactions were life experience questions pertaining to the students: “So you really, really did some thinking about your real life, didn’t you?” Societal interactions were cultural concerned with the sensitive issue of race, “Yes, because he [Mr. Bodine] doesn’t like black people. But boy was he happy that she [Mrs. Lewis] was a nurse and that she saved their baby’s life.” The greater share of the student statements 16 out of 23 were literal text-based interactions, “The baby she got heat prostration.” Personal interactions were personal opinions, “It was funny when the mom said she was gonna run her daughter over trying to get into the house.” Societal interactions were cultural sensitivity issues concerned with race, “I thought they [Mrs. Bodine and Mrs. Lewis] was about to fight because the lady she [Mrs. Bodine] was white and the probably don’t like black people.”

The most questions and statements for both the teacher B and her students were in the text-based sidebar. Both had questions or statements in all three sidebars. The students had a higher percentage of personal and societal interaction questions and statements then did their teacher. For both the teacher and students, the highest number of questions and statements were text-based, personal interaction questions and statements were next, with societal interaction questions and statements being last. Teachers B had more on-topic speaking occasions than her students; speaking 57.6% of the time. Teacher B also had more off-topic speaking turns than her students who had no off-topic statements.

Continuing to use the coding scheme, the transcripts were repeatedly read in order to detect any additional regularly occurring phrases or content pertaining to the sensitive issue of race. In an inductive “grounded” approach (Glaser and Strauss, 1967) to the data, the interactions were re-examined for emerging themes, constructs, or relationships. Three patterns emerged: statements that contained the sensitive issue of race, friendship statements, and other issues such as a discipline statement from the teacher. The issue of race was further analyzed and determined to include an explicit and implicit aspect. The additional patterns for the teachers and students had a direct relationship in studying the
nature of the interaction between the teachers and students on the contemporary social issue of race. These patterns were coded as explicit and implicit based on the sensitive issue of race. The content was interpreted further against the literature on children’s perceptions of race and the results of the interpretation will be discussed throughout the chapter.

**Explicit and Implicit Qualitative Patterns for Chapter 15**

Next the explicit and implicit patterns that had a direct relationship on the interaction between the teachers and the students on the contemporary social issue of race were coded and tallied. In Teacher A’s book discussions for chapter 15 of *crossing jordan*, explicit statements were student/teacher statements in which race was clearly the topic and contained such words as black or white. “He [Mr. Bodine, Caucasian neighbor] might see that a black person is nice.”, is an explicit response from a student in Teacher A’s classroom when the class was discussing what Mr. Bodine would do now that Mrs. Lewis [African-American neighbor who was a nurse] saved his daughter Missy’s life. Statements in which race was the understood topic were coded implicit. An example of an implicit statement from Teacher A: “Can you believe that Cass’s dad and Jemmie’s mom were sitting in the same truck together?” Table 7 shows the number of responses and their corresponding percentages for the explicit and implicit patterns for Teacher A and her 12 students for chapter 15’s book discussion. The interrater agreement for these coding results was 90.6%. The numerical data for explicit and implicit statements were changed to percentages to give a clearer picture of the influence of the critical issue on the book discussion.

**Table 7**

*Number and Percentage of Explicit and Implicit Statements for Teacher A and Teacher A’s Students for the Book Discussion of Chapter 15*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Teachers &amp; Students</th>
<th>Explicit statements</th>
<th>Implicit statements</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Teacher A</td>
<td>n 13 (19.4%)</td>
<td>n 13 (19.4%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher A’s students</td>
<td>2 (5.6%)</td>
<td>10 (27.8%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note.* The dash indicates a lack of response in this area.
Right away one can see that when you combine the teacher and student percentages of explicit and implicit statements for Teacher A and her students discussed the issue of race for more than 50% of the total statements made during their book discussion. Teacher A spent 19.4% of the book discussion time on implicit statements about race. However, it should be noted that she made no explicit statements on race during the discussion. For both the teachers and the students the percentage of implicit statements was greater than explicit statements. The students in Teacher A’s class spent 33.4% of their book discussion time on race with the percentage of implicit statements being five times greater than the explicit statements.

In Teacher B’s book discussion for chapter 15 of *crossing jordan*, explicit statements were student/teacher statements in which race was clearly the topic and contained such words as black or white. As one student stated, “He [Mr. Bodine] didn’t like her [Mrs. Lewis], he didn’t like black people.” Statements in which race was the understood topic were coded implicit. An example of an implicit statement from Teacher B was, “Now that was really something for him [Mr. Bodine] to thank her [Mrs. Lewis] and shake her hand, wasn’t it?”, as the class was discussing Mr. Bodine’s change in attitude toward his African-American neighbors. Table 8 shows the number of responses and their corresponding percentages for explicit and implicit patterns for Teacher B and her 12 students for the book discussion of chapter 15. The interrater agreement for these coding results was 92.4%. The numerical data for the explicit and implicit statements were changed to percentages to give a clearer picture of the influence of the critical issue on the book discussions.

**Table 8**

*Number and Percentage of Explicit and Implicit Statements for Teacher B and Teacher B’s Students for the Book Discussion of Chapter 15*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Explicit statements</th>
<th>Implicit statements</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>n</td>
<td>%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teachers &amp; Students</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher B</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>(3.8%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher B’s students</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>(7.1%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Teacher B and her students discussed the issue of race for 40% of the total statements made during their book discussion. Teacher B spent 21.3% of the time discussing race making both explicit and implicit statements. For both the teachers and the students the percentage of implicit statements was greater than the explicit statements. The students in Teacher B’s class spent 19% of their book discussion time on critical issue statements with the percentage of implicit statements being approximately one and a half times greater than the explicit statements.

Although the teachers were uncertain at the beginning of the study just how their students would relate to the issue of race, the tables indicate that the issue was discussed at length. Brown and Bigler (2005) stated, “Research suggests that knowledge of the breadth and implications of gender and racial stereotypes emerges around age 6 and increases with age” (p. 540), and

. . . by age 10 children can recognize discriminatory actions that are both overt (e.g., name calling) and covert (e.g., being suspected of wrongdoing), understand that these actions may be caused by others’ social stereotypes, and use contextual information to make decisions about whether discrimination is likely to have occurred. (535)

**Written Reflections**

Students also completed a written reflection form that briefly summarized the critical chapter for *crossing jordan*, chapter 15. This chapter was the turning point in the story. Missy Bodine [the baby sister] comes down with heat prostration and sets into motion a chain of events that will forever change the relationship of the Bodine and Lewis families. Cass Bodine, realizing that something is terribly wrong with her sister Missy, ran next door to get Mrs. Lewis, an African-American nurse. Mrs. Lewis came to Missy’s aid and saved her life. Now Missy’s dad [Mr. Bodine] had to reconcile his feelings about African-Americans, given that Mrs. Lewis had just saved his baby’s life. In this chapter one felt the emotions of anxiety, relief, and racial apprehension as the adults in the two families began to relate to each other for the first time.

The *crossing jordan* reflection form had the same three questions as *A Taste of Blackberries*: (a) What do you remember about today’s book discussion? (b) Underline the part of your answer in number one that you feel is the most important. (c) Did you say
anything in today’s discussion? If the answer is yes, tell me what you said. If the answer is no, tell me why you did not say anything (see Appendix I for a copy of the reflection form). The reflection forms were analyzed using the explicit and implicit coding criteria based on the primary trait rubric to see if the students addressed the sensitive issue of race in writing their answer for number one. Explicit statements were student/teacher statements in which race was clearly the topic and contained such words as black or white. Statements in which race was the understood topic were coded implicit. These statements were also summarized and interpreted against the literature on race.

In Teacher A’s class, 11 of the 12 students wrote a mean number of 1.7 sentences about the day’s discussion. Not one student wrote about race directly. There were no explicit statements about race; 36.8% of the sentences had implicit statements. Seven students had at least one implicit statement in their answer to the first question and had underlined that statement as the one they thought was the most important: “The mom [Mrs. Lewis] and dad [Mr. Bodine] are sitting in the truck by each other.” Four students thought that Missy’s illness was most important: “I remember that the baby almost died and I felt like I would cry.” The remaining student was off-topic and wrote, “I remember Jamie.” In answering question number three, three students or 25% said they had participated in the discussion. Their contribution to the discussion varied: Missy’s heat prostration, “The baby had to go to the hospital;” Mr. Bodine, “The man said, thank you;” and a summary of the discussion that took place the previous day. A high percentage [66.7%] of the students chose not to participate in the discussion: two did not want to participate; four did not have anything to say, one didn’t think she had the right answer, and one student, “I did not because it [the discussion] was interesting.” One student just wasn’t sure if he had participated.

Teacher A’s reflective form mirrored the students’ reflective forms. On her reflective form, Teacher A summarized what she felt were the main points in the book discussion and then underlined two points she thought were the most important from her summary. The focus of her discussion was: (a) Missy’s heat prostration, “What do you [class] think is happening?” The teacher was referring to when Cass had taken Missy away from Lou Anne and “she hardly moved at all” and (b) Cass asking Mrs. Lewis for help, “Here comes mama, she’s in the house and Jemmie’s mother is at the house, what
do you think is going to happen?” Teacher A underlined: (a) The time when Mr. Bodine and Mrs. Lewis were sitting together in the truck after taking Baby Missy to the hospital; and (b) Mr. Bodine thanking Mrs. Lewis for her help in saving his child as the most important points in the discussion. The students’ reflections also focused on either Missy’s heat prostration [as one student said, “heat attack”] or the beginning of a reconciliation for the Lewis and Bodine families. Teacher A thought that the students who wanted to participate in the discussion did so, but she realized that there were a lot of students who did not wish to participate. She pointed out that the opportunity to join the discussion was available to all the students.

In Teacher B’s class 12 students wrote a mean of 2.4 sentences. However, there were no explicit or implicit statements in the students’ answers to the first question. Eleven of the students wrote about Missy’s heat prostration but did not mention Mrs. Lewis’ help. In writing about the heat prostration incident, eight of the students mentioned that they were afraid Missy was going to die: “I was really scared that Cass’s little sister was going to die because Cass’s little sister was overheating.” One student mentioned, “That the girl was scratching the boy in the face,” as the most important and two students recalled that students had mentioned family members dying of heat prostration. The last student responded that he was bad and had been sent back to his seat. In answering question number three, eight students or 66.7% said they had participated in the discussion. Their contribution to the discussion was divided into three categories, sadness over Missy’s illness, “I remember when Missy was overheating,” memories of a grandparent who had died, “Yes that my great grandma died,” and the comical incidents in the chapter, “I liked the part when the boy was standing on the handle bars and did not fall off, that was cool.” Four students did not take part in the discussion. Two students could not think of anything to say “I don’t know what to say,” one student’s response had been said by another student, and the last student commented, “I was bad and I was in my seat.”

Teacher B’s follow-up book discussion centered on three themes, Missy’s overheating incident, “So you thought Missy was gonna die and you were really sad,” making personal connections, “So your granddaddy died and being over-heated was part of it,” and the ending of the chapter, “What do you think about how it ended?” It’s
interesting to note that the students reflected on two of the three themes from the class discussion, Missy’s overheating and personal connections to the story. However, the focus on the end of the chapter which touches very dramatically on the sensitive issue of race and initiates a turning point in the story was overlooked completely by the students.

Even though, the students’ reflection forms reflected the class discussion, they did not reflect their teacher’s reflection form. She commented on her disappointment with the day’s discussion. “I was very disappointed in our discussion. It was a very long chapter and critical to the characters’ change of heart. The students were hot [no air conditioning] and tired, so they zeroed in on the funny parts.” She had to ask leading questions in order to get students to discuss the end of the chapter. However, even though she was disappointed in the discussion, she felt that the students were “glued” to the story as she read and all the students had the opportunity to contribute to the discussion.

The students’ statements were also compared to the literature on race and ethnicity. In both third-grade classes, the student statements about race and the actions of the two families locked in this conflict are very insightful and often very accurate. According to Quintana (1998), between the approximate ages of 10 and 14, children begin to understand the social realities of race:

These social realities include awareness of differences in social class, how ethnicity may affect the initial formation of friendships and dynamics of group interaction, and that members from other ethnic groups may hold prejudicial and biased views of children because of ethnic and racial status. (p. 39)

Pre-and Post-Discussion Essays

*Crossing Jordan* was the second book read by both third-grade teachers. Before the book was read, the students in each of the third-grade classes were given a pre-discussion essay prompt. Once the books had been completed, the students were given a post-discussion essay with the identical prompt. The prompt for *crossing Jordan* was, What would you do if your parents said that you couldn’t be friends or play with someone just because she or he was a different color than you were? For both the pre-and post discussion essay, students were directed to write as much as they wanted and not to worry about writing conventions such as spelling or punctuation. A primary trait rubric (Lloyd Jones) was developed specifically to evaluate the students’ writing based on the

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book’s sensitive issue, race, rather than the quality of the students’ writing. Maintaining consistency between the two books in the study, each essay had the possibility of a score from 0-4 with 0 being the lowest score and 4 being the highest score.

The rubric scores indicated that the students understood the sensitive issue of race. In Teacher A’s class there were 12 students that took part in the study. The pre-and post discussion essays were scores of 4, 3, and 2. On the pre-discussion essays, 33% of the essays were scored at a 4 or a 3 [4 students]. On the post-discussion essays, 50% of the scores were a 4 or a 3 [6 students]. There were no 0 scores. On the pre-and post-discussion essays, 67% [8] of the students had the same score, 25% [3] showed a gain, and 8% [1] had a loss. Teacher A’s class had a mean score 2.3, a median score of 2.0, and a standard deviation of .75 on the pre-discussion essays. On the post-discussion essays, the mean score was 2.6, the median score was 2.5, and the standard score was .99. The 25% of the students who showed a gain in their rubric score on the post-discussion essays was reflected in the mean, median, and standard scores.

Next the students’ essays were coded using the explicit and implicit codes for crossing jordan. On the pre-discussion essay, students in Teacher A’s class wrote a total 28 sentences. Twenty-two sentences or 79% addressed directly or indirectly the issue of race. Eleven students wrote either an explicit statement or an implicit statement. One student essays contained both types of statements. On the post-discussion essay, the total number of sentences was 33. Thirty-two sentences or 97% contained the issue of race with either an explicit or an implicit statement. Twelve students wrote either an explicit or an implicit statement, with four students’ essays containing both types of statements. This content analysis corresponded with a number of studies (Aboud, 1996; Brown & Bigler, 2005; Quintana, 1998) that concluded that children understood the concept of discrimination by the age 10.

There were 12 students that took part in the study in Teacher B’s class. The majority of the students’ rubric scores for the pre-discussion [83%, 10 students] and post-discussion essays [75%, nine students] were 4’s or 3’s indicating an understanding of race. There were no zero scores. On the pre-and post-discussion essays, 75% [9] had the same score, 8.3% [1] showed a gain, and 16.6% [2] showed a loss.

In coding for explicit and implicit statements, the students in class B wrote a total
of 56 sentences for the pre-discussion essay with 91% of those sentences containing either an explicit or an implicit statement on race. Every student wrote either an explicit or an implicit statement in their essay. Nine students wrote both types of statements. On the post-discussion essay, Teacher B’s students wrote a total of 51 sentences with 91% of those sentences containing either an explicit or an implicit statement on race and seven students wrote both types of statements. Teacher B’s class had a mean score of 3.2, a median score of 3.0, and a standard deviation of .71 on the pre-discussions essays. On the post-discussion essays, the mean was 3.1 and median was 3.0 with a standard deviation of .76.

Chapter 15 was the setting for the turning point in the story. It provided a foundation for the two families to form a friendship. It is interesting to note that the verbal interaction in the classes during the book discussions of chapter 15 had over 40% of their discussion statements concerned with the explicit or implicit issue of race. The rubric scores for the pre-and post-discussion essays with an average mean of 2.5 in Teacher A’s class and an average mean of 3.1 in Teacher B’s class indicated that the students understood the racial issues and were able to express their views on the essays. However, the reflective forms for chapter 15 had different results. There were no explicit statements for either the teachers or the students.

The identification of explicit and implicit statements about race was further analyzed using Quintana’s model for children’s understanding of ethnicity and race (1998). His model had four levels that were broken down into approximate age ranges: Level 0, approximate ages 3-6; Level 1, approximate ages 6-10; Level 2, approximate ages 10-14; and Level 3, adolescence. For the purposes of this study, levels 1 and 2 will be used for the analysis since the ages of those levels corresponded to the ages of the third-grade students in the study. The explicit and implicit statements of class A and class B were representative responses from the focus groups, writing samples, and the interaction data of the book discussions.

Level 1 is a transition stage from Level 0 in which children of 3-6 years old were integrating their perceptions of ethnicity to children approximately 6-10 years old who were at a literal level of beginning to understand ethnicity and race, were becoming aware of such “non observable” characteristics as language and food choices, were “fixed
on nonsocial, somewhat abstract aspects of ethnicity” (Quintana, 1998, p.29). The acquisition and development of concrete operations was very important at this level 1 stage. “These skills [cognitive] appear to allow children to consider multiple dimensions associated with their understanding of their personal and social world” (Quintana, p. 35). Children at Level 1 rarely showed an “ethnic preference for a playmate,” tended to be less racially biased, and described friendship in terms of “having similar preferences and enjoying similar activities” (Quintana, p. 36).

The students in Teacher A’s and B’s classes displayed many instances of being developmentally within Quintana’s Level 1 in understanding ethnicity and race verbally [interactive book discussions and focus groups] and/or in their writings [reflection forms, pre-and post-discussion essays]. They had the opportunity to participate in their class discussions and did participate in the writing exercises and the focus group discussions. As nine and ten year-old students, their ages fell within level 1’s range. Students in Teacher A’s and Teacher B’s classes made several level 1 responses throughout the study in student and teacher interactions during book discussions: “Cass [Bodine-Caucasian] and Jemmie [Lewis-African-American] had got back friends again like they could see each others a lot more and the mom [Mrs. Bodine, Caucasian] she had gone and thanked Mrs. Lewis [African-American neighbor who was a nurse] for saving her baby; Cassie’s dad [Mr. Bodine-Caucasian] was driving in the car with Jemmie’s mom [Mrs. Lewis] and when they got in the house, he said thank you for taking care of my baby.” Some examples from the writing samples were: “The dad [Mr. Bodine] is starting to liking his daughter’s friend [Jemmie]; I don’t have any other color friends; Dr. King said that everyone should play with everyone; If my parents said I couldn’t play with somebody white, I would play with them any way when I go outside and when I see them.” Focus group samples were: “My sister and her friend go everywhere together, one is African-American and one is Caucasian; He [Mr. Bodine] wasn’t just mad because he didn’t have no money to pay Jemmie’s mom back [for the new sneakers she bought his daughter, Cass], he was mad because at that point the still didn’t like black people; I think that the most important part of the book [crossing jordan] is that they got to be friends because their two parents actually got along at the end of the story and they actually made a good club because of their colors, black and white; I think the most important part [of crossing
Jordan was don’t judge people by their color or how they look and stuff because you
don’t even know them and you are talking trash about them.”

As illustrated in the quotes above, the student are following Quintana’s
developmental model of understanding ethnicity and race (1998):

Children at this level [1] may have difficulty understanding prejudice and may be
troubled by experiencing or witnessing situations involving prejudice. Children
usually do not understand the social implications of ethnic status until the next
developmental level [2, approximate ages 10-14]. (p. 37)

At times the separation of Level 1 responses and Level 2 responses were
somewhat blurred. Level 2 was concerned with the social and nonliteral perspective of
ethnicity and occurred at approximately 10-14 years in age. The difference between level
1 and level 2 was that “…level 2 reflects children’s understanding of a social
perspective of ethnicity” (Quintana, 1998, p. 37). At this level, children become more
aware of social class, acknowledge the existence of prejudice, and begin to understand
the formation of friendship groups based on ethnicity. Examples of level 2 responses in
the book discussions were: “The dad [Mr. Bodine] apologized and he said thank you for
saving my baby; They [Mr. Bodine & Mrs. Lewis] shook hands, and they didn’t know
what to do after that; Yah they’ll be friends [Cass and Jemmie], their moms and dad are
going to be friends, and then say, ‘I [Mr. Bodine] was wrong about ya. I thought you was
going to be bad,’ but they’re going to become friends like the girls.” There were no level
2 responses found on the reflection forms. There were level 2 responses in the pre- and
post-discussion writing samples: “I’ll tell my mom that she need to stop this color and
white thing and let her child play with whoever she want to play with this day; That
wouldn’t be fair because I wouldn’t have anybody to play with. I’d just be alone on the
playground playing with nobody and Ed plays basketball with me and he’s white; I
wouldn’t be mad or sad or anything. I don’t play with white people; It would not be fair.
You have your civil rights. My heart would not be happy.”

There were also several level 2 responses found in the focus group statements: “I
thought it was sort of bad because it’s not right to be a racist of other people. You don’t
even know their last name, their middle name. You don’t know them well and then you
say stuff about them; He [Mr. Bodine] was racist, his dad was probably the person who
didn’t like them [blacks], his dad was probably part of the KKK and so he taught his son not to like black people and call them nasty words; The girl’s daddy, the white girl’s daddy didn’t like black people because he got jumped by some of them and he thought that black people were really mean and its like slavery and they beat Cass’s daddy up.”

The responses of the third-grade students in class A and class B fell developmentally within the approximate age ranges of level 1 and level 2 [6-14] of Quintana’s model of developmental understanding of ethnicity and race. Some of their statements were quite thought-provoking and clearly show that the students were capable of expressing their views in their writing and in their discussions on racial issues. The following excerpt from a student’s post-discussion essay gave a very insightful view of racial relations:

| I would be very very disappointed [if I could not have friends of a different color than me] because I have three black friends and they are very nice to me. I am glad I wasn’t there back when the whites were separated from blacks. If I was alive back then my life would be more sad and there would be a difference in my life. I would want equal rights if I were alive back then, I would be like Martin Luther King. |
CHAPTER 5

INTERPRETATIONS, FUTURE RESEARCH, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study investigated two classes that were involved in book discussions on the contemporary social issues of death and race. It provided multiple opportunities for students to express their views through verbal [book discussions and focus groups] and written [pre-and post-discussion essays and reflection forms] formats. It also attempted to fill a void in the study of children’s literature containing contemporary social issues. Results included a descriptive account of the read-aloud and the book discussion process in each class using books containing contemporary social issues. As such, no attempts were made to compare the classes with one another.

In this section, the interpretations of the phenomena of the sensitive issues as enacted in the two classes (Stake, 1995) are discussed. In presenting and discussing the data in chapter 4, several questions and insights arose. These are discussed in the following three sections: 1) Who defines sensitive issues? 2) What is involved in “quality” book discussions? 3) What can be said about using writing as a means of understanding views of sensitive issues? A conclusion explores future research and recommendations for the read aloud, and book discussions, and the place of sensitive issues in a literacy program.

Sensitive Issues

“There are many courageous teachers who use social issues books regularly . . . , but there are also many who are concerned about using books that realistically depict racism, class conflict, and violence—afraid these books may be too disturbing for children” (Lewison, et al., 2002, p.215). Teacher A’s and Teacher B’s classrooms were like the majority of elementary classrooms; traditionally, the introduction and discussion of sensitive social issues were considered too controversial (McBee, 1996; Lehr, 1995; Wollman-Bonilla, 1998).

Initially, the teachers in this study had concerns and were apprehensive about the books’ topics. The notion of sensitive social issues was problematic since the teachers
believed the issues to be too delicate for their students. According to the teachers, *crossing jordan* and *A Taste of Blackberries* were not the typical books used for their read alouds. There was uncertainty about how the students felt about discussing the issues of death and race; there were questions about the difficulty the students might experience relating to the sensitive issues. They were not sure if their students were “ready” to be exposed to sensitive reading material. Teacher A summed up her concerns: “It just gave them a different feel because I don’t read anything normally like that to them you know because it’s real life. A lot of things I read are happy. I don’t want to read things that are sad.”

The real question to be addressed in using books with sensitive issues was who defined the issue as sensitive? As Wollman-Bonilla (1998) stated, “As teachers carry out the work of selecting texts for classroom use, many seem to lack the courage to present non-mainstream perspectives and experiences, and they lack faith in children’s ability to recognize and handle difficult issues” (p. 287). In thinking about her class’s book discussions on *crossing jordan*, Teacher B confirmed the statement that students can recognize and question sensitive issues: “They [students] didn’t understand the segregation concept because they’re not living in that as much. However, they got righteous indignation. They could not understand this man [Mr. Bodine], you know. They [students] couldn’t understand why they [Jemmie and Cass] couldn’t be friends.”

As can be seen in the representative samples used in chapter 4 and the students’ statements on death and race, the students connected with the issues of death and race, at times in greater depth than was initiated by the teachers, in the book discussions. Some of these statements were profound for students 8-10 years old. A few student comments illustrate this depth.

1. The most important part of *A Taste of Blackberries* was the boy couldn’t take that his best friend passed (euphemism for death) and that his friend couldn’t send him signals from his flashlight.

2. It was hard for him to say good-bye to his friend.

3. The most important part of *crossing jordan* was when the dad changed his mind for both girls to be best friends. Somebody, just, well God probably, just
put down a miracle that they were best friends, it didn’t matter what color they were.

Moreover, in the final teachers’ interview, their initial concerns about relevancy of the books for a read aloud and class discussion had dissipated. Having never read the books before, the teachers discovered that they actually enjoyed reading them. What had started with uncertainty ended with appreciation. The apprehension, of not knowing how the book discussions would develop, was alleviated once the teachers realized that the students were responding favorably to the literature, contributing and enjoying the book discussions. For *A Taste of Blackberries*, Teacher B said, “I thought the writer was so good and I think it was the very first time that my children had really read or heard anything [about death] and really talked and dealt with death. I got that sense.” Both teachers were surprised that the issue of death was so well portrayed in terms that were very comprehensible and “comfortable” to the students, a statement that was reflected in Trelease’s (2001) review of *A Taste of Blackberries*. As Teacher B stated,

Honestly, I enjoyed reading it and it was the first time I had read it. And so as a reader I could approach it and I enjoyed the book, and I think that comes across. If you like the book, the kids tend to like the book.

Teacher A thought that *crossing jordan* was “by far their favorite book. The students could relate to it because you know of course they have white kids and they have black kids and they both do associate at school and they couldn’t do blackberries.” Teacher A agreed, “We got the most awesome discussion out of it. They were cheering for the girls all the way through the book.” In short, when teachers risk introducing sensitive issues through quality literature, they discover ways to broaden the curriculum without fear of broaching a variety of human conditions (Mohr, 1993; Shannon, 1986).

Still, the comfort level of the teachers will take time to develop. As mentioned above, because the treatment of the death of a friend in *A Taste of Blackberries* was so well done, the teachers thought the majority of their students did “fine” with the topic, making connections to family members who had died. The one issue that did come up was the students’ confusion and lack of understanding with the narrator’s anger over his friend’s death. Thinking back, the teachers thought when they read the book again, they
would review the steps of grieving with their students, pointing out that anger was one of those steps.

Realizing that the subject of race might be more of a sensitive issue for the teachers and that they may not have the time to read *crossing jordan* and/or look at the individual chapters ahead of time, the researcher gave each teacher a list of possible words with page numbers to preview for their comfort level. During their interview at the end of the study, even though each teacher enjoyed this book more than *A Taste of Blackberries*, they recognized and discussed some additional areas that posed a comfort reach for them during the read aloud and book discussion. In *crossing jordan*, the friends, Cass and Jemmie, were running a race to raise money for sickle-cell anemia. Naturally, some of the students in their classes had questions about the disease. The teachers did not feel comfortable or knowledgeable enough to engage in a conversation about sickle-cell.

I can’t remember [what issue] but I just remember feeling uncomfortable because they [students] got off on something that I didn’t want to talk about and I tried to steer the conversation back, probably in *crossing jordan*. It was something if I recall that I thought a teacher should not get into and I ended up probably saying talk to your parents about that. (Teacher B)

Teacher A admitted that she left out certain words in the story like “bigot;” “I just do not want to say the word bigot.” She also thought that “Sometimes there wasn’t something I really needed to discuss, you know, but I kind of felt like I had to [because of the study]. There wasn’t a whole lot to discuss sometimes I guess.” Even now, there are some lingering hesitations because of some of the explicit language that is used in *crossing jordan*. Following the study, the researcher learned that the teachers did not put *crossing jordan* in their class library but kept it on their desk or in a cupboard. The book, however, was available to check out in the school library.

The teacher interview sessions and the focus groups provided additional opportunities to personally gauge the course of the study and ascertain the importance of discussing sensitive issues to the students. The transcripts provided a wealth of information, much of it included in this study to triangulate the outcomes of the book discussions and the written projects.
Quality Book Discussions

Quality book discussions start with the selection of quality literature to read, but it is so much more. It involved many factors related not only to interaction but also to the context of instruction (Hoffman et al., 1993; Martinez & Teale, 1993; Riecken & Miller, 1990).

Scheduling was one factor. In valuing the quality of the read aloud and book discussion, there were the additional factors of the amount of time committed to this process and where it was placed in the daily schedule to allow for maximum impact. Due to time constraints within their schedule, teachers in this study felt they could only allot 20 minutes for the read aloud and book discussion, the minimum time suggested by research on read alouds, which in fact only allowed five–ten minutes for discussion. Once implemented, the teachers were consistent in maintaining their routine and approach throughout the study, in their read alouds and book discussions. Teacher A chose to place her read aloud and book discussion at the very end of the day, 35 minutes before dismissal. This was not a quality time for her classroom. There were several interruptions, such as school announcements and or sending notes that needed to go home. Students were restless and knew that dismissal was imminent. “I wish I had more time to hear what they wanted to say, because a lot of the times, the bell was going to ring or something like that. There wasn’t really enough time to get what they wanted, to develop it [book discussion] a little more” (Teacher A). After the first book was completed, the researcher suggested, but did not insist, to Teacher A to rethink her read aloud time at the end of the day because it was so hectic and did not allow enough time for an in-depth discussion to a time that was more conducive to a read-aloud format. Teacher A chose to keep her accustomed read-aloud time. It should be noted that the daily interruptions at the end of the day occurred regularly at approximately the same time. Moving her schedule up by just 30 minutes would have avoided these conflicts and the students may have been more attentive.

Teacher B inserted her read aloud time as a bridge after her students returned from computer lab and before a reading workshop [center] time. She planned to read the entire chapter before beginning the book discussion. When a chapter was long, she cut back on the discussion. However, at times Teacher B was conflicted with this choice and
would allow the discussion to continue. “Sometimes I had to stop and my kids got really angry, but I had to go on to workshop or something else in the classroom.” Even though, the scheduling of Teacher B’s read aloud and book discussion occurred at a more optimum time of the day, an adjustment to the amount of reading that took place before the actual discussion would have permitted more time for the interactive book discussion to achieve its full potential.

Although Teacher A and Teacher B read to their classes before this study was initiated, a follow-up book discussion was not part of their present schedule. It was not seen as part of their present reading curriculum but was seen as taking away crucial time that was needed for FCAT preparation. Considering the scheduling demands placed on teachers today, teachers need to strategically plan for good, quality read alouds and interactive book discussions to occur within their classrooms, keeping in mind time considerations and class schedules (Eeds & Wells, 1989; Martinez & Teale, 1993; Riecken & Miller, 1990).

The read-aloud style was another factor related to the quality of book discussions. Teacher A used an embedded read-aloud format, stopping every so often to direct questions to the students. She accepted three or four answers and continued reading. The questions were random, making it difficult for the students to anticipate their timing. As mentioned previously in the study, the graduate observer felt that this “stop and go” routine did not allow students time to formulate their answers. By the time some students were ready to answer the question, the teacher had resumed reading. “The problem with such questions is that they constrain children’s responses to a fact here and a detail there” (Beck & McKeown, 2001, p. 12), making it difficult for students to become fully involved in the discussion of the “big picture.” The majority of the questions were text-based, efferent questions not requiring very elaborate answers. Many were concerned with listening skills related to reading such as understanding vocabulary, or prediction questions with an emphasis on comprehending the text rather than the sensitive issue. Occasionally, an aesthetic question based on the text was asked. At these times, Teacher A’s questions took on a very personal almost confiding tone, giving more students a chance to respond, “Boys and girls, sometimes when something bad happens, don’t you
want to talk to someone?” However, the students usual responses consisted of a one-word and/or a brief one-two sentence comment.

Typically, Teacher B read the entire chapter before stopping for a discussion. Occasionally she would stop and ask a question during the read aloud. Often during the discussion, she asked text-based questions that were concerned with visualizing the text, “Do you think she writes like she’s putting pictures in your head?” The students answered with several examples, “I started to picturing him in Mrs. Miller’s garden.” Her second style of questioning was to ask an open-ended question; “What would you like to share?” accept answers from several students such as, “When the baby was over-heated and she wasn’t moving, I figured that the baby was gonna be dead. I started to cry;” and reaffirm a portion of a student’s answer, “Oh, yea, it made you very sad and you started to cry;” and move on to another student. Again, the emphasis was on comprehension strategies such as visualization rather than relating incidents to the thematic topic connected to the sensitive issues. The students’ answers were rarely discussed in depth; the teacher/student interaction on a particular question was short. However, several students did get to speak during the discussion.

A third factor was setting the purposes for reading. It was unclear if the teachers in this study had set purposes for addressing sensitive issues in the read aloud and discussion, or made an initial assessment of their goals. Teacher B stated that, “one of the things I really wanted to teach my children is that reading the word on the page puts pictures in your head, visualization, that’s basically what I did work on. I was just thinking about making them better readers.” Sometimes it appeared that the discussion was used solely as a means to review the main points in the day’s reading, addressing major reading concepts such as vocabulary or comprehension questions. As Teacher A stated, “I questioned them a lot. It’s just like normally what I do with read alouds. It’s not something beyond. My kids were really good at predicting what was going to happen.”

Instead of focusing primarily on the content which specifically dealt with the sensitive issues, the teachers followed their usual routine, using the texts to emphasize reading skills. Only when the sensitive issues were “right there” and could not be avoided, were the sensitive issues explored and the students given a genuine opportunity to contribute to the discussion (Kutz, & Roskelly, 1991).
In addition to the read aloud and book discussion, teachers in this study did little or no planning for a variety of extension activities, feeling that including extensions would discourage the students from enjoying story time. The teachers were pleased that the books were on the Accelerated Reading list and that the students were able to take a computerized comprehension test on the books. However, “extensions of stories provide invitations to rethink and reflect” (Hoffman, et al., 1993, p. 501). These teachers considered the read aloud a stand-alone activity, rather than acting as a conduit for a number of activities based on the literary experience such as writing, music, drama and the visual arts.

A fourth factor had to do with the focus of the discussion through questioning. In reading books containing sensitive issues, it was vitally important that the sensitive issue remain in the forefront of the discussion, and that the discussion attain a challenging level of interaction, extensive enough that all students had the opportunity to be involved. It was apparent looking at the results of the coding analysis in chapter 4, that the students in class A and B were receptive to such a challenge.

It should be noted that the students in class A had a higher percentage of explicit and implicit statements for *A Taste of Blackberries* and *crossing jordan* than their teacher. The students in class B had a higher percentage of explicit and implicit statements for *A Taste of Blackberries*. One reason for this was the sensitive issue was so prominent in the story; it just could not be avoided. Another reason was the students were involved in the discussions and making connections to the sensitive issues. Their voices were often detailed and candid. They did not shy away from the issues. Students even asked their teachers to explain sickle-cell anemia when it came up in the text. In one class, one student volunteered that he was a carrier for sickle-cell. There were many examples of students’ openness in the discussions on death in *A Taste of Blackberries*: “I like the other chapters better. This one is shorter and sadder, the bees were only trying to protect themselves by stinging, and it was like a sad story his friend died just from a tiny bee sting and he was harshful to him right before he died.” Students’ natural responses were also evident in the *crossing jordan* discussions: He’s [Mr. Bodine] is going to apologize for all the mean things he said, When the baby was over-heated and she wasn’t moving, I figured that the baby was gonna be dead. I started to cry, Mr.Bodine didn’t
want to pay Ms. Lewis back for buying Cassie some shoes because he probably didn’t have no money, and he sorta didn’t like them [the Lewis’] because they were black.”

However, the questioning level remained at the basic or moderate level of recall throughout the discussions in both classes. The majority of the questions/statements were text-based, relying on answers that were readily available in the text itself. In both classes there was a noticeable lack of questions about societal and cultural issues that pertained to the moral interpretations, cultural sensitivity and social justice concerns of death and race. Too much emphasis was placed on the process of reading skills to the exclusion of content and theme (Beck & McKeown, 2001). This imbalance was detrimental to understanding and responding to themes which embody literary universals regarding the human condition (Rosenblatt, 1995).

Relying on text-based questions which primarily focused on reading competencies such as comprehension, vocabulary instruction, and visualization, teachers missed many opportunities to more thoroughly examine the sensitive issues. This study showed that students were up to the challenge of discussing the issues. As cited throughout this study, the students responded to the issues with sensitivity and concern (Probst, 2003; Wollman-Bonilla, 1998). The students, however, needed the option to be challenged with strategic questions/statements that were concerned with the sensitive issues rather than the basic text-based questions revolving around predominant reading skills (Probst, 2003; Riecken & Miller, 1990; Rosenblatt, 1982; Sanders, 1974).

A fifth factor had to do with the role of retrospection and debriefing. Focus group discussions were another forum for book discussions, beyond the read aloud, and a time for students to take a retrospective look at sensitive issues. It was worth noting how the focus group discussions compared to the read aloud-book discussions. The focus group questions allowed for a balance of efferent and aesthetic questions with a range of questions from low complexity, requiring simplistic answers, to high-complexity questions, requiring analytic thinking. The continuity of the questions and answers at times flowed from one student to the next, as they commented on what had been said or added to the discussion. This style of questioning made it possible for students to respond to the sensitive issues with much greater depth and personal connection. In addition there were two facets of the focus group discussions that turned out to be critical: the length of
the discussion and student participation. During the focus group discussions the students voiced some displeasure with the length of time spent on the book discussions in their class and that, at times, the discussion ended when students were still volunteering answers. With the researcher’s introduction, the students knew immediately, that everyone in the focus group was going to get a chance to participate in answering the questions. In “round-robin,” turn-taking fashion, each student had a chance to answer, add, or question the initial question. They also understood that unlike their brief class discussions, time was not going to be a factor. The focus-group discussion was scheduled during their enrichment time which was 45 minutes long. This format gave students a chance to think about the question that was posed, formulate an answer, and know s/he was going to get the opportunity to be involved and respond. When students are given parameters that meet their needs during a discussion, the depth of the discussion is enhanced and can actually become student driven rather than teacher directed. If teachers just take the time to listen during book discussions, they discover that the voices of students are so important and can be so relevant. “I thought it [book discussions] helped me, helped me know what its about and what and how it will go like in your family, like you gets stung by a bee, when you get heat prostration, and that disease [sickle-cell anemia], I think the most important part of the story is that at the end of the story the dad said, black people aren’t that bad to white people and he said I shouldn’t be a racist because I didn’t even know them. And I was talking stuff about them and he finally met them and said dang they’re nice” (Eeds & Wells, 1989; Flood, et al., 2003).

Writing, a Means to Understanding the Views of a Sensitive Issue

One valid way to accentuate and expand a student’s voice in book discussions was to extend it using writing. As Tierney & Shanahan stated, “We believe strongly that in our society, at this point in history, reading and writing, to be understood and appreciated fully, should be viewed together, learned together, and used together”(1991, p. 275). Reading and writing are often seen as the opposite sides of the same coin, each possessing a process that enhances the other, readers are writers and writers are readers. As Kutz & Roskelly (1991) pointed out, “. . . Reading like writing, depends on what readers bring to it, as well as what they find through it” (p. 189).
This study gave teachers additional strategies to strengthen the reading/writing connection for students, especially when using the read aloud and book discussion format with authentic texts containing sensitive issues. There were two distinct written mediums used, essays with prompts and reflection forms. Both were windows into children’s views of sensitive issues and book discussions. Some of the most sincere and often times startling responses came from the students’ writing, yielding personal glimpses into their thoughts. The writing prompts offered students an additional chance to voice their thoughts privately on paper (Burnett, 1997; Many, 1991; Raphael & Englert, 1990).

Some of the post-discussion essays did refer back to the text and the book discussion, but the majority of the responses contained unreserved explicit and implicit statements on the sensitive issues of a very personal nature, sometimes five and six sentences long. The essays also validated the book discussions, showing that the students understood the sensitive issues and were making personal connections to those issues. One difference between the two was that the writing on the essays was, in many instances, on a deeper, heart-felt level than the book discussions. In the prompt for *A Taste of Blackberries*, in what ways would you change if your best friend died; most students expressed a great deal of sadness over the death of a friend: “I would move on with my life, I would do better in school. I would try to be good in class. I would try to get an A on my report card. I would be good everywhere I go. I would be very sad.” In the prompt for *crossing jordan*, What would you do if your parents said that you couldn’t be friends or play with someone just because she or he was a different color than you were, many students were angered that friends of different colors would not be allowed to play together: “I would not care because I do not have any white friends but if I did I would see that particular person, I would convince them [my parents] that I can play with my friends even if my friends are a different color than me.”

Since the reflective forms were more structured, asking specific questions based on one day’s book discussion and validating students’ role in the discussion, the majority of the death and racial statements were found in the pre-and post-discussion essays. Nonetheless, the reflection forms did accurately show whether the discussion was centered on the sensitive issues and if so, whether the students understood the major discussion points and were able to validate their role in the discussion.
The data from the reflective forms for *A Taste of Blackberries* showed that in both classes, the students’ reflections mirrored the teachers’ book discussion. Students and teachers in both classes were in agreement on the important points that were covered in that day’s discussion. In class A 85% of the students’ reflections were concerned directly or indirectly with the issue of death. Eight students or 67% thought they had participated in the discussion. In class B 56.5% of the students’ reflections were concerned directly or indirectly with the issue of death. Seven or 58% of the students thought they had participated in the discussion.

The data from the reflective forms for *crossing jordan* gave an interesting contrast. The students’ reflections mirrored the teacher’s discussion. However, not one student wrote about race explicitly and 36.8% of the sentences had implicit statements. This result corresponded with the results of the explicit and implicit coding for the day’s discussion on chapter 15, Teacher A made no explicit statements. Only 25% of the students thought they had participated in the day’s discussion. In class B the students’ reflective forms did not mirror all of the points in their teacher’s discussion. Teacher B covered three points in her discussion; the most important was concerned with the issue of race. The students mentioned only two of those points on their reflection form, leaving out the issue of race entirely. Teacher A’s reflection form commented on the disappointment of that day’s discussion. She was not able to involve the students in the most critical aspect of the chapter, the sensitive issue of race. There were no explicit or implicit statements on race in the students’ reflection forms. However, eight or 66.7% of the students thought they had participated in the discussion. In the explicit and implicit coding for the day’s discussion on chapter 15, both the teacher and the students made explicit and implicit statements.

Thus, this type of form was appropriate for touching base with the students, assessing how the day’s discussion was internalized by the students. It could be especially useful to teachers using texts with sensitive issues in their read alouds as a form of self-assessment, seeing if there was anything that needed changing in the discussion format such as student participation, noting the students’ concerns, and evaluating a student’s comfort level in the discussion.
Writing forms, such as essays, journals, and personal writing that allow students enough time to express their opinions on the content of a book discussion, especially book discussions on sensitive issues, would be the best forums to use when seeking students’ reaction to the issues, checking on their connectivity to the issue, and watching for any misinterpretations. As shown in this study, with even a limited amount of time, the essays contained a deeply personal touch and the students easily made distinctive connections to the books (Lehr, 1995; Lewison, et al., 2002; Many, 1991).

Although sensitive issues could be located in the writing, the quality of the students’ writing in this study was inconclusive due to several factors, among them time considerations and the difficulty of assessing improvement of the writing scores on a four-point rubric. Many students scored a three on the rubric for the pre-discussion essay and it was difficult, at that point to move up to a four, since a score of four required the students to exhibit an in-depth understanding of the issue. The standard deviation scores for the essays did act as an indicator of how closely the scores were dispersed. Another difficulty in assessing writing quality was the length of time, 20 minutes, which may not have been adequate for composing an answer to the discussion prompt. Given more time, the students could have formulated a rough draft, and or spent time reviewing what had been written.

Moreover, the researcher was surprised and disappointed the teachers saw no additional role for writing in this study. One of the reasons that third grade was chosen was the amount of time spent in third grade preparing students to take the Florida Writes exam in fourth grade. As can be seen in the research, there were many occasions for writing extensions such as personal journals, essays, poetry. “. . . reading and writing in combination are more likely to prompt critical thinking than when reading is separated from writing or when reading is combined with knowledge activation or answering questions” (Tierney, Soter et al., 1989). Teachers believed students “processed it [the discussion] so well verbally,” they would not include any writing extension activities, such as the essays, when reading these books again. Their preferred extension activity was an AR [Accelerated Reader] test, which the students took when the books were completed. The AR test is a comprehension quiz based on the content of the book.
Recommendations and Conclusions

Future Research

As with any study, this one presented additional questions for future research. The majority of students in this study were African-American in a Title I school. A likely next step would be to research this topic with classes that are more culturally diverse in a middle and/or upper socioeconomic school setting. Previous research findings indicate that different cultures view death differently from others (Barrett & Heller, 2002; Florian, 1985; Florian & Kravetz, 1985; Orbach, et al., 1986; Schonfeld & Smilansky, 1989; Slaughter, 2005; Slaughter & Griffiths, 2007), just as racial tensions may be more prevalent in different parts of the country (Brown & Bigler, 2005; Copenhaver-Johnson, et al., 2007; Hirschfeld, 1994; Quintana, 1998).

Different topics might be chosen for the sensitive issues, like divorce or substance abuse, depending on the needs and developmental levels of the population in the study. As Rasinski & Gillespie stated (1992):

. . . that children will read material that is personal and important to them. For many children, these important issues include the serious problems that they must confront on a daily basis both in and out of school. Substance abuse, illness, death, disabilities, prejudice, cultural differences, relocation, nontraditional home environments, and child abuse are crucial issues in many children’s lives. (p. vii)

This was a third grade study; students in fourth and/or fifth grade might be more receptive to in-depth discussions and able to write more fluently on the issues of death and race because of their maturation levels. Although research supports that children begin to understand the concept of death between the ages of five and seven years old, older children from age 10 through adolescence had a much more mature conceptualization of death (Florian, 1985; Orbach et al., 1986; Schonfeld, & Smilansky, 1989). Likewise, with the issue of race, according to Quintana (1998), there are “levels of development in children’s understanding of ethnicity and race.” From ages 6-10 years old, there is a literal understanding of ethnicity and race; from ages 10-14, children understand the social perspective of ethnicity and by adolescence they start to form ethnic-group consciousness and ethnic identity.
Research on sensitive issues that occurred in two different grade levels at the same time using the same book or different books for the read aloud and book discussions could yield an in-depth comparative study. Some possible dimensions for comparison include how the sensitive issue is addressed in each grade, the role of the teacher and the students during the book discussion, scheduling of the read aloud and book discussion, the teachers’ read-aloud style, time spent on reading instruction versus content, the effects of different questioning patterns and the range of difficulty of the questions, and additional opportunities for students to reflect and discuss the sensitive issue such as focus groups, writing, and the arts (Duffy, 1993; Galda, 1990; Green & Harker, 1988; Hoffman, et al., 1993; Lickteig & Russell, 1994; Many, 1991; Piazza, 2003).

More research is needed on ways to utilize focus groups with book discussions on sensitive issues. This was a time-sensitive study. Teachers in this study firmly indicated that 20 minutes a day was the maximum amount that could be spared, and at times, they acknowledged that they thought they were taking valuable time away from getting ready for the state’s testing program. The graduate observers had a sense that the students knew discussions were constrained by time and that this factor might have influenced student participation. As with the read aloud and book discussions, 20 minutes did not seem to be enough time for the students to adequately develop their thoughts on paper. Focus groups add extra time for student involvement and, more importantly, for peer discussion (Vygotsky, 1999). Future research exploring the effects of focus groups on book discussions, would give teachers additional guidelines.

In conclusion, more studies tailored to address the importance of connecting writing to read alouds, containing sensitive issues, are needed to insure that contemporary issues find a prominent place in the literacy curriculum.

**Recommendations and Conclusions**

Given the importance of the read aloud, teachers need to choose authentic literature of high quality that incorporates sensitive issues into their texts. “As educators, we must be sure we’re fulfilling our responsibilities: to provide children with high-quality literature that challenges them to explore different ideas and perspectives” (McClure, 1995, p. 25). One of the teachers in this study commented, “I’m just very grateful to be
turned onto these two books because I don’t have a wide repertoire of the more current children’s books.” There are many resources easily available to the classroom teacher to help them choose appropriate books with contemporary issues: the school librarian is an excellent source for researching thematic books, and books, such as Sensitive Issues, An Annotated Guide To Children’s Literature K—6 by Rasinski & Gillespie, and The Read-Aloud Handbook by Trelease list books by categories and age levels. There are several book lists readily available on the internet, America Library Association, Coretta Scott King Award, Tómas Rivera Award, Caldecott and Newberry book awards, just to name a few.

In the secure environment of the classroom, as teachers choose to include books containing contemporary sensitive issues, they will in turn become more comfortable teaching with them. Thematic texts on sensitive issues provide students with the ability to identify and discuss problematic issues in their own lives, or introduce them to settings and human conditions outside their immediate realm (Thibault, 2006; Rosenblatt, 1995). In addition, many multi-cultural books also contain contemporary issues that are relevant to students and mirror our multi-cultural society. Through multi-cultural books students learn about the diversity of cultures within our country, about past and present issues of social injustice, and especially about the qualities that we all share and have in common (Mathis, 2001; Mendoza & Reese, 2001). Teachers have a vital, supportive role in introducing literature with sensitive issues by facilitating understanding, and modulating misinterpretations. Shannon (1986) contends that, “part of the teacher’s task is to help children perceive what books are saying both directly and indirectly” (p. 659). In this study, when the students were asked in their focus group if they liked having book discussions on sensitive issues, there was a resounding “yes” to the question.

Children respond to literature in many ways, and their responses may be viewed through many theoretical lenses. Response is often an evanescent thing—a matter of a few seconds. . . . . As children embrace or resist texts through language and a variety of artistic modes, they are forging links between literature and their own lives. Such links have the potential to be both informative and transformative for their developing sends of themselves as individuals and members of society. (Sipe, 1999, p. 127)
The read aloud on contemporary social issues needs to be considered a significant element of any literacy program, not an after-thought or a frill (Hoffman et al., 1993; Wollman-Bonilla, 1998). It is a very powerful teaching tool that provides a catalyst for involved classroom discussions. Teachers can take a number of steps to ensure the inclusion of sensitive issues and improve read alouds. One is to include open-ended questions that go beyond the text, encouraging students to extend their thinking, challenge their cognitive ability, and take their involvement with the read aloud to a more personal level (Eeds & Wells, 1989; Lehr, 1995). Another is to vary the types of questions, using efferent and aesthetic questions so that students are able to derive the necessary information and reading skills from the text, increase their comprehension, and also connect on a personal, emotional level with the issues in the text (Rosenblatt, 1994). Last, for students to become fully involved with the read aloud, extension activities need to be implemented across the curriculum, especially in writing. It is essential for teachers to build into the curriculum planned literacy activities for students to connect writing and reading.

Authentic fiction mirrors real-life people and situations and shows students they are not alone. By sharing universal concerns such as moral problems, divorce, physical maturity and special challenges, students develop personal insights that imbue their writing with the depth and sincerity that readers find gratifying and meaningful. (Piazza, 2003, p. 115)

Writing should be integral to reading, and reading should be integral to writing. “Writing and reading together engage learners in a greater variety of reasoning operations than when writing or reading are apart or when students are given a variety of other tasks to go along with their reading” (Tierney & Shanahan, 1991, p. 272). Using writing as an extension activity offers such a wide variety of choices, from journal writing to personal journals, to poetry writing. As Piazza (2003) stated, “...there are numerous rewards associated with writing, whether expressing self, developing the imagination, playing with language, or reporting and arguing information” (p. 405).

Clearly, students need every opportunity to express themselves on the issues and problems that affect their everyday lives. We know “students bring these problems to school along with the emotional weight of fear, grief, confusion, sadness and/or anger.”
(Heath, Sheen, Leavy, Young, & Money, 2005, p. 567). As this study has shown, students did not shy away from the discussion of sensitive issues. In fact, they often felt they did not have ample time to discuss the issues fully. Using quality literature with interactive read alouds provides a safe and comfortable format for teachers to introduce sensitive contemporary issues into the primary curriculum.

Classroom literacy events such as read alouds, discussions, and writing and reading extensions, give students a variety of styles for their personal expression. In the non-threatening atmosphere of the classroom student voices can be heard and seen making individual connections to the literature, achieving a deeper understanding of life’s issues, and interpreting the moral, cultural and social implications.
APPENDIX A

FLORIDA STATE UNIVERSITY

HUMAN SUBJECTS IN RESEARCH COMMITTEE

INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD APPROVAL FORM
APPROVAL MEMORANDUM

Date: 9/8/2006

To: Judith Renwick
6559 Man-O-War Trail
Tallahassee, FL 32309

Dept.: CHILDHOOD EDUCATION, READING AND DISABILITIES SERVICES

From: Thomas L. Jacobson, Chair

Re: Use of Human Subjects in Research
Exploring Third Grade Students Ability to Express Their Views On Contemporary Social Issues Following Read Aloud Book Discussions

The forms that you submitted to this office in regard to the use of human subjects in the proposal referenced above have been reviewed by the Human Subjects Committee at its meeting on 9/8/2006. Your project was approved by the Committee.

The Human Subjects Committee has not evaluated your proposal for scientific merit, except to weigh the risk to the human participants and the aspects of the proposal related to potential risk and benefit. This approval does not replace any departmental or other approvals which may be required.

If the project has not been completed by 8/8/2007 you must request renewed approval for continuation of the project.

You are advised that any change in protocol in this project must be approved by resubmission of the project to the Committee for approval. The principal investigator must promptly report, in writing, any unexpected problems causing risks to research subjects or others.

By copy of this memorandum, the chairman of your department and/or your major professor is reminded that he/she is responsible for being informed concerning research projects involving human subjects in the department, and should review protocols of such investigations as often as needed to insure that the project is being conducted in compliance with our institution and with DHHS regulations.

This institution has an Assurance on file with the Office for Protection from Research Risks. The Assurance Number is IRB00000446.

cc: Carolyn Piazza
HSC No. 2006.0661
APPENDIX B

LEON COUNTY SCHOOLS

REQUEST FOR RESEARCH

REVIEW BOARD APPROVAL FORM
November 3, 2006

Ms. Judith A. Renwick
6559 Man-O-War Trail
Tallahassee, FL

Dear Ms. Renwick,

The Leon County Schools Research Review Board has determined that the findings of your proposed study could be pertinent to our efforts and so we are approving your request to conduct the research. Integral to this approval are the revisions to your parent consent form that was sent by email November 2, 2006 and your email clarifications of November 2 and October 15, 2006.

Your research request is approved for the period of November 2006 through October 2007. Should you desire to extend your research efforts after this period of time, you must submit (a) a progress report, (b) preliminary results of your research, and (c) a request for renewed approval for continuation. Any significant changes or amendments to the procedures or design of this study must be approved by resubmitting the request for research to the Research Review Board.

Approval by the Research Review Board does not in itself constitute permission to carry out the research. You may now contact principals of the schools in your study. The principal has the final decision relative to research at each school. It is your responsibility to return the enclosed "Principal's Consent for Research Participation," signed by the principal(s) of the school(s) to be involved, prior to the start of any research. Receipt of this form by this office will complete the approval process.

Since your research study involves direct contact with students, the background check policy requires all researcher(s) to be fingerprinted for clearance. It is the responsibility of the applicant(s) to complete all required documentation prior to the beginning of the study.

Leon County Schools is approving your research partly for the potential benefit of information to the district; therefore, it is important that you send this office one copy of your results and discussion when your study is complete. We will place information from your study in our research library and annotated listing of conducted research. We look forward to receiving your results.

Please feel free to phone me (850.488.7007) if I may be of further assistance.

Sincerely,

Margarida F. Southard, Ph.D.
Program Monitoring and Evaluation
Chairperson, Research Review Board

C: Joan Hays, Astoria Park: D.J. Wright
APPENDIX C

INFORMED CONSENT LETTER

TEACHER CONSENT FORM
Teacher Informed Consent Form

I freely and voluntarily and without the element of force or coercion, consent to be a participant in the research project entitled, “Exploring Third Grade Students Ability to Express Their Views On Contemporary Social Issues Following Read Aloud Book Discussions.”

This research is being conducted by Judy Renwick, who is a Ph.D. candidate under the direction of Dr. Carolyn Piazza in the Department Childhood Education, Reading, and Disabilities Services at Florida State University.

I understand that the purpose of this study is to gather information that may help improve students’ ability to write and improve his or her reading and writing connections. I also understand that third grade was chosen because it is a very important preparation year for the FCAT and the fourth grade Florida Writes Test.

I understand that the researcher will be giving the students pre and post-writing prompts on the contemporary social issues found in the books that are read aloud to the students. I understand that I will be asked to read two books (The Taste of Black Berries and Crossing Jordan) on separate occasions to the students in my classroom, followed by a class discussion on the chapter(s) that I read. I understand that the students and I will be given a reflection form to answer on three of the chapters of each book. I will also be asked to fill out a self-report. The total time commitment (excluding the read aloud and discussion) would be about 45 minutes.

I understand that for each book, the read aloud and following book discussion of three chapters will be videotaped.

I understand that the study will start at the beginning of October and end before the Thanksgiving Holiday.

I understand that there are benefits to participating in this study. I will be providing educational professionals such as myself with information and strategies on how to help students develop and improve their writing quality and perfect their reading and writing connections.

I understand that the identity of the students and teachers will be kept confidential. Names will be replaced with code numbers. All responses, observations, videos, and work samples will be kept confidential to the extent allowed by law and stored in a locked cabinet and only available to the research team. Results will be reported in the form of group information. At the end of the study the videos will be destroyed.

I understand that I may contact Judy Renwick (850) 488-4673 (renwickj@mail.leon.k12.fl.us) for answers to questions about this research or my rights. Study results will be sent upon my request.

I have read and understand this consent form.

__________________________________________  ________________
Signature                                      Date

__________________________________________  ________________
Researcher                                   Date
APPENDIX D

INFORMED CONSENT LETTER

PARENT CONSENT FORM
PARENT CONSENT FORM

I voluntarily, without element of force, consent for my child to participate in a research project titled: “Exploring Third Grade Students Ability to Express Their Views On Contemporary Social Issues Following Read Aloud Book Discussions.”

This project is being conducted by Judy Renwick, a Kindergarten teacher at Astoria Park Elementary. She is a doctoral candidate under the direction of Dr. Carolyn Piazza in the Department of Childhood Education, Reading, and Disability Services at Florida State University.

I understand that the purpose of this study is to gather information that may help improve students’ ability to write and improve his or her reading and writing connections. Third grade was chosen because it is a very important preparation year for the FCAT and the fourth grade Florida Writes Test. I understand that the study will take place in my child’s classroom as part of the regular curriculum.

I understand that my child will listen and have the opportunity to discuss two books being read by her or his third grade teacher. My child will also be asked to participate in a variety of classroom language, reading, and writing activities.

I understand that the study will start at the beginning of October and end before the Thanksgiving Holiday.

I understand that there are benefits to participating in this study. My child will provide teachers with information and strategies on how to help students develop and improve their writing quality.

I understand that my child may be videotaped as he/she participates in the activities. The videos will be accessible to only the research team.

I understand that the study will be completely confidential. Although my child will be asked to write their name on some of the learning activities, his/her identity will be kept secret. The research team will replace the names with code numbers. All responses, observations, and work samples will be kept confidential to the extent allowed by law and stored in a locked cabinet. Results will only be reported in the form of group information. At the end of the study the videos will be destroyed.

I understand that my child’s participation is totally voluntary and participation or non-participation in this study will not affect my child’s grades. S/he may withdraw from this study at any time without consequences. I have been given the right to ask and have answered any questions I may have about this study. I have read and understood this consent form.

I understand that I may contact Judy Renwick (Mrs.) at Astoria Elementary School (850-488-4673) (renwicki@mail.leon.k12.fl.us) for information or questions I may have about this study or my child’s rights. Study results will be sent upon my request.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Child’s Name</th>
<th>Child’s Third Grade Teacher</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Parent/Guardian’s Name (Please Print)</th>
<th>Parent/Guardian’s Signature</th>
<th>Date</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>9-8-07</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Researchers
APPENDIX E

INFORMED CONSENT LETTER

STUDENT ASSENT FORM
Student Assent Form

My name is Mrs. Renwick. You may recognize me because I work here at Astoria Park Elementary as a Kindergarten Teacher. I would like to ask your help in a study that I am doing on writing. I am interested in knowing if your writing improves after you have a chance to listen to your teacher read a story and discuss that story in class. This information will help me design better writing strategies for teachers who work with students like you. Let me explain.

Your teacher will be reading two books to your class. I will ask you to write about the information in each book before your teacher reads the book and again, after your teacher reads the book because it is very important. I will also ask you to answer some questions about the stories. Sometimes, I will videotape and listen to the book conversations that follow your teacher’s reading. The videotape will help me remember what you and your class say. I will not use your name on any of work that I collect. Everything that you do will be confidential.

If you would like to help with this study, you can print your name on the line below and then sign it in cursive. Even though you sign this, you can always stop participating at any time. Just let your teacher know that you want to leave the study.

If you are not sure whether you wish to participate, your teacher will come to your desk to answer your questions. Then you can make your decision.

If you do not want to participate, do not sign this form.

I have read and understand this form. Yes, I wish to participate in this study.

Name (please print) _______________________________________________________

Signature ________________________________________________________________

Teacher’s Name (please print) _____________________________________________

Date __________________________

Researcher ______________________________________________________________

Date __________________________

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APPENDIX F

ESSAY RUBRIC

A TASTE OF BLACKBERRIES
CROSSING JORDAN
Rubric for *A Taste of Blackberries*

Your teacher will be reading *A Taste of Blackberries* to the class. This is a book about friends and their experiences. “Friends are a part of our lives. In what ways would you change if a best friend died?” We want you to write your answer to that question. This is not a test. Write as much as you would like. Do not worry about spelling or punctuation. Do your very best.

Directions:

Lower scores are indicative of a lack of knowledge of the topic or inadequate writing skills. Higher scores indicate an understanding of all parts of the question and provide supportive ideas. Writing skills are adequate or better.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Score</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>The response shows evidence that the student has an in-depth understanding of the topic of the death of a friend and includes three to four statements about a friend’s death. These statements might include personal connection statements about a friend’s death, value statements about the death of a friend, moral or societal statements about a friend’s death, changes that might occur when a best friend dies.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>The response indicates that the student makes a connection with the topic of a death of a friend and includes two to three statements about the death of a friend. These statements might include a personal connection statement about a friend’s death, value statements about the death of a friend, moral or societal statements about a friend’s death, changes that might occur when a best friend dies.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>The topic of the death of a friend is minimally developed and has poor focus by including extraneous or loosely related ideas. The response includes one statement about the death of a friend. This statement might include a personal connection statement about the death of a friend, value statements about the death of a friend, moral or societal statements about a friend’s death, changes that might occur when a best friend dies.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>The response briefly touches on the topic of death. The prompt is repeated. The response has an inconsistent focus.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0</td>
<td>The response is irrelevant. There is no response. The writing is unscorable.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Rubric for *crossing Jordan*

Your teacher will be reading *crossing jordan* to the class. This is a story about girls of different races who want to be friends. “What would you do if your parents said that you couldn’t play with someone just because s/he was a different color then you are?” We would like you to write your answer to that question. This is not a test. Write as much as you would like. Do not worry about spelling or punctuation. Do your very best.

Directions:
Lower scores indicate a lack of understanding of the importance of diversity or inadequate writing skills. Higher scores will address the importance of diversity, a fairness issue, and the repercussions of disobeying their parents. Writing skills are adequate or better.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Score</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>The response shows evidence that the student has an in-depth understanding of diversity and includes three to four statements about diversity. These statements might include personal connection statements about race, value statements about diversity, playing with friends of different races, moral or social statements about diversity.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>The response indicates that the student makes a connection with the topic of diversity by including two to three statements about diversity. These statements might include personal connection statements about race, value statements about diversity, playing with friends of different races, moral or social statements about diversity.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>The topic of diversity is minimally developed and has a poor focus by including extraneous or loosely related ideas. The response includes one statement about diversity. This statement might include a personal connection statement about race, value statements about diversity, playing with friends of different races, moral or social statements about diversity.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>The response briefly touches on the topic of diversity. The prompt is repeated. The response has an inconsistent focus.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0</td>
<td>The response is irrelevant. There is no response. The writing is unscorable.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
APPENDIX G

INITIAL CODING ELEMENTS

A TASTE OF BLACKBERRIES

CROSSING JORDAN
# Initial Coding Elements to Consider for Book Discussions

**Taste of Blackberries**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Death</th>
<th>Off-Topic</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Teacher</td>
<td>Student</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Text Based Interactions</strong></td>
<td>+</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Questions: Literal</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inferential</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Evaluative</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Text: text comparisons</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Personal Interactions with the Text</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Life Experiences</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal Opinions</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Value Judgments</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Societal Interactions with the Text</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Moral Interpretations</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cultural Sensitivity as it relates to Death</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Justice</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
# Initial Coding Elements to Consider for Book Discussions

**crossing jordan**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Diversity</th>
<th>Off-Topic</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Teacher</strong></td>
<td><strong>Student</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>+</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Text Based Interactions**

- **Questions:** Literal
- Inferential
- Evaluative

**Text: text comparisons**

**Personal Interactions with the Text**

- Life Experiences
- Personal Opinions
- Value Judgments

**Societal Interactions with the Text**

- Moral Interpretations
- Cultural Sensitivity as it relates to Race
- Social Justice
APPENDIX H

GUIDE FOR THE INITIAL CODING ELEMENTS

A TASTE OF BLACKBERRIES
CROSSING JORDAN
GUIDE FOR THE INITIAL CODING ELEMENTS

A TASTE OF BLACKBERRIES
Merriam-Webster’s Online Dictionary defines death as “the end of life, the cause or occasion of loss of life.” (Main Entry). A Taste of Blackberries is about the sudden death of a favorite friend.

The Coding Elements form were used as the initial guide for coding discussions about death. During the observations and scoring of the videos, additional patterns may emerge. The form had two major headings, Death and Off-Topic. Each of these headings had a subheading, Teacher and Student. Tally marks were noted as positive (+) or negative (---) statements or questions, initiated by the teacher or the students. Therefore, to tally for the issue of death in the book A Taste of Blackberries, positive statements about death implied approval or acceptance of the friend’s death. Examples of such statements included: “I would cry.”; “I would be really sad.”; “I would pray for her.”

Negative statements implied lack of remorse, or denial that the death took place. Examples of such statements included: “I would try to get a new friend.”; “I would say too bad and walk away.” Off-Topic statements/questions were not concerned with death. Such statements were about discipline or events that had no connection with the topic of death.
The sidebars indicated the type of text interaction that occurred with teachers and the students. Text-based interaction was the first sidebar and covers questions/statements that were literal, inferential, or evaluative and were concerned directly with the text. The answers to literal questions/statements were found directly in the text. Although inferential questions/statements were based on the text, the student made a connection between the text and prior knowledge. For evaluative questions/statements, the student thought about or assessed the information given in the story. Text: text comparisons were those questions/statements made by the teacher or the student that compared and or contrasted incidences in a text that the students read previously to the present text.

The second sidebar unit was concerned with personal interactions with the text. What kind of connections were made between the text and the student’s life experiences? What personal opinions did the student have about the story line in the text? Did the student express any value judgments about the information in the text?

The third sidebar was interested with the societal interactions (moral interpretations, cultural sensitivity) as it pertained to death, and social justice themes as they related to the text.

Before the teachers’ and students’ transcripts were tallied from the videotapes and fieldnote observations on to the coding element form, they were listed and coded with a strategy adapted from Richards (2006). The “Question, Connect, Transform (QCT).” For this study, Q (a,b,c) represented those Questions/statements, literal, inferential, or evaluative that were concerned directly with the text. T:T represented the Text:Text comparisons. C (a, b, c) indicated Personal Connections (life experiences, personal opinion, value judgments) that teachers or students made with the text. T (a, b, c)
symbolized the societal interactions of the text that endorsed moral interpretation, cultural sensitivity of the idea of changing or transforming the injustices that were portrayed in the text. O:T will represented off-topic under each of the categories.
GUIDE FOR THE INITIAL CODING ELEMENTS

CROSSING JORDAN
GUIDE FOR THE INITIAL CODING ELEMENTS
TO CONSIDER FOR BOOK DISCUSSIONS

Coding for Discussions about Diversity

Merriam-Webster’s Online Dictionary defined diversity as “the condition of being diverse: variety; especially the inclusion of diverse people (as people of different races or cultures) in a group or organization” (Main Entry). *crossing jordan* was about people of different races learning to live with each other.

The Coding Elements form was used as the initial guide for coding discussions about diversity. During the observations and scoring of the videos, additional patterns may emerge. The form had two major headings, Diversity and Off-Topic. Each of these headings had a subheading, Teacher and Student. Tally marks were noted as positive (+) or negative (---) statements or questions, initiated by the teacher or the students.

Therefore, to tally for the issue of diversity and/or race in the book *crossing jordan*, positive statements about diversity implied approval or acceptance of people of different colors or race. Examples of such statements included: “I like to play with all kids,” “It doesn’t matter what your color is.”; “I have friends that are not black (or white).” “My best friend is black (or white).”

Negative statements implied disproval, rejection, or prejudice of people of different colors or race. Examples of such statements included: “I don’t like to play with black (or white) kids; They are mean.”; “I don’t trust kids who are different from
me.”; “My parents say to stay away from those kinds of kids.”; “I have only black (or white) friends.” Off-Topic statements were statements/questions that were not concerned with diversity. Such statements were about discipline, or events that had no connection with the topic of race.

The sidebars indicated the type of text interaction that occurred with teachers and the students. Text-based interaction was the first sidebar and covered those questions/statements that were literal, inferential, or evaluative and were concerned directly with the text. The answers to literal questions were found directly in the text. Although inferential questions/statements were based on the text, the reader made a connection between the text and prior knowledge. For evaluative questions/statements, the student thought about or assessed the information given in the story. Text:text comparisons were those statements/questions made by the teacher or the student that compared or contrasted incidences in a text that the students read previously to the present text.

The second sidebar unit was concerned with personal interactions with the text. What kind of connections were made between the text and the student’s life experiences? What personal opinions did the student have about the story line in the text? Was the student expressing any value judgments about the information in the text?

The third sidebar was interested with the societal interactions (moral interpretations, cultural sensitivity as it pertained to race, and social justice themes) as they related to the text.
Before the teachers’ and students’ transcripts were tallied from the videotapes and fieldnote observations on to the coding element form, they were listed and coded with a strategy adapted from Richards (2006). The “Question, Connect, Transform (QCT).” For this study, Q (a,b,c) represented those Questions/statements, literal, inferential, or evaluative that were concerned directly with the text. T:T represented the Text:Text comparisons. C (a, b, c) indicated Personal Connections (life experiences, personal opinion, value judgments) that teachers or students made with the text. T (a, b, c) symbolized the societal interactions of the text that endorsed moral interpretation, cultural sensitivity of the idea of changing or transforming the injustices that were portrayed in the text. O:T represented off-topic under each of the categories.
APPENDIX I

REFLECTION FORMS

A TASTE OF BLACKBERRIES

CROSSING JORDAN
A TASTE OF BLACKBERRIES

REFLECTION FORMS

TEACHER DIRECTION FORM
STUDENT REFLECTIVE FORM
TEACHER REFLECTIVE FORM
Teacher Directions for the Student Reflection Form--*A Taste of Blackberries*

Teachers,

After you have read and discussed chapters 3 and 6 in *A Taste of Blackberries*, please pass out the reflection form for each chapter (The reflection forms are identical. Make sure that the students write in the chapter and date at the top.) Give each student a form. Before you read the questions, tell the students that the word reflection means to think about a question before you write your answer. When all the students have a form, ask the class to read along with you silently as you read the questions out loud. When you have finished reading, say:

1. Print your name in the space provided at the top of the page. Write the chapter and today’s date in the spaces at the top of the page.

2. This is not a test. You will not be graded on your writing. We’re interested in knowing how you feel about today’s discussion.

3. You may write as much as you wish for your answers. You may use the back of the paper if you need more room.

4. Are there any general questions? **Do not give examples of possible answers.**

5. You may begin.

1. What do you remember about today’s book discussion?

2. Now, look at your answer for question number one. Underline the part of your answer that you feel was the most important.

3. Did you say anything in today’s discussion? If the answer is yes, tell me what you said. If the answer is no, tell me why you did not say anything.
Student Reflective Form for *A Taste of Blackberries*

Name: _____________________________         Chapter: _____   Date: _____________

1. What do you remember about today’s book discussion?

________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________

2. Now, look at your answer for question number one. Underline the part of your answer that you feel is the most important.

3. Did you say anything in today’s discussion? If the answer is yes, tell me what you said. If the answer is no, tell me why you did not say anything.

________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
Teacher Reflective Form for *A Taste of Blackberries*

Name: _____________________________         Chapter: _____   Date: _____________

1. What do you remember about today’s book discussion?

________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________

2. Now underline the part in question number one that you felt was the most important.

3. Do you think that all of the students got a chance to participate in the discussion?
   If the answer is no, tell me why some students did not participate?

________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
CROSSING JORDAN

REFLECTION FORMS

TEACHER DIRECTION FORM
STUDENT REFLECTIVE FORM
TEACHER REFLECTIVE FORM
Teacher Directions for the Student Reflection Form—crossing jordan

Teachers,

After you have read and discussed chapters 6 and 15 in crossing jordan, please pass out the reflection form for each chapter. (The reflection forms are identical. Make sure that the students write in the chapter and date at the top.) Give each student a form. Before you read the questions (Please read all the questions to the students and ask them to try to answer all the questions.), tell the students that the word reflection means to think about a question before you write your answer. When all the students have a form, ask the class to read along with you silently as you read the questions out loud. When you have finished reading, say:

1. Print your name in the space provided at the top of the page. Write the chapter and today’s date in the spaces at the top of the page.

2. This is not a test. You will not be graded on your writing. We’re interested in knowing how you feel about today’s discussion.

3. You may write as much as you wish for your answers. You may use the back of the paper if you need more room.

4. Are there any general questions? Do not give examples of possible answers.

5. You may begin.

1. What do you remember about today’s book discussion?

2. Now, look at your answer for question number one. Underline the part of your answer that you feel is the most important.

3. Did you say anything in today’s discussion? If the answer is yes, tell me what you said. If the answer is no, tell me why you did not say anything.
Student Reflective Form for *crossing jordan*

Name: _____________________________         Chapter: _____   Date: _____________

1. What do you remember about today’s book discussion?

________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________

2. Now, look at your answer for question number one. Underline the part of your answer that you feel is the most important.

________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________

3. Did you say anything in today’s discussion? If the answer is yes, tell me what you said. If the answer is no, tell me why you did not say anything.

________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
Teacher Reflective Form for *crossing jordan*

Name: _____________________________         Chapter: _____   Date: _____________

1. What do you remember about today’s book discussion?
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________

2. Now underline the part in question number one that you felt was the most important.

3. Do you think that all of the students got a chance to participate in the discussion?
   If the answer is no, tell me why some students did not participate?
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
APPENDIX J

STUDENT FOCUS GROUP QUESTIONS
STUDENT FOCUS GROUP QUESTIONS

What did you think about the books your teacher read?

*A Taste of Blackberries*

crossing jordan

What did you feel was the most important part of the book?

Tell me about the book discussions that you had: Did you enjoy them?

Did they add to the meaning of the story?

Is there anything that you did not like about the book discussions?

Were you an active participant in the discussions?

Were you able to make personal connections to the book? In what ways?

Do you think these books should be read to future classes? Why? Why not?

If your teacher were to read these books to another class, what suggestions do you have to improve the read aloud and the book discussion?
APPENDIX K

TEACHERS’ SELF-REPORT
TEACHER SELF REPORT

Name:___________________________________  Date: ____________

1. Male ___  Female ___

2. How many years have you been an elementary teacher? ____

3. How many years have you been in the field of Education? ____

4. How many years have you been at this school? ____  Taught third grade? ____

5. Your age:

   21 – 29 ____  30-39 ____  40-49 ____  50-59 ____  60+ ____

6. What is the highest degree you hold?

   Bachelors ____ Masters ____ Specialist ____ Doctorate ____

7. What are your areas of certification? _________________________

8. Estimate the amount of time you spend weekly during a nine-week grading period on the following literacy activities in your classroom.

   Extensively  Often  Sometimes  Never

   *Reading vocabulary

   *Comprehension

   *Oral reading

   *Silent Sustained Reading
   (students reading independently)

   *Reading in content areas

   *Reading aloud to students

   *Read books to your students dealing with a contemporary social issue?

   *Oral or written responses to literature

   *Book discussions

   *Process writing or writing workshop

   *Reflective writing

Use of technology
Other (specify)

9. How often do you do the following?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Activity</th>
<th>Always</th>
<th>Often</th>
<th>Sometimes</th>
<th>Never</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Attend professional conferences/workshops</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Take University courses</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Read professional journals</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(Likert Scale 4-1)

10. Your classroom’s demographics:

- Estimate the number of students receiving free/reduced lunch: _____
- Number of African-American students: _____
- Number of White or European American students: _____
- Number of Hispanic students: _____
- Number of Asian or Pacific Islander students: _____
- Number of Native American students: _____
- Students with English as their first language: _____
- Students with Spanish as their first language: _____
- Students with a first language other than English or Spanish: _____
- Above average readers (reading more than 1 grade above their grade): _____
- Average readers (reading at grade level or within one grade plus or minus of their grade): _____
- Below average readers (reading more than 1 grade below grade): _____
- Students receiving Speech and Language instruction: _____
- Students receiving Special Education services other than Speech and language: _____
APPENDIX L

TEACHERS’ INTERVIEW QUESTIONS
TEACHERS’ INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

What did you think of the books that were chosen for the book discussions?

A Taste of Blackberries:

crossing jordan:

What did you feel was the most important part of each book?

What did you think about the book discussions? Did you find them meaningful? Is there anything that you did not like about the book discussions?

Do you feel that all students got to participate in the discussion?

Were the students able to make personal connections to the books? In what ways?

Would you read these books to future classes? Why/why not?

What would you do differently next time you read these books to your classes?

When you are reading are you actually thinking about the type of questions that will be asked on say the FCAT?

What do you think should have been done differently during the course of this research?

What questions would you like to ask me?
REFERENCES


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Kristo, J. V. (1993). Reading aloud in a primary classroom: Reaching and teaching young readers. In K. E. Holland, R. A. Hungerford, & S. B. Ernst (Eds.), Journeying: Children responding to literature (pp. 54-71). Portsmouth, NH:
Heinemann.


BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Judy Renwick was born in Beverly, Massachusetts. She spent her first twelve years in Beverly, living in a Sicilian-American neighborhood in an apartment above her grandfather’s bakery. When she was twelve, she moved to Danvers, Massachusetts and graduated from Danvers High School in 1963. She received her B.A. from the University of Massachusetts in Amherst in 1967 and her M.A. from Michigan State University in 1971. In 1999 Judy became a National Board Certified Teacher. She was Vice-President for National Board Certified Teachers of Leon County, Inc. from 2004-2006, and President 2006-2007. In 2003, she became a Developer for Just Read, Florida!

Considering it a rare privilege to have worked with students at so many different stages and levels, Judy was a Special Education teacher for several years, teaching students in state institutions to students in public school. In regular education, Judy has taught grades PK—5th grade, was a Title I reading and drop-out prevention teacher, and a Learning Disabilities consultant. At the college level, she taught undergraduate courses in reading and language arts at Florida State University.

Judy and her family moved to Tallahassee in 1984. In 1985, she joined forces with Susan Smith to establish The Magnolia School, an alternative school for active learning. In 1990 she accepted a position at The Florida State University Schools (Florida High Lab School) and taught there for 16 years, becoming an Assistant Professor. Judy has presented numerous workshops on reading to teachers and parents, and worked with focus groups, mentoring second and third year teachers. She is currently a Kindergarten Teacher at a Title I school in Tallahassee.

Judy enjoys spending time with her family, and traveling to visit her children and grandchildren. She also likes to read, garden, and take long walks on the beach.